

Review of Linton and Mowat, *Qualitative Research and Practical Theology*

Kevin G. Smith¹

Linton J and Mowat H 2006. *Qualitative research and practical theology*. London: SCM Press.

1. Purpose

John Linton and Harriet Mowat state their purpose as follows: ‘The primary purpose of this book is to address the question: How can we faithfully use qualitative research to provide accurate data for theological reflection?’ (vii). In other words, the book is about the use of qualitative research for practical theology. To be more specific, their objective is to show how practical theologians can use qualitative research to form or transform practices which are faithful to the gospel.

2. Summary

The book divides into two approximately equal halves. In the first half (chs. 1-3), Linton and Mowat seek to answer three fundamental questions: (a) What is practical theology? (b) What is qualitative research? (c) How can practical theology use qualitative research

¹ Kevin (kevin@sats.edu.za) is the Vice-Principal and Academic Head of the South African Theological Seminary. He holds an MA in New Testament from Global University, a DLitt in Greek from Stellenbosch University, and a PhD in Theology (Old Testament) from SATS. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

methods? These three chapters constitute the theoretical core of the book. The second half (chs. 4-8) offers five concrete examples of the use of qualitative research for practical theological reflection. My summary will focus on the three key questions in chapters 1-3.

2.1. What Is Practical Theology?

Linton and Mowat define practical theology as 'critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world' (6). The primary task of practical theology is to facilitate faithful practices—Christian communities practicing their faith in ways that are consistent with God's redemptive mission in the world, that is, faithfully participating in the continuing gospel narrative. There is nothing pragmatic about this; practical theology strives for *faithfulness* more than effectiveness.

Practical theology seeks to reflect theologically on human experience, with the twin objectives of illuminating and transforming experience. It approaches experience with a hermeneutic of suspicion, wondering if what seems to be happening is what is really happening. Therefore, the practical theologian must *complexify* situations so as to explore them theologically. Complexified situations lend themselves to theological reflection because practices are theory- and value-laden. That is, practices embody particular beliefs; therefore, they are suitable objects of critical theological enquiry.

2.2. What Is Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research is a method of studying things in their natural settings. It takes human experience seriously, and seeks to understand the meanings people ascribe to phenomena and experiences.

It assumes that human beings are by definition 'interpretive creatures'; that the ways in which we make sense of the world and our experiences within it involve a constant process of interpretation and meaning-seeking. ... Identifying and developing understandings of these meanings is the primary task of qualitative research (29-30).

Unlike the scientific method, which focuses on *nomothetic truth* (scientific knowledge that meets the criteria of falsifiability, replicability, and generalisability), qualitative research deals with *ideographic truth* (knowledge discovered through unique, non-replicable experiences). It seeks to understand and interpret such experiences. Qualitative research can provide three types of knowledge: (a) knowledge of others: understanding how individuals or groups view and interact with the world; (b) knowledge of phenomena: what certain practices mean to people; and (c) reflexive knowledge: the role of the researcher in constructing the world he is researching.

All forms of qualitative research are (a) narrative focused and (b) participatory. The researcher listens to people's stories, endeavouring to understand the meanings they ascribe to their world and their experiences. In all qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, the researcher participates in the process of retelling people's stories and interpreting them. The researcher is 'involved with the research process not as a distant observer, but as an active participant and co-creator of the interpretive experience' (35).

Constructivism is the epistemological framework underlying qualitative research. 'Constructivism assumes that truth and knowledge and the ways in which it is perceived by human beings and human communities is, to a greater or lesser extent, constructed by individuals or communities. ... it presumes that "reality" is open to a variety of different interpretations and can never be accessed in a pure, uninterpreted form' (35). Christians can never be pure constructivists, because we believe in an ultimate reality. Nevertheless, we still recognise that social realities are interpretive constructs, and that in the process of trying to describe them the researcher influences the description.

One of the challenges with qualitative research is applying it to others. The qualitative researcher's task is not to generalise, but to provide a thick description of a particular situation. Nevertheless, shared experiences allow for transfer through the concepts of *identification* and *resonance*. The experiences described resonate with others in similar situations, so they identify with the experiences. This can lead to 'transformative resonance' (47). *Theoretical generalisation* is also possible: the documented experiences lead to theory formation; the theoretical model can be applied to other situations.

Triangulation is the use of a multiple-method approach to qualitative research, in order to validate the descriptions. 'Objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations' (50). Using multiple methods secures a thicker description, capturing more perspectives than a single-method approach.

The researcher must clearly understand the objective of the research from the outset. Linton and Mowat identify four general purposes (51-52): (a) *describing* something, (b) *explaining* the reasons for

something, (c) *evaluating* the effectiveness of something, or (d) *generating* theories, strategies, or actions.

Reflexivity is a key concept for qualitative research. 'Put simply, reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings' (59). The researcher must realise that she cannot stand outside the research process. In conducting the research, she will 'both influence and be influenced by the process ... A reflexive approach recognizes this reciprocal relationship and seeks to make it explicit' (60). There are two kinds of reflexivity that the researcher should bear in mind: (a) personal reflexivity: the ways in which the researcher's values, experiences, interests, beliefs, and so on impact the research process; and (b) epistemological reflexivity: how the researcher's assumptions about the world and about the nature of knowledge impact upon the research.

2.3. How Can Practical Theology Use Qualitative Research Methods?

Having described first practical theology and then qualitative research, Linton and Mowat turn their attention to way in which two disciplines with vastly different epistemological foundations—theology and qualitative research—can come together.

Practical theology seeks to interpret 'situations, scripture and tradition, [and] Christian practices' (75).

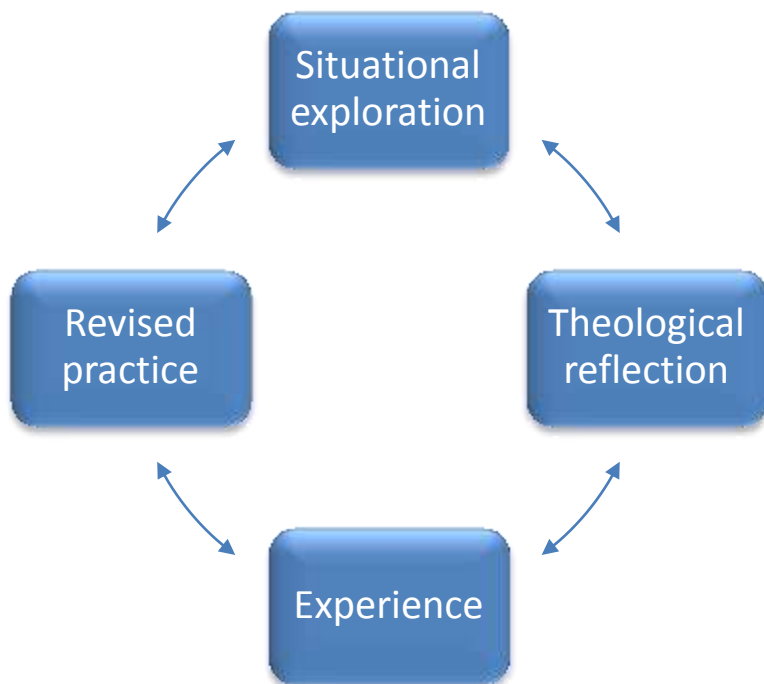
Practical theology ... is fundamentally hermeneutical, correlational, critical and theological. It is hermeneutical because it recognizes the centrality of interpretation in the way that human beings encounter the world and try to 'read' the texts of that encounter. It is correlational

because it necessarily tries to hold together and correlate at least three different perspectives—the situation, the Christian tradition and another source of knowledge that is intended to enable deeper insight and understanding. It is a critical discipline because it approaches both the world and our interpretations of the Christian tradition with a hermeneutic of suspicion, always aware of the reality of human fallenness and the complexity of the forces which shape and structure our encounters with the world. It is theological insofar as it locates itself in the world as it relates to the unfolding eschatology of the gospel narrative, a narrative that indicates that truth and the grasping of truth is possible. Any methods used by the practical theologian will need to reflect and hold in tension all of these dimensions (76-77).

Linton and Mowat explore both *mutual critical correlation* and *mutual critical conversation* as models for bringing theology and qualitative research together. Paul Tillich (1951) developed *critical correlation*, in which the social sciences (reason and experience) raise questions to which theology provides answers; modern practical theologians consider this model inadequate because it is one-sided and unidirectional. David Tracy (1975) modified it to *mutual critical correlation*, in which the correlation of questions and answers is two-sided, theology and the social sciences conversing as equals. 'Christian tradition and practice and other forms of theory and practice are brought together in mutually constructive critical dialogue' (79). This lead to the following definition:

Practical Theology is the mutually critical correlation of interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian fact and the interpreted theory and practice of the contemporary situation (Tracy, quoted in Linton and Mowat 2006:79).

The authors particularly like Stephen Pattison's (2000) model of mutual critical correlation, which he calls *mutual critical conversation*, because it revolves around a mutually critical conversation between the



Christian tradition, the social sciences, and a particular situation.

Figure 1: Mutual critical correlation as a model for practical theological reflection

However, Linton and Mowat do not believe theology and the social sciences should be *equal* conversation partners. They favour a model where, in the field of practical theology, theology has logical priority, without in any wishing to diminish the value of the social sciences. This

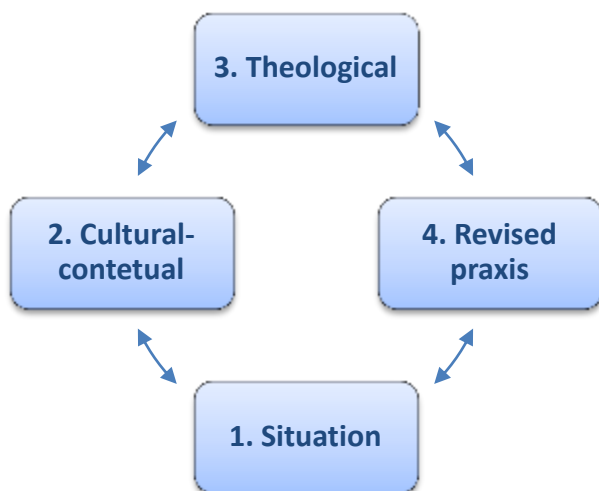
is tied to their realist ontology and their belief in revelation (that God really speaks in scripture).

In the end, Linton and Mowat propose a four-stage process for practical theological research (see Figure 2):

1. The *situation* refers the intuitive, pre-reflective stage; we begin to explore the nature of the situation and identify what we suspect of the key issues.
2. In the *cultural-contextual analysis*, we use qualitative research and draw on theories from the social sciences to 'develop a deep and rich understanding of the complex dynamics of the situation' (96).
3. *Theological reflection* is 'critical reflection on the practices of the church in the light of scripture and tradition' (95). Theological reflection is present in steps 1-2, but takes centre stage in step 3.
4. Formulating revised praxis: 'the conversation [between stages 1-3] functions dialectically to produce new and challenging forms of practice that enable the initial situation to be transformed into ways which are authentic and faithful' (97).

Figure 2: Linton and Mowat's model of practical theological research

In the book's conclusion,² Linton and Mowat endorse the view that practical theology is a form of *action research*, in which the goal is not only to understand practice, but also to transform it. 'The basic dynamic of action research is the dialectical movement from practice (action) to theory, to critical reflection on practice, to revised forms of practice



developed in the light of this spiralling process. The data and practice

² Linton and Mowat include five reports of qualitative research projects, as illustrations of how to conduct different types of studies. The reports are examples of researching personal experience (ch. 4), a local church (ch. 5), ministry (ch. 6), pastoral issues (ch. 7), and participatory research (ch. 8). For each report, they use the following method of reporting: (1) the situation: an initial analysis of some of the complexities of the situation; (2) the method: presentation and motivation of chosen research methods; (3) theological reflection: an example of theological reflection on the data; and (4) suggestions for revised forms of practice: indicative suggestions for forms of revised practice based on the findings.

are constantly challenged, developed and revised as they interact critically and dialectically with one another' (255). Throughout this process, the goal is not primarily pragmatic—to solve problems and help communities function more effectively. Rather, the practical theologian has 'the goal of interacting with situations and challenging practices in order that individuals and communities can be enabled to remain faithful to God and to participate faithfully in God's continuing mission in the world' (257). Action is never an end in itself; it is always in service of revelation and mediation of the gospel.

Evaluation

Linton and Mowat have provided an excellent primer for the use of qualitative research methods in practical theological research. Their descriptions of (a) practical theology and (b) qualitative research are most helpful, as is their simple vision of how practical theology can make use of qualitative research methods without compromising its own epistemological foundations. I find myself in complete agreement with their theoretical basis for bringing practical theology and qualitative research together through a mutually critical correlational model in which theology takes logical priority over qualitative research. *Qualitative research and practical theology* should be required reading for any theological student undertaking empirical research as part of a practical theological research project.

Reference List

- Pattison S 2000. Some straw for the bricks. In S Pattison and J Woodward (eds.), *The Blackwell reader on pastoral and practical theology*. London: Blackwell.
- Tillich P 1951. *Systematic theology*, vol. 1. London: SCM Press.

Smith, 'Review of *Qualitative Research and Practical Theology*'

Tracy D 1975. *Blessed rage of order*. New York: Seabury.