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THE RESEARCHER: ENGAGED PARTICIPANT OR DETACHED OBSERVER?

*A reflection on the methodological implications of the dialectics of belonging and distanciation for empirical research in practical theology.*¹

SUMMARY

The relationship between the researcher and the researched is one of the fundamental methodological issues which distinguish different approaches to empirical enquiry. Methodological debates on this issues usually contrast a detached observer (outsider or subject-to-object) perspective with an engaged participant (insider or subject-to-subject) perspective. There seems to be consensus among practical theologians that the observer and participant perspectives respectively correspond to quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The aim of this article is to explore an option that goes beyond the traditional dualism of the researcher's role, namely as detached observer or engaged participant. On the basis of Ricoeur's views on the dialectic between belonging and distanciation, it is suggested that the practical theological researcher embodies the dialectics of belonging (the insider perspective) and distanciation (the outsider perspective) in every research endeavour, whether quantitative or qualitative. The article ends with some methodological implications of this view of the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

1. Introduction

The "new" practical theology that has emerged recently in the United States, in Canada, in Latin America, in Europe, South Africa and East Asia has a new scope (Gräb & Osmer 1997, 1-5). Its field of study is no longer restricted to matters of church organisation or the roles and functions of ministry, but lived religion inside and outside the church. This broadening of the scope of practical theology required a change in methodology. Whereas the "old" practical theology mainly applied the results of exegesis or dogmatics, which is often called a deductive or applied approach, the "new" practical theology had to seek a methodology or methodologies to study the "lived religion" in its explicit and implicit multiplicity (Gräb & Osmer 1997, 3). The result was an "empirical turn" in practical theology: the adoption of

social-scientific methods to carry out empirical research, by practical theologians within a practical theological framework.

This adoption of social-scientific methodology in theology and religious studies, however, does not imply that practical theologians agree on the methodology of empirical research. Anyone who wants to conduct empirical research has to choose from a vast array of research paradigms, strategies, methods and techniques embedded in different metatheoretical and theoretical frameworks. The aim of this article is to contribute to the methodology of practical theology, understanding itself as an empirically-oriented discipline with a transformative orientation, by focusing on one of these methodological issues, namely the relationship of the researcher to the researched.

The relationship between a researcher and the researched is one of the long-standing methodological problems in the social sciences. In the next section (part 2) we briefly explore this problem and also refer to the methodological debate regarding this issue in practical theology. In the third part of the article we try to overcome the fundamental opposition between subject and object, “insider” and “outsider”, which underlies the methodological problem of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, by drawing on the ideas of Paul Ricoeur. This is followed by a discussion of some methodological challenges for practical theologians conducting empirical research in a multicultural, multireligious context (part 4). The article ends with a short conclusion.

2. The problematic relationship of the researcher to the researched

In *The passion of the Western mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view* Richard Tarnas (1991) undertakes the ambitious task of writing a concise narrative history of the evolution of the Western mind from the ancient Greek to the postmodern. He describes how three cultural epochs between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, gave birth to the modern world view with its new faith: science (Tarnas 1991, 282).

For when the titanic battle of the religions failed to resolve itself, with no monolithic structure of belief any longer holding sway over civilization, science suddenly stood forth as mankind's liberation — empirical, rational, appealing to common sense and to a concrete reality that every person could touch and weigh for himself. Verifiable facts and theories tested and discussed among equals replaced dogmatic revelation hierarchically imposed by an institutional Church. The search for truth

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was now conducted on a basis of international cooperation, in a spirit of disciplined curiosity, with a willingness, even eagerness, to transcend previous limits of knowledge. Offering a new possibility of epistemological certainty and objective agreement, new powers of experimental prediction, technical invention, and control of nature, science presented itself as the saving grace of the modern mind (Tarnas 1991, 282).

A major tenet of this modern, scientific world view is the dualism between two realms, namely the subjective mind and the objective world: “The Christian dualism between spirit and matter, God and world, was gradually transformed into the modern dualism of mind and matter, man and cosmos: a subjective and personal human consciousness versus an objective and impersonal material world” (Tarnas 1991, 286). In this framework, knowledge of the universe was possible on the basis of *impersonal scientific investigation* (cf. Tarnas 1991, 287). This position of detachment from the object of study forms the basis of the objective-subjective distinction — a distinction which is “the epistemological and emotional well-spring of the western scientific endeavour...” (Jenkins 1992, 48).

This “traditional” (positivist) view of science, with “objectivity” as one of the key notions that guaranteed the scientific status of knowledge, implies that the researcher adopts the role of a detached observer. Scientific knowledge (“episteme”) was seen as superior to all other forms of knowledge (such as traditional and local knowledge) which were seen as mere opinion (“doksa”). Objective, scientific, knowledge was only possible if the researcher’s role in the research situation could be regarded as that of a detached observer. Any hint of subjective involvement by the researcher is to be deplored (Blaikie 1993, 210; cf. De Groot 1961, 171 et seq.). “Onbevooroordeeld, objectief onderzoek, alleen erop gericht het studie-object te doen spreken en te leren kennen, óók als de onderzoeker wel degelijk emotioneel betrokken is bij de uitkomsten, is het wetenschappelijk ideaal” (De Groot 1961, 172). Bryant (1995, 117) calls this the “view from nowhere”, because there is no place for the identity and interests of the researcher (cf. Habermas 1971). The researcher is not in view, only the objects of study. He/she is an *outsider*.

This ideal of objectivity² implies that different researchers should come to the same “objective” facts by following the correct procedures and methods. If not, there is some bias (subjectivity) that should be eliminated. Following methodological rules is seen as such a check on subjectivity and personal biases (Porter 1995, 4). Through methodological control measures it was assumed that the researcher could eliminate or at least reduce threats to objective research (cf. Mouton 1996, 112-113). Requirements of (quantitative) research such as validity and reliability have traditionally been tied to this pursuit of objectivity.

The ideal of objectivity led to a preference for quantification and quantitative research. Mathematics was seen as an ideal language for research due to its structuredness, rigour and uniformity. The use of numbers provided a means to struggle against subjectivity and helped to strengthen the illusion of impersonality that was so highly regarded (cf. Porter 1995, ix). It also helped to establish research identities and scientific credibility (cf. Porter 1995, 193-216). Within this view of science the researcher was seen as the expert, the one who takes all decisions related to the research, who directs the research and whose interpretations (observations) were regarded as valid knowledge. The result was an asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the researched.

This positivist view of science gradually lost its hegemony through “agents of rupture” who applied the critical approach of science to itself (Beck 1992, 165; cf. Rossouw, 1981, 1-16). However, despite severe criticisms of the positivistic ideals for research, it was difficult to let go of the illusion of objectivity. When Popper made room for the subjectivity³ and scientific creativity of the researcher, this subjectivity was restricted to the context of scientific discovery. It was still important to view science, in the context of scientific justification, as cleansed of all human subjectivity (cf. Rossouw 1981, 12-13).

This view of the researcher as a detached observer, who stands outside the research situation and who has to control all subjectivities including his/her own,⁴ was challenged from the origin of the social sciences. The problem of understanding meaning in the social sciences (cf. Habermas 1984, 102 et seq.) was specifically addressed by the tradition stemming from Dilthey and Husserl.⁵ This led to the longstanding controversy regarding explanation (*erklären*) and understanding (*verstehen*) and the discussion whether the study of social phenomena could be like the scientific study of nature (cf. Hughes 1990, 2).

The fundamental problem addressed by the interpretative alternative (cf. Hughes 1990:89 et seq.) for the social sciences is that their study object is “symbolically prestructured” (Habermas 1984:107). Habermas (1984:108) formulates the problem of *Verstehen* as follows:

The problem of *Verstehen* is of methodological importance in the humanities and social sciences primarily because the scientist cannot gain access to a symbolically prestructured reality through *observation* alone, and because *understanding meaning* [*Sinnverstehen*] cannot be methodologically brought under control in the same way as can observation in the course of experimentation.

Understanding meaning thus requires a different approach, a *Verstehen* or *insider* approach. The researcher cannot enter the world of meaning, the

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“lifeworld” of the research participants, through an objective stance.⁶ Only through “entering into” the lifeworld of the researched as an *insider*, could the researcher hope to gain understanding of meaning. “Meanings — whether embodied in actions, institutions, products of labor, words, networks or cooperation, or documents — can be made accessible only *from the inside*” (Habermas 1984, 112). On the methodological level this tradition of social scientific research is associated with a preference for qualitative methods.

Today “traditional” or “modernistic” approaches (both quantitative and qualitative) to research are radically challenged from many sides. The devastating critique of the objectivistic view, the questioning of expert cultures, and more insight into the relation between knowledge and power (cf. Williams & May 1996, 160-163) has led to a questioning of the epistemological authority of scientific (academic) experts and the severe critique of and/or abandoning of the ideal of objective knowledge. In reaction to the “objectivistic” approach with its view of the detached researcher, many “postmodern” research approaches today stress the role of the researcher as fully engaged participant. We witness the growth of popularity of “alternative” methodological approaches such as action research, participant action research or co-operative inquiry (cf. Reason 1994). Heron (1996, 19), for example, stresses that co-operative inquiry “is a form of participative, person-centred inquiry which does research *with* people not *on* them or *about* them.” Co-operative inquiry thus offers a style of inquiry based on a participative relationship and an abandoning of the functional distinction between the researcher/expert and the researched/lay persons (cf. Guba 1996, x). “In community-based action research, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who *does* research, but that of a resource person”, writes Stringer (1996, 22).

This view of the researcher as *engaged participant* is also a key notion of feminist methodologies.⁷ Feminist researchers challenge “the claim that valid knowledge is only produced through a commitment to truth and objectivity and that in order to achieve this objectivity, a gulf is necessary between the researcher and the object of research”, writes Pat Usher (1997, 53). They strive to maintain equality of the research relationship (cf. Millen 1997) and to empower the research participants. They passionately guard against the exploitation of the researched and encourage participants to construct their own meanings. This view of the research relationship leads to a “radical epistemology” where the researched become co-creators of knowledge.

Against this background one could say that in the social sciences views on the relationship of the researcher to the researched range from viewing the researcher as a detached observer to that of the researcher as a fully

engaged participant. At the risk of oversimplification Blaikie (1993, 210-211, 215-216) says social science researchers have to choose between two alternative positions: they can either relate to the researched as subject-to-object, embracing a detached stance and playing the role of an outside expert, or relate as subject-to-subject, embracing an involved stance as a reflective partner in the research process.

The methodological debate in practical theology, especially in the Netherlands, echoes a similar dichotomy (cf. Dingemans 1996a; 1996b; Heitink 1993; Höfte 1990; Pieterse 1993; Van der Ven 1993a). In this debate an *insider* (participant, hermeneutical) approach is often contrasted with an *outsider* (observer, empirical-analytical) approach. Furthermore, this debate on a participant or an observer approach is usually linked to the debate between quantitative and qualitative research approaches (cf. Höfte 1990, 344-352; Van der Ven 1993a). The two methodological options for practical theologians are thus either a quantitative approach with its observer perspective, or a qualitative approach with its participant perspective.

Apparently this methodological debate has lost its intensity in recent times. There is a consensus that both perspectives are required. Van der Ven (1993a, 106) summarises the conclusion of this debate as follows: "The emphasis must be placed on the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative empirical methodology, which correspond to the participant and the observer perspectives respectively." Despite differences (cf. the discussion by Dingemans 1996a, 55-57; 78) it thus appears that the methodological problem has been resolved. Depending on the research question (cf. Van der Ven 1993b; Ziebertz 1993) the researcher can choose a quantitative approach with its implied observer perspective, or a qualitative approach with its participant perspective, or even both in succession. Dingemans (1996b, 91) can therefore state that "today, *coalescence of approaches* and *complementarity of methods* are the key phrases in practical theology."

Despite Dingemans' optimistic conclusion, I am not convinced that we have resolved this methodological issue. In particular the conclusion that quantitative research corresponds with an observer perspective, and qualitative research with a participant perspective, seems to me to be problematic. Do we only take a participant perspective when we do qualitative research? If this is the case, what do we do with the fundamental claim of the *Verstehen* approach referred to above, namely that the social scientist cannot enter the symbolically prestructured reality through observation alone, but only by participating in meaning construction? In Habermas' words (1984, 108):

The social scientist basically has no other access to the lifeworld than the social-scientific layman does. He must already belong in a certain way to the lifeworld

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whose elements he wishes to describe. In order to describe them, he must understand them; in order to understand them, he must be able in principle to participate in their production; and participation presupposes that one belongs.

On the other hand: do we only take an observer perspective when we do quantitative research? If this is the case, what do we do with the *Verstehen* problematic which Habermas (1984, 112) succinctly expresses in the following question: “How can the *objectivity of understanding* be reconciled with the performative attitude of one who participates in a process of reaching understanding?” Rainwater (1996, 104) says that even those “who resisted the hegemony of the nomothetic methodology faced the challenge of devising more ‘objective’ tools for accessing their domain than the particularized (idiographic) methodologies of *Verstehen* and narrativity seemed to offer.” The conclusion that quantitative and qualitative research respectively correspond with an observer and a participant perspective does not solve the fundamental methodological problem in practical theological (and social scientific) research, namely: how to relate an objectivating and a performative attitude (cf. Habermas 1984, 112).⁸

Against this background I would like to explore another option regarding this methodological dilemma. The main thesis of this article is that we have to respond to this dualism between the researcher as outsider or insider not by trying to position ourselves as researchers somewhere on the continuum between insider and outsider, nor by taking either a detached or an involved perspective, but by placing ourselves at an equal distance from these two extreme positions. I therefore would like to argue that the practical theological empirical researcher has to embody the dialectics between belonging (the insider perspective) and distanciation (the outsider perspective) in every research endeavour, whether quantitative or qualitative. The theoretical inspiration for this argument is the topic of the following section.

3. The dialectics of belonging and distanciation

How can we move beyond the dualism between insider and outsider, researcher and the researched, observer and the observed, subjectivity and objectivity, understanding and explanation we referred to above? The result of a dichotomous thinking style underlying these rigid binary oppositions (cf. R. Usher 1997, 6) is that *either* one option *or* another has to be defended as the correct one. Fay (1996, 223-228) discusses several of these “pernicious dualisms” in the philosophy of social science, and concludes that a dualistic thinking mode prevails in the philosophy of social science. He therefore urges his readers to adopt a dialectical mode of thinking to move beyond a simplistic, confrontational style.

It is at this point that I would like to introduce the theoretical ideas of Paul Ricoeur, a master of dialectical thinking. "Where others see only dichotomies, Ricoeur sees dialectics", writes Charles E. Reagan (1996, 99). Reagan however quickly draws attention to the fact that Ricoeur's dialectical method never results in "lazy eclecticism" or the mere combination of elements from both poles (cf. Ihde 1995, 64). The result of his dialectical analyses is not a Hegelian third term that renders the original poles useless. Instead, the tension of the original dualism is retained. It is through the employment of his hermeneutic dialectic that Paul Ricoeur has contributed enormously to the methodological debate in the human and social sciences (cf. Hahn 1995).⁹ His contribution to overcome the epistemological dualism between understanding and explanation, and his application of the model of a text to meaningful action are two examples of his outstanding methodological contributions (cf. Reagan 1996, 45-46).

Can Ricoeur also help us to move beyond the dualism of engaged participant/insider and detached observer/outside that we regard as being of methodological significance for empirical research in practical theology? I would like to suggest that his views on the dialectic between belonging and distanciation can indeed help us to overcome this dualism.¹⁰

In his essay on "Science and ideology" Ricoeur (1991, 246-269) discusses the problematic distinction between science and ideology. He argues that a sharp and clear-cut distinction between the social sciences and ideology can only be upheld if these sciences are viewed in a positivist way (Ricoeur 1991, 256). When the positivist criteria for social theory are abandoned (which he argues must be the case because they are untenable), the possibility of an epistemological break between science and ideology is lost: "We cannot play and win on two tables at once; we cannot abandon the positivist model of science to give an acceptable meaning to the idea of social theory, and at the same time take advantage of this model in order to institute an epistemological break between science and ideology" (Ricoeur 1991, 258). Ricoeur further argues that a clear break between science and ideology presupposes a subject capable of total knowledge of ideological differences, a *freischwebende Intelligenz* capable of evaluating ideologies from a non-evaluative and non-subjective stance. With reference to Gadamer's work he says that this creates a dilemma that is impossible to overcome due to the ontological condition of preunderstanding, "the very structure of a being that is never in the sovereign position of a subject capable of distancing itself from the totality of its conditionings" (Ricoeur 1991, 266).

Should we therefore renounce the opposition between science and ideology? In a characteristic fashion of his methodological style (see above)

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Ricoeur rejects this possibility.¹¹ Instead Ricoeur (1991:267-269; cf. Bien 1995:304) presents us with four hermeneutical propositions.

- (1) All objectifying knowledge about ourselves in relation to society, social class, cultural tradition and history is preceded “by a relation of *belonging* upon which we can never entirely reflect” (1991, 267).
- (2) Although objectifying knowledge is always preceded by a relation of belonging, it is not totally dependent on this relation of belonging. It renders absolute knowledge impossible, but *relative autonomy* of objectifying knowledge is still possible due to the factor of *distanciation*. This distanciation that allows for a partial critique (Bien 1995, 304) of ideology also implies a self-distancing, “a distanciation of the self from itself” (Ricoeur 1991, 268). The essence of this proposition is summarised by Ricoeur (1991, 268) in the following statement: “...distanciation, dialectically opposed to belonging, is the condition of possibility of the critique of ideology, not outside or against hermeneutics, but within hermeneutics.”
- (3) Due to distanciation, a critique of ideology can partially free itself from the relation of belonging and can be organised in knowledge. However, this knowledge will always remain incomplete, supported by an interest as Habermas (cf. Habermas 1971) has argued: “It is condemned to remain partial, fragmentary, insular knowledge; its *incompleteness* is hermeneutically founded in the original and unsurpassable condition that makes distanciation itself a moment of belonging” (Ricoeur 1991, 268).
- (4) A critique of ideology is necessary, but this task can never be completed: “Knowledge is always in the process of tearing itself away from ideology, but ideology always remains the grid, the code of interpretation...” (Ricoeur 1991, 269).

Can these hermeneutical principles, and more specifically the dialectic between belonging and distanciation, help us to overcome the dualism implied by the researcher’s role as insider or outsider? My thesis is that the opposite poles of insider and outsider could be dialectically related on the basis of the dialectic between belonging and distanciation. Why? Because the insider/outsider dualism is tied to the same science-ideology dialectic. The intention of both the insider/engaged participant and the outsider/detached observer perspective is to eliminate or at least to reduce ideology. From the insider/engaged participant perspective the aim is to eliminate or to reduce the researcher’s ideological (subjective) interpretations by stressing the importance of the interpretations of the research participants (the researched). The researcher therefore has to immerse him/herself in the life-world(s) of the researched (the moment of belonging) so that their voices (interpretations) are not muted by the researcher’s interpretations. On the other hand: from the outsider/detached observer perspective the aim is to eliminate or to reduce the ideological interpretations (“false consciousness”) of the researched and of the researcher him/herself (the self-distancing

which is implied by distancing). The researcher therefore cannot take the interpretations of the researched at face value, but has to take a critical (objectifying) stance (the moment of distancing).¹²

The hermeneutical dialectic between belonging and distancing is thus at the heart of the methodological dialectic between the insider/engaged participant perspective and the outsider/detached observer perspective. An insider perspective implies belonging to the lifeworlds of the research participants (cf. Habermas 1984, 108), and an outsider perspective presupposes distancing. As with belonging and distancing, we need both these methodological perspectives. If we let go of the insider perspective, if we fail to recognise the “primordial relation of belonging”, the result is an *alienating distancing* (*Verfremdung*) (cf. Ricoeur 1991, 272; 297). On the other hand, if we ignore the outsider perspective, we lose the possibility of a critique of ideology, with the danger of lapsing “into full relativism, into complete historicism” and a killing of research itself (cf. Ricoeur 1991, 265).

4. Methodological implications of the dialectics of belonging and distancing

What are the methodological implications of such a dialectic view of the engaged participant and the detached observer perspectives for empirical research practices in practical theology?¹³ From the conclusion at the end of the previous section one can deduce that the practical theological empirical researcher has to embody the dialectics between belonging (the insider perspective) and distancing (the outsider perspective) in *every* research endeavour, whether quantitative or qualitative. I therefore disagree with the conclusion (see above) that qualitative and quantitative empirical methodologies respectively correspond with the participant and the observer perspectives. However, this does not imply that there are no differences between these two main approaches to empirical research. Due to the nature of quantitative research it will probably involve higher levels of distancing than qualitative research (cf. Morrow 1994, 264). Qualitative research on the other hand, with its high level of interaction between researcher and the researched, will usually involve higher levels of belonging than quantitative research. Nevertheless, whether one conducts quantitative or qualitative research, one has to be both insider and outsider, engaged participant and detached observer.

What does it mean for a researcher to be an *engaged participant*, an insider in every research project? On the basis of Habermas’ arguments (1984, 108) it seems to me to imply that practical theological researchers will have to enter the lifeworld(s) of the researched. We have to seek “to

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honour the integrity of the phenomena we study by trying to meet religious people on their own ground and on their own terms, and by not forcing phenomena into the moulds of our own conceptual schemes” (Krüger 1995, 89). More concretely it implies that we have to familiarise ourselves with the social, cultural, economic and political contexts of those who participate in our research projects. Even when the researcher and the researched share the same cultural and religious milieu it is a difficult task (cf. Krüger 1995, 89). In a multicultural, multireligious context such as South Africa this poses an enormous challenge for practical theological researchers. We have to immerse ourselves in the worlds of the researched, by interacting with them, by learning as much as we can about them, their histories and their religious heritages, and by being sensitive towards their life experiences (cf. Fay 1996, 28). Whether we engage in quantitative or qualitative research projects we have to respect the researched in the research problems we develop, the goals and research questions we formulate, the way in which we collect the data, the interpretations we make and the ways in which we communicate our results. This pole of the dialectic also implies that we engage in dialogical relations (communicative actions) with the researched. Those who participate in our research projects should not be regarded as mere objects of information, but as subjects of communication (cf. Kunneman 1996, 132).

This can be illustrated by means of a research project on the religious and moral values of the youth which was conducted in 1995.¹⁴ Although the research was not undertaken with the dialectics of belonging and distancing in mind, we can retrospectively identify many aspects of this quantitative research project in which we tried to give expression to the moment of belonging.¹⁵ The conceptualisation of the project itself is an expression of our belonging. We did not undertake this research project purely for intellectual or academic reasons. We are concerned about the religious and moral values of the youth of South Africa given the history of South Africa, and would like to contribute towards a new, democratic society in which the different peoples can live together harmoniously. The practical religious and moral concerns underlying this project are an embodiment of our belonging. The moment of belonging can also be seen in the construction of the questionnaire. We have, for example, tried to take the lifeworlds of these students into account by asking questions on violence, human rights, economic justice, abortion, etcetera which are pressing issues in the South African context. We have also tried to conduct the research in a communicative spirit. We personally visited every school in our sample in order to explain the purpose of the project and to gain permission to conduct research. We were also present during the data collection in order to build rapport with the students, to answer their questions, and to observe the different contexts in which the survey was undertaken. The moment of belonging also plays an important role

regarding the analysis and interpretation of the data and the communication of the research results as we have constantly to draw on our understanding of the South African context and the lifeworlds of these students (see Van der Ven, Dreyer & Pieterse 1997a, 1997b and 1997c).

What does it mean for a researcher to take the stance of a *detached observer*, an outsider in every research undertaking? It means, amongst other things, that a researcher cannot be content with the descriptions and interpretations, the commonsense and lay language of the researched. Sayer (1992, 39) says science is redundant if it fails to go beyond a common-sense understanding of the world. Bourdieu (cf. Jenkins 1992, 53) also points out that research subjects' discourse takes much for granted, often remains on the level of the general and reflects a "semi-theoretical disposition" due to their desire to impress. Immediate knowledge thus is an illusion (cf. Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron 1991, 13). Whether we engage in quantitative or qualitative research projects, we have to adopt a critical, reflective stance.¹⁶ More concretely this means, for example, that researchers have to be critical towards the data they have collected, their methodological choices, the research methods they have used and the interpretations they have made (cf. Jenkins 1992, 52). Techniques of objectification such as the logical critique of ideas and statistical testing of spurious self-evidences can be useful to move beyond the illusion of transparency (cf. Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron 1991, 15).

The role of quantification¹⁷ and statistics regarding distanciation can also be illustrated by means of the research project referred to above.¹⁸ We asked the students about their concern for nature, their appreciation of nature, their willingness to act in favour of nature and their willingness to sacrifice for nature. From their responses to these themes we see that they have a very high concern for nature (4.7 on a five point scale), a high appreciation of nature (4.0), and a rather high willingness to act in favour of nature (3.5) and to sacrifice for nature (3.7). Although they can almost be regarded as environmental heroes, this does not mean that they are ecological saints. On the basis of further statistical analyses it became clear that there is no association between the students' ecological attitudes and their religious attitudes.

However, the stance of a detached observer implies more than an objectivating and critical attitude towards research methods, procedures, processes and results. The objectivating and critical attitude should also be directed to the researcher him/herself. The researcher is not standing outside the research relationship as a transparent, rational subject (cf. Kunneman 1996, 131, 133; Dreyer 1997, 21-22), but shares the same epistemological framework with the researched. Due to the ontological condition of preunderstanding (see above) every researcher is also a member of a lifeworld

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that has been intuitively mastered (cf. Habermas 1984, 110). Although this lifeworld can never be fully known, researchers have to reflect critically on their own lifeworlds which they bring into the research situation. To be a detached observer implies that every practical theological researcher must take a reflexive and critical stance regarding his/her cultural, economic, social, and political positions.¹⁹ We have to ask ourselves to what extent our research incorporates the prejudices of the day (cf. Reinhartz 1988, 170). Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 69; cf. Bourdieu 1988) also refers to the necessity of the researcher to be selfcritical, to situate him/herself in social space, “to objectivize his position in the universe of cultural production, in this case the scientific or academic field”, and constantly to guard against the “ethnocentrism of the scientist.” In short, we have to reflect critically on our scientific *habitus* (cf. Bourdieu 1988).

Distanciation also implies that researchers will reflect critically on the metatheoretical and theoretical frameworks that implicitly or explicitly feature in their research. Due to the theological framework of empirical research in practical theology (cf. Van der Ven 1993a) it is of particular importance that researchers be reflective regarding their theological presuppositions. Fuchs (1989), for example, demonstrates how different ecclesiological perspectives lead to different interpretations of the same empirical data, and to different proposals for action. Empirical research by the Allensbach Institute in Germany points to a de-institutionalization and an individualization of religion. From a hierarchical model of the church these results can only be viewed negatively. However, from a pneumatological view of the church the individualization of religion could be seen as an advance and an opportunity as it preserves the fundamental ecclesiastical tension between individual freedom and membership of the community (Fuchs 1989:74-75).

5. Conclusion

Smith and Berg (1988, 9) say it has always been hard for social researchers to know what to do with their selves: “On the one hand there have been voices encouraging us to keep our selves out of our inquiry, to take postures that are distant. On the other hand there are those who suggest we become fully involved, to swim, as it were, in the streams whose currents we wish to know.” We, practical theological researchers who embark on the exciting journey of empirical research, also face this dilemma. The question is: are we willing to take up the challenge to explore the uncharted methodological territories beyond the dualisms of insider and outsider, engaged participant and detached observer to which we have grown accustomed?

NOTES

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2. Porter (1995, 4) calls this view of objectivity "mechanical objectivity." He says that mechanical objectivity has been a favourite of positivist philosophers, and it also has a powerful appeal to the wider public.
3. "In die prentjie wat Popper van die wetenskaplike proses van kennisverwerwing teken, kom die subjektiwiteit van die wetenskaplike ondersoeker op verskeie punte in die spel waar die standaardbeeld juis meen dat dit bewustelik uitgeskakel word, of behoort te word" (Rossouw 1981, 4).
4. This view presupposes that "researchers are subjects in the Cartesian sense — capable of forming rational knowledge in the face of personal, social, political and moral interests and standing outside the social context of the 'objects' of research" (P. Usher 1997, 53). Cf. Bernstein (1983, 115-119) on "The Cartesian legacy."
5. Bernstein (1983, 34-37) describes the role of philosophic hermeneutics, with Heidegger and Gadamer as the main contributors, in this regard. He mentions a number of concepts of Cartesianism which Gadamer, building on the work of Heidegger, subjects to sustained criticism in his *Truth and method*, among them the idea of a basic dichotomy between the subjective and the objective and the idea that human reason can completely free itself of bias, prejudice, and tradition (Bernstein 1983, 36).
6. "The concept of the *life-world* is the antithesis of all objectivism" (Gadamer 1993, 247).
7. Blaikie (1993, 210) maintains that feminism offers the most extreme version of the "involved" perspective.
8. Habermas (1987, 204-205) deals with this methodological problem in terms of the "life-world" and "system" perspectives.
9. He is also an influential figure in practical theological thinking (cf. Dingemans 1996a; Heitink 1993; Pieterse 1993; Van der Ven 1998b). Ricoeur's theory of interpretation (Dingemans 1996a) and his action theory (cf. Hermans 1993; Heitink 1993) have also contributed to the methodology of practical theology.
10. Ricoeur's views on the dialectic between understanding and explanation can also be of value because of the *epistemological* dimension underlying the problem of the relationship between researcher and the researched (see above). However, it seems to me as if the dialectic between belonging and distanciation is more suggestive for the *methodological* dimension of the relationship between researcher and the researched (engaged participant — belonging; detached observer — distanciation).
11. Ricoeur (1991, 263) makes the following interesting remark in this regard: "Must it [the distinction between science and ideology — JSD] be purely and simply renounced? I admit that I have often been very close to thinking so when reflecting on this puzzling issue. Simply to renounce it, however, would be to lose the benefit of a tension that can be reduced neither to a comfortable antithesis nor to a confusing *mélange*."
12. "Distance is a fact; placing at a distance is a methodological attitude" (Ricoeur 1991, 281).
13. Bryman (1988, 174), after a lengthy discussion on quantitative and qualitative research methods, warns that the application of philosophical ideas to social research must not lose touch with the practices and aims of social researchers. Kats (1996, 15) echoes this warning. He says that methodological debates are often at such a high level of abstraction

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that they have little or no influence on the actual research practices, and mentions the “Positivismusstreit” as an example of such a futile debate: “Methodologische hoogstandjes zonder grond oefeningen in het onderzoek leiden tot verstarring. Zo is de vruchteloosheid van de ‘Positivismusstreit’ ... voor het concrete onderzoek haast legendarisch” (Kats 1996, 29).

14. The empirical research project “Religious and moral values of the youth of South Africa” was undertaken by the Department of Practical Theology of the University of South Africa in co-operation with the Department of Empirical Theology of the Catholic University of Nijmegen. A sample survey was conducted in 1995 among 538 students from standard 9 who attend Anglican and Catholic schools in the Johannesburg/Pretoria region. This sample approaches the empirical universum of standard 9 students in schools affiliated to both churches in the Johannesburg/Pretoria region.
15. The aim is not to evaluate to what extent we have succeeded in giving expression to the moment of belonging in this particular project, but to give an example of what this might mean in terms of an actual research project. With hindsight it is possible to identify aspects where we failed to give adequate expression to the moment of belonging.
16. According to Habermas (1984, 122-123; 126) this means that a researcher has to leave his or her natural, performative attitude, and adopt a theoretical attitude, an attitude which is primarily characterised by reflexivity. Bourdieu (cf. Jenkins 1992, 52) speaks of the necessity of “objectification” and “objectification of objectification.”
17. It is interesting to note that Porter (1995, ix) refers to quantification as “a technology of distance.”
18. This example is taken from Van der Ven (1998a).
19. Habermas (1971, 212) writes: “Yet we can methodologically ascertain the knowledge-constitutive interests of the natural and cultural sciences only once we have entered the dimension of self-reflection. *It is in accomplishing self-reflection that reason grasps itself as interested.* Therefore we come upon the fundamental connection of knowledge and interest when we pursue methodology in the mode of the experience of reflection: as the critical dissolution of objectivism, that is the objectivistic self-understanding of the sciences, which suppresses the contribution of subjective activity to the preformed objects of possible knowledge.”

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