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Normative Implications of Designing Empirical Research

Family Research and reflective theological normativity¹

Christoph Morgenthaler

1. Introduction

How can a dialectical relationship between empirical research and theological normativity be established during the planning of a particular project of empirical research? The following article argues that reflective theological normativity can and should influence the design of an empirical study at important points of the planning process. It draws on the systems view of scientific activity proposed as a working model for family research by Lavee & Dollahite (1991). In planning empirical research a number of decisions connected with norms and values must be taken with regard to the selection of research topic, theoretical and methodological approaches as well as the application of research findings. Besides that normativity which is rooted in the consensual knowledge of the scientific community, deployment of a reflective theological normativity can also give to such decisions a critical and disclosive power.

This problem will be discussed with regard to a research project, recently initiated at the Institute of Practical Theology in Bern, concerning rituals in families with young children.² Taking seriously the plural contexts of today's society, the project is aimed at studying the form, content and function of rituals and ritualisations in families of different types, the contextual conditioning of these rituals and their effects on the lives of these children and their families. It focusses on three types of rituals and ritualisations: (1) baptism, representative of a ritual that is simultaneously familial and trans-familial and is celebrated once in a lifetime, (2) Christmas celebrations, representative of inter-familial and season-specific rituals and (3) parents' and children's bedtime interactions, representative of intra-familial and daily rituals.

The project is still in its infancy, so results cannot yet be presented. Instead, I would like to draw the attention of the reader to the importance of theological normativity for *designing* such a research project. "In the beginning" of the research process many decisions must be taken. These contribute in an important way to the creation of the small research world such a project will become. How are theological normativity and empirical research to be related in designing an empirical-theological study? This question is of particular importance for a research project based in the theological department of a state university and ranked with other research projects stemming from various social-scientific disciplines.

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Journal of Empirical Theology* 15 (1), 19-36.

² Our project "Rituals and Ritualisations in Families: Religious Dimensions and Intergenerational References", is part of a national research program called "Childhood, Youth and Intergenerational Relationships in a Changing Society" (NRP 52). It is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and will be realized in col-laboration between the disciplines of religious education (Prof. Maurice Baumann), homiletics/liturgy (Prof. Christoph Müller) and pastoral care (author) 2003-2005.

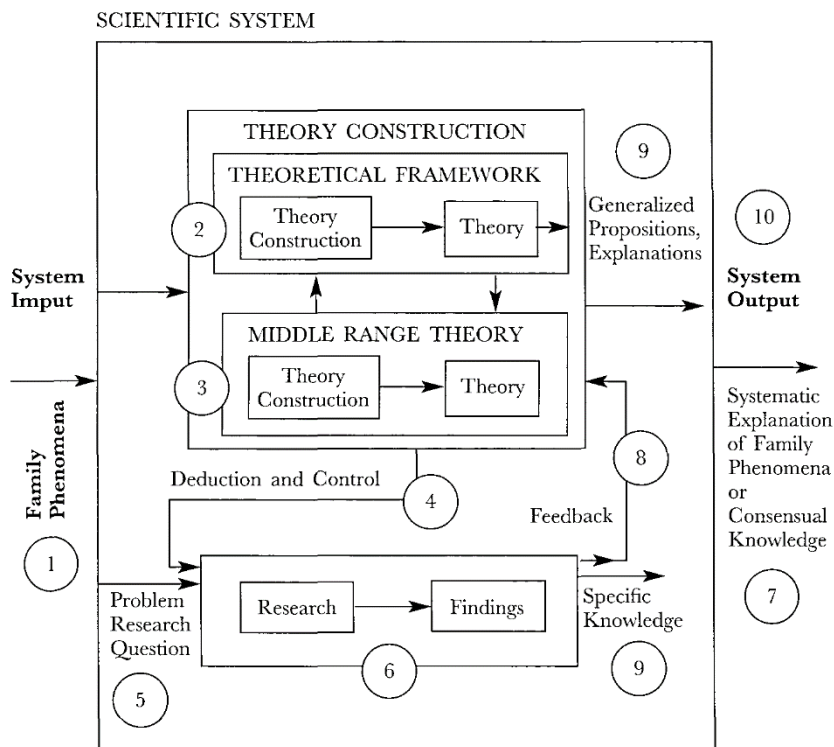


FIGURE 1

2. A Systems View of Scientific Activities in Family Science and its Consequences for the Discussion of Normativity

The relationship between empirical research and normativity is not a new question in family science. It has often been discussed (e.g. Schneewind 1999, p. 87; Klein & White 1996, p. 48): Are propositions of an evaluating and normative type part of scientific family theories or not? The objectives and style of family theories and associated research will vary depending on the answers to this question. This is also true of the problem of relating empirical research to theological normativity in family science. Theology as a discipline develops its own normative criteria (especially in the field of ethics) on the premises of biblical and church traditions. In addition, theology develops frames of interpretation for human activity and human experience in a broader sense, connected to specific claims of truth and validity. These also imply claims to normativity.

If this is so, at precisely which points in constructing the research process do normative criteria emerge? Is it possible as part of the empirical research process to assess adequately the theological influence of normativity? And conversely: Is a normative definition of theology sufficiently open to the empirical influence of research? More adequately: How might empirical research, which understands normativity as its own concern, be related to a theology integrating empirical research as an essential part of its own task? These are the questions I would like to address now.

A systems view of scientific activities in family science will help us to state these problems more clearly. Lavee & Dollahite (Lavee & Dollahite 1991) in their reappraisal of empirical research in family science during the last five decades find that a closer and more explicit mutual relationship between theory and research is of paramount importance for future empirical investigations into new fields of family science. They therefore propose a systems view of scientific activities and review it with regard to empirical research in family science (see Figure 1).

Their systems view of scientific activities in family science brings together three levels or subsystems of scientific activities:

1. theoretical frameworks (TF) or general theories refer to a body of interrelated concepts and propositions about family phenomena in general (such as symbolic interaction, choice and exchange, and general systems theory);
2. middle range or substantive theories (MRT) refer to lower-order theories, more limited in scope, about specific substantive areas (such as mate selection, violence, intergenerational continuity) that are intermediary between the minor hypotheses evolved during the day-to-day routines of research and the master conceptual schemes (TF) of empirical research;
3. empirical research (ER) refers to the various methods of data collection and analysis.

From a systems theory point of view, the scientific process can begin or end at any subsystem. The model therefore describes any scientific activity in family science: building or refining a general theoretical approach, building middle-range theoretical models, and conducting empirical research. Lavee & Dollahite (1991, p. 364) state their central assumption as follows: “Although each subsystem has its output, which may be of value in and by itself, a continuous feedback loop among the system’s components is necessary for the system’s optimum operation. In other words, each component in the system is able to generate some information about family phenomena, but it is the interaction among the components that leads to a systematic explanation of family phenomena”. Each step of the scientific scrutiny of a specific family problem – i.e. choice of unit of study, of variables and measures, of research methods, of methods of data analysis and presentation of research – must be guided and controlled by theory. Lavee & Dollahite (1991, p. 370) come to the following conclusion: Research, as good as it may be, “is only a part of the scientific cycle and is only able to supply limited information. It is theory that gives meaning to research findings, and it is theory that enables the development of systematic consensual explanation of family phenomena”.

While it is impossible to go into their argument in more detail, I find their systems model of scientific activities useful for formalising and explicating decisions that need to be taken in designing an empirical study such as ours. The selection of the components of the model and the ways of connecting these components each mirror decisions which have to be taken in scientific research. The actual operation of the system of scientific activities presented by Lavee & Dollahite always implies a selection of specific scientific activities and of couplings (“Koppelungen”) between selected activities. Each step of selection of systemic components and couplings is connected with values, norms and rules. Depending on the selection and coupling of the components and their pragmatic transformation in specific research strategies, different types of research emerge. Ten points at which such decisions are taken and choices between possibilities are made are identified here (see Figure 1).

1. Decisions at the level of the selection of phenomena to be studied: Which phenomena are selected? What norms and values guide these decisions (why investigate, to take but one example, religious influences of families rather than religious influences of education at school)?
2. Decisions at the level of TF: Which fundamental theoretical stances are selected (shall we draw on functional or symbolic-interactional theories in our understanding of families)?
3. Decisions at the level of MRT: Which middle-range theories are selected for developing hypotheses and explaining family phenomena (for example, MRT pertaining to solidarity or to ambivalence, see below p. XY)?
4. Decisions pertaining to the co-ordination of theory and empirical research: How are theory and empirical research connected (for example: “theory first, then empirical research” or the “composite approach” according to Lavee & Dollahite 1991, p. 365)?
5. Selection of specific research questions: Why and how are specific research questions selected (bedtime versus dinnertime ritualisations)?

6. Conception of empirical research: Decisions with regard to methodology, variables, methods of analysis, etc.
7. Type of knowledge: What type of knowledge is chosen as the objective of the research? Is it knowledge of the interpretative or of the explanatory type, or should we connect interpretation and explanation?
8. Feedback loops between theory and research: Are such feedback loops built into the research strategy? Where and how? What is their function? (bottom-up versus top-down/bottom-up feedback loops)
9. Level of output: At what level of abstraction should the output of the research be formulated (theoretical formalisation of a problem versus “substantive” output concerning a specific problem of family science, such as intergenerational transmission of religion)?
10. Application of knowledge: How is the knowledge produced by empirical research to be applied? Is this stated in an explicit or implicit way?

With these aspects in mind, we can now show how theological normativity and empirical research must be related to each other at certain points of designing a particular study. In the following, I will look more closely at four of these aspects.

3. Theological Normativity and Inputs to Empirical Research

How are empirical research and normativity connected in a social context? Let us focus first on the input side of the system of scientific activities. How is this input of family phenomena into scientific research managed? Indisputably, what appears to be a “problem” is structured and filtered through the social, political and historical context shaping “family phenomena”. On the other hand, the system of scientific activity itself also works in a selective manner. Scientific paradigms, traditions of scientific work, control mechanisms of the scientific community and so on influence the selection of phenomena. This is not at all a formal and value-neutral process. Rather, it is the first point where the dialectic of empirical research and normativity comes into the open (see figure 1, point 1).

Our research project, too, is situated in a social-historical and political context favouring (or hindering) adequate politics concerning family research. Family research and politics in Switzerland are not currently as well developed as in many countries of the EU. This ought to be changed. Early in the year 2002, the Swiss National Science Foundation launched a new national research program entitled “Childhood, Youth and Intergenerational Relationships in a Changing Society” (SNSF 2002). The declared objective is “to shed new light on the living conditions and the needs of children and adolescents in Switzerland, and how these may evolve in the future” (p. 4). Our team has applied to this program for the public funding of its research project.

But can theology contribute to a better understanding of the living conditions of children and adolescents? It is noteworthy that theology is not once mentioned as a scientific discipline in the implementation plan, and churches appear under the rubric of clubs and societies! The problem is fundamental: Theological research trying to promote itself in the context of the scientific policy of a secular state must yield results that are of tangible pragmatic relevance for a welfare policy. What are the implications of this? Are theology and empirical research in theology relevant only insofar as they are useful? Should empirical research in theology become the dumb-waiter for state research interests by trying to prove its usefulness to a welfare policy? Or is it important that theology stresses the “non-functional” aspects of religion, its own and unique normativity?

Let me outline a possible response at a particular point of the project. The national research program not only puts a theme on the agenda of the scientific disciplines, but also a specific perspective: It “aims to investigate the living conditions and needs of children and adolescents in Switzerland. It

assumes as a basic premise that the young can actively contribute to shaping their living environment, and should do so” (SNSF 2002, p. 5). What does "compliance with objectives", which is stated as one of the decisive criteria for the evaluation of the projects by the research board, mean in this case?

Figure 2. The interplay between contextual normativity and theological normativity

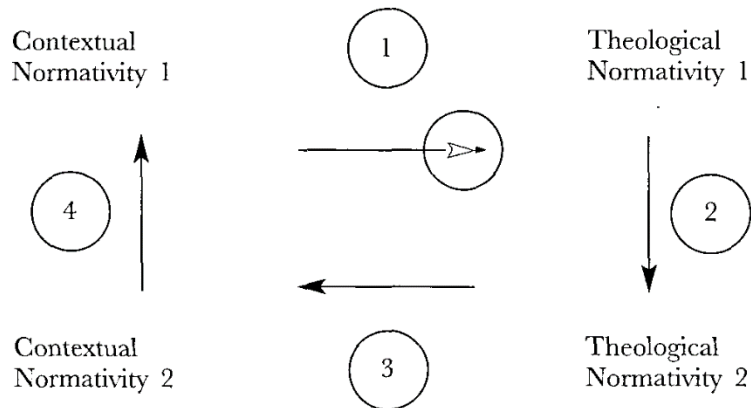


FIGURE 2

The project’s research objective itself is presented as a normative judgement. Not only can the young actively contribute to shaping their living environment, but they “should do so”. This is a good example of normativity inherent in a social context and resulting from a social-political process leading to a research policy. The problem can now be restated as follows: Are norms that are implicit in contextual expectations of social-scientific research, such as appear in this implementation plan, compatible with theological normativity? What is the appropriate relationship between social and theological normativities at this point? In seeking an answer, I propose that a constructive relationship between social and theological normativity could be conceptualised as a four-step process (see figure 2).

First step: Careful theological analysis of normative implications in the social expectations for the research (contextual normativity 1). What does it mean for theological thinking if the implementation plan stresses the perspective of children and their ability and right to shape their environment? How well prepared is theology to take this perspective as possible for its own thinking about family and intergenerational relations? I cannot discuss this question at length. But consider what Marcia Bunge (2001) writes on the current state of theological reflection on children in her introduction to a seminal volume with the title *The Child in Christian Thought* (in the Religion, Family, and Marriage Series edited by D. Browning and others). “In the first place, until very recently, issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology” (p. 3). And later: “However without further knowledge about what the church yesterday and today has said about children, and without focused attention on children in contemporary theology, it is easy to assume that what Christian theology offers to contemporary reflection on children is at best irrelevant and at worst destructive” (p. 5). I think it is important for theology, and for an adequate positioning of theological normativity, that normative claims appearing in the social context of research should be taken as a serious challenge for the theological thinking and rethinking of normativity (theological normativity 1). How can theology contribute in a meaningful way to the social discourse about children, their rights, unique perspectives and contributions to the shaping of their living environment, if it is as badly prepared for that task as Bunge argues?

This leads us to the *second step*: the “reworking” and reprocessing of theological normativity within the theological debate itself, of its guiding metaphors and theological frameworks, and of the corresponding ethical consequences (theological normativity 2). This is essentially the purpose and scope of the volume just mentioned: “to offer a critical examination of past theological perspectives on

children in order to strengthen ethical and theological reflection on children today and to contribute to the current academic and broader public discussion on children” (BUNGE 2001, P. 7). Theological re-evaluation of original sin with respect to children, but also of children as models of faith could, as some of the articles in Bunge’s volume argue, lead to a critical re-evaluation of the ambivalence in children’s own activities.

This leads to the *third step*: Such a reshaping of theological normativity leads to refined categories of normativity pertaining to the problem at hand (contextual normativity 2). “Children at times devote themselves to activities that are not always life-giving but instead are self-centered and harmful to themselves and others” Bunge 2001, p. 19). This theologically informed perspective on childhood could lead to a careful reconsideration of “the responsibilities of children and the possible level of their accountability” (ibid.). In turn this could inspire critical questions concerning the normativity implicit in a research policy. Yes, children are able to shape their environment. But do they always shape it in a life-giving way? How can they become the responsible actors they are supposed to be, and what if they do not act in a responsible way? How can we avoid turning them into little adults again, as they were regarded — not always to their advantage! — for centuries, as theology reminds us? And how can we strengthen the responsibility of parents and adult society in such a way that children can be valued as active agents in their life worlds — and accepted as dependent, imperfect, sometimes volatile beings too? Such theologically informed questions could be fed back into the continuing discussion process within the research context. This would help to alter and refine the normative categories implied in the research policy (*step 4*). In this way, theology would contribute, in a critical discussion, to the reworking of contextual normativity. This leads us back to step 1, but on a new level of reflection.

Dreyer (1998) posed the dialectic of belonging and separateness as a fundamental working principle of empirical research in Practical Theology. Is the four-step model just presented not another embodiment of this dialectic of belonging and separateness on the level of the normative implications of empirical theology stressed in Dreyer's article? In some ways Steps 1 and 2 mirror the position of theology as a participant in modernity, meeting normative social claims to research on their own ground. In Steps 3 and 4 this gives way to a distancing, critical movement toward normative reflection. Theological reprocessing of social norms leads to a distancing from social expectations, fuelling new research perspectives in the light of Christian traditions.

This clarification is important for the start of any research process. Consequences for our project could be drawn as follows: It is an interesting scientific, theological and methodological challenge to look at ritualisations and rituals from a new perspective: How do children contribute as actors to the formation of family rituals? How do they shape this part of their living environment? And in what way is their contribution to the construction of such ritualisations – like the contribution of their parents – ambivalent, at times constructive and at times destructive? Such a shift of perspective could also be of help both in theological reflection and in empirical research. As Bunge (2001, p. 10) says with regard to the history of Christian thinking about children: “Just as when scholars have used gender as a category of analysis for understanding the past, when one uses the category of children... one is able to disclose neglected areas in the history of Christianity.” Taking up this change in perspective, we could add that empirical research might disclose areas in the contemporary practice of Christianity neglected to date. It might be, to highlight but one idea, that as active members of our societies children contribute in a much more extensive way to intergenerational transmission and shifts in religion than we ever realized.

4. Theological Normativity and the System of Scientific Activities

How, then, can our question be stated with regard to the internal dynamics of the whole system of scientific activities? This is my second question. Here, the problem is more delicate. How important

is normativity, and specifically theological normativity, within the system000? The model presented by Lavee & Dollahite highlights the problem by stating it in terms of systems theory. From a systems point of view it is obvious that science is governed by its own rules and is coupled only structurally with its context; in other words, science has its own logic and cannot be directly instructed by the context (as theories of autopoietic systems put the problem). Is there still a place for theological normativity within this system? My answer is: yes. Points at which important decisions in the research process are made were highlighted in Figure 1 (Points 2-8). Normativity also plays a role within the system of scientific activities at each of these points. I select two of these intersections of normativity and empirical research for a short discussion.

4.1 The Selection of Appropriate MRT (figure 1, point 3)

How are family phenomena transformed into “explained family phenomena”, as Lavee/Dollahite describe the fundamental procedure of empirical research? I believe this transformation cannot take place without reference to middle-range theories. They help to conceptualise problems in a form that is both meaningful in relation to broader theoretical frameworks and accessible to empirical research through the refutation of specific hypotheses.

Let me show how this is relevant to one aspect of our study. One of the perspectives proposed in the implementation plan is that intergenerational relations should stand centre-stage in research. We take up this perspective in centring the research on ritualisations in parent-child interactions. Now, in what ways can these intergenerational relations be conceptualised and placed in a theoretical perspective? One important strand in the empirical study of intergenerational relations stresses intergenerational solidarity (see for example an influential series of articles and books by Bengtson and colleagues, Bengtson & Harootyan 1994, Silverstein & Bengtson 1997): positive emotions between generations, consensus, shared values across generations, commitment to mutual assistance. This approach was criticised as overly biased in a positive way. It cannot really account for other aspects in intergenerational relations, such as isolation, conflict, abuse, love-hate relationships, emphasised in a second line of research (Marshall et al. 1993). Lüscher & Pillemer (1998) propose ambivalence as a third and more useful concept: Societies and the individuals within them are ambivalent about relationships between parents and children. “Intergenerational relations generate ambivalences. That is, the observable forms of intergenerational relations (among adults) can be social-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences” (p. 414). Ambivalence has two aspects: it includes both ambivalence at the social, structural level and the contradictory perceptions and subjective experiences of individuals. The relevance of these MRTs for our study is obvious. It is through theoretical transformations that ritualized parent-child interactions observable at a certain time of the day become objects for empirical research. Depending on the theoretical perspective applied, the need for interpretation is focused in different directions. If parent-child-interactions are scrutinised in the light of the premise of intergenerational solidarity, research questions will appear as follows: What is the contribution of early ritualised parent-child interactions to the foundation of intergenerational solidarity? How do ritualisations contribute to the promotion of mutuality, positive emotion, shared values? If parent-child interactions are studied from the point of view of ambivalence, research questions, hypotheses and the need for interpretation shift in another direction: How do forms of intergenerational ambivalence appear in parent-child-relationships? How are they rooted in social-structural factors such as the “dynamic organization of norms and counter-norms” (Lüscher & Pillemer 1998, p. 415) attached to the roles of mothers or fathers, for example? Do ritualisations contribute to an adequate handling of such ambivalences? Has their function changed during the past few decades? Were they (and the connected forms of religion) validating solidarity in older generations, while in contemporary families they help parents and children with the management of ambiguity?

On what suppositions do we now base our selection of one middle-range theory or another? I think that here again, normativity and specifically theological normativity are key. This is not undisputed.

Some would say that such decisions must be made on the basis of norms immanent to scientific research: productive development of theory, adequacy with regard to the research topic, economy of assumptions, power of explication could be cited as criteria. Differing theories can themselves be put to the empirical test through the establishment of research strategies that help to decide between them on empirical grounds.

But I hold that the categorisation of intergenerational relations by differing theories has normative implications far beyond these purely scientific criteria. It could be argued that Lüscher & Pillemer's (1998) assumption of ambivalence is of greater value because of its greater complexity, which is more adequate to the complexities of roles and role-enactment in the post-modern age and to the social conflict zones which cut right through family life today. There is also a range of anthropological assumptions underlying this decision. Lüscher & Pillemer (1998) try to integrate two traditions of thinking about human relations and the human capacity to relate: a pessimistic view of man as "homo homini lupus" (man is the wolf of man) on the one hand, and an optimistic view of man as capable of fundamentally positive social contracts on the other, two grounding figures in European tradition of thinking since Hobbes and Rousseau.

Why do we prefer ambivalence as an organising concept for the purpose of our study? In addition to the arguments already cited, theological normativity once again comes into play at this point. We prefer ambivalence because of problems put forward by theology, especially feminist theology, connected with the other possible principles. Take as an example the term "solidarity". Christian theology and ethics have always sympathised with a solidarity view of intergenerational relations. However, feminist critique of this ethical concept has clearly shown that this view is connected in important ways with roles women are thought to take over in family life. As a matter of fact, women are the ones who usually bear the burden of activities aimed at strengthening this intergenerational solidarity. A theoretical stance favouring solidarity is liable to hide this fact and even to validate it within the frame of reference of a theological normativity that has been central to Christian thinking for a long time. This holds true as well for interpretations of sin as a form of autonomy, which again have a strong bias in traditional Christian thinking (Plaskow 1975; Miller-McLemore 1996). Sin in alternative feminist thinking, however, has been reinterpreted in terms of over-dependency and loss of autonomy in relations. Ambivalence as a category at least gives room for the dynamic of norms and counter-norms within social roles. This is not insignificant for the empirical study of parent-child interactions. Take the example of the interaction of mother and child. To interpret it in terms of the categories of solidarity, compassion and affection alone is likely to underestimate the dynamic of the role of being "also a mother" (Miller-McLemore 1994 referring to the pressure on women to perform in all spheres of life and be maternal too in today's society). To interpret it in this way is also liable to take solidarity as the main theological norm, a theological operation with a longstanding "holy" tradition, certainly, but with a long tradition of implicit and explicit oppression of women, too. A dialectical relation between concepts chosen for empirical research and critical theological thinking can shed critical light on possible negative and oppressive effects of such categorisation, and has also a power of disclosure for the perception of the empirical reality of child-mother interactions.

4.2 The Selection of Research Instruments (figure 1, point 6)

Which research strategies are chosen for a specific study? What methods of computing the results of empirical research do we prefer? In what ways do the subjects of empirical research control the data they help to generate? Decisions on questions of this nature are influenced by criteria immanent to the system of scientific activities. They depend on the consensual knowledge of the scientific community about adequate methodologies in connection with specific research questions, on selection of TF and MRT, on technical know-how and the availability of resources, to cite but a few important criteria. But I hold that normativity and specifically theological normativity are again important at this point of the research process.

To take but one example, we would like to use video recording and playback of bedtime routines, ritualisations and rituals as a methodological approach. What are the implications of this? Such video recordings seem technically feasible. Families become accustomed to such recordings. Techniques of analysis are available. Control over the recordings can be carefully handled and ethical standards respected. So where is the problem? Let me put it in this way: Is it right to make intimate moments of interaction between parents and children into objects of scientific scrutiny? Is it right to engage parents and children in the playback and interpretation of their own ritualisations? How does this methodological operation influence the actual “object” of research, the ritualised interactions between parents and children and the way these ritualised interactions are conceptualised, analysed and interpreted by the researcher? In other words: What is the impact of the “scientific ritualisation” of video playback on day-to-day family ritualisations? For “ritual” is not a category applying only to bedtime ritualisations. In many ways it applies to scientific procedures too. Methodologies are not only formal procedures. They affect their objects. And objects at times affect methodologies. Since I cannot delve into the details of this problem, let me explore just one corner of it.

Theoretical approaches to ritual have a long history. These approaches can be classified, very roughly, into three types of reasoning: The first type aims at restoring rituals as a way of restoring the normative foundations of society, in order to compensate for modernisation with its by-products of disintegration, desolidarisation and the decay of values (see as an example Jons 1997). The second type, most prominently held by Habermas, aims at clarifying those effects of ritual practices which were for a long time not accessible to reason, but which must be clarified in order to save the project of modernity from breakdown. In other words, modernity should be able to integrate the ritually sanctioned normative consensus of pre-modern times into the rational affirmation of domination-free discussion and socially accepted values (Habermas 1981, p. 118f.). The third type of theorising tries to overcome the alternative of either a forced autonomization of the human subject or the restoration of ritually sanctioned forms of community by centring reflection on the relation of subjectivity to the alterity of the “Other” symbolized in rituals. “Rituals are not in themselves the strange and the other, but they mediate the relation to such spheres and as places of boundary experiences they reflect the enigmatic shine of the totally other falling back onto them, giving them a mysterious character”, as Wimmer & Schäfer (1998, p. 13) put it.

What is the significance of this for our study? The choice of an analytical methodology appears to be connected in important ways to this question of the interpretation of rituals. What is the objective of our study on a deep level of analysis? Do we intend to generate knowledge about ritualised parent-child interactions, with the hope of finding ways to re-ritualize intergenerational relationships? Or are we, on the contrary, trying to shed the light of rational analysis onto a realm of intergenerational relationships that resists rational understanding, even in modernity and post-modernity? Or do we assume that ritualisations in parent-child interactions reflect the strange dimension of alterity, of a third party, of incommensurability in human interaction? And is video recording and playback compatible with the first, the second or the third approach? We have not yet come to a conclusion. Probably we will not do so before we have carefully considered the relation of this question to theological normativity again.

As the two examples just mentioned show, the dialectic of empirical research and critical theological reflection is indeed relevant for the discussion of decisions within the system of scientific activities. As theories of autopoietic systems state the challenge, this discussion cannot be initiated from without but only from within the boundaries of this system of scientific activities. Tracy (1981, pp. 14-21) argues that theology as an academic discipline must develop the power of its “analogical imagination” also with regard to the academic public. One way of doing this could well be the critical theological discussion of the intricacies, details and decisions of empirical research. Naming and reflecting normative implications of empirical research could well be a way of influencing the system of scientific activities from *within* its boundaries and could become an important arena of the deployment of analogical theological imagination as a form of public theology.

5. Theological Normativity and the Output of Empirical Research (Figure 1, Point 10)

Let us come back in a last step to the context of empirical research in theology. This context is important in shaping and influencing normative social expectations to empirical research. I have tried to show this on the input side of our research project. What role does normativity play at the other end of the queue, on the output side of empirical research? It seems a consensus widely accepted today in family research that values and norms influence application-oriented empirical research. Schneewind (1999), to cite but one example, believes this to be the case with respect to the legitimation of research objectives, the transformation of empirically laden theories for the sake of scientifically sound interventions in families, the assessing of implementation and the evaluation of interventions. “The critical point is... the legitimation of objectives which is not fed by an explicative or interpretative version of social science alone but is dependent ultimately on definitions and explications of other disciplines such as theology, social philosophy, ethics, pedagogy, politics, economy” (p. 89).³

We state the objective of our research project as follows: Processes of ritualisation will be empirically described, and their transmission and function within family life made clear. How their formation can be influenced by the practice of churches will be demonstrated. The study will show how children and their parents can be stabilised and inspired to mutual, just and life-enhancing relationships by the creative practice of institutionalised and familial rites and rituals.

This is an objective with a clear normative component. Again, we could legitimate it with reference to the objectives of the Swiss research programme “Childhood, Youth and Intergenerational Relationships in a Changing Society”, which states that studies “should provide practical bases and innovative suggestions to strengthen the family and extrafamilial infrastructures – municipal, cantonal and federal – required for children and adolescents to thrive” (SNSF 2002, p. 4). But again, theological normativity can provide a helpful frame for empirical research with application-oriented normative goals.

I will say only a few words concerning this point. What is the main topic of empirical research within theology? Van der Ven referred (in the very first issue of JET 1988) to the formal object of empirical theology being the dialectical relation between what religious praxis is and what it should be. It is — to use a genuinely theological symbol — the psychological reflection and formation of the communicative practice of the Gospel in our societies from the perspective of liberation in the kingdom of God (Van der Ven 1994, pp. 76ff.). Theology is not only interested in reality as it is. It is also interested in reality as it could be, in reality in transformation, in reality that has still to come into being. It is interested in reality in the light of a transformed future symbolised by the kingdom of God.

Empirical research is value-laden because it serves social objectives, whether they are made transparent or not. Empirical research in theology is — in a similar, but more specific way — inherently value-laden because it inscribes itself into this perspective of transformation of the kingdom of God. It makes explicit its own normative assumptions concerning mutual, just and life-enhancing human relationships in the transforming perspective of the kingdom of God. And it tries to contribute to the continuing transformation of reality in a changing society in an inspiring and life-giving way.

The three decisions made in the foregoing discussion mirror in some ways this perspective of the kingdom of God. Children should be seen as participants in the humanising transformation of reality. Family relationships should be seen as fundamentally ambivalent. They can foster mutual, just and life-enhancing relationships, within and beyond family. But their idolisation, their twists and abysses should also be seen and criticised from the point of view of justice and liberation in the kingdom

³ Translation by author: “Kritischer Punkt ist ... die Legitimation von Zielen, die sich nicht aus einem erklärenden oder verstehenden Wissenschaftsverständnis speist, sondern letztlich auf die Festlegungen und Begründungen anderer Disziplinen und Instanzen, wie Theologie, Sozialphilosophie, Ethik, Pädagogik, Politik oder Wirtschaft, angewiesen ist” (Schneewind 1999, 89).

which has come and is still to come. Ritualisations in parent-child interactions can be empirically investigated, because there is no theological reason or need to sacralise the family by its re-ritualisation and immunisation to reason. But methodologies should be used or modified in such a way that the possible alterity of the experience of the participants hinting at a dimension of liberation beyond human possibilities is not destroyed.

6. Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw? Considering what has been said, the first conclusion is this: Reflecting on the relationship between empirical research and theological normativity is of particular importance at the design stage of an empirical study. Secondly, the systems view of scientific activity presented by Lavee & Dollahite (1991) is a helpful tool for clarifying the normative implications of empirical research in theologically informed family science. Thirdly, there is ample room for theological normativity in empirical research, provided the normative implications of empirical research are adequately brought into the open through rational discussion. I hold that theological normativity functions best when its dialectical relation to empirical research is explicated at important points of such research, and when its power of disclosure is combined with sound and reflected empirical strategies. The fourth conclusion therefore is this: besides normativity rooted in the consensual knowledge of the scientific community, normativity connected with other basic social values and norms, mediated through academic disciplines such as theology, influences the process of empirical research at every stage. In order to take this influence into full account I propose an enlarged model of Lavee & Dollahites' (1991) systems view of scientific activity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. A systems view of theological normativity and empirical research

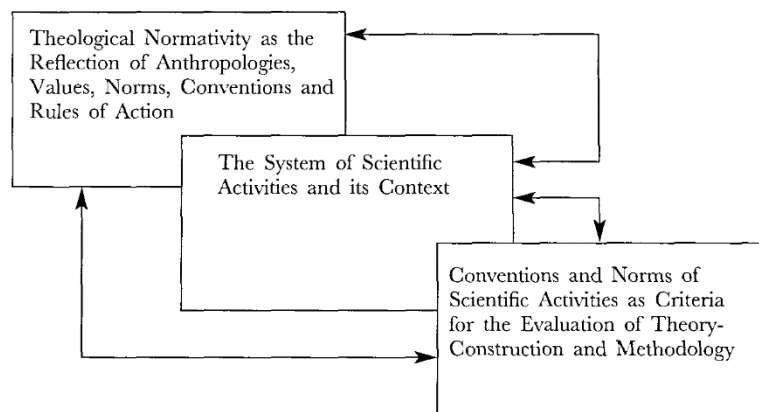


FIGURE 3

There are again three inter-related levels in this model. Social scientists and “empirical” theologians act on these three levels. In their day-to-day work they set in motion the system of scientific activity. In doing this, they are in some ways citizens of two or more different communities with differing normative obligations. They belong to the scientific community with its guiding root metaphors and its normative regulation of scientific action, and they are citizens of other public communities they belong to with their own peculiar normative expectations and regulations, for example churches or political parties. Reflection on these normative obligations not only enhances the quality of ethical reflection in empirical research but also widens its disclosive power. Such personal reflection and the handling of the role-strain associated with tension between differing loyalties is part and parcel of scientific work as I understand it.

My fifth and last conclusion is this: Empirical research and theology are in some ways complementary systems of scientific activity: In theory theology stresses the importance of normativity for human life. There can be no meaningful human action without respect for values and norms. Yet it tends in its actual performance to neglect the mediation of normativity to empirical reality. Research as it is carried out in the social sciences stresses the importance and intricacies of the human relationship to “reality”. There can be no successful human action without adequate knowledge of this reality. Yet it tends in its actual performance to neglect the reflection of normativity implied in its procedures. Thus, theology and empirical research can both draw strength from a higher degree of co-operation.

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