1

Practice Matters

New Directions in Ethnography and Qualitative Research

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I trace my own nascent interest in ethnography and pastoral care back to 1993, when I attended the famous Re-imagining conference sponsored by the Ecumenical Decade Committee for Churches in Solidarity with Women, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There I participated in my first anti-racism workshop, where personal experiences of racism were poignantly described and blatant instances of racism in the media were dissected. I remember feeling overwhelmed by emotion and asking the leaders of the workshop what I could do, as a white woman, to make a difference. The leaders gave me a surprising answer: learn more about your own ethnicity. Ever the literalist, I took this on in graduate school, where I conducted an ethnographic study of Italian Catholic devotional practices in Mary, Star of the Sea parish in San Pedro, California (Moschella, 2008a). Through immersion in one Italian American community, a picture of the people’s lives, faith, and practices began to appear. Through studying the history of immigration, I saw how the process of Italian immigrants becoming American in the early to mid-20th century was clearly linked to a process of “becoming white.” My research helped me understand how discrimination and racism have persisted in the US and how these forces can be challenged or supported by religious practices. This research experience also convinced me that pastoral care itself must be reimagined if it is to be a truly liberating endeavor.

For me, engaging in an ethnographic study was a transformative experience, and one that set the stage for my work in developing a methodology for pastoral ethnography (Moschella, 2008b). I soon discovered that I was not alone in reaching toward this new approach and that I was participating in a growing trajectory of scholarship employing qualitative research as a means toward pastoral (or practical) theological ends. In this chapter, I will offer a brief
history of this trajectory in the field of pastoral theology, with some attention to the wider discipline of practical theology as well. I will then describe a number of recent, exemplary studies within this trajectory, grouping them into three streams of work, and noting how the issues animating the broader field of qualitative research have echoes and analogues in pastoral research. The three streams include: ethnographic and qualitative research that illuminates and invigorates pastoral practices; the work of the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network of scholars that focuses on the intersection between theology and ecclesial practices; and narrative qualitative studies. These three streams are not exhaustive; neither are they entirely discrete, as will become evident. Many of the exemplary studies I reference demonstrate the overlapping concerns, methods, and goals in each category. Nevertheless, this broad classification helps illumine the contours of pastoral scholars’ current questions, goals, and contributions. Following this exploration of the literature, I will make a case for the importance of qualitative research in pastoral theology and care, arguing that practice matters, and that exploring actual practice is in fact central to the field’s stated identity of “constructive theology growing out of the exercise of caring relationships” (Mission Statement, *Journal of Pastoral Theology*). In the last section, I will address future directions in this research trajectory, articulating my particular interest in the development of the third research stream, narrative qualitative research, and its burgeoning creative, therapeutic, and prophetic capacities.

**Development of the Research Trajectory**

The qualitative research trajectory in pastoral theology and care participates in a broader “turn to culture” in theological and religious studies that can be seen in the work of historians, ethicists, systematic theologians, and biblical scholars.1 Timothy Snyder offers an apt description of this pronounced shift:

> The turn to culture in academic theology has recovered its incarnational, or embodied, nature, which has at times been obscured by the abstract and universalizing tendencies of theological reflection in the post-Enlightenment era. Most of all, it reintroduced a creative tension between the particular and the universal in theological reflection. (Snyder, 2014)

Don Browning helped set the stage for pastoral and practical theologians to participate in this turn to culture with his emphasis on social and cultural description (Browning, 1991). Robert Schreiter’s work (1985) on local theologies embraces an inter-connected view of theology and culture. Elaine Graham
(1996) illuminates the transformational and revelatory dimensions of practice, highlighting the “creative tension” of which Snyder speaks, and arguing for an interpretive rather than prescriptive role for pastoral and practical theologians.

John Patton’s description of the communal contextual paradigm of care, along with his image of the pastoral caregiver as a “mini-ethnographer” (Patton, 2005, p. 43) encourages pastors and scholars alike to pay careful attention to the lives of persons and communities in order to be able to practice genuinely helpful pastoral care. At the same time, multiple contributions of scholars of color, feminists, womanists, and others from under-represented or marginalized social groups have challenged the pastoral field to recognize the dominant cultural paradigms embedded in the literature that do not adequately represent their lived religious experiences. Their focus on the cultural contexts of care, now routine in introductory pastoral theology and care courses, spurred the need for new methodologies in pastoral research.

The field of congregational studies provided impetus and resources for the pastoral trajectory in qualitative research by emphasizing the study of congregations in their complex social and geographic ecologies (Ammerman et al., 1998; Eiesland, 2000). Participatory action research, with its emphasis on community-based research for the purpose of social change, is a related approach that practical theologians have taken up with vigor (Cameron et al., 2010; Conde-Frazier, 2012). My work on ethnography as a pastoral practice brings ethnographic principles and methods to the practice of pastoral care (Moschella, 2008b). To date, numerous scholars from pastoral and practical theology as well as other theological fields have been engaging in qualitative research studies linked to theological reflection (Scharen and Vigen, 2011).

Similarly, the teaching of ethnography and qualitative research in theological schools has been expanding dramatically. Once the sole purview of sociology of religion, such courses are now taught by pastoral, practical, and systematic theologians, ethicists, field education supervisors, clinical pastoral educators, and others. Susan Willhauck (2016), in research funded by Wabash, found that qualitative research methods are being taught in more than 50 theological schools in the US and Canada alone.

I argue that the disciplined study of religious practices is one way of keeping pastoral scholars and practitioners accountable to the people in the ecclesial, social, and political worlds we address. In pastoral theology, in particular, we need to be informed about the particular practices and experiences of a wide array of culturally and religiously diverse persons, congregations, and communities. Rather than prescribing overly general theories of care, we need the wisdom that can only come from close exploration of lived theology and practice. The qualitative research trajectory helps us reclaim the central importance of listening, of attending to people in their
socio-cultural particularity, and allowing ourselves to learn from the people who share their stories with us.

The Field of Qualitative Research

This trajectory in pastoral theological research has required us to adapt the methodological resources of the broader field of qualitative research. In their Introduction to *The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2011) review the various research paradigms animating that field. Rehearsing the history of debates among proponents of quantitative, positivist, constructivist, and critical theory paradigms, the authors show how forms of resistance to qualitative research still loom over the field. While many quantitative researchers regard qualitative studies as “unreliable, impressionistic, and not objective” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 9), qualitative researchers assert the value of studying “the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 2). These tensions linger, contributing to a range of interpretive paradigms within qualitative research, ranging from positivist/postpositivist, constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, cultural studies, to queer theory (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 13). Each of these approaches has distinct criteria for evaluation, theories of analysis, and types of narration. Denzin and Lincoln stress that the politics of interpretation must always be kept in view. They write:

> The interpretive practice of making sense of one’s findings is both artistic and political. Multiple criteria for evaluating qualitative research now exist, and those we emphasize stress the situated, relational, and textual structures of the ethnographic experience. There is no single interpretive truth. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 15)

Denzin and Lincoln’s postmodern perspective, though still contested, finds echoes in much of the current work in pastoral and practical theology.

Such multiple interpretive paradigms can be seen in the three streams of ethnography and qualitative research that I describe below. These streams include: research in pastoral ethnography and qualitative research designed to illuminate and invigorate pastoral practices; the work of the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network, with its focus on theology; and qualitative studies that emphasize the development of alternative, justice-oriented narratives. In each stream there are slightly different embedded values concerning not only the subject(s) of the research, but also the methods of evaluation, analysis, and narration. Norwegian practical theologian Tone Stangeland Kaufman, describing the “conundrum” of theologically motivated qualitative research, calls such embedded values, “theory-laden practices with inherent normative dimensions” (2016, p. 146). It is also important for pastoral theologians to recognize the political dimensions of interpretation.
Pastoral Ethnography and Qualitative Research

The first broad stream of pastoral work with this trajectory employs qualitative research in order to elucidate and invigorate pastoral practices. The term “pastoral ethnography” implies the intention that the research process itself is conducted in such a way as to honor the voices of the participants, embody ethical regard in research relationships, and facilitate the participants’ increasing agency in their collective theology and practice (Moschella, 2008b). This work is often conducted by religious insiders (including but not limited to Christians) who acknowledge that they incorporate their theological values and questions into the research process. Studies of this sort plumb the wisdom and limitations of particular and/or local religious practices, which may inspire analogical insights for scholars and practitioners in diverse settings. This stream of work has been nurtured by the Study Group on Religious Practices and Pastoral Research at the Society for Pastoral Theology’s annual meetings since 2004. An early edited volume highlights the contributions of a number of these scholars (Maynard et al., 2010). Also included in this category are qualitative studies that are not ethnographic in nature, but utilize qualitative methods and purposes of inquiry. The Association for Practical Theology, the International Academy of Practical Theology, the Congregational Studies Project Team, and the Religious Education Association have also nurtured scholars’ use of qualitative research methods.

A fine example of pastoral ethnography can be found in Leanna K. Fuller’s (2016) study, When Christ’s Body is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations. Here Fuller utilizes ethnographic methods to compare the experiences of conflict in two mostly white, mainline Protestant congregations. Through qualitative interviews and participant observation (the author had been on the staff of one of the churches when a conflict that split the church occurred), Fuller studies how the conflicts erupted, identifying the practices that helped each congregation manage the conflict and those practices that hurt and/or contributed to breakdown and alienation in each case. By comparing data from the two congregations’ experiences, and using psychodynamic, social psychological, and theological lenses to analyze her findings, Fuller gleans a layered understanding of these conflicts. This then enables her to offer broader practical, constructive proposals that are grounded in experience. How a congregation deals with conflict, Fuller points out, is as important as the substance of the conflict. Students, pastors, and other religious leaders can imagine points of intersection and insight for their diverse congregations and groups. Fuller makes transparent her pastoral theological commitment to offer a religious response to human suffering (Miller-McLemore, 1998, p. 179; Fuller, 2016, p. 191), thereby enabling readers to evaluate the significance of her conclusions and recommendations more readily.
As noted above, pastoral and practical theologians are also employing qualitative methods (other than ethnography) to study a topic, a practice, or the experiences of a cohort of persons in similar situations. Such topics include: the faith lives of adolescent girls (Parker, 2007; Mercer, 2008), war (Graham, 2011), forced displacement (Holton, 2016), and so on. In *A Womanist Theology against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, Stephanie Crumpton (2014) offers a pastoral theology based on a qualitative study involving extensive individual and group interviews with six African American women who experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or intimate violence as adults. Through her analysis of these interviews, Crumpton identifies the extensive spiritual harm done to the women by their abusers and by a wider society that is quick to stereotype, blame, disbelieve, or disregard black women. Describing insights articulated by the women themselves, Crumpton constructs “working images of Womanist/Care” (p. 125) to inform congregational responses to such violence. She goes on to add a chapter on clinical considerations for pastoral counseling, utilizing self-psychological theory in her analysis. The author’s explicit reference to her theology and womanist values exemplifies an interpretive paradigm that acknowledges the political commitments operative in all research and, rather than pretending to be neutral or disinterested, makes those commitments transparent. This paradigm is also evident in Phillis Sheppard’s essay in this volume.

An important larger-scale study by pastoral theologian Brett Hoover (2014) demonstrates the benefits of doing ethnography in combination with extensive sociological research, both qualitative and quantitative. In *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism*, Hoover describes how recent demographics have led to the phenomenon of “the shared parish” in Catholic churches in the US. Different from assimilationist American parishes or ethnic parishes, this phenomenon involves two or more cultural groups inhabiting the same church, “living in the tension between cultural difference and human connectedness” (Hoover, 2014, p. 222). Hoover’s in-depth ethnography gives readers a close-up view of how this phenomenon plays out in one such parish. By linking this ethnography to wider currents in Catholic parish life in the US, the author increases the credibility and relevance of his findings. At the conclusion of his study, Hoover offers a well-grounded theological vision of community that honors cultural distinctiveness. Hoover’s work is rigorously interdisciplinary; significantly, he participates in the scholarly guilds of both theologians and social scientists.

These three exemplary studies suggest a range of recent work in this stream within the larger trajectory of qualitative research in pastoral and practical theology. In each case, the author is in some sense an insider, emic, exploring worlds of religious experience through face-to-face contact with research participants or partners. In these studies, we can see echoes of the constructivist, feminist and womanist, and ethnic interpretive paradigms found in the
broader field of qualitative studies. Fuller’s study illumines the nature of conflict and pastoral responses in two mostly white US Protestant churches, providing much transferable wisdom for religious leaders. Crumpton's study lifts up the particularity of African American women’s experiences of both intimate and cultural violence and shows how each kind of violence compounds the other. Hoover employed a postmodern research paradigm in his ethnography, where he participated as a bilingual Catholic priest, in order to understand how Latino and Euro-Americans develop and manage intercultural practices in a shared parish. In these studies, the authors explore religious practice through research relationships in which they share their questions and their goals openly with their research partners. Their accounts demonstrate their convictions that the practices of the church really do matter on the ground, in the lives of people.

**Ecclesiology and Ethnography**

The second stream of work within the broad trajectory of qualitative research in practical and pastoral theology is associated with the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network. Founded by Pete Ward and Christian Scharen in 2007, this trans-Atlantic network of scholars hosts a series of conferences taking place in Durham, UK, and other parts of Europe, a book series and a journal (Ward, 2012; *Ecclesial Practices*), as well as a thriving pre-conference study group held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. This body of work explores the intersection of Christian theology— particularly ecclesiology— with the study of local and particular faith practices. This work has been described, variously, as “constructive theological ethnography,” “ecclesial practices,” or “fieldwork in theology.” Contributors to this conversation include but are not limited to: Pete Ward, John Swinton, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Christian Scharen, Luke Bretherton, Tone Stangeland Kaufman, Jonas Ideström, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, and Eileen Campbell-Reed. Establishing a starting point in Christian theology as the basis for qualitative research typifies some, but not all, of these authors’ approaches, which vary widely. These scholars are engaging in rigorous reflection upon theology, method, and practice, taking up questions of normativity, reflexivity, and representation. Some broadly define this area as “research in service of the church.”

The issue of normativity appears prominently in the influential book, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, written by Scottish practical theologians John Swinton and Harriett Mowat (2015). They argue that the veracity of Christian theology precedes and ultimately overrides the knowledge gained from social scientific study. This represents one end of a continuum of views that scholars in the network hold. These authors resolve the tension between practical theology and empirical knowledge by prioritizing
Christian (Barthian) theology over other kinds of truth. Problems with this approach include the relative devaluation of human experience and an apparent disregard for the diversity and complexity of Christian theologies (Kaufman, 2016). Here we can hear echoes of the tensions in the larger field of qualitative research, where norms for interpretation are contested. Epistemological debates over which kinds of knowledge count in the academy and in the church are also at play.

Christian Scharen (2015) in *Fieldwork in Theology* begins with different theological warrants for engaging in the study of lived practices of faith: “the task of understanding [the complexity of this beautiful and broken world] requires a careful, disciplined craft for the inquiry—a craft I call fieldwork in theology—if one seeks both to claim knowledge of divine action and to discern an appropriate human response” (p. 5). He then turns to the social science of Pierre Bourdieu, arguing against many critics that for Bourdieu, “every act of research is simultaneously scholarship and a social commitment to make a better world” (p. 29). For Scharen, the aim of fieldwork is to analyze and clarify the church’s work in the world; it is to find with Merleau-Ponty, “an entryway into a grounded, fleshly, incarnational approach to being in the world” (p. 29), so that concrete social realities can be identified and the church can be engaged in “moral solidarity with those in need” (p. 89). His work suggests a fuller role for qualitative research in practical and pastoral theology. Though normativity is still implied or “interwoven” in Scharen’s approach, as Tone Stangeland Kaufman’s helpful essay (2016) might suggest, there is more authority granted to the “grounded, fleshly, incarnational approach to being in the world” (Scharen, p. 29). For Scharen, the relationship between theology and human response (or practice) is more symmetrical in terms of what counts for valid understanding.

Perhaps the foremost example of an ethnographic study that explicitly engages reflexivity is *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (McClintock Fulkerson, 2007). This is the study of Good Samaritan United Methodist Church, an intentionally racially integrated congregation in Durham, North Carolina. This congregation also made an explicit commitment to welcoming members of a group home who had significant physical and intellectual dis/abilities. The church sought to provide, in McClintock Fulkerson’s phrase, “a place for all to appear” (p. 231). She offers a thick description of the worship services and other religious practices of the congregation. Employing reflexivity, McClintock Fulkerson describes her discomfort as a participant observer in this place. She acknowledges feeling ill-at-ease when she, a white southern woman, comes to worship one day and notices that three-quarters of the congregation has dark skin. She also admits to finding herself at a loss for words and not knowing how to hold her body when meeting and trying to interact with a disabled man in a wheelchair. She analyzes her own bodily felt discomfort and asserts that accounts of social oppression ought to be linked with “the experiential field upon which the visceral register plays”
Her analysis of the intersection of culture, race, and power dynamics in this setting is further grounded in a study of the history of Durham and the wider United Methodist Church. Her interpretation accounts for the ways in which the local church’s embodied practices of worship and hospitality both meet and fail to meet its theological goals.

This study is especially valuable for pastoral theologians who value embodied experience and seek to overcome social oppression. This kind of visceral reflection helps draw back the curtain from what the author calls “obliviousness” to race and dis/ability. It reveals the incorporated character of white privilege and able-bodied privilege, and how these “can co-exist with belief in equality and (Christian) inclusiveness” (McClintock Fulkerson 2007, p. 20). Taking both beliefs and enacted practices seriously, McClintock Fulkerson’s study lifts up “the primacy of the situation for theological reflection” (p. 235). She notes that theology alone cannot tell us what is necessary for “redemptive alteration” (p. 254); needed are creative attempts to work with the available bits and pieces of inherited tradition to interrupt dominant groups’ obliviousness. Grace, too, takes place in the context of a (this)-worldly church.

A third example of research associated with the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network is pastoral theologian Eileen Campbell-Reed’s (2016) noteworthy study, Anatomy of a Schism, which, while not strictly speaking an ethnography, employs qualitative methods of study and highlights the issue of representation. Campbell-Reed relies upon her extensive interviews with five Baptist clergywomen to forge a new interpretation of the schism of the Southern Baptist Convention (1979–2000). Through a close reading of the five clergywomen’s stories, Campbell-Reed narrates the struggle within the Southern Baptist Convention between theological Biblicists and Autonomists, highlighting the gendered, psychological, and theological dimensions of the schism. Her layered interpretation describes the history of the Southern Baptist Convention and its contested views of gender complementarity. The author articulates the psychological dimensions of “splitting,” understood as both an intra-psychic experience and the historical event of the schism, and draws out implications for theology and evolving meanings of ministry. Similar to McClintock Fulkerson, Campbell-Reed concludes with an emphasis on the creativity needed to go forward in faithful living, which involves challenging the “dehumanization of the disempowered” (Campbell-Reed, 2016, p. 145).

The feminist commitments of the author are evident in her choice of participants and her focus on their stories as a lens through which to view the larger historical struggle. In presenting clergywomen as complex historical actors and not just the subject of Southern Baptist debates over the ordination of women, Campbell-Reed breaks through the taken-for-granted knowledge of much previous scholarship. In retelling religious history from the point of view of those whose voices have been marginalized, the study participates in the narrative stream in qualitative research as well.
The Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network continues to generate much exciting scholarship, demonstrating a range of positions on issues of normativity, reflexivity, and representation. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, who calls her work “ethnographic theology,” helps push forward the question of how “ethnographic methods can help us foster the already organic relationship between everyday and academic theologies” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2014, p. 11). Pastoral and practical theologians, always working at integration of theory and practice, have much to learn from this conversation.

Narrative Approaches to Qualitative Research

The third stream of work within the ethnography and qualitative research trajectory is the one that I find the most compelling and simultaneously the most difficult to describe. I am calling it narrative qualitative research because it foregrounds the development of personal and social narratives as sites of transformation. This work draws upon insights of the field of narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990) and the recognition that hegemonic cultural narratives can control and distort our human stories and lives. In order to redress the political power of such destructive cultural stories, researchers are deliberately using ethnographic and qualitative study to lift up alternative stories, stories that are life-giving and oriented toward relational justice (Graham, 1992). This stream of work also embraces the position of Denzin and Lincoln that “the interpretive practice of making sense of one’s findings is both artistic and political” (2011, p. 15). The prophetic, therapeutic, and artistic dimensions of these studies are what make them so compelling to me.

One example is Kathleen Greider’s (2007) landmark volume, Much Madness is Divinest Sense, which takes an exploratory approach to understanding psychiatric illness in a way that goes beyond positivist explanations. Not a field study, this investigation analyzes the published memoirs of 18 religiously diverse “soul-sufferers” (Greider’s term for those who suffer from psychiatric illness). From their memoirs she draws rich descriptions of issues of identity, suffering, care, and healing. Greider asserts that we must take into consideration the ways in which “the sickness of society sometimes causes or complicates the sickness of persons” (p. 93). While Greider does not explicitly draw upon narrative theory in this text, I classify it here because the text does the work of narrative practice in that it deconstructs both popular and medical explanations of madness, explores what insiders have to say, and “thickens” the cultural story by describing the daunting social conditions that contribute to or exacerbate the suffering of persons with psychiatric conditions and their families. By focusing on the spiritual wisdom found in the memoirists’ accounts, Greider honors the hard-won wisdom and God-given “divinest sense” that the poet Emily Dickinson (1890), herself a soul-sufferer, named. The artistic
dimension of interpretation is also on view in this study, both in its reference to
poetry and in the very use of memoirs as the basis for study. The beauty and
power of the personal accounts conveys the authority of insiders to tell their
own stories and transports the reader into a more experience-near under-
standing of the gifts and challenges in soul-sufferers’ experiences.

A salient new contribution to the narrative research stream is We Are Not All
Victims, by Pamela Couture (2016). Based on ethnographic research in Kamina,
Democratic Republic of Congo, from 2003 to 2014, this book tells an alterna-
tive story of the peacemaking activities of the people of Kamina and their reli-
gious leaders. Couture’s account is based on the recorded (and in some cases,
translated) testimonies of 78 persons who publicly bore witness to the Luba
struggle, along with numerous qualitative interviews and prolonged periods of
participant observation. Remarking on the tendency of Western authors to
interpret Congolese life only in terms of violence, intrigue, victims, and perpe-
trators, Couture writes:

In contrast, the alternative story shows the Luba as agents of their own
peacebuilding, using both indigenous and Christian religion as warrants
for peace, and engaging in these activities inland, where people live ordi-
nary lives and rise to extraordinary courage when the times call for it.
(Couture, 2016, p. 4)

Couture deliberately prioritizes the multiple and rich stories that the people
tell her about their lives, their experiences of the conflict, and their efforts to
build peace. Her narrative offers a striking contrast to extant histories and
journalism related to the area.

Couture’s methodology relies explicitly upon two narrative therapy con-
cepts: the importance of social witness and recognition; and the therapeutic
value of contributing to a cause that is larger than oneself (Combs and
Freedman, 1996; Couture, 2016). Couture positioned herself first as a ghost
writer attempting to tell the people’s story faithfully, from their point of view.
Later, after years of research, getting to know the people, and working with
them on drafts of the book, she came to see her role rather as “their spirit-
writer: my spirit, mutyima muyampe, literally, my thinking heart, accompa-
nies their muya, literally, their soul, in these words” (Couture, 2016, p. 18).
Couture now recognizes that this is a collaborative story that expresses her
own voice and “thinking heart” as well as the voices and souls of the people
who have opened their lives to her.

Couture’s research might thus be considered a form of narrative pastoral
care in that it anticipates the impact of the research upon the people and the
readers for whom it is written. Narrative theory emphasizes people’s authority
over their own stories, and the therapeutic value of sharing such richly deve-
loped stories with other persons and groups.
A choice that Couture has made along these lines is to house her digital interviews and other primary source material in the Drew University archives so that future scholars can have access to them. In particular, she wants the interviews to be available to Congolese scholars so that they can reinterpret them from the original languages.

Work in the narrative stream also overlaps with the intercultural and postcolonial trajectory in pastoral theology. Melinda McGarrah Sharp points out the likelihood of “misunderstanding stories” taking place when people attempt to communicate across cultural boundaries, due to the legacy of colonialism that has tacitly influenced even well-meaning institutions such as Christian missions and the Peace Corps (McGarrah Sharp, 2014, p. 3). This presents a conundrum for qualitative researchers, who—like many of the above authors—must contend with the challenge of writing stories in ways that accurately and fairly represent their research partners, without idealization or condescension. Other tensions for researchers attempting to coauthor stories include tensions between voice and silence, and questions of who can speak in a given situation. As McGarrah Sharp points out, while on the one hand there is the danger of speaking for others, on the other there is the danger of remaining silent, if that means ignoring pressing social concerns in local or global communities (2014, p. 127). Further reflections on postcolonial pastoral theology can be found in Emmanuel Lartey’s essay in this volume (Chapter 4).

**Why Practice Matters**

Having reviewed these three overlapping approaches within the trajectory of qualitative research, I turn now to making a case as to why the study of religious practice matters for students and scholars of pastoral theology and care. Given that the field foregrounds human experience as a starting place for theological reflection, it makes sense to continue to study religious practices in situ, attending to the lived experiences of diverse persons and groups in their historical and socio-cultural contexts, as well as to explore their first-person published accounts. In the same way in which many pastoral theologians in the past (and some in the present) have found that staying active in a pastoral counseling practice keeps their teaching about pastoral counseling honest, pastoral theologians now need to continue to read and engage in qualitative studies in order to stay honest and informed about the social and political dimensions of lived religion. In order to teach and practice pastoral care that helps more than it hurts, we need ethnographic and qualitative research studies that illuminate the embodied experience of persons and groups in their cultural complexity and evaluate the impact of religious practices. Pastoral ethnography and qualitative research force us to see social realities to which
we might otherwise be oblivious, and in this way help the field promote more intelligent, sensitive, and life-giving forms of care.

For these reasons I argue that practice matters. By this I mean that individuals and organizations, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, counseling centers, chaplaincy departments, and so on, proclaim certain theological values not only through what they say, but also through what they (we) do, and importantly, through what we do regularly, habitually, and ritually, wittingly or unwittingly. For example, Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s (2007) study, noted above, demonstrates how the long history of segregated worship in the US exerts an impact upon well-meaning worshippers (including researchers) even as they try to form a truly integrated congregation. Here is a congregation intentionally interrupting the most segregated hour of the week in America, 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once put it. Yet when McClintock Fulkerson gives us a glimpse into the worship life of this congregation, and a reflexive glimpse into her awareness of her anxieties as she feels them in her body in this situation, it becomes clear how much practice matters. In particular, it becomes clear that patterns of practice that have been long ingrained into embodied persons at worship do not easily give way to change. We see what Paul Connerton means when he says that the past is “sedimented in the body” (1989, p. 72). Liturgy, preaching style and substance, dress, and language all function to signify identity in particular ways. It is in the nitty-gritty interactions between and among pastors and people that the resilience of social power arrangements of privilege become visible. If pastoral and practical theologians cannot “see” what goes on in living human faith communities, we cannot hope to challenge the structures that hold white privilege and other forms of injustice in place.

Ethnographic and qualitative studies, when they are done well, lay bare the social realities that pastoral practitioners are up against when trying to work for healing, justice, and transformation. Through engaged qualitative study, we discover the “theologies-in-practice” (Graham et al., 2005, pp. 170–199) that are enacted by persons and/or groups, as well as researchers. While such discoveries may be alarming—they may challenge previously held notions of the loving quality of group life, for example, when we see that social hierarchies prevail in that same group—it is important that we recognize the gaps between spoken theology and lived practice, and engage with faith communities in authentic theological reflection upon them. In this way we can help to create the conditions for new, more just, and faithful living.

**The Meaning of Practice**

Ideas of what constitutes a religious or pastoral practice are highly contested in theological circles. Ted Smith (2012) highlights theoretical differences posed in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Bourdieu (as well as others) that have influenced the conversation. Smith notes that in MacIntyre’s moral
philosophy, the importance of an authoritative tradition of excellence in “activities like medicine, agriculture, prayer, and the care of souls” is emphasized (Smith, 2012, p. 247). MacIntyre’s influence is evident in the focus on normativity in the work of some of the scholars engaged in the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network conversation described above. John Swinton and Harriett Mowat, for example, state that the task of practical theology “is to work towards the unification of the Church’s theological understandings and her practices in the world, and in so doing, ensure that her public performances of the faith are true to the nature of the Triune God” (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, p. 25). Here we see a primary concern with defining Christian practices in terms of their coherence with a particular theological understanding of the nature of God.

Bourdieu’s social theory offers a broader definition of practice, one that relies less on the authority of a religious tradition and more on embodied, cultural knowledge. Some of the authors we have cited above, such as Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Christian Scharen, rely more on Bourdieu’s understanding of practice, especially in the way that it helps elucidate and account for the “material relations of race, class, gender, and citizenship” (Smith, 2012, p. 249). Similarly, I have embraced a broader definition of practice for the work of pastoral ethnography, influenced by Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Paul Connerton (1989), and others: “Just about any activity, if it is performed regularly and with a shared understanding of religious intent or meaning, can be considered a religious practice. ... Nothing can be deemed too secular to study, because the secular and the sacred, like the intellect and the spirit, and like theology and practice, dwell in us together” (Moschella, 2008b, p. 51).

Though I do not think it is possible to separate entirely religious practices from secular ones, some scholars seek to do just that, imagining emphatic differences between the church and the world. A chief example of this approach can be found in Resident Aliens (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989), as noted by Scharen (2015, pp. 7–11). Besides the obvious problem of a lack of humility in asserting such clear lines of demarcation between the church and the world, this approach cannot account for the complexity of religious experience inside congregations or outside of them, nor within Christians or other religious or spiritual practitioners. Nancy Ammerman’s (2014) sociological study, Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes, for example, finds a range of theologies and spiritual practices within the membership of American religious congregations and in other groups, such as neo-pagans and non-affiliates. When participants are encouraged to offer their own definitions of spiritual practice, a wide array of activities and committed actions is named, including Bible study and worship attendance for some, as well as praying, serving others, or walking outside in nature. Yet none of these practices is limited to those who hold to classic Christian doctrines. Nor are religious beliefs the key factor in church membership or participation. Studying religious practices with a broader lens provides
insight into the variety and messiness of lived experience. The church and the world are part of each other, just as human faith and doubt are also entangled within Christians and other humans.

Tom Beaudoin (2016), in his essay, “Why Does Practice Matter Theologically?” argues that practical theology has been too confident in its Christian center, too narrow in its focus on Christian practice (p. 12). In this, he raises awareness of the ways in which Christian-centrism can limit practical theologians’ capacity to see clearly (a topic Kathleen Greider addresses in her essay in this volume, Chapter 5). Beaudoin writes, “What counts as Christian practice is always generated out of local inherited available materials, conscious and personally/culturally unconscious” (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 27). It is incumbent upon practical and pastoral theologians to recognize the historicity of practice, that is, the way in which all religious practices have been invented, borrowed, translated, improvised, and cobbled together, rather than handed down by the divine in some pristine or unchanging form. Theology, too, arises out of human-made traditions, scriptures, and activities, and is therefore also a product of culture, not something that stands outside of it (Tanner, 1997). As Beaudoin notes, it is no simple or easy adjustment for practical (or pastoral) theologians to even consider moving Christianity out of the center of its discourse—this is why he calls it a conundrum (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 12). Indeed, it is difficult to research and write and practice pastoral or spiritual care in ways that express one’s own theological tradition and values, while at the same time upholding the utmost respect for alterity (Doehring, 2015, pp. 1–4). Qualitative research can assist us with this conundrum. It can help us recognize both the limitations of our theologies-in-practice (e.g. short-sightedness, self-interest, lack of awareness of the impact of privilege and power arrangements), as well as our potential to alter our practices and enlarge our worldviews (e.g. by respectful listening to and engagement with those who differ religiously, unmasking white privilege, working for structural change). When we see what is really happening on the ground, we see how faith practices are both loving and flawed, both life-giving and life-limiting. By engaging respectfully and even reverently in research relationships (Campbell-Reed and Scharen, 2013), we open ourselves to be moved by peoples’ stories and to share in the vulnerability of relationships (McGarrah Sharp, 2013, pp. 105–132). Qualitative study of religious practices can increase mutual understanding and help keep us humble in the face of religious difference.

I endorse a broad concept of religious practice, one that can hold together McIntyre’s emphasis on intentional pursuit of greater excellence within a religious tradition with Bourdieu’s emphasis on the materiality and social distinctions inherent in and produced by practice. Pamela Couture’s study, described above, helps to illustrate what such an approach makes possible. In Kamina in the Democratic Republic of Congo, she finds that both Christianity and the local Luba indigenous traditions helped to support practices of peacemaking. She notes that “motivated by spirituality, the local people themselves have
created a complex, organic model of peacebuilding, including capacity building, conflict transformation, and development” (Couture, 2016, p. 22). Her close, shared experiences of practice promoted a deeper understanding of both religious influences.

For pastoral theologians, religious practices matter in that they reveal the messy and complex ways in which human beings enact their religious values and strive to flourish. The qualitative study of practice matters in that it grounds theological reflection in lived experience, revealing both its beauty and inspiration, as well as its ongoing need for transformation in the face of injustice, violence, poverty, or peril. Practice matters in that it is what we do in the name of the holy and what we offer to those seeking care.

**Moving Forward: Narrative Means to Pastoral Theological Ends**

As we look ahead, I am particularly captivated by the potential of narrative qualitative research projects to enhance the liberative and empowering goals of pastoral theology and care. Narrative theory brings intentionality and values to the fore: whose stories will be lifted up? Whose words, whose language, whose loyalties, and whose royalties are at stake? We write for the academy, of course. Or do we/can we write for the wellbeing of the world, and of the diverse communities of persons who share their stories with us?

In the past 30 years, numerous pastoral theologians have described the value of stories and story-telling in pastoral care practices. The work of Charles Gerkin, Andrew Lester, Edward Wimberly, Anne Streaty Wimberly, Christie Cozad Neuger, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, Carrie Doehring, Duane Bidwell, and Karen Scheib, among others, has advanced forms of pastoral care that emphasize the telling and hearing of stories, both human and divine. Ruard Ganzevoort (2012) notes that “In a sense, theological reflection on religious practices has ... always been a reflection on the convergences, confluences, and conflicts between the myriads of stories” (p. 214). Pastoral care, in particular, involves assisting care-seekers in gathering up the threads of meaning in their lives, and weaving them into authentic and life-giving stories. While listening to individuals has long been a key pastoral practice, the field has now gained a greater appreciation for the pastoral task of co-creating communal and collective stories as well.

Narrative approaches to qualitative research involve at least three significant dimensions that support these pastoral goals. The first is an emphasis on empowering marginalized persons and groups, through creating space for them to tell their stories and an audience to hear them (Ganzevoort, 2012, p. 214). I will call this dimension, “stories seldom heard.” The second dimension I want to note is the use of narrative approaches to deconstruct harmful
hegemonic narratives and coauthor thicker, more life-giving stories. The third dimension concerns the artistic and poetic possibilities inherent in researching and writing narrative accounts of religious practice.

**Stories Seldom Heard**

If pastoral theologians are trying to advance a postcolonial or decolonial agenda, as Emmanuel Larney, Melinda McGarrah Sharp, and Nancy J. Ramsay (in her essay in this volume, Chapter 7) suggest, the principles of narrative theory can help us honor the rich and complex stories that colonized and subjugated peoples have to tell. Ethnographies and qualitative research projects that focus on the lives of people who are marginalized due to race, gender, geography, dis/abilities, homelessness, poverty, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on, are helping to “change the subject,” as Mary McClintock Fulkerson (1994) might put it. Qualitative research that foregrounds the faith stories and religious practices of persons and groups who are marginalized, oppressed, or stigmatized changes the pastoral conversation.

Of course, there are tensions and risks associated with such research, as has already been noted above. The subject of research matters, as does the subjectivity of the persons involved in the study. The burden of representation is considerable and complex. Phillis Sheppard points out, for example, that practices of reflexivity alone do not necessarily overcome the risk of reifying racism when raced bodies are portrayed in practical theology (Sheppard, 2016). I assert that researchers need to work collaboratively in order to challenge each other’s biases and blind spots. Even so, there is no guarantee that researchers will do no unwitting harm.

Nevertheless, I maintain that qualitative research is needed to lift up the voices of those whose stories are seldom heard. Sarah Farmer, for example, studies experiences of hope among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women (Farmer, 2016). Such work helps to break down the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, those who are imprisoned and those who are free, in a context of mass incarceration marked by racial discrimination (Alexander, 2010). To be sure, special ethical hurdles must be met in research with such vulnerable populations; it is critical that protocols for informed consent and other measures for the safety of research partners are observed. At the same time, it is an ethical lapse to fail to consider the stories of those whose freedoms are severely curtailed, both while they are incarcerated and when they return to living in the outside world.

Additional studies with immigrant communities and other-documented persons in the US, now experiencing greater political scrutiny and pressure, are also needed. Conde-Frazier (2011) offers an example that lifts up the needs of children in immigrant families. Jan Holton’s work on forced displacement helpfully foregrounds the experiences of refugees, veterans, and homeless
persons (Holton, 2016). In the current regressive political climate, it becomes all the more important to attend to the conditions of the most vulnerable, and to create venues in which their stories can be richly told and brought into greater public awareness. These efforts support the liberative and prophetic functions of pastoral theology and care.

**Stories and Strength**

Barbara Wingard and Jane Lester (2001), two narrative therapy leaders from indigenous communities in Australia, sum up a key goal of collective narrative therapy in the title of their book, *Telling Our Stories in Ways that Make Us Stronger*. Qualitative research that combines the insights of narrative therapy with the study of religious practices (broadly defined) has the potential to make pastoral theology stronger. Though pastoral theologians have talked about communal contextual models of care for many years now, we have not fully theorized or realized them in pastoral care and counseling practices (McClure, 2010). Collective narrative therapies work with people to develop thicker, richer stories about themselves—stories that take social and historical contexts into account, and stories that honor suppressed knowledges that support people’s agency, intentionality, faith, and moral integrity.

As we have seen, ethnographic and qualitative research projects can probe the dominant cultural myths operating within people’s lives. Narrative therapy, relying on critical theory, involves conversations that map the historicity of problems that constrict and constrain human stories. One of the strengths of ethnographic and qualitative research is that it often involves studying and articulating the history of social conditions that contribute to current practices. In narrative therapy, one goal is to map out the history of problems through questions that probe their origins, periods of waxing and waning, and the social situations that support or diminish them. When the social and historical dimensions of a problem become clearer to a person or group, the internal grip of the problem is eased, and the capacity to redress it is increased (Moschella, 2016, p. 256).

In the vignette at the start of this chapter, I offered my story of the way in which studying the religious practices of a group of Italian American immigrants opened a window into the history of immigration, discrimination, and racism for me. As the leaders of the anti-racism workshop I attended may have anticipated, coming to terms with the history of Italian immigration and the cultural construction of ethnicity helped me appreciate the history of diverse racial groups and the cultural construction of race as well. I came to understand both the painful history of discrimination that Italians and other immigrants from southern Europe experienced and the ways in which these immigrants and their descendants, particularly after World War II when the “melting pot” ideology took hold, could gain status and economic advantages as they started to be perceived as white. I could also see the clear difference in the experiences of
darker-skinned peoples, whose racial and ethnic markers did not “melt,” and who have been targeted for ongoing discrimination and violence since the days of slavery. As historian Mathew Frye Jacobson (1999) points out, there are three large areas in which the effects of historical and ongoing racism in the US are clearly documented (housing, education, and jobs). While this understanding does not make the evil of racism less vexing, it does make the situation clearer, and it helps make me less oblivious.

Similarly, the narrative practice of mapping helps to make personal and social problems visible as historically situated, rather than as the taken-for-granted, natural realities that they may at first appear to be. In narrative qualitative research, mapping the history of local religious practices can help persons and groups tell their stories in ways that strengthen their historical understanding, theological values, and ethical clarity. Thus, collective, narrative accounts can make people as well as pastoral theology stronger.

Artistic and Poetic Dimension

A third important dimension of narrative approaches to qualitative research and writing has to do with art, creativity, and poetics. In narrative therapy, rich story-telling is not a precise science: it relies on the give-and-take of relationships and the wisdom of words that are spoken and “rescued” by the hearer. Similarly, the process of writing ethnographies and qualitative research accounts involves the creative activity of composing. Consideration of the intended audience is one aspect of this imaginative work. In addition, however rigorous the process of analysis may be, researchers do not simply “write up” their findings in a mechanical way. Writing ethnographic narratives involves both rigorous rational thinking and a more receptive kind of reflection. Immersion in the many stories, language(s), and rituals of religious life may cause images to bubble up in the researcher’s mind (Moschella, 2008b, p. 191). The use of writing conventions such as metaphor is key to the imaginative work of communicating complicated understandings in a clear and concise way. Janet Soskice writes, “A strong metaphor compels new possibilities of vision” (1985, p. 58).

Heather Walton (2016), a proponent of poetics in practical theology, emphasizes the capacity of artistic methodologies to: “promote deep forms of empathetic engagement with the other and OTHER,” and to “render the familiar strange provoking epiphanies, re-enchantment, sacralisation, and return of soul” (Walton, 2016, p. 9). Narrative approaches to research, in part because of their artistic dimensions, draw out similar capacities.

Pamela Couture’s work (2016), cited above, employs the genre of creative non-fiction. In this, she draws inspiration from practical theologians’ reflections on poetics and spiritual life writing, noting the work of Heather Walton (2015). Couture’s commitment to telling true stories is explicit, as is her conviction that the truth of the people’s stories she heard is best expressed in a creative and
compelling narrative. She takes license in recreating dialogue and in abbreviating some stories for the sake of poetics and narrative coherence (Couture, 2016, p. 18). In choosing this approach, Couture articulates her values and narrative purposes: she seeks to honor the people who have entrusted her with their stories, not only by allowing them to review the drafts and influence her interpretations, but also by writing their stories in an engaging literary form that she hopes will serve the people’s goal of getting their story out to a broad readership.

Walton notes that the poetic dimensions of practical theology are controversial, perhaps suggesting an echo of the debates within the social sciences noted above over the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative study. Given that both pastoral and practical theologians have been anxious to secure their place in the academy, and given the academic trend toward supporting evidence-based knowledge, such controversy is understandable. If we get caught up in our metaphors and moments of encounter, might we stray away from empirical knowledge and undermine the field’s quest “to see and think clearly in order to make a difference in the world” (Walton, 2012, p. 174)? Yet, Walton points to Terry Veling’s claim that “aesthetic reasoning” is needed “to safeguard a practical theological ecclesiology from becoming so spellbound with a critical analytic method that it ultimately has a very positivistic approach toward human actions” (Veling, 2005, pp. 195–203, cited in Walton, 2012, p. 174).

Narrative qualitative research, in all of its prophetic, therapeutic, and artistic dimensions, can enhance our work in pastoral theology and care. Studies written in this vein help us imagine more attentive forms of care, care that transforms the stories and structures that haunt and limit human persons beloved of God. Such sensitive and compelling accounts have the potential to open up new understanding and increase the likelihood that religious and spiritual practices of care will be a source of blessing, wonder, and hope.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described an evolving trajectory of ethnographic and qualitative research in the field of pastoral theology and argued for the continuing relevance of such practice-oriented research. While examining only a fraction of the vast array of critical studies employing qualitative methods and modes of interpretation, I have highlighted some recent and exemplary studies within three research streams. Moving forward, I hope to see pastoral theologians, religious leaders, chaplains, and other practitioners continue to do ethnography and qualitative research in these various ways, so that our theories, theologies, and practices can be informed by rigorous research and theological reflection upon particular, multiple, and varied religious experiences and practices. In particular, I advocate for the prophetic, therapeutic, and poetic possibilities of narrative qualitative research.
Notes


2 This research stream is related to the fields of congregational studies and participatory action research, though space does not allow me to fully take up these approaches here. See Elaine Graham, “Is Practical Theology a form of ‘Action Research’?” in *International Journal of Practical Theology*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, August 2013, 148–178. Also see the multimedia journal, *Practical Matters: A Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology* (Emory University), an academic space that fosters conversations about and between religious practices, practical theology, and qualitative research.

3 I am indebted to Eileen Campbell-Reed and Pete Ward for help with this section.

4 This transparency is a good scholarly practice, in that readers who have access to the data can more fully evaluate the author’s conclusions. In presentations of her work, Couture has also raised money to support an educational foundation for Congolese students. She emphasizes the importance of “giving back” benefits to her research partners (e-mail conversation with the author, December 30, 2016).

5 This dimension of the writing is reminiscent of Karen McCarthy Brown’s landmark volume, *Mama Lola: A Haitian Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). Brown broke with conventions in anthropology and the study of religion by interspersing historical chapters with fictional chapters that she composed out of the many bits and pieces of stories that she had heard and recorded during her field study.

References


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**For Further Study**
