

A Walk in the Woods: The Role of Focus Groups in Finding Meaning

I didn't want to tell the tree or weed what it was. I wanted it to tell me something and through me express its meaning in nature.¹

Wynne Bullock, photographer

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<https://doi.org/10.25782/jeps.v21i1.698>

Abstract:

This article² describes the use of methods and the search for a methodology in the research of gender roles within the Dutch Evangelical Movement (DEM). This hermeneutical research is situated in the field of practical theology. The metaphor 'A walk in the woods' illustrates in a heuristic way the advantages of focus groups in understanding how meaning is constructed among female leaders within the DEM. Using a narrative approach, the interaction within a specifically convened focus group is combined with the 'problem tree' method, in which data already identified is discussed, and possible reasons behind it explored. I argue that working with diverse focus groups provides insights into the theological and social cultural dynamics at play, and reveals within the given frame deeper underlying motivations and actions that bring greater clarity to the actual current (or lived) situation of women within leadership.

Keywords:

female; methodology; focus group; leadership; practical theology

¹ Wynn Bullock, photographer, cited in *Photographic Composition: A Visual Guide*, by Richard D. Zakia and David Page (Oxford: Elsevier, 2010), p. 250. Appendix 1 is about how to capture a tree through photography.

² This article was written in preparation for a conference at a theological institute in Central Asia. The request was to speak about methods and methodology in the field of practical theology with the possibility of publishing the paper. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the conference had to be cancelled but, since the paper was in process, it was decided to turn this into an article which verifies the methodology of my doctoral dissertation.

Introduction

It is a pleasant bustle when eleven women enter the conference room of the Dutch Evangelical Alliance.³ All of them are theologians, most of whom are working in the church and within theological education. Some women are in-between jobs or ministries; others are working in a field which is not their first choice. Two are pastors of a church, something most of them dreamed about when they were still little girls (as did I).

The women came together to talk about the position of women within the Dutch Evangelical Movement (DEM). I invited this group as part of a piece of research into the role of women within this DEM. We discussed numbers, policy documents, theology, and experiences according to a method called ‘the problem tree’.⁴ It was an experiment which was received so well that I decided to centre my empirical research around focus groups to understand the theological, social and cultural dynamics at play.

In this article I will clarify my choice for the use of focus groups in combination with the problem tree method. Starting with a short introduction to the field of ethnography in relation to practical theology, I proceed to clarify the difference between a method, the technical part of doing research, and the methodology, which gives rationale to the theoretical framework. To illustrate the relationship between a method and methodology, I move on to the position that focus groups have within my own methodology. Within all of this, I will follow a metaphor that I have named ‘A walk in the woods’, which represents the heuristic approach of this hermeneutical research.

This article is part of a broader research on the theological, social, and cultural dynamics within the DEM in relation to female leadership. My overall research question is, ‘How are gender roles of women understood among Dutch evangelicals in the context of late

³ This was 11 June 2019 at ‘MissieNederland’ which is the name of the Dutch Evangelical Alliance and the Dutch Evangelical Mission Alliance who merged in 2013. In 2019 I was the president of a network within that Alliance called ‘Equivalent Leadership’, which focused on encouraging the conversation about women in leadership within the evangelical churches affiliated with MissieNederland.

⁴ More about this method later in this article.

modern society?⁵ The research is hermeneutical in nature: I will describe the process towards interpretation and understanding by listening to the experiences of female theologians and observe the interaction among them. Or in the words of practical theologian Ruard Ganzevoort,

In practical theology, we study the field of lived religion in a hermeneutical mode, that is, attending to the most fundamental processes of interpreting life through endless conversations in which we construct meaning. These conversations not only include exchanges with our fellow humans, but also with the traditions that model our life.⁶

Thus, the aim of this research is to contribute from the perspective of the praxis of theology and to clarify the issues at stake in the debate about female leadership in the Dutch Evangelical Movement.

Why a Focus Group?

In 2015 I was actively involved in the establishment of a network of evangelical female theologians. The network's goal was to discuss and address the obstacles women experience in their jobs or ministries related to gender. The observed practices and the experiences of evangelical female theologians demonstrated the lack of consensus concerning the role and position of women in leadership. These female leaders encounter various theological positions, ambiguous beliefs, and a struggle to negotiate between the diverse opinions and a societal context where gender roles are shifting and debated. The several meetings demonstrated the value of conversations in which experiences and emotions are shared and recognised. The very existence of this network even caused a stir among Dutch evangelicals. In 2016 a well-known Dutch Christian newspaper nominated the network as one of the trending topics in their overview of the year.⁷ The interaction with these women and the meetings subsequently organised with church

⁵ Laura Dijkhuizen, 'The Invisible Woman. Gender Roles in Contemporary Evangelical Churches in the Netherlands', doctoral proposal (Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, 2018).

⁶ Ruard Ganzevoort, 'Forks in the Road when Tracing the Sacred: Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion', paper presented at the International Academy of Practical Theology (Chicago, 30 July–3 August, 2009). The section on hermeneutics clarifies the point well.

⁷ Clipping from *Nederlands Dagblad*, originally posted on our social media group January 2, 2017, without attribution (a copy of the article is in the archive of the author).

leaders within the DEM, inspired me to focus my research on the topic of female leadership. In the words of feminist theologian Jenny Morgans, 'I was *called* to research, that I *needed* to do following on from experiences that I had had.'⁸ The experience, with open conversations during our regular lunch meetings, is the motivation to delve into the method of open conversations from a research perspective. From 2018–2020 I participated in a research group called Methods in Creative Conversations.⁹ Meanwhile I studied the methods and methodology concerning interview techniques and focus groups, reviewing a range of literature to arrive at a research methodology.¹⁰ And as this research is on the role of women within the religious domain, the book *Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods* edited by Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips has been a major inspiration.¹¹ The information on Focus Groups is drawn from sources specialising in methodology concerning interview techniques such as the focus group.¹²

Focus groups and practical theology

This research is situated within the discipline of Practical Theology which can be defined as a 'critical, theological reflection on the practices

⁸ Jenny Morgan, 'Reflexivity, Identity and the Role of the Researcher', in *Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. by Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips (London: Routledge, 2018). pp 189–202 (p.190).

⁹ The description of this research project was as follows: 'Grounded within the fields of practical theology and ethnography, Methods in Creative Conversations will explore the nature of transformation (or conversion) that takes place within conversational participants including the transformation of the minister or mission-person.' As written in the project description. The organisers were Drs Cathy Ross (Cuddesdon / CMS), Anna Ruddick (Urban Life) and Mike Pears (IBTS Centre). The results are presented in a booklet: *A Guide to Creative Conversations*, (Oxford: Church Missionary Society, 2020), also available online, <<https://churchmissionsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/A-Guide-to-Creative-Conversations-FINAL-single-pages-Low-RES.pdf>> [accessed 16 March 2021].

¹⁰ Among which: Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds, *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 68–79 and 310–328; Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 2nd edn (London/New York: Routledge, 2011); Christine Bellamy and Perri 6, *Principles of Methodology: Research Design in Social Science* (London: Sage, 2012). For a very practical approach to methods, including a chapter on focus groups, see also Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 2013).

¹¹ Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips, eds, *Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹² Among which: D. W. Stewart, P. N. Shamdasani, and D. W. Rook, *Focus group: History, Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007).

of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world'.¹³

Practical theology starts with the experiences of people,¹⁴ and it focuses much more on 'what people do rather than on official religion'.¹⁵ Although one should not mistakenly see practical theology as only looking at practices in a general way, it is broader than that. As Ganzevoort and Roeland point out, 'The notion of praxis as a field, a patterned configuration of action, experience, and meaning, includes and transcends these activities into a more integrative understanding of what is going on.'¹⁶

One of the approaches or styles within practical theology is called empirical theology which is closely connected to social sciences.¹⁷ As such, ethnographic research, rooted in the field of anthropology, plays an important part¹⁸ because it focuses on what people actually do. 'Historically it focusses on the cultural dimensions of life and behaviour such as shared practices and belief systems.'¹⁹ The starting point of ethnographic research is a holistic perspective which considers the context, social structures and (faith) convictions. Although traditionally a researcher would immerse within a community through participant observation, in social sciences conducting interviews and focus group meetings are included in ethnographic research.²⁰ Sociologist Karen O'Reilly explains it as follows:

Ethnography is a practice that evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of

¹³ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), p. 6. Cf. on Practical Theology, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011).

¹⁴ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 5.

¹⁵ R. R. Ganzevoort and J. Roeland, 'Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18, no. 1 (2014): 91–101 (p. 93).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 99.

¹⁸ Cf., Christian Scharen, and Aana Marie Vigen, eds, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. (New York: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁹ Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, pp. 11, 12.

²⁰ Compare, O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, pp. 127, 128, on what makes an interview ethnographic.

their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories.²¹

The choice for the interview techniques, such as those used in focus groups, reflect the holistic, creative, and evolving way that this research unfolds. The experiences and stories of the interviewees determine to an important extent the next steps in this research.

For example, in the introduction of the previously described focus group meeting, I introduced our topic ‘the invisibility of women’ as a problem. Organisers of evangelical events and the people who invite preachers for the services on Sunday often justify the lack of women in the pulpit by stating that they could not find a woman who was available or equipped to speak.²² Also personal experiences and the interaction with female theologians, as well as the observance of the lack of female speakers, seemed to confirm this statement. I started digging to explore if the invisibility was a subjective observation or supported by facts. I gathered information through an internet search, studied policy documents and conducted interviews, all in combination with reviewing literature on women in church leadership internationally, analysing reports on emancipation and gender issues in The Netherlands, and Dutch articles about the lack of women in leadership within society.²³ The information I gathered confirmed the observation that women are uncommon within leadership roles in the DEM. Therefore, I asked the female theologians in the focus group about possible reasons for the invisibility of women within leadership in the DEM. To my surprise, some answered that the invisibility is not always seen as a problem. Neither by men nor women.²⁴ This forced me to change my next step.

²¹ Ibid., p. 3.

²² During the years I was connected to the group of female theologians and later to the Equivalent Leadership network, I addressed organisers about the lack of female speakers. Some would excuse themselves by admitting they had not thought of inviting women, but usually the answer was ‘we tried to find one but could not’.

²³ According to the international Gender Gap Report 2020, The Netherlands dropped eleven places in the world ranking list on gender equality. This has been widely reported in the media. Source: World Economic Forum, *Gender Gap Report 2020* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2019).

²⁴ Equivalent leadership, ‘Minutes of Focus Group Meeting’, Driebergen, 11 June 2019, p. 2.

Is the topic I am addressing as problematic as I thought it would be? I needed to take a step back and do some research on this before moving ahead,²⁵ and at the same time it spurred me to reflect on my personal motivation and participation in this research.²⁶

From Method to Methodology

Empirical theology leans heavily on methods, and therefore methodology, within the broader field of social sciences. Although research within practical theology focuses on the religious dimension of the praxis and comes from a religious perspective,²⁷ the methods employed to gather information are similar.

The difference between methods and a certain methodology is often overlooked and the words are used interchangeably. To clarify the difference, the following definition as to methods might be helpful:

Methods are specific techniques that are used for data collection and analysis. They comprise a series of clearly defined, disciplined and systematic procedures that the researcher uses to accomplish a particular task. Interviews, sampling procedures, thematic development, coding and recognized techniques and approaches to the construction of the research question would be examples of qualitative research methods.²⁸

Finding meaning is an important feature of qualitative research, of which interviews and therefore focus groups form an integral part. ‘Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world

²⁵ This issue is addressed within the Equivalent Leadership network. Most leaders are in favour of an even male/female division but the culture within local churches seems to be in contradiction with this shift at the denominational and theological level (documented in the minutes of the meeting of October 8, 2019). This dilemma is one of the topics within the broader research.

²⁶ I was encouraged in this by the discussion of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of the self in Jaco. S. Dreyer, ‘Knowledge, Subjectivity, (De)Coloniality, and the Conundrum of Reflexivity’, in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, ed. by Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 90–109. Reflexivity will be part of the introductory chapter of the final dissertation.

²⁷ Ganzevoort and Roeland, ‘Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology’, p. 96.

²⁸ Slee et al., *Researching Female Faith*, p. 2.

and the experiences they have in the world.²⁹ Or as Christine Bellamy puts it, ‘Social scientists study “meanings”. This capacious term encompasses the full range of mental life including ideas, beliefs, desires, systems of classification, emotions, judgement and styles of thought.’³⁰

Therefore, qualitative research is a ‘contact sport, requiring some degree of immersion into individuals’ lives’.³¹ Contact with human beings is essential to find meaning by analysing their words, behaviour and stories. Creating theories out of experiences involves much interaction, which means that the data is highly subjective and dependent on the current context, cultural and psychological factors pertaining to the interviewees as well as the researcher, and the composition of a group. In the words of Karen O’Reilly, ‘It is reflexive about the role of the researcher and the messiness of the research process.’³²

Methodology serves the overarching theoretical framework as a guide in the research and in this way interprets the data resulting from the methods. It is not the sum of methods, the describing of findings, but rather an understanding, a defensible way to make sense of the results and interpret them. Methodology is concerned with drawing conclusions that can be defended and brings a rationale to looking beyond the surface to find deeper meaning.³³

Although methodology is clearly connected to methods, it is more than an application of techniques. It has to do with an overall approach, the choice of a model or perspective serving the theoretical framework in which the data collected by the chosen methods is

²⁹ This and other definitions of qualitative research are stated and explained in chapter one of the book *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* by Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell, pp. 1–40.

³⁰ Bellamy and 6, *Principles of Methodology*, p. 30.

³¹ Stewart et al., *Focus Group*, p. 13.

³² O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, p. 11. See also pp. 99, 100 on reflexive ethnography. Cf., Jaco. S. Dreyer, ‘Knowledge, Subjectivity, (De)Coloniality, and the Conundrum of Reflexivity’, pp. 90–109 and Jenny Morgan, ‘Reflexivity, identity and the role of the researcher’, pp. 189–220.

³³ See Bellamy and 6, *Principles of Methodology*, p. 2.

interpreted and leads to new theories. It is a search, a journey, a process in which suddenly one might shout, ‘Eureka, I have found it!’³⁴

The Focus Group as Evolving Research

Working with focus groups is strongly connected with (in-depth) interviews, which can provide similar data.³⁵ Leading up to the focus group meeting, I collected and analysed data from policy documents of faith communities that were related to leadership and women, from additional relevant literature and from an internet search. The aim of the internet search was to gather information on the number of female pastors and speakers within the DEM.³⁶ These results were discussed in semi-structured interviews with four leaders of the largest faith communities: the United Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches and the Dutch Baptist Union.³⁷ I experienced these interviews as a walk. It was like spending an afternoon together in the woods: the further in, the deeper the conversation goes. This can be the experience when walking with a single person but also with a group. Sociologist of religion Anna Davidsson Bremborg explains two main approaches to the in-depth interview by means of two different metaphors, where the interviewer is either a miner or a traveller. This is summarised as follows.

The (semi-structured) interview in the field of religion offers insight into a complex world. The interviewee understood as a source of knowledge, could be described by using the ‘miner metaphor’, whilst seeing the interviewee as a source of stories is designated the ‘traveller

³⁴ This exclamation is borrowed from the following citation: ‘The creation of theory is seen as a *heuristic* exercise leading to more or less satisfying accounts of reality, and qualitative methods are favoured by this approach because they take far greater account of the porous line between the researcher and the researched.’ (Slee et al., *Researching Female Faith*, p. 3.)

³⁵ See Guest, Namey and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, pp. 173, 174.

³⁶ This internet search was commissioned by the network of Female Theologians (later, Equivalent Leadership) and supervised by the author from September 2018 – Feb. 2019. The results are documented in: MissieNederland, ‘Minutes Team Meeting Network Female Theologians’, Driebergen, 2019. The findings were presented to the network at the meeting of 5 May 2019: MissieNederland, ‘Report Network Meeting Equivalent Leadership’, minutes, Driebergen, 5 May 2019. The minutes and report can be requested from the author or by e-mailing: info@missienederland.nl.

³⁷ The interviews were transcribed, analysed, and coded according to different areas. After this they were divided into five different topics and subsequently organised.

metaphor’, and asks for a different approach.³⁸ The miner metaphor shows a more static approach and is applicable when one is in need of a significant amount of detailed data such as numbers, policies or the outcomes of meetings. The traveller metaphor resembles the example of the walk in the woods, as with this approach the interviewer can distil knowledge through shared stories and experiences. Although the miner approach is valuable for collecting information about the situation within the different churches, the traveller metaphor is more suitable to answer my research question and suits the context of late-modernity in which narratives play such a dominant role. As Ruard Ganzevoort points out in his explanation of the narrative approach within practical theology:

The question then is whether we see an interviewee’s stories as windows through which we can access the historical truth and/or the interviewee’s inner mindset or whether we see them as time-, place-, and relation-specific. If we take the latter position narrative research is limited in its capacity to unveil external facts, but it has high potential to uncover the processes of giving meaning to life experiences through life stories.³⁹

In the four semi-structured interviews I mainly followed the miner metaphor to access information, but I combined this with personal questions to learn more about the narratives behind the figures. Or, in Ganzevoort’s words, to look through a window to the inner mindset.⁴⁰ I invited the interviewees to share their route to leadership within their denomination. We, metaphorically speaking, started the ‘walk towards the woods’. Along the way, I asked a few questions about the figures that emerged from the gathered data. Who are the women in leadership? Is there policy on gender-equality in leadership? Were there meetings, decisions, or regulations to encourage female leadership? I started digging. Moving on we discussed their personal position on female leadership, and ended up sharing dreams about the leadership of the DEM. The ‘walk’ provided a confidential and relaxed atmosphere

³⁸ Anna Davidsson Bremborg, ‘Interviewing’, in *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 310–328 (p. 311). See also Mike Crang and Ian Cook, *Doing Ethnographies* (London: Sage, 2007), p. 35.

³⁹ Ruard Ganzevoort ‘Narrative Approaches’, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed by B. Miller-McLemore, (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 214–223 (p. 221).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

which resulted not only in information, but also aided the discovery of the way the person gave meaning to the current circumstances. In this way the interview resembles a creative conversation where the interviewer and interviewee interact and determine the direction of the walk. It is an evolving and not a static process; the interviewer is neither neutral nor purely objective. It is therefore a necessity that they reflect on their own involvement extensively in the research.⁴¹ Anna Davidsson Bremborg highlights the co-creative nature of the process:

The postmodern approach rejects any universal meta-story that could explain everything; instead, knowledge is viewed as constructed, achieving meaning through relations. On this view, knowledge emerges between the subject and the object, in relations between the interviewee and the interviewer, as well as between producers and readers of texts (reports). This more recent epistemological view has brought the interviewer as a person into focus. The interviewer's background, pre-understanding and personality are all seen as having significance for the result.⁴²

Thus, it is important to reflect on my own role as researcher, which is an ongoing process,⁴³ asking what do I bring to the research and acknowledging the potential impacts of this.⁴⁴

Invisible Women? The Focus Group in Practice

If one-to-one interviews might provide the needed information, why add focus groups? To answer this question, it is good to define a focus group and specify what, in terms of research in social sciences, the

⁴¹ Cf, Fran Porter, ‘“Sometimes you need a question”: Structure and Flexibility in Feministic Interviewing’, in *Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. by Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 83–97. And Helen Collins, ‘Weaving a Web: Developing a Feminist Practical Theology Methodology from a Charismatic Perspective’, in *Researching Female Faith*, ed. by Slee, Porter and Phillips, pp. 54–69.

⁴² Davidsson Bremborg, ‘Interviewing’, p. 311.

⁴³ Cf, Jenny Morgan, ‘Reflexivity, identity and the role of the researcher’, p. 201. In the article named below I have described the personal factors which led to this research. Despite the title, the article is in Dutch and published on a platform that focuses on diversity: Laura Dijkhuizen, *It's a man's world* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Wj, 2020), <<https://www.nieuwwij.nl/opinie/its-a-mans-world>> [accessed 3 September 2020].

⁴⁴ See Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds. *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, pp. 20, 21. And Part Four ‘Practicing Reflexivity’, in *Researching Female Faiths*, ed. by Slee, Porter and Phillips, pp. 187–216.

benefits are. Researchers Greg Guest, Emily Namey and Marilyn Mitchell put it this way:

A Focus Group is a carefully planned discussion with a small group of people on a focused topic. They yield data and insights that are more than just the sum of the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of those taking part in the discussion.⁴⁵

Regarding my research, focus groups are helpful in discerning how the position of women is perceived within the evangelical churches. According to Davidsson Bremborg, ‘a focus group gives rich insight into how meaning is negotiated and how arguments are defended and re-evaluated’.⁴⁶ The interaction between individuals and the process of giving meaning to experiences value the issues at hand. This has already demonstrated itself, not only in organised focus group meetings, but also through the interactions between female theologians and church leaders as initiated by the Network of Female Theologians. For example, the lack of possibilities for female theologians to obtain a leadership position within the church has been undervalued for decades, not only by men, but also by women in the church. As mentioned by one of the participants in the first focus group meeting, it was not seen as a problem. However, when female theologians come together and share their disappointments, frustrations, but also victories and success stories, it becomes clear that the lack of vacancies for women is indeed a problem. At least for them. Since the awareness campaign between 2016–18 more and more leaders have come forward, not only in sympathy with these women, but they have begun to acknowledge the problem. However as with most changes, this is a slow process and the effects in terms of numbers are yet to be seen. The group interaction in combination with a confrontation with the data is extremely important in this whole process. It creates awareness and forces those present to (re-)think the matters at stake. Looking beyond facts, clichés and opinions lead to convictions and values which are part of the (church-) culture and reveal social structures and customs. While digging deeper, roots are discovered which might have been hidden for decades or

⁴⁵ Guest, Namey and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, p. 172. For a broader introduction read chapter 1 of Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, *Focus Group* (see footnote 12).

⁴⁶ Davidsson Bremborg, ‘Interviewing’, p. 313.

more. This is no walk in the park but an adventurous hike, the destination of which is as yet uncertain.

The practice

As previously noted, my first focus group meeting was an experiment. I wanted a group of female theologians to interact with the complaint I had heard so often: women speakers are difficult to find or not available for speaking activities. Initially I sent an e-mail⁴⁷ to a homogenous group, all women who were theologians but different in age and work situation. I shared the idea of organising a focus group to discuss this topic. I explained that the invitation was related to my research, but that the meeting would also benefit the development of the network Equivalent Leadership. From the start, I informed them of the purpose of the meeting, that the conversations might be recorded, and notes would be taken for a report. I made sure that it was clear that the results would be used in my research, but that I would anonymise them if quoted. Not all responded to the e-mail but the ones who did, were pleased to contribute. The final invitation went to ten women of whom eight were able to attend. All together we were eleven people in the room, eight participants, a notetaker,⁴⁸ my intern who assisted me by writing key words at the flipchart, and myself as the moderator.⁴⁹

To keep the conversation focused and on track, I chose a method called ‘the Problem Tree’.⁵⁰ I drew the contours of a tree on the flipchart and wrote in the trunk: Women are invisible. “The ‘Problem Tree’ is a tool to analyse the first and second-level causes and effects of a core problem.”⁵¹ The effects are symbolised by the leaves and the causes by the roots. So, the trunk was in the middle of the paper and

⁴⁷ This e-mail was sent Tuesday, 19 March 2019; a reminder to non-responders was sent 16 April 2020.

⁴⁸ This person was asked at the last moment, as the one I had originally invited had to withdraw due to health issues. The notetaker is an experienced secretary within several editorial boards and is a theologian herself. I paid her a pre-agreed small amount for her services.

⁴⁹ On recruiting participants and making contact also see Stewart, et al., *Focus group: History, Theory and Practice*, pp. 54–56.

⁵⁰ Jacques M. Chevalier, ‘Problem Tree’, in *SAS²: A Guide to Collaborative Inquiry and Social Engagement*, by Jacques M. Chevalier and Daniel J. Buckles (New Delhi: SAGE, 2008), pp. 108–115.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

there was room under and above the trunk to write words at the places where normally the leaves would be and similarly the roots. At the end of the meeting, we took a picture of the completed tree, the results of which were added to the minutes.⁵²

The participants were not well acquainted with each other and there were no attachments such as family relations, being colleagues or attending the same church.⁵³ This is strongly recommended in conducting focus groups because pre-existing groups share certain cultures and habits. In addition, power differentials might become problematic and prevent every participant from expressing themselves freely.⁵⁴

The room was set up in a circle because this arrangement encourages people to stay focused and connected, and eye contact is possible. It enables the participants to talk freely and stimulates the conversation, while additionally giving the opportunity to observe body language, which is more concealed behind tables.

This setting paid off. I could see that the women turned towards the speaker, moving their bodies, leaning forward, and making hand gestures when agreeing or if they wanted to share related anecdotes. At a certain point, when a few women quite passionately communicated how they were treated differently than men in similar situations, the atmosphere in the room became noisy and chaotic. Although we had agreed to listen to each other, this subject brought forth so many emotions and memories that conversation rules no longer applied. One person stood up, seemingly desperate to share her story. This demonstrates the dynamics of the focus group and the way interaction can bring forth deeper emotions and the longing to share these with women in similar circumstances. Although the psychological aspect of my topic is not part of my research, noting it is helpful in the search for

⁵² Equivalent Leadership, 'Minutes of Focus Group Meeting', Driebergen, 11 June 2019.

⁵³ Almost all books on qualitative research have a section on the importance of sampling, choosing the right people to observe, interview or invite to a focus group meeting. See, e.g., Davidsson Bremborg, 'Interviewing', pp. 313 and 314 on sampling and chapter five in Guest, Namey and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, pp. 41–74. Or the experiences described in Crang and Cook, *Doing Ethnography*, p. 83 showing that in certain cases pre-existing groups are helpful but there are several pitfalls that are better avoided.

⁵⁴ Guest, Namey and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, p. 173.

meaning. Furthermore, it brings an awareness that a single experience may seem unimportant or appear to be a minor detail, but when stories are shared, the cumulative experiences and the resonances between those can reveal social structures, which lead to a deeper understanding of the culture.

To give an example: one person mentioned that she received her theology diploma together with two male fellow students. All were congratulated with a short speech by the same person. The two men were admired because of the wonderful gifts God had given them and praised for their hard work, but when she came forward, the speaker mentioned that it had been so sociable to have her in the class with them.⁵⁵ This could easily be a slip of the tongue, an exception and not the rule, but it brought forth similar anecdotes which lead us to the discussion about significance: What are stories like this telling us, what does this mean?

Deriving Meaning: Towards a Methodology

As I have already noted in this article, discovering a methodology is a search, a journey. When the data arising from the various research methods is selected, coded, analysed and interpreted, the methodology serves as a framework in which conclusions and findings make sense. Although, in turn, methodology is a process itself. It is like artwork: although the artist might have an idea about what they intend to create, along the way the piece of art will develop under the influence of the experiences and development of the artist themselves, the context, and interaction with others. It is not only about craft and skills, nor the right method, analysis, or sample. It is about how to understand the facts, the stories, the emotions, and the interactions. It is an evolutionary process in finding meaning, or, as Bellamy states, it is how to evaluate the facts we find.

By ‘methodology’, we mean the understanding of how to proceed from the findings of empirical research to make inferences about the truth — or at least the adequacy — of theories. Its importance stems from the fundamental insight that findings about empirical facts are often most interesting when

⁵⁵ Equivalent leadership, ‘Minutes of Focus Group Meeting’, Driebergen, 11 June 2019, p. 4.

they enable us to make deeper judgements about what might be going on beneath those facts.⁵⁶

With the metaphor ‘A walk in the woods’ in mind, I picture the women of the focus group around one particular tree, the ‘problem tree’. The leaves are effects or symptoms of the problem. These are visible, out in the open; how they are seen, however, depends on perspective, personality, and narrative. To say there are no leaves, is reasonless. The information I gathered through the interviews, the internet search, and the documents, are the leaves. When I asked the group to share their experiences, looking at the leaves, the answers confirmed the observations. Statements like, ‘I was at a conference with only male speakers,’ or, ‘Last year I was invited to preach in this church, and they said to me that I was the first woman ever to preach there,’ confirm the statistics.

After describing the leaves, the next stage is to discuss possible causes, roots, for these effects or symptoms. To start imagining what it might look like beneath the surface. But not only that, by sharing stories, anecdotes, pain, and joy while looking at that tree ‘meaning is constructed and negotiated on women in church leadership within the DEM’.⁵⁷ Roots are revealed and the next step is to discover if these roots are substantiated by fact through literature study and the experiences of others. For example, one participant mentioned that women always need to be more prepared and show more expertise than men.⁵⁸ This could be a statement out of frustration or a subjective observation. However, not only was she joined by women sharing examples, in a recent interview with a well-known Dutch historian, Dr. Beatrice de Graaf, the same opinion was expressed.⁵⁹ Does this make it a valid observation? When this was put to the male secretary of the Dutch Union of Baptists Churches in one of my interviews with him, he

⁵⁶ Bellamy and 6, *Principles of Methodology*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Inspired by the explanation offered by Anna Davidsson Bremborg, ‘Interviewing’, p. 313.

⁵⁸ Equivalent leadership, ‘Minutes of Focus Group Meeting’, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Carolina lo Galbo, ‘Beatrice de Graaf: “We zijn er pas echt als er ook luie, slechte vrouwen aan de top komen”’, *De Volkskrant*, October 19, 2018, <<https://www.volkskrant.nl/mensen/beatrice-de-graaf-we-zijn-er-pas-echt-als-er-ook-luie-slechte-vrouwen-aan-de-top-komen~b12d06a8/?fbclid=IwAR0wrs435Q93gDKXpP5VIK2GZrGy2IsZSUQy7ux4NjV-UCwZ9EwVmZbG2tI>> [accessed May 8, 2020].

considered this as ‘nonsense’.⁶⁰ In discussing it with peers, one of my male colleagues could not imagine this as a valid, contemporary observation, similarly using strong words and a louder voice.⁶¹

Considering this, it is arguable that the perception of female and male leaders on this issue is different. Depending on experiences, but also on personal worldview as influenced by gender, position and background, meaning is constructed in a different way. This can be seen as the constructivist paradigm through which ontology, epistemology and methodology are viewed.⁶² Or as Ganzevoort expresses it, ‘The epistemological question has to do with the view that narratives are interpretations of an experienced reality in relation to a specific audience.’⁶³ Since this is not the place for an extensive discussion on this, it merely paints a picture of the way I am trying to find meaning using different interview methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups, looking at a ‘problem’ through the problem tree method. Every walk with the same or with different people produces more insight.

How to proceed from here

As mentioned in the introduction, the experience of the first focus group meeting led to a continuation of this path. In this chosen framework of the walk in the woods, I identified three choices: I take the same group to look at different trees; I bring different groups together to look at one tree; or a combination of these two. I have decided to concentrate on this third option. The ‘women are invisible’ tree was chosen on the basis of my own observations, in light of the response to it within the meetings, and on the strength of the supporting

⁶⁰ Personal interview with the author, Amsterdam, 15 February 2019.

⁶¹ In a peer-review session on my draft article about the current situation of the position of women within the DEM, 29 October 2019.

⁶² Cf., Egon G. Guba and Y.S. Lincoln, ‘Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research’ in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), pp. 105–117. In a later version the participatory paradigm was added which is very helpful in considering the ontological and epistemological aspects of the interviewee as well as the role of the researcher themselves: Yvonna S. Lincoln, Susan A. Lynham, and Egon G. Guba, *Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011).

⁶³ Ganzevoort, ‘Narrative Approaches’, 211.

data that was gathered. But it is very much a possibility that during the walk one of the participants might say, 'Have you seen that tree? Let us go over there and have a look!' To follow a heuristic path which unfolds along the way is an important feature of qualitative research and confirms the hermeneutical nature of this project. 'The flexibility to follow new leads during fieldwork and to take advantage of new information as it is collected and reviewed is a major strength of inductive sampling and of qualitative research in general.'⁶⁴ Sampling, choosing the best representatives and the right number of people for the groups, and for any follow up interviews, is therefore of major importance and needs to be taken into consideration before, during, and after the whole process. The group (or the individual) I take, figuratively speaking, for a walk determines for a large part the next step in the research.

In essence, this works like a continuous circle where the outcome of the initial interviews sets the stage for the first focus group meeting. The effects and causes mentioned in this first meeting lead to the topic(s) I bring to the next focus group meeting to identify the way that gender roles are understood. The interviews and focus group meetings lead to the interpretation of an observation but also bring up new questions to be researched by literature and brought back to a focus group.

Looking back at the different way the two men reacted to the statement that women must work harder to have the same opportunities, inspires me to convene a counter group with male theologians. Looking at the same problem tree with different homogeneous groups gives more insight into the way in which meaning is negotiated. In this way I can distillate the role personal experiences in relation to gender plays. It might be interesting to consider a male moderator for a meeting like this.⁶⁵ Along the way I might also consider different counter groups, such as women not in leadership versus women in leadership, or leaders in the church versus leaders in society.

⁶⁴ Guest, Namey and Mitchell, p. 45.

⁶⁵ Guest, Namey and Mitchell, pp. 187–190 on the role of the moderator.

However, this will depend strongly on the limiting factors of logistics such as time and finances.⁶⁶

Conclusion

In this article, by means of an illustrative case study from my own research, I have demonstrated how the careful use of a particular qualitative research method within the field of practical theology can bring greater clarity to the issues at hand in a given research topic. I have shown that working with diverse focus groups to consider a ‘problem’ provides insights into the theological and cultural dynamics at play and reveals within the given frame deeper underlying motivations and actions that give clarity to the current (lived) situation of women in leadership. In this I use a methodology based on the metaphor of ‘walking in the woods’, closely connected to the traveller metaphor of Anna Davidsson Bremborg. In this all I am aware of the famous quote of William Blake: ‘The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way.’⁶⁷

⁶⁶ I did receive a small grant to cover the costs of five focus group meetings, including payment for the notetaker.

⁶⁷ William Blake cited in Zakia and Page, *Photographic Composition*, p. 249.