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RITUALISATIONS IN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS

Normative Implications of Designing Empirical Research

SUMMARY

The article focuses on how a dialectical relationship between empirical research and theological normativity can and should influence the design of an empirical study at important points of the planning process. It draws on a systems view of scientific activity proposed as a working model for family research by Lavee & Dollahite (1991). Many decisions, each connected with norms and values, have to be taken with regard to the selection of the research topic, the theoretical and methodological approaches and the application of research findings. Besides normativity rooted in consensual knowledge of the scientific community, reflective theological normativity can deploy a critical and disclosive power as is demonstrated in the article with regard to a research project centering on the theme of bedtime ritualisations in parent-child interactions, their inter-generational transmission and their relationship to the institutionalised ritual of baptism.

1. Introduction

As always, Mum comes to say good night to Christine (aged 10). As mother is sitting at the bedside, Christine lets her know in a small voice that she does not want to go to school any more. After a silence and some comforting words from her mother, Christine tells about problems with the other girls in the class. Christine's mother gets the impression that a kind of group bullying is going on in Christine's peer-group. The girls verbally attack each other. Christine was especially hurt in a discussion they had the other day, about boys. When Christine showed no real interest, one girl called her "childish", and the others laughed at her. Christine starts to cry. She does not cry when the others are around. She has to be "cool". But now she can show how sad she is. After a while she stops crying and says that her mother can go now and not to tell father about her troubles. She takes her "sad-doll" in her arms. She will say her prayers, which, as she told her mother the other day, she has created for herself.

Bedtime routines such as this one described by Christine's mother in one of the first exploratory interviews are one of the themes of a research program recently initiated at the Institute of Practical Theology in Bern. From this brief sketch of Christine's bedtime routine, a number of research questions suggest themselves:
1. Bedtime routines seem to be important as a sort of “container”. Christine’s mother calls them a “backdoor” to a special time where there is room to talk about the day’s problems, about the catastrophes in a child’s world, and about what was good during the day. Is this the case in other families too? Is it the case for children of different ages? Is it true of boys and girls? How do these rituals develop during the first decade of a child’s life?

2. What is the function of such “rituals” for the family system, for example the primary triad of mother, father and child? Why does Christine ask her mother to tell father nothing about her problems? Is it important for Christine to have such a safe space where “women folk” in the family can talk about problems men just do not understand? Does this secret-keeping in some way mirror what is happening in Christine’s peer group? What are the effects of this ritualisation? And what happens next to Christine’s first step of breaking the rules of her group not to say a word to anyone else about what is happening among the girls?

3. What is the function of such rituals for coping with both everyday stress and stress connected with important transitions in a child’s life-cycle (for example the stress of no longer being a small child but becoming a teenager, as in Christine’s case)? Are families with an appropriate form of life ritualisation “healthier” than families of an either over- or under-ritualised type? Under what circumstances are rituals family resources and when do they become part of oppressive structures in and around families?

4. And last but not least, what is “religious” about these ritualisations? It is as if Christine were trying to develop what Winnicott (1985) has called the “potential space” that he believes is central for developing a religious understanding of life, to mention but one possible line of thinking. Do ritualisations in parent-child interactions create safe places to develop identity and personal religious practices (such as personal prayer) fostering the autonomy of a girl on her journey into adolescence?

Bedtime routines and other family rituals and their intra-familial transmission, interpretation and formation are the main topics of the first part of our research program, with interesting implications for pastoral care and pastoral psychology based on a systems approach. In the second part of our research project, forms, functions and effects of institutionalised rituals in the family life cycles are investigated specifically with regard to baptism. How is baptism with its long tradition in church history received and interpreted within the frame of reference of different types of families today? What are its functions for these families, for example for their structuring or restructuring within the family lifecycle, for the regulation of intergenerational relationships, or for their adherence to a certain type of religious practice? A third theme of our common research project concerns the intergenerational transmission of these rituals and their functions. How are rituals transmitted from one generation to the next? Can a process of individualisation be observed in the social transmission of rituals and ritualisations from generation to generation? Is it still possible to discern certain types of traditions handed down within families (for example from mother to daughter)? We have chosen this threefold approach as a heuristic research strategy hoping