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THE UTILITY OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: MAPPING THE DOMAIN, GOALS, STRATEGIES AND CRITERIA OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Historically practical theology entered the theological encyclopaedia as a discipline of 'crises' in the praxis which ministers, congregations and churches experienced in making the Christian tradition relevant in the life of individuals, communities or in society as a whole. Among scholars in practical theology there is a deep consensus that practical theology starts with practical concerns and contributes to practice, but what is the utility of practical theology? This article want to 'deconstruct' the consensus that all practical theology is by default practical. If practical theology wants to construct knowledge about the improvement of practice, some strategies are preferable compared to other strategies. The question of utility refers to the methodological criteria of empirical research regarding (a) the *object* of research or the problem to be solved, (b) the *needs* of the stakeholders as to the research and its results and, (c) the type of *knowledge* to be produced. If utility is the target of practical theological research, then the question is which research strategies meet these methodological criteria better than other criteria. Some research strategies are strong on reaching certain goals, but are weak regarding other goals. It is only in the complexity of the type of knowledge, research strategy and methodological criteria that the focus on practice orientation can be decided.

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1. INTRODUCTION

How to contribute to the future of the Christian religion in the historical, socio-cultural and societal conditions in which people live? This is the core question of practical theology as discipline. Historically, practical theology entered the theological encyclopaedia as a discipline of 'crises' in the praxis, which ministers, congregations and churches experienced in making the Christian tradition relevant in the life of individuals, communities, or in society as a whole. Don Browning, who can be regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern practical theology, formulates it as follows:

> Religious communities go from moments of consolidated practice to moments of deconstruction to new, tentative reconstructions and consolidation. Then a new crisis emerges and the communities must launch into the entire process once more (Browning 1991:6).

There is a deep consensus among scholars in practical theology that practical theology starts with practical concerns and contributes to practice. According to Browning, the structure of theological reasoning runs from practice, to theory, to practice. He is even inclined to mention that this should be the structure of all theology (Browning 1991:9).[1] For Browning, this is not a dialogue restricted to the Christian community and the Christian sources, but a "critical reflection on the church's dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action toward social and individual transformation" (Browning 1991:36).

What is the utility of practical theology? Some will answer this question on the basis of the role of practical theology in learning practical skills in order to do theology. We know that scholars in practical theology often argue on this basis. It is not wrong, but it does not answer the question of the practice orientation of knowledge. Of course, we can (and should) use this knowledge in theological training and education. But what type of knowledge meets the demands of practice orientation? What do we mean by utility of knowledge? How is this knowledge created in research?

In this article, we wish to 'deconstruct' the consensus that all practical theology is by default practical. We start with Rick Osmer's (2004; 2008; 2011) formulation of the 'consensus' of practice orientation, and claim that this 'consensus' does not help clarify the practice orientation of practical theology, because it does not clearly distinguish the different domains, goals, strategies and criteria of practical theological research.

1 In this instance, Browning agrees with Rahner (1972).

First, we formulate four questions regarding Osmer's consensus of the fourfold tasks of practical theology. We take up these questions in the remainder of this article. The first issue is the role of the hermeneutical understanding of core ideas of the Christian tradition in research programmes. Next, we distinguish four goals of research programmes in terms of the types of knowledge they produce: descriptions, explanations, design, and concepts. The first three goals imply empirical research strategies. Is every research strategy fit to contribute to the development of each type of knowledge? We argue that this is not the case. If practical theology wants to construct knowledge about the improvement of practice, some strategies are preferable compared to others. Finally, we address the issue of utility in terms of methodological criteria of empirical research. Utility refers to methodological criteria regarding the *object* of research or the problem to be solved; the *needs* of the stakeholders as to the research and its results, and the type of *knowledge* to be produced. If utility is the target of practical theological research, then the question is: Which research strategies meet these methodological criteria better than other criteria?

2. BEYOND THE 'CONSENSUS' IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Rick Osmer (2004:149), one of the leading scholars in practical theology, has put a great deal of effort into formulating the new consensus in practical theology. His 'consensus idea' is familiar with the four dimensions of Browning's (1991) practice-theory-practice orientation. According to Osmer, the major difference between his theory and that developed by Browning lies in the fact that he distinguishes four core operations within practical theology, whereas Browning distributes them across the theological encyclopaedia (Osmer 2004:150). There may be less difference than Osmer presents, if we understand the four dimensions as sub-movements within a practice-theory-practice orientation of all theological scholarship (Browning 1991:36). His concept of a fundamental practical theology is presented as an overarching container concept, incorporating four sub-movements, namely descriptive, historical-normative, systematic, and strategic, within a hermeneutical engagement with the community and its practices that displays the religious dimensions of the situation. In this section, we restrict ourselves to the formulation of Osmer's (2004; 2008; 2011) new consensus. We evaluate the claim of the new consensus that it builds action-guiding theories of religious praxis (Osmer 2004:152). Does the structure of the practice-theory-practice orientation, as developed in the new consensus, help practitioners improve their praxis?

What are the tasks of practical theology? According to Osmer (2011:2), there are four interconnected tasks:

- Descriptive-empirical: What is going on? Gathering information to better understand particular episodes, situations, or contexts.
- Interpretive: Why is this going on? Entering into a dialogue with the social sciences to interpret and explain why certain actions and patterns are taking place.
- Normative: What ought to be going on? Raising normative questions from the perspectives of theology, ethics and other fields.
- Pragmatic: How might we respond? Forming an action plan and undertaking specific responses that seek to shape the episode, situation, or context in desirable directions.

The central claim is that practical theology attends to four tasks along the lines of a hermeneutical circle (Osmer 2008:22-23). This hermeneutical circle is composed of five moments: pre-understanding, putting some facet of our pre-understanding in question, dialogical interplay between the horizon of the interpreter and that of the text, person or object being interpreted, and fusion of horizons and application. Osmer (2011:2) situates the fourfold task on the level of pastoral and ecclesial leadership. When practical theology emerged as an academic discipline in the modern, research university, "its task was to develop 'theories of practice' and 'rules of art' that might guide the reflective practice of the leaders of the Church" (Osmer 2011:2). According to Osmer, this level needs to be distinguished from the meta-theoretical level. Practical theologians conceptualize and carry out the four tasks differently on the basis of decisions made on a meta-theoretical level. Osmer identifies four issues: the theory-praxis relationship; sources of justification (scripture, tradition, reason and experience), models of cross-disciplinary work, and the theological rationale (Osmer 2011:3).

We wish to raise four questions regarding the formulation of the 'consensus' by Osmer:

1. The fourfold task is situated on the level of the reflective practitioner, not on the level of the theory formation of scholars. Scholars are not reflective practitioners within a hermeneutical circle, but critical agents within research programmes (and teaching programmes related to the knowledge created in research programmes).
2. Within research programmes, the empirical circle is at the heart of research programmes. The aim of research programmes is to develop

new knowledge. It aims to put our knowledge claims to the test. Within theological research programmes, scholars share knowledge claims (core ideas) of the Christian community. Hermeneutical interpretation is necessary to understand the knowledge claims of the Christian community. But the hermeneutical circle is not the overall purpose of research programmes.

3. In Osmer's formulation, the empirical task is called the descriptive-empirical task. Descriptions are grounded on a form of attending as a spirituality of presence, and can also incorporate critical reflection on the current practice (Osmer 2008:58). The question is whether descriptions are the only type of knowledge of practical theological research programmes. Research programmes also incorporate other forms of knowledge such as explanations and designs of interventions.

4. In the creation of knowledge, scholars can use different research strategies. Not every type of research strategy meets the demands of practical relevance or utility. Osmer is aware of the role of different strategies of inquiry. But we think that the difference in research strategies needs more attention precisely in view of the question of practical relevance. Which research strategies are more appropriate in terms of the utility of practice?

3. WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY?

If practical theology is about the development of 'theories of practice' and 'rules of art' (cf. Osmer), then the first question is: What is a research programme in practical theology in which 'theories of practice', and so on are built? The work of scholars in practical theology cannot be situated on the level of reflective practice, but on the level of a research programme (and in relation to this, an educational task). Practical theologians contribute to practice (for example of leaders, congregations, believers) by developing research programmes, creating knowledge about practices in which they are interested. In this section, we will first formulate a concept of a research programme based on the work of the Dutch philosopher of science Kuipers (2001; 2005; 2007), who positions himself as a neo-classical scholar in the line of Kuhn and Lakatos. Next, we will discuss the thorny issue that practical theology starts from a hermeneutical pre-understanding of the Christian practice. Can we acknowledge the fact to share notions grounded in the Christian traditions, on the one hand, and put our knowledge claims to the test, on the other?

Research is fundamentally an interested enterprise; it serves the agenda of a research programme. Kuhn and Lakatos introduced this idea into the philosophy of science. Since the 1980s, it has become more or less accepted that science develops in encompassing units called research programmes (Kuipers 2007:2). The development of scientific knowledge does not proceed through the development of specific hypotheses and theories, but in more encompassing terms. Structural features of research programmes are:

> a *domain* of existing or not yet existing phenomena; the *goals* of solving some problem associated with it, be it finding its true description or its true theory, or the construction of an intended intervention or concept,[2] a *core idea*, or a set of coherent ideas couched in a certain vocabulary, about how to solve the problem, and additional ideas, *heuristics*, suggesting how to safeguard the core idea against prima facie failures to solve the problem (Kuipers 2005:31; 2007:63-64).

What is the domain of practical theology? Christian practice as religious-communicative action naming God? In the past decades, the domain of the research programme of practical theology widened: from the practices of ministers, to the practices of believers within the community of the Church, to the practices of Christian believers in the coordinates of Church and society (public domain), to the interaction between Christian believers with adherents of other religions (Hermans 2014). This widening of the material object of practical theology has created more diversity in research programmes in practical theology. Where some research programmes include religion on the World Wide Web and in virtual communities, others focus on the practices of ministers and congregations.

A core idea of research programmes in practical theology regards the origin of naming God in the narrative of death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to build a research programme in practical theology beyond the core notions of our epistemic community. All inquiry is from 'accepted' knowledge within an epistemic community to 'new' knowledge. Research aims at expanding our knowledge, but it does not start from nowhere, nor do we need to presuppose "universal, hard and fast premises, clear-cut concepts, straight and narrow theories and universal, irrefutable test results" (Van der Ven 2010:95). This is the epistemological position of strong rationality. There is no research programme that does not start from ideas, which are accepted within an epistemic community

2 Problems refer to what we '*do not know*' about a phenomenon (such as a professional practice or congregational development) and the challenges related to it.

as knowledge base. "We begin our conversations by bringing our fallible views and judgments to those who traditionally make up our epistemic communities" (Van Huyssteen 1999:265). Each judgment is made in the context of a specific community, and is based on arguments and ideas that are accepted in that community. We cannot abstract from a *conversational context* when justifying concepts, ideas and viewpoints. This is the epistemological position of 'weak rationalism'. We cannot claim absolute knowledge. We are part of an epistemic community in which we share concepts, ideas and viewpoints but at same time accept that we only have fallible knowledge, which can stand the test of falsification.

'Weak' rationalism demands that we should extend our individual evaluation to communal evaluation, and further to trans-communal evaluation (Van Huyssteen 1999:265). This does not imply a demand to include all possible rational agents in our justification, regardless of time and place. If we were to demand this, it would be impossible to determine the validity of our justifications. Scientific truth is something that is established over time by the community of inquiry, including future generations and different contexts. The principle of fallibilism[3] demands that we need to ground scientific theory not in the origins of our knowledge (context of discovery), but in the rules and norms of inquiry (context of justification). "Our claims to knowledge are legitimized not by their origins — for the origins of knowledge are diverse and fallible — but rather by the norms and rules of inquiry itself" (Bernstein 1971:175).

What is the distinctive role of the hermeneutical or interpretative task and the empirical task in a theological research programme? In a research programme, the hermeneutical task aims at understanding the meaning of practices from the perspective of the epistemic community that is involved in these practices. In order to understand what healing means for a specific (type of) evangelical community, we need to understand hermeneutically the meaning this community connects with this practice of healing. But it is wrong to say that the four tasks are related to each other within a hermeneutical circle. The tasks function within a research programme that aims to solve problems within a specific domain (e.g.,religious-communicative practices) based on a core idea or set of related ideas (e.g., the Christian origin narrative of death and resurrection of Jesus Christ). The hermeneutical task plays a role in the context of discovery, but not in the context of justification. In this instance, the empirical task is centrally based on the principle of fallibalism. We put the knowledge of an epistemic community to the test with the help of the norms and rules of

3 The principle of fallibalism states that all knowledge is fallible, i.e. it must be possible to refute a knowledgr claims based on the norms and rules of inquiry.

inquiry. If some image of God blocks the practice of mourning for believers in a certain type of Christian community, the insight fulfills a critical role towards a theological pre-understanding which considers this image to be beneficial for believers who mourn over a beloved one (Zuidgeest 2001).

4. GOALS OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The overall goal of practical theological research is to solve problems in the domain which is the target of a research programme. In the 'consensus', the general idea is that all practical theological research contributes to solving practical problems. But, is this really the case? In this section, we will distinguish different goals of practical theological research. Following Kuipers (2001; 2005; 2007), we distinguish between four goals of a research programme, based on the type of knowledge it produces, namely descriptions, explanations, designs and concepts.

Descriptive programmes are the first type of research. They are meant "to describe a certain domain of phenomena, primarily in terms of individual facts (individual programmes) or primarily in terms of general observable factors (general or inductive programmes)" (Kuipers 2001:6; 2007:59). Individual facts are, for example, specific rituals of different Christian denominations. General observable factors refer to, for example, the experience of a divided self. According to James (1961:114-142), all of us have some amount of discordancy in our character, but in some this heterogeneity is more extreme than in others. Human beings want to overcome experiences of a divided self, because the self is experienced as being in conflict with itself, thus causing anxiety. Descriptive programmes are also known as observation programmes: the research takes the form of more or less selective observations, and the resulting facts are couched in so-called observational terms. We like to stress (again) that observational terms are not given by the natural world, but are created through a theoretical lens through which researchers examine their research object.

Explanatory research programmes have a different aim: "They are directed at the explanation and further prediction of the observable individual and general facts in a certain domain of phenomena" (Kuipers 2005:29). An explanatory programme is (quasi-)deductive, whereas a descriptive programme is dominated by inductive reasoning. Explanatory programmes are always built on underlying descriptive programmes. Different explanatory programmes can arise from the same descriptive programme. For example, observations of religious rituals, practices, beliefs and emotions can be explained by different theories. For example, secularization theory (e.g., Bruce 2011) and religious market

theory (e.g., Stark & Finke 2000) both profess to explain religious decline and revival. Next, we could critically evaluate to what extent these theories indeed envisage elements of religious decline and/or revival (Aarts *et al.* 2008; Aarts 2010; Sterkens & Vermeer 2012).

Intervention design research programmes involve the development of knowledge *on* interventions (in terms of the improvement of a certain practice) or *from* interventions (in terms of the construction of a certain practice). This type of research is often neglected in favour of description, explanation and prediction. However, research in the field of organizations and policy is mainly design research (Van Aken *et al.* 2008) or policy research (Verschuren 2009a). Since design programmes often use knowledge obtained in descriptive and explanatory programmes, the design process will only be considered *scientific* if it is not fully based on existing knowledge and techniques. That is, new theories have to be developed or new experiments have to be performed if a design programme is to be scientific (Kuipers 2005:30). Or, we can imagine design research into the development and testing of a protocol of pastoral counselling of people in different contexts (e.g., hospital settings and religious institutions) and different religious groups (e.g., different Christian Churches). It could include research into the development and implementation of a programme format for television (or internet), structured according to the core aspects of a spiritual biography.

Finally, explicative research programmes are directed to concept explication, that is the formal construction of simple, precise and useful concepts that are similar to given informal concepts (Kuipers 2007:62). The strategy of concept explication starts by deriving conditions of adequacy from the intuitive concept to be explicated and, if relevant, from empirical findings, which the explicated concept will have to satisfy, and evident examples and counter-examples that the explicated concept has to include or exclude. Explication may go beyond what the explicated concept has to include or exclude and beyond the explication of intuitive concepts. It may also aim at the explication of intuitive judgments, including their justification, demystification or even undermining.

5. RESEARCH STRATEGIES OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

What type of research strategy should get preference in practical theological research? The choice of a research strategy is, in "real academic life", often related to the preferences of the researcher. Researchers often continue to use research strategies in which they have been successful. However, research strategies should be chosen in view of the goal of the

research and the research question related to this. In this section, we will first distinguish seven main categories of a research strategy. Then we will answer the following question: Which type of research strategy is useful to develop a specific type of knowledge?

A research strategy incorporates all the decisions of the research design. It includes the method of research, in the sense of data collection and data analysis, but also decisions, whether it is theory oriented or practice oriented, about the depth or width of the research, the number of research units, and so on (Verschuren 2009a). Creswell formulates nine core questions which a research strategy should answer, including what we want to understand better about our topic, the unit(s) that we want to study, method, data analysis, how to validate our results, ethical issues, and the practicality or value of the result (Creswell 2003:49-50). We will follow the typology of research strategies as offered by Verschuren (2009a; 2009b). The reason for this is that his typology is interesting in view of the discussion on utility in the next section. In general, the majority of authors focus on the same research strategies that exist in the field. The major difference is the ordering of the research strategies.

Research strategies can be distinguished regarding the input of the research that forms the basis of the analysis. The first question in choosing a research strategy is: What do we analyse? In data-based strategies, what we analyse is data that is available through empirical observation. The input in human resource-based research is capacities of the human mind (reflections; analysis) (Verschuren (2009a:36).

In data-based types of research strategy, the next decision relates to the choice for quantitative or qualitative approaches (Creswell 2003:13-17; Verschuren 2009b:280-282). The choice for quantitative approaches is led by the need to generalize the insights of the research. In order to be able to generalize the results, the focus of this research strategy is on the magnitude (mass) of a phenomenon, large samples, and external validity (a-selective method of sampling; e.g., does the sample reflect the population?). Qualitative research aims at depth of understanding of a phenomenon, and internal validity. Depth refers to the variety of the phenomenon, which demands for interpretative and comparative ways of analysing the data. Internal validity refers to questions regarding the process of production of the data, namely whether the observed data reflect the ontological reality which exists 'out-there'. The focus of qualitative research calls for small samples, and labour-intensive processes of data collecting and data analysis.

There are two main types of research strategies in quantitative types of data-based research, namely correlational and experimental testing

designs. Correlational research is more than survey research, although this is the major kind of research in this type (Bryman 2008:45). In this type of research, the main operation in data analysis is establishing the association between phenomena. Correlation coefficients give insight into the strength and direction of this association. Based on the correlation coefficients, other types of multivariate analysis are possible, such as scaling techniques, factor analysis, and regression analysis. Subtypes within this category are survey research, panel research, trend research, and cohort research. Experimental testing designs include a manipulation of the independent variable (e.g., an intervention) in order to determine whether it does have influence on the dependent variable (such as the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of people) (Bryman 2008:50). There are two types of experimental designs: true and quasi-experimental designs. True designs demand that the researcher can manipulate all the variables involved in the research. Subjects are distributed on a random basis to different treatment conditions. This type of research is conducted in laboratory settings (e.g., in psychology). Quasi-experimental designs are conducted in real-life situations in which not all variables can be manipulated (e.g., the composition of the groups involved in the different treatments cannot be randomised).

We distinguish three types of research in qualitative research: Q-type research, q-type research, and design research (see Verschuren 2009a; 2009b). The Q-type of qualitative research is characterised by an inductive approach, in the sense that it is driven by empirical data and not by theory (e.g., assumptions derived from theory). It uses labour-intensive methods of data collection (open interviews, observation) and of data analysis (interpretation, constant comparative method). The research process is flexible and evolves in response to the lived reality of the phenomenon of the research (such as life narratives, ritual expressions, group decision-making processes). Different subtypes can be distinguished within this category: grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), ethnographic research, narrative research (De Haardt *et al.* 2014), discourse analysis (Wijsen 2013) and phenomenological research (Heimbrock 2007). Within qualitative research, the q-type resembles quantitative research, in the sense that it follows mainly a theory-driven approach and the empirical cycle (from theory to data and back to theory). But this type shares the use of qualitative methods of data collection and data analysis with the Q-type of qualitative research. The two most well-known variants of this strategy are the comparative case study (Yin 2009) and the qualitative survey (Jansen 2010). The third type of qualitative research is practice-oriented research or design research. The difference between the first two types is that this type implies an intervention. The start and goal of

practice-oriented research is an intervention (or action) problem, and not a theoretical knowledge problem as in the quantitative testing research (see above). The problem of the research can be either the improvement problem, or a design problem. In the former, the focus is to improve a practice *from* an intervention (Verschuren 2009b); in the latter, the focus is *on* interventions, e.g., designing interventions (Mckenney & Reeves 2012).

All the strategies mentioned above are data driven. There are also strategies driven by the capacity of the human mind to produce knowledge. Verschuren (2009a) calls them human resource-driven research. He distinguishes two subtypes: knowledge-based research and reflective research. By contrast, the inputs for human resource-based research are capacities of the human mind. In knowledge-based research, the input is knowledge that exists in literature and/or in the heads of experts. By confronting and analysing these insights, the researcher endeavours to produce new knowledge. Examples are literature research, Delphi research (Keeney *et al.* 2010), and focus groups with experts (Stewart & Shamdasani 2015). In reflective research, the knowledge basis does not exist in literature and/or in the mind of experts, but is produced by the reflective capacity of the researcher. In this type of research, the researcher is an instrument for both 'observation' and analysis.

We can now answer the question as to what degree a research strategy can serve different goals? Figure 1 presents an overview of our analysis. Correlational research strategies are strong in producing descriptive and explanatory knowledge. Experimental strategies are strong in producing explanatory knowledge, e.g., knowledge on the causal relationship between x and y. There is a difference between experimental and quasi-experimental research in this regard. As explained earlier, quasi-experimental research is conducted in real-life situations, in which not all variables can be manipulated. The strength of producing causal explanations is, therefore, weaker in quasi-experimental than in experimental research. Hence, we place a '+' between brackets for quasi-experimental research. The three other data-driven strategies are weak in producing explanations. Both the Q-type and the q-type are strong in producing descriptions. The Q-type is also useful in producing new concepts using an inductive approach. This is different with the q-type, which is theory driven, because it takes the existing knowledge base as the frame of reference of the research. There is one type of research design in the q-type. It is strong in developing knowledge on interventions, namely the comparative case study design. Design research is very strong in producing new knowledge on (and from) interventions, but it can also serve the goal of producing new concepts. Both types of human research strategies have their strength on concept explication.

Figure 1: The extent to which research strategies can serve different goals of research

	Descriptions	Explanations	Designs of interventions	Concepts
Correlational	++	++	-	-
Experimental	-	+(+)	++	-
Q-type	++	-	-	+
q-type	++	-	(++)	-
Practice oriented	-	-	++	+
Knowledge based	-	-	-	++
Reflective	-	-	-	++

– = not useful

\+ = useful

++ = very useful

6. CRITERIA OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

In conclusion: What can practical theological research contribute to the practice of believers, professionals, and congregations? In order to answer this question, we will relate different types of practical theological research to different criteria of research. Some criteria are related to the question of truth; others are related to utility. What we intend to clarify is that some types of research score high on truth, others score high on utility, and again others score high on both criteria.

We start by making a distinction between two types of criteria in scientific research, namely internal-scientific or theory-oriented criteria and external-scientific or practice-oriented criteria (Verschuren 2009a:29). The majority of handbooks on methodology only refer to internal-scientific criteria, namely internal validity, external validity (or generalizability), verifiability of the results, and cumulativity of theory development (Bryman 2008). With regard to the utility of research, we need external-scientific criteria. Regarding the question of utility, Verschuren introduces three demands referring to the *object* of research or the problem to be solved, the *needs* of the stakeholders as to the research and its results, and the type of *knowledge* to be produced (Verschuren 2009a:18-19). We will briefly elaborate on each type of demand. As to the object of research, the main question is:

What are the characteristics of the problem we are researching? What are the characteristics of the problem in practices in the real-life world? Do we seek the uniqueness of phenomena and their variability in different local contexts? Did the phenomenon emerge relatively recently, which implies that we need to incorporate aspects that are relatively unknown to us? Do we include the social processes influencing the phenomena that we research? Is the interconnectedness (interaction) between people influencing the phenomena of our research? Are we able to incorporate the specificity of different subgroups in our research?

The next demand of utility relates to the needs of stakeholders. These needs result from the fact that stakeholders want to do something with the knowledge that is produced in the research; for example, make a decision, develop a plan, perform a ritual practice, and so on. Verschuren (2009a:20-21) distinguishes four criteria in this category: comprehensibility, acceptability, legitimacy, and research as learning process. In order to understand that the knowledge produced in the research fulfils their needs, the results must be comprehensible for stakeholders. The stakeholders must accept the knowledge as relevant. They must perceive the knowledge and the way in which it was produced as legitimate. And finally, the stakeholders need to be involved in a learning process that helps them change.

The last demand of utility relates to the type of knowledge produced in the research. Verschuren (2009a:21-22) distinguishes the following criteria in this category: holism, interdisciplinarity, context restraint, profoundness, and transformation. Holism refers to the fact that one researches the entire phenomenon, studying the real-life phenomenon, in the conditions of time and place as it manifests itself. Interdisciplinarity refers to the fact that many real-life problems cut across different disciplines. The knowledge is bound to the context in which it is gathered. Profoundness refers to the fact that behind problems, a myriad of causes can influence this problem. Finally, transformation refers to the fact that it does not suffice to understand phenomena. The important issue is whether the problem can be addressed and whether the stakeholder can do it.

Based on the formulated criteria, we can now answer the following question: Which research strategy in practical theological research fulfils the demand of utility more than other strategies? As Figure 2 shows, the two data-driven, quantitative strategies are strong on internal criteria. It is also clear that they are weak in fulfilling demands of utility. The three qualitative, data-driven strategies score high on utility, but they can also deal with internal scientific criteria of truth. The two human resource-related

strategies score well on practice-oriented demands, but are weak with regard to internal scientific criteria.

Figure 2: The extent to which research strategies meet methodological criteria (based on Verschuren 2009a:38)

	Theory-oriented	Practice-oriented (utility)		
	Internal scientific	Object of research	Needs of stakeholders	Type of knowledge
Correlational	++	-	-	-
Experimental	++	-	+	-
Q-type	+	+	++	++
q-type	+	+	++	++
Design research	+	++	++	++
Knowledge based	-	+	+	++
Reflective	-	+	+	-

– = does not meet

\+ = meets

++ = meets very well

In summary: The question of utility relates to a set of practice-oriented demands of practical theological research. These demands refer to the issues regarding the object of research, the needs of stakeholders, and the type of knowledge generated in research. As we have shown, some research strategies can meet the demands of practice orientation better than others. It is not simply qualitative vs. quantitative, or inductive vs. deductive. We need to argue from the level of research strategies in order to decide which research type better meets the demands of practice orientation than other types. Within each research strategy, there are different types of methods. Finally, we need to connect the selection of a research strategy to the goal of the research. We have distinguished research goals according to the type of knowledge that are the result of the research: descriptions, explanations, intervention-designs, or concepts. Some research strategies are strong on reaching certain goals, but are weak regarding other goals. It is only in the complexity of the type of knowledge, research strategy and methodological criteria that the focus on practice orientation can be decided.

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