



Research on International Collaboration¹

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I am not a quantitative researcher. I am more of an anthropologist than a statistician. I am more dedicated to good descriptive research—the school of social science which says before you can do good research you have to have good hypotheses based on descriptive work, which may be based on anecdotal work. Almost anyone can describe what is going on in their immediate purview. One needs a passion for the problem, but not a passionate commitment to a given solution. Sometimes we are so solution-oriented that we don't take time to get passionately involved in the problem. Sometimes I wonder, with all these marvelous solutions, does anyone know what the question is? We oversimplify things and tend to give stereotyped answers to complex problems.

Naming things well is important to research. One of the first things the Lord did with Adam was put him to work as a researcher. Didn't have much to go on—not a lot of previous data—no library he could go to—but God gave him an assignment to create a creature taxonomy.

I take a creational and redemptive approach to research: part of our task is to appropriate that which is in the creation redemptively so that the mercy and grace of God can flow more effectively toward it.

I am not oriented to evaluative research. Evaluative studies tend to be short-sighted and simply inform the executive decisions within a given moment. They tend to have relatively little generalizable value.

If we are to do international collaboration, we first need to understand our own biases about research. In approaching other cultures, we must remember that what is research in one country is not in another, and the biases usually reflect a particular cultural posture. We bring a rational, reasoned approach, and people from many other cultures bring a more historical, emotive, systemic approach.

Here are some kinds of research which make sense within the scope and function of the concern we have for the missionary family, the missionary kid, and the missionary social system.

Types of Research

1. *Problem-centered Diagnostic Study*. This research is typically in response to a contemporary problem. If done well, a by-product is that the research develops better inquiry techniques, which are then available to others and may spawn a generation of inquiries which have some comparability.
2. *Facilitation Studies*. Research facilitation generally involves one or more professionals who assist institutions (and/or institutional researchers) to assess impact. Institutions want to know what works and what doesn't.

¹ Presentation on Research in International Collaboration. International Conference on Missionary Kids (ICMK). Nairobi, Kenya, 1989. Implementation Workshop 33. Conference Theme: Timely Responses to Today's Realities-The MK Challenge in the Multinational Missions Community. See http://www.missionarycare.com/ebooks/Raising_Resilient_MKs.pdf for eBook giving background to this and other conferences: Joyce Bowers (ed). *Raising Resilient MKs: Resources for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers*. Association of Christian Schools International, 1998.

3. *Family Systems Studies*. We need good comparative and correlational studies in family systems. Some of the best international comparative work has been done on school systems, particularly in the Western nations. In missions or any other sort of Christian endeavor, we can't just muddle through without really knowing what is going on.
4. *Organizational Development Factors Study*. This research genre examines matters such as the missionary family and the organizational development problems within which that family functions.
5. *Closely Related—Social System Analysis*. Research that inquires into the family as system, systems within systems, and how they impact one another. One of my passionate concerns is how mission policy affects the mission system, which affects both the schools and families; and affects not only the effectiveness, but also the health of missions and missionaries.
6. *Longitudinal Studies*. In social science, some of the most important breakthroughs have been made in longitudinal, developmental studies. They are never done as doctoral dissertations or master's theses because they take too long. Longitudinal studies follow events as they unfold over time. Most of what we do are cross-sectional or "slice of time" studies which are prone to structural errors in the design.
7. *Instrument Development*. Instrument development can part of most research studies. It is best done collaboratively where interested parties give each other ideas about how to find out about things.

I don't have a lot of patience with surveys. We need to get away from surveys and get down to more intensive work. I am much more inclined to do ethnographic close-on work and interview studies that are carefully designed and thorough. Survey research can't be done well unless the important factors are already known. How do you know the factors? You need evidence from other descriptive research, which is scarce or non-existent in our areas of interest. We should not despise the study that only looks at twelve cases, or only one school, or at one family over a period of time.

Goals of International Collaboration

What do we mean by international collaboration? There are several specific goals we should think of in terms of international collaboration:

1. *Complement One Another, not Duplicate*. Different cultures and groups look at things differently. You have to back off and let them come at things the way they want to, and then find ways to complement their perspectives. If you come at a situation with several different perspectives, you may get a more textured or third-dimensional view while allowing differences of approach to the same problem. In order to do that, we have to back off from the proprietary nature of some of our studies. The difference in how we look at things is partly cultural, but probably more specifically in the nature of our training. There are many research traditions in which people are trained, and some of them are quite narrow. For some, the word "research" has a unique meaning not held in common with other people.
2. *Replicating for Comparative Purposes*. Replication is the fountainhead of good comparative studies--doing it over again, either in the same context to see how it holds up, or replicating a study in another situation for comparison. It is usually a good idea to design a study in such a way that it can be replicated. Discipline yourself to stay away from peculiar things that exist in the environment of your study and nowhere else. A lot of participant/observer studies can't be replicated because you can't enter another environment in the same way.
3. *Reciprocation vs. Exploitation*. Exploitation is what we do when we coerce other people into collecting our data. A lot of people think of international collaboration in research in those sorts of terms—I'll get people from various places to collect data, and then it will be an international

study. There is a difference between getting others to help with a study, and finding people who can relate as peers in that project thus improving the quality of the research.

Problems of International Collaboration

1. *Problems of Priority Differences.* Whenever you do international or intercultural collaboration, one problem is that many researchers from the third world are Westernized and may not bring a truly indigenous point of view to their research.

Examples of differences in priorities:

A. *Topical Dissonances.* We have different ways of defining things. For example, the constructs “personality” or “motivation” do not transfer into some cultures. The notion of “truth” or “integrity” doesn’t go across all cultural lines. For example, I had a student from a culture where it is giving the highest compliment to quote someone, but not to cite the quote because that would be lesser honor. In the United States, we call that plagiarism. In Arabic cultures you give honor to someone by using their words; and you defame them if you use a citation, because that suggests that the world doesn’t already know those words.

B. *Notions of Sequence Vary.* Westerners are typically logical in their approach. We tend not to look thoroughly at the presenting symptom; we say let’s go to its origin and then come back at it. Many people in the world start in a different place—or at different places. It takes a certain amount of broad-mindedness to truly collaborate, because you will each do things that seem unfounded in the eyes of the other.

C. *The Importance of Specific Studies.* Americans have different ideas than do those from another culture about what constitutes important variables in research. We could accomplish interesting and valuable research if we could listen to what others think are important variables.

2. *Epistemological Differences*

A. *Narrative Representation.* Americans tend not to think in terms of narrative representation. A high percentage of other cultures do think in terms of narrative representation as a valid way to describe. Americans tend to think that without numbers, tables, percentages, and frequency charts one hasn’t done a good job of research. The value of the story to be told is the central thing in descriptive research. Oscar Lewis’ work, for example, is exemplary of a Latin American ethnographer: he simply tells the story. I believe there is a tradition to be developed in relation to this example. Maintain research commitment to the evidences from the family system in the family context, but tell the story in such a way that everyone can grasp it, read it, enjoy it, and be edified by it. We, as researchers, dare not become so arcane and remote that we talk only with each other.

B. *Cause-and-Effect Diagnostic Paradigms.* Westerners generally think in terms of cause-and-effect. The vast majority of this world thinks in terms of, in the Islamic phrase, “Allah wills it.” It is not a cause-effect statement, but a different kind of epistemology which says “don’t worry yourself with why”. Don’t assume that Allah, for example, is cause and what happened is effect. That is not what the statement means. It means Allah wills it; you need not be concerned. God takes care of his business; we take care of our business. In Western culture, we tend to believe that there is a cause somewhere; we just need to find it. That fetish will drive us in opposite directions from many potential international collaborators.

C. *Meaning of Intellectual Curiosity.* That drives a lot of us, including a lot who are not researchers but who are here in this workshop. It’s probably a healthy manifestation of intellectual curiosity because you’re Western. I don’t see a lot of third-world participants here, because in many cultures intellectual curiosity is not the driving force. They use their minds for things that make more sense in their context. Inquiry has a different purpose for many people. Even rationality has a different shape for many people.

3. *Organizational Motives.* Here I refer to motivations of the sponsors of research, not structural differences in organizations. When we come to motives for doing research, these differences are important. For example, few cross-cultural organizations understand research as having an academic sharing value; contributing to literature. Internal enlightenment is usually more important—"We will be better people if we know. . . ." That is not too different from the Western notion that we are able to use knowledge; but Americans in particular take a pragmatic view—we take knowledge as a power source. We have a control-oriented view of research because it gives us power and control. Internal enlightenment is more like a Buddhist stance—it exalts the spirit. I want Christian researchers to understand that there is a worship quality in knowledge and learning. There is a function of the image of God that is fulfilled as human beings utilize and function in all the attributes that God has created—including the intellect, the understanding, and the capacity to know.
 - B. *Orientation to Problem-Solving.* Westerners and people educated in the West presume that this is one of the divine ordinations of humankind. I happen to think problem-solving is a great thing, but there are many in this world who don't. Problems are not there to be solved; they are to be dealt with because they build character. Tribulation isn't a problem to be solved in the biblical statement; it is something to be appreciated, because it works patience. Orientation to problem-solving is very different across cultures.
4. *Style of Research Itself*
 - A. *Continuum—Planned vs. Emergent.* Anticipate and pre-solve problems or they will cause trouble later on. That is quite untypical of research attitudes the world over. In other cultures, the plan is very brief and is a starting place for a sort of heuristic exercise—we will study some things, and they will lead us to other things, and ultimately we will become internally enlightened. Because I am thoroughly Western, I tend to be very planned, not emergent; but if you get into international collaboration, that will become an issue, and you will need to do some give and take.

Potential Solutions

The differences listed above are not obstacles to be overcome; they add a great deal to the richness and enlightenment of research, but it takes patience and respect.

1. *Learn How to Learn Each Other's Techniques.* Get on the same wavelength; learn to do it their way, so you get pretty good at it, and people will accept and respect you more.
2. *Learn to Complement One Another's Work.* Work with someone from your own culture to practice those skills. You look at it this way; I'll look at it that way. You look at these subjects; I'll look at those. Then we'll look at each other's results and see what we can put together. Peer teamwork.

What is the Future for Intercultural Collaboration?

1. We will experience some side-by-side discoveries. We will produce some by-products of the experiences themselves, such as comparable case literature. How we need good case literature, both for training and for the research value! Put some of your people to work writing up what they are doing.
2. Intercultural analyses will give us a better understanding of what it is that makes situations different from one another. Missionaries are quick to say, "This place is different from that place," and "These people are different from those people"; but not very often do we find good material about what makes them different and what is underneath the presenting symptoms of their differences. *We need good comparable case literature and intercultural analyses* to avoid persistently plodding up the wrong hills.

3. We need to know what phenomenologies are cross-cultural.² Things that are different on the surface may nevertheless be indicative of phenomenologies that are common. Everyone the world over is concerned about dressing in such a way as to accommodate the weather. Some people don't wear much clothing because it's a lot more comfortable not to. But compare that behavior with that of the Eskimo. We need to see that which is cross-cultural so that we know where to build bridges. In any kind of missiological work, bridges are crucial. The best example in Scripture is Paul in Athens. He was aghast at the idolatry. However, he forced himself to spend time with the idols and discovered the little plaque, "To the unknown god" and that was his bridge. God gave Paul a bridge in the cross-cultural nature of religion. The differences between monotheism and polytheistic idolatry are an intercultural problem. But Paul used the cross-cultural nature of the witness to a transcendent god. That kind of mentality is something we need to build more strongly into our tradition, whether we are talking about MKs [missionary kids] or other mission issues.
4. We need to distinguish what is transcultural. By transcultural I mean some stance that is inherently above culture. I think there is a culture above culture. The rudiments of the Kingdom of God are a map of a culture that is above culture. What is it to be a Christian? I can have one foot in the American culture, but I need to have the other foot in the transculturalness of being Christian. What are transcultural incentives we have for some of our phenomenology, and ultimately what are the transcultural values? That can come out of collaborative research; it will never come out of monocultural research.

Nagging Issues

There are some things we may need to deal with before we mount any significant international research studies:

1. First, we have to come to grips with fundamental value differences. Though the family is cross-cultural, what we value in families is wildly different. For Americans, family is not important, even though the last two Presidents have told us it is. Americans, along with Australians, are probably at the bottom of the heap when it comes to family values. Most of the rest of the world has a keener appreciation for family values, and for that matter, most of the rest of the world has a keener appreciation for the spirit world. Only among Americans and some Western Europeans do you have to argue for the possibility that there is a God.
2. There are also some conceptual differences. For example, our concept of what is worth being resolved or answered. How do you make an answerable question?
3. We also need to better understand our own curiosity. To what extent is our curiosity exploitative?

² I am using the term cross-cultural in the sense of things that are true across cultures. Intercultural is used of matters when cultures come together. We have intercultural differences and cross-cultural similarities. Think of "inter" as interact—and sometimes interfere!—those are intercultural issues. Cross-cultural matters are such things as all societies have family structures. Nuclear family is an intercultural problem in a society of extended families.