Qualitative Research as Cultural and Religious Encounter

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This session springs from a book-in-press with Taylor and Francis called *Qualitative Research and Intercultural Understanding: Conducting Qualitative Research in Multicultural Settings*, a book in which the three presenters each take a part. In order to understand people and their cultures we need to research (search closely: *recherche*) the interconnected qualities of people's lives in their social, cultural and religious milieux. In qualitative research the researcher is a research participant no less than those whom s/he is studying. Qualitative researchers collect and analyze data through the lens of who they are. The researcher's personal make-up is at least partially tacit, as is the make-up of research participants to those participants. Our culture is like our metaphorical body: we can see our hands and feet; looking in a mirror we can see our faces, but we cannot see the blood coursing through our veins, our hearts beating, and all the various parts of us working together. Stepping inside participants' worlds requires a patient dance between objectivity and subjectivity; insight and understanding come from what Michael Polanyi described as "the process by which the tacit co-operates with the explicit, the personal with the formal." Qualitative researchers need to examine themselves at the same time that they examine the lives of others, endeavoring to make explicit the tacit elements – norms, beliefs, expectations, biases. The encounters engendered by qualitative interviews and participant observation are always two-way streets; researchers and participants encounter one other. These issues are not always comfortable, straightforward or pleasant; power structures and misunderstandings disturb the qualitative researcher's earnest intentions to build a dialogue of care.

This session will invite participants to engage with these ideas through telling their own cultural stories and their stories of intercultural and interreligious encounters, and listening to the stories of others. Then, together, the group will explore implications for religious education and research into religious education.

Structure of the session: The three presenters will each tell something of their own stories and why this topic is important to them, then participants will be asked to form pairs and conduct short interviews around these questions: What is your cultural story? Describe an intercultural or interreligious encounter you had that was important to you. What lasting effect has this encounter had on you, in your personal life and your life as a researcher and/or religious educator?

Finally, there will be whole group discussion of insights gleaned from these brief interviews and implications and applications for religious education and for intercultural and interfaith qualitative research.