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“
By referencing
this invisible
world, they
account for what
is real and for
what constitutes a
reasonable
explanation of any
event, including
my behavior as a
participant
observer.”

IN THE DREAMTIME OF THE SAUCER PEOPLE

Sense-Making and Interpretive
Boundaries in a Contactee Group

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This phenomenological analysis describes the author's encounter with the lifeworld of Unarius, an extraterrestrial contact group, which utilizes idiosyncratic procedures like dreams and past-life "memories" to verify what is real. The article explores the dialectic between immersion and objectivity as it impacts the ethnographer's experience of sense-making within a highly unusual socially constructed reality. The discussion centers on the recognition of interpretive boundaries between the researcher and group members as they both assign presumptive meanings to similarly experienced phenomena. Assessments of such boundaries occur when problematic events like discordant encounters with the member's meaning system lead the researcher to examine taken-for-granted interpretations.

Ethnographers expect to encounter new meaning systems, especially when they analyze groups with highly spiritualized understandings of the world. However, few worldviews evoke such deep incredulity as psychic contact with extraterrestrials and the claim that this contact is a legitimate scientific enterprise. The research on contactees (those who telepathically communicate with space aliens) mixed with studies of religiously oriented flying-saucer groups decades ago (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Buckner 1968; Wallis 1974; Stuppel and Dashti 1977). The cultures of such groups (Balch and Taylor 1978; Kirkpatrick and Tumminia 1989b; Bartholomew 1991; Lewis 1995) have been seen as more sociologically important since the Heaven's Gate mass suicide (Lewis 2002). However, most studies concentrate on the marginality of these belief systems (Bartholomew, Basterfield, and Howard 1991; Spanos et al. 1993; Newman and Baumeister 1998), while fewer concentrate on the social-psychological processes of belief itself (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Tumminia 1998).

This ethnographic study details the interpretive world of the contactee group Unarius Academy of Science headquartered in El Cajon, California.¹ According to this group's distinctive logic, all events can be observed and explained through its "Science." The Science teaches that everything consists of energy attuned to harmonic

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This study was the subject of my dissertation, "Brothers From the Sky" (1995), under the direction of Ralph H. Turner at the University of California, Los Angeles. I am very appreciative of his scholarly guidance. I also acknowledge R. George Kirkpatrick, who began the study in 1986. I further extend my thanks to Rob Benford and the anonymous reviewers, whose time and comments I value.

frequencies and that energy frequencies connect individuals to “memories” of past lives, other dimensions of existence, and prophetic visions. Sometimes called “fourth-dimensional physics” or “interdimensional physics,” the Unarian Science explains the ways invisible dimensions guide members into uncovering the “truth” about their existence. The philosophy asks its students to channel messages from the infinite intelligence of Space Brothers and to heal themselves through the practice of past-life therapy.

Unarian accounts of the power of the Science sometimes resemble interpretations more akin to that of the Azande poisoned chicken oracle (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Mehan and Wood 1975; Pollner 1987) than those of modern science (Giere 1979).² As a referential framework, the Science operates as an incorrigible belief system full of unsubstantiated claims and disconfirmed prophecies (Tumminia 1998). It does not matter that the outside world has a different version of credible science, because Unarians verify the power of the Science through a constant stream of evidence produced in their own way. They gather facts from dreams, recovered memories of past lives, visions, bodily sensations, psychic readings, channelings, and other experiences of supposed Space Brother contact. To Unarians, these common everyday experiences present incontrovertible proof of the authenticity of their brand of scientific logic, and they make up the daily topics of polite conversation within the group. By invoking the reality of the Science, Unarians render their interpretations sensible and reasonable because they are based on their version of empirical observation.

In this article, I explore my dialectical dilemma between immersion and objectivity as it relates to maintaining rapport with a group that sustains a considerable interpretive distance from the outer society. From a phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, I examine the interpretive boundaries between the Unarians and myself as we tried to make sense out of each other’s reasoning. I detail my encounters with the Unarian lifeworld and the times that the group’s reality seeped into my own, causing me to employ my own explanations of the “truth” of its Science. I also recount the ways that our divergent interpretations separated our experiences of the same phenomena.

INTERPRETING REALITY

Various theories inform us about what to look for as members articulate experiences of their realities (Schutz 1962; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Garfinkel 1967; Pollner 1987). Peter L. Berger (1967, 45) argues that "worlds" are socially constructed and maintained by elaborate systems of belief upheld by extensive systems of public and private validation. Sociologists following translations of Schutz use the term "world" to convey the totality of the lived experience. Phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Emerson 1988) say that these worlds are preinterpreted as objective realities that member descriptions make observable. Social actors document their presuppositions and taken-for-granted interpretations in everyday discourse (Pollner 1987). Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) cites Schutz's work on multiple realities, which is derivative of William James's ideas on subuniverses of meaning. For Goffman, as well as for Schutz and James, it is the interpreted meaning of the experience that constitutes reality. Some theories of collective action utilize Erving Goffman's notion of framing processes (e.g., Benford and Snow 2000) as the actions of meaning construction in interpretive schemata. According to Benford and Snow (2000, 614), "Frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action."

Phenomenology discusses the lifeworld as the entire ensemble of typifications upon which all experience, knowledge, and behavior are interpreted and enacted (Ritzer 1983). Building on Schutz's (1962) and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theories about the structure of the lifeworld, John R. Hall (1981, 138-39) suggests that an "applied comparative lifeworld phenomenology" is needed that is "concerned with the actual constitutions of meaning and action" in "temporally enacted meaningful attitudes." This approach seeks to study "empirical cases of the interplay between consciousness and the social world" (*ibid.*, 138). An applied lifeworld phenomenological perspective incorporates descriptions of lived experience as the intersubjective embodiment of a here-and-now. Sociologists ordinarily conceptualize the lifeworld experience in cognitive terms or as the process within an interpretive framework of commonsense reasoning, but members of unconventional groups may experience their worlds in more holographic ways. Hall (1979) suggests this in part when he shows that certain communal groups have different experiences of time. Such groups often integrate

emotions, somatic sensations, shifts in temporal perception, dream experiences, or possible altered states into the grammar of their sense-making processes, leaving phenomenologically oriented ethnographers with the difficult task of relating to the "politics of experience" of these extraordinary social worlds (Laing 1967; Rochford 1992).

Drawing on phenomenology, ethnomethodology focuses on the interpretive procedures we employ in commonsense reasoning to generate and to preserve our sense of social structure and the factual character of our social realities (Garfinkel 1967). Augmenting Schutz (1962), Garfinkel (1967, 32) posits that all sense-making from science to "witchcraft" is produced and maintained by reflexivity and by the accounting procedures used in the practical accomplishment of local knowledge. Both lay people and professionals use the documentary method of interpretation, or identification of the underlying reason for appearances.

Clues to our interpretive processes are seen in the ways we talk when making sense out of a taken-for-granted world we perceive to be intersubjectively shared (Mehan and Wood 1975; Pollner 1987). Even sense-making activities that create a so-called unreality (Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 1985) can be observed for procedures of fact finding and production of evidence that validate perception. Pollner and McDonald-Wikler (1985) examine the case of a severely retarded child whose parents insisted that their child was competent. In the face of extensive evidence to the contrary, the parents developed explanatory practices to describe the child's behavior as normal, thus reinforcing the family's view of reality. The parents documented their reality by creating and describing their own facts to dispute the assessments of others. They rationalized the contrasting views of outsiders by claiming the child acted retarded in public but not at home.

Many unconventional beliefs, some calling themselves scientific, draw strict sense-making boundaries that are sustained even when those beliefs are subject to disconfirmation. According to Berger (1967), spiritual beliefs retain credibility through social networks, or plausibility structures, by employing narratives conducive to upholding those beliefs despite competing information. Referring to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work, Snow and Machalek (1982, 17) argue that groups support their unusual beliefs utilizing plausibility structures, or "interaction networks that are simultaneously based on and devoted to sustaining those very ideas." Snow and Machalek remind us that most

groups, whether conventional or deviant, rely on plausibility structures that invoke the natural attitude as a means of self-validation. Even preposterous ideas resist disconfirmation within a group's internal unfalsifiable logic. According to Snow and Machalek, undeniable disconfirming evidence "goes unnoticed by the believer" (p. 23).

In contrast, Pollner (1987) explains that mundane reasoners notice contradictory evidence, but they explain it away through pointing out errors others have in their interpretation of the facts. Mundane reasoners (Tumminia 1998) also produce a host of "facts" from their worldview to counter empirical proof of the falsity of their beliefs. Incorrigible beliefs endure because facts are constantly found to support their credibility and because errors are identified in the way other people perceive disconfirming evidence.

Some researchers have recognized the limitations of their own sense-making enterprise and the risk of interpretive distortion. Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) claim that sociologists are in the reality-construction business just like their subjects. Hall (1981) proposes that an effective applied phenomenology goes beyond the typifications of the observer. Ethnographers try to avoid distorting the perspectives of their subjects by engaging in various sorts of member validation. Increasingly, ethnographers (Bloor 1988; Emerson and Pollner 1988; Rochford 1992) write about interpretive boundaries in the context of member validation of the ethnographer's descriptive work. While many social scientists seek to infuse their research with accounts of the subjective realities of the people they study, they frequently fall short in the eyes of their subjects. These accounts differ (Schutz 1962; Bloor 1988) precisely because they are constructed within disparate paradigms and for different purposes—thus the shifts in meanings and in conceptual frameworks. While Douglas (1976) recommends that researchers rely on member validation of the ethnographer's reasoning, Emerson and Pollner (1988) contend that informants' reactions should become data rather than a measure of validity. Rochford (1992, 102) suggests further analysis of the "politics of these encounters."

Deviant or problematic events (Goffman 1974; Garfinkel 1967; Zaner 1970; Meisenhelder 1979), for instance, discordant encounters with member validation, generate brief moments of insight into the taken-for-granted reality of the ethnographer's world. Members of groups may repeatedly challenge an ethnographer's presumptions

about reality through words and through involving the researcher in experiences that cannot be readily explained. In the field, the juxtaposition of contradictory worldviews between the ethnographer and the group member delineates their respective interpretive boundaries and is worthy of study in its own right (Mehan and Wood 1975; Wieder 1988; Bloor 1988; Rochford 1992; Pollner 1987). We can see in these borderlands of interpretation some of the presumptions each holds up as real.

A frequently cited example (Mehan and Wood 1975; Pollner 1987; Tumminia 1998) in ethnomethodology is the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937). Evans-Pritchard wrote about his various conversations with the Azande, who constantly showed him evidence of witchcraft. For example, a carver insisted on the indisputable evidence of witchcraft by showing him the split in a wooden bowl. In addition, the Azande reported information about witches garnered from dreams. When the Azande consulted their poison oracle about these and other issues, the oracle sometimes gave them contradictory answers to the same question; yet the Azande did not question its accuracy. When Evans-Pritchard reasoned with the Azande about their unempirical faith in witches and oracles, they either laughed at him or countered his arguments with further elaborations on the intricacies of their belief system. Evans-Pritchard disputed his subjects' discernment of the reality, and his work left us with the intriguing awareness of the phenomenon of interpretive boundaries.³ When two versions of reality disagree, which one is correct? Whose perception is to be trusted, that of the ethnographer or that of the subject? Pollner (1987) calls this type of interpretive puzzle a reality disjuncture.⁴

As a reflective perimeter of meaning and perception, an interpretive boundary between the ethnographer and subject can show the workings of commonsense reason, how each draws upon typifications. As a reality disjuncture, the boundary indicates how each assumes an a priori world separate from the interpretations used to turn it into an observable reality. Both ethnographer and subject refer back to their own stocks of knowledge as resources for sense-making. Facts are produced to bolster each position, but when perspectives cannot be reciprocated, disjunctures mark the borders of their respective interpretive worlds. In this study, I describe my own boundary recognitions of the questionable ways Unarians documented facts and produced evidence. Also, I recount the problematic separation I experienced from the ways

Unarians framed the meaning of everyday events and how that separation led me to reflect on our respective methods of reality construction.

ENTRY INTO THE FIELD

From the perspective of fieldwork, ethnographers walk the line between the dynamics of inclusion and professional distance. Pollner and Emerson (1988, 237) refer to the normal practices fieldworkers use to sustain the boundaries between the "observer and the observed." Pollner and Emerson recognize that fieldworkers often serve as resources to the groups they study, potentially becoming workers, believers, and close confidants. As the researcher is drawn into activities, the presumption of staying a mere observer begins to fade. Ethnographers can retain their distance by asserting verbal and physical boundaries and by evading inclusion, although they run the risk of alienating their informants. Psychological engulfment remains another risk of immersion in the field. Will the group's reality bleed into the observer's reality? To some extent, this is desired in order to understand the subjectivity presented, but ethnographers must mindfully negotiate such experiential understanding to preserve their epistemological borders.

Before I entered the field, I had anticipated some of challenges Pollner and Emerson (1988) write about; however, I did not know how deeply I would have to deal with these issues. Unarians accounted for anything by referencing its connection to the Science. The assumption of the all-pervasiveness of the Science shaped their sense-making as interpretive territory into which I could not deliberately cross given my role as a fieldworker. The perpetual inference of the Science, which produced significant tension on my part, marked a singular boundary that manifested itself throughout the myriad of conversations I had with Unarians. Without acknowledging the workings of the Science in every event, whether I believed in it or not, I could not interact with them or make sense out of what they said to me. The implicit constant recognition of the action of the Science in everyday life cordoned off the limits of the Unarian lifeworld.

Unarius had a local reputation for being an odd cult that insisted on strict submission (Parfrey 1995) when Dr. R. George Kirkpatrick began

the study in 1986 by constructing a questionnaire containing standard demographic and attitudinal inquiries. Unarians initially refused to answer the survey, saying that he was asking the wrong questions. As his assistant, I studied the group from my office by analyzing Unarian books or videos and by talking to ex-members who defined Unarius as a “mind-control” cult. Unarians eventually took the survey (Kirkpatrick and Tumminia 1989b), but they reported back to us that we were using the wrong methods of scientific investigation. They suggested that we learn the science of past-life therapy by attending their classes. From the beginning, Unarius framed all communications with us in terms of the virtues of its Science and the errors of our own.

From a distance, we knew that the core group of about forty members discussed all the minutia of their lives in the context of spiritual psychotherapy during weekly class sessions. Their therapy consisted of attending classes and receiving past-life readings. They sought the advice of their leader, Uriel the Archangel, and her assistant Antares (Kirkpatrick and Tumminia 1989a). We understood that Unarius functioned as a highly cohesive, authoritarian group for its most committed members. Yet students could come or go if they chose to do so, although the philosophy strongly reminded them that departure meant loss of redemption. In such a small committed group, any fieldworker would have to deal with demands for considerable conformity to its mystical worldview. Passing as an Unarian could be problematic given that we did not know what that might actually entail or how far a participant would need to go given its questionable reputation. I deemed that posing as a member was unsuitable because the Unarians already knew of our interest. I decided to gain entry as a known researcher to provide some official distance from the group with which I could maintain a skeptical involvement. I clung to this identifiable borderland between us, while Unarians refused to recognize the validity its existence.

In the winter of 1988, Dr. Kirkpatrick sent a letter asking permission for me to interview Unarians and to attend meetings. When we received no response, we made a field visit in January to talk with Antares, the coordinator of the center. Antares welcomed me by giving me a local membership list with phone numbers. He gave me permission to call anyone and to participate freely, although he took me aside to caution me not to make the mistake that Dr. Kirkpatrick had made by classifying Unarius as a religion. He repeatedly made it known to me that

Unarius was a science, not a religion. Because Unarians saw themselves as scientists, they maintained an interpretive boundary against mysticism. I attended classes and volunteered when I could. More or less, Unarian members came to view me as part convert, part Unarian student, and part sociologist. As I visited them repeatedly from 1989 to 2002, I became more empathetic toward their struggle to rid themselves and the universe of all perceived imperfections. We found ways to accept each other as long as I cooperated with the framework of Unarian interpretation.

The key to my acceptance in the field was the patronage of Antares (also known as Charles Spaegel, Vaughan or Louis Spiegel), the former director of the Unarius Academy of Science who passed away in 1999. Under his watchful eye, I became such a regular fixture that he consequently referred to me as the Unarians' "resident sociologist." Antares also treated me as a student of the Science, giving me several boxes of Unarian books and intermittent psychic readings when he thought I needed them. He instructed others to help me collect documents, and he allowed me to browse boxes of unmarked photos. Antares encouraged me to communicate with their leader Uriel and even to touch her hand during an auspicious event. He allowed me to volunteer at the center, doing typing, sorting, and mailing, while I also attended classes in past-life therapy with the other students. My continued relationship with Antares was based on the singular interpretation that I was ignorant of the Unarian Science and my past lives with Uriel. I knew as long as I reiterated that I wanted to learn about the Science and I submitted to its authority, I would be allowed to interact with the group. Even with Antares's approval, a few students could barely tolerate me. But to the group's way of thinking, irritation was a clue that I "really" belonged there, because I was "triggering" a memory of a past-life interaction. Most members ignored my presence, while others welcomed me, volunteering to be interviewed.

Initially, some students befriended me out of their own sensibilities as well as concern for my spiritual welfare. One student, Nina, gave me a free place to stay after I started to commute from Los Angeles. Antares encouraged me to stick with it, for he assessed my situation as one of divine unknowing. According to him, though I came in the guise of a researcher, I would soon learn that I was sent by the Space Brothers to discover my past.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO UNARIUS

Early in my fieldwork, I often sat at a table with Thomas, who would mind the reading room while he put together a mass mailing. Thomas inevitably opened his conversations with the latest headlines, inasmuch as they held clues to what was “really” happening in the world under guidance of the Space Brothers. Seventy-year-old Thomas, who held a master’s degree in music, served as musical director and official librarian. A student since 1975, Thomas believed he was a reincarnated librarian from the lost continent of Atlantis and also from the fabled Alexandrian Library. In addition to his past lives, he disclosed much of his present life story to me.

His memories of his childhood included a strict, remote father and a significant dream about outer space in which two spiral galaxies rotated in opposite directions. This dream in his opinion pointed the way to Unarius. As an adult, he interpreted the dream image as the swirling positive and negative forces of the universe. Thomas had studied theology at the Swedenborg seminary, which at the time was located across the street from Harvard University. He had enjoyed using the library at Harvard, where he became familiar with the work of Pitrim Sorokin. In passing, Thomas mentioned Sorokin to show me he knew something about sociology. He added that Sorokin had surely been inspired by the Space Brothers, for he saw history occurring in cycles the way Unarians did. He, like other Unarians, tried to convince me that enlightened sociology came from channeled messages from outer space.

Thomas’s understanding of history and the daily headlines presented a study in contrasts for me. We shared marked interpretive boundaries. Whether they came from the tabloids or from legitimate news sources, headlines documented the work of the Science. At the university, my colleagues met the national news with skepticism, disgust, anger, and derision. Their skepticism usually followed charges of fraud, mismanagement, or international conspiracy. But at Unarius, Thomas embraced the same news as evidence that the promises of the Space Brothers were being fulfilled or that Uriel was working on a spiritual dimension to bring about world peace and metaphysical change. Unarians saw the handiwork of the Brothers and the promise of the Science in every news story. During the months I occupied the reading room, Thomas credited the Brothers’ guidance to Gorbachev’s reforms in the former Soviet Union, the protests for democracy in Red China,

and the success of the space shuttle program. He explained that some world leaders had come from other planets to shape world events for the better.

Thomas assured me that the recent discovery of nuclear fusion, or cold fusion as it is also known, would save the planet. Cold fusion, according to him, showed the action of the Brothers on the other side. At school, my colleagues expected that the cold fusion story would prove to be a hoax, because they were certain that only dishonest scientists could claim success from such experiments. But from the Unarian point of view, this signified the implementation of the Space Brothers' plan to bring free, nonpolluting energy to earth.

Thomas also followed "big news" from the tabloid press, where he had learned about the mystery "face" on Mars. Thomas told me a Russian space probe had taken photos of a human face sculpted in surface rock. He said that the face bore the message, "Go Back. Stay Away." Thomas affirmed that this was a message from the Martian underground cities that had battled Earth in an ancient space war. I thought the rock formation occurred by coincidence, although I also facetiously wondered if the message was written in Russian, English, or Martian. With a willingness to understand Unarian subjectivity tempered by skepticism, I attended classes on the history of the Martian Wars.

In the succeeding decade of fieldwork, I adapted to the Unarians' way of interpreting news by anticipating that every news story would verify the work of the Space Brothers. In 2001, Unarians waited for the realization of their long-held prophecy, the arrival of a spaceship from the planet Muon followed by thirty-three other starships of the Interplanetary Confederation. When the events of September 11 transpired, I knew the underlying cause of the attack would be explained from their unique perspective. Unarians pointed out that the advent of the "vehicles of light" had precipitated the release of negativity, a condition that had been purportedly foretold many years ago. At the year's end, Unarians cited the warlike nature of the earth world as the reason the flying saucers did not land and why they would continue to remain invisible. In one class I attended, the lecturer explained that the Space Brothers would contact students in their dreams with instructions about what role they would play when a physical landing did take place.

“REAL” KNOWLEDGE AND “REAL” TEACHERS

To be part of Unarius, one must play the role of a student who reports the working of the Science in dreams, memories, and other experiences. Charles Spaegel, who received his spiritual name Antares from Uriel the Archangel, served as my teacher and pressed me to learn from his life and accumulated knowledge. Holding the second highest status next to Uriel the Archangel, Antares claimed he had been reincarnated from Satan, Tyrantus, Kaa (the space traveler), Ta-Nu of Lemuria, Pontius Pilate, Nero, Cardinal Richelieu, and Napoleon. Antares once told me how Uriel realized who he *really* was in a past life. When Uriel awoke from a nap one day, she reported what she had dreamed. She told Antares that he was indeed the Fallen Angel, Satan, who had come to her to redeem himself through the study of Unarius. In an interview, Antares recalled the incident to me, saying that he knew what Uriel said was true because he felt his solar plexus spin with recognition. In all the subsequent stories that emerged, Uriel cast Antares as her evil foil. About 1984, Uriel said that he had overcome all this negativity through the study of the Science—hence his name change to Antares.

Antares had sent off innumerable letters around the world to scientists, enclosing a summary of his book, *Interdimensional Physics: The Mind of the Universe* (Norman 1989). In response, he was invited to speak at a parapsychology convention, and he thought he would soon travel abroad to meet Russian scientists. On one of the days he ran around the center preparing his packets to mail, he also took time to instruct me personally in the Science. To him, the facticity of its accomplishments stood all around him. He flourished his hand in the air, gesturing to all the bookshelves. “Here is the knowledge of the Science. We have contacted all these scientists. Here are their dissertations.” Smiling, Antares challenged me in a friendly manner. “Who are the great sociologists? We’ve probably heard from them.”

I answered tentatively, “Well, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.”

Elated, Antares pulled a book off the shelf. “Right here. It’s right in this book. Read what he said.”

Incredulously, I read the passage. Years ago, according to the text, Karl Marx had spoken through Antares when he said,

So herein and herewith, I speak freely to the citizenry of the earth world to tell them I, Karl Marx, who is presently living on an inner and higher

dimension than the earth plane, [*sic*] has finally admitted to his blunders, his own egotism, and He believed that he himself could save the world when he was incarnated under the name of Karl Marx. (Norman 1973, 426)

Antares encouraged me to continue my studies, for he was sure I would experience a breakthrough when the time was right for me. Somehow, I had expected something different from Marx, but I perused the books for other notables. I found that Frederick Engels had also spoken from the great beyond:

I am, in the physical, doing what I came to the earth plane to do, and that is to actually bring to earth world peoples, the full disclosure—the whole and total knowledge of what this Unarius Mission is, and how it was initiated . . . (Norman 1974, 208)

This was typical of the Unarians' discourse. In their view, Unarians had access to all the great minds of the universe. What is ordinarily viewed as science presupposes an objective world independent of our interpretations; the Unarian Science was no exception. Whenever they needed important information, they turned to their scientist Brothers on the spiritual planets. Antares assured me that if I could "let go," the Brothers could speak through me. I never did "let go" by trying to channel cosmic scientists or ethereal truths. I stuck to my note taking and to my attempts at maintaining professional distance in the midst of involvement, staying within my definition of science as Unarians continued to explain the extraterrestrial basis for sociology.

HOW PAST LIVES MAKE SENSE

Unarian sense-making involves finding "scientific" evidence of past lives.⁵ Past lives make sense because they account for present appearances, such as illness, emotions, or the content of social interaction. Unarians talk about their past-life revelations with sincerity. Narratives remain tenuous, for they are subject to group examination and criticism. Without verifications from others, particularly Antares and Uriel, members could not be sure their past-life memories were accurate. Others might counter their stories with contradictory memories or interpretations, but conflicting stories posed no problems for the students, who

trusted that the truth would ultimately be revealed. Almost any story, like visions of dancing with snakes on Atlantis or dreams about a past life with Jesus, found recognition as long as the teller did not attack the veracity of the Science or the decisions of their leaders.

As I became a regular fixture at Unarius, people became as curious about my cosmic origins as I was about their social origins. In one of my first encounters with Antares, he told me how the students had lived many lifetimes before inhabiting their bodies here on earth. In some of those lives, they had studied at "learning centers" on other planets and dimensions. Now they studied here at Unarius, once again absorbing the celestial science. Antares and the students intimated that I had been sent in this same manner, even though I did not consciously know it.

Until I walked into the center, I had no past lives. The more time I spent at Unarius, the more past lives would be attributed to me. In a phone conversation, Antares once told me I had been a handmaiden to the goddess Diana and that I had lived in her temple. One afternoon, as I attempted to write in my field notebook, Antares told me I had been a scribe on the planet Orion millions of years ago; then a few days later, he added that I had also been a spy there. The other students verified Antares's analysis, stating the facts as they saw them. They thought I had been a spy too, because I acted like one, always asking questions, collecting documents, and recording events. The facts were clear to them. When I volunteered to help Carol with some computer work, another student, Dave, coldly quipped, "You're letting her into the computer system now! She's a spy." Someone unfamiliar with the ways Unarians speak might have thought I was being labeled an outsider, but the insinuation meant that Dave was remembering an encounter with me in a past life. By being labeled a spy, I had been given an insider status, and to the Unarian way of thinking, I had been offered an opportunity to clear the wrongs of a previous existence.

Unarians continued to include me in their world and define me as a student, despite the appearance of my inability to work the Science. When I was asked if the Science had helped me, I said that I was not aware of how it did. When I was asked if I had discovered any of my past lives, I answered, "Antares said that I had a past life on Orion" (or whatever life he had related to me recently). I practiced the ethnographer's art of evading questions (Pollner and Emerson 1988), but I was perceived as ignorant because I did not elaborate on any recovered memories from past lives. Nor did I report the content of my dreams. Those

who accepted me as a hanger-on resigned themselves to my ineptness. I volunteered little information about my own thoughts and feelings or any supposed past lives, a sign of an incompetent student of the Science. The perplexing riddle of my lack of advancement was solved when I attended an Interplanetary Confederation Day celebration. The parade leader asked me to carry the banner of the planet Valneza. Later Nina remarked, "Oh, that's why you don't understand the Science. You have a past life in Valneza, the planet of nature worshippers who don't have much development." My incompetence seemed logical and reasonable given this information provided by the Space Brothers.

RECEIVING A PAST-LIFE READING

One evening I received a past-life reading at a free introductory class about reincarnation hosted by Antares. Dressed in a gray sport coat and red tie, Antares spent a short time going over some basic Unarian concepts. Then he asked, "How many of you believe that life is never-ending? Raise your hands if you do." Everyone raised a hand except me. When I did not raise my hand, I felt uneasy because my subjective boundary was showing. The longtime students and even the newcomers had come to hear more about reincarnation, not to challenge it. Before the psychic readings began, "advanced" students gave their testimonials on how Unarius had helped them. Following the testimonials, we took a short break before we sat down again.

"Who would like a reading? Come forward and sit in the front row," Antares began. "Diana, how about you? Sit up front here. Would you like a reading?"

I replied that I was not sure, which brought a gale of laughter from the students. It was the laughter of sympathy. As Unarians say, one has to face the past even though it may be difficult.

Other people who had never been to the center took seats in the first row. I followed them. Antares, or the "Professor" as he was sometimes called, sat facing us when he opened up: "Tell me a problem you're having, something you'd like to work on."

I had somehow ended up first in line, so I spoke up although I found it hard to do. Unarian students had conveyed to me their own difficulties about speaking up in class under similar circumstances. I certainly did not want everyone to know my problems. The problems and the pains

that I would like magically to go away were not ones I would reveal in public. Trying to cooperate, I said, "I'm having a problem at the university. I'm feeling very nervous and depressed."

Antares looked at me for a moment before he slowly closed his eyes.

I see you at a medieval university, where you are studying under the patronage of the Pope. You have many enemies. The Pope protects you from these people. You are afraid to offend him in any way because you may lose his favor. Too concerned with how you are viewed, you are on edge and very nervous.

Maintaining his scientific boundary, Antares went on to explain how religion was a problem in my past life, because I could only espouse an officially sanctioned view.

"Well," he said, ending the reading, "does that help you?"

I felt defensive, because the reading had actually affected me in a positive way. I felt an emotional lifting. Although I could not bring myself to believe in the veracity of the story, symbolically Antares was right. I was too caught up with what other people thought of me. For the moment, I experienced him as a sort of interplanetary Carl Rogers, empathetic and insightful. Truthfully I replied, "Yes, it does. I feel a lot better. Thank you." I knew what I should say if I were really a student of Unarius. I should say that I worked in a building constructed in the style of the Middle Ages, so there must be a connection. The facts, according to Unarian logic, pointed to the "truth" of Antares's reading. But I did not elaborate, because I could not make myself say something I really did not believe. I maintained my boundary with silence.

After waiting to see if I would say any more, Antares turned his attention to the next person. This young woman with a blond ponytail eagerly revealed what had been bothering her. Here was a woman who was eager to know her past lives. "I always wondered," she blurted out as she sat on the end of her chair, "why I've had to wear glasses all of my life?"

"At what age did you start?" he asked.

"Seven," she answered.

The "Professor" began to concentrate. "I see a picture," he whispered. Antares hesitated as if he had a hard time grasping the significance of the problem. Antares said that he saw a caterpillar, a large green fuzzy caterpillar. He verbally painted a scene of a young girl who

was playing in a tree. When the girl slipped off the tree, a caterpillar fell into her eye. Sadly, she eventually became blind in that eye.

The woman with the ponytail waited for her permission to speak. "Yes, that makes sense. I used to be fascinated by caterpillars when I was a child. Once I kept one in a shoebox under my bed, and it died. What do you think that meant?"

"Revenge!" Antares shouted out, grinning from ear to ear, while the whole assembly responded with a jolt of laughter.

As others delighted in the newcomer's response, I clearly saw why I stood on the border of their world, seeking entrance but not really achieving it. Others could make sense out past lives, but I dismissed them as illogical even though I had received some benefit from the psychic reading. The "natural attitude" (Schutz 1962) requires a suspension of disbelief. I could never willfully suspend all my disbelief during my fieldwork, although I noticed that sometimes I was caught off-guard without it. In a way, I lived in the Unarian lifeworld, but I was not of it.

REASONABLE ACTION IN THE "SCIENCE"

The biggest contrast of interpretive boundaries occurred when I gave Unarians a copy of what was written about them. As do others, Rochford (1992) reports on the resistance of groups against being defined by the categories of researchers. A group may defensively question the reasoning used in the written accounts of an ethnographer's findings. In this case, the matter went a little bit further. Not only was I perceived as misrepresenting Unarius because of my past-life karma, but also I was accused of failing as a student because I did not understand what I was taught. In essence, I was seen as failing my teachers both earthly and cosmic. Despite this appearance, I knew that if I referenced my actions to the Science, my violation would appear reasonable and understandable and I could continue to visit the group.

In April 1993, Antares called me on the phone. At his request, I had given him a forthcoming article, "Unarius: Emergent Aspects of an American Flying-Saucer Group" (Tumminia and Kirkpatrick 1995). Antares had asked student Lianne to read it, but it had taken more than a month to get a response. Antares hated it. He used his agitated voice, strained and high-pitched, to communicate his disapproval. Antares

gave me a royal chewing out as he explained that Unarius was “not a UFO group, but a corrective therapy.” Furthermore, Antares said that I was making it sound like a cult, a common misrepresentation because Unarius was “very avant-garde in many areas” and so easily misunderstood. It had pioneered past-life therapy as well as other scientific practices. He recognized that many people found their philosophy hard to grasp unless their “foundation was sufficient.” He emphasized that the foundation of Unarius was in physics. Referring to me, he made it clear that it was “unintegrated” people (unaware of their past lives and their higher selves) who misconstrued what Unarius did. According to Antares, I had written all these misrepresentations because of a “strong religious bias” in my past lives, because I had “great guilt to balance by doing something of a positive nature.” Bluntly, Antares told me that what I wrote was not from my higher self.

According to my fieldnotes, Antares added,

This was not inspired. There’s no inspiration here. This is coming from your subconscious. It doesn’t tell the truth about who Ruth Norman [Uriel] is. Our books were written without any effort. That’s one way to tell if it’s inspired. It just comes through from the Brothers. I know you put a lot of work into this, but what can I say? The article is filled with errors.

I recorded his criticisms as rapidly as I could, but the list was so long that even Antares had to stop. He chastised me further by saying, “All of your past is showing. You were a nun. You were a teacher in a Catholic university like St. Mary’s or Loyola and,” he stressed, “you are so guilty.”

Typically, given the Unarian philosophy, my past life was now triggering someone’s karma. Antares explained,

Lianne read it too, and she wrote a long response to it, then signed it Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Pierce, and William James. I looked at it, and told her that her response was not from the Brothers. She was reliving something with you from the past. But talk to Lianne maybe she can help you.

He made several more suggestions on how I could help myself overcome this. Antares went on and on, bringing out his biggest guilt trip: “Uriel read it. She was horrified. After all the years, she has tried to

bring this teaching, so it could free mankind. Really, I don't think this will work. What can we do?"

"Maybe, I could talk to Lianne and correct the errors?" I replied.

"No. No. This is just not working." I could imagine Antares shaking his head.

"Well," I ventured. "I guess I was wrong. I really don't know anything about the Science. I'll just come back and learn more."

As I came up with this answer, I remembered being in second grade (in this lifetime) when the local bishop visited our classroom in parochial school. I sat in the back of the class, so it took some time for the bishop to get to me. The bishop went down the rows. He held out his hand to each student, who in turn kissed his enormous ring. This memory provided me with a clue to how I should behave. I also knew I must verbally pacify Antares to keep my access to the field. So I said the most submissive thing I could. I admitted again, "Well, I just don't understand."

Antares sounded happy again. "Knowing you don't understand, being willing to learn—that's the key. OK, we'll just leave it at that."

In Unarian logic, I was having a "flashback" due to the past-life reading Antares had just given me over the phone. If I were a true Unarian, I would piece it together. I had lived a past life at a Catholic university. I had just pictured in my mind's eye the kissing of a bishop's ring. Antares was Cardinal Richelieu in a past life. Yes, in Unarian logic, it all fit together. I was having a reliving of my past life. If I had sincerely accepted it and if I had been grateful for Antares's help, I could have made progress in the Science. If I had been a real student, I would have talked to Lianne to explore our past lives together. I had experienced some of the Unarian reality, but I could not cross that boundary of interpretation. As it was, I attributed my memory to my adaptation to Unarian culture, not to past lives. However, I knew that I would have to admit my ignorance of the Science to be readmitted to the group. Antares had certainly disapproved of what I wrote, but he was more upset that I had not used the Science. From his frame of mind, I had no recognition of my past lives, which indicated that I had failed my teachers. Antares preserved his interpretive boundary by pointing out the errors in my reasoning, while I inventoried the fallacies in his. For that moment, we reflected each other in the mirror of interpretation.

DREAMS AND SAUCER SIGHTINGS

In modern presuppositions of our commonly shared world, dreams have lost their validity as real. This is not the case for Unarians. Unarians discuss dreams as part of the fact-finding process of the Science. Dreams hold great portent, for members believe they travel out of their bodies while they sleep to visit other dimensions.⁶ By the same token, they believe that other spiritual dimensions visit them. They say they can receive enlightened messages from their teachers as they sleep, as well as resolve the problems from past and present lives. Sharing the contents of dreams, both in everyday conversation and in formal testimonials, facilitates the use of this documentary method of obtaining knowledge through the Science. Dream analysis offers a tangible way to use the Science. In the Unarian way of seeing things, dreams provide real contact with the Space Brothers.

Dreams often initiated major mythical revelations in the group. For example, what Unarians call the Great Lemurian Cycle was initiated by Crystal's dreams (Unarius Students and Norman 1976). During this cycle, students gave testimonials about their past lives on the planet Lemuria, where they were controlled by electronic surveillance and lived horrible lives as robot-like zombies. On the basis of their "memories" of this time, they acted in psychodramas that were videotaped "proof" of the power of Unarian Science. Spies infested all of Lemuria. From the perspective of the Science, the reason the Space Brothers had sent me to Unarius was to clear my Lemurian karma as the Unarian students were doing.

Students understood that their spiritual teacher, Uriel, could heal them in their dreams. The dreams contained evidence of her healing powers, as Melanie testified (Uriel and Unarius Students 1988, 205):

She [Uriel] took me into the bedroom and sat me down. Two students were there with me, Decie and Loretta, and something I have realized, I have a lot of Atlantis karma with these two people. That is why they were there. Uriel said, "Now Melanie, I am going to remove an obsession from you, but I want you to tell me what kind of an obsession it is." She kind of waved her hand over me, and I remembered the dream the next day, but that was the end of what I remembered of that dream. So within a very, very short time after that dream, the last sign of my Herpes condition was totally gone. . . . These few dreams were most important to me, because I saw proof of Uriel in these dreams.

Over the years that I talked to students about their dreams, I learned that few students had ever seen a “real” flying saucer except in their dreams. Many students had seen lights in the sky, and they followed news reports of so-called strange lights that hovered over distant places. Ernie remembered big blue balls floating off the cliffs of Big Sur as he drove one afternoon. Another student, Miriam, observed a “craft” as a small ball of white light outside her apartment one night. However, dreams opened the channels for what they perceived as real contact with the saucers.

At one juncture, the Academy’s classes focused on dreams. During class, Rafael recalled a “healing dream” in which he saw himself sailing to an island to capture King Kong. On the island, he netted and caged two miniature Kongs. As Rafael described it, the sight of the little monsters prompted a deep fear in him. Although he might be able to control the smaller ones, Rafael feared he would never be able to control the larger beast. Rafael supposed his fear came from the “lower self” to thwart his spiritual progress. He believed he could master his lower nature as long as he stayed on the positive path of life. His self-revelation brought about the landing of a glowing flying saucer that invited him within. On board the starship, he found a beautiful woman who led him to a cleansing pool; he dove in to experience a remarkable healing. In Rafael’s dreams, he often saw the “Brothers” in the guise of beautiful women.

Lani worked out her misgivings about Unarius in a dream. She confided in me one day, saying that she had once entertained some doubts about the teachings. She felt that the prophecy of a space fleet landing was hard to believe, even secretly admitting that she really did not believe in the Space Brothers. Lani rescued herself from doubt by surrendering to the power of the Science, conceding that Uriel’s knowledge must be much greater than her own. That night, she dreamed a large spacecraft landed, which took her and her boyfriend aboard. In the dream, Lani asked, “Can anyone see us?” “No,” came a reply. “We are in another dimension.” Lani asked why they had been taken aboard. The Space Brothers answered, “We know you need proof.” Lani explained to me that this was a good example of how a student who does not put limitations on herself can open up to higher intelligence and know anything.

Ronald, the printer at the center, told me a tale of having a vision of a flying saucer before class. Quite sleepy, he dozed off, only to experience

a “memory” of a past life when he rode in a spacecraft above Atlantis. Ronald said that a glowing scientist appeared, beckoning him to follow. They ascended stairs made of light beams; then this caring scientist instructed him in the principles of “high-energy physics.” Ronald warned me, however, “It’s a waste of time chasing flying saucers. Let them come to you.” This comment referred to the Unarian belief that when a student raised his or her consciousness, the spaceships would ultimately reveal themselves.

SPACE BROTHERS CONTACT ME

Fieldworkers often hear cautions against “going native” or being psychologically engulfed by their subjects (Emerson 1988). In her fieldwork on spiritualism, Burke Forrest (1986) underwent some unexpected and frightening effects of socialization when she began to see spirits. Intense dream states caused her to leave the field. Joseph Damrell (1977) reported a surprising, nonordinary shift of perception during meditation while studying Vedanta. E. Burke Rochford (1985) wrote that he was converted to Hare Krishna. Tanya Luhrmann (1989) stated that she entered the witches’ worldview through a process of interpretive drift and that, as a participant, she felt the power of the witches’ circle. Ironically, Evans-Pritchard (1937) saw witches travel at night in the form of lights on the horizon. In their statements about the permeability of realities, Mehan and Wood (1975) noted how the civilized Tobias Schneebaum became a cannibal by joining a tribe in Peruvian jungle. Without ascribing phenomena to the existence of separate metaphysical realities, these examples speak to the power of the social to affect subjective perception through participation.

In my lengthy fieldwork, I learned to think like Unarians as well as dream like them. While asleep, their world permeated the cognitive boundaries I had erected against them. During the time I talked extensively with Unarians about their dreams, I experienced my first *vivid dream* about a Space Brother. It is helpful to distinguish vivid dreams from ordinary dreaming. Vivid dreams evoke unforgettable images and feelings. More than just watching pictures in the mind, vivid dreams stimulate deep feelings with emotional responses to color, touch, words, and sounds. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

I was deeply asleep, so deep into the dream state that I experienced all the following as vividly real and at the time I could not distinguish that I was dreaming. I sensed I was at the San Diego Airport. Everything was dark as I looked out into the night sky to see the stars animatedly twinkle in the deep blackness. On the horizon, I heard a sound that penetrated my body and that made the cells of my body vibrate to its rhythm. In the distance a cluster of stars started to move as if they were a formation of airplanes. As they flew towards me, they formed an image of a woman. Under the pressure of their sound, I staggered back and fell on the ground. Excitement and fear gripped my mind and body as I thought, "The saucers—there are the saucers."

The ships moved closer, but their presence was overwhelming me with their size, luminosity, and vibratory sound. As they landed I was dwarfed like an insect in a forest of light and sound. A mountainous spaceship opened its doors to reveal its denizen. A red haired man, looking a bit like the actor Russ Tamblyn of *West Side Story*, emerged in white brocade Nehru suit that sported a gold medallion. He beckoned me aboard. The ramp he extended consisted of sound waves. Excitedly I thought, I *must* see the ship. With each step up the ramp, my cellular structure seemed to transform, which was represented outwardly by different changes in clothing. By the time I made it to the top, I was dressed in a purple and gold sari that periodically sparkled with golden light beams.

There propelled by an inner state of great longing, I threw out my arms to be embraced. The Space Brother enfolded me in his arms. Every cell of my body was awash with waves of loving feeling. In turn, as a monarch might escort a consort on a royal tour, the Space Brother showed me the many chambers in the ship.

In a room with a bronze floor engraved with a map of earth, the Brother explained to me the karmic destiny of my planet. We rode on hovering metallic plates to different sections of this great map, which as he detailed its significance would act out his words in a holographic display. From this vantage point I saw civilizations rise only to fall, and radio waves sent from the pyramids of Egypt to the pyramids of Atlantis.

This dream caused me to do sense-making in the light of day, for it was a serious reality disjuncture. If I had been a true Unarian, this dream would have been "scientific" proof of the existence of the Brothers, subjective validation of the power of the Science. Again, if I had been a real Unarian, I would have shared my experience during a testimonial in class; thus I could have added credence to the collective reality. But I held back because I did not want to contaminate the field setting by

having members get involved with my experience instead of their own. Furthermore, I did not want to come under their social control. The less I revealed about myself, the more I felt my own autonomy. This did not mean that the saucer dreams entirely ceased, but with my frequent exits from the field to return to Los Angeles, I could shake off their influence within a few days. I attributed this vivid dream to an unconscious accommodation to the intersubjectivity of the group, although I also entertained other explanations.

Interestingly, my research partner, Dr. R. George Kirkpatrick, also sustained dreams about the saucers and visits from the Brothers. The most dramatic impact upon him occurred on our way to present a paper on Unarius at the Pacific Sociological Meetings in Reno, Nevada (Kirkpatrick and Tumminia 1989a). We drove from San Diego up Highway 395, making camp along the way at Lake Diaz. During the middle of the night, I heard screams coming from his tent. As I peered out, I saw in the moonlight the occasional bump against the tent fabric like he was kicking or punching the tent. I reasoned that Dr. Kirkpatrick was having a bad dream, the contents of which I learned the next morning. He said he dreamt that a giant flying saucer the size of the lake landed on the water. Aliens that he could not describe pressed him into joining a plan to introduce a new technology on the earth. This technology consisted of inventing a biological equivalent of such objects as cars, houses, and computers, which materialized by accessing the correct genetic code. He fought the aliens off only to escape by waking from his dream.

Here again was a clear interpretive boundary permeated by the alleged Space Brothers. We, like the Unarians, had seen and contacted the flying saucers, but we had vastly different interpretations of what the events meant. What for us was evidence of the power of suggestion, fatigue, or with any stretch of the imagination, a tap into the collective unconscious, instead would have been for Unarians unquestionable proof of the truth and the power of their Science. Even after our encounters with the Brothers, their facts remained our fiction.

CONCLUSION

From a lifeworld perspective, Unarians live within a socially constructed reality guided by Space Brothers who communicate their presence through the experiences of members. Unarians presume that the

“scientific” principles of past lives and the actions of their beloved Space Brothers function behind all physical appearances. They, like other social actors, engage in fact-finding pursuits that validate their point of view. Through social interaction, Unarians document their reality by gathering evidence through dreams, psychic readings, and other types of logical inferences in line with their lifeworld assumptions. Unarians see the evidence of the Science, the great metaphysical law of energy, as it operates throughout all universes and within all human beings. By referencing this invisible world, they account for what is real and for what constitutes a reasonable explanation of any event, including my behavior as a participant observer.

Douglas (1976; see also Rochford 1992) argues that the ability to pass as a member indicates the depth of the researcher’s understanding of a group. A well-socialized participant observer can come to think and to feel some of a group’s reality, but probably not without noticing his or her own boundary of interpretation based upon some degree of objectification. My experience of fieldwork in Unarius involved a continual juggling of our respective meaning systems and frequent negotiations of the various reality disjunctures (Pollner 1987) the setting produced. From my orientation, I accounted for Unarian sense-making by pointing to their use of incorrigible propositions (Tumminia 1998). By defining the Unarian experience in that way, I discounted evidence that Unarians would say is proof positive that the Science was working with me. Our discordant worldviews separated our experiences of the same phenomena by placing them within different interpretive boundaries. The guardian of these boundaries is belief; if we do not for an extended length of time suspend our disbelief in another’s interpretive territory or lifeworld, we cannot make it our own. I would argue that even ethnographers who come to experience group realities deeply would also recognize the boundaries of their experiences.

Tempered by academic training, the ethnographer’s science processes a personal world of reflexivity with that of the sensing-making procedures of the group under observation. The participant observer enters the field with the presumption that the observed social world will remain reasonably separate. As Rochford (1992) and others (Schwartz and Jacobs 1979; Bloor 1988; Pollner and Emerson 1988) observe, field workers anchor themselves in the notion of being objective outsiders, separate from the social settings and the meaning systems they study. As part of this privileged status (Rochford 1992; Pollner 1987),

their assumptions about meaning are often taken for granted until members challenge them. Some informants question the reasoning and credentials of field workers in the course of interaction or in solicited encounters of member validation. Within this ironic house of mirrors, the ethnographer imposes meaning on people who are documenting their understanding of how the world works by criticizing the validity of the investigator's interpretation. It is through these discordant exchanges that we understand the limitations of our own perspectives and the subtle ambiguities of the social construction of reality.

NOTES

1. The research began under the direction of R. George Kirkpatrick at San Diego State University in 1986 with a questionnaire, content analysis of books and videos, and interviews with ex-members. As his assistant, I helped expand the study by employing taped interviews of life histories and extensive document research (Tumminia and Kirkpatrick 1995). I also conducted regular participation observation from 1989 to 1993 with breaks for my graduate work at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since 1993, I have continued to communicate with informants, some of whom are ex-members, while also visiting the Academy about once a year. Because Unarians predicted the coming of spaceships in 2001, I extended my study until 2002.

Because most Unarian names are part of public record, only a few names are concealed for the sake of anonymity. Members have their testimonies and photos published in their in-house press; in addition, local newspapers often publish their names in interviews. Some Unarians have several names because they occasionally change their names in connection with past-life revelations. When I broached the subject with several members, they said they did not want me to use pseudonyms because my actions might "set off wave-form frequencies" that might cause them to relive difficult past-life memories. They explained their resistance to the use of pseudonyms in terms of the "Science."

For the sake of brevity, I compare the Unarian worldview to that of the Azande. Other comparable beliefs would be spiritualism (Forrest 1986) or the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime (Eliade 1973; Bell 1983) because of their reliance on information gleaned from dreams, visions, spirit guides, and extensive mythology.

2. The mere mention of science evokes cognitive territoriality. Alfred Schutz (1962) conceptualizes scientific contemplation as a finite province of meaning. He argues that the theoretical social scientist substitutes a model of the lifeworld for the intersubjective working lifeworld. Habermas (1970) indicates that science is the main mode of legitimation in the modern world. Interpretations of what is true science (Wallis 1979; Gieryn 1983; Giere 1979, 1988) and what is not science define credible academic work. Academic science reserves boundaries tied to notions of logic and empirical observation that exclude reasoning based on magic and faith. As an ideal type, science strongly distances itself from nonscience (Gieryn 1983, 791) by taking strong ideological

postures against religion and superstition, yet under sociological inspection, its boundaries remain “ambiguous” and continually negotiated. According to Gieryn (1983), science demands boundary work to maintain its public image, access to resources, and intellectual territory.

Many social scientists would concede that science itself is socially constructed. Academics defend their interpretive boundaries to function in their own domains. Philosopher of science Ronald N. Giere (1979) explains that those who believe in UFOs cite many facts to uphold their original beliefs, although their conclusions are based on multiple fallacies. This fallacious pattern of reasoning usually does not fit into the boundaries of accepted scientific reasoning. Giere (1988) takes into account a sociological analysis of scientific discourse by citing work on relativism and social constructionism. He offers the cognitive approach to explaining science as theories and models akin to schemata or frames, but he resists the idea that science is comparable to magic because they are both systems of sustainable beliefs. In reference to the Azande beliefs, he writes, “We must admit that contemporary scientific practice is superior to Azande witchcraft” (ibid., 132). He sees and asserts an interpretive boundary to science. Unarians also critique religion and magic as outside the boundaries of their “Science.”

3. Although Evans-Pritchard (1937) did not accept the Azande explanations of witchcraft and the oracle divinations, he could not carry on conversations or interact with the Azande unless he tacitly accepted their version of reality (Pollner and Emerson 1988). Similarly, Wieder (1988) could not fully comprehend the accounts of his subjects without referring back to the internal logic of the convict code.

4. According to Pollner (1987), when opposing accounts of reality occur, mundane reasoners do not necessarily question their worldviews. They solve the puzzle of a reality disjuncture by referring to their stocks of knowledge to identify errors others have made in trying to criticize their reality.

5. In much the same way the Azande credit witches for misfortune, Unarius attributes causation to a negative past life. Unarius claims it has already “totally cured” people of diseases such as cancer and mental illness. Unarius does not prohibit students from using conventional medicine, although it views illness as a connection to a past life (memories in the psychic anatomy). During my fieldwork, two students who studied Unarius most of their adult lives chose to use the Science to treat their cancers, only to die of the disease. I know of students who were diagnosed with schizophrenia previous to their involvement. Two students still function and hold jobs, but they have distanced themselves from the group. Another ex-student dropped out of classes to wander the streets and to be subjected to intermittent hospitalizations. In this case and in others, Unarians attributed fault to the student, not to the Science. On the other hand, when one student sought medical treatment for melanoma, she attributed her cure to the Science.

6. In his theory of multiple realities, Schutz (1962) discusses dreams as a nonparamount reality. Following on the work of William James, Schutz holds that the reality of everyday life is paramount, but reality as subjective perception consists of several subuniverses, or separate styles of reality. These nonparamount realities, the world of dreams, phantasms and imagery like art, the play world of children, the world of the insane, and scientific contemplation, are provinces of meaning (p. 232). But a dream

may only be accounted for as socially real when a dreamer awakens and discusses it within the assumptions of everyday life (McLain 1981).

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