PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION RESEARCH ON CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS GROUPS: AN HERMENEUTIC PROCESS

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This paper reports on the experiences of a research group engaged in participant observation research on contemporary religious groups. The groups studied, and the settings in which they act out their religious life-styles, are briefly described. The major concern of the paper, however, is with what happened to members of the research group as they conducted the research. Sometimes, research seems to be thought of as a kind of neutral undertaking, in which the *subject*, a neutral, objective observer, describes and analyzes the *object*—whatever is the focus of the study—using research techniques in such a way that they function as a kind of "bridge" between the mind of the observer and "the world out there". In this view, research is *not* seen as *reflexive*, that is, as involving the possibility that the bridge between observer and world bears traffic in *both* directions. The position taken in the paper is that research, especially that done in the participant-observation style, is certainly reflexive—the observing subject is, in the process, affected, in the sense that he not only interprets the world, but "the world" interprets him. That is what is meant by the claim that participant-observation research tends to be an *hermeneutic* process.

I

THE VARIETY OF SETTINGS

The first setting was that provided by the Temple of Harmony, a Spiritualist Church, located in a residential suburb of Denver. It is housed in a small two-story building which was purchased from a Protestant congregation several years ago. It has a simple sanctuary

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and a number of small meeting rooms. The staff includes two unsalaried ministers and six other mediums, all of whom are part-time in their relation to the church. The congregation numbers about one hundred and fifty adults. However, the majority of the persons present for any given service seems to have no permanent relationship to the church. They are from many religious backgrounds and are frequently still active in another church or religious fellowship.

The basic creed of the Temple of Harmony is eclectic, with a major emphasis on spiritual communication with "those who are beyond." They do not claim to be a Christian church; however, Jesus is honored as a gifted medium, and the services are almost identical to those of a "free-church" Protestant congregation. Hymns are sung; prayers are offered; a short homily is given, and a set of "messages" from "the other side" is delivered to persons in the congregation by one of the mediums present. After the short service, the people move to the several smaller rooms in order to participate in seances, healing services, or to receive individual "messages" or answers to personal questions.

The atmosphere is low-keyed and informal throughout. Some of the spirits seem to be playful. Therefore, there is a frequent note of humor in the readings. The messages are quite general and nearly always of a positive type. On one occasion, a single message was accepted by three men in the congregation as being a personal message to each of them. The key word would appear to be "comfort." Many people come who are troubled or seeking assurance. After a "message" or a "healing", they seem to be reassured and more peaceful than when they arrived. However, they frequently return the next week for another "treatment." The majority of the participants might be called "seekers." There is an intense interest in all forms of spiritualism, in extrasensory perception, astrology, and idealism. The Temple of Harmony is serving a small but earnest group of people who find assurance or peace of mind in its program.[1]

The second setting was a Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The building in which they meet is a small, neat structure. The sanctuary is simple, with seating for about two hundred persons. There is a very sophisticated audio system, with speakers throughout

[1]Description of setting taken from field notes of two graduate students: one a female, aged 36, Master of Divinity candidate, with graduate training in theology and education, a Roman Catholic from an urban, lower-middle class, mid-western background; the other male, aged 36, Master of Diviniy candidate, with graduate training in English and theology, an ordained Christian Church-Disciples of Christ minister, from a rural, middle class, mid-western background. These demographic data are supplied in this and subsequent cases because of the possibility that the characteristics indicated may have influenced what the observers "saw" or experienced in the research process.

the building. The congregation is predominantly lower middle class or blue-collar in orientation. The services are similar to evangelical Protestant services. Hymns, usually of a gospel type, are sung; prayers are offered; a scripturally-based sermon is given, and personal testimonies are provided by some of the members.

After the service, there is a short break before the evening study period. The entire congregation, including small children, seems to remain for the study. This consists of an almost word for word reading, in question and answer style, of the church's newspaper, The Watchtower, for that week. The content is heavily scriptural, with a major emphasis on prophecy, moralistic injunctions and a strong boundary maintenance system. The members are among the saved, while all others are among the damned. The Evil One is loose in the world and is ruling all worldly institutions. The separatist motif is strong. Those who come into the fellowship appear to be searching for security, for an answer to the moral chaos which surrounds them in urban society, and for the assurance of eternal life. The atmosphere is authoritarian, yet the people seem to be experiencing a sense of freedom within that structure. Loyalty to the movement appears to be quite high, yet there is little evidence of charismatic leadership. It would appear that the relationship is self-motivated and that personal needs are being met in a concrete manner.[2]

The third setting was found at the Metropolitan Community Church of Denver, a congregation which self-consciously serves the homophile community. The ministerial staff persons are self-proclaimed homosexuals, and the majority of the members is of that sexual orientation. However, the church is open to all persons and includes a number of individuals who are part of the "straight" world. The theological orientation of the group is evangelical; however, a major emphasis is placed on ecumenicity. Many of the members were reared in fundamentalist Protestant churches. Others are of mainline Protestant background and some were formerly Roman Catholic. Nearly all have at some point in their lives experienced isolation from the church and indeed from the mainstream culture. As a result, a strong in-group atmosphere is maintained. The language code of the homophile is commonly shared by the congregation and at times is expressed in the sermons. The major emphasis is on acceptance, self-affirmation, and self-worth. A significant counseling service is per-

[2]Description taken from field notes of a graduate student, aged 25, middler Master of Divinity candidate, with graduate training in theology, an ordained Methodist minister, from a rural, lower-middle class, western background.

formed by the staff, and the congregational leadership is active in the "gay liberation" movement.

The congregation rents offices and meeting rooms from a local Unitarian Church and serves as an organizing force among a number of smaller innercity churches. A monthly newspaper directed to the larger gay community is published. There is a major effort within the program to meet the social needs of members. Frequent dinners, dances, picnics, and other activities correspond to those of congregations many times the size of the 150 member group. The stated purpose of the church is to preach the gospel, and to become a universal fellowship for all who share a commitment to Jesus Christ. However, a review of its program, its literature, and even a casual association with its members, clearly indicates that its primary aim is to provide for the social and spiritual needs of the homosexual community in Denver.[3]

The fourth setting was provided by VIAS. VIAS is composed of a number of young adults in the metropolitan area who are related to the Roman Catholic Church. The members were brought together as a task force of semi-volunteer workers in churches and church agencies. Many of those active in the group were in college together and were participants in the Newman Club. The Director of VIAS was himself a lay student director of the Newman Club of a nearby university.

VIAS appears to have both a public, official purpose and a latent purpose. The literature of the movement describes its founding by the diocesan leadersip as Volunteers in Alternate Service for young adults who desire to serve the church in positions which provide subsistence salaries and a common living arrangement. A few of the members are thus employed and four do share a communal household. However, another brochure describes VIAS as a Latin word meaning "ways" or "roads" with an implication that the young adults are gathered to find the avenues of service that will put the church in touch with the social problems of the city in a creative manner.

The weekly meeting is held in a member's apartment each Wednesday. The program consists of a Home Mass, usually with strong lay participation and an informal atmosphere. The Eucharist seems to have deep meaning for the participants and, for some, is the only contact with the church or its sacraments. The remainder of the evening is spent in an informal social period, with refreshments and

[3]Description taken from field notes of a graduate student, aged 29, senior Master of Divinity candidate, with graduate training in theology and psychology, an experienced college teacher, counselor, a layman, non-denominational, from a rural, lower-middle class, mid-western background.

conversation about jobs, housing, money problems, social life, and other normal young adult areas of concern. Apparently, VIAS functions as a socialization vehicle for a group of young adults who are in process of finding their place in the larger society.[4]

II

Participant-Observation as Art and Science

The most important factor in the participant-observation method is the stance assumed by the researcher. As a *first* step in helping the students become self-conscious of that stance, we suggested that they put into writing their prior understandings and attitudes toward the groups with which they would be working. Our theoretical base was that movement toward the objectivity of a scientific approach would be enabled to the extent that the researchers became aware at the conscious level of prior commitments, prejudices, and values which could in any manner cause distortion in perception or difficulty in open communication.

One member of the team had a very obvious problem. He was "straight" yet he was entering a predominantly "gay" world. He had to deal with cultural conditioning of the straight society toward the sub-culture with which he would be working. Another was a contemporary post-Vatican II Roman Catholic who had to understand the similarities and differences between her childhood understanding of her church's teachings and those of the group to which she was going. A third had a severe distrust of fundamentalist religion, which would tend to antagonize his appropriation of his study group's language and meanings. The researchers who were to work with the VIAS group saw in that situation the possibility of too ready an identification with a church renewal group with which they might share a deep commitment. The very process of articulating these concerns prepared the students for the variety of perception problems with which the group was to wrestle during the period of research.

As a *second* step in the process of preparation, the researchers tried to internalize the type of cautions offered by Bruyn as the six indices of subjectivity adequacy.[5] 1) The longer the time of interaction the more likely an accurate interpretation will be found; 2) the

[4]Description taken from field notes of two graduate students: one, a male, aged 26, a senior Master of Divinity candidate, with graduate training in theology, experienced as a minister, ordained United Presbyterian, from an urban middle class eastern background; the other, a male, aged 26, a senior Master of Religious Education candidate, a Roman Catholic layman, with professional experience as a church educator, from an urban, middle class western background

[5]Bruyn, Severyn T., *The Human Perspective in Sociology,* Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 180-83.

closer the researcher remains in location to the group and their "life space", the more likely he is to understand their meanings; 3) the greater the variety of social situations in which he participates with a group, the more likely he is to gain insight into their meanings; 4) the more he is able to enter the language circle of the group, the more likely it is that he will be able to receive appropriate communication from that group; 5) the deeper his degree of intimacy with the group, the more accurate his reading of the group is likely to be; and 6) the more the researcher is able to determine social consensus among the members of the group, the more readily he will be able to test his own interpretations of their meanings.

Our research group experienced a great variety of levels of achievement in terms of these six indices. Some were able to move to a greater degree in one or two areas and found themselves quite lacking in others. Some gained a fairly moderate degree of accomplishment in all six. For instance, the student who worked with the homophile church group entered the language circle of the community and was able to use the argot in casual conversation. He also began to pick up the non-verbal symbol system used by the community. Another student, however, was only mildly successful, toward the end of the process, in entering into the language of his group because he had previously rejected all fundamentalist terminology.

As a *third* step in the process of assuming a stance which was inclusive of participant-observation as both art and science, we shared with the research team an understanding of the hermeneutic process. The science of interpretation in contemporary biblical, theological and literary studies includes several components which are now seen as a wholistic process. The social context must be appropriated in as complete a manner as possible. A careful exegesis of whatever statement or behavior is being observed must be attempted. A translation from the language and symbol system of the group to the language and symbol system of the dominant culture must be attempted. And finally, a recognition must be present that the hermeneutic process is circular. While the researcher is interpreting the meanings and behaviors of the group, he/she discovers that the meanings and behaviors of the group are interpreting his/her own meanings and behaviors to his/her self-consciousness also. As the observer comes to understand the group on a deeper level, he/she may also come to understand himself/herself on a deeper level because of the very interaction involved. Against the sub-cultural ethos of the gay world, the ethos of the straight world comes into focus in a new way. In the supernaturalistic worldview of the Temple of Harmony, our two research-

ers saw their own ontological presuppositions clarified in a more precise way than they had ever been prior to that experience. In becoming involved in the commitment patterns of young adults of the Roman Catholic faith, our two students saw their own commitment systems called into question. The hermeneutic circle or interpretive cycle in which they were involved was seen as a two-way operation.

Finally, the *fourth* step in preparing for this venture was seen as the appropriation of an empathetic stance. The ability to see through the other person's eyes, to speak with his words, to feel with his sensors was not a mental trick which could be assumed merely because it was seen as necessary. Each of the researchers was required to develop that degree of empathy with his group that he was capable of marshalling. At first, this was a trial and error process. Some were gifted with personality structures which made such an exercise easier. Another had previously been in extensive clinical work, which required the same skill. Others had to struggle to attain even a slight ability to "stand in the other person's moccasins."

The extent to which any one of our researchers was able to take these steps was a clear indicator of his potential for successful participant-observation, and conversely, the degree of his success in adequately interpreting his group could perhaps be traced directly to his ability to achieve in terms of these four steps. These are the factors which create the possibility of participant-observation being both an art and a science.

III

Participant-Observation Research as an Hermeneutic Process

Understanding of participant-observation research as an hermeneutic process was confirmed in the clearest possible way by the experience of one student who, during most of the time he was engaged in the process, found himself in a state of turmoil. This student elected to do participant-observation of the group known as Jehovah's Witnesses. When he first got into contact with this group, he approached it in a manner suggesting that, for him, observation really meant *infiltration,* with the intent of exposure of the "bad beliefs" that were being entertained in the group. The language he employed concerning the group made frequent references to "what *they* are doing to all those poor unsuspecting people," a language clearly indicating an implicit, if not explicit, conspiracy theory. For nearly three months, we attempted, in various ways, to communicate to this student the message that the approach he was taking was inappropriate

to the participant-observation method, that proceeding in this way he could not come to any real understanding of the behavior of Jehovah's Witnesses adherents. Articulating his thoughts and feelings about the process in which he was engaged became an obvious source of real agony for this student. Unquestionably, a part of the reason for this agony was the student's realization that, in standing firm in his conspiratorial stance, he was not adhering to the norms of the research group. These norms had to do, of course, with the maintenance of an open, empathetic, non-judgmental relationship to the group under study, with a willingness to respect and, where possible in the setting, enter into the subjective meanings being acted out by the members of the group. The student found these norms difficult, if not impossible, to adhere to, since he was convinced that the beliefs accepted in the group were false and therefore dangerous.

Concerning his experience with, and involvement in, the research process, the student commented as follows: "The inhibiting factors . . . were overwhelming emotional problems, a view that religions were deliberately exploiting people and entangled in these factors was my motivation for selecting Jehovah's Witness. My motive was 'to find them out,' to expose their fraud."[6] Significantly, the rest of the research group was asked to accept part of the responsibiilty for this stance, since we had earlier said some things about the necessity of "infiltrating" this group. The discussion of infiltration was in the context of pointing out that in instances where members of the group being studied might resist being observed, and thus prevent the researcher from getting an accurate view of what was going on in the group, it might be necessary to conceal the fact that one was doing research. What we learned from this was that a term such as infiltration cannot, apparently, be used in a descriptive, non-pejorative, manner, even if it is explicitly labeled as such.

At the end of the research process, the student was able to see that his view of what he had been doing had finally changed. He saw the change in his understanding of the research situation as involving the affirmation that what was once a distracting conspiracy used to scare people into joining the cult, is now an honest attempt to show people God's plan." He spoke of his earlier view of the conspiracy as involving observation, and of his later view of it being made possible by an increased feeling of being able to *participate in* the Jehovah's Witnesses worldview, even though he could not accept it for himself. "After my change," he writes, "I found myself taking delight in seeing evidence that we were in the 'last days.' I really am living in Jehovah's

[6]Field notes of the student who studied the Jehovah's Witnesses group.

world. For me, that's participation at its best." The change that had taken place in this student's image of the research process was, finally, clear enough in his mind that he was able to articulate it in terms of a "before and after" statement. Before the student moved beyond "observation" to "participation" (as he understood it), the Jehovah's Witnesses "conspiracy" was stated as their belief that God "has shown us and not other churches. They gather Sundays and point out *falseness* of other churches and the world, and the world, and the *truth* of Jehovah's Witnesses." After the "conversion" from mere "observation" to real "participation," the conspiracy could be stated in quite different terms. The Jehovah's Witnesses were now seen as saying that "there is something wrong with the world. God is trying to warn us. We have seen his message (Bible) that other churches refuse to believe. We gather and learn of Jehovah and his ways. We notice how different they are than those of the world and its churches and rejoice that we are of Jehovah God." What we had thought of as two parts of the same process, namely, participant-observation (the use of the hyphen indicates that we thought of them together) had become for this one student two separate *kinds* of processes—*observation,* in which a conspiratorial theory was allowable, and *participation,* in which such a theory was gradually seen as inappropriate.

Other members of the research group found themselves inevitably drawn into the struggle being experienced by the student who was involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses. The reason for this was very probably the style of work employed in the research group. We used most of the class sessions as an opportunity for discussion of the kinds of experiences the students were having as they engaged in the process of participant-observation research. Some notes from the research journal of one member of the research group are indicative of that group's involvement in what was occurring. They are perceptive and insightful with respect to the idea that this kind of research is an hermeneutic process. About twenty-four hours after the student who was working on the Jehovah's Witnesses project had made an oral presentation to the research group, another member of that group wrote in his Journal the following remarks (which I quote at some length because of their great relevance to the point under discussion). "What we observed was a private struggle, a struggle cast in language which is familiar but framed in a rhetoric which is foreign. It was a hermeneutic struggle in which the need to be in calm control fought it out with the need to express the inner chaos. . . . And he graphically portrayed the inner turmoil of participating in classes in which the key theme was not an apprehension of the subject but a personal con-

frontation of the subject. . . . He, without much ability to distance, is left with the langauge of academe, but without the rhetoric (emotional or objective) which will dispel the power of the confrontation itself. . . .Therefore he becomes the object of our concern, a certain source of our distress (a distress that had its source in the realization that his difficulties with participant-observation might be a threat to our own precarious grasp and acceptance of its methodological norms) which we may, if we wish, dispel by casting him into our own interpretive academic rhetoric. But that rhetoric cannot do him or his problem justice if it merely serves to distance us from him—to 'put his problem into perspective.' . . . If we are true participant observers of life and of our fellow student we feel that pain welling up through the disjunction of his rhetoric and presence, we recognize where he speaks truly to our own sense of things . . . we are a part of his pain, part responsible for that pain and, at the same time, we are ourselves, living out and involving our own hermeneutic, our own sense of ourselves which we express through our own kind of rhetoric." The author of this journal entry was saying something about his own (and our) dealings with the method of participant-observation. More importantly, perhaps, he correctly discerns a fundamental ambiguity at the center of that method—that it involves the mastery of a language that must serve, at one and the same time, to "distance" us from what is being studied and to enable us to be empathetic toward it."

Members of the research group experienced a kind of tension with respect to this ambiguity—a tension that was expressed in terms of a felt-conflict between the languoge game employed in participant-observation research and that utilized in the groups being studied. As one student put it, "the longer I attend the sessions at Temple of Harmony the more I become confused by what is happening in the Research Seminar. Upon reflection it seems that part of my distress results from being involved within two quite different systems—language groups. One of them is ostensibly the subject of the other. . . But each has a life independent of the other. My distress seems to arise in part from the fact that the language circle of the subject (T of H) makes more sense—seems more real, more crucial for human interaction and adjustment, than the language of the class. The language circle of the class is analytical—focused upon sorting out, comprehending and understanding the constructs of behavior. The language is no more or less technical than that which I hear at T of H, but it is mind language transcribing behavior into mental, graspable sets. The language which I hear at T of H is behavior langauage predominately. It is descriptive and thus appears to be at least one

step nearer the experience of the speakers. In this light the analytical language often seems pretentious and parasitical. It lives off of phenomena rather than living within them. It is caught up in its own gnostic tendencies—believing that it may adequately describe phenomena and name them with its secret names—which is its means of controlling knowing. But I am not convinced that the analytical language circle of the classroom does not blaspheme the phenomena upon which it lives." The student who wrote these words in his research journal spoke for other members of the group as well. On several occasions, the language conflict (the research language versus the language of the group under study) was discussed. The language of participant-observation apparently performed its function of aiding our attempt to achieve detachment and objectivity, to provide the necessary cognitive distance from the phenomena being studied, yet the research langauge game was experienced also as a barrier to the empathy that is so essential in this kind of work.

A somewhat different hermeneutic process was occurring with the other student who was involved in the study of the Temple of Harmony group. In this instance ,the student was in part reacting to her memory of her earlier process of religious socialization into the Roman Catholic faith. Both this memory and her mastery and acceptance of a broadly functional understanding of religious behavior are reflected in the following entry in her research journal. "I'm not sure if it's all authentic—it doesn't really matter, those there received comfort. But it's a lot like the comfort I received from church years ago—guides equals angels, powers equals saints. 'Be patient, it will come to you.' This I can't buy intellectually, but I can see how comforting it can be to think you can be in touch with spirits who love and guide you." The student who wrote this was able to achieve a high level of empathy with the human subjects whose religious behavior she was observing, a feeling she expressed in an interesting way. "Boundary maintenance?" she wrote in her journal. "I felt none tonight—I don't even know if we were the only strangers—I suspect not." She too experienced the ambiguity of the language games, for she notes in parenthesis in her journal the question, "How in the hell can I tell what these people are feeling by observing them?" The question asked is part of an internal dialogue of the self, since the question is followed by another one, stated in the context of "bias." "My bias—how can these people 'feel' without sacrament—is that the medium?" Both her own earlier religious background and her increasing commitment to the research language game are brought out in this statement. Noting the absence of sacrament (a reflection of her Roman Catholic involve-

ment), she moves quickly to the question of whether there is, in the setting being studied, a functional equivalent for it (a question prompted by involvement in the research language game).

Involvement in participant-observation tended to become a highly self-conscious process, a fact which became especially clear in the instance of the students who studied the group called VIAS. For them, experiencing participant-observation in a self-conscious way occurred almost at the outset of their involvement in it. "We had imaged participant-observation as something done with romantically mysterious groups," they wrote near the beginning of their research report. "In a sense, we had adopted a hidden agenda that said participant-observation was really 'infiltration' (there is that word, again!) into some forbidden, mysterious world. VIAS was anything but that. It was, for us, common and ordinary—mundane, if you will. Hence, we experienced an emotional let-down." But the "let-down" was only temporary, for very quickly there emerged a new understanding of the situation. "We came, expecting-hoping-fearing to meet a group we had already defined and categorized; we discovered instead a group which could not really even define itself and which defied our pre-set categories. Perhaps that was what we needed."

As it turns out, these kinds of statements about the feelings they had at the beginning of their encounter with VIAS offer us some clues as to the ways in which participant-observation research became for these students both the learning of an art and an hermeneutic process. After their first attendance at a meeting of the group, they recorded the fact that they "left the meeting confirming one another that 'this is obviously a young adult group looking for vehicles of socialization,' and 'this group is not about what they say they are about.' The subsequent unfoldment of the meaning and purpose of the group served to dispel these simplistic inferences. . . . VIAS was too familiar for both of us. 'We've been here before' we both said—a casual gathering in a college dorm, the weekly meeting of the Newman Club, the young adult meeting at our local churches. The cues and the language were too close to our own experience of faith. So familiar that the complexities of the group, and its deeper meaning was at best not apparent to us, and at worst not acknowledeged by us." Clearly, for these students, participant-observation was, at the start, a method that called for the deliberate cultivation of self-conscious awareness of what was going on, both in terms of increasing mastery of the research language game, and in terms of what was happening to them as they employed this vocabulary to articulate their growing understanding of the behavior exhibited in the group under study.

The self-conscious awareness did not, apparently, diminish. Instead, it tended to continue and increase as these students moved toward completion of the study. After attending several meetings of the VIAS group, they moved into a new phase of the study as they sought out individual members of the group for interviews. Concerning these interviews, they comment in their research report that "the individual interviews opened our eyes to a yet unexplored and unapparent vision of VIAS as it existed in the minds of some of its members. Even though we had maintained a position of self-criticism toward our research methodogy, the interviews helped us to realize that we still carried an agenda (discovery of the phenomenon that is VIAS) that screened our group observation. It is through these interviews that we discovered the personal meaning that is being created by those participating in the common group experience. It is important to remember that the group behavior that we are observing is a function of the personal response to the individual's perception of what VIAS is, and not a response to what *we* have observed VIAS as being." Here, these students have grasped one of the fundamental points concerning a phenomenological understanding of participant-observation research and of human behavior—the importance of attempting to discover the subjective meanings experienced by the persons whose behavior is being observed. Here too, one sees their version of the ambiguity of the language games involved in this kind of research.

Once again, the experiencing of that ambiguity opens the way for an understanding of participant-observation research as an hermeneutic process. "Participant-observation is a type of art," wrote one of the students who studied the VIAS group. "This point has been discussed and agreed upon. . . . But just as important as the art form is the art piece—the final product, the compiled data and observations. As a work of art, these observations should be viewed with great respect and handled with some fragility. . . . I have mixed emotions about recording my observations of the group on the written page. I suppose some of my reluctance is founded on the realization that the media from which I was creating was not lifeless clay, wood or paint, but rather people—who feel, mean, love, and emote. At times during this research study, I have sensed within myself the risk of violating another's integrity by observing too much, and at times I held back. My greatest fear would be that someone might read this paper and assume that they understood what VIAS is all about, and in that assumption they would be doing violence to the integrity of those people. But even with these reservations I am still excited about our re-

sults. Something totally new has been created—a new perception of the phenomena called VIAS, and because VIAS is all these things and none of these things, the time and effort has been well spent by all involved." The statement, as it stands, hardly requires extensive comment. What comes through immediately is the student's appreciation of the method he was learning to use, his empathy with and respect for, the human subjects whose behavior he was attempting to understand by the use of the method, and finally, his healthy scepticism about the ability of the method to encompass in any total way the universe of meanings being acted out in the group he observed and participated in. Of real importance is the fact that these things were learned in actual engagement with the participant-observation methodology, and not from what was *said* about the cognitive understanding of the method.

The other student who was involved in the VIAS project had some things to say that were of a somewhat similar nature, but he had a quite different and unique way of saying them. What concerned him was the fact that, in the end, they had not been able to "define" VIAS. Their original exposure to the research language game had led them to suppose that by the use of this methodology they could "sleuth out" the *real* VIAS, that they could perceive the order that was inherent in the chaos. Since they found themselves unable to do this, this student wonders if this means they failed. In the end, however, his conclusion seems to suggest, not failure, but a very exciting kind of learning experience. VIAS is, he points out, "A young adult socialization group, a politically subversive movement within the Archdiocesan structure, a group of committed people engaged in lay ministry, and a 'half-way house' back into the Church and possibly into the professional ministry. But it is something more; something which is elusive and transitory and chaotic. The reality which is VIAS is not capable of linear categorization. . . . Reality is not linear or clean or neat or orderly, which is perhaps why symbols are so crucial to religion." The limits of this paper do not allow us to go very far into the kind of issues—methodological, anthropological, and metaphysical —that this statement raises. What is important is to make note of the fact that, for these students, the use of participant-observaion as a methodology made possible a new way of understanding how human beings experience "reality," and along with this the opportunity to experience, if only briefly, a kind of transcendence of their culture-boundedness. Because of their self-consciously admitted closeness to some of the goals and objectives of the group they were studying, they could not exploit that moment of transcendence to the fullest extent

that might have been desirable, both methodologically and humanly speaking, but they did, at least, catch a glimpse of what that kind of transcendence might mean.

The final project to be reported on in this paper is in several respects unique. One member of the research group had already served on the staff of the Metropolitan Community Church in Denver for a period of several months before he began his participant-observation study of this homophile community. The student brought to the study the capacity for empathy and sensitivity to what was happening acquired from previous training in psychology. Of real importance too was the fact that he was able to have his wife accompany him to many of the meetings of the group under study. This meant that his male-oriented impressions were set alongside those derived from the female-oriented observations of his wife. From time to time, they found themselves with significantly different understandings of what was being observed and participated in; occasionally too they noticed that what was said to one of them about was was happening differed from what was said to the other.

The most significant feature of this study was the mastery of the language game employed in the homosexual sub-culture that was achieved. Partly based on this mastery of the language game, and partly based on other observations of interaction within the group, the student involved in this research was able to show how religious beliefs, sentiments, attitudes, and values functioned as an ideological structure that legitimized and sanctioned the homosexual life-style. Here as well, the ambiguity and potential conflict of language games noted in connection with the other studies turns up, but perhaps in a somewhat different form. The ambiguity, in this instance, appears to have at least two sources—one socio-cultural, and the other religious. The *socio-cultural* source is the obvious difference between the "gay" world and the "straight" world. Members of the group knew that the student was *not* a homosexual, but nevertheless at times they sought pastoral care from him with respect to matters pertaining to homosexual love affairs. This set up the possibility of role *ambiguity,* which at times became acute enough to be called role *conflict.* The *religious* source of ambiguity is that the belief system employed by this group is, on the spectrum of theological positions, extremely conservative, if not fundamentalist. The student involved in the study has, for a number of years, been engaged in the process of sloughing off the fundamentalist position derived from his early religious socialization. Yet, both his ministerial commitment and the norms of participant-observation research made it imperative for him to bracket his own

theological stance out, if he was to be effective in ministry and achieve the necessary combination of detachment, objectivity, and empathy in the research process.

The student's summary of the conclusions of his study makes it clear how he was involved in the ambiguity of language games, and how he was able to deal with that ambiguity. In this case, the hermeneutic aspect of participant-observation appears to be more latent than manifest, more implicit than explicit, but it is certainly there. "I first entered the MCC community," this student writes, "with the perceived notion that I would find people, torn by societal and inner conflicts, searching for self-acceptance. In order to maintain as much objectivity as possible I noted this predisposition and made every intellectual effort to keep it aside during my observations. Now after ten months and hundreds of hours of observation with the gay community at worship and socially, I am convinced that my data support my initial assumption. The gay who walks through the doors of the MCC church . . . is seeking more than stained glass windows and theological pablum to feed his ego needs. He is turning to a positive avenue for acceptance . . . (I)in the disguise of religious search the gay finds a rewarding answer. . . . The MCC is helping provide (a) . . . world-view by providing a secure gathering place where gays can openly express their needs, psychologically and sexually, and where they can, at the same time, address their energies to acceptance by God."[7]

The research done by this student uncovered the way in which religious ideology is used in this homosexual community as a means of self-acceptance, social location, and identity *vis a vis* the "enemy"—the straight world. "They have taken the weapons which they perceive the straight world using against them and turned them to their own usage in their struggle for acceptance. The straight's main weapon is social damnation based, in many cases, upon the argument of natural law. By reversing the natural law argument, declaring and believing that 'God loves all men' the gay world disarms the straight world's arsenal. If the straights can no longer declare, with Bible firmly held in hand, that homosexuality is immoral, unnatural, and against God's will, then the gays have found their acceptance. . . . 'God loves us; thus to be truly Christian you straights must follow His action. If you do not, you straights are immoral, not us gays'—an argument I have often heard." A brief anecdote will provide a fitting conclusion of this whole discussion. Seeing a group of homosexuals, a

[7]For further information on this study see the paper by Paul F. Bauer, "The Homosexual Subculture at Worship: A Participant Observation Study," *Pastoral Psychology*, Winter, 1976. Bauer was a member of the research group which is the subject of this paper.

woman was heard to comment, "it's a bunch of fairies." To which one of the "queens" replied, "No, honey, we're a church group." The student who made this study believes that the coming into existence of a church serving the homosexual community is directly related to the realization, on the part of the gays, that they are powerless. "But the gays 'solve' that problem. With 'God on our side,' the gays . . . lift high their banners proclaiming God's love for them. Now, in their eyes they have power—Absolute Power. In essence, they are in the position to say, 'It's your move, straights.' "

V

Conclusions

Since the substance of what we have to say in this paper has already been stated, the conclusions can be conveniently stated in the form of several brief observations:

1. The research group had some significant variety of background and experience, but a somewhat larger group would be desirable in the future work on this project.

2. While variety was exploited in the projects undertaken by members of the research group, the almost limitless resources in the metropolitan area of Denver, Colorado, for this kind of research have only been minimally utilized.

3. The question of whether participant-observation is an *art* or a *science* was never completely settled. This is probably desirable. Elements of both art and science are present in the process of participant-observation. It was helpful to the research process to keep these dimensions of the work in tension with each other.

4. The emphasis placed on participant-observation as an hermeneutic process was not something imposed upon the work that members of the research group did. The fact is that the realization of this hermeneutic aspect of what we were doing emerged almost as a surprise, in the course of our twice-weekly seminar discussions of the work in progress. We experienced this hermeneutic in the interaction that occurred within the research group.

5. This aspect of participant-observation needs further research with future groups of students, in settings not yet investigated. It would be desirable to discover, if possible, whether the understanding of participant observation as an hermeneutic process was simply a function of the constitution of the research group and the religious groups that provided the research settings, or whether it is an integral part of the methodology.