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THE IMPACT OF PROLONGED OBSERVATION ON THE ROLE OF THE "NEUTRAL OBSERVER" IN SMALL GROUPS

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During a prolonged study of small, elected decision-making groups, the observer introduced certain unintended strains in the groups. As a result the groups went through three distinctly different phases in defining their relationships with the observer. In the first phase the observer was regarded as an inspector and largely sealed off from communication and access to data. In the second phase the observer was treated as an adviser and consultant; this threatened the intended non-interference of the observer. Finally, in the third phase he was allotted a role of an autonomous observer. The phase development is seen as a general dynamic feature of such relationships. The definitions of the role of the observer had an impact on the content and amount of communication between the group members and the observer. If the results reported from the study are of a general nature, they must have implications for the validity of data reported from short-term observation in small groups.

Problem*

This paper reports an analysis of how the role of a neutral observer is defined, tested, and redefined as it is exercised in the several phases of repeatedly observing small groups. The study situation called for observation without participation. However, strains developed that had to be resolved if the observer was to have continued access to information from every member of the groups involved. This paper examines alternative modes for coping with the task of observation under conditions where the role of the observer is constantly subject to informal re-definition.

This study varies somewhat from traditional investigations of the role of the observer in natural groups because of temporal conditions and the size dimension of the groups involved. Most studies in the literature involve a limited number of observations of natural groups larger in size

* I am in the fortunate position to have had the opportunity to discuss with my friends and colleagues the problems dealt with in this paper. Those who have generously given me their time and patience are: Nils Halle, Otto N. Larsen, Johan P. Olsen, Herbert Menzel and Odd Ramsøy. Needless to say, only I am responsible for the paper's faults.

than that to be reported here. In the present case, "small groups" refers to collectivities of four to seven persons who repeatedly met for periods up to four years. This group setting afforded opportunities for structures and expectations to evolve and pass through different phases of development. The principal research question then becomes, how is the role of the neutral observer shaped by these developmental processes? The reciprocal questions are of equal interest: how does the injection of an additional person of relatively high status whose role is initially defined as that of neutral observer affect the group developmental processes?

These questions imply some difficult analytic tasks in sorting out situational and positional variables in the research setting. How, for example, shall we assess the impact of qualifications for participation in the group, or the stage of group development at the time that the observer penetrates the process? The limitations of the present case in these regards may briefly be noted by reference to the literature on phase-development in small groups.

Mills has described how a new member is adapted to a group through four stages—the behavioral or primordial role, the normative role, the instrumental role, and the executive role.¹ While such a model has some general utility for the present analysis, the following specific difference should be noted. Mills' "newcomer" is assumed to want full membership in the group; the observer in the present study, on the other hand, only wants limited membership. The question then becomes what expectations emerge from a desire for limited membership in a group? And, can small groups, as in the present study, accommodate the needs for limited membership as effectively as larger groups that generally have broader tolerance limits for a range of activity? Data bearing on these questions might also throw light on whether it is the penetration of the observer's independent role more than the introduction of an additional group member that enhances phase development in a group.

Golembiewski's review of the literature concludes that most groups go through a four-phase development.² Rankordering of members is involved in the first phase, followed by conflict and frustration about the group's task, and then the emergence of group stability. With the development of a firm structure, Golembiewski noted that groups gain confidence and begin to overstep established norms to innovate in meeting task problems. The present study affords some opportunity to organize observations in accord with a similar phase model but with one limiting condition set up by variability in field conditions: in each case it was not possible for the observer to begin his observations at the moment the group formed. In some cases in the present study, the groups had been active from a few to several months before the observer arrived on the scene.

The problem and focus of this paper may be further clarified by posting some exclusions from this analysis. Conventional methodological problems concerning, for example, issues around validity and reliability of observation are not here under discussion. Ethical problems con-

¹ Mills, Theodore M.: *The Sociology of Small Groups*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967, pp. 85–87.

² Golembiewski, Robert.: *The Small Group*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 195.

fronting the observer, often included in studies of participant-observation, will not be treated here. The above problems, along with a concern for how the observer is socialized into group norms, has been an interest of several studies on the observation of groups. The focal point here, however, will be on the reaction of groups to the presence of an observer and the problems in tension management that resulted.

Groups in the Research Setting

Since 1965, in all municipalities of Norway, small groups usually ranging in size from four to seven persons, have met regularly to work out policy recommendations concerning certain local matters. Members are elected to the groups by their local communities through the ordinary political channels. The formal rules for the work of the groups are diffuse, and norms governing their behavior have developed very differently in the groups.

The groups observed were characterized by a low degree of cohesiveness. Hierarchical structures tended to develop at an early stage, but the hierarchy was relatively stable only in groups having a strong leader. In other groups the status of the members varied according to the kind of problem to be settled and how the expertise of each member was defined in relation to this problem. The appointed formal leaders of the groups were not necessarily the real leader.

The members of the groups did not seem to use the groups as a frame of reference for other activities; only members with relatively low prestige considered their membership prestigiously rewarding.

Over a period of three years, the observer attended approximately 60 meetings of 14 different groups in municipalities located all over Norway. The ostensible purpose of the investigation was to study decision-making processes and the formation of group norms. In each group the observer was introduced as a research worker connected to the university and recommended to each group by its own parent organization. The purposes of the project were presented openly and additional information was given upon request.

There was an agreement between the groups and the observer that the latter should remain "neutral" during the group deliberations and meetings. That is, it was understood that the observer would not participate in the discussion or be consulted concerning deliberations. The decisions of the group had political consequences and were not to be influenced by outsiders who were not elected to the body. The general definition at the outset, then, was one that prescribed observation without participation.

Findings

The First Phase: Observer as "Guest" and as "Inspector"

Ambiguity marked the opening penetration of the observer into most of the group settings. Despite common formal definitions of the situation, individual members clearly varied in their perception of what the observer's role actually meant. An important variable in the early definitional activity was the length of time that the observer was expected to be present for observation.

If the observer had travelled to participate in a single meeting, he was conferred all the privileges that a guest-role involves. Provisions were made for the guest's comfort by the group members who, in spite of all agreements, refused to accept that the observer was to remain neutral. They insisted that the guest participate in the discussions, and wished to use the observer as a consultant in difficult cases. Such temporary deviations from the group's normal behavior involve few or no consequences for the group's future behavior. A visitor to the group can be treated as a highprestige member without disturbing the already established status hierarchy among the other members, as long as it is clear to everybody that the stay is only going to be of short duration.

The introductory phase was quite different in those groups who knew the observer was going to be present again and again. Here the observer was met with scepticism, and vague attempts were made to avoid participating in the research project. Above all, the observer's "neutrality" was maintained to such a degree that the observer became isolated and often directly ignored. At a later date, when communications had been restored, the opportunity arose to discuss these introductory opposing attitudes with the group members.

It then turned out that the group's assessment of the observer's role deviated strongly from the role the observer himself had tried to adopt. Most of the members had a positive attitude towards research in this field. However, this appeared to be a general attitude. As soon as the participants holding this relatively positive view were confronted with a concrete project within their own group, they reacted against "just them" being chosen as objects of research. Vague ideas about what sociologists were actually doing at the same time were combined with the feeling that this was knowledge one ought to have. Since it was taken for granted that the other group members possessed the necessary insight in sociological problems, there was some reluctance to expose oneself in asking for more information. This dilemma of "pluralistic ignorance" made it difficult for the sociologist to advance information which could help outline the role of the observer.

In this diffuse situation the group members resorted to other and well known roles in order to explain the behavior of the observer. To them it seemed difficult at first to understand why anyone could be interested in participating in meeting after meeting without any reward in the form of influence on the decisions made. They looked around for cues to this

behavior, both inside and outside the system, but during this phase they never made inquiries to the observer directly. One source of cues were the letters of introduction which the observer had brought from the groups' parent organization and from the nation's central administration. These letters seemed to indicate a connection between the observer and the leaders of these bodies, and so the idea that the observer really was serving as their *inspector* began to emerge. Immediately this looked like a sensible answer to the puzzles regarding the observer's presence and interest in everything that happened in the group. We know from other studies, that the observer often is ascribed an exaggerated insight into the problems of a group under observation.³ Later discussions revealed that this study was no exception. That perception, of course, stressed the impression of the observer as an inspector.

³ Mills, Theodore M.:
op.cit. p. 28.

Another fact which served to enhance the impression of the observer as an inspector, was a particular quality of these groups. The formal norms regulating their work were diffuse and sometimes contradictory, and many different norm-senders could be perceived. The gap between the decisions they could realistically make and the decisions they knew they ought to make was often quite extensive. That created an uncertain situation in which the group members were in search of directions or corrections in their work. Expectations from stronger norm-senders in the form of advisers and inspectors were discernible. Thus, at first, it seemed natural to allot the role of inspector to the inactive observer. From the point of view of the observer it was somewhat unpleasant and frustrating to become associated with the role of an inspector and attributed motives which are considered incompatible with those of a researcher. It turned out to be an unpleasant situation for the group as well, when it came to believe that an "inspector" was watching all the members' moves. They sought protection by limiting as much as possible their communication with the observer.

The Second Phase: The Observer as "Adviser"

The transition between the first and the second phase took place imperceptibly. The channels of communication outside the formal setting of the meeting were the first to open. In the first groups observed the initiative came from the observer as well as from the members of the group; in the last groups observed, communication with the observer was initiated by the group members only. (The observer had become aware of the phenomenon and now tried to control this part of the phase development by not taking any initiative). As a consequence of the communication outside the regular setting of the meetings, the conditions for communication in the formal part of the meetings also improved, leading eventually to a turning point where deliberate attempts to engage the observer in communication during the groups' deliberations were made. Such attempts were most often made in situations of conflict, where two or more sections in the group were

sharply opposed to each other. Hoping to get support from the observer, or solving a conflict with the help of a person not directly involved, one section would ask the observer to express his opinion. Thus, gradually, attempts were made to give the observer the role of an *adviser*.

There seemed to be agreement within the group concerning the desirability of this new role. The acceptance of the new role was in part enhanced by the feeling of relief by getting rid of the "inspector", who obviously had created certain strains in the group. Also, as mentioned before, the need for advice was acute in some of the groups, and almost any kind of expertise was considered useful. The need for advice varied in the groups, of course, and it appeared that the greater the professional element in the group, the less the need for advice, and consequently the entry into the second phase was slower and less pronounced.

Having reached this second phase the observer encountered some real difficulties. While in the first phase, the observer was somewhat helpless and had only a limited influence in shaping his own role. The second phase offered opportunities to participate actively in the defining of the role. Assuming that the substantive accomplishment of the research project is based upon open and continued communication with *all* group members, it is a necessary requirement for the observer to avoid being identified with one fraction of the group by taking a stand on matters of decision. The dilemma could be solved without too many difficulties, if the questions to be settled had either a right or a wrong answer. However, in the work of the groups under observation, decisions very often hinged upon moral and political judgment while formal or legalistic rules of settlement were scant. Thus, a solely advisory role, based on fairly unambiguous criteria, was possible only in a small proportion of the decisions made. In remaining questions the observer had to choose between (1) the role of an active participant with rights to take a standpoint based on his own values and norms, (2) a role as an active participant with visible values and norms based on a well balanced selection of the values and norms being represented in the group, or (3) a continued "neutral" role.

The first of these roles would lead to reduced information from sections of the group and, quite likely, a resistance which would soon force the observer to leave. Carried to its furthest, the consequences of this role would be a dialogue between the researcher and some particular group members, excluding others. In a project of this kind such a strategy might not be very viable. The encompassing formal structure in groups of this kind could not possibly allow such a dialogue to take place. Besides, the observer's direct influence on the decision processes would make the same persons unsuitable as objects of study. The second role was found ethically unacceptable because it would force the observer to express values which were not in accordance with his own convictions and personality. Thus, the third role, the more neutral one, presented itself as the least impracticable.

Once the group members came to believe that it might be feasible to

engage the observer in the activities, the group no longer was willing to accept the passive neutral role. Many attempts were made to make the observer state his attitudes and preferences concerning group problems as well as matters of a personal or general nature. In the beginning the losers and potential winners in the different conflict situations most often were the ones who tried to redefine the group and the conflict by attempting to bring in the observer. But after a time it appeared more as if the observer became part of the "local performance" where the ability to predict the other group members' behavior is important. The observer's reticence was met with antagonism, and it became legitimate for the group to abreact against the observer. Then, at the next meeting, new appeals might be made to the observer; he would be welcomed and experience positive sanctions. It seemed as if it became a goal in itself to find out what kind of a person the observer really was. Meanwhile, the observer experienced a vacillation between negative and positive sanctions in the meetings as well as outside. The range of these shifts varied, of course, from one group to another. Groups being "central", in the sense of having the widest access to resources and the greatest number of strings to play upon, were the least interested in the observer.

The groups' reactions are not unlike the reactions a patient displays toward his psychoanalyst when the latter refuses to give him advice and guidance. It may even be more relevant to draw attention to the problems encountered in psychiatric group-therapy situations, where the patients' reaction to the group's leader and other non-patients in the group will be dependent on whether they are defined as real or not.⁴

The tendency toward expanded primary group relations is a general feature of smaller groups which remain together over a long period of time. However, there are obvious differences in the methods applied in order to gain insight. While therapy groups at times will have strong outbursts, the groups in the present investigation would apply sanctions which sometimes were so subtle that the observer might wonder whether they ought to be regarded as sanctions at all.

The result, however, was that rather than being secluded and isolated the observer became the focal point in the group during the short intervals between deliberation and decision-making. During these periods the observer gained new information, especially about the group members' attitudes and premises on which decisions were based. The observer was allowed to ask unconventional questions and eventually had an opportunity to explain his own role, and why it was so important to participate in the groups' meetings.

The Third Phase: Emergent Autonomy of the Observer

The possibility for the observer to explain his own position gradually paved the way into a third phase. Eventually the observer's role became meaningful to the group and their expectations of him slowly changed to the extent that they nearly coincided with the observer's behavior. At

⁴ Burton, Arthur (Ed.), *Encounter: The Theory and Practice of Encounter Groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1969.

In order to be accepted as "real" the non-patients in the psychiatric groups have to introduce elements of their lives as they live them outside the group sessions, and they must desist from acting a role which is not in correspondence with their own personality. The underlying theory is, that therapy is dependent on communication, and communication is furthered in groups where the patients get sufficient information about non-patients in order to have realistic expectations as to their future behavior.

the same time it seemed as if the group members grew tired of the tension between the observer and themselves. And as a result, the observer felt that now he could recede to the intended "neutral" role, while being more or less accepted as a permanent member of the group. The communication channels which had been established in the second phase, remained open during the remainder of the project, and the observer finally had arrived in the kind of role originally planned. Now and again the former roles of "inspector" and "adviser" reappeared, but mainly the neutral, integrated observer role was the dominant one.

At this stage it might be appropriate to replace the concept of "neutral observation" by some more adequate term. The ideal of neutrality in observation is classical in sociological methodology, and although considerable scepticism as to the possibility of neutrality in general has been voiced on many grounds, the ideal has survived even though the content has changed.

The above description has shown that throughout this particular study the observer had an unintended impact on the groups observed, and, although there was steady progress toward a situation in the third phase in which the observer found it somewhat unproblematic to assume a "neutral" posture, it does not seem warranted to call the observation neutral in any usual sense.

In order to emphasize the state of independence between the group and the observer which emerged in the third phase of the observation, it might be more correct to speak of "independent observation" or "autonomous observation". In the third stage, the group and the observer were autonomous in relation to each other, in so far as the group would make its decisions without attempting to engage the observer, and the observer was allowed to classify his observations without interference from the group. The group and the observer constituted a relatively stable sociological unit. The observer adopted those group norms which did not interfere directly with the research process, while the group adjusted its structure to make room for the observer also.

From the outside it looked as if in the third phase the balance of the group had been restored. Also, it seemed as if there had been little change in the original group structure. Once more there appears to be strong forces at work in the direction of retaining an already existing group structure. Studies show that these forces are also at work when the group is enlarged to include an extra member.⁵

Some Implications

When a small and relatively stable group suddenly is increased by one member, a change takes place in the group regardless of who this new member may be. During the time it has existed the group has created its own structure based on more or less conscious, common goals. Ties of affection, communication channels, patterns of cooperation, and a

⁵ Parsons, Talcott, Robert F. Bales and Edward Shils: *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953, pp. 99-103.

prestige hierarchy have been established, and common values and norms of behavior have crystallized. An enlargement of the group necessarily must result in changes in all of these relations, also when the new group member is willing to become fully socialized into the group.

An observer enters the group on his own premises, which depend on his research strategy and thus partly determine the degree of his socialization to the group norms. In the study discussed here it was considered urgent that the observer remain passive and avoid interference in the decisions within the group. In reality the observer had to remain passive almost all the time, because the decision processes constituted most of the group's total interaction. Consequently the observer was defined as an outsider, not only because of his special group membership, but also—and more importantly—because of his peripheral location in the communication structure. In such a situation the group may choose to provide compensation for the observer by including him in that part of the communication which remain after the decision processes have been finished. Or, the group may choose to isolate the intruder completely. This latter possibility characterized the first phase of the observation.

So far, this is in accordance with results obtained in other research studies involving small groups. For example, through a series of experiments in groups with respectively high and low degrees of common norms, Schachter has shown that groups with a high degree of common norms repeatedly tried to communicate with the outsider, thereby attempting to convince him of the importance of their points of view. Groups with a looser structure and a less homogeneous pattern of norms showed less need to integrate the outsider and consequently communicated less with him.⁶

It is tempting to compare the role of the experimentally introduced outsider in the above mentioned experimental study with the role of the observer in the first and second phase of this investigation. However, Mills explains the results of Schachter's experiment not in terms of differences in group structure, but in terms of differences in the expectations which the experimenter unconsciously introduced in his subjects.⁷ Even though the influence on the groups, exerted by the observer of the present study, is small compared to an experimenter's encroachment upon his group, it is nevertheless important to be aware of the expectations the observer also inadvertently has of the group concerning his own role.

Such a condition appears, for instance, in the perception of the observer's relatively high prestige. Not only was the observer identified with the leaders of the group's parent organization during the first two phases; he also was allotted the relatively high prestige often attributed to persons from scientific institutions. However, it should be added that the observer's prestige varied from one group to another; relative prestige ranking was defined on the basis of the other group-members' prestige, which also varied between the groups. This variation in the observer's relative prestige did not seem to have any significant impact upon the

⁶ Schachter, Stanley: "Deviation, Rejection and Communication," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XLVI (April, 1951), pp. 109–207.

⁷ Mills, Theodore M.: "A Sleeper Variable in Small Group Research: The Experimenter," *Pacific Sociological Review*, Vol. 5 (Spring, 1962), pp. 21–28.

development of the phase movements described. It is difficult to draw a definite conclusion regarding this point. Even though relative prestige of the observer varied, the range of variation was rather narrow—and largely confined to the high end of the dimension. It would have been desirable to observe the effect of an observer having a relatively low prestige in relation to the groups.

Not only the groups ascribe high prestige to the researcher. The researcher, also, evaluates his own activity highly and consequently expects a certain respect for his work. Normally it is difficult to separate activity from actor, thus the researcher will expect some degree of deference, even when initially having introduced his role as unintrusive and unimportant.

Differences between manifest and latent expectations create tensions toward which the groups are likely to react. In the first instance the groups may reject these tensions by excluding the person who creates them; in the next instance the need to establish correspondence between the expectations are likely to create the need for more information about the observer and about the value of his presence for the group. In the first instance a group will avoid redefining itself psychologically by keeping the observer outside the prestige-hierarchy. In the second instance it may try to obtain the necessary information so that the observer may be ranked according to the same dimensions as the other group members.

However, this may turn out to be an impossible task because the prestige among the group members also is allotted on the basis of participation in the decision-making processes. Not only is the influence on the decision itself important in assigning a person's prestige; also, the number of interaction units plays an important role.⁸ And the observer does not participate in the main part of the interaction. A relatively high-prestige member who desists from using his influence, and who only participates slightly in the communication, breaks with the usual pattern and is likely to create confusion.

To the extent that the observer's presence becomes a problem for the group, such incongruity will accentuate tensions in the group at this point. Theodorson's view might be considered. He connects group structure to the group's need for status-congruency among its members, and maintains that loosely structured groups require less status-congruency.⁹ At first glance the latter point might be taken to explain experiences made during the first phase of the present study. In more solidly structured groups the need for status-congruency will be stronger—as in the second phase of the study—.

It is important that the *dynamic* aspect is emphasized here. As these groups pass through phases in their development, the crucial questions concerning the process must be: When the groups react to the observer in different ways, is it (1) because of the addition of a new member, (2) because of the observer's neutral role, or is it (3) because of the group's own development, so that the three phase progression

⁸ March, James G.: "Influence Measurement in Experimental and Semi-Experimental Groups," *Sociometry*, 19 (1956), pp. 260–271.

⁹ Theodorson, G.A.: "Leadership and Popularity Roles in Small Groups," *American Sociological Review*, XXII (February, 1957), pp. 58–67.

observed is actually a group characteristic manifested in attitudes to a participating observer? Further, might it be (4) because of the observer's relatively high status, or (5) because of certain qualities of these particular groups? These queries have been considered in the following paragraphs.

The phase development described in the beginning of this paper (Golembiewski's review of the literature on small groups) also characterized the present investigation. The reactions to the observer could be interpreted without difficulty, in the light of the same phase progression. Golembiewski distinguished four phases. In the present investigation only three have been considered. Yet, this is not seen as disagreement. It is assumed that Golembiewski's third and fourth phases both are included in the present study's third phase.

It is important to note that in the present study the observer did not, normally, begin his observation at the time the groups were formed. In some cases the groups had been active for several months before the observer arrived. Nevertheless, the development described took place. This can be explained either as reactions to the particular role of the observer, or, as an adjustment the group, as a group, must undergo because of the addition of a new member.

No parallel to the group development described by Mills (also cited in the beginning of this paper) was found. As mentioned earlier, the observer entered the group on different premises than did the "newcomer". The difference in membership (limited membership for the observer versus full integration for the "newcomer") is likely to be perceived by the group members, who then react differently toward, on one hand, a new member who wants to become fully integrated, and, on the other, one who only wants certain rights and obligations. The pressure toward full membership will be stronger in a small group—where tolerance limits usually are narrow—than in a larger group. This is important because it reinforces the impression that it is the observer's *independent* role, more than the introduction of a new member, that produces the phase development.

The fourth question posed, as to whether or not the phase development was in part due to the observer's relatively high prestige, is difficult to answer. The relative prestige of the observer varied from one group to the next, but the actual differences were small, and no impact in the nature of a differentiation in the phase development was noted. Greater differences in relative prestige might have given different results, perhaps more consistent with observations regarding other forms of data collection. For example, interviewing in the upper social strata, does create a different situation from that of interviewing in the middle or lower social strata.¹⁰

One may speculate that the amount of the group members' knowledge concerning social research would be a powerful variable. It is likely that the groups would have reacted with less uncertainty in the introductory phase of the study had their insight into the sociologist's way of working

¹⁰ Fivelsdal, Egil: "Noen problemer ved intervjuing av personer i ledende stillinger". Institutt for samfunnsforskning, Oslo 1959. Stencil.

been more extensive.

The fifth question posed concerns some specific qualities of the groups under observation, and to what extent these qualities could explain the phase development. The looseness of the structure of the group, along with the lack of norms for their expected behavior, created a situation in which the members were in need of some guidance. There is no doubt that this condition served to augment the development of the adviser role attributed to the observer. However, some contrary evidence may be considered at this point: It appeared that also in groups with access to professional resources—and, consequently, less need for guidance—did the second phase develop, although less markedly than in the groups with no professional element.

There seems to be evidence that the phenomenon of a distinct phase development in an observer's relationship to small groups under prolonged observation is of a general nature, but further research is needed. The results suggested by the present study came about as a by-product of a data collection procedure of a project that had quite a different focus. An investigation designed specifically to throw light upon the observer's position during long-range presence in small groups would have brought out more definite evidence.

Summary

This paper has presented an analysis of the dynamics of an observer's role in prolonged observation of small groups ranging in size from five to seven persons. The observation period in some of the groups lasted up to three years. The groups were politically elected and met at varying intervals to perform a certain decision-making task.

The relationship between the observer and the groups went through easily distinguishable phases. In the first phase the observer was regarded as an inspector and representative of external authorities. His "neutral" role was emphasized to such a degree by the groups that communication channels were largely sealed off and he became isolated. In the second phase ambivalence began to assert itself. It became important to identify the observer on a wide range of variables, to get him to participate actively in the groups' work, to get him to abandon his disconcerting neutral role. When, for various reasons, this was not possible, the group resorted to the use of a rapidly changing sequence of negative and positive sanctions. The situation was not unlike the vacillation a psychiatrist experiences in patient reaction. The final phase brought about clarification of role expectations which made it possible for the observer to assume a neutral, integrated role, with open communication channels to the members of the group. This is the only role—it is argued—which is effective in projects of this type.

The *size* of the groups, the *duration* of the observation, and the "*neutral role*" of the observer appeared to be the three main factors explaining the phase development in the groups' reaction to the observer.

The distinction between the type of observation described and traditional participant observation is not readily discernible. An observer may choose to sit behind a one-way screen. Or, he may choose to engage in active participant observation. A middle-of-the-road strategy consists in observation without a screen, but with some cloak of neutrality and noninterference in the group processes. The present analysis has been designed to elucidate some problems inherent in the latter strategy. This type of observation has been utilized in several studies, but still there is no good name for it. The dilemma is not evident in larger groups, but it is felt to be a problem in smaller groups, both for the observer and the observed.

It may be somewhat deceptive and misleading to use the label "neutral observation" to describe this kind of data-gathering procedure. The whole phase development proved that the observer had a great deal of influence upon a relationship to the groups which may indeed be crucial in terms of the kinds and quality of the data secured. It is believed, however, that the events and the atmosphere which dominated once the third phase of the study had been reached, makes it warranted to replace the term "neutral observation" by "independent observation" or, perhaps, "autonomous observation".

If the account gives a true picture of prolonged observation in small groups it raises methodological problems relating to some aspects of the extensive body of small group research reported in the literature. It seems reasonable to make the inference that the type of observation which was performed during the first phase might easily have led to other conclusions than that produced from data acquired during the second and third phases of the observation. Had the observation ceased after only a few weeks or months, the results of the observation might well have assumed a different form. This may imply that in investigations based on this particular type of observation one ought to be somewhat sceptical about the validity of data secured through short-term presence in the small groups being the object of research.