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Why Participation Matters to Understand Ritual Experience

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Abstract

Two cases in which researchers take part in religious ritual show how being a participant enhances the researcher’s understanding of what is happening. Through these cases the authors attempt to shed light on the methodological problems concerning the “intersubjectivity” of research on ritual. Ritual goes beyond the verbal and pulls bodily sensations, emotion and gestures into the domain of intersubjectivity established through fieldwork. Experiencing the emotional and physical sensations that accompany ritual give the researcher a clue as to what other participants
experience. But maybe more importantly, the participation of the researcher also triggers reflections on the meaning and efficacy of the ritual. These verbalized interpretations of what has happened may further strengthen the researcher’s understanding. The authors argue that it is exactly through putting this intersubjectivity at the centre of both the actual fieldwork and the subsequent analysis that the ever flexible and contested nature of ritual and the dynamic tension between semantic and tacit meaning can be most fruitfully explored.

**Keywords:** intersubjectivity; mediumistic consultation; participation; praying; ritual experience.

**Introduction**

During his research in a new suburb in the center of the Netherlands, where he studied the role of churches in civil society, Marten van der Meulen participated in an Alpha course (Van der Meulen, 2006). The Alpha course is a missionary activity with a strong evangelical outlook that has become popular in many different churches worldwide. This particular Alpha course was organized by a conservative-reformed church plant, which was the subject of one of the case studies in his research. In his field notes Van der Meulen describes an event of this group after the so-called Holy Spirit weekend.1 This weekend, in which there is a lot of emphasis on praying and being filled with the Spirit, is often seen as the central event of the Alpha course. Van der Meulen could not attend this meeting and hooked up with the group after the weekend. To his surprise he noticed some important changes in the group and his place in it. He describes himself as a “regular member of a group that was cosy, but not very close.” After the Holy Spirit weekend he noticed how he felt sometimes like a “spectator of a group that had experienced something together.” That same evening, spectator Van der Meulen was invited to assume closeness with the group through helping and praying with laying on of hands for a group member with cancer.

Another co-author, Knibbe, through her fieldwork in a spiritual society, unintentionally became subject to the bodily sensations that are expected to occur during ritual practices such as group meditations and energy-work. However, it was not at all clear to her what these bodily sensations meant nor whether they were common. Asking the other participants led to long discussions, but no unambiguous answers.

These incidents related to ritual acts call into question the role of the researcher in understanding ritual, the question of the meaning of ritual, as well as the relationship of the researcher with the other participants. Is a researcher inherently “different” from the other participants because of his/her agenda? To what extent

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is s/he the same through the fact of embodiment, going through the same ritual motions? Doing qualitative research, and in particular fieldwork, is often referred to as not so much a quest for gathering objective facts, but as establishing a field of intersubjectivity, a hermeneutic merging of horizons. How can we speak of intersubjectivity in the context of ritual, when much of what is going on is non-verbal, shared through gestures, bodily sensations and emotions? Yet, as Van der Meulen and Knibbe both experienced, these same ritual acts can create irrevocable changes in people’s subjectivities as well as in the intersubjectively shared field of meanings and gestures.

In this article we will explore this issue through examining two examples. The first is an elaboration of what happened after the Holy Spirit weekend, and how Van der Meulen came to understand and share in what was happening via ritual gestures such as praying. The second example concerns Knibbe’s fieldwork in a spiritual society where people practise their paranormal skills. Before going into these examples we will summarize some of the vast literature on ritual as it has influenced our understanding of ritual and to the extent that it is relevant to the questions we wish to examine here.

**Studying Ritual**

In studying ritual, questions of methodology and epistemology are of great importance, that is, *what is the nature of ritual* and *how can we know anything about ritual?* Like the concept of culture, ritual seems to be a concept with an endless supply of definitions.

Boudewijnse (1995) argues that there are two major trends in the history of constituting ritual as a field of study. One trend has been that from the middle ages onwards, as the distinction between mind and body became more pronounced, behaviour evolved from a clear indicator of the state of mind and intentions of a person, indeed as one and the same thing, to something that could be divorced from the inner processes. Subsequently behaviour had to be interpreted, and it became feasible that it could lie about inner feelings. In short, behaviour became *representative* of something else unseen, requiring the efforts of scientists and philosophers to understand it. Behaviour and intentions became separated as well, so behaviour that was not directly serving a practical purpose had to be “symbolic.” This has been reinforced by the second trend emerging in the nineteenth century, when religion in philosophy and scientific thinking was replaced by ethics, because the validity of religious beliefs seemed to evaporate under the scrutiny of reason. The only thing resisting this “solvent” was ritual, which has earned it the status of a separate category of human behaviour (see Goody, 1977).
One of the most influential authors on the subject of ritual, both within anthropology and beyond, is Victor Turner. In *The Forest of Symbols*, when he tries to distinguish ritual from ceremony, Turner makes his briefest statement on the nature of ritual: “Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory” (Turner, 1967: 95). In his definition, however, this view is not expressed very clearly, for there he states that ritual is “formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers” (Turner, 1967: 19).

Ritual in Turner’s view has a central role in reconciling and preparing people for society and their position in it. He took society to be a structure of positions, which meant he focused on ritual to tell him about the conflicts within these structures as well as showing him the central values in a society. The central distinction between pre-industrial and post-industrial societies pervades his most important contributions, like his exploration of the liminal, the “betwixt and between” transitional period that especially characterizes initiation rituals. Consequently, he seems to see most rituals as *rites de passage*, a transition between two states, effected in three main steps: separation, transition and reintegration. Generally, rites of passage are associated with life crisis rituals, but in their original sense, the way Arnold van Gennep meant them, they are all rituals that *bring change*, including, for example, seasonal rites.

Turner’s view is a decidedly symbolical one. He has clear thoughts as to the effects of ritual on people: they imply the manipulation of symbols in a space away from everyday reality, an inter-structural interlude, in order to align the forces and meanings the symbols represent according to the way they are needed to ensure the general social equilibrium or to adapt to change.

Two other authors who have analysed the nature of ritual in depth are Humphrey and Laidlaw. Their conclusions seem to directly contradict the traditional “anthropological” approach to ritual as exemplified by Turner, who was influenced by both Durkheimian functionalism and Weberian interpretivism. Instead of taking “ritual” as the phenomenon to be explained, they take the more dynamic (and abstract) approach of exploring “ritual” as an adjective, and “ritualize” as a verb, in order to arrive at a generalization of the nature of ritual acts (cf. Bell, 1992). In their conclusion they state that “The pivotal transformation which ritual effects is to sever the link, which is present in everyday life, between the actors’ intentions and the identity of the acts they perform” (Humphrey and Laidlaw, 1994: 260). By this they mean that during a ritual act, gestures and body movements can be made that are on the outside “normal” as they belong to the repertoire of acts in daily life. However, in ritual, these acts take on a different
meaning, a meaning usually very loosely and contradictorily defined. The special thing about ritual is that ritual acts are given an object-like existence by the fact that they are “ontologically constituted beyond individual intentions” (1994: 267). A ritual act seems to have an ontological status like that of natural categories; it is just there to be performed, while both its meaning and effects are very variable.

Humphrey and Laidlaw argue that ritual in itself tends to disperse meaning; consensus about its meaning is the result of outside forces, reactions to ritual, to its essential endless meaninglessness, its weird means-end relationship. They point out that the several ways in which they have observed meaning in ritual can be re-appropriated (assuming that “originally” it arose out of meaningful activity): by “meaning to mean,” that is, by consciously ascribing certain meanings to the ritual acts performed and assembling them in the overall meaning-making in life, or by psychologically responding to the ritual act, generating culturally patterned emotions.

They quote Wittgenstein, who suggests that the very pointlessness of ritual evokes a psychological reaction which attributes “depth” and “ancestry” to it. Its “depth” is not dependent on its ancestry, but on the experience in ourselves (Humphrey and Laidlaw, 1994: 266). The ritual act is as disquieting as what it may be thought to represent, provoking a “rushing in of meaning.” But they maintain that the ontological “object-like” status of ritual should be separated from this “rushing in” of personal and conventional symbolism.

However, there are other approaches to ritual, to the problem of meaning and to the relationship of the individual subjectivities with regard to ritual acts that are of importance. Bell (1992) argues that the distinction between act and meaning, central to the analysis of ritual, obscures the fact that rituals produce and reproduce relationships of power, as well as provide the basis for researchers to establish their authority, since they can provide insight into the meaning of a ritual. The view of Michael Jackson speaks directly to this criticism (although chronologically it was formulated before Bell’s book was published) as the writings of Jackson are exemplary of a steady stream of literature emerging during the last few decades that has concerned itself with rediscovering the body and sensations, not as simply discursively constituted, as a Foucauldian approach would have it, but as of fundamental ontological importance for our being in the world and thus for our understanding of it as social scientists (see also Knibbe and Versteeg, 2008). Central to this conceptualization, which revolves around Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, is Jackson’s assertion that “the body” should be considered as a subject, not as an object. With this assertion he defies the Cartesian division between subjects and objects, which causes the body to fall into the category of objects, the “accidental
vessel of flesh for a subject.” Habitus, then, is the interplay between bodily habit, on the one hand, and intentions, on the other hand; the dynamics between patterns of habitual practical activity and forms of consciousness (Jackson, 1989: 119).

In his view, thinking and communicating through the body precede and remain beyond speech, human movement does not symbolize reality, it is reality: “The subjugation of the bodily to the semantic is empirically untenable” (Jackson, 1989: 122). In trying to explain why ritual seems to defy explanation to the extent that any interpretation may seem correct and plausible, he quotes Bourdieu:

Rites, more than any other type of practice, serve to underline the mistake of enclosing in concepts a logic made to dispense with concepts; of treating movements of the body and practical manipulations as purely logical operations; of speaking of analogies and homologies (as one sometimes has to, in order to understand and to convey that understanding) when all that is involved is the practical transference of incorporated, quasi-postural schemes (Bourdieu, 1977: 116, cited in Jackson, 1989: 126).

Therefore, in ritual the body use should not be explained as symbolic behaviour but taken at face value and analysed as what it is: a particular way of moving, of thinking and communicating with the body.

In ritual, the habitual relations between ideas, experiences and body practices may be broken, for example, by letting women perform as men, men as women or humans as monkeys. In this way, new ideas and experiences can be provoked. Consequently, Jackson defines ritual as the “Disruption of bodily habitus during which people can act out the possibilities of behaviour they embody but normally cannot express” (Jackson, 1989: 129). The relation of the body movements in ritual with those in daily life is different, simply because they are performed by different people and for their own sake. In this way, “mimeticism, which is based upon a bodily awareness of the other in oneself, (...) assists in bringing into relief a reciprocity of viewpoints” (Jackson, 1989: 130).

Ritual can be seen as consisting of bodily techniques that move people to a world where boundaries are blurred and experience can be transformed. Their meaning is indeterminate and ambiguous, and allows for individuality. Words limit the range of meaning they can express, and lead to falsifiable truths, truths that can be contradicted, whereas bodily techniques lead to experiential truths.

In Jackson’s view, being embodied can be the common ground on which to base anthropological findings:

for by using one’s body in the same way as others in the same environment one finds oneself informed by an understanding which may then be interpreted according to one’s own custom or bent, yet remains grounded in a field of practical activity and thereby remains consonant with the experience of those among whom one has lived (Jackson, 1989: 135).
Naturally, this has great consequences for what we have proposed as our subject here, namely the processes of intersubjectivity established through ritual and the ways a researcher participates in these processes. To get a grip on the relative merit of the approaches presented here, we should first illuminate the points where they most contradict each other. Humphrey and Laidlaw rigorously separate the nature of ritual from the meaning it is supposed to have. They see ritual as consisting of acts which have somehow become separated from meaning. According to traditional approaches in anthropology, as exemplified by Turner, ritual is about meaning and symbols and little else, symbols and meaning justify their existence and reveal the deepest values of a society, whereas Humphrey and Laidlaw identify these processes of “meaning-making” as the re-appropriation of ritual acts, and not intrinsic to them. Coming from a very different angle, Jackson maintains that no physical act or gesture is meaningless, but has to be understood through its relation to other acts and gestures and through the embodied intersubjectivity, the “reciprocity of viewpoints,” established by participant observation.

We suggest the following characterization of the ritual mode. Physical acts in ritual assume the character of being ends in themselves, but their meaning and value remain dependent on Jackson’s version of Bourdieu’s habitus and the cultural categorization constituting experience. Therefore, understanding the meaning and rationality of ritual acts means exploring the relationship between bodily, empirically observable acts and meaning; the relationship between the seen and the implied among the people who perform them.

All these considerations of the nature of ritual have in common that the meaning of ritual is quite unstable and variable, but also that ritual acts can provoke profound reactions and transformations that escape any attempt to pin them down verbally. What does this mean for the researcher attempting to study ritual? The introductory examples show a certain irony where the study of ritual is concerned, an irony which is at the heart of a recurring debate on the meaning of ritual practice. Although many students of ritual nowadays favor a subjectivist method of studying ritual, which means that they really make an effort to become a ritual participant, it seems hard to move beyond an objective stance and draw interpretive consequences from a methodologically acknowledged subjective position. Apparently it is very difficult to say something about the meaning of ritual practices when the viewpoint is primarily emic.2 On the other hand, we may ask

2. Everson (1991) states that the position that ritual is meaningless, advocated by Frits Staal, is a form of objectivism, in which meaning is submitted to language. On a different note, Stringer (1999) suggests to talk of “significance” instead of meaning to separate the latter from a self-evident semantic context.
whether there are interpretations of ritual that are true to methodological subjectivism in their interpretation or whether this leads to a variety of theologies of ritual which have neither comparative salience nor academic scope.

We argue that a subjectivist position is possible as an analytical approach in the study of ritual. This means that we have to fully take into account the fact that ritual has no intrinsic meaning. Meanings become attached in a constant process of prefiguration within a particular tradition, within the actual practice in a ritual context, and through the refiguration of the people involved in the actual practice or reflecting on it (Ricoeur, 1984). The emphasis in research should therefore be on this signifying capacity in relation to the objective and temporal nature of ritual practice. Through participation the researcher becomes part of this intersubjective process in ways that are not always distinguishable from the researched and that go beyond the semantic. In the following, we will explore in more detail how this happens.

Including the Researcher

A Tuesday evening in 2004, a private home in Leidsche Rijn (Utrecht)

The theme of the night is prayer. On a DVD, Nicky Gumbel, Anglican vicar and Alpha inspirator, tells passionately some stories on the topic of how prayer has changed the lives of people. The group seems impressed by what they hear, because when the tape stops they are quiet for a few moments. Then the group disperses in small groups to pray for different personal issues that people may come up with. Van der Meulen is part of one of the groups that is led by Patrick and Lois. People are a bit shy; they are obviously not used to this form of praying. It is quiet for some time. Then Paul, who is an elder in the church, says that he wants to request prayer for two things. The first thing is that he finds it difficult as an elder to be open about his faith. The second thing is more important. He is clearly nervous, looks up and strokes his chin with his hand. He and his wife cannot have children, he says. “That is rather difficult.” Louis and Patrick pray for Paul. Louis starts. He prays for a long time. He prays in a low voice, articulating his words carefully. He asks for blessing and openness in this situation. Patrick does not pray but only says “amen” to Louis’ prayer. Louis has tears in his eyes when he has finished praying. It is quiet again for some time. Louis asks whether there are other topics for prayer. There is prayer for the father of one of the members. It is quiet again. Nobody seems to want to mention another topic. Then Van der Meulen asks whether Patrick and Lois want prayer. Patrick hesitates but then says that he is seriously ill; he has a form of leukemia. The group is taken aback. Patrick: “Well, I didn’t think it necessary to tell a lot of people. My family knows it, though.” Louis starts praying for Patrick but
then invites Van der Meulen: “You are welcome to pray for him too.” Van der Meulen nods. Louis puts his hand on the left shoulder of Patrick, Van der Meulen puts his hand on the other shoulder. Louis prays, for a short time. Van der Meulen prays too: “Lord, please heal Patrick in heart and soul, spirit and body, in Jesus’ name.” Patrick is rather moved after the prayer. One of the women pats him on the shoulder. He says: “this old man should sit down for a while.”

After some talking, Patrick says he’d better check his watch to see what time it is. It is time to close the night indeed, but the other group is not ready yet. While they are still sitting in the circle, Louis says that it was good of Van der Meulen to ask whether they wanted prayer. It appears that Louis wants prayer too, asking specifically to be filled with the Spirit. The group stands up again. Patrick prays for Louis. After being prayed for, Louis checks with the other group. They have finished as well. The group moves to the living room. It is very quiet there. One of the women has red eyes and unkempt hair. She is very peaceful. Apparently the moment of prayer has also been intense in the other group.

Van der Meulen’s research objective was to study forms of civil society in Christian congregations in a new suburb. This meant he was first of all interested in the ways a ritual practice such as this prayer event could constitute bonds between group members. A significant conclusion was that ritual creates and enhances closeness and that this cumulates the social capital of this group. But does this mean that the researcher in this example arrived at that conclusion through participation? Van der Meulen describes himself as a spectator who clearly missed an important change in the group. He “saw” a change in the intimate nature of the evening after the Holy Spirit weekend, but this impression was only confirmed at the moment that he responded to the question to pray for somebody in the group. It seems as if he became aware of having been a spectator at the moment when this distance was reduced. For the group the emotional and physical closeness, growing openness and the personal change that group members experienced, were signs that God actually was doing something in and through the Alpha course. Because of his research objective the researcher could not just appropriate this religious experience, but by being conscious of the disparate interpretations, some of them as a researcher and others as a believer, could look more closely at what was going on.

This is one example of how the researcher’s participation in ritual practice can become part of social hermeneutics. We might wonder, however, whether it mattered for Van der Meulen’s analysis had he kept his distance as a spectator.

3. We may note, as Van der Meulen does, that we are dealing here with a particular kind of social capital, namely a form that is seen by the group as being a direct effect of divine involvement.
Apparently it did matter, because had he not participated in this way, that is, as a believer praying for a group member, he would not have felt what it was like to become part of the transformation in this group. The fact that Van der Meulen was recognized as a believer was perhaps even more critical for the course of events. We might ask whether this fact is also of importance for his theory of social capital. Could he sense what was developing socially because he was part of the process?

In the next section we will discuss another example of fieldwork where the researcher explicitly made her own experience the subject of conversation.

A Problem of Meaning

A Wednesday evening in 2002, village hall Welden

Every two weeks at eight o’clock the Spiritual Association of the Hills gathers in the village hall, somewhere in the South of the Netherlands. There are about 40 people present, men and women; many couples. In a low and calm voice, the leader of the night’s event tells the audience how he became a medium, how he, after having been a successful businessman “lost almost everything.” When he went to a medium for help she recognized him as a “colleague.” He explains what he is going to do: some people will be invited to sit on a chair in front of the audience. What the group will see, he warns, “will not be spectacular. I pass my hands around their bodies to unblock their energies. Sometimes I whisper something in their ears.” But he expects that when these people share what they have experienced during this time, the audience will understand that it goes very deep.

Before inviting anyone to come forward, the medium leads a meditation accompanied by soft music, urging the audience to open themselves to the divine energies, to feel oneself and to love oneself. Later into the healing he compliments the group: “You see, I am sweating, that does not always happen. I get so warm because you are a very good public, creating a good atmosphere.”

During this meditation everybody in the audience is holding hands. On the left the researcher is holding the hand of a woman she knows, holding her right hand is a man she has seen earlier but has not yet spoken. While soft music plays, she follows the instructions for meditation, relaxing. Suddenly, a strange sensation starts up in her right arm. It tingles, and her fingers start moving involuntarily, inside the man’s hand. As soon as seems proper she lets go of the man’s hand, and puts her own hand on her knee.

4. Kim Knibbe has written before about this group and this particular case in her PhD dissertation (Knibbe, 2007).
Ignoring the wriggling, Knibbe concentrates on the question of how the people of the spiritual group will explain this phenomenon. It may not be a “deep experience” like the medium had told them to expect, and it had nothing to do with him passing his hands around her body because she is sitting in the middle of the audience. But it is definitely the kind of phenomenon that this group likes to discuss and speculate on. Meanwhile, the healing continues and with it the expectation that more miraculous and unexpected things might occur.

After the meditation, some people are invited to sit in front, on chairs facing the audience. The medium walks around these people, passing his hand around their auras without physically touching them. Most people sit with their palms facing upwards in meditation, receptive to the divine energies. The medium stops to talk to one woman and she opens her eyes. He comments that she probably did not feel so much, because she couldn’t let go of her thoughts to “return to herself.” She answers: “Yes, it seems to be so simple, but somehow I cannot manage to do it!” He turns to another woman, one of the regular visitors: “You are a very level-headed person but you should learn to love yourself more. You have been raised with a heavy emphasis on doing your duty, but you have to learn to arrange your own priorities. Maybe at first people will be a bit angry when you say no to their requests, but they will not mind later on, and come to understand.”

She nods, and confirms his description of how she was raised. But when he tells her she should give more weight to her own priorities, she protests: “I thought I was doing that already!” After this exchange, the woman sits next to Knibbe in the audience. Disappointingly, her only comment to Knibbe and the woman on her other side is: “at least I got rid of that terrible headache I had all day!”

To another of the regular members, Piet, the medium says: “I think you have been able to experience a more tranquil mood than usual.” Piet nods. After the healing he tells Knibbe that he felt he was becoming very drowsy and heavy limbed; an unusual state for the energetic person he is.

After the healing, some of the visitors happen to be talking about the man, whom we will call Matt, who was holding Knibbe’s right hand. Some of them had gone on a trip with him to England, visiting places where the energies of the earth are supposed to be particularly strong, such as Glastonbury. They noted that he enjoyed showing off his paranormal powers, especially to young women. He claimed to be a psychic, which some people doubted, and a magnetist, which was less controversial. Then Knibbe tells about her wriggling fingers. The group

5. A magnetist is someone who can heal pains or remove energy “blocks” by using his hands to transfer energy to his patients. Many magnetists are now turning themselves into Reiki-masters. Reiki is similar to magnetism, but more organized by courses and degrees.
concludes that Matt was probably magnetizing her. On the researcher’s question why he would do that without her consent, they answer that it was indeed not a very ethical thing of him to do. They suggest that it was probably to arouse Knibbe’s interest in him. During the trip to England, when they told him he should not use his powers like that, he denied it and just continued doing it anyway. According to Jacques the young women travelling with them were afraid of him.

Jacqueline, one of the visitors, remembers what a psychic recently told Matt. This medium was invited to the group to read and draw people’s auras – it was a meeting Knibbe had attended. The medium told Matt that she saw he was a magnetist and that he liked women. She then told him that he would not listen to other people warning him when he was “going in the wrong direction.” According to the medium this would only change when Matt learned it the hard way and she warned him “that the top of your head will start to itch” because of a different kind of energy.

At that time the regular group members agreed that it was a polite but very strong warning to Matt that he was abusing his powers to boost his own ego. Now, they conclude, he still had bettered his life, as was evidenced by the researcher’s wriggling fingers. One of the women gives Knibbe the advice that next time she is seated next to Matt, she just should resist inside. Then his powers will not be able to penetrate her protection.

This seemed to be the end of the story. Two weeks later, however, the event is raised again while the group is having a drink at the bar before a meeting. Jim tells the story to Linda, a psychic and a magnetist as well, who was not there when it happened. She has a different view of the event. She asks Knibbe which of his hands she was holding. “The left hand,” the researcher replied. “Well, then, he couldn’t have been the person giving you the energy.” According to Linda, the left hand is the “drawing hand,” the one that receives energy. Her explanation for the wriggling fingers is that Matt must have “blocked” himself from receiving the energy of the whole group (everybody had been holding hands) and that meant that all the energy circulating from one hand to another was fed into Knibbe’s right arm without finding a way out, causing her fingers to start wriggling. Matt had not been magnetizing her; he had just been protecting himself.

Nevertheless, Jim still found this objectionable. By blocking himself from the group energy, Matt knew that Knibbe would be the end-station, he argued. That’s Magnetism is considered not very hard to master, although people are believed to have different “energy levels.”
also not very nice, is it? Linda shrugs: she can understand he had wanted to protect himself. Especially psychics and magnetists are sensitive to other people’s energy.

Analysis

In analysing the case studies in terms of the participation of the researcher in the ritual, three observations can be made. First, participation enhances the understanding of the significance, if not the exact “meaning” of ritual and the ways it creates intersubjectively shared understandings that go beyond the verbal. For this reason, evocative narrative seems to be the best way to convey what happened, rather than a “cause-effect” factual account. Secondly, the participation of the researcher triggers interpretations of the practice by the other participants. Third and final, the researchers in both cases more or less induced interpretations during and after the ritual event.

Participation can increase the understanding of what ritual practices mean in a particular context. We see this in the case of Van der Meulen, where the prayer starts as a rather conventional discussion and sharing, but which acquired a different mood and sentiment when the prayers got in motion. The use of touch, the performance of the praying people, the use of space and the actual bodily practice of praying, all added to the fact that the researcher had an experience of prayer in this group. But as has been said before, thanks to this experience, Van der Meulen also became aware of the type of change that had taken place in this group. Whereas at first he had felt an unproblematic insider, he was faced with an outsider’s feeling after the group had been on the Alpha weekend. He only regained his insider status through his involvement in the praying. His feeling of being included in this intimate and spiritual highlight of this group, gave Van der Meulen a clear idea of what had taken place during the weekend. The group had encountered its own capacity for intimacy and closeness. For Van der Meulen the experience of closeness showed him the essential mood and motivation for this group of Christians to be active in their new living environment.

In the event that Knibbe experienced we see how the researcher’s wriggling fingers point to the fact that the participants experience these rituals as sensuously powerful, having real consequences. The body is a field of interpretations, onto which known and unknown spiritual changes are being read, and eagerly anticipated. The “healing ritual” creates the temporal space in which things might happen, but just as easily might not happen. The fact that they sometimes do not happen only adds to the credibility and ontological status of bodily sensations when they do occur: these sensations cannot be willed; therefore they must originate
from “somewhere” or “someone” else. Exactly from where or from whom is subject to discussion and ongoing “research.”

Our second observation concerned the fact that through participation the researcher can trigger interpretations of practices by the participants. This has been seen as a researcher’s caveat, an obvious flaw in the method of fieldwork, something to be avoided at all costs by being the fly on the wall. When we look at the examples of Van der Meulen and Knibbe we see, however, that the “flaw” can be made fruitful, by being straightforward and reflexive about the role of the researcher.

With Van der Meulen we see a fieldworker who was recognized as a believer, which made it possible for him to join in prayer with laying on of hands in the Alpha group. Although he was not sure about his role, sensing a difference in the group after the Holy Spirit weekend, he was included in the transformation that was taking place, on his own suggestion to pray for a group member. We see how Van der Meulen takes up an even more active role when he, with a pastoral intent, invites somebody to receive prayer. This position is acknowledged by one of the leaders. The very fact that Van der Meulen prayed affirms the change that the group experienced and as such it reinforced the sense of efficacy of the ritual in the Alpha group.

Knibbe’s informants had many things to talk about when she revealed what she had experienced in the circle. The wriggling of her hand and the setting in which it happened, brought the participants to discuss the abuse of spiritual power, gender roles and normative roles of behaviour for mediums. The event challenged people to test their knowledge and experience of spiritual processes, thus adding to their interpretive framework of the relation between the spiritual world and mediums. As such, the incident made new knowledge possible for researched and researcher alike. By affirming Van der Meulen’s offer to pray for the group member, he became included as an insider. At the same time, it demonstrated to the group the transformative power of the Spirit, changing even ambiguous “outsiders” such as the sociological researcher. As such, inviting the researcher to become involved in praying fitted perfectly in the overall goal of the prayer meeting, namely, changing the hearts, bodies and social positions of the participants. In this construed communitas the fieldworker ceased to be a fieldworker.

The intentional character of the creation of meaning is even clearer in the case of the spiritual group. By disclosing the fact that her fingers wriggled, the researcher explicitly and purposely ignited a discussion about the meaning of the ritual. This meaning was not yet present, but was created in the act of discussing. However, it was not a one-way traffic in which the researcher simply distills
meaning from a debate among the researched. On the contrary, the participants were interpretation-hungry and actively questioned and engaged the researcher.

**Conclusion**

Taking as a point of departure a conceptualization of fieldwork as the establishing of an intersubjectivity, we have explored the epistemology of the participation of the researcher in ritual. In this epistemology of participation, we have paid attention not only to the semantic, but also to gestures and sensations in the fields of intersubjectivity that emerge through ritual acts and the processes of interpretation and attribution of meaning they set in motion. We based this on a discussion of the nature of ritual that problematizes the search for the “meaning” of ritual and instead speaks of ritualization, the ritual mode and rituals acts as possibilities that break open the habitual flow of embodied action but are also dependent on it.

When ritual practices and gestures are seen as prefigured by certain traditions, then the question becomes how they are dependent on the habitus of the participants, including that of the researcher, and how these together create the fields of intersubjectivity in which the significant changes expected (by both participants and researchers!) to take place during ritual occur. In this article however, we went beyond this question to single out the intentional character of the participation of the researcher in ritual. We argue that it is the recognition of the intentional character of the construction of meaning by the research which makes the difference to earlier discussions of the role of “subjective” knowledge in the interpretation of ritual. This intentionality moves beyond, or at the least moves to the limits of Jackson’s “reciprocity of viewpoints.” Both Knibbe and Van der Meulen actively engaged in the formation of the ritual and in the process of creating meanings afterwards. The researchers in doing this, created a form of ritual and specific meaning that would not have existed without the presence and active intervention of the researchers. Paradoxically, this was done to enhance the researcher’s understanding of what was happening. Knibbe’s disclosure of her wriggling fingers created new meanings that served to understand the process of meaning making by the participants.

It is generally noted in methodology theory that in participant observation researchers are part of the processes they intend to observe. We would add that the researcher is a participant who just as much as the other participants induces meaning or is subject to the creation of significance by other participants. By taking account of this position and by being intentional about the possible active role the researcher can play, one can deepen the understanding of the context, as
we have shown in the two fieldwork cases. This is not a methodological flaw but it is a participatory method in which misunderstandings, insights and experiences in a ritual setting are taken for what they are: possibilities of meaning and existence created by different participants with different agendas and different intentions, but all investing in their ritual actions to bond, to create understanding and to experience insight. Although the outcome of qualitative research is a form of objectification, the final objectification includes the researcher’s own ritual participation in the analysis.

References


