

# Living “in the world”: Bordering and relating practices of church communities

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## Abstract

In this paper, I articulate a theoretical argument for the study of relating practices within a community context that draws on Dwight Conquergood’s work with *kinesis* and borders, the continual breaking and remaking of social borders in and through discourse. Specifically, I adopt a social-discursive perspective that focuses on how the discursive practices of bordering (the doing of community life) and relating (the doing of relationships) mutually constitute one another in Judeo-Christian church communities. After articulating the theoretical argument, I suggest possible research questions that could follow from the social-discursive framework, propose a possible research site, and explore participant-observation as a useful methodological approach.

“With displacement, upheaval, unmooring, come the terror and potentiality of flux, improvisation, and creative recombinations.”

(Conquergood, 1991, p. 185)

### Introduction

According to some scholars, community and communication are important processes in everyday social life. For example, Cohen (1985) argues that “people map out their social identities and find their social orientations among the relationships which are symbolically close to them, rather than in relation to an abstracted sense of society” (p. 27). Further, Rothenbuhler (1991) contends that “among the most important functions of communication is the construction and maintenance of meaningful relationships between individuals and the social orders in which they live” (p. 63). With these two authors’ views in mind, the purpose of this proposed study is to investigate relating practices in a community context.

To study relating practices in community life, conceptual understandings must not limit the study of relating practices to the relationship dyad as the unit of analysis and must not privilege a static, stable view of social life. Instead, the theoretical position articulated in this paper draws on Conquergood’s (1991) work on borders and *kinesis*, the continual breaking and remaking of social borders in and through discourse. Specifically, this study focuses on how the discursive practices of bordering (the doing of community life) and relating (the doing of relationships) mutually constitute one another in Judeo-Christian church communities. While reviewing extant literature, I will elaborate on a theoretical argument supporting a social-discursive orientation to the study of community and relating practices. Following this, I will suggest possible research questions that could follow from the theoretical arguments, a possible research site, and recommend a methodological line of inquiry.

### Review of Literature

The literature on social networks and speech communities provides a point of departure for this project. After briefly articulating each concept, I will illustrate where each of these research traditions are limited given the goals of this study. Scholars of interpersonal communication often highlight the individual as a unit of analysis rather than other social units of analysis, such as the relationship dyad. Recognizing that dyadic relationships do not exist in isolation but within larger social contexts, there is a continued move to investigate the effects of individuals’ social networks on the dyad (e.g., Parks, 1997; Samter, 1994; Surra & Milardo, 1991).

Surra and Milardo (1991) define a social network as “a collection of individuals known by a target person” (p. 3). Further, networks are defined in terms of the “interdependencies that link partners to their kin, friends and other associates” (p. 2). Social network scholars, however, have not looked at the communicative processes that construct borders that would differentiate inside(rs) from outside(rs), and how these borders constitute how the network members relate. However, Jerrome (1984), in a participant-observation study from a sociological perspective, described the bases of attraction, pursued activities, and norms governing the relationships of a small group of middle-class, middle-aged English women who named themselves “The Tremendous Ten.”

Jerrome’s study is not communicatively-oriented although she acknowledges that “dialogue with friends is a source of concepts and categories describing the world: in common with friends one attaches certain meanings to events and relationships, a process which has implications for all areas of social life” (p. 698). By moving the focus beyond a friendship dyad she created a space for research to investigate how larger social units are characterized by relating processes. One move to make is to look at how “The Tremendous Ten” as a discursive boundary is (re)produced over time and how this bordering work is performed communicatively. Investigating these communicative processes of border construction would entail a move similar to Cohen’s (1985) work on the symbolic construction of community in terms of how people engage in symbolic practices to sustain a boundary that creates simultaneously a sense of identity and difference from other people and communities. Relatedly, Jerrome’s study could be productively read within the context of naturalistic group research (Frey, 1994), as well as a bona fide groups perspective which emphasizes the analysis of permeable group boundaries and relations of interdependence with the group’s immediate context (Putnam & Stohl, 1996).

A second concept that is relevant to this project is a speech community. A speech community can be understood as a group of people who share a common language, as well as rules and norms that guide the practices and interpretation of speech activities (Hymes, 1962). The codes that exist within a particular speech community “precede utterance and action” and “constrain and enable what can be said and done in speech” (Phillipsen, 1992, p. 14). A study of a speech community might investigate its underlying structural premises that indicate “who speaks, to whom, in what language(s), through which channels, on what occasions, in what settings, for what purposes, in what sequences of action, and with what instrumentalities” (Phillipsen, 1992, p. 9).

The concept of a speech community leads one to look for the shared norms and rules, the underlying premises, as codes that indicate the relations among a person and society, and the role of communication in these relations. Thus, the notion of a speech community tends to “center” the investigation to those premises that are *shared* and how they enable and constrain the communication

that occurs among members of a community. Although there are notable exceptions (e.g., Katriel, 1986), the ethnography of speaking tradition has historically focused more on shared norms, directing attention to the center, and privileging a view of stability and unity, eliding sites where norms and rules are contested and struggled over.

Both social networks and speech communities as units of analysis tend to emphasize static and stable understandings of social phenomena. Duck, West, and Acitelli (1997) suggest that to conceptualize social phenomena as nouns (e.g., “a relationship” or “a community”) privileges a state or static view, while emphasizing the verb forms (e.g., relating and bordering) highlights the process or fluidity of everyday discursive practices, how people “do” social life (for a fuller review of literature that critiques static views, see Duck et al., 1997). Rather than studying social “things,” scholarship needs to move to a study of dynamic social processes (Duck, 1990; Wood, 1995; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In addition to a static view of social life, both social network and speech community work emphasize stabilizing forces; speech communities tend to focus on shared, rather than contested, norms, while social network research tends to center the individual within stable webs of relations.

As an alternative to static, stabilizing, and centering forces, Conquergood’s (1991, 1995) work on borders and *kinesis* emphasizes the movement of social life, and sites where meaning is contested and struggled over. Conquergood (1991) argues this motion and struggle takes place at the borders which “bleed as much as they contain” (p. 184). At the borders, distinctions between inside and outside become blurred and fuzzy; the world is not fixed and neat and whole. Borders are “betwixt and between,” sites for contesting and struggling over meaning. Boundaries and borders move and flow, continually being refashioned in and through discourse. The boundaries are where improvisation is salient, creativity in de Certeau’s sense as the “art of making do” (de Certeau, 1984) and Levi-Strauss’s bricolage (Carl, 1997; Conville, 1997; Levi-Strauss, 1966), or the continual (re)articulation of symbolic resources. The boundaries are where one’s “self” interacts with one’s “relationship,” which intersects with one’s and others “community,” and “culture,” etc. Bakhtin (1986) argues that “the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries” (p. 2).

Conquergood (1992, 1995) also talks about a notion of *kinesis*, or dynamism, as distinct from *mimesis* (imitation) and *poiesis* (construction). *Kinesis* is the continual breaking and remaking of borders as performed in and through discourse. When the notion of borders is articulated with an understanding of *kinesis*, a dynamic move is made to a fluid notion of bordering as an unfinished social practice.

The study of bordering practices raises the problematic issue of community, and concerns regarding how to define community and how communities are constituted. Although scholars have divergent perspectives on the notion of community, positing myriad definitions and understandings,

Fuoss (1995) argues that for most persons “community is not so much conceptually problematic as operationally contested (i.e., to which of the myriad complementary and competing communities do I belong, what does it mean to be a member of these communities, and what does the membership entail)” (p. 81). Considering Conquergood’s emphasis on how meanings are contested, and the naturalistic approach of this study (see below), I will adopt the view of community as operationally contested in the participants’ everyday practices of social life.

With an understanding of community as an operationally contested phenomena, and the theoretical move to bordering and relating practices, scholars are positioned to ask different questions about social networks, relationships, and speech communities. Rather than looking at who interacts with whom from the perspective of an individual that a social network approach might take, which takes for granted the way discourse may structure network members’ relations, the theoretical move articulated in this study emphasizes bordering practices in the particular context of everyday social life -- i.e., how particular borders are (re)produced over time in and through discourse. Such discursive practices could include, in the church communities for this study, conversations, rituals, sermons, written publications of the church, music (singing songs), etc.

Further, instead of looking at the interaction between members of a stable, fully constituted network, scholars would look at how the communication actually constitutes the relations of the members. Whereas a study of the church community as a speech community might look at how norms, values, and premises are centralized and shared by the church members, thus taking for granted that they are uniformly accepted by all the members, researchers would de-center these premises by looking at the borders where these premises are challenged and contested.

There are two examples of bordering work that may be salient in Judeo-Christian church communities, the research site suggested for this study. Tucker (1996) writes how the Worldwide Church of God set up boundaries between those people in the fellowship of the church and those “in the world.” As this church group grew from its quasi-cult beginnings, some people would no longer interact with their families and friends that were “in the world,” but would invest their relational energies with those in the fellowship of the church. Tucker describes that what it means to be “in the world” has changed over time in this church; this breaking and remaking, the contestation and struggle over meaning, takes place over boundaries, where the two worlds of the church fellowship and “outside world” meet.

A second site for bordering work concerns the fragmenting of the church into various “offshoot” organizations, with some claiming to be the “true” church, while other “splinter” groups no longer engage in this rhetoric. Research in coalition formation debunks the myth of a whole, unitary community, and focuses on bargaining and negotiation processes (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980). Instead of

a static, unitary view, communities are fragmented, with multiple sites for bordering work to be enacted. However, research on coalitions stems from a social-psychological tradition that details how coalitions form, along with their size and structure, largely guided by the assumptions of social exchange principles (Murnighan, 1978). This social exchange approach assumes that parties try to maximize their gains and diminish their losses, and that the distribution of resources is a criterion used to predict how actors choose among alternative coalition opportunities (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980). This social-psychological focus is limited in terms of this project because it does not account for the communicative practices that constitute the boundaries of coalitions.

In sum, then, with the study of the discursive practices of bordering and relating in a community context, I am not trying to capture the church as a discrete, unified culture, nor am I searching for patterns, continuity, coherence, and unity. Instead, my theoretical orientation positions me to investigate 1) how meaning is contested in/at the boundaries, betwixt and between worlds, where creativity and improvisation are salient, and 2) how these boundaries are (re)constructed and contested in discursive practices. The remainder of this paper addresses the research questions suggested given the theoretical orientation of this paper, a description of a research site, and a discussion of a suggested methodological approach.

### Research Questions

My discussion above highlights the practices of bordering and relating as social processes. Given this, possible research questions include:

- How does the (re)production of the discursive boundaries (bordering work) within and among the communities simultaneously enable and constrain the relating practices of the community members?
- What discursive boundaries are prominent (absent) within and among these church communities?
- Through what practices are these discursive borders contested and reproduced?

### Methodological Approach

The emphasis in this project is on the *doing* of border work as a set of discursive practices among multiple, fragmented communities, and participant-observation methods provide a means to engage and understand these discursive practices as they are socially performed. After a description of the research site and a brief discussion of why this site is especially suited for this study, I will then discuss in more detail participant-observation as a naturalistic method of inquiry and the logistics of

data collection and analysis.

#### The research site

The research sites I propose to work with are congregations of the Worldwide Church of God. To understand why this research site is particularly worthy of study given my research questions, I will provide a very brief description and background of this church and its congregations.

The Worldwide Church of God (WCG) was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong around the 1930s and 1940s, and borrowed heavily from Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormon doctrines (Tucker, 1996). The church has been viewed by some evangelicals as a “classic case study of an authoritarian cult, headed by a ‘prophet’ founder who led his devoted followers away from biblical orthodoxy into [hu]manmade doctrines” (p. 27). These novel doctrines slowly became more mainstream “Protestant” Christianity over the years, and seemingly with each doctrinal change a new “offshoot” church would break away and form. The latest, and arguably the most significant, doctrinal changes over the past decade struck at the core of the teachings of the church where a “new covenant” was proclaimed. Based on these changes, the largest splinter group formed in 1995, the United Church of God. They justified their break from WCG by stating that “Long-held beliefs members have dearly sacrificed for have been officially negated and replaced by doctrines that are diametrically opposed to the teachings that led members into the church” (Tucker, 1996, p. 31). In 1986, the U.S. membership of WCG was at 89,000, but currently there are about 49,000 members. In addition to the United church split, which is arguably more consistent with the doctrines related to the founding of WCG, there are other off-shoot groups such as Global Church of God, Church of God International, and the Philadelphia Church of God.

As doctrines change and church communities emerge and fade, a tremendous amount of bordering work is being performed as members decide whether or not they will remain with WCG, to attend another church, or to discontinue affiliation with any formal church organization. Further, members must also make decisions about the status of their relationships with other church members, in and outside of the church. Since the goal of this study is to look at the intersections of bordering and relating practices, this research site should feature these processes, making it a particularly salient place to begin inquiry. Further, the bordering of the church communities are being contested, which suits the theoretical approach taken in this study: Conquergood’s notion of *kinesis*, or the continual breaking and remaking of discursive borders.

A second reason these church communities are well-suited for this study is that I grew up attending church services in the Worldwide Church of God (although not in these particular congregations) which affords me dual perspectives of both “insider” and “outsider,” living on the

border between these two “worlds” (Lugones, 1994). Although I have subsequently ceased attending the church, I have many contacts with people in the various churches, potentially allowing for easier access into the church communities.

Next, I will discuss why participant-observation is a useful methodological approach for this study considering the theoretical arguments presented above.

### Participant-Observation

With the focus on the *doing* of bordering work and relating practices, participant-observation positions me as a researcher to experience this activity in its naturalistic setting while it is being performed. According to Gold’s classical typology (1958) of complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer, I will adopt a participant-as-observer role. Adler & Adler (1994) further differentiate this membership role into peripheral and active membership categories. The peripheral membership role “observes and interacts closely enough with members to establish an insider’s identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership” while the active member role “describes researchers who become more involved in the setting’s central activities, assuming responsibilities that advance the group, but without fully committing themselves to members’ values and goals” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380).

My own participation as a researcher will fall somewhere between the peripheral and active member roles, which positions me to interact with church community members at church services, social functions, and possibly for dinner at members’ homes (a common ritual in these particular church communities), places where bordering and relating practices may be performed. However, due to my background of growing up in the one of WCG’s congregations (even though subsequently no longer attending), I will also have the insights from a complete participant role (Gold, 1958).

Because this participant-observation will take place in a naturalistic setting, the shape and form of the study will emerge throughout the participant observation (Erlandson et al., 1993). Erlandson et al. (1993) argue, however, that there are numerous things to consider before entering into the naturalistic setting to facilitate this emergent process, including negotiating the conditions of entry, planning sample selections, planning for data analysis and collection, and developing a logistical plan for the study, notably negotiating the human subjects review process. I will briefly discuss each of these below.

### Negotiating the conditions of entry

For this project, I will make contact with the prominent “splinter” groups related to the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) and the WCG congregation itself. It is accepted practice to make contact with the minister for a certain church area (one minister may pastor multiple congregations,

especially within these times of fluctuating membership) to attend a church service. I will identify myself as a graduate student who is studying relationships in a church community context. I will let each minister know that I attended WCG while growing up, but am no longer attending as a practicing member.

#### Planning sample selections

Erlandson et al. (1993) suggest identifying the various “stakeholders” in the church as a way of determining possible sample populations. Based on my own experiences in WCG some of the stakeholders include: ordained members (ministers, elders, deacons), lay members (baptized, unbaptized/prospective members), youth group members (teens up to 18 years of age), children (pre-teen), church administration, disfellowshipped members, and members who no longer attend WCG or “offshoot” organizations. I will talk with people representing each of these “stakeholder” positions in the three church communities to get a richer understanding of the variety of positions within the communities.

#### Planning for data collection and analysis

In addition to field notes from the participant-observation and a reflexive journal in which I will write weekly entries, part of naturalistic inquiry is to engage in interviews with various stakeholders (as identified above) as well as to collect documents of the churches (audio tapes of sermons, books, newspaper and magazine articles of the various churches). I hope to have interviews -- conversations with a purpose (Dexter, 1970) -- with the various stakeholders to gain an understanding of their meanings for the doctrinal changes, the fragmenting of the various church communities, and their relating practices amidst these changes, if indeed they experienced these events as significant changes. I will be able to make contact with current members at church services, social functions, or at their homes. For disfellowshipped members and members who no longer attend services, I will need to either get this information from the minister or by “snowball sampling” from current members.

In terms of length of time for the participant-observation, sample sizes for interviews, and quantity of documents, the focus will be more on the richness of the information rather than the volume, a characteristic of naturalistic inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1993). Although it is difficult to predetermine, I hope to perform my participant-observations for three months/one semester, in at least three congregations (WCG, United, and Global as these are the most prominent congregations in the area). This will allow me to gain a sense of the different community borders that are salient. After three months, I can then assess whether or not I should continue (with observations, interviews, and collecting documents) based on my ability to gain fresh, rich insights relative to the amount of time, energy, and resources invested in the project (Erlandson et al., 1993).

For the analysis of the field notes, reflexive journal, interviews, and documents, I will draw on

Spradley’s (1979) domain and thematic analyses. A domain is any “symbolic category that includes other categories” with each member of a domain sharing at least one feature of meaning with the other members (p. 100). Spradley emphasizes themes, or the relationships among the domains, rather than each domain in isolation. He defines a theme as any “cognitive principle, tacit or explicit, recurrent in a number of domains and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning” (p. 186). Spradley’s approach is useful to the goals of this project because it emphasizes the symbolic systems of meanings that people use to interpret their worlds and to generate discursive practices.

#### Human subjects review process

One issue to address in terms of the logistics for this study is the human subjects review process. By contacting the minister of each congregation before attending any church functions and informing the ministers about my interest as a researcher, I hope to alleviate concerns about informed consent. The minister would probably introduce me to the congregation during a church service, as this is common practice to welcome new people into the congregation. This would be an opportunity for him (ministers in this congregation are all male, still) to state to the congregation that I am interested in relationships in church communities as a researcher and that I would like to talk with members of the congregation about their relationships in the church.

For any formal interviews that may or may not be audio-taped (depending on the circumstances), there would be a consent form for participants to sign. Also, for any teens and children under the age of 18 with whom I would conduct more formal interviews, both the interviewee and her or his parents would sign a consent form. All participants in the project will have an opportunity to review any transcripts of tape-recorded conversations and to edit them for accuracy and confidentiality purposes. Further, participants will have the option to (not) be included in any formal write-ups of this study (e.g., class papers, conference papers, journal articles, presentation of findings to the church communities). Also, pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of the participants, if desired.

#### Conclusions

This study contributes to research in personal relationship research by bringing together issues of relating in larger social contexts beyond the dyad and emphasizing the importance of discourse in the constitution of relating and everyday practices of community life. Further, the theoretical moves in this study complement and critique existing research of speech communities and social networks by emphasizing those facets of social life that are fragmented and continually changing, as well as the bordering practices where meaning is contested and struggled over.

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