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### Participant-Observation Consultation Report

**Meeting:** HAMS (Harm reduction, Abstinence, and Moderation Support) Live Weekly Group Meeting

**Location:** St. John's Episcopal Church  
139 St. John's Place  
Brooklyn, NY 11217

**Date/Time:** Tuesday, November 15<sup>th</sup> 2011 7-8 p.m.

**Leader of Meeting:** Kenneth Anderson

**Participant/Attendee:** "Adam" (given name is not disclosed for anonymity)

### **General Overview/Ambiance**

The live meeting at St. John's Episcopal Church for the Harm reduction, Abstinence, and Moderation Support (HAMS) group was one in which I had the ability to learn how communication styles work with participants involved with substance use that they have found to afflict their quality of life. The set up of the meeting was one of a comfortable and friendly environment. For an agnostic, for lack of a better word, the fact that it was located in the basement of a religious establishment only briefly crossed my mind when I observed small posters of religious paintings in the windowsill. What aided most to the lax was the seating layout and the nonverbal communication exuded from the members. While few in number at this particular live meeting, the roundtable discussion left for an open space for easy cross-talk communication and a maximum propensity for eye contact and individual attention.

### **Communication Styles**

#### **Live Meeting**

The entire dialogue was built around constant intercommunication strategies in a deregulated/extemporaneous form. Both the participant and the leader of the meeting communicated with each other primarily through story telling, a way in which appears to aid in the humanization of the experience and is applied to their online chats. With this "coffee break" style of interaction, the participants were able to develop a conversational relationship in which humor was more than welcome and aided in understanding and the removal of the "superior-inferior" relationship found frequently at general public meetings. This opened the door for much more than just substance use/misuse but also the historical and political journeys of its existence in American society.

What was also interesting was the use of code names for members in which anonymity could be upheld. Code names gave off the opportunity for members to be a part of a HAMS only inclusive setting verses a very excluded stance set for outsiders. This is creates an advantage for leader-participant and participant-participant relations by temporarily closing off outside infiltrations of assumptions and dictatorial ideologies while opening up the table for included members.

#### **Online Chat**

There was much reference to the online chat system used by many participants in which they were said to have more involvement and frequent visits to because of the ease of accessibility to the internet service. The use of the internet opens the doors to more connections than previously available. With HAMS and the vast majority of modern organizations have come to utilize the internet to their advantage. Additionally, the use of the internet has come to change the way that members/users communicate. While it detracts from physical interactions with people it, as told by HAMS members, fosters an atmosphere of more open and interactive communication that is open to people with different cultural environments and experiences.

### **Frames**

While there was the ability to speak openly about any experiences one felt relevant to that evening's conversation, there was a subconscious frame around the meeting and the organization as a whole. The quote "it helps not to be told what to do" has shown to be one of, if not the most, significant framing device of HAMS. As Adam and Mr. Anderson shared their experiences with other, predominately Abstinence only, programs, it was easy to observe that they emphasized the importance of not being told how to behave and think. While one may assume that the location of the live HAMS meeting in a church may denote an abstinence ambiance, they emphasize the need for members, leaders within HAMS and other organizations, and the outside world to understand that force is not the best solution for the vast majority of people whose lives are being negatively afflicted by alcohol. In addition to not being dictatorial, they also emphasize the notion that better really is better, and any change for the positive progression of one's self is more suitable than being set up for, what may seem to be, an inevitable failure with, primarily, 12 step programs.

### **Effectiveness in Communication Strategies vs. Other Organizations**

As was found in PDF files available on the HAMS website, there was also a distinction to be followed with this particular organization versus the practice of other groups and the professional field. As was described by Adam, attending live/online meetings for HAMS, participants not only receive support but they have the ability to give support as well. While participants are discouraged from directing people as to where they should be going, HAMS members are encouraged to support and understand each other, to be human in understanding rather than be prescriptive. Additionally, members are discouraged from using labels on themselves and others, a practice which is prominent in other groups like A.A. where one labels themselves as powerless and helpless. The de-labeling of the group helps create a positive outlook on substance management; this is where the main objective of the organization comes into play. Members are stimulated to develop the understanding that there are no limits in the harm reduction relative to their alcohol use, that limits are to be taken as gradual steps in a direction that they see fit for themselves, not by professionals that diagnose individuals with psychological/behavioral problems based upon books primarily made to tackle general symptoms for biological problems.