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THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONVERSION

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Abstract

This essay reviews recent research on religious conversion, particularly within the context of "new" religious movements. It addresses three fundamental issues pertinent to the study of conversion: first, the conceptualization and nature of conversion; second, the analytic status of converts' accounts; and third, the causes of conversion. The chapter concludes with a proposed agenda for subsequent research on conversion and related topics.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade and a half much of the West has witnessed a proliferation of new religious movements and mass therapies (Glock & Bellah 1976; Wuthnow 1976; Robbins & Anthony 1979, 1981; Tipton 1982; Barker 1983; Richardson 1983). One of the more pronounced concomitants of this apparent spiritual awakening has been a burst of scholarship on conversion. Indeed, an examination of two recent bibliographies, one on conversion and the other on new religious movements, suggests there has been a dramatic increase in research on conversion. Of the 256 behavioral science entries listed in Rambo's (1982) bibliography of research on conversion (up through 1980), 62% have appeared since 1973. The remaining 38% date back as far as the 1902 publication of James's classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. An inspection of Beckford & Richardson's (1983) more recent bibliography on new religious movements similarly reveals a sharp increase in research on conversion since

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1973. Of the 145 entries that can be classified as pertinent to conversion, 95% have appeared in the last 10 years. It is also worth noting that these 145 entries comprise around 40% of the works listed in this more general bibliography. Thus, not only has conversion stimulated considerable discussion and research in recent years, but it appears to be the phenomenon that students of new religious movements examine most frequently.

The purpose of this review is to inspect and evaluate this extensive recent research, as well as the earlier literature, in order to assess what is known about conversion. Our approach is interpretive and critical rather than descriptive; it is also selective rather than comprehensive. We examine important works in various fields such as psychology and psychiatry, but we focus primarily on sociological contributions. In addition, the review is organized around what we regard as three fundamental issues in the study of conversion: (*a*) the conceptualization and nature of conversion; (*b*) the analytic status of converts' accounts; and (*c*) the causes of conversion and generalizations about them. It is our contention that a thoroughgoing understanding of conversion is contingent on the consideration and eventual resolution of each of these issues and the questions they raise. Our aim here is not to resolve these issues, but to discuss them in light of recent scholarship and research and to suggest a range of questions and directives for future research.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONVERSION

In the 1908 Cole Lectures given at Vanderbilt University on the psychology of conversion, George Jackson inveighed against attempts to conceptualize and operationalize conversion by saying, "It matters . . . little what principle of classification we adopt, or whether we adopt any at all . . . what does matter is that we steadfastly resist all attempts to 'standardize' conversion" (Jackson 1908:97). Although it is unlikely that most students of conversion today are familiar with Jackson's injunction, it would appear at first glance that many are not only aware of it but have taken it to heart, for most of the recent literature is devoted to pinpointing the causes of conversion without having conceptualized it clearly. Consequently, the question of how to identify the convert is seldom answered unambiguously. There are, however, a few works that address this conceptual issue. In this section we critically examine the traditional and implicit conceptions of conversion and assess the few existing conceptual works. Our objective is to develop an understanding of conversion that lends itself to empirical investigation. Such an undertaking is especially important, since understanding the causes of conversion presupposes the ability to identify the convert.

Conversion as Radical Personal Change

The one theme pervading the literature on conversion is that the experience involves radical personal change. This conception dates back to the Biblical use of the term and the cluster of words used to refer to it: the Herbrew word *shub* and the Greek words *epistrephein, strephein,* and *metanoia.* These words indicate a dramatic change, a turning from one viewpoint to another, or a return to principles from which one has strayed (Gillespie 1979:12–17). Now, as in earlier times, scholars still debate whether conversion involves sudden, gradual, or multiple and serial changes (Pratt 1926, W. H. Clark 1958, Parrucci 1968, Lynch 1977, Richardson & Stewart 1977, Richardson 1980, Bankston et al 1981). But the notion of radical change remains at the core of all conceptions of conversion, whether theological or social scientific.

Beyond this point, however, the consensus vanishes. Not only are social scientists understandably uneasy about the theological tendency to associate conversion with some conception of a deity or with the attainment of some "enlightened state," but they also disagree about the precise nature of the change involved. To argue that it entails personal change that is radical, drastic, fundamental, or dramatic merely distinguishes among degrees of variation. It does not specify, either conceptually or operationally, how much change is enough to constitute conversion.

A number of scholars have addressed this problem by proposing continua for distinguishing radical and complete changes. Most such schemes constitute variations of Nock's (1933) distinction between *conversion* and *adhesion.* Nock coined the latter term to denote the possibility of participating in religious groups and rituals without assuming a new way of life. Unlike conversion, which Nock (1933:6–7) defined as a "reorientation of the soul" involving a "deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another," adhesion involves the acceptance of new religions as "useful supplements and not as substitutes." The adhesionist thus has "a foot on each side of the fence."

This distinction between conversion and adhesion has been elaborated by Shepherd (1979) and is similar to Travisano's (1970:598) separation of conversion from *alternation,* which he defines as reversible and less comprehensive than the former. "Complete disruption," he argues, "signifies conversion while anything less signals alternation." Gordon (1974) similarly distinguishes conversion—"a radical discontinuity in a person's life"—from less extreme changes such as *consolidation,* which involves the adoption of a belief system or identity that combines two prior but contradictory world views or identities. A final kind of personal change is what has long been known as *regeneration* (E. T. Clark 1929, Nock 1933, Lang & Lang 1961). This term refers to the enthusiastic adoption of a belief system that had not been taken seriously

previously or that had been abandoned out of skepticism, rebellion, or indifference.

Taken together, we have at least four kinds of apparently distinguishable changes: the commonplace kind of role changes, called alternation, that occur without disrupting an individual's existing world view (Travisano 1970); the consolidative variety, illustrated by "a person raised in a southern Baptist church, who rejected these beliefs for drugs and perhaps Eastern religion, and who then became a Jesus Person" (Gordon 1974:166); the regenerative type associated with St. Augustine, whose mother's deep religious convictions influenced his early years; and the dramatic, metamorphic sort of change exemplified by the Apostle Paul's embrace of Christianity while on the road to Damascus. These conceptual distinctions are useful insofar as they suggest that personal change is not unidimensional and that conversion is but one type of personal change. It is not entirely clear, however, where conversion begins and ends on this continuum. In fact, it is not evident that only the more radical type of change should be conceptualized as conversion. The answer depends not only on the still unresolved problem of designating the degree of change required for conversion, but also on specifying exactly what it is that undergoes change. Is it beliefs and values, behavior and identity, interpersonal loyalties, or something even more fundamental?

Conversion as a Change in One's Universe of Discourse

A number of works have suggested that it is indeed something more fundamental than beliefs and identities that changes when one undergoes conversion. Heirich (1977:673–75) speaks of a change in one's "sense of ultimate grounding" or "root reality." Jones (1978) draws a parallel between conversion and Kuhn's (1962) idea of a paradigm shift. Travisano (1970:600–1) suggests that conversion is rooted in a transformation in what Burke (1965:77) called the "informing aspect" of one's life or biography or in what Mead (1962:88–90) termed a "universe of discourse." Snow & Machalek (1983:265) have argued similarly that, inasmuch as conversion involves radical change, the universe of discourse is the relevant concept.

Viewed in this light, conversion concerns not only a change in values, beliefs, and identities, but more fundamentally and significantly, it entails the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of a primary authority. Such a conception does not restrict conversion only to changes from one religion to another or to the adoption of a religious world view where one was previously absent. In addition, a nominal affiliate of a religious community may come to hold old but not particularly salient ideas with a new intensity and clarity of vision. Nominal belief thus becomes "true" belief, and what was previously peripheral to consciousness becomes central. Thus both consolida-

tion and regeneration might be construed as types of conversion. What is at issue is not whether the universe of discourse is entirely new, but whether it has shifted from periphery to center. When such a shift occurs, the corresponding change in consciousness is likely to be as radical in its effects as if the universe of discourse were entirely new.

Empirical Indicators of Conversion

If a change in the universe of discourse is the key to conceptualizing conversion, the question arises of whether that change can be operationalized. What, in short, are the empirical indicators of conversion? An inspection of the research literature reveals three possible indicators: membership status, demonstration events, and rhetorical patterns.

MEMBERSHIP STATUS Students of both mainstream religious traditions and new religious movements frequently treat shifts in organizational affiliation as indicators of conversion—e.g. denominational switching (Roof & Hadaway 1979, Newport 1979, Fee et al 1981, Hoge 1981) and changes of the rite of passage variety whereby a nonmember becomes a member (Lofland & Stark 1965, Harrison 1974, Heirich 1977, Enroth 1977, Hood 1981). Although this practice is rationalized for purposes of convenience, it is questionable on both theoretical and empirical grounds. First, it mistakenly equates membership with conversion, two related but not identical phenomena. It also ignores the commonplace observation that individuals can be members of the same group or movement in different ways and with varying degrees of commitment (Kanter 1972, Etzioni 1975, Zurcher & Snow 1981). As Beckford (1983a) observed in his research on Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church, it is not uncommon for members to alter their views over time and even to pass through distinct phases of commitment that vary in style and strength. There is also evidence that membership in many religious groups is much too heterogeneous to justify its use as a reliable indicator of conversion (Fichter 1954, Fee et al 1981, Hoge 1981). Finally, studies of a number of new religious movements—ranging from an esoteric, millenial UFO cult to a Japanese Buddhist movement to Hare Krishna—indicate that the relationship between membership and conversion is tenuous (Snow 1976, Balch 1980, Rochford 1982a). Since such observations indicate that membership is seldom, if ever, a sufficient condition for conversion, researchers should be more circumspect about conducting studies based on the presumed linkage between the two variables.

DEMONSTRATION EVENTS A second factor frequently used as an empirical indicator of conversion is the demonstration event. These activities are essentially public displays of conversion that function as status confirmation rituals.

They ostensibly provide dramatic evidence both to oneself and to others that one is imbued with the appropriate spirit or force and is therefore an authentic devotee or convert. Examples include baptisms, giving testimonies, glossolalia, and other ecstatic utterings and trances.

Because of their dramatic nature and presumed spontaneity, both insiders and outsiders have often treated demonstration events as valid and reliable evidence of conversion. Research suggests, however, that such an interpretation may be unwarranted. Noting that these events frequently occur in an emotionally charged atmosphere in which there is considerable pressure to demonstrate the strength of one's convictions, W. H. Clark (1958) questioned whether these displays are attributable to authentic and enduring inner change or merely to compliance with the demands of intense normative pressure. This question is also raised in Moscovici's (1980) analysis of the differences between compliance and conversion behavior. Whereas the former refers to behavior expressed in public but lacking private acceptance or commitment, the latter involves private acceptance or internalization but not necessarily public display. To illustrate, Moscovici (1980:211) notes that "one can visualize a purely public compliance without any private acceptance, as illustrated . . . by concentration camps, and a private acceptance without public manifestation, as witnessed by secret societies and, during certain epochs, Christian heresies." Thus, what is taken as conversion may frequently be compliance behavior. Evidence of such compliance and its orchestration is provided by an array of studies of revival meetings and crusades of the Billy Graham variety (Lang & Lang 1960, Whitam 1968, Hood et al 1973, Clelland et al 1975, Wimberly et al 1975, Altheide & Johnson 1977, Bruce 1982).

This research also suggests that a majority of the conversions that allegedly occur during revivals and crusades are not really "true" conversions but ritualized reaffirmations of existing beliefs and values. For example, one survey of a sample of participants at a Graham Crusade in Knoxville, Tennessee, revealed that 91% were church members and that 71% attended church at least once a week, thus prompting the conclusion that such crusades are ritualized opportunities "for people to show what they claim to be, namely, bona fide Christians" (Wimberly et al 1975:163). This is not to say that such public affirmations necessarily preclude the possibility of conversion. It simply means that conversion cannot be automatically inferred from such demonstration events. Drawing on Bem's (1972) self-perception theory and on research pertaining to the development of commitment (Gerlach & Hine 1970, Kanter 1972, Turner & Killian 1972, McGuire 1977), these findings imply that demonstration events may be understood more appropriately as functioning to facilitate and sustain conversion.

Thus, demonstration events in and of themselves do not indicate conversion.

Rather, they may often signify little more than ritualized performance in response to situational constraints and therefore have little enduring significance. Accordingly, researchers should exercise caution when considering the use of demonstration events as indicators of conversion.

RHETORICAL INDICATORS Snow & Machalek (1983) have recently proposed a third set of indicators of conversion. They reason that if it is the universe of discourse that undergoes change during conversion, then that change should be discernible in converts' speech and reasoning. Drawing on research on the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement and on a number of secondary sources, they identify four properties of the speech and reasoning of converts. They contend that it is the display of these four rhetorical properties that distinguishes the convert from other group members and thereby indicates the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral one to the status of a primary authority. The four rhetorical properties are: biographical reconstruction, adoption of a master attribution scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of the convert role.

Biographical reconstruction refers to a double-edged process involving the dismantling of the past, on the one hand, and its reconstitution, on the other. Some aspects of the past are jettisoned, others are redefined, and some are put together in ways that would have previously been inconceivable. One's biography is, in short, reconstructed in accordance with the new or ascendant universe of discourse and its attendant grammar and vocabulary of motives. Because this proposed indicator of conversion is such a prominent feature of converts' speech and reasoning, it has frequently been acknowledged (James 1902; Shibutani 1961; Berger 1963; Burke 1965; Berger & Luckmann 1967; Travisano 1970; Gordon 1974; Jules-Rosette 1975; Taylor 1976, 1978; Beckford 1978a; Jones 1978).

The adoption of a master attribution scheme, the second rhetorical indicator, occurs when a new or formerly peripheral causal schema (Kelley 1972) or vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940) authoritatively informs all causal attributions about self, others, and events in the world. Feelings, behaviors, and events formerly interpreted with reference to a number of causal schemes are now interpreted from the standpoint of one pervasive schema. Moreover, matters that were previously inexplicable or ambiguous are now clearly understood. A single locus of causality is thus simultaneously sharpened and generalized. Snow & Machalek (1983) note that this process is frequently accompanied by a shift in the causal locus—that is, a change from an internal to an external locus of blame or vice versa. They found, for example, that whereas

many Nichiren Shoshu converts once accounted for their preconversion lives by referring to some structural arrangement, after conversion they internalize the causality and avow their personal responsibility.

A suspension of analogical reasoning, the third rhetorical property of conversion, is derived from the converts' perceptions of their world views as unique or incomparable and their subsequent reluctance to use analogic metaphors in talking about their beliefs and practices. Analogic metaphors, which demonstrate the ways in which one thing is like another, can be contrasted to iconic metaphors, which "picture what things are, rather than how things are alike" (Brown 1977:115). Snow & Machalek (1983) contend that converts are not averse to using iconic metaphors such as "God is love" because they help establish the uniqueness of their respective group or world view. Analogic metaphors, on the other hand, are resisted because they violate the convert's belief that his or her world view is incomparable to other competing perspectives. If iconic metaphors affirm the authenticity and sacredness of conversion, analogic metaphors threaten to invalidate it. Thus, converts suspend analogical reasoning when discussing their world views and ritual practices.

Embracement of the convert role is the final rhetorical indicator of conversion. Snow & Machalek (1983) suggest that the convert not only introjects the convert role and sees himself or herself in terms of that role, but that it influences the convert's orientation in all interactive situations. Daily activities and routines that were formerly taken for granted or interpreted from the standpoint of various situationally specific roles are now understood from the standpoint of the convert role. The convert is thus acting not merely in terms of his or her own self-interest but to further the group's cause or mission. Accordingly, he or she enthusiastically avows his or her convert identity in nearly all interaction situations. It is not merely a mask that is worn in only some situations; rather, as Travisano (1970) has suggested, it is relevant and central to nearly every situation.

Snow & Machalek (1983) argue that these four rhetorical features mark the occasion of conversion. Therefore, it is no longer necessary for the researcher to decide arbitrarily who has experienced it. Whether their formulation is valid, however, remains an empirical question, especially since the argument is primarily grounded in data on a single religious movement. One of the objectives of future research, then, should be to examine whether these rhetorical properties are discernible in other groups and ideological contexts. If they are generalizable, then we will be well on our way toward establishing reliable empirical indicators of conversion.

THE ANALYTIC STATUS OF CONVERTS' ACCOUNTS

A second unresolved issue in the study of conversion is related to the treatment and use of converts' verbal accounts. This issue is particularly important, since most of the research attempting to explain conversion has relied primarily on such accounts for data on the underlying causes of conversion. Following the customary sociological practice of treating verbal accounts as objective reports that speak for themselves, most researchers who have studied conversion tend to accept converts' statements as valid and reliable records of past events and experiences. Bruce & Wallis (Bruce 1982, Bruce & Wallis 1983, Wallis & Bruce 1983) have recently defended this conventional practice. Others, however, have challenged its validity, suggesting that converts' accounts ought to be treated as topics of analysis, rather than as objective data on why and how conversion first occurred (Taylor 1976, 1978; Beckford 1978a, b, 1983a).

Several sets of observations suggest not only that this recommended line of inquiry is appropriate, but that using converts' recounted experience as the basis of causal explanations is both empirically and theoretically misguided. The first set of observations pertains to the socially constructed nature of converts' accounts, the second to their temporal variability, and the third to their conspicuously retrospective character.

The Socially Constructed Character of Converts' Accounts

A number of studies have shown that converts' accounts tend to be constructed in accordance with group-specific guidelines for interpreting certain experiences as religious conversions. In his research on Jehovah's Witnesses, Beckford (1978a) found that conversion to the movement could best be understood as a process whereby converts learned to construct "appropriate" verbal accounts of their personal religious development. These personal accounts were not simply the idiosyncratic and private constructions of the individuals who professed them. Rather, they were individual expressions of basic themes in the general ideology of the Watchtower organization.

In his report on becoming a Zen practitioner, Preston (1981) similarly observed that practitioners must learn to make correct attributions about their spiritual development. That is, they must learn how to recognize the "correct" symptoms associated with Zen sitting, attribute these symptoms to the "proper" causes, and continue to refine their ability to identify and interpret these symptoms correctly. Although this can be understood as a process of learning to take and play a role, it is important to note that conformity to role requirements in this instance means that one learns not only the normatively prescribed way to practice Zen, but also how to think and talk about that practice.

In his research on conversion to the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, Snow (1976) reaches similar conclusions. He observed that members were told to construct their conversion experiences according to the five characteristics of an acceptable experience. In addition, members were frequently instructed to watch and listen to core converts recounting their respective experiences in order to learn how to construct an appropriate testimony. Consequently, most of the conversion experiences that Snow heard and recorded were structured in accordance with specified guidelines.

These observations should not be interpreted as suggesting that converts merely parrot the official script when constructing their conversion accounts. Each prospective convert brings his or her own personal biography to the process, but this contribution is colored by the group's universe of discourse. Thus, specific ideologies do not strictly determine the character of converts' accounts; rather, they provide the basic algorithms upon which the convert constructs an "appropriate" account of his or her conversion experience. The social construction of conversion accounts may thus be regarded as a kind of "alignment process" involving the linkage of individual biographies with group goals, ideology, and rituals (Snow & Rochford 1983). Converts' constructed accounts do vary, but the variation is around a central theme.

The Temporal Variability of Converts' Accounts

In addition to being molded by salient ideological themes, converts' accounts may also vary temporally. That is, they do not remain fixed throughout the duration of one's status as a convert; rather, they are reconstructed or elaborated over time. This fact is not surprising, especially in the case of religious conversion, given the dynamic nature of religious life. A key element in many religious traditions is the idea of spiritual growth as an ongoing, developmental phenomenon. It is therefore reasonable to expect that long-term converts' accounts will be affected by changes in their spiritual or religious life. Such variation is also likely to accompany changes in the organization and ideology of the groups to which they have converted (Beckford 1983a).

This temporal variability, whether due to "spiritual growth" or ideological and organizational changes, is rarely captured in the existing literature because of researchers' tendency to use cross-sectional data. Confirmation of this variability is provided, however, by more longitudinal research, particularly of the ethnographic variety. In her study of ritual and conversion in the African Apostolic Church of John Maranke, Jules-Rosette (1975) not only describes in great detail changes in fellow Apostles' accounts, but she also charts changes in her own conversion experience. Snow & Rochford (1983) have also observed that the testimonies of converts to Nichiren Shoshu and Hare Krishna are frequently elaborated and refined, and in some cases even reconstructed, with the passage of time. Beckford's (1978a) study of the Jehovah's Witnesses goes

one step further by revealing a clearly temporal correspondence between conversion accounts and changes in the character of the movement and its ideology from one historical period to another. "What the Watchtower literature makes very clear," Beckford observed (1978a:258), "is that the 'favored' features of conversion experiences have varied with the movement's ideology which, in turn, has varied with its external fortunes." Consequently, one would expect marked differences among the accounts of various cohorts of converts. Interestingly, such differences are discernible at the aggregate, historical level of analysis, but they tend to diminish when one looks at individual, longstanding converts because even these Witnesses, as Beckford found (1978a:260), "draw upon the present-day rationale of the Watchtower Society and in this way tend to conceal the actual period of their conversion."

The Retrospective Character of Converts' Accounts

The foregoing observations indicate that accounts of conversion are social constructions subject to reconstruction with the passage of time and therefore are highly suspect as sources of data about the causes of conversion. This conclusion is also indicated by the conspicuously retrospective character of converts' accounts (Taylor 1976, 1978; Snow & Machalek 1983; Beckford 1983a, b). This backward-looking tendency, which is part and parcel of the previously discussed proposition that "biographical reconstruction" constitutes a core feature of the speech and reasoning of converts, implies that converts are not fully reliable sources of evaluative data about their preconversion lives.

This tendency is not restricted to converts, however. A central axiom of Mead's (1932) philosophy of the present, Burke's (1965) dramatism, and Berger & Luckmann's (1967) phenomenology is that personal biographies and identities are redefined continuously in the light of new experience. For the convert, however, this everyday phenomenon is greatly amplified and intensified largely because "conversion represents in exaggerated form the fundamental nature of selfhood—its capacity for reflection, change and reorganization . . ." (Bankston et al 1981:285) and because converts are constantly being called upon to account for their conversion and to describe how they have changed.

Since the previous observations indicate, first, that the resultant accounts are constructed on the basis of the ideological resources available at any given time and, second, that these accounts may change as the resources change, several specific conclusions and research directives would seem to follow. First, data derived from converts about their cognitive orientation and life situation prior to conversion should be treated as information that tells us more about the convert's current experience and orientation than about his or her past. Second, much of the literature on conversion confuses retrospection and introspection (Taylor 1978:317) and therefore treats converts' accounts as explanations of

conversion, rather than as the phenomena requiring sociological explanation. And third, this common practice ought to be abandoned. In other words, the construction and composition of converts' accounts should become topics of analysis. Such a line of inquiry would advance our understanding of (*a*) the process by which personal biographies are constructed and reconstructed, (*b*) the centrality of this process in relation to conversion, and (*c*) the differences and similarities in the way conversion is constituted in different groups and movements, whether religious or not.

THE CAUSES OF CONVERSION

As previously noted, most of the research on conversion has been concerned primarily with trying to identify the causes of conversion. This extensive literature can be roughly classified into three waves. The first occurred during the first three decades of the twentieth century and was dominated by theological and psychological explanations (James 1902, Starbuck 1915, Coe 1917, Thouless 1923, Pratt 1926, E. T. Clark 1929). The second wave, inspired largely by the experiences of American POWs during the Korean War, featured the development of the "brainwashing" or "coercive persuasion" model of conversion (Moloney 1955, Miller 1957, Bauer 1957, Sargant 1957, Lifton 1961, Schein 1961). The publication of the Lofland-Stark conversion model in 1965 signaled the arrival of a third wave of explanatory attempts that rely heavily on sociological thinking (Lofland 1966, Heirich 1977, Richardson 1978, Bromley & Shupe 1979, Downton 1979, Snow & Phillips 1980, Lofland & Skonovd 1981, Long & Hadden 1983). Contributors to these three waves of inquiry have identified, either theoretically or empirically, a range of factors that allegedly precipitate or cause conversion. They may be grouped into the following categories: (*a*) psychophysiological responses to coercion and induced stress; (*b*) predisposing personality traits and cognitive orientations; (*c*) situational factors that induce stress; (*d*) predisposing social attributes; (*e*) a variety of social influences; and (*f*) causal process explanations involving the confluence of a range of elements. We will examine each set of factors in turn, looking at their power to explain conversion.

Psychophysiological Responses to Coercion and Induced Stress

The "brainwashing" or "coercive persuasion" model is the most popular explanation for conversion outside of sociological circles. The basic thesis is that conversion is the product of devious but specifiable forces acting upon unsuspecting and therefore highly vulnerable individuals. This proposition rests on the conjunction of elements from both physiological psychology and psychoanalytic theory. The physiological component is rooted in Pavlov's work, which

was developed further in Sargant's *Battle for the Mind* (1957), subtitled "the physiology of conversion and brainwashing." According to Sargant, "various types of beliefs can be implanted in many people, after brain function has been sufficiently disturbed by accidentally or deliberately induced fear, anger or excitement" (1957:132). Induced physiological dysfunctioning of the brain is thus seen as the key to conversion. When this proposition is combined with psychoanalytic theory, we have a picture of the convert as an individual who has been made receptive to new ideas because his or her critical facilities and ego strength have been eroded by information control, overstimulation of the nervous system, forced confessions, and ego destruction, among other factors (Moloney 1955, Lifton 1961, Schein 1961).

It is not surprising that this "mind control" explanation of conversion has gained considerable currency among the public. It provides a convenient and "sensible" account for those who are otherwise at a loss to explain why individuals are attracted to "deviant" and "menacing" groups. Moreover, it exempts both "the victim" and his or her significant others outside the movement from any responsibility, thereby preserving the integrity of their world views and life-styles.

This brainwashing explanation has not enjoyed similar popularity among social scientists, however. While a relatively small number of writers advance this thesis (Enroth 1977, Singer 1979, Conway & Siegelman 1978, Delgado 1979, J. G. Clark 1979; J. G. Clark et al 1981), social scientists find it of limited utility and generality. It is inconsistent with the finding that most conversions are voluntary and occur in the absence of the sort of confinement and stress experienced by those whose ordeals inspired the model (Robbins & Anthony 1980, Barker 1983). It also obscures the related finding that not only is there a high incidence of defection among "cult" members (Bird & Reimer 1982), but that the turnover is often voluntary, even in the case of the more authoritarian communal movements (Shupe et al 1977, Beckford 1978b, Barker 1983). The coercive persuasion thesis has also been criticized for its tendency to impugn new religious movements by implying that they are inherently repugnant to people in possession of their rational faculties and must therefore be imposed on a reluctant clientele (Robbins & Anthony 1980, 1982; Shupe & Bromley 1980).

A final shortcoming with this model is that those who favor it base their case primarily on information derived from ex-converts who have been deprogrammed. Accounts of apostasy are no less retrospective or transformative than accounts of conversion, and they are therefore no more reliable as sources of data. Moreover, analyses of the accounts of apostates who have been deprogrammed versus those who have defected for other reasons reveal that the deprogrammed apostates tend to verbalize greater hostility toward their former "cults" and are more likely to attribute their conversion to brainwashing or

"mind control" (Beckford 1978b, 1983a; Solomon 1981; Shupe & Bromley 1983).

Predisposing Personality Traits and Cognitive Orientations

A more popular approach among social scientists attributes conversion to the predisposing effects of various personality traits. According to this way of thinking, the causes of conversion reside "within" the psyche of the individual, rather than "outside" in the form of situational and social influences (Salzman 1953). While there is no clear consensus among investigators as to the precise nature of these personality traits, they are often seen as psychologically dysfunctional. Predisposition to conversion is often described as a "susceptibility," as if conversion were a disease. One of the more vivid examples of this view is provided by Levine (1980: 146–51), who sees the appeal of cults as an "escape from freedom" for those who suffer character disorders in the form of attenuated ego and superego development. A variation on this theme is provided by Simmonds (1977), who characterizes Jesus Movement affiliates as "addictive" personality types who depend upon an external source for the gratification of their needs. According to this view, conversion does not constitute a personality transformation but rather the substitution of one addictive "substance" for another. Kildahl's (1965) research suggests that people who undergo sudden conversions tend to score lower on intelligence tests and higher on a hysteria scale, while Galanter (1980:1577–79) found that those who initially joined the Unification Church fared worse on a "general well-being" scale than long-standing members, drop-outs, and nonmembers. Galanter attributes therapeutic benefits to Unification Church affiliation because long-standing members do score higher on this scale. Proponents of another perspective eschew the imagery of pathology and emphasize socialization into absolutist or fundamentalist beliefs and values (Toch 1965; Richardson & Stewart 1977:829).

More recently, a growing number of social scientists have posited a "seekership" orientation that appears to predispose some to conversion (Straus, 1976, 1979; Balch & Taylor 1977; Lofland 1977; Bankston et al 1981; Lofland & Skonovd 1981; Batson & Ventis 1982; Richardson 1982; Shinn 1983). The basic proposition is that "seekers" are more likely to undergo conversion precisely because they are in active pursuit of just such a self-transformation. In most cases, the idea of seekership or quest does not connote a coping strategy employed by people in frantic search for a solution to some tension-inducing life problem. Rather, it evokes the image of one on a journey for personal and spiritual development and meaning. In fact, Batson & Ventis (1982) base their model of the religious experience on an analogy to the psychology of creativity. While this perspective provides a useful corrective to the view that converts are passive subjects who have been unwittingly molded by powerful external forces, it does not explain exactly what predisposes people to become seekers.

Thus, sociological and psychological research that would help disclose the origins of seekership is needed.

Tension-Producing Situational Factors

A third set of causes often held accountable for conversion includes situational factors that induce tension. These can include marital strain, the loss of a family member, change or loss of a job, the pressures of higher education, or any of a number of other tensions. Greil & Rudy (Unpublished manuscript) surveyed studies of conversion to ten different groups and found that tension was a causal factor in eight of them. It has proven difficult, however, to determine clearly how great a role tension plays in precipitating conversion. First, when converts view their lives retrospectively, they are apt to exaggerate preconversion tensions because of the very nature of biographical reconstruction. In their examination of Nichiren Shoshu conversion accounts, for example, Snow & Phillips (1980:435) found a tendency either to redefine life before conversion as being fraught with problems or to allude to personal problems that were either not previously discernible or not troublesome enough to warrant remedial action. Heirich (1977:658) similarly reports that the Catholic Pentecostals he studied tended to exaggerate their preconversion sinfulness.

A second factor making it difficult to assign causal responsibility to tension among converts is the absence of corresponding evidence for nonconverts. For example, a number of studies have established that converts to groups, including the Unification Church, the Divine Light Mission, the Hare Krishna, and the Ananda community, report high levels of drug use prior to joining the movement (Judah 1974, Nicholi 1974, Lynch 1977, Galanter & Buckley 1978, Nordquist 1978). Since levels of drug use among nonconverts are not specified, it is difficult to interpret this as symptomatic of the sorts of tensions that produce conversion. Some research has shown, however, that drugs may facilitate conversion among religious seekers (Batson & Ventis 1982:98–116).

A third problem with the tension hypothesis is that it implies that conversions occur only under duress and therefore may represent irrational responses to life's problems. Finally, Heirich's (1977) work, which is clearly one of the better empirical studies of conversion, failed to find evidence indicating that stress and tension precipitate conversion.

Social Attributes and the Structural Availability of Converts

Social attributes, as distinct from personality traits and tension, have long been assigned a significant role in determining behavior. Recent research has identified a number of social attributes that specify the categories of people amenable to conversion to contemporary religious movements. Most studies portray devotees of new religious movements as young—typically in their twenties—middle class, more highly educated than commonly acknowledged, and fre-

quently from stable family environments (Judah 1974; Snow 1976; Galanter & Buckley 1978; Nordquist 1978; Bromley & Shupe 1979; Ungerleider & Wellisch 1979; Barker 1980, 1983; Rochford 1982a; Beckford 1983b; Shinn 1983).

Such findings indicate that we are not faced with a picture of a highly marginal, alienated, and materially dispossessed population that seeks refuge in cults. In fact, Bromley & Shupe (1979) adduce evidence that compels them to reject alienation as a factor that explains attraction to unorthodox, new religions. Rather, the differential recruitment of persons possessing the aforementioned characteristics may simply reflect their availability for movement participation. Being young, single, free from occupational ties, or a student makes for a kind of structural availability that affords people the discretionary or unscheduled time to participate in religious movements. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that these are precisely the sorts of people who comprise most of the membership of groups such as the Hare Krishna and the Unification Church. These social characteristics create a pool of candidates available for conversion, but whether these people actually become converts depends upon social interaction processes.

Social Influences

Most of the social influences identified in the research on conversion can be classified into one of three broad categories: social networks, affective and intensive interaction, and role learning.

SOCIAL NETWORKS In considering the relationship between social networks and conversion, it is important to recall the distinction made earlier between membership and conversion. Social networks are very important in explaining how people are recruited into new religious movements and organizations (Lofland & Stark 1965, Gerlach & Hine 1970, Bibby & Brinkerhoff 1974, Harrison 1974, Heirich 1977, Barker 1980, Galanter 1980, Snow & Phillips 1980, Snow et al 1980, Stark & Bainbridge 1980a, Rochford 1982b). For example, among noncommunal groups, such as Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists, studies have found that the vast majority of members—ranging from 59% to 82%—were recruited through social networks. Even among communal groups, such as the Unification Church and Hare Krishna, research has indicated that a significant proportion of devotees were recruited similarly. Nevertheless, while friendship and kinship networks often provide the avenues through which people join religious groups, it is not clear that network recruitment dynamics can be held accountable for the social-psychological transformation implied by most conceptions of conversion. Rather, we must turn to two other sets of social processes to understand conversion itself.

AFFECTIVE AND INTENSIVE INTERACTION When Lofland & Stark (1965) first proffered their conversion model, they included "cult affective bonds" and "intensive interaction" as two of the seven conditions necessary for conversion. Subsequent research has substantiated the importance of these two factors (Harrison 1974, Heirich 1977, Lofland 1977, Barker 1980, Stark & Bainbridge 1980a, Snow & Phillips 1980, Lofland & Skonovd 1981, Greil & Rudy 1983). Since a positive, interpersonal tie to one or more group members can function as an information bridge, increase the credibility of appeals, and intensify the pressure to accept those appeals and corresponding practices, it is not surprising that conversion is unlikely, especially for nonseekers, in the absence of affective ties. The nature and variety of other interaction processes and strategies are less well understood, however. Accordingly, Lofland (1977) and Snow & Phillips (1980), among others, have called for closer scrutiny of the processes of intensive interaction. It is likely that subsequent attempts to specify the nature of these interactive processes will yield a more refined understanding of exactly how conversion occurs. At this stage, one can simply conclude that far more remains to be learned about the impact that this set of influences has on conversion than has been documented to date.

ROLE LEARNING In attempting to account for conversion by focusing on social influences, a number of scholars have drawn upon the well-established tradition of role theory. One of the earliest analyses of this type was Zetterberg's (1952), which appeared when the brainwashing model was in vogue. More recently, Harrison (1974) has described the process of building commitment to a Catholic Pentecostal group as a social learning experience culminating in the status passage of receiving the "Baptism of the Holy Spirit." But the most fully developed treatments using the role learning perspective have been advanced by Balch (1980) and Bromley & Shupe (1979). Based upon his participant observation of a UFO cult, Balch argues that the sudden personality transformations he observed were not conversions. Rather, having been privileged to look "behind the scenes" at the cultists' backstage behaviors, he concludes that their behavioral changes should be attributed to rapid role learning. He notes that while this role learning extended to the use of a special vocabulary and reliance on metaphoric speech, there is no evidence that it constituted an actual transformation of consciousness (Balch 1980:139–42).

At the same time, to assume the convert role neither signals a cynical gesture on the "convert's" part nor precludes a subsequent transformation of consciousness. To the contrary, Bromley & Shupe (1979) recently proposed a more fully developed role theory approach to explain "rapid affiliative change" as an alternative to the older model that assigns primacy to predisposing traits. Their approach is not bound to assumptions about motivations purporting to explain

why individuals join marginal religions. Instead, they attempt to specify how individuals learn roles that produce cognitive and behavioral transformations. Similarly, Richardson & Stewart's (1977) notion of "conversion careers" alludes to a process whereby certain people on spiritual quests are able to assume and subsequently abandon a succession of convert roles.

These more recent efforts to explain conversion, particularly the interactionist and role theory approaches, imply a fundamental departure from a premise upon which earlier accounts, especially the brainwashing model, were based. That premise can be stated as follows: "Because conversion is a phenomenon that is qualitatively different from other sorts of individual transformations, it requires a unique explanation." This statement implies the operation of unique social and psychological processes that cannot be accounted for using conventional sociological and psychological explanatory schemes such as symbolic interactionism, role theory, and learning theory. Inadvertently, analyses based upon the aforementioned premise are more likely to mystify than inform our understanding of conversion because they treat it as a peculiarly enigmatic phenomenon that eludes the explanatory powers of conventional social science.

Causal Process Models of Conversion

The greater part of sociological research on conversion has traditionally involved attempts to model the sequence of causal relations that culminate in conversion. This effort dates back at least as far as W. H. Clark's (1958) three-stage model of the conversion process. More recently, however, efforts at modeling have built upon the highly influential Lofland-Stark prototype (1965). By incorporating several of the aforementioned factors into a single model of the conversion process, Lofland & Stark largely wrote the agenda for conversion research for the following two decades. Because this model is described in fairly abstract and general terms, it has invited "testing" on other groups to gauge its applicability (Seggar & Kunz 1972, McGee 1976, Austin 1977, Richardson & Stewart 1977, Downton 1980, Rambo 1980, Snow & Phillips 1980, Bankston et al 1981). But the natural histories of conversion patterns vary from group to group. As a result, the natural history of one group, however abstractly it is described, will by no means necessarily record the natural history of another. This fact helps explain divergences reported by those who have tried to apply the Lofland-Stark model to groups for which it was never intended (Griel & Rudy 1983). This criticism does not mean that conversion is the result of idiosyncratic processes that defy theoretical generalization. To the contrary, conversion is probably comprised of causal processes amenable to generalization. But merely to label a sequence of stages does not specify the causal relationships responsible for conversion. Thus, researchers will continue to meet with limited success in explaining conversion when they confuse natural histories with causal processes.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

Our critical examination of research on conversion has identified a number of questions and concerns that have been neglected and have therefore impeded progress in this area. Drawing on these observations, we now propose a brief agenda of research questions that, if followed, may lead to appreciable developments in what sociologists can learn about conversion in the near future.

First, careful reconsideration of existing conceptualizations of conversion is still needed. Although social scientists have recently made some progress in distinguishing conversion from related phenomena, most conceptualizations remain ambiguous and are not explicitly presented. In particular, the sort of social psychological transformations implied by the idea of conversion must not be equated with status changes such as membership affiliation.

Closely related to the first injunction is a second recommendation to strive for more useful empirical indicators of the thoroughgoing changes that comprise conversion. All too often, scholars propose theoretically sophisticated conceptualizations of conversion only to use convenient but crude measures. The language behavior of converts represents an area of considerable potential for developing such indicators.

Third, the study of converts' verbal accounts shows great promise for advancing our understanding of the nature of conversion itself. Rather than treating such accounts as sources of data about the social and psychological precipitants of conversion, we expect richer returns from questions such as these: In what ways and to what extent can conversion accounts be seen as constitutive of conversion itself? Do converts' verbal accounts change over time? If so, how and why do they do so? What sorts of social negotiations and transactions produce, maintain, and modify these accounts?

Fourth, are the aforementioned "rhetorical indicators" of conversion specific in their applicability to the group from which they were derived, or can they be generalized to converts to other religious groups and movements? If these four characteristics lack broader applicability, are other rhetorical properties more easily generalizable?

Fifth, can the transformative processes that comprise religious conversion be observed in other contexts? For example, can knowledge about religious conversion be generalized to explain radical transformations of political allegiances, life-style preferences and practices, or occupational commitments?

Sixth, most conversion "causal process models" actually represent typical natural histories of conversion events. Research is needed to specify more precisely what sorts of interactive processes are associated with the actual consciousness transformation that is thought of as conversion.

Seventh, presuming sufficient advances in conceptualization and measurement, the study of variations in conversion rates could yield valuable sociolog-

ical information. For example, it would be useful to discern patterns of ebb and flow in conversion rates in order to establish linkages between religious change and developments in the secular spheres of society. The work of Stark and his associates (1979, 1980b), while not based directly on conversion rates, is illustrative of the kind of research that is needed. These sorts of analyses would also yield a better understanding of the sociocultural conditions that underlie and legitimate spiritual seekership and mass conversions.

Finally, although this paper addressed only the nature and causes of conversion, a growing body of research on the maintenance of conversion commitment (Kanter 1972, McGuire 1977, Bromley & Shupe 1979, Barker 1980) and apostasy or defection from religious groups (Brinkerhoff & Burke 1980; Beckford 1978b, 1983a, b; Shupe & Bromley 1983, Skonovd 1983) promises to disclose a great deal more about the nature and limits of conversion itself.

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