Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion

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# Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion*

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Snow and Machalek (1983; 1984) have pointed to the importance of language in understanding the conversion process. In particular, they have identified four "rhetorical indicators" characteristic of the accounts converts give about their conversion experience. After a brief review of these indicators, and of the Snow and Machalek approach more generally, we offer a critique and an alternative interpretation of the part played by language in the conversion process, and by the four indicators in particular. We substantiate our position both theoretically and empirically, with data gathered from a small sample of Christian evangelicals. We find, happily, that the four indicators characteristic of the Nichiren Shoshu believers studied by Snow and Machalek were to be found also among our Christians. However, only one of those four indicators, "biographical reconstruction," was unique to the Christians who claimed a conversion experience, as such. The rest of the indicators were as common among lifelong Christians as among self-professed converts, indicating that they are probably indicators of religious commitment more generally, rather than of conversion per se. Of even greater theoretical significance, we believe, is our argument for understanding language and rhetorical devices as actively chosen tools and methods in converts' own efforts at self-transformation, rather than as indicators of what has already happened to them.

Recently, Snow and Machalek (1983; 1984) have suggested that an analysis of the talk and reasoning of subjects can provide a fruitful approach to the study of conversion. They propose that conversion be viewed as a change in one's "universe of discourse," and that certain "rhetorical indicators" in the talk of individuals should identify the convert. Based primarily on Snow's (1976) study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, they suggest that converts may be identified by: 1) the adoption of a master attribution scheme; 2) biographical reconstruction; 3) the suspension of analogical reasoning; and 4) the embracement of a master role (Snow & Machalek, 1983: 266-78).

The turn to a consideration of the talk and reasoning of the religious person as a potentially rich source of data for the study of "everyday religion" has been noted by several researchers (see Beckford, 1978; Robertson, 1971; Robertson & Campbell, 1972;

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Taylor, 1976; 1978), but Snow and Machalek have been the first to develop the idea to any extent. As a first attempt to introduce a focus on language to the study of conversion, Snow and Machalek's formulation warrants serious theoretical and empirical attention.

We agree that a focus on the language and rhetoric of the religious person is a promising approach to the study of conversion; however, we believe that the Snow and Machalek approach, important as it is, stresses the wrong implications of convert rhetoric. In this paper we develop a theoretically and empirically based critique of the Snow and Machalek approach to the study of conversion. Our purpose is to present an alternative theory of conversion, focusing specifically on the role of language in the conversion *process.* We also hope to stimulate further theoretical and empirical work in this area.

Snow and Machalek's (1983) approach to the study of conversion grows out of a constructive critique of much of the contemporary work in the area. They argue (1983: 159) that while researchers have explored the "causes and consequences" of conversion, there has yet to be an extensive analysis of the nature of conversion itself. In fact, while researchers have proceeded to generate theories of the process of conversion (e.g., Heirich, 1977; Lofland, 1978; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Richardson & Stewart, 1978), the characteristics of the converts themselves are usually either ignored or assumed. They suggest that "this is a serious oversight, especially since an understanding of the conversion process presupposes the ability to identify the convert" (1983: 260). With these concerns in mind, Snow and Machalek (1983) proceed to develop a definition of the "convert as a social type," based on an analysis of the talk and reasoning of subjects and supported by their own underlying theory of conversion.

We will argue in this paper that Snow and Machalek's theory of conversion is flawed because three of the four proposed "rhetorical indicators" of conversion fail to distinguish religious converts from people who, though not "converted," are religiously *committed.* That is, we believe that the Snow and Machalek formulation fails to distinguish between *conversion* and *commitment* as two distinct phenomena (Barker & Currie, 1985). Since distinguishing the convert from other religious types is the supposed goal of their framework, we believe that this flaw attenuates considerably the usefulness of the Snow and Machalek theory. We will provide both theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence to substantiate this claim.

In the first section of the paper we briefly present the essentials of the Snow and Machalek (1983; 1984) theory of conversion. In the second section we develop our own alternative ideas on conversion, present some data derived from interviews with a sample of evangelical Christians, and attempt to show why we think that the Snow and Machalek approach to conversion needs to be reconsidered.

## A SUMMARY OF THE SNOW AND MACHALEK APPROACH TO CONVERSION

As Snow and Machalek (1983) observe, despite considerable difference of opinion over the nature of conversion, there is one underlying assumption upon which most researchers would seem to agree, and that is that "conversion involves a radical change in a person's experience" (1983: 264). Whether fast or slow, complete or partial, radical change in *something* is assumed to underlie the experience of conversion. What Snow and Machalek

argue (1983: 264) is that it is one's "universe of discourse" which undergoes radical change in the conversion experience. While they borrow the term from Mead (1934: 88-90), the idea has been used in a number of different contexts, under a number of different names. For example, it is quite similar to Wittgenstein's (1958) notion of "language game" and Kuhn's (1962) concept of paradigm. "Universe of discourse" and related notions refer to the idea that human beings orient themselves to the world from a set of taken-for-granted assumptions. These sources of "ultimate grounding," or "root reality," in Heirich's (1977) terms, are socially constructed frameworks of meaning imbedded in language and other symbols that provide a system, or "sacred canopy" (Berger, 1967) for making sense of self and world.

This approach postulates a theoretical connection between universe of discourse and consciousness that is based on language. It is thus a thoroughly cognitive approach to the study of conversion, having its origins within the complementary assumptions of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1973) and the sociology of knowledge tradition, best exemplified by Berger and Luckmann (1967). In short, consciousness is the product of communication (i.e., symbolic interaction) within a shared universe of discourse. Since language is the primary "carrier" of meaning, we have access to the elusive entity of consciousness via language. It follows that if conversion involves a change in one's universe of discourse then it also involves a change in consciousness, and the evidence of both changes should be found in the language (i.e., talk and reasoning) of the convert. Or, as Snow and Machalek put it (1983: 279), "Inasmuch as language is practical consciousness, it stands to reason that transformations of consciousness necessitate transformations of language." The question remains, however, as to exactly *what sort* of rhetoric and reasoning we should expect to find characteristic of the convert. Snow and Machalek (1983: 266-78) propose four "rhetorical indicators" or "formal properties" of the convert.

Of the four rhetorical indicators of conversion proposed by Snow and Machalek (1983: 266), *biographical reconstruction* is clearly the one with the most appeal, both theoretically and empirically. Biographical reconstruction refers to the idea that individuals who undergo the radical change of conversion reconstruct or reinterpret their past lives from the perspective of the present. In a very real sense, the past is created anew. This does not necessarily entail a wholesale fabrication or "distortion" of one's previous life, but rather a restructuring in which previously important events may be de-emphasized and less significant ones elevated to greater prominence. The concept of biographical reconstruction has considerable theoretical and empirical precedent. Perhaps the most cogent formulation of this notion is to be found in Mead's *Philosophy of the Present* (1932). For Mead, the focus of reality is the present, and it is through human action in the present that the past and future become meaningful. Thus, as argued by Mead, and illustrated by converts, the past is reconstructed in light of the new meanings which emerge from one's present status as a convert. Others, including Beckford (1978), Berger and Luckmann (1967), James (1958), Taylor (1976; 1978) and Travisano (1970) have also noted the phenomenon of biographical reconstruction accompanying conversion. While they have approached the idea from a number of perspectives, each has recognized the apparent importance of the phenomenon for an understanding of conversion.

At least one issue, however, remains problematic. If we accept Mead's (1932) approach to the problem, then biographical reconstruction is actually ubiquitous: we reconstruct

our pasts constantly as we confront new experiences, and conversion is not qualitatively different in this respect. Snow and Machalek (1983: 269) agree that the biographical reconstruction involved in conversion is also present in everyday, non-conversion experience, but they suggest that in conversion, biographical reconstruction is greatly *amplified* and *intensified.* But if biographical reconstruction in conversion is only quantitatively (not qualitatively) different from "normal" identity reconstruction, then operationally how can we decide how much reconstruction is beyond "normal?" Snow and Machalek (1983) provide no general procedure for making such a decision, nor do they indicate exactly what procedures they employed in deciding to assert that biographical reconstruction was quantitatively great enough in the converts they observed to warrant the "convert" identity. We will have more to say on this problem below.

The second indicator of conversion proposed by Snow and Machalek (1983: 269) is the *adoption of a master attribution scheme.* Based on the assumption that individuals employ causal interpretations to make sense of themselves, others, and experience (Heider, 1958; Kelly, 1967; 1971; Spilka *et al.,* 1985), attribution is a common and fundamental cognitive process. What distinguishes the convert from others, though, is the adoption of a *master* attribution scheme, one which informs all causal inferences (Snow & Machalek, 1983: 270). While the average person might utilize a variety of interpretive schemes to attribute cause (e.g., natural law; human nature; divine intervention; see Apostle *et al.,* 1983), converts resort to a singular rhetoric of cause and effect. When asked to account for the state of the world, self, or others and their actions, converts inevitably resort to one attribution scheme.

The third indicator of conversion proposed by Snow and Machalek (1983: 273) is perhaps the most original and interesting of the four. They propose that the talk and reasoning of converts exhibits a *suspension of analogical reasoning.* Arguing that one important means through which individuals relate and comprehend inchoate experiences is through the use of metaphor or analogy, Snow and Machalek suggest that converts avoid the use of analogy when discussing their beliefs. The reasoning behind this proposal is persuasive: Since the use of analogy is meant to indicate that "one thing is like another," it is contrary to the basic motive of religious belief to suggest that an equivalence exists between one's own beliefs and those of some other group. In Durkheim's terms (Durkheim, 1965; Snow & Machalek, 1983: 275), the suspension of analogical reasoning can be seen as a technique for affirming the sacredness of one's own beliefs over the profanity of all others, thereby insulating and protecting one's own beliefs and self from the contamination of association with alien world views and individuals.

Finally, Snow and Machalek (1983: 276-78) propose that the convert can be identified by his *embracing of a master role.* This property of the convert should be the easiest to observe. In embracing a master role, the convert comes to see him- or herself almost totally in terms of the role as *convert and member of a particular group.* In contrast, modern life usually imposes role compartmentalization, where individuals are expected to enact a variety of roles depending upon the context in which they find themselves. In the embracing of a master role, the convert both subordinates other roles to the master role (or eliminates them entirely if they are in conflict with the master role), and attempts to apply the master role in all situations. In the first case, there is a clear prioritization of roles, or identities. For example, one is a Christian above all else, then a mother, wife,

and teacher. Thus, while other roles may be important to the convert, their importance derives not from their intrinsic qualities, but from their relation to the master identity. It might not be unreasonable to say that the master role not only informs all other subordinate roles, but *infuses* them with a distinctive meaning. Thus, one becomes a "Christian mother," a "Christian wife," a "Christian teacher," and the like. In this way, the convert is able to continue to negotiate with the secular world but is able also to infuse the secular roles with a sacredness derived from the master role. Furthermore, and relatedly, the adoption of the master role means that the convert views every situation as an opportunity to enact the master status. Despite the compartmentalization of roles thrust upon the modern convert, there is thus a generalization of the master status and role to all situations, providing a psychological basis not only for proselyting activities, but also for a defense against the self-dividing forces of the modern secular world.

## CONVERSION AS A PROCESS OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION

We agree with Snow and Machalek that conceptualizing conversion as fundamentally a *process of change* is essential, that viewing a shift in universe of discourse as an important element of this change process may also be useful. However, in their attempt to locate the process of change in some phenomenon "more fundamental than beliefs or identities . . ." (1984: 170), Snow and Machalek's theory offers us a rather weak conceptualization of the *person* who experiences conversion. In their scheme, the person is replaced with the term "consciousness," and this concept is never well developed.

In contrast, we see conversion as involving primarily a change in *self*-consciousness, or, using the more conventional term, as a change in the self-concept (Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1979). Thus, conversion is seen to involve a change in the way a person thinks and feels about his or her self. One advantage of this approach is that it allows a more plausible theoretical link between the individual and the universe of discourse via language (Mead, 1934; Schwalbe, 1983) than is possible with the concept of "consciousness." In addition, it also makes available to us the extensive theoretical and empirical literature on the self-concept (see Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982; Gecas, 1982).

To distinguish the self-concept change involved in conversion from other, more routine, changes in the self-concept (e.g., role changes, life-cycle changes), we use the term *self-transformation.* Self-transformation, as we define it here, refers to a change in, or the creation of, what Turner (1976) has referred to as the "real self." In making the distinction between the "real self" and the "spurious self," Turner is acknowledging the fact that not all of our self-conceptions are of equal importance to us and that we are generally aware of a distinction between who we are *really* versus who we might be in a particular role, or under a particular set of circumstances. We capitalize on Turner's distinction between the "real self" and the "spurious self" by viewing conversion as a self-transformation — the creation of a new vision of who we *really* believe we are when all our social roles and self-presentations are stripped away.

Secondly, we think also that a focus on the language and rhetoric of converts is a useful direction to pursue, not so much because it allows us indirect access to consciousness, but rather because it is *through language* that individuals transform themselves. That is, we take what is referred to as a "functionalist" approach to language (see Schwalbe,

1983), which leads us to ask: what sort of activity does this rhetorical device accomplish? Thus, where Snow and Machalek view particular kinds of language and rhetoric as observable *indicators* of some underlying change in consciousness, we view particular kinds of language and rhetoric as methods used by subjects to achieve self-transformation. Though these two uses of language are not mutually exclusive or incompatible, they do lead to somewhat different research questions. The central question motivating our research is: *how do subjects use language and rhetoric to achieve self-transformation?*

What are the implications of the differences between our approach to conversion and the approach developed by Snow and Machalek? In the first place, Snow and Machalek view conversion in a way that focuses more on *what happens to* a person, while we view conversion more as a process of *self*-transformation. That is, we view the subject as an active participant in this reconstruction of the self (Richardson, 1985). Second, there is the issue of identifying the convert. For Snow and Machalek, the subject's *self-conception* as a convert or a non-convert is largely irrelevant to determining whether or not the subject is a convert. Instead, they propose that the only basis necessary for the identification of the convert is the presence or absence of their four proposed rhetorical indicators of conversion. In effect, from Snow and Machalek's point of view, the researcher or analyst is better qualified to determine who is or is not a convert than are the subjects themselves.

Because we view conversion as an inherently subjective phenomenon, we believe that the subject, and only the subject, is qualified to tell us who he or she *really* is. Consequently, we determine whether or not someone is a convert by asking the person the question: Are you a convert? Though Snow and Machalek (1983: 261-64) are justifiably cautious in their interpretation of converts' accounts of their conversion experiences, we think that it is a mistake to ignore what our subjects tell us — particularly when they are telling us who they are. Indeed, if we are unwilling to believe our subjects when they tell us that they are converts, then why should we believe them when they tell us that they are Christians, Jews, or Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists?

Finally, if having the self-concept of a convert is all that is necessary to qualify one as a convert, is there any theoretical utility in Snow and Machalek's purported "rhetorical indicators" of conversion? Based on our "functionalist" approach to language, these rhetorical devices can be theoretically useful only if it can be shown *how subjects use them as methods* in their efforts to achieve self-transformation. Or, alternatively, it may be possible to show how these rhetorical devices are used to achieve some other feature of religious life, such as religious commitment.

The thoughts expressed above have evolved from thinking about the nature of conversion, thinking about Snow and Machalek's approach to conversion, and examining some data we have gathered from a small sample of evangelical Christians. Having so far discussed ideas — theirs and ours — we would now like to present and discuss some of the data. If it appears that our data conform nicely to our ideas and not so nicely to the ideas of Snow and Machalek, that is because our ideas have been formed and reformed with more or less continuous reference to our data. Thus, we do not present the following analysis as any sort of definitive empirical "test" of the Snow and Machalek formulation. To do that would be unfair. Instead, we offer the analysis so that the reader may have some sense for the empirical evidence that has forced us to question the Snow and

Machalek approach and to formulate our own ideas on the role of language in conversion.[1]

## SAMPLE AND METHODS

We had initially become interested in the prospects of assessing the Snow and Machalek approach as a result of auditing taped interviews obtained in the early 1970s from members of a so-called "Jesus Freaks" organization located in the Northwest (Mauss & Petersen, 1974; Petersen & Mauss, 1973). Since the interviews with those earlier Christians could not have been informed by the much later work of Snow and colleagues, we were interested and impressed by the frequency with which those interviews, as we listened to them more than a decade later, yielded the kinds of rhetoric Snow and Machalek reported finding among their converts to Nichiren Shoshu. Since many of the "Jesus Freaks" were undoubtedly converts, it seemed quite possible that Snow and Machalek might be on to something. We decided, therefore, to try to obtain some sort of new sample of contemporary Christians and subject them to interviews that could be more explicitly informed by the Snow and Machalek formulation.

### *Sample*

During the 1984-85 school year, we obtained access to a sample of young Christians who were active in Christian evangelical groups and fellowships on or near the campus of Washington State University. Our subjects constitute an "opportunity" sample obtained through a "snowball" method: Subjects referred us to others in their religious network, or related ones, and these, in turn, referred us to others, etc. Altogether, we were able to obtain interviews with 15 such subjects. The respondents were about evenly divided by gender and ranged in age from 19 to 28. They were all from distinctly middle-class backgrounds, though some had enjoyed more affluent upbringings than others. Many had been reared in mainline Christian churches, including Roman Catholic.

### *Methods*

The main criterion used in deciding how to structure the interviews was to provide the subject the opportunity to display the kinds of rhetorical properties Snow and Machalek suggested should characterize the convert. Consequently, the interviews were very open-ended; the respondents were asked to discuss themselves and their religious

1. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer who contributed to the evolution of our thinking here by forcing us to reconsider an earlier form of our critique of Snow and Machalek. At first we had taken the more simplistic tack that we could partially replicate the Snow and Machalek study of Nichiren Shoshu converts by applying their four indicators to our own alternative sample of Christian Evangelicals and seeing if those indicators distinguished "converts" from "lifelong" Christians in our sample. Such a "replication," we reasoned, would allow us not only to check on the *generalizability* of the four indicators from one religion to another, but also to "validate" the indicators against the self-professions of our converts. While we still think that approach has some merit, we now concur with our anonymous critic that such an approach is not so much a "test" of the Snow and Machalek indicators as it is an attempt to supplant *one definition* of "convert" (theirs), which does *not* include the self-label criterion, with a *different* definition (ours) which *does* include that criterion. This realization, in turn, forced us to articulate more clearly (we hope), and more thoroughly, our rationale for preferring our definition, with its emphasis upon what happens to the *self*.

beliefs in interviews that ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours in length. It was felt that this approach would provide subjects with the time and the freedom to display their characteristic ways of talking and thinking about themselves and their beliefs. All of the interviews were conducted by the first author in his academic office on campus. Several of the respondents also allowed us to make copies (with due protection for privacy) of diaries that they had kept around the time of their conversion. The interviews were tape-recorded with the subject's consent, and later transcribed in written form for analysis.

The first step in our analysis was to attempt to determine whether or not any or all of the four rhetorical indicators were present in the talk of our 15 subjects. In order to do this, it was necessary to operationalize the four rhetorical indicators in some explicit way. Unfortunately, Snow and Machalek (1983; 1984) do not provide any clues about how they or anyone else might do this. As a practical matter, deciding whether or not a subject engaged in "biographical reconstruction" or "suspended analogical reasoning" was somewhat difficult, and open to a substantial amount of interpretation. It was decided, therefore, that each of us would examine the transcripts separately using an explicit definition of the four rhetorical indicators. By comparing notes, we would then be able to see whether or not we agreed on which subjects did or did not exhibit which indicators. Below are listed the explicit definitions that were employed along with two examples of each of the indicators as they were found in the transcripts. (Pseudonyms are, of course, used throughout for all subjects.)

*Biographical Reconstruction:* Where the subject *actively* reinterprets past experiences or self-conceptions from the vantage point of the present in such a way as to *change the meaning* of the past for the subject (especially significant segments are emphasized in the passages that follow).

*Example #1*

Gina: So then during high school, I had a lot of friends that I did sports with, and everything, that were really Christians; and I thought they were fanatics. They just turned me off. *When I look at it now, I respect them a lot more . . .*

*Example #2*

Mark: I grew up in a family with high morals. I always considered myself to be a "good kid," so to speak. I was very involved in athletics and what not, but I guess now if I look back, I really . . . I can look back on God's little architectural plan for me he kind of started; *I can look all the way back to my sophomore year in high school and just kind of see how all these things kind of meld together as he led me towards himself.*

*Adoption of a Master Attribution Scheme:* Any evidence that the subject attributes all outcomes or the reasons for all outcomes to one source (e.g., "God, "Jesus", "the Bible").

*Example #1*

Jason: How is my life different? I read the Bible today. I pray today. If I have any question, I'll go to the Bible. *All the answers we have in this world are in that book.*

*Example #2*

Frank: The Bible more or less teaches . . . *Romans, 13:1, says that all power and authority is from God and all earthly authorities are from God,* and stuff. And that is how I feel about contemporary political situations: that power and authority is given to people on earth by God and what they do with it is a different story.

*Suspension of Analogical Reasoning:* The willingness of the subject to equate his or her beliefs or ideas with the beliefs or ideas of other individuals or groups.

*Example #1*

Interviewer: Is that the only way you can get that love?

Frank: In Christ? Yes. That's the only way you can really find what true love is. *Because true love only rests in God. It is only in God, and you need to go through Christ to get to God.*

*Example #2*

Pete: I also believe that it's the only true way to be happy on earth: To feel like you are important, to feel like you mean something. *To feel fulfilled while you're on earth, you have to be a Christian.*

*Embracing a Master Role:* The subject sees a full interpenetration of the Christian identity with all other identities; the subordination of all other identities to the Christian identity; or the elimination of other identities incompatible with the Christian identity.

*Example #1*

Pete: . . . but hopefully *in all that I do people can see that maybe I'm different,* not on a superficial level; maybe they can't see from just being in a class with them, but maybe they can a little bit; maybe you could see me at a party and I wasn't drinking and say, "He's a little different; he's got some different beliefs there."

*Example #2*

Rod: Since *my religious life, of course, permeates everything I do,* my behavior is a function of my faith in the living God. And that includes all my behavior, whether I am edifying myself or not; *all that behavior is a function of what I believe in.*

## FINDINGS

Both of us agreed that each of our 15 Christian subjects displayed some or all of the rhetorical indicators proposed by Snow and Machalek, suggesting that these rhetorical properties are not exclusive to the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist "universe of discourse." We also agreed, however, based on further analysis, that while all 15 of our subjects displayed evidence of suspending analogical reasoning, adopting a master attribution scheme, and embracing a master role, four of the 15 subjects failed to engage in the fourth purported indicator of conversion — biographical reconstruction. As it turns out, these

four subjects also *denied* ever having had a conversion experience and consistently refused to refer to themselves as being "born again." In fact, two of these four subjects initially declined to participate in the study because they had heard it was about "born again" Christians, and they did not feel that they would be appropriate subjects because they considered themselves to be "lifelong" Christians. These four subjects all claimed deep religious commitment, but no conversion experience as such. Take, for example, the exchange with Rod, a 21 year old senior:

Interviewer: *Okay, we'll start out with the basic stuff, and I already know a little bit of this, but it will get us going anyway. When did you become a Christian?*

Rod: *It's difficult to say, since growing up in the church I never really had a conversion experience. I remember it . . . as early as I think five years old is when I remember making my first commitment. Since then, it's very much been a process.*

Interviewer: *You basically consider yourself a lifelong Christian?*

Rod: *So far, yes, and I expect that to carry on.*

In contrast, consider the exchange with Jonathan, a 26 year old graduate student, campus minister, and (we think) convert:

Interviewer: *First of all, when did you become a Christian?*

Jonathan: *November 4, 1978. More of a theological reason, because in the way I believe and so forth there was a particular instant when you became a Christian, that you obeyed God's call. A lot of other people may think, "Well, somewhere along the line Jesus came into my life," and stuff. Well I know, because I obeyed, and so that's how come I can say, "Yes, I know the time and the hour."*

The four subjects (including Rod) who denied being converts were the same subjects who failed to display any propensity to engage in biographical reconstruction. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suspect that biographical reconstruction *is* unique to converts as Snow and Machalek suggest. Yet, where Snow and Machalek would interpret this finding primarily as *evidence* of an underlying change in consciousness among the converts, we believe that converts exhibit this pattern of language use *because it facilitates* the change we call "self-transformation." But why? And how?

Briefly (and relying on Mead [1932]), knowing who we are in the present (our self-concept) is dependent on the knowledge we obtain about ourselves in symbolic interaction with others. Such knowledge contains not only material for constructing ourselves in the present, but also material for constructing our past and future selves. That is, one function of the universe of discourse is to provide us with a methodology for the construction of our biographies. In self-transformation, we adopt a new universe of discourse and with it a new methodology for constructing the self. Consequently, self-transformation requires a rhetorical mechanism, or device, to assist people with the task of realigning their biographies in a way that makes sense from the new perspective. We use the term

"biographical reconstruction" to label the device, but the specific rhetoric used in any instance is a feature of the particular universe of discourse in question. For example, both Christian theology and Freudian psychoanalysis provide individuals with a rhetoric for achieving biographical reconstruction, but the content of each rhetoric, and consequently the meaning of the selves created, are very different.

In the "born again" Christian sub-culture, biographical reconstruction generally involves the repudiation of a sinful past. Attendant to that repudiation is the creation of a past self that is seen by the convert, from the converted vantage point, as a "spurious self," with his or her "real self" being the person now in communion with Jesus. In our interviews with these young college students, the past self was often seen not so much necessarily as having been sinful, but lost and without direction. Consider the following statement by Mark, a 20 year old sophomore:

> Mark: *I . . . consider the building of one's character like building a pyramid. I was bringing all these blocks, all these building blocks, and they were great, but then I couldn't really start building. I couldn't really go anywhere with these things; and then I was bringing all these things in and later I found a cornerstone, which was Jesus Christ; and then I was able to really start building.*

Whether or not Mark felt this way about himself before his conversion is almost irrelevant. What is relevant is that only by creating a past "spurious self" through biographical reconstruction is it possible for Mark to create his "real" Christian self in the present.

Biographical reconstruction was absent from the rhetoric of our four "lifelong" Christians, probably because they saw little or no discontinuity in their "real selves" (i.e., Christian) over time. In short, no self-transformation is evident. This is not to say that these subjects viewed themselves as unchanging — quite the contrary. But they were more likely to refer to change as "growth," or "a process," and never as a clean break with the past. And the growth they experienced always left fundamentally unchanged their "real" Christian selves.

While our four "lifelong" Christians failed to engage in biographical reconstruction, they did display, to varying degrees, the three remaining rhetorical properties argued by Snow and Machalek to be indicators of conversion. The fact that our four "lifelong" Christians were equally as likely as our 11 professed converts to suspend analogical reasoning, adopt a master attribution scheme, and embrace a master role, casts doubt, at least in our eyes, on Snow and Machalek's contention that these three rhetorical properties are unique to the convert. With respect to one of these (embracement of a master role) an alternative explanation more plausible to us, for there is some evidence in our data to support it, is this: The embracement of a master role was evident in the talk and reasoning of all 15 Christians because it especially facilitates high levels of religious *commitment,* a characteristic shared by *all* of our subjects.

If "conversion" involves the attempt to change, or create, the "real self," then it seems reasonable to view "commitment" as the attempt to maintain a consistency in the "real self." Where biographical reconstruction assists in the *creation* of a new "real self," the embracing of a master role appears to assist in the *maintenance* of the "real self." Highly committed, "lifelong" Christians are no less likely to display such indicators than are

their "converted" comrades because they share with these new Christians the desire and necessity of maintaining a consistent image of their "real selves" as Christians. To illustrate, consider again the willingness of Rod (a "lifelong" Christian) to embrace the master role of Christian by infusing all his other roles with his "real self":

> Rod: *Since my religious life, of course, permeates everything I do, my behavior is a function of my faith in the living God. And that includes all my behavior, whether I am edifying myself or not; all that behavior is a function of what I believe in.*

By allowing his "religious life" to "permeate" all his interactions and roles, Rod works to maintain his true Christian self. In a sense, Rod sustains his "real" Christian self in interaction with others by dissolving the distinction between his "real self" and various "spurious selves." By expanding the terrain of interaction to encompass all his roles, Rod provides himself with ample opportunities to display, affirm, and maintain his "real self."

Though we also discovered evidence of the suspension of analogical reasoning and the adoption of a master attribution scheme in the rhetoric of all 15 subjects, we have not yet formulated a theoretical link connecting these devices in any formal or explicit way to conversion, commitment, or any other facet of religious life. However, given that both self-professed converts and avowed non-converts displayed these characteristics, at the least we do not think that they are directly involved in conversion, as suggested by Snow and Machalek. It seems reasonable to us that all three indicators (*other* than biographical reconstruction) are likely to be a product of religious socialization, and are also likely to play some role in the process of maintaining religious commitment. This seems particularly true of the embracement of a master role, as we have explained just above.[2]

Since we are fairly certain that biographical reconstruction plays an important role in conversion, it is helpful to explore this idea in more detail. If biographical reconstruction functions as we suggest, then we would expect to find the greatest need for this device immediately following one's "born again" experience, with a diminishing need for it as one achieves a more complete self-transformation. To test this hypothesis, we went back to the interviews with our 11 self-professed converts to see whether or not the frequency of instances of biographical reconstruction varied with the length of time since their "born again" experience.

Our converts varied in what we might call their "spiritual age" (i.e., time elapsed since being "born again") from 8 to 72 months, with a mean of 35 months. Only three of our subjects had converted within the previous 12 months, however, and none had done so within the previous 6 months. Consequently, our sample had few newly born-again Christians, with most of them having a spiritual age of about 18 months or more. Despite this skewness in our sample, an examination of the transcripts did reveal a

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2. It is difficult for us to think of any theoretical basis on which one would expect these rhetorical indicators (other than biographical reconstruction) to be products of *conversion* but not of *socialization.* Would we not expect the children of (say) Christian fundamentalists to internalize these traits from their parents and ministers in growing up Christian? Would they not learn also how to *make use* of a master role, a master attribution scheme, and non-analogical reasoning in defense of their faith?

tendency for the newer converts to engage in relatively more biographical reconstruction than their "older" counterparts. For example, the four converts less than 18 months "old" averaged seven instances of biographical reconstruction per interview, while the remaining seven "older" Christians averaged just slightly more than two instances of biographical reconstruction per interview. Differences in the length of interview time between the two groups could not account for this difference. This bit of evidence, though certainly not conclusive, tends to support our view of the role that biographical reconstruction plays in conversion.[3]

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research on religious conversion has been inspired by the recent work of Snow and Machalek (1983; 1984). Their approach has encouraged us to think about conversion as involving a change in one's universe of discourse and has focused our attention on the role of language and rhetoric in conversion. However, based on our own ideas about conversion, on the role of language and rhetoric in conversion, and on some data from a small sample of evangelical Christians, we have arrived at an alternative view of conversion to that offered by Snow and Machalek.

Our primary difficulty with the Snow and Machalek formulation is that it does not seem to recognize sufficiently the essentially subjective nature of conversion. Where Snow and Machalek focus on "universe of discourse" and "consciousness," we focus on the self-concept; where Snow and Machalek use rhetorical indicators to identify the convert, we rely on the person's self-professed status as a convert. Where Snow and Machalek view particular kinds of language and rhetoric to be a *reflection* of some underlying changes in consciousness, we view particular kinds of language and rhetoric as *tools* individuals use to achieve a transformation of the self. Finally, where Snow and Machalek tend to view conversion as something that "happens to" a person, we view the person as an active participant in the creation of a new "real self."

In our attempt to assess the merits of the Snow and Machalek formulation, we conducted interviews with 15 evangelical Christians. We found clear evidence of the Snow and Machalek rhetorical indicators of conversion in our sample, suggesting that these indicators are generalizable to groups other than the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists studied by Snow (1976). However, we also found that only one of the four proposed indicators (biographical reconstruction) was capable of differentiating self-professed converts from self-professed non-convert believers. This finding, in our opinion, attenuates the utility of the Snow and Machalek formulation as it now stands. We suggest instead that while biographical reconstruction does seem to be involved in the process of conversion, the remaining three indicators do not. We think that these three remaining indicators (particularly the adoption of a master role) may facilitate religious *commitment*, which is why we found evidence of these indicators in the rhetoric of all 15 of our Christians. At this time, however, we have not undertaken to explain exactly how these indicators

3. A possibly interesting parallel occurs to us here between typical religious evolution at the *personal* and the *institutional* levels. That is, the declining significance of biographical reconstruction (and perhaps other novel elements) in the *convert* is in some ways analogous to the declining importance of the charismatic elements in a new "sect" as it evolves toward a "church."

facilitate religious commitment, leaving us uncertain about the exact nature of that relationship.[4]

It is our view that the study of religious conversion can greatly benefit from the meshing of two trends we see developing in the literature. On the one hand is the Snow and Machalek (1983) approach, with its emphasis on language, rhetoric, and universe of discourse. On the other hand are studies of conversion, or self-transformation, that focus on the self-concept (see Ebaugh, 1984; Gordon, 1974; 1984; Harrison, 1974; Staples, 1985; Straus, 1979; 1981; Travisano, 1970). Our own efforts have constituted an attempt to capitalize on the benefits of each approach. We propose that conversion be viewed as a *process;* that this process is fundamentally one of *self-transformation;* that self-transformation is achieved primarily through *language* (Mead, 1934; Schwalbe, 1983); and that the convert plays an *active* role in his or her own self-transformation. We feel that viewing the conversion experience in this way is consistent with contemporary thinking in social psychology and opens up numerous directions for research capable of deepening our understanding of conversion.

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4. Nor are we attempting at this time to deal with certain other discoveries from our data, which may prove interesting in subsequent research. For example, two additional traits were widespread (if not universal) in the accounts of the *converts* in our sample: 1) social "bridge-burning" (renunciation of formerly significant others like family members, spouses, lovers, or important friends); and 2) an especially powerful urge to witness (proselyte) about the "good news" of the newly found faith. Insofar as these traits are acted out, they are more behavioral than rhetorical, of course. However, they have a rhetorical function as well when included as part of the convert's "account." They may be simply subsumable as elements in biographical reconstruction, especially in the functional process of redefining the "self" in terms of new relationships and new responsibilities.

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