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What Have We Learned From Process Models Of Conversion? An Examination Of Ten Case Studies*

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Many attempts to understand the conversion process have been guided by Lofland and Stark's (1965) "process-model." We examine ten case studies of the conversion process in diverse groups in order to specify the conditions under which the Lofland-Stark model applies. Several components of the model are rejected for conceptual reasons. Other components are to be found in some types of groups but not in others. Only "formation of affective bonds with group members" and "intensive interaction with group members" seem to be indispensable prerequisites for conversion. Thus, any group which is to successfully convert people must be structured so as to foster interaction among group members. Because there is no one process-model that can accurately account for all cases of conversion, the process-model approach should be abandoned in favor of "subjective" and "organizational" approaches to understanding conversion.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, the sociological study of religion has been characterized by a dramatic increase in the amount of attention paid to the analysis of the so-called "new religions" (Long and Hadden, 1979:280). This increased concern with religious innovation has, in turn, given rise to increased interest among sociologists in the phenomenon of religious conversion. Because the "new religions" are often faced with the need to recruit new members from a population whose world views are often quite different from their own, the desire to understand these new religious movements has almost inevitably led to an interest in understanding the processes by which they recruit prospective members and by which they encourage them to renounce old beliefs and embrace new ones.

Many attempts to comprehend the conversion process have been guided explicitly or implicitly by the "process model" used by Lofland and Stark (1965) in their case study of the Unification Church when it was a relatively unknown sect struggling for survival

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on the West Coast. Based on their analysis of life histories of various early Unification Church members, Lofland and Stark formulated a “value-added model” delineating seven logically ordered stages through which people must pass if they are to become converts. According to these authors,

For conversion, a person must (1) experience enduring, acutely felt tensions, (2) within a religious problem solving perspective, (3) which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker, (4) encountering the (cult) at a turning point in his life, (5) wherein an affective bond is formed (or preexists) with one or more converts, (6) where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized, and (7) where if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction (1965:874).

When Lofland and Stark published their process-model in 1965, they were exploring virgin territory, but today there exist a number of case studies of the conversion process, many of which have directly addressed the issue of the validity of the Lofland-Stark model. In the decade and a half that have passed since the formulation of the Lofland-Stark model, a number of researchers have addressed the question of the model’s empirical adequacy by studying the conversion process as it takes place in such diverse groups as Hare Krishna (Judah, 1974), Divine Light Mission (Downton, 1980), Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism (Snow and Phillips, 1980) a UFO cult (Balch and Taylor, 1978), a metaphysical church given the pseudonym, “Church of the Sun” (Lynch, 1978), a fundamentalist Christian group called “Crusade House” (Austin, 1977), a group of Jesus People known as “Christ Communal Organization” (Richardson *et al.*, 1978, 1979), Mormons (Seggar and Kunz, 1972), and a Mormon schismatic group called the Levites (Bear, 1978). Some of these researchers have conceived of their studies explicitly as tests of the Lofland-Stark model; others have applied the model in a post-hoc fashion as a means of illuminating their data.

It should be noted here that Lofland and Stark never made any claims for their model as a general model of conversion applicable to all groups. In fact, Lofland has complained (1978:21) that too many researchers have tried to apply his model to the conversion setting they were studying rather than develop their own qualitative process-models of conversion. In spite of such disclaimers, the Lofland-Stark model has often been treated as if it were intended to be a general model of the conversion process.

One of the more recent — and more thoughtful — attempts to assess the general validity of the Lofland-Stark model has been provided by Snow and Phillips (1980). Based on their observations of adherents of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, Snow and Phillips argue that the Lofland-Stark model is not generally applicable. Of the seven proposed prerequisites for conversion, Snow and Phillips found that only one, intensive interaction with other converts, seemed essential to the conversion process as it took place among adherents to Nichiren Shoshu. They go on to argue that the conversion process may well be different in different kinds of groups and call for further study of the extent to which conversion “varies across groups differing in ideology, organization and public reaction” (1980:444). Baer (1978:293) and Richardson (1978:320) have suggested that the conversion process will be different in different organizational settings. Pilarzyk (1978) has contrasted the process of “conversion” in ISKON to the process “alternation” in Divine Light Mission and has pointed out the relationship between these differences and differences in the structure of the two groups.

Perhaps, then, instead of asking *whether* the Lofland-Stark model is applicable, we should be asking about *when* it is applicable. Enough case studies in different group

settings have now been conducted to enable us to draw some conclusions about the kinds of organizational contexts that seem to fit the model and the kinds of organizational contexts in which the model does not seem appropriate. Such an analysis of the organizational context of the conversion process should supply us with fresh insight about the dynamics of the conversion process.

To engage in the kind of analysis we are calling for, comparative data on conversion are necessary. Several researchers (Gordon, 1978; Pilarzyk, 1978; Gerlach and Hine, 1970) have tried to obtain such information by conducting research in several different group settings. Here we employ a different strategy for obtaining comparative data. In this paper we compare the results of ten case studies in the process-model tradition (including the original Unification Church study) in an attempt to see what conclusions we can draw about the nature of the conversion process as it occurs in different types of religious groups. We begin by outlining the most salient differences among the groups described in the case studies we examine. Second, we discuss some of the theoretical and methodological weaknesses of the process-model approach as it is applied in these case studies. Third, we examine the case studies to see to what extent and under what conditions the seven prerequisites to conversion proposed by Lofland and Stark seem to be valid. Fourth, we review the results of our analysis in the light of theoretical and empirical work stemming from other traditions of conversion research. Finally, we sketch some conclusions about the dynamics of the conversion process and about the directions that future conversion research might profitably take.

THE CASES

The ten cases we compare represent the total population of case studies of the conversion process of which we are aware that report enough information relevant to all seven tenets of the Lofland-Stark model to allow us to pass judgment on the extent to which the case in question fits the model.¹ We make no assumptions about the extent to which the movements studied in these ten case studies are representative of the total population of new religious movements in the United States. Given our purpose here, it is less important to have a representative sample than it is to have sufficient variation within the sample to allow us to observe the conditions under which the model being examined does and does not hold true (See Zetterberg, 1954:55-58).

As it turns out, there is quite a bit of variation to be found among the ten religious groups considered here. Three of ten cases studied deal with conversion to "Eastern religions" (Hare Krishna, Nichiren Shoshu and the Divine Light Mission); five deal with groups that derive from the Christian tradition (Christ Communal Organization, Crusade House, Mormons, Levites and Unification Church); the remaining studies deal with groups whose ideology could perhaps best be described as "occult" (The Church of the Sun and UFO cult).

The groups considered here vary along several other dimensions as well. Some of the groups advocate for their members a communal lifestyle in which most if not all member activities are conducted within the confines of the group, while others are considerably less "greedy," allowing members more unsupervised contact with non-members and greater access to participation in roles not sponsored by the group in question. Related to this

“communal vs. non-communal” dimension is another dimension along which these groups vary: the degree to which affiliation with a group tends to involve a radical discontinuity in social roles. Some groups (Hare Krishna, for example) encourage recruits to leave their families, jobs, educational institutions, etc., to take on a new round of life which is centered around the goals of the organization, while other groups, such as Nichiren Shoshu, do not see their goals as being inherently in conflict with the performance of other roles. Groups which encourage discontinuity of social roles are often, but not always, the same groups which sponsor communal life styles among their members.

The groups also vary with regard to the way they are perceived by the general public. Membership in certain of these groups, involving as it does a deviant lifestyle, often carries with it a certain amount of stigma, while membership in others does not bring with it any diminishing of “respectability.” A distinction must be made here between deviant lifestyles and deviant world views.² Members of the Church of the Sun, for example, often espouse beliefs which resemble an “occult smorgasbord” (Lynch, 1978:96), but they live in middle-class families, hold down middle-class jobs and continue to be respectable members of the “establishment.” It is interesting to note here that the groups that are relatively more stigmatized are the same groups which advocate radical discontinuity in social roles. It may be that it is the tendency for members of these groups to eschew traditional social roles that leads them to be stigmatized, or it may be that stigmatization (as labelling theorists might have it) reinforces tendencies to abandon accepted social roles.

Finally, the groups discussed here seem to differ with regard to the degree to which the ideology of the group is at odds with the world view members espoused before contact with the groups. Travisano (1970:600) distinguishes between two types of identity change. “Conversion” involves a “radical” reorganization of identity, meaning, and life, while “alternation” involves a less drastic change of world-view or identity, a variation on a theme as opposed to the substitution of a new melody. Recruitment to some of the groups in which we are interested (the Mormons for example) seems to involve for most recruits a change that Travisano would call “alternation,” while recruitment to other groups, such as the Divine Precepts cult, seems to more often involve “conversion.” Of the several variables we are working with, “degree of identity change” has presented us with the greatest difficulties in classification. Many of the cases do not present sufficient evidence for us to have a great deal of confidence in the way we have treated them here. And even if the researchers on whose work we depend had paid more attention to this variable, the problem of operationalizing it would still be formidable.

Table 1 displays our classification of the groups discussed here with regard to the several dimensions discussed above. In all cases, we have relied on published ethnographic information supplied by the authors of the case studies we are examining as the primary basis for our classifications. Note that we have treated all the variables discussed above as dichotomous. This almost certainly involves some degree of distortion and oversimplification. Clearly, a variable like “degree of identity change” is better represented as a continuum than as a dichotomy, and much the same could be said for the other variables as well. We have persisted in treating these variables as dichotomous for two reasons. First, the small number of cases with which we must work does not allow us to make use of finer distinctions. Second, our classifications in some cases are based on such limited information that to attempt to draw finer distinctions would be foolhardy.

Table 1: Variation Among the Conversion Cases

1.1	Does the group in question advocate for its members a communal lifestyle?	
	Communal	Non-Communal
	Christ Communal Organization ^a Hare Krishna UFO Cult ^b	Church of the Sun Crusade House ^c Divine Light Mission ^d Levites ^e Nichiren Shoshu
1.2	Does membership in the group in question involve a radical discontinuity in social roles?	
	Radical Discontinuity	More Moderate Change
	Christ Communal Organization Divine Light Mission Hare Krishna UFO Cult Unification Church	Church of the Sun Crusade House ^f Levites ^f Mormons Nichiren Shoshu
1.3	Are members of the group in question regarded as "deviant" by the "general public?"	
	Stigmatized	Non-Stigmatized
	Christ Communal Organization ^g Divine Light Mission Hare Krishna UFO Cult Unification Church	Church of the Sun Crusade House ^h Levites Mormons Nichiren Shoshu
1.4	Do members of the group in question see themselves as having moved from one universe of discourse to another?	
	Conversion	Alternation
	Church of the Sun Divine Light Mission Hare Krishna Nichiren Shoshu Unification Church	Christ Communal Organization ⁱ Crusade House ^j Levites Mormons UFO Cult

- a. At the time of the fieldwork conducted by Richardson *et al.*, 1979, Christ Communal Organization lived communally; today most members have apparently abandoned the communal lifestyle.
- b. Although the lifestyle here would not usually be described as "communal," members' daily round of life is devoted to group activities and group goals (Balch and Taylor, 1978).
- c. Members live in a common residence, but the lifestyle here seems better described as co-operative than communal (Austin, 1977:283).
- d. About 25% of the members of Divine Light Mission live communally.
- e. Some members live in a communal setting but most do not (Baer, 1978:280).
- f. For those who live communally the change in lifestyle can be assumed to have been greater than for those who do not live communally (Baer, 1978:280).
- g. Here one gets the impression that it is members' lifestyles rather than their beliefs which are regarded as deviant (Richardson, *et al.*, 1978, 1979).
- h. Austin (1977:283) refers to the group as "deviant," but our reading of his evidence suggests that he is being a little over-dramatic here.

- i. Members seem to view their conversions as a radical change, but for many this "radical change" represents a return to fundamentalist Christian beliefs (Richardson *et al.*, 1978).
- j. For approximately half the members included in Austin's (1977) sample, perceived change appears to have been quite minimal. For the other half, the degree of perceived change seems to have been somewhat greater.

Table 1 may give the reader the impression that the organization of the groups we discuss is static. This is clearly not the case. Religious organizations — like other organizations — evolve over time, but this evolution is impossible to capture in the type of classificatory project in which we are engaged here. To take only one example, Christ Communal Organization was clearly a communal organization when Richardson *et al.*, (1978, 1979) did their fieldwork. Today, however, most members of the CCO do not live communally. In order to classify groups in such circumstances we have treated them as if they were frozen in the ethnographic present. In other words, our classificatory scheme treats each group as if it has not changed since the research on the basis of which we have classified it was conducted.

Table 1 may also give the impression that the groups we discuss here are monolithic in structure. Again, this is not the case. For example, some members of the Levites live communally but most do not (Baer, 1978:280). In such cases, we have tried to place the group in question in the category that best describes the experience of most group members at the time the research on that particular group was conducted.

The small number of cases with which we are working here makes any kind of sophisticated quantitative analysis of our data unfeasible. All we will be able to do is examine each stage of the Lofland-Stark model, indicate how many of the cases in question conform to the model's prediction and make a few broad descriptive statements about any characteristics of the groups which conform to the model's predictions that seem to distinguish them from those which do not conform.

The small number of cases with which we must deal is not the only methodological problem that confronts us. Another major difficulty is that we are attempting to compare studies which were not conducted with an eye to facilitating comparison. Each author has used his own operational definitions and his own measures for the various variables singled out for examination by Lofland and Stark. We are often forced to accept an author's assessment of whether or not the case he is examining conforms to what would be predicted by the model at face value, since we are not always provided with enough empirical data to enable us to evaluate the author's assessment.

PROBLEMS WITH PROCESS-MODELS

Other problems with the approach we have employed in our analysis here stem from methodological shortcomings endemic to the process-model tradition. One of these has to do with the question of level of analysis. Conversion is usually conceived of theoretically as an individual phenomenon. The Lofland-Stark model explains conversion in terms of the background characteristics of individuals and in terms of situational factors that impinge upon the lives of individuals. In spite of this, our study involves the religious group as the unit of analysis. It is clearly not quite kosher to test a model predicting

the behavior of individuals by examining data collected about the groups with which the individuals may have affiliated themselves.

Our reason for proceeding in this manner is, of course, that we have no choice. From Lofland and Stark on, researchers on conversion to new religions have tended to focus on the group as the unit of analysis, on the apparent assumption that all individuals who join a particular group being with the same background characteristics, join for the same reasons and go through the same changes. There is good reason to doubt that this is always so. Austin's study of Crusade House (1977:284-85) makes it clear that for only about half of the "converts" studied did involvement with Crusade House actually involve a drastic change in behavior (see also Richardson, 1978). Gordon (1974) has provided us with a cogent exposition on the varieties of identity transformation that take place among the "Jesus People." Lofland and Skonovd (1981) have recently argued for the existence of six "conversion motifs," several of which could easily characterize converts participating in the same group. Wallis' (1977) discussion of recruitment in the Scientology movement shows a special sensitivity to the differences in motivations, experiences and movement career patterns among recruits. Pilarzyk (1978), in his account of conversion in ISKON and Divine Light Mission also is careful to point out the differences that characterize the experiences of recruits to the same group. Balch (1980) has advised us on the basis of his study of a UFO cult not to be too quick to jump to the conclusion that all those who publically perform the role of convert have totally embraced that role. It is our contention that the implicit assumption that all members of a given group have all undergone the same essential transformation process and can therefore be regarded as a single unit for the purposes of analysis constitutes one of the major weaknesses of the typical case study of the conversion process.

Furthermore, focusing on the group rather than the individual as the unit of analysis implies that conversion is a one-event phenomenon. Richardson and his associates (Richardson, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1982; Richardson and Stewart, 1978; Richardson, *et al.*, 1979) have argued that conversion is often a multi-event phenomenon and that, for a solid understanding of the conversion process, we must pay attention to "conversion trajectories." If we focus on the group as the unit of analysis we eliminate the possibility of tracing the individual from one group to another as he or she pursues a "conversion career."

Related to the level of analysis problem is the failure on the part of many researchers to attempt to actually measure in any way the extent to which a change in identity has actually taken place. In most cases it is simply assumed that affiliation with a group necessarily entails identity transformation. Recruitment is understood to imply conversion. Therefore, what purport to be studies of converts to religious ideologies are actually studies of recruits to religious groups. But as Zygmunt (1972) has forcefully argued, recruitment and conversion are two separate processes. Judah (1974:169) has suggested that individuals may become committed to participation in the Hare Krishna movement long before they really comprehend or embrace the group's ideology. Balch (1980) has shown that active participants in the UFO cult harbored persistent doubts about the validity of the world view espoused by its leaders. Strauss (1976, 1979) has also shown that people who have chosen to play the role of convert are not necessarily the "true believers" that outsiders take them to be.

This puts the researcher in the peculiar position of trying to account for something which may not have taken place. Seggar and Kunz's (1972) study of "conversion" to Mormonism, for example presents no evidence that could convince the reader that the outlooks of their respondents have changed. Is it, then, newsworthy when they find that the Lofland-Stark process-model, designed to account for conversion, does not seem to have much heuristic value in explaining a change in organizational affiliation?

Another methodological weakness of conversion studies has been alluded to by such researchers as Snow and Phillips (1980), Beckford (1978), Taylor (1976), Berger and Luckmann (1967) and by Lofland himself (1978). Most conversion studies rely for their evidence of the factors conditioning the conversion process on accounts collected from converts after the fact. The problem with this is that, since conversion is generally conceptualized as a radical reorganization of experience, the converts' accounts of their past experiences may be best seen as products of their new identity-transformation process rather than as objective reports on the antecedents of the conversion process. Converts, in an attempt to reinterpret to themselves, to one another, and to outsiders the content of life before conversion, often construct testimonials of the "I once was lost, but now I'm found" variety. Beckford (1978:260) has argued that conversion accounts should be understood as creative constructions on the part of the individuals within a collectivity to present their experiences in a manner that will be appealing and convincing to others. If accounts are to be seen as constructions in the present rather than as recollections of the past, we must be skeptical of studies which take such accounts at face value as statements of the motives and events which actually led to conversion.

This does not necessarily mean however that we should be equally skeptical of all aspects of accounts. Respondents' recollections can often be corroborated by other methods. It strikes us that we might be able to place somewhat more credence in converts' recollections of actual events in their lives than in their recollections of motives or feeling states. Thus we would be inclined to make more of a statement that a convert came into contact with a group shortly after moving to San Francisco that we would make of the statement that this marked a period of great tension in the converts' life.

Because of the above mentioned weaknesses in the studies we examine and because of difficulties we faced in comparing the studies, any findings drawn from them must be interpreted with extreme caution. Nevertheless, we proceed in our analysis with the conviction that conclusions drawn from an analysis of imperfect studies will still be useful to scholars trying to devise ways to improve our state of knowledge in this area.

TESTING THE LOFLAND-STARK MODEL

Table 2 presents in schematic form our findings about the extent to which the cases we have examined at second hand seem to conform to the Lofland-Stark model.

TENSIONS

Most of the studies inspected reveal that converts admit to experiencing high levels of tension, but there are good reasons for refusing to accept this evidence at face value. The main problem here is that we have no way of knowing whether experiencing tensions

Table 2: Do the Cases Fit the Lofland Stark Model?^a

	Tensions	Previous Dispositions	Seekership	Turning Point	Affective Bonds	Neutralized Extra-Cult Attachments	Intensive Interaction
Church of the Sun	Yes	Yes	Yes	½	Yes	Yes	Yes
Christ Communal Organization	Yes	Yes	Yes	no evidence	Yes	Yes	Yes
Crusade House	½	½	No	½	Yes	No	Yes
Divine Light Mission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unification Church ^b	Yes	½	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hare Krishna	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Levites	Yes	Yes	No	no evidence	Yes	No	Yes
Mormons	No	No	No	No	No	No	no evidence
Nichiren Shoshu	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
UFO Cult	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

a. Classifying the cases has involved so many "judgement calls," that these can not be noted here. Readers are referred to the original studies, from which they may draw their own conclusions.

b. Lofland (1978) reevaluated his original process model on the basis of changes which had occurred in the recruitment practices of the Unification Church. Our classification here is based on the 1978 reevaluation.

distinguishes converts from non-converts. Although Heirich (1977:664-65) found that many of his respondents who had become involved in the Catholic Pentacostal movement did report high levels of tension, this did not differentiate them in any significant way from a matched sample of non-Pentacostals. Similarly, Richardson *et al.*, (1978:49) report that many recruits to Christ Communal Organization experienced tension but add that this was probably true of all youth in the sixties. Even Lofland and Stark admit in their original study that the problems experienced by their converts may not be qualitatively different from those experienced by other people (1965:867). All they assert is that converts experience these problems more severely and over longer time spans. Picking up on this, Snow and Phillips (1980:435) argue that what distinguishes converts from non-converts is not that they experience a higher level of tension but that they have a greater tendency to reexamine their biographies in order to find evidence of discontent prior to conversion. In other words, Snow and Phillips are suggesting that reports of tension may be better treated as evidence of retrospective reinterpretation of converts' histories than as actual evidence of converts' feeling-states prior to conversion. It should perhaps be noted in passing that there is a tradition of conversion studies (which we refer to later in this essay as the "organizational approach") which does not assume the importance of felt tension in the conversion process (see, for example, Gerlach and Hine, 1968).

It is interesting to note in this context that three cases where evidence of tension prior to recruitment was absent are the three cases where we seem the least justified in talking about conversion. Seggar and Kunz, are, in their study of Mormons, really talking about recruitment rather than identity change and present no evidence that any type of attitude change or identity change has, in fact, taken place among their "converts." Balch and Taylor (1978:60) report that the phenomenon they observed in the UFO cult should not be thought of as conversion since they found no evidence of drastic change

among recruits who were already familiar with the "cultic milieu." Austin (1977:284-85) found that not all people who became residents of Crusade House experienced this as a drastic change in behavior and that it was only among those that did experience it as such that high levels of tension were reported. While one might argue that this proves that tension *is* a precondition for a radical change in identity, one might equally well argue that it merely proves that a feeling of radical change is a precondition to the perception of tension.

We are not suggesting here that converts to these groups did *not* experience tension. We assert only that evidence of tension based on retrospective accounts is not very convincing. It should be pointed out that the one study of which we are aware that actually measured tension *during* the conversion process (Galanter, 1980:1579) did find that participants in a Unification Church workshop scored lower on a well-being scale than a matched population of non-members.

RELIGIOUS PROBLEM-SOLVING PERSPECTIVE

When Lofland and Stark argue that a religious problem-solving perspective is a precondition to conversion, they are trying to make the point that the converts' previous cognitive orientations will make them more or less likely to accept the ideology of a particular group. A number of students of religious conversion have argued that this is the case (Gordon, 1974; Greil, 1977; Harrison, 1974; Richardson, 1978; Richardson *et al.*, 1978, 1979). The work of Richardson and his associates (1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981) on conversion trajectories also implies that predispositions are an important factor to consider in attempting to understand the conversion process. All but one of the case studies examined here report some degree of disposition to accept a group's ideology prior to coming into contact with the group. For example, Lynch (1978:100) reports that two-thirds of the members of the Church of the Sun had read at least one book on the occult before coming in contact with the group. Baer (1978:291) reports that over 95 percent of his Levite respondents had had a religious problem-solving perspective prior to contact with the group. Snow and Phillips' (1980) study of Nichiren Shoshu offers us the best example of a group whose members do not seem to have espoused a religious problem-solving perspective prior to conversion, and even here, one might argue, the evidence is less than conclusive, since the measures Snow and Phillips chose made it unlikely that they would find evidence of the existence of a disposition to find Nichiren Shoshu ideology appealing.

But perhaps we should not make too much of this finding that converts seem to be predisposed to joining the movements that they join. First of all, the finding is not all that surprising; what we are saying, in effect, is that people join religious movements whose ideologies make sense to them, and, after all, who could really expect otherwise? Second, one might well argue that there are few world-views in existence which do not share some elements with one another. If this is the case, then, finding some kind of match-up between old world-view and new is just a question of looking hard enough. Third, in cases of "alternation," the proposition that individuals will espouse ideologies compatible with their previous dispositions is true by definition. If people have changed from one system of beliefs to another which is not radically different, then it is tautological to say that there must be similarities between old beliefs and new.

We are aware of several studies of new religious movements which compare the world-views, attitudes and psychological states of people who join a particular group to those of people who do not. Galanter (1980: 1578) found that individuals who joined the "Moonies" had stronger affiliative needs than individuals who attended a workshop, but did not join. In a different study of "Moonies", Barker (1981) finds a number of cognitive and emotional variables which distinguish converts both from people who attended a workshop and from a control group which was not connected to the Unification Church. Barker's data suggests that the role of previous dispositions may vary according to the recruitment strategies and structure of the group with which the potential convert has come in contact. More studies of this type will have to be conducted before we may accurately assess the importance of previous dispositions to the conversion process.

SEEKERSHIP

We find evidence in six out of ten cases of some pattern of religious seekership and it is possible that in some of the other cases (e.g., Snow and Phillips, 1980), the reason that no evidence of seekership was found is that the researchers did not look very hard for it.

A pattern of seekership seems more likely to precede conversion when the group involved advocates a communal lifestyle, when the group involved is stigmatized by the community at large and when conversion involves a radical discontinuity of social roles. The majority of the groups in which no pattern of seekership was found are those in which the process of change found within the groups is better described as "alternation" than as "conversion."

It should be noted that the patterns of seekership described in the case studies we examined do not always support our "true believer" stereotype of the religious seeker. The "seekers" described in the case studies are not anomic fanatics frantically chasing after meaning, but rather people who seem curious about religious and/or occult matters. Richardson *et al.*, (1978:48) report members of the Christ Communal Organization had been "looking for something" prior to conversion, but they do not say that they were looking frantically or desperately. Before joining the UFO cult, (Balch and Taylor, 1978:51, 57), "converts" viewed themselves as "metaphysical seekers," but seekership seems to have been a role with which they were quite comfortable. Downton (1980) in his study of Divine Light Mission emphasizes the casualness of the seekership phase as well as the gradualness of the conversion process as whole.

TURNING POINT

Most of the individuals described by the case studies we examined report that contact with the group with which they affiliated came at a turning point in their lives. The one case where we find no evidence of people experiencing a "turning point" is the case (Seggar and Kunz, 1972) where we seem least justified in talking about "conversion." But as Snow and Phillips (1980:439) point out, we must be cautious about accepting such evidence at face value. All of the factors which make us unwilling to accept "a state of acutely-felt tension" as a prerequisite to conversion make us equally unwilling to incorporate the idea

of the necessity of a social or psychological turning point. The problem of how to interpret people's accounts of their conversions is again relevant here. When people tell us that their conversions came at turning points in their lives, are they giving us factual accounts of events as they occurred, or are they reconstructing their biographies in such a way as to justify their conversions? After all, if conversion is experienced as a radical transformation of identity, behavior and life, then it follows logically that it must have come at a turning point in one's life. In the convert's eyes, it is the fact of the experience of conversion that defines the turning point as a turning point.

AFFECTIVE BONDS

The formation of affective bonds within the group seems to be an important part of the conversion process in eight out of the ten cases we have been examining. Seggar and Kunz (1972:182) report that the formation of affective bonds does not seem to be an important feature in affiliation to Mormonism among their sample of "converts," but it is doubtful that we are really dealing with conversion in this case anyway. Balch and Taylor (1978) do not find either the preexistence or formation of affective bonds among converts to the UFO cult, but there were specific features of the structure and ideology of the group that discouraged the formation of such ties.

NEUTRALIZATION OF EXTRA-CULT ATTACHMENTS

In six of our ten cases we find that conversion is associated with the absence or neutralization of affective bonds outside the group. Neutralization of extra-cult attachments seems most important in groups where conversion involves a radical transformation of social roles and where conversion involves the sacrifice of social respectability. The only "respectable" group in which we find an absence of affective bonds is the Church of Sun (Lynch, 1978:105). We find here little pressure on converts from either within the group or outside it to give up attachments with non-members; rather, it seems that we are dealing here with a group whose members never had very many close personal ties to begin with.

Our data support Snow and Phillips' (1980:442) contention that neutralization of extra-cult attachments will be an important part of the conversion process primarily in the context of "deviant" groups. Our data also support the argument of Richardson and Stewart (1978) that severing of extra-cult ties will be important only in those cases where significant others are not likely to support the convert's new perspective. They suggest that if significant others *do* support the convert's new perspective, then the *presence* of extra-cult ties will facilitate conversion. Presumably, converts to groups which are stigmatized and which involve a radical discontinuity in social roles will be less likely to find support for their new perspective among significant others.

INTENSIVE INTERACTION

Intensive interaction with other members of the group seems to be an important part of the conversion process in all ten cases. The one apparent exception to this generalization

is the UFO cult (Balch and Taylor, 1978) where a high degree of interpersonal interaction was not encouraged, but even here an extremely high level of commitment was demanded and members were required to make the group the central focus of all action. Thus, a building up of personal commitment through the creation of a high level of involvement with group goals was found in all ten cases.

CONCLUSIONS

Conceptual weaknesses with the formulation of three of Lofland and Stark's seven prerequisites for conversion (e.g., "tensions," "religious problem-solving perspective," and "turning point") make us unwilling to place too much credence in data from our case studies which speak to these aspects of the model. We turn then to an examination of the circumstances under which the remaining four proposed elements in the model ("seekership," "affective bonds," "neutralization of extra-cult attachments," and "intensive interaction") will be present.

Lofland and Stark's original process model was based on observations of a group which was regarded as deviant by society at large and which demanded of new members a radical change in social roles. Those studies which have found the Lofland-Stark model most adequate have been those which have addressed themselves to movements which share these features. Thus, the Lofland and Stark model seems to describe accurately the religious conversion process as it occurs in one organizational context. Where it has not proven to be an adequate description, this may not be because the model is a bad one but because the organizational context has been different from which Lofland and Stark observed.

It may prove profitable to over-simplify the differences among the groups examined here into two ideal-types. Type One includes groups which, like the Unification Church, are stigmatized and involve a radical discontinuity of social roles. (In addition to the Unification Church, the "purest" examples of this type are Hare Krishna and Divine Light Mission). Type Two includes groups, like Crusade House, the Levites and Nichiren Shoshu, which are not stigmatized and which do not sponsor a drastic transformation of social roles. Seekership and the neutralization of extra-cult attachments seem to be prerequisites for conversion in the context of Type One groups but not in the context of Type Two groups. The reasons for these differences are not hard to understand. Groups which allow or encourage members to continue to pursue activities in the "outside world" are capable of recruiting new members via pre-existing social networks (Snow *et al.*, 1980; Rockford, 1982; Greil and Rudy, 1984). In such groups, new recruits may make contact with the group through friends, relatives, and acquaintances who are already members. It stands to reason that in such cases, seekership is less likely to be a prerequisite to conversion than in situations where the activities of group members tend to be focused within the confines of the group. In Type Two groups, it is quite easy for potential recruits to happen upon a group even if they are not actively involved in the seekership role; in Type One groups, it seems less likely that individuals will encounter the group unless they have defined themselves as being "in the market" for conversion.

There are two possible reasons why the neutralization of extra-cult attachments seems important to the conversion process in the context of Type One groups but not in the

context of Type Two groups. First, since Type One groups involve a radical discontinuity of social roles, joining a group of this type almost by definition entails breaking off contacts with individuals with whom one associated in previous roles. The second reason has been alluded to earlier in this essay. Type One groups espouse world-views and/or lifestyles which are seen as deviant by the society at large. If members are to hold fast to deviant world-views or lifestyles, it may be necessary to insulate them from contact with former significant others who might discredit them. Since the world-views and lifestyles of Type Two groups are less likely to be seen as deviant by the "outside world" it may be less necessary for these groups to try to sever affective bonds between new converts and non-members. Galanter (1980:1578) found that a crucial difference between people who joined the Unification Church and those who toyed with the idea of membership but did not join was that the latter group had more "outside affiliations" than the former group. Long and Hadden (1983) have attributed problems experienced by the Unification Church in retaining members to shortcomings in the group's socialization techniques; we would argue that these problems may be due rather to the difficulties inherent in the trying to maintain the boundary between members and non-members (Greil and Rudy, 1984).

Regardless of organization context, two elements of the Lofland-Stark model seem to be crucial to the conversion process; these are affective bonds and intensive interaction with group members. Snow and Phillips (1980:444) have asserted that "the interactive process holds the key to understanding conversion." Our findings lead us to support this conclusion. Our evidence suggests to us that the crucial dynamic in the conversion process is the process of coming to see oneself as one's reference group sees one, of coming to see that reality is what one's friends say it is. (Lofland and Stark, 1965:871; Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). The formation of affective ties and intensive interaction within the group became all-important because it is through becoming committed to an organization and the people in it that an individual becomes converted to the organization's perspective.

Organizations which seek to foster the conversion process all seek to create an atmosphere in which potential converts are encouraged to interact with those who may be expected to support their new world-view and discouraged from interacting with those who might be expected to challenge that world-view. Because they are perceived as deviant, Type One groups may find it necessary to regulate contact between members and non-members to a greater extent than do Type Two Groups. Nonetheless, in our view, the essential dynamic of the conversion process remains the same: conversion is a process whereby one comes eventually to see the world from the perspective of one's new reference group. Any religious group which is to be successful in facilitating the conversion of recruits will need to be structured in such a way as to foster intensive interaction among group members.

It should be noted here that there is nothing specifically "religious" about this process; any group which intends to encourage identity change among its members will be likely to be structured along similar lines. Elsewhere (Greil and Rudy, 1983, 1984), we have discussed at greater length the common features which we believe are to be found in all "Identity Transforming Organizations."

Because conversion takes place in different organizational contexts, it is foolhardy to expect that a process model like the one proposed by Lofland and Stark will accurately describe *the* conversion process. There is no such thing as *the* conversion process; rather,

there are as many conversion processes as there are organizational contexts in which conversion takes place. As stated earlier, Lofland himself has encouraged researchers to develop their own qualitative process-models of conversion instead of slavishly applying his (1978:21). In a more recent piece Lofland and Skonovd (1981) have outlined six different "conversion motifs." In our opinion, there is little to be gained from such a proliferation of process-models. Nor are we sympathetic to attempts to save the Lofland-Stark Model by making it more general (Austin, 1977; Bankston *et al.*, 1981). The problem with the Lofland-Stark model is not that it is not general enough; the problem with it is that it is a process-model. Process-models are descriptive models which attempt to describe ideal-type sequences in which given phenomena generally develop. If the interactive process is indeed the key to understanding conversion, then, it would seem advisable to abandon the search for the sequence or set of sequences that best *describes* the conversion process in favor of an attempt to grasp the *dynamics* of the social interaction that is the essence of conversion.

We conclude this essay by noting briefly the relationship between the approach to conversion which we are espousing and others currently being done in this field.

We may have given the impression in this essay that all studies of the process of recruitment and conversion to new religious groups have employed a process-model approach. This is not the case. At least three other approaches can be discerned among the relatively large number of conversion studies that have appeared in recent years. The approach with which our concluding remarks are most compatible is one which Balch (1979) refers to as the "structural-functional" approach but which we prefer to call the organizational approach. This approach emphasizes the way in which organizational patterns of interaction are structured so as to encourage the acceptance of a new world view (Kanter, 1968, 1972; Gerlach and Hine, 1968; Hine, 1970; Bromley and Shupe, 1979b; Harrison, 1974; Lofland, 1978; Richardson *et al.*, 1979; Greil and Rudy, 1983, 1984; Balch, 1979). The second approach, which Strauss (1976, 1979) has called the "subjectivist" approach and which Long and Hadden (1983) have called the "drift" approach,³ concentrates on the way social actors go about constructing for themselves the role of convert (Lofland, 1978; Lofland and Skonovd, 1981; Strauss, 1976, 1979; Balch, 1979; Bromley and Shupe, 1979a; Taylor, 1976; Richardson, 1982). The third approach is the brainwashing approach (Clark, 1979; Conway and Siegelman, 1978; Enroth, 1977; Patrick and Dulack, 1976; Singer, 1979; Stoner and Parke, 1977). This approach argues that the explanation for conversion is to be found in the unorthodox psychological techniques employed by "cults." Sociologists, especially those writing from within the subjectivist tradition (Robbins and Anthony, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1982; Richardson, 1982; Shupe and Bromley, 1979) have criticized the brainwashing approach to conversion, charging that it is better understood as an ideological justification for opposition to new religious movements than as a social scientific tool for understanding them. This is not the place for a detailed evaluation of the brainwashing approach to conversion. Suffice it to say that the brainwashing approach's insistence that there is something psychologically unique about the process of conversion to deviant religious groups stands in direct contrast to the organizational approach we have advocated here. Our analysis suggests that conversion is to be explained by the same concepts that sociologists employ to illuminate any socialization process; the difference between conversion and other kinds of socialization lies not in psychological processes involved but in the organizational context in which

it takes place. We agree with the assertion of Long and Hadden (1983:13) that conversion ought to be studied as one type of socialization activity.

Long and Hadden (1983) have suggested that the apparent contradiction between the "drift" approach to conversion and the brainwashing approach may be resolved. The brainwashing approach, in their view, emphasizes the organizational pressures placed upon potential converts while the drift approach emphasizes the voluntaristic nature of conversion and the precariousness of commitment. They argue that there is no logical contradiction between an approach that emphasizes the importance of the individual and an approach that emphasizes organizational pressures on the individual. Long and Hadden are right to assert that there is no inherent incompatibility between these two approaches, but they are wrong to equate the brainwashing approach with the organizational approach. The brainwashing approach posits a radical discontinuity between conversion and other socialization processes; it is the organizational approach that emphasizes the social context of conversion.

We agree with Long and Hadden that an emphasis on the situational context of identity transformation is not incompatible with the recognition that people creatively work out their own identities. To see identity transformation as the willful act of individuals trying to solve problems of living is not necessarily to deny that social situations pose the problems that must be solved and help to channel the directions that people take in trying to solve them.

In our opinion both the organizational approach and the subjectivist approach promise to enhance our understanding of the conversion process. Future research must focus on the ways in which individuals construct new identities in different types of organizational settings. And, if future research is to be directed toward understanding the conversion process in different social settings, then it is imperative that researchers begin to develop data collection and classification procedures amenable to the kind of cross-group comparisons that we have attempted in this essay.

FOOTNOTES

1. If any readers are aware of other cases that fit our criteria for inclusion in this study, the authors would appreciate it if they would bring these to our attention.
2. We are indebted to Melinda Bollar Wagner for pointing out to us in personal conversation the importance of this distinction.
3. The approach Long and Hadden call "drift" seems to incorporate both the process-model approach and the subjectivist approach.

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