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Source: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Jun., 1985), pp. 163-179

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [Society for the Scientific Study of Religion](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1386340>

Accessed: 02/09/2013 16:22

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The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research*

JAMES T. RICHARDSON†

Conversion/recruitment research has been guided for years by a traditional paradigm assuming a passive subject being converted by external powers over which no control is possible. The traditional model is also quite psychological and deterministic. A new or alternative paradigm has been developing, derived mainly from studies of recruitment to new religions. It posits a more active, meaning-seeking subject who exercises volition in deciding to convert to a new religion. The conflict between the new and the old paradigms is discussed including characterizing the so-called brainwashing model as a modern variant of the traditional paradigm. Also, the idea of an alternative conversion paradigm is contrasted to other theoretical perspectives from recent papers by Lofland and Skonovd and by Long and Hadden.

The topic of conversion has been a major theme in the sociology of religion for years, and this interest has grown considerably with the advent of new religious groups in our society and other countries. There has been a related growth of interest in recruitment to social movements in general, provoked by the rapid growth and spread of politically-oriented movements of the 1960's.¹ In popular terms, this interest has been given impetus by a simple but important question: "Why would representative members of the best educated and most affluent generation in American history get involved in such strange groups and movements that seem opposed to dominant political structure and cultural themes and values in our society?"

Those interested in answering such questions for political movements were guided at first by traditional deprivation and strain-oriented psychological theories that have predominated for years in the areas of recruitment. But, although some researchers and others insisted on retaining the traditional paradigm approach to this area (Feuer, 1969), others quickly began to modify the approach (Flacks, 1967, 1973; Skolnick, 1969). Some researchers stressed the sensibleness of participation, and noted the idealism of many participants who claimed to be acting out values learned in the home and in their educational experiences. There was no "generation gap" to be found, and the youth

**This article was presented in an earlier version at the International Society for Political Psychology annual meeting, Washington, D.C., 1979. Appreciation is expressed to Brock Kilbourne, Roger Straus, James Downton, Thomas Robbins, Eileen Barker, John Lofland, Robert Balch, and Anson Shupe, Jr. for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts.*

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1. In this paper the term conversion is being use somewhat broadly to connote change in a person's behaviors and beliefs. Thus the term is not limited to religious phenomena; and indeed the ideas associated with conversion can be found under a number of rubrics. Our intent is not to tie the term conversion directly to any definition of religion or even just to religion, but instead to focus on changes in beliefs and behaviors *without* considering the characteristics of the sets of beliefs and behaviors involved.

involved were there *because of* rather than in spite of their unique generational history. There was an air of *affirmation* of personal values in the actions of the dissidents, at least as implied and sometimes stated directly in some of the studies done of this phenomenon.

Thus, almost without any awareness of what was taking place, there was something akin to a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) in the way recruitment and involvement in political social movements were interpreted. Shortly thereafter the same sort of paradigm shift became discernible in the writings of some researchers of new religions. Although this new view of religious conversion has not become the unanimous perspective in all the social and behavioral sciences interested in conversion, it has achieved a prominent position in certain circles. A major conflict has developed between the emerging paradigm and more traditional approaches. This paper focuses in some detail on this conflict between paradigms in conversion research, attempting to explain what happened, and tie the developments to changes within related areas and broader disciplinary perspectives.

Specifically, the major thesis of this paper is that something akin to a new alternative paradigm in the Kuhnian sense may be developing in conversion research, especially research in sociology and social psychology.² The old conversion paradigm, with its deprivation and strain assumptions about the passivity of human beings, and its over-emphasis on the individual, is giving way, at least partially, to another view of conversion. This new view stresses humans as volitional entities who assign meaning to their action and to the actions of others within a social context. This paradigm shift may well be a part of related developing concerns within the disciplines of sociology and social psychology. However, research in the area of conversion and recruitment is contributing its own independent impact. It is not just "tagging along" behind changes in those areas. This new research from studies of new religions will be examined in some depth, after first characterizing the traditional conversion paradigm.

The Old Conversion Paradigm

The traditional conceptualization of conversion derives from the culture of which it is a part. The prototype of conversion for the traditional paradigm is the common interpretation of the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. The "Pauline experience" has been a major basis of understanding new religious experience for people of Western European culture, especially since the time of the Reformation. The revivalist tradition in America continued and even augmented the focus on Pauline-like conversion experience because of the emphasis on recruitment brought on by the "free market" in religion resulting from the lack of an official state church (Berger, 1967). Some segments of Christendom have thoroughly extracted the emotion from such experiences, and have attempted to make them more gradual and predictable in occurrence, treating them as rites of passage. But the prototype is still there, and it has even gained new impetus of

2. As Masterson (1970) has pointed out, the term "paradigm" is used in several different ways in Kuhn's work. We avoid an argument over the term's meaning, but instead use the term paradigm to mean an over-arching perspective that suggests the problems to be studied, and the methods to use in seeking answers to research questions in a given area. We also assume that a paradigm in the social and behavioral sciences furnishes a perspective about the basic nature of human beings and of the social, biological, and psychological world of which they are a part. See Perry (1977) and Eckberg and Hill (1979) for discussion of applications of the paradigm concept in sociology.

late via some of the new religious movements of Christian origin, such as the Charismatic Renewal and the Jesus Movement (Richardson & Reidy, 1980). Even some of the Eastern-oriented religions such as Hare Krishna have adopted a view of conversion that seems similar in important ways to the Pauline experience (see Pilarzyk, 1978).

A characterization of common perceptions of the Pauline experience on the road to Damascus should yield some interesting insights into how most people in Western culture have viewed conversion. First, the experience has been perceived to be sudden, dramatic, and emotional; it had a definite irrational quality to it. It was inexplicable in any terms except those that included an active agent not under the convert's control. A powerful external agent over which Paul held no sway caused Paul to be converted. Traditional views of this event attribute agency to an omnipotent god; more recent "sophisticated" views attribute agency to unconscious psychological influence, or similar concepts. Whatever the characterization of the active agent, that agent as definitely *not* the person. In Paul's case an ostensibly powerful man was totally incapacitated by the actions of the external causal agent focusing on him as an individual.

The Pauline experience was also a single event that was thoroughly changing one's life. Thus the event was viewed in individualized and psychologized ways. A single individual was changed via a total break with the past, in a relatively permanent way. One static personal situation was dramatically modified into another static situation. The conversion involved an apparent total negation of the old self and the implantation of a new self, at least as it was experienced by Paul and presented by many since. From the perspective of a traditional Christian view, there is but one true religion to which one could convert (even if some variations are allowed); therefore, the expectation that *once is enough* for a lifetime, and that only some serious problem would require another experience of conversion later in life). A modern version of this "once is enough" motif is the expectation that conversion, or some related form will occur during *adolescence* and that it should last a lifetime.

The Pauline experience is also often interpreted in cognitive terms. It was thought that what happened to Paul caused him to change his beliefs immediately, and that behaviors congruent with the new beliefs then were developed. Behaviors follow beliefs, then, in the traditional paradigm.

In sum, this prototypical experience is psychological, deterministic, and assumes a passive subject.³ It is usually viewed as predestinational (using a theologically connoted term) or predispositional (to use a more psychological term). More sociological terms that might be fitted into this deterministic model include such notions as situationally determined.

Significantly, many people within the Christian culture have assumed that this type of conversion experience was a good thing to have happen to people (as long as its occurrence brought people *into* the Christian orbit). Those who disagreed with the Christian

3. Paul, of course, is often pictured as actively fighting his conversion and being overcome anyway. Note that this view lends *support* to a passivist perspective in that it seems that, no matter how hard one fights, the external agent can and will prevail. There is also the question of whether Paul was actually fighting conversion or was instead actively seeking a new personal meaning in a rapidly changing world and had decided to "check out those crazy Christians" as a part of his personal quest. If this latter view has any credence at all, then we need to be asking sociology-of knowledge questions about how the traditional passivist view could have come to dominate and hold sway so long in Western history.

perspective or with religion in general (or with the idea of a dramatic, emotional conversion) would not think so positively of the event. Especially virulent objections to "conversion as a good thing" have been adopted by some in Western culture who hold basically competing views about causal agents. Some psychiatrists and others of a more psychological bent might well hold negative views of religion in general and of religious conversion in particular (see Kilbourne and Richardson, 1984).

Freud is a case of one who adopted a deterministic view precluding the actions of an omnipotent god. Freud thought that unconscious psychological forces (some of which are even at the instinctual level) might cause a conversion and further that this was symptomatic of something bad. Freud has many disciples who, even if they have rejected or modified his specific theories, generally accept his overall negative evaluation of religious conversion. Yet at the same time, Freud and most of his followers have implicitly promoted a view of conversion that is derived indirectly from the prototypical experience of Paul. Only the active agent differs. For Freudians, the unconscious is that agent. More recent versions of such psychological and deterministic views use more modern rhetoric of "brainwashing" and "mind control." Singer (1979), Clark (1979), Verrier (1979) and Conway and Siegelman (1978 and 1982) among others, have made recent psychoanalytically-oriented attempts to apply this traditional deterministic paradigm in the study of newer religious groups.⁴

In the sociological area there is also no dearth of competing views that implicitly promote a deterministic view of conversion, even as they decry religion in general. Some interpretations of Marxism posit economic factors as all-consuming and determining, and treat religious phenomena as epiphenomenal. To be involved in religion is to be, by definition, in a state of false consciousness. Secularization theory also implicitly incorporates a traditional "Pauline paradigm" view of conversion, even if its focus is on societal level trends (see Richardson, 1984). Other, somewhat less controversial, passivistic sociological and social psychological perspectives talk of deprivations (Glock, 1964) and strains (Smelser, 1963) that may "force" a person to seek out religious or other experiences to compensate for life's shortcomings. This view of "forced" conversion implies that if enough information is available about a person's psychological and social (even sometimes biological) background (and about the situation), then one can predict whether or not that person will be converted. Prediction may then be viewed *ipso facto* as an adequate explanation in such mechanistic views of human beings.

The New Paradigm

Just as there have always been those who have fought against such a constricting notion as conversion (and religion, in general) within the Christian tradition, so have there been those who demurred within the social and behavioral sciences. Within the Christian orbit there have been those interpretations which stress the view that individuals must "work out their own salvation," and that they can indeed "fall from grace" through their own actions. That more humanistically oriented view is sharply contrasted with the just-

4. See Richardson (1982 and 1983), Kilbourne and Richardson (1984), Bromley and Richardson (1983), Robbins and Anthony (1982), Melton and Moore (1982), Anthony, Robbins and McCarthy (1980), and Richardson and Kilbourne (1983) for critiques of these modern applications of brainwashing versions of the traditional paradigm.

described conceptualization of Paul's being struck down by God on the road to Damascus — a deterministic view that is sometimes coupled with a "once saved, always saved" view implying that even after a person is converted, there is little that one can do about it.

Within the social and behavioral sciences there have also been those who opted for a more humanistic perspective that allowed for an acting and conscious human agent, as has already been noted. Within the psychoanalytic tradition Jung broke dramatically with Freud and claimed that religion can often help people integrate their lives. The very title of Jung's best known book, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933) illustrates his more positive "active agency" view. The work of Gordon Allport (1950) in the area of psychology of religion also tends toward this different view, as does the work of Viktor Frankl, whose *Man's Search for Meaning* (1962) involves a rejection of Freudian-dominated perspectives. William James' work, particularly his discussion of "volitional conversion" as contrasted to "the conversion of self-surrender," is also germane (James, 1958).

Within sociology and social psychology we have seen newer, more humanistically-oriented, interpretations being offered — views that take a somewhat "softer" line toward such previously frivolous matters as religion, religious experiences, and other activities that might be viewed as fulfilling for individuals (Lee, 1973, and Berger, 1963). The interactionist perspective in social psychology and sociology as developed by Erving Goffman is somewhat agency-oriented, because of its attention to meaning. The same can be said for the work of ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkle and especially deviance theorists such as Matza. Within social psychology a rejection of the mechanistic view of man has attempted to turn that discipline on its head and encourage it to overcome the domination of the laboratory as the only acceptable research site (see Sampson, 1978, Gergen and Maranski, 1980, Ginsburg, 1979, and Backman, 1979). Social psychology is no longer a discipline which studies only how an individual is influenced by the group in laboratory, but instead is beginning to recognize and study, using a multiplicity of methods, how the individual relates to social groups in many different settings.

It is within this broad, more humanistic tradition in sociology and social psychology, but also somewhat independent of it, that a new paradigm in conversion/recruitment research has begun to develop. Recent work on new religious movements by some sociologists and social psychologists and a few psychologists and psychiatrists has helped produce an alternative view of conversion to the new religions. This view stresses an active subject seeking to develop their own "personhood," an emphasis that has caused something of a Kuhnian crisis because of the traditional paradigm's assumption of a passive subject. The thinking and meaning-seeking subject is a major anomaly, causing many scholars to rethink their perspective and consider an alternative paradigm. The major elements in this "activist" alternative paradigm have been summarized in Richardson (1982), and will be alluded to in the following discussion of the emergence of this alternative paradigm in conversion/recruitment research.

Development of the Emerging "Activist" Paradigm

Although there are a number of different developments within sociology and social psychology that relate to the rise of an alternative and competing conversion paradigm, one of the most important occurred with the publication of the oft-cited article by John

Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965). They presented a model of “conversion to a deviant perspective” that incorporated both predispositional elements and situational elements. This model was developed out of research on the beginnings of the Unification Church in America (Lofland, 1966, 1977). As such, their work can be viewed as the beginning of sociological and social psychological studies of new religious movements in America, even though they themselves were more interested in the deviancy aspects of their work. At the time of their work, no one guessed that either the specific group studied or the larger movement itself would gain the attention that it has and no one could have anticipated the impact of their conversion model, which has since been applied in many different contexts, including other new religions.⁵

The Lofland/Stark conversion model was an important step in the process of developing an alternative paradigm because it serves as a bridge between the old and the new. The model contained a logically complete and up-to-date statement of the traditional psychological predisposition perspective, referred to as the “motivational” model by Zygmunt (1972), that focused on the forces that might “push” a person into conversion. This view is similar to and derivative of the “Pauline paradigm” described herein. But the model also spoke to the future of research on conversion by focusing on the process of conversion, which, of course, was a recognition that conversion has a definite organizational aspect (Griel and Rudy, 1982) and is a social event. One other key aspect of the model was the incorporation of subjects who would sometimes self-define themselves as religious seekers, and take action to change by interacting with selected people and by allowing affective ties to develop with them.

Thus the Lofland/Stark model contained an implicit focus on a volitional subject, along with more traditional deterministic elements. Evidence for the seminal and bridge-like quality of this work is the fact that it has been a starting point for those working in both the old and new traditions of research on conversion. Some researchers more oriented toward a traditional view focusing on predispositions have used that aspect of the model, while others could find support for a more sociological and even activist starting point in the interactionist elements of the situational part of the model.

Recently Lofland has moved more overtly in the direction of the activist perspective, as evidenced by his book *Doing Social Life* (1976) and his more recent update of the earlier model (1978). He says of this shift (1978: 22):

I have since come to appreciate that the world-saver model embodies a thoroughly “passive” actor — a conception of humans as a “neutral medium which social forces operate.” . . . The world saver model is actually quite anti-interactionist, or at least anti the interactionism frequently identified with . . . Blumer. . . . It is with such a realization that I have of late encouraged students of conversion to turn the process on its head and to scrutinize how people go about converting themselves. Assume, that is, that the person is active rather than merely passive.

5. See Snow and Phillips (1980) for one prominent assessment of the impact and veracity of the Lofland/Stark model. Also see Lofland, 1978; Stark and Bainbridge (1980); Richardson and Stewart (1978), and Griell and Rudy (1982).

Lofland's earlier model was not as "thoroughly passive" as he suggests and can be viewed as an "open door" for recent more activist-organized work in this area. A number of his students and others making use of that earlier model have focused on the more humanistic and active elements of the model.⁶ The most well-known such work is that of Roger Straus, a Lofland student who has done research on Scientology and other new groups.

Straus, in a paper published as part of Lofland's book *Doing Social Life* (1976), develops a model of "seeking" or "creative transformation" that relies on a view of human beings as active and meaning-seeking entities. He decries earlier work in the area of "identity change" that employs a "passive image of humans," and instead opts for a perspective that assumes "... the individual human acting creatively within a natural life setting in order to construct a satisfying life" (252). His model of creative transformation is apparently the first explicit treatment of this process adopting such an activist view of human beings. Included in this provocative work are discussions of initial "creative bumbling," and "strategies for creative exploitation" (by individuals seeking to join a new group, in contrast to usual interpretations of the conversion situation). In a later paper (1979) Straus discusses in more depth the activist paradigm that he was positing in the earlier work. He says (1979: 158):

Sociologists have conventionally approached religious conversion as something that happens to a person who is destabilized by external and internal forces and then brought to commit self to a conversionistic group by social forces applied by that 'trip' ... and its agents. This stands in contrast to an alternative paradigm of the individual *seeker* striving and strategizing to achieve quantum change in his or her life experience, and which treats the groups and others involved in this process as salesmen, skills, coaches, guides and helpers — themselves typically converts further along in their own personal quests.

Also of note is the work of Balch and Taylor, who studied a much publicized UFO group (see Balch and Taylor, 1976 and 1978). In their 1978 paper they include a section on "The Role of the Seeker," in which they delineate the active searching behavior of most of their respondents. This seeking approach to life is of such importance that some people become members *in spite* of the absence of some usually expected pressures such as the development of interaction and affective ties between members and prospects. In a later paper, Balch (1979) deliberately contrasts the two perspectives, referring to one as "structural-functional" (by which he means our "passive model") and the other (using Straus' term) as "activist." He says (1979: 8-9):

6. Note that, as Matza (1969) points out, it is not sufficient to avoid the use of psychological determinism in explaining conversion. One can also be deterministic about sociological factors. For instance, some writers emphasize the importance of social interaction, which does mean a focus on the situational. However, this view may assume that the person is being "pushed" about by social factors. Rodney Stark, Lofland's earlier co-author, has adopted this more sociologically-oriented view of conversion, contained in the earlier model, with his focus on the "networks" of recruitment (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). Stark and Bainbridge express some appreciation for the "psychological predisposition" part of the earlier model, but do not build on the activist orientation implicit in the model. Their work is quite valuable in explaining the process of conversion, but has some limitations because of the view of the convert incorporated.

The most conspicuous failure of the structural model is its inability to account for decisions to join the UFO cult. Much has been written about the devious ways that cults lure unsuspecting recruits into their psychological traps. The prevailing view is that recruitment techniques systematically exploit powerful, social and psychological forces that weaken the prospective members' critical judgment. . . . This argument is not a very useful explanation of recruitment and conversion to the UFO cult. . . . Recruitment was structured to reduce contacts between members and would-be recruits. . . . Interaction was severely circumscribed . . . [The leaders offered] their message on a take-it-or-leave-it basis . . . the UFO cult did not systematically manipulate social pressures to get people to join.

Balch states that the critical similarity among those who joined was (1979: 9): "All of them defined themselves as seekers before joining." He also noted how the prospects then decided to cooperate with efforts to convert themselves and willingly played the role of new converts, which involved many changes of behavior and belief. Balch pursues this role-playing idea in another paper (1980) in which he explicitly rejects brainwashing interpretations of joining a new religion in favor of a more mundane role theory interpretation. He says (1980: 4): ". . . their overt behavior was misleading. They *looked* tuned in, *appeared* committed, but were simply playing a role that concealed their true feelings. . . ." Balch stresses then the volitional aspects of role-playing and urges (1980: 42): "Don't be deceived by appearances" into inferring total commitment from behavior.

Bromley and Shupe (1979) have also applied a role theory perspective to conversion to new religious movements. Their paper is reminiscent of the much earlier work by Zetterberg (1952), but is informed by later work and their own research. Bromley and Shupe conclude that the old "motivational" model focusing on predispositions is inadequate. Instead they note that the rapid conversion syndrome which has gained so much attention is more easily explicable in terms of (1979: 161): ". . . socially structured events arising out of the role relationship." They discuss the pattern of people deciding to play roles and getting involved in a group, with a more thoroughgoing acceptance of beliefs occurring latter in the recruitment process. As such, their model is at least implicitly more activist in orientation, because of its stress on the decision to become involved in the role.

Others studying new religious movements have contributed to the emergence of a new paradigm. Gerlach and Hines' work (1970) on conversion to the neo-Pentecostal movement (and "Black Power" movement as well) is pervaded by a view of conversion and commitment phenomena that considers predisposition unimportant. They focus instead on interaction within friendship and kinship networks, and implicitly suggest an active subject who follows such networks into conversion and commitment development. Hines' separate paper (1969) on the "bridge-burning act" that is a part of this process is activist in its orientation, with its focus on the crucial decision of a convert to take the symbolically important action of cutting ties with an old way of life and moving into a new one.

Downton (1979), in his study of conversion to the Divine Light Mission, posited an active subject seeking out new ways to live, and new interpretations of life. While he did integrate some of the notions of external pressures that usually accompany more deterministic sociological work, he was in the main activist in orientation, and put the

major responsibility for conversion on the seeking subject. His book explained in great detail the way in which Divine Light Mission converts managed their own conversions.

Travisano (1970), building on Berger's notion of "alternation" (1963), has presented an interpretation of conversion in the symbolic interactionist tradition. Travisano's seminal piece implies an active subject more or less in control of one's own destiny, seeking out changes in identity. This work has been used by Gordon (1974) in a study of a Jesus Movement group but, although Gordon's paper yields some interesting findings, the active agent perspective is somewhat subdued. Richardson (1980) critiques and builds on the work of Travisano and Gordon in developing a more explicit application of symbolic interaction theory to contemporary conversion in new religions. In doing so, he applies an activist orientation in explaining the "conversion careers" of individuals participating in the new movements. He states (1980: 50) that one of the factors crucial in explaining what happens is "the explicit plans, desires, or motives of people involved in conversion careers." In a later paper (Richardson, 1982), this point is expanded to present more systematically the major elements of the emerging paradigm. In yet another paper, implications of the new paradigm for secularization theory are discussed (Richardson, 1984).

More recently in the study of new religions an explicit focus on *leaving* new religions has developed. This area of study has developed as researchers recognized that only a small minority of those who join such groups actually stay for lengthy periods of time (Levine, 1984, and Bird & Reimer 1982). The act of leaving (or disaffection, deconversion, disaffiliation) has, by its very nature, led to greater recognition of the volitional nature of such actions. Thus, this area of study contributed its own impetus to the emergence of an alternative paradigm in conversion/recruitment research (Balch, 1983b; Beckford, 1979; Derks and Van der Lans, 1981; Galanter, 1980, 1983; Richardson, Van der Lans and Derks, 1981; Skonovd, 1983; Solomon, 1981; Ungerleider and Wellisch, 1979; and Wright, 1983).

Work by David Matza has also been significant, even though it focuses on deviancy.⁷ Matza discusses the process of becoming deviant, using the concept "affiliation," and argues against a "preordained" perspective in the study of affiliation. Matza also disagrees with what he calls "contagion" as an adequate explanation for affiliation, and instead develops the concept of "conversion," by which he means a process that involves a willing, conscious and intending subject. He makes the point that while Sutherland's concept of "differential association" (Sutherland and Cressey, 1978: 80) was a significant step forward from "contagion" explanations of how people become deviant, it was still in the "preordained" tradition. (What was new about Sutherland's position was that the "pre-ordaining" was accomplished via the *social organization forms* in which the person was involved, instead of via theological or psychological agents or factors).

Matza suggested that a radically different approach to the matter of adopting a deviant perspective was unobtrusively presented by Howard Becker in his much-cited essay, "Becoming a Marihuana User" (1953). In this essay Becker posits a conscious and

7. Matza (and most of the work he discusses in this context) is working in an area commonly referred to as "deviance," and specifically focuses on how one becomes deviant. This may seem a far cry from studies of conversion, but this is not the case. Indeed Matza cites in a brief but positive footnote the work of Lofland and Stark (1965), which he suggests (1969: 104) is a "recent attempt to conceive the elements of conversion in the process of taking on deviant world-views."

intentional subject who wills to try marihuana. He writes of a subject who acts, who engages himself in a line of action, and who builds meaning into his actions. Matza (1969: 122) says that in the work of Becker "The subject creates an act" and "the subject has mediated the entire experience (of becoming a marihuana user)." Matza explicitly argues against theoretical positions that "foreclose the authority of the subject" and instead stress deterministic factors of any kind.

Taylor (1976) makes some of the same points in his theoretical discussion of conversion. He relates Matza's ideas to those of phenomenologists Berger and Luckmann (1963) and ethnomethodologists Scott and Lyman (1968). Space does not allow a detailed analysis of this theoretically rich paper, but a quote from Taylor will illustrate the major focus of the paper (1976: 10):

A sociology of religious conversion which sees the phenomena in terms of the result of predisposing sociocultural factors, background circumstances, or situational contingency, repeats the mistake of seeing it only in these terms, and again rules out for empirical consideration the convert himself.

He calls for "an appreciation of converts' self-determination in a conversion process" (18).

Thus, it appears that a steady evolution of a new view of conversion can be traced in the work of a number of researchers over the past 15 or 20 years. That work has taken several theoretical paths, but an overall trend seems unmistakable. These several scholars have, in one way or another, recognized a more active subject "working out" one's own conversion. They have noted that conversion to new religions often means a series of affiliative and disaffiliative acts that constitute a conversion career, and that individuals are often only deciding to behave as a convert, playing the convert role, as they experiment with or affirm their personhood. These researchers have found that conversion is a social phenomenon, with affection and emotional ties playing key roles in the affirmative decision to negotiate with a group about possible participation and commitment. This new emerging paradigm competes against modern versions of the traditional "Pauline paradigm" that has been dominant for decades.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE IDEA OF AN EMERGING PARADIGM

Lofland and Skonovd

An appealing alternative explanation to the idea of an emergent paradigm is presented in the recent Lofland and Skonovd paper (1981). They claim that the types of conversion have themselves changed over time, a contrasting idea to the notion of an emerging paradigm. As part of their analysis, Lofland and Skonovd offer a three level view of what is taking place when conversion occurs and is studied by scholars: 1) the level of reality or what is "really" happening; 2) the level of accounting for conversion by those who have the experience; and 3) the level of explanation by the scientist attempting to understand and explain what has taken place. Quite often, this third level (scientific explanation) is totally dependent on the second level (conversion accounts) for apprehension of the first level (reality).

Lofland and Skonovd offer six types of conversion (intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalistic, and coercive), characterizing each using five independent elements. They suggest that these major types occur at different times and with different frequencies, depending on the social and historical content. They claim, for instance, that recent times have seen an increase in what they call intellectual and experimental conversions (which are conceptually quite like what we have termed the activist view of conversion). They also note that the mystical type (which is closest to what is referred to here as the traditional paradigm) is not prevalent anymore, although they qualify this somewhat. They claim, as well, that the revivalistic type of conversion (which is conceptually quite close to their mystical type) has declined in modern societies but is on the upswing again in new religions.

Thus, Lofland and Skonovd posit major shifts in the *reality* of conversion experiences (first level of abstraction) in different historical epochs, for different societies within the same time frame, and even within the same society but among different subgroups. Their theoretical position is significant. But there is a distinct possibility that the difference in types of conversion motifs found by Lofland and Skonovd is directly tied to the development of a new alternative and competing paradigm, and that what is most variable is not the "real experience" of conversion but the way that researchers view that conversion. An alternative explanation to theirs' is that the experience of conversion is somewhat pan-human and relatively unvarying, but that the way in which the experience is viewed by the participant and the researcher (who uses convert accounts as data) does vary over time and space locations. As Beckford (1978) has noted, there may be variation in styles of accounts of conversion. The recent upsurge in the number of people claiming to be "born-again" is a case in point, as is the specific description of the orientation of the Jehovah's Witness participants studied by Beckford. Also, researchers studying conversion are not immune to faddism, and as indicated, the accounts given by the researchers and scholars could also vary, even if what they are describing does not. Certainly the problems faced by scholars in this regard are immense. They are trying to apprehend the reality of a phenomena, but usually must use as data the accounts of those experiencing the phenomenon. Especially because of the "biographical reconstruction" aspects of this problem the validity of the scholarly accounts may be questionable (Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds, 1978). Personal biases of the scholar may also intervene in the process of reliably grasping the convert's account and how it relates to what actually happened (see Richardson, 1983, for a discussion of such biases).

Long and Hadden

Long and Hadden (1983) also offer an alternative but closely related interpretation to the idea of a new emerging paradigm. They propose a "dual reality" perspective on conversion to new religions that involves the "brainwashing" model and the "social drift" model, using a concept from Matza's earlier work (1964) which is more socially deterministic than his 1969 book. They claim that (1983: 1) "the social drift model suggests that people become converts gradually, even inadvertently, through the influence of social relationship, especially during times of social strain." Long and Hadden cite some of the same references used here for their brainwashing model, which is the most prominent contemporary

example of what we call the traditional paradigm. Their illustrations for the drift model include some of the same work cited here to support the new more activist paradigm idea, even as they explicitly recognize the social determinism of the drift model.

Long and Hadden point out that conflict is occurring over “cult recruitment” because neither the brainwashing theorists or the drift theorists are apprehending all there is to be known about the process of socialization of new members into cults. They use the term “dual reality” repeatedly as a way of saying that both perspectives offer a valid *but only partial view*. They offer a way of integrating the perspectives based on Wentworth’s (1980) work on socialization. The specifics they propose are of less interest here than their recognition that there are different ways of looking at conversion and related phenomena. Long and Hadden note the different styles of interpretations of the same phenomenon, and relate these to disciplinary differences:

Intellectual trends in the different disciplines created considerable momentum for these choices (of perspective). In sociology, where drift models are popular, the study of socialization has for a generation focused primarily on the novice. In psychology, reliance on the medical model of person pathology deemphasizes willful deviance in favor of extraordinary external influences, like cult brainwashing tactics (3-4).

They also recognize the inherent determinism of modern examples of research using the traditional paradigm (the brainwashing theorists) and of some approaches that are less psychological and more sociological:

Both the brainwashing and social drift models implicitly make the assumption of one-way determinism which characterizes classic assumptions in socialization theory. Analysis of interaction directs attention to both members and novices as active, creative participants in the conversion-socialization process. On first appearance, the drift model may not appear deterministic. . . The model appeared nondeterministic only because those social forces competed for the novice’s commitment, creating a tug-of-war which made conversion precarious. But *the outcome was no less determined, only more complex to analyze* (7; my emphasis).

However, it seems just as reasonable to assume that, instead of an isolated contemporary conflict between drift and brainwashing theorists, an alternative paradigm has been emerging in conversion research. This emergence has involved movement from a deterministic, psychological perspective, to a still-deterministic but more sociological perspective. However, the latter view, via its emphasis on interaction, has been pregnant with the seeds of a more activist paradigm. This more activist view is not yet dominant within sociological and social psychological studies of conversion to new religious movements, but does seem to be gaining adherents as more research is done in the area. Few researchers who have gone into the groups for their data share the perspective of the brainwashing theorists, a fact that raises profound questions about the credibility of contemporary proponents of the traditional paradigm, most of whom have depended on accounts from a select sample of ex-members for their data (see Richardson, 1982 and 1983 for critiques of this research).

Both the emergent paradigm espoused here and the “dual reality” perspectives on

conversion/recruitment research are controversial, just as such views have been in other areas of science. This controversy occurs in part because such views do not take at face value what researchers say, but instead “steps back” for an objective view at the *setting* and the *characteristics* of those doing the pronouncing. The view stated here may be too extreme, and there may well be a meeting ground between the Lofland/Skonovd approach, the Long/Hadden view and what I have proposed. Indeed, Lofland and Skonovd, in their discussion of “affectional” conversion, suggest that the recent spate of research emphasizing this type may result from fads in accounts given by those being *converted*. I would go further and suggest that the faddism may have been with the scholars doing the research and writing about conversion, a view also implied by Long and Hadden. It seems highly likely, for example, that affectional ties developed from meaningful interaction have been an aspect of conversion and recruitment for a long time and in different settings, but that researchers have not noticed this until recently because of the blinders of the traditional “Pauline paradigm,” which emphasizes that Paul’s conversion was just “between God and himself,” with no other humans involved.

REASONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF ACTIVIST PARADIGM

There is some speculative data to support indirectly our ideas about the possibility of a new competing paradigm in conversion/recruitment research. As noted in Balch (1983a) and Richardson (1982 and 1983), present research reflects a shift in the methods used to apprehend conversion phenomena. Most of the early research on religious conversion was carried out by psychologists and psychotherapists using case study methods, and was informed by the traditional view of conversion. Recently research on recruitment to new religions has used more participant-oriented methods with researchers similar in key ways to those being studied. Thus the researchers cited in support of an idea of an emergent new paradigm in conversion research usually participated in the groups during the time of their research, doing indepth interviews and administering survey or personality assessment instruments while there. Also, the recent wave of research on new religions has typically been done by younger researchers who shared some ideals and values of those being studied, even if all that was shared was a negative evaluation of certain aspects of contemporary culture.

A similar point can be made about those who first began using a more subject-oriented interpretation of conversion/recruitment to the political movements of the 1960’s. Often researchers shared values with subjects concerning political structure and about specific issues (the war, racism, sexism, etc.) (see Skolnick, 1969). Understandably, it was difficult for researchers to talk about deprivation and strains “forcing” recruitment, since by implication both the subjects and the researchers, who shared similar views (and perhaps even social origins), would be treated as passive subjects, being influenced by social and psychological forces. Thus the volitional model was unconsciously adopted in much of the research on political participation in the 1960’s. It may well be the case that the volitional model was *always* a better explanatory device for participation in political movements. However, differences in social location and orientation between researchers and the subjects of the research may have interfered with recognition of that fact. A similar point can be made about studies of deviancy, which have shifted from an almost singular

focus on “nuts and sluts” to studying more “acceptable” behaviors such as marihuana use and “alternative lifestyles.”

The same comment may be appropos of research on religious conversion. Perhaps *social location differences* between researchers and subjects in decades past deterred true understanding of what was actually happening with the conversion and recruitment. Perhaps anti-religious biases interfered, as did differences in universes of discourse of researcher and subject. The continued negative view of participation of new religions by a number of researchers seems to illustrate this idea (see Stark, 1971). As already mentioned, some of the professionals most negative about the new religions are those who do not do research on people in the groups or on “satisfied” ex-members, but instead focus all their attention on a small segment of all participants who have had difficulty in adjusting to life after leaving (or being forcefully extracted from) the groups.⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Certainly, the kind of speculative evidence presented here does not prove that a new paradigm is emerging in competition with the traditional paradigm in conversion/recruitment research. However, it does make more plausible the possibility that such an alternative paradigm has been evolving. At least, I would hope that this effort will focus greater attention on the problems associated with the assumption that Lofland and Skonovd's third level of abstraction — the explanations of the researchers — is always reliable. Researchers certainly need to concern themselves with ascertaining whether the accounts of converts are accurate, which is Beckford's (1978) point, and we need to improve the quality of the data if the accounts are inaccurate. But we also need to concern ourselves with the accounts given by researchers about conversion/recruitment phenomena. This is especially the case when they vary so, as do accounts by those studying new religions. According to which scholarly accounts one reads, participants have been brainwashed or they are making conscious decisions based on careful consideration.

As is probably obvious to most readers by now, the brainwashing perspective, as a major modern variant of the traditional conversion paradigm, does not mesh well with most of the data gathered on actual participation in new religions. This raises questions about similar views espoused by scholars in the past. The modern persistence of such a traditional view of conversion and recruitment is echoed by much of the writing critical of those who participated in the political movements of the 1960's. The persistence and continued resurgence of such views in the face of considerable research to the contrary lends credence to the notion of different paradigms competing in these major scientific areas of concern. And the debate over which view is the right one about conversion/recruitment lends credence to Kuhn's basic insight that science is a political process, and that scientists are in part politicians lobbying and fighting for recognition of their views.

8. Most such subjects have actually been taken out of the groups against their will. See Singer (1979) who admits that 75% of her subjects left the group not entirely of their own will, and Conway and Siegelman (1982) who state that 71% of their sample of ex-members were deprogrammed. See Kilbourne and Richardson (1984) for a conflict theory analysis of the relationship of new religious and psychotherapeutic disciplines, and see Kilbourne (1983) for a specific re-analysis of the data presented in Conway and Siegelman (1982).

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