Toward a General Model of the Process of Radical Conversion: An Interactionist Perspective on the Transformation of Self-Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops the concept of radical conversion of self-identity as a moral career. Following the theoretical orientation of symbolic interactionism, the concept is explicated and differentiated from other forms of self-change. A critical review of the model developed by Lofland in *Doomsday Cult* is offered, through which a revised statement of the sequences of radical conversion that is conceptually applicable to cases of diverse content is constructed. Lastly, the revised model is tested using secondary case material and the logic of analytic induction. The findings indicate the model is consistent with the empirical descriptions contained in each case. Suggestions for further analysis are then discussed.

This paper represents an initial attempt at constructing a general model of radical conversion. This type of self-transformation is of considerable theoretical importance, but is a seldom investigated dimension of personal change, and

one which has not been integrated into a systematic sociological perspective. The primary focus of this paper is that of theoretical explication of the concept of radical conversion and the identification of the sequences of changes and events characteristic of the biography of converts.

Identity change of any type does not take place in a social lacuna. For example, it has long been recognized by sociologists that stable personal indentities are concomitant with stable social structures. Rapid social change and poorly integrated social systems are characterized by higher incidences of poorly integrated identities (cf. Durkheim, 1951; Sorokin, 1941). It is apparent that some social structural conditions are associated with serious symbolic disturbances in self-identities, and correspondingly, with the tendency to construct alternative identities and commitments which are radical departures from their previous states (cf. Parsons, 1951:520-525; Thornton, 1981). If these alternatives captivate large numbers, we call them social movements.

It is in the context of the social movement that the process of conversion is linked with historical transformation. The sociology of social movements however, has treated the individual experience of self change in a rather mechanical fashion and contains a "passivist" imagery of the human actor (Straus, 1976:252). For instance, much sociological emphasis has traditionally been placed on the characteristics of converting leaders and the institutional conditions which foster their rise to power (cf. Blumer, 1936-37; Heberle, 1949; 1951). Charisma in leaders increases the probability of converting followers, but the former cannot monistically account for the latter. Not all members of a society are equally potential converts, even if exposed to similar influences. The self is not mechanical, but rather a dialectical process of creativity and reflection. It is this dimension of self-change which has been neglected by sociological accounts of conversion. Thus, while we are sensitive to the influence of communal and organizational factors, our purpose here is a more adequate conceptualization of the self-processes of the conversion experience. We seek a model of radical conversion which is actor-centered.

Sociological approaches to understanding self-change have typically emphasized less dramatic transformations than

conversion, viewing the content of the self as the product of cumulative socialization and status passage. However, while this is a useful perspective, it neglects the important fact that persons at times come to see their current identity as "not for them" and engage in new forms of interaction in search of a new meaning of self (Shibutani, 1961:526; Straus, 1976:253). They seek new reference points to locate themselves which may mark dramatic breaks with past identities. Human beings often experience what Klapp (1969) has called a "symbolic disturbance" in their identity when some form of adjustment is necessary or desirable. At times, these searches for self-location lead individuals outside of their established channels of interaction and into radically different ones. No picture of the process of identity formation is complete without recognition of the self's potential for radical discontinuity as well as its developmental continuity.

We propose to construct a model of the sequential elements of radical conversion. Our first task, however, is definitional. A major problem has been a lack of consistency and clarity in the definitional criteria of conversion. Through an overview of perspectives on the nature of identity transformation, a typology will be constructed which distinguishes radical conversion from other forms of self-change. We will then proceed to a critical evaluation of Lofland's (1966) model of conversion, with the intent of revising it to a form generalizable to all instances of identity change which meet the definitional criteria of radical conversion. Lastly, we will test the validity of our model, using the logic of analytic induction, through an analysis of secondary case materials. The result of this conceptual effort will be a formal model useful in directing qualitative research on radical self-conversions of diverse contents.

A CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF RADICAL CONVERSION

Radical conversion may first be differentiated from other forms of self-change on the basis of two general dimensions, *time* and *degree*. We suggest relatively sudden identity change to be one definitional criterion of conversion, although it may be precipitated by factors having a long biographical history.

We conceptualize sudden change as one end of a continuum, the opposite of which is gradual or incremental identity change. A second dimension of identity change is that of the degree or extensiveness of the change. With respect to this criterion, conversion must involve a dramatic change in master status (cf. Hughes, 1945), or in other words, a reorganization of self about a new core identity trait. The antithesis of this experience would be partial or segmental change (see Figure 1).
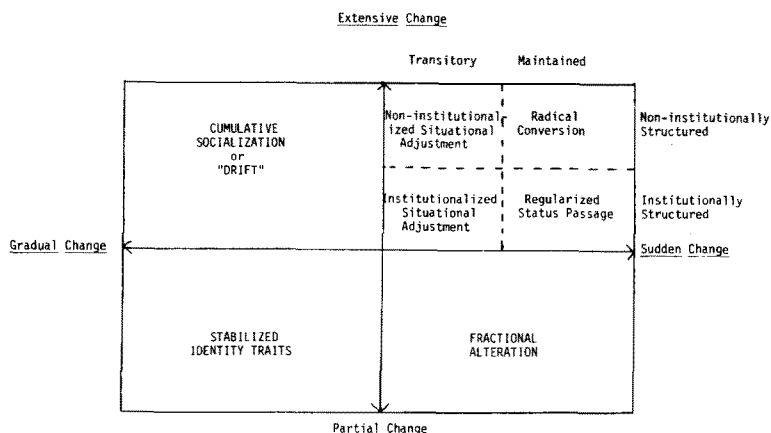

FIGURE 1. A Conceptual Typology of Forms of Identity Change

Radical conversion, as any change in self, may be conceptualized as representing a particular point on the axis of these two dimensions. Radical conversion involves *both* a relatively sudden change which is concomitantly extensive in degree, for neither sudden nor extensive change alone is sufficient to define conversion. An individual may undergo an extensive change which is acquired gradually rather than suddenly. Such a person is said to have "drifted" into change or undergone some form of cumulative socialization, such as socialization into a delinquent or drug subculture (cf. Matza, 1964). The individual must have a sense of self-history to be cognizant of the transition which has taken place.

On the other hand, partial change, though sudden, bears little effect on the core self or on self-other relationships.

Sudden change of this type we term "fractional alteration" (cf. Travisano, 1970:596-598.). This does not require a major reorganization of self as object, nor a significant change of life-style (e.g., family ties, occupation, friendships). Much of what is often labeled religious conversion is best conceptualized as fractional alteration. Change of denominations by Protestants, even in the direction of greater or lesser fundamentalism, should not be confused with radical conversion, for restructuring the self and self-other relations is typically not required. Nor, for that matter would the movement from Protestant to Catholic identification likely involve self-change of a radical degree (Parrucci, 1968:146). Even the apparently more dramatic case of Catholics experiencing the "Baptism of the Holy Spirit" through commitment to the Catholic Pentecostal Movement should not be viewed as radical conversion. As Harrison (1974:388-380) has shown:

> Almost all Pentecostal Catholics appear to have retained and even increased their loyalty to the Catholic Church, combining frequent Mass attendance with weekly attendance at Pentecostal prayer meeting.
>
> ...involvement in Catholic Pentecostalism does not ordinarily engender intense conflicts with conventional occupational, educational or familial statuses.

It is likely that social movements which require only fractional alteration are more successful. Fractional alterations are not "reality shattering" experiences, but radical conversion is a:

> ...process by which a person comes to adopt an all-prevading world view or changes from one such perspective to another.
>
> ...conversion denotes a major discontinuity in behavior, a wrenching of the personality, associated with such descriptive phrases...which indicate that the convert has apparently experienced a drastic shift in the orientation of his valuation of reality (Glock and Stark, 1965:6-7; cf. Kim, 1979:20).

As can be seen in Figure 1, radical conversion is not the only form of extensive and sudden self-identity change. Further differentiation is necessary. First, conversion concerns a *maintained* change in self-identity as opposed to a transitory

change in identity. Secondly, conversion cannot be said to be an institutionally structured or prescribed pattern of self transformation.

Transitory changes of identity may take noninstitutional or institutional forms. War prisoners experiencing "reorientation" attempts by their captors often exemplify this pattern of adaptation, reverting to their former identities upon release. Many "converts" actually are only "verbal converts" (Lofland and Stark, 1965:863-864), that is, conversion may be professed or believed, without a true reorientation of world perspective. These changes are best described as situational adjustments (cf. Becker, 1964). Some forms of transitory identity change are more institutionally structured and expected, as is the case when one enters the role of mourner. This is an institutionalized adjustment of self socially integrated with collective ritual.

Other forms of institutionalized ritual may produce more lasting self change. Rituals such as marriage and puberty rites are associated with regularized status passage. In this sense, Protestant "born again" experiences more accurately should be placed in this category, as these actually represent a ritual performance (Wimberly, et al., 1975:168). At times, such ritualized status change may take the form of "status forcing," such as occurs in the criminal trial (Straus, as per references 1969:81-84).

It is now possible to derive a more explicit conceptual definition of radical conversion. Specifically, radical conversion of self implies a *maintained, sudden* and *extensive* transformation of identity, achieved *in the absence of an institutionally prescribed change of status.* This definition removes from consideration many forms of self-change often treated as conversion, but which in fact are qualitatively very different. The definition also specifies radical conversion as a *form* of self-transformation without limiting the process to a religious content. Any core identity trait may be the focus of the conversion experience.

As is implied in Figure 1, radical conversion is but one of many forms of identity change, and is atypical. However, it is theoretically a very significant phenomenon. As noted earlier, radical conversion may be linked with social movements and historical change. However, the social psychological

significance is that radical conversion represents in exaggerated form the fundamental nature of selfhood—its capacity for reflection, change, and reorganizaiton. Radical conversion, then, is best interpreted from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, for at the core of this theoretical orientation we find a conception of selfhood not as thing, but as process. From this perspective, flux is the essential characteristic of self, even if stability is more apparent. The phenomenon of radical conversion is *the* crucial empirical instance supporting the validity of the perspective of symbolic interactionism, at least as represented in the tradition of the Chicago School. As Mead (1964:13) argues:

> ...the individual realizes himself insofar as, in some sense, he sees himself and hears himself. He looks in the glass and sees himself; he speaks and hears himself. It is this sort of situation in which the individual is both subject and object. But, in order to be both subject and object, he has to pass from one phase to another. The self involves a process that is going on, that takes one form and now another—a subject-object relationship which is dynamic, not static, a subject-object relationship which has a process behind it, one which can appear now in this phase, now in that.

Any conception of human behavior which does not have this process as its locus is particularly subject to the fallacy of a mechanical and passive imagery (cf. Blumer, 1969:95). The self is a dialectical process in which the actor may "try on" alternate identities, shifting to-and-fro in diverse assessments of self (cf. Lifton, 1970:316-319). Radical conversion marks a dramatic shift in the object-self, but one which is subjectively experienced as newly integrated. Slipping out of such a newly acquired identity becomes as difficult for the true convert as conversion would be for the individual with a stable conventional identity. Our approach is to understand this process as an outcome of a moral career in which a sequence of stages progressively increase the potential for radical alteration of self.

RADICAL CONVERSION AS A MORAL CAREER

A very valuable point of reference when dealing with identity change is found in Goffman's concept of "moral career." This concept refers to "...the regular sequence of

changes that career entails in the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others" (Goffman, 1959:123). As Goffman noted, the value of the concept lies in its "two-sidedness." It allows for recognition of both the subjective and public dimensions of identity. The concept also has general utility for it may be applied to all forms of self-change—gradual or sudden, partial or extensive—and is particularly consistent with an interactionist approach. What we attempt to accomplish here is the identification of the sequences of experiences and changes in the biography of the radical convert which lead to a state where conversion is an eminent potentiality.

The most systematic attempt to account for radical conversion in a manner consistent with the perspective we wish to develop is found in Lofland's (1966) *Doomsday Cult*. This research, however, dealt specifically with conversion to an unconventional religious cult. We will critically review the elements of Lofland's model with the intention of using it as a basis for constructing a hypothetical statement of the essential career sequences associated with all radical conversions, regardless of specific content.

Lofland (1966:31-60) suggested the developmental sequence of conversion is characterized by two categories of conditions and events: *dispositional* and *situational* influences. The former are predisposing conditions which initially create susceptibility to a conversion experience, while the latter are situational contingencies which ultimately move a potential convert to the transforming experience.

Dispositional influences identified by Lofland (1966:31-49) are: (1) tension, (2) a religious problem solving perspective, and (3) religious seekership. From Lofland's point of view, tension exists when there is a felt discrepancy between some imaginable state of affairs and the actual circumstances of existence as perceived by the individual. Tension would seem to be a necessary element in any conversion experience, and most theories of personality change include some conception of it (cf. Lewin, 1938; Frank, 1978). Indeed, as Lofland (1966:32) notes, "...no model of human conduct entirely escapes some concept of tension, strain, frustration, deprivation, or the like, as a factor in accounting for action." Tension which produces dissatisfaction with current identity

would seem axiomatic in the understanding of any conscious identity change. We suggest, then, tension may be taken as the initial precipitating experience in the career of the radical convert. However, tension may be necessary, but is clearly not sufficient to the explanation of radical conversion.

The second of Lofland's suggested predisposing factors, a religious problem-solving perspective, must obviously be formalized and generalized. It should first be pointed out that prolonged tension within an individual implies a failure of current patterns of action to establish an "acceptable self." Adopting a *religious* problem-solving perspective is but one possible consequence of this failure. A number of alternative problem-solving orientations are likely present in any culture, and it is important to note individuals may not move from an awareness of the failure of their current action to the stage of seeking some form of specific solution. They may simply endure, drift into alcoholism, use drugs, or commit suicide, to name but a few possibilities. The process may end in other words, without movement to an active seekership. Seekership flows from the recognition of failure, and contains in it by definition, some problem-solving orientation(s) which sets parameters on the form seekership takes. An alcoholic, for example, becomes a candidate for conversion to an ex-alcoholic identity when this behavior is self-defined as implying failure to create an acceptable identity. If it emerges, seekership may take a number of alternatives, such as religious "re-birth" or psychiatric "cure." Quite likely, seekership itself progresses from a covert form in which alternatives are considered to a stage of overt seekership which develops the implications of a particular problem-solving orientation. This is not a rationally developed sequence of events but is best described as a process of "creative bumbling" (Straus, 1976:254-256).

It should be pointed out here that it is largely through predisposing conditions that social and cultural structures influence the volume and form of conversion experiences present in a population. Some social structures produce greater levels of tension, with cultural content limiting the available problem-solving orientations, and therefore, the forms seekership may take. Nevertheless, the full explanation of radical conversion requires investigation of potential

converts' situational definition of meanings, i.e., the analysis of "situational contingencies." For the religious converts in his study, Lofland (1966:50-52) identified the following situational determinants of their conversion: (1) the turning point, (2) strength of cult-affective bonds, (3) strength of extra-cult-affective bonds, and (4) intensive interaction with the converting agency, i.e., the cult. Our task here, as with the predispositional conditions, is to generalize the applicability of these concepts.

Turning points, as career contingencies, are characteristic in the biography of most individuals, but become crucial in the moral career of radical converts because of the presence of the predisposing factors. Most of us experience turning points. They are not occasions for dramatic self-reorganization however, since the necessary preconditions are typically absent. Turning points in most biographical careers only create the potential for what we have designated "fractional alteration" of identity, such as changing jobs, having a child, going back to school, or changing religious denomination. In the moral career of the radical convert however, these cross-roads in biographical development hold much greater potential. These situations have special meanings to those with certain predispositions. Conceptually, the turning point in the radical convert's career is represented by a combination of the strong desire to take some action to resolve identity problems with what is defined as a new opportunity for doing so (cf. Straus, 1969:124-129). Without the experience of the turning point, a crucial catalyst in the conversion process is absent. Consequently, it must be present in the careers of all radical converts. It is the turning point which links the seeker to a specific conversion possibility, yet exposure to the possibility of conversion does not complete the process. Conversion of the self to a radically new identity involves loss as well as gain.

Lofland recognized this latter point in addressing the influence of cult affective versus extra-cult-affective bonds. We suggest these types of situation influences may be generalized to all radical conversion experiences by conceptualizing these two types of affective bonds as counterbalancing attractions. Much like tension, contradictory influences and rewards have been recognized

by many theorists of human conduct. For example, Lewin (1938) argued that the behavior of a person reflects a field of psychological forces affecting the individual at a given time. For Lewin, the life space of the individual (i.e., one's total environment) is filled with positive and negative psychological forces which move (change) the person in one way or another depending on the cumulative influence and direction of these forces. Lewin's specific (micro) sociological orientation argued that the dynamics of small groups may be utilized to create an imbalance in the person's life space thus resulting in personal change.

Similarly, psychological behaviorists have found differential group reinforcements may be used in generations self change or "growth of the self" (cf. Schein and Bennis, 1967). The concept of contradictory attractions suggested by Lofland is, then, one which is general to many theoretical approaches, and is a likely element in any form of personal change. We need only apply it to the special case of radical conversion. For the convert, breaking established lines of social action means removing existing identity supports, as inadequate as they may be. Participation in social life involves numerous commitments, or "side bets" as Becker (1960:35) has called them, to maintaining established patterns of interaction. For the potential convert however, new patterns hold great promise. If conversion is to occur, the identity stakes in one's line of action must be defined as low in comparison to the benefits of self-reorganization (cf. Toby, 1957). The drug addict or prostitute, for example, would seem to have little to lose and much to gain by converting to a non-deviant life-style, assuming the presence of the necessary preconditions and turning point. This is why conventional persons have such difficulty in commonsensically understanding relapse. However, secondary deviants (Lemert, 1967:40-64) usually perceive little to be gained through self-change, for it is often deviant subcultural identity supports which form the basis of their essential self. It is because of this relativity in the relationship between the inherent value of old lines of action and the potential value of new ones that converting agents often attempt to socially isolate the new-commer, thus systematically reducing the value of existing identity supports while substituting their own (cf. Lifton, 1961). Research on

radical conversion must therefore be especially sensitive to the conditions and processes which transform and reduce relative value of old commitments, for where this value is not truly lost, conversion cannot be accomplished.

If the relative stakes in conversion are high, the potential convert will likely move, as Lofland (1966:57-60) suggests, to a state of intensive interaction with the converting agent. Such agents are not only religious in nature—they may take the form of cult, Alcoholics Anonymous, a charismatic individual, or even an abstract "generalized other." This intensive interaction is the final sequence of events which replaces an old identity with a new one. It is at this stage that the new identity gains its stability and is maintained. With an early cessation of such interaction, disruption of the stability of the new self and defection is likely (Straus, 1979:163).

A MODEL OF RADICAL CONVERSION

Our review of Lofland's interpretation of the conversion process leads to a statement of its essential elements which we believe is applicable to radical conversions generally. Though the content of the conversion experience may vary, we suggest the moral career has a specific form characterized by a sequence of stages, each being a necessary condition for the self's movement to the next. As with any career, no stage is deterministically sufficient for further movement in the direction of conversion. The self, as a dialectical subject/object process, may cease its movement toward symbolic reorganization, or change its direction, due to innumerable biographical contingencies. In a sense, the moral career of radical conversion is much like a perforated funnel—many more enter than complete the experience—with each new stage characterized by high attrition.

Our revised model of the process of radical conversion now contains a sequence of six stages: (1) tension, (2) failure of current action to establish an acceptable self-identity, (3) seekership, (4) a turning point, (5) relatively low stakes in maintaining current identity, and (6) intensive interaction. We shall now proceed to an initial empirical examination of the model. We will attempt to determine if it is isomorphic with a

sample of cases of radical conversion, and if it is, suggest its utility as a sensitizing device in field research on the phenomenon.

METHOD

Our methodology combines content analysis with the logic of analytic induction. We use for this test a sample of cases drawn from secondary sources which contain descriptions and accounts of conversion experiences. Each source is treated as a single case here, though it may contain an account of a number of individual instances of conversion. This selection was accomplished by a review of citations found in discussions of conversion and related topics. We used, then, an availability sample, not a random sample, of conversion cases.

A total of 47 cases were initially included. The next task was to examine the content of each of these descriptions of conversion with respect to two criteria: (1) does the case meet our definition of radical conversion, and (2) if so, are each of the elements contained in our model present in the case? Failure to meet the definition meant the case was to be removed from consideration. Should a case be consistent with the definition, but not contain the elements predicted by the model, it would mean revising the model in a manner consistent with that case and all other cases previously examined, or rejecting the model altogether (Manning, 1971; Cressey, 1953; Glaser and Straus, 1967). The final result of this working between the cases and the model is an empirically founded statement of the sequence of events universally present in the careers of radical converts, at least to the extent which this sample represents such careers.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Of the original 47 cases, 18 were excluded because they did not meet the definition of radical conversion. Thus, 29 cases were considered for further analysis.[1] As can be seen in Table 1, these cases contain a variety of contents.

Most interestingly, given the information contained in the 29 accepted cases, no exception to our model was found, although in some of the cases there was insufficient information to determine if certain stages were present. As illustrated in Table 2, however, none of the cases were *non-supportive*. In no instance could the model be rejected as inapplicable. Initially, therefore, we accept our formal model of the moral career of radical conversion as empirically valid.

Table 1.   Distribution of Cases by Conversion Type (N = 29)

Conversion Type	N	Percent
Religious	11	37.9
Sexual	6	20.7
Political	6	20.7
Other	6	20.7
Total	29	100.0

The preceding conceptualization and findings are offered primarily as a sensitizing device to be used in further qualitative analysis of the phenomenon of radical conversion. A number of directions may be suggested. First, given this study's use of secondary materials, it is limited to a statement of the conditions under which radical conversion was attained. More adequate understanding requires comparative study of radical converts and subjects which either terminate their progression toward it, or are diverted into other career paths. Another research need in this area is more investigation of non-religious forms of conversion. The concept applies well to radical self-transformation in any context, but as is reflected in Table 1, the current literature is dominated by concern with religious conversion. The present writers plan to investigate patterns of disengagement from deviance using the above model. Traditional theories in criminology and the sociology of deviance have emphasized processes of "drift" to account for getting into deviant life-styles. Less concern has been given to how individuals get out of such life-styles, and we expect drifting out is more unlikely than drifting into such patterns. We, therefore, expect to find the conversion experience to be very important in many cases of disengagement from deviant identities (cf. Laslett and Warren, 1975; Warren, 1980).

The various substantive areas of sociology which deal with aspects of self-change have had little interest in conversion. Ironically, this has been true even of symbolic interactionists, who, as noted initially, should find in the phenomenon much

Table 2.   Comparison of Case Characteristics and Predicted Sequences
in Conversion

			Conversion Sequences*				
Case #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
2	+	+	+	+	+	?	+
3	+	+	+	?	+	+	+
4	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
5	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
6	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
7	+	?	+	?	+	+	+
8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
9	+	+	+	?	?	?	+
10	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
11	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
12	+	+	+	+	+	?	+
13	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
14	+	+	?	?	+	+	+
15	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
16	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
17	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
18	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
19	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
20	+	+	+	+	+	?	+
21	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
22	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
23	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
24	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
25	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
26	+	?	?	+	+	?	+
27	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
28	+	?	?	+	+	+	+
29	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
TOTAL	29	26	26	25	28	24	29

+ = Factor Present

0 = Factor Not Present

? = Insufficent Information

*1 = tension; 2 = failure of current action to establish an acceptable
identity; 3 = seekership; 4 = turning point; 5 = relative stakes;
6 = intensive interaction; 7 = conversion

support for the validity of their theoretical orientation. It is
our contention that what has been both a heuristic concept
and area of substantive concern in the sociology of religion
may also have utility in sociology generally.

NOTE

[1]A bibliography of case source materials is found in the appendix. The case number in Table 2 corresponds to the position of the source in this alphabetical listing.

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