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THE LOFLAND-STARK CONVERSION MODEL: A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT

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The most refined and widely cited conversion model within the sociological literature is the value-added scheme propounded by Lofland and Stark (1965) well over a decade ago. This paper is a critical examination of the Lofland-Stark model. Data derived from an extensive study of recruitment and conversion to the *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement in America provide little empirical support for the model in its entirety. Several components of the model are also theoretically questionable. The analysis suggests that affective and intensive interaction are not only essential for conversion to *Nichiren Shoshu*, but that conversion in general is highly improbable in the absence of these two factors.

The proliferation of religious movements and mass therapies during the past decade has prompted some observers to suggest that America is currently "gripped by an epidemic of sudden personality change" (Conway and Siegelman, 1978:11; Zurcher, 1977) and that we are living in an "age of conversion" (Richardson and Stewart, 1978:24). Although one can quibble over the accuracy of such characterizations, there is little question that the phenomenon of conversion has indeed captured the attention of a growing number of laymen and of social scientists (Colson, 1976; Conway and Siegelman, 1978; Enroth, 1977; Patrick, 1976; Richardson, 1978).

Within sociology, conversion has traditionally been explained as a sequential "funneling" process, including psychological, situational and interactional factors (see Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Richardson *et al.*, 1978; Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Shibutani, 1961; Toch, 1965; Zablocki, 1971). Of the various works representative of this approach to conversion, the most prominent is the model propounded well over a decade ago by Lofland and Stark (1965; see also Lofland, 1966). Based on a field study of the early American devotees of Sun Myung Moon (hereafter referred to as the Unification Church), the model suggests that "total" conversion, involving behavioral as well as verbal commitment, is a function of the accumulation of seven "necessary and constellationally-sufficient conditions" (Lofland and Stark, 1965:874). Specifically, a person must (1) experience enduring and acutely-felt "tensions," (2) within a "religious problem-solving perspective," (3) which results in self-designation as a "religious seeker." Additionally, the prospective convert must (4) encounter the movement or cult at a "turning point" in life, (5) form an "affective bond" with one or more believers, (6) "neutralize" or sever "extracult attachments," and (7) be exposed to "intensive interaction" with other converts in order to become an active and dependable adherent. The first three factors are classified as "predisposing." They hypothetically exist prior to contact with the group and function to render the individual susceptible to conversion once contact is established. The remaining four factors are regarded as "situational" contingencies. They hypothetically lead to recruitment to one group rather than another, if any other, and to the adoption of the group's world view. In the absence of these situational factors, total conversion will not occur, no matter how predisposed or susceptible the prospective convert may be. Accordingly, the conversion process is conceptualized as a value-added process in which the addition of each new condition increases the probability that conversion will occur.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of conversion by critically examining the Lofland-Stark model and the extent to which it applies to our findings on conversion to the *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement in America. Two issues guide the inquiry. The first has to do with the model's empirical generalizability. Lofland initially suggested that the applica-

tion of the model was "universal" (1966:61). Whether this is in fact the case remains an empirical question. Although the Lofland-Stark model is the most widely cited conversion scheme in the sociological literature (see Richardson, 1978; Richardson and Stewart, 1978; Richardson *et al.*, 1978; Robbins and Anthony, 1979; Wilson, 1978), it has rarely been subjected to rigorous empirical examination.[1] Instead, most studies have uncritically used the model as a *post factum* ordering scheme for classifying data pertaining to the group under investigation (e.g., Judah, 1974; McGee, 1976). Moreover, neither Lofland and Stark nor those scholars drawing on the model have fully considered the extent to which the conversion process may vary across movements—according to differences in value orientations, organizational structure, and the way a movement is publicly defined. Given that communal groups tend to be more demanding than noncommunal groups (Kanter, 1972; 1973), it seems reasonable to assume that such differences in organizational structure might lead to differences in the conversion process. Similarly, we might expect the conversion process to vary according to whether a group is publicly defined as "respectable," "idiosyncratic" or "revolutionary" (see Snow, 1979; Turner and Killian, 1972:257-59). Consideration of such factors seems especially important given the fact that *Nichiren Shoshu* is a noncommunal group in contrast to the Unification Church.

Aside from the issue of empirical generalizability, several components of the model strike us as theoretically questionable when viewed from the complementary perspectives of Mead (1932, 1936, 1938), Burke (1965, 1969a,b) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) and the related work on "accounts" or "motive talk" (see Blum and McHugh, 1971; Mills, 1940; Scott and Lyman, 1968). In particular, two aspects of this work inform our approach to conversion and therefore our theoretical critique of the Lofland-Stark model. The first suggests that social conditions and the various elements of one's life situation, including the self, constitute social objects whose meanings are not intrinsic to them but flow from one's "universe of discourse" (Mead, 1934:89) or "informing point of view" (Burke, 1965:99) or "meaning system" (Berger, 1963:61). The second and corollary principle emphasizes that meaning itself is constantly in the process of emergence or evolution; that personal biographies as well as history in general are continuously redefined in the light of new experiences.[2] Since conversion involves the adoption and use of a new or formerly peripheral universe of discourse and its attendant vocabulary of motives, it follows, as Burke (1965) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) have emphasized, that this ongoing process of retrospective interpretation would be heightened and more extensive in conversion than is customary in the course of everyday life.

Drawing on these concepts and on data pertaining to conversion to the *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement, we will critically examine the extent to which the Lofland-Stark model is conceptually useful and empirically on target.

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1. Aside from the work of Richardson *et al.* (1978), we know of only two studies which might be considered "tests" of the Lofland-Stark model. The first, Seggar and Kunz's (1972) examination of conversion to Mormonism, not only had mixed results, but we question (for reasons that will become clear later in the paper) the extent to which conversion can be adequately studied solely by means of *post factum,* structured interviews. We also question whether an examination of conversion to an institutionalized religious denomination constitutes a fair test of a conversion model pertaining to "deviant" cults or belief systems. The second study examines the relation between psychological stress, prior socialization and direct social influence (Heirich, 1977). Because its findings bear upon some related components of the Lofland-Stark model but neglect others, it cannot be regarded as a test of the Lofland-Stark model in its entirety.

2. In *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932:31), Mead notes, for example: "If we had every possible document and every possible monument from the period of J. Caesar, we would unquestionably have a truer picture of the man and of what occurred in his lifetime, but it would be a truth which belongs to the present, and a later present would reconstruct it from the standpoint of its own emergent nature." Similarly, Mead writes in *The Philosophy of the Act* (1936:616): ". . . that which arrives that is novel gives a continually new past. A past never was in the form in which it appears as a past. Its reality is in its interpretation of the present."

DATA, CONTEXT AND PROCEDURES

The data on which this examination is based were collected by the senior author during a year and a half ethnographic study of the *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement in America (hereafter referred to as NSA). The movement was formally introduced in the U.S. in 1960 as a foreign extension of *Sokagakkai*—a Japanese Buddhist movement that emerged as a significant religious and political force in post-World War II Japan.[3] At the time of its establishment in 1960, NSA claimed fewer than 500 followers, nearly all of whom were Japanese brides of American G.I.'s. Today the movement claims over 200,000 variously committed adherents, over 90 per cent of whom are Occidental and most of whom have joined since 1966.

The movement's primary goals are similar to those of the Unification Church. Although NSA promises the attainment of personal regeneration and happiness in the immediate present through the realization of an endless stream of material, physical and spiritual "benefits," its ultimate objective is the construction of a new civilization. Like the Unification Church, it seeks to change the world by incorporating an ever-increasing number of people within its ranks and changing them in accordance with its doctrine.[4] Personal transformation is thus seen as the key to social transformation. However, unlike the Unification Church, NSA does not accept Christ or some variant thereof as the "one way." Instead, the answer for NSA resides in the repetitive chanting of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* to the *Gohonzon* (a small sacred scroll inscribed in Japanese and regarded as the most powerful object in the world) and in the practice of *Shakubuku,* the act of bringing others into contact with the *Gohonzon* and the key to unlocking its power—*Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.*[5]

Organizationally the movement is composed of numerous units and cells linked together not only through a clear-cut leadership hierarchy but also through intersecting movement associations and interpersonal ties between members of different cells.[6] Members are typically recruited into one of these cells; and it was at this organizational level that the senior author initially gained entrée into the movement and began a year and a half association with it as a nominal convert and active participant observer. Since core members would spend all their leisure time engaged in NSA activities, the role of participant observer called for the devotion of considerable time and energy to the movement. This intensive involvement included daily phone calls (at all hours) from members, attending meetings on the average of three nights per week, accompanying members on recruiting missions into public places, visiting other members in their homes, and even giving "an experience" (testimony) when called upon during *Shakubuku* (conversion) meetings. Although an attempt was made to be as open and honest as possible about the researcher's sociological

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3. For a discussion of the *Sokagakkai* movement, see Babbie, 1965; Dator, 1969; Murata, 1969; White, 1970. Since NSA is a foreign extension of *Sokagakkai,* it is important to note that for strategic reasons NSA has attempted to deemphasize its relationship to the *Sokagakkai* and to establish its own separate identity. In 1966, for example, the name of the movement was changed from *Sokagakkai* of America to *Nichiren Shoshu* of America. Unlike the *Sokagakkai,* NSA has refrained from mixing politics and religion. For an analysis of these differences and of NSA's highly accommodative behavior, see Snow (1979).

4. In their recent examination of the Unification Church, Bromley and Shupe (1979:22) refer to it as a "world transforming movement, i.e., one which seeks total, permanent structural change of society across all institutions." This orientation was also evident in the early years of the movement. Its major goal then, as now, was "a complete restoration of the world to the condition of the Garden of Eden" (Lofland and Stark, 1965:826). Since NSA's "unchangeable mission," according to its major leader, is the "building of a new culture," it might also be classified as a world-transforming movement.

5. *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* is variously translated as "Adoration to the Scripture of the Lotus of the Perfect Truth," "I devote myself to the inexpressibly profound and wonderful truth embodied in the *Lotus Sutra,*" or, as most core members prefer, "Devotion to the mystical, universal law of cause and effect through sound."

6. NSA shares with Pentecostalism, the Black Power movement, and the Women's movement a segmented and reticulated organizational structure, but has more centralized leadership and decision making. For a discussion of these dimensions of movement organization, see Gerlach and Hine (1970).

identity, neither this identity nor the purposes of the research were announced in each movement-related situation. As a consequence, not all members who functioned as informants were aware of the research interests to which they were contributing. The nature of the senior author's association with the movement was thus participatory and intense, and overt and covert at one and the same time.[7]

In addition to observational and experiential data, we also draw on information obtained from in-depth, conversational interviews with fifteen core members and an examination of a random sample of members' testimonies (experiences) appearing in the movement's newspaper, *The World Tribune*.[8] Since most editions of *The World Tribune* contain several members' testimonies, we randomly selected 504 experiences from 1966 to 1974 (six per month), excluding the years 1972 and 1973 which were not accessible during this phase of the research. The testimonies were examined for demographic data and information pertaining to manner of recruitment, accounts of past life situations, motivational accounts for joining, benefits received, length of membership and nature of participation. These data pertain more to the highly committed and active members than to the entire membership. This is suggested by the fact that the mean length of membership at the time of each testimony was twenty months, with the mode being one year and the median around fourteen months. Also, because the *World Tribune* is, in part, a promotion vehicle and recruitment aid, the less active and more peripheral members are less likely to be called upon or to volunteer to give testimony in the newspaper. We thus assume that the population from which the sample was drawn consists primarily of "core converts" or "true believers." While this sample would undoubtedly be too limited for some purposes, it is well-suited to our interests. It not only complements and provides a "validity check" for the observational and experiential data, but also makes it possible to assess the Lofland-Stark model with quantitative data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Predisposing Conditions

Tension. Lofland and Stark suggest that a state of acutely-felt tension or frustration is a necessary predisposing condition for conversion. This tension, as well as the other predisposing conditions, are viewed as "attributes of persons" that exist "*prior* to their contact with the cult" or group in question (1965:864; their emphasis). We would thus expect our data to demonstrate that NSA members experienced severe tension and acutely-felt needs prior to joining the movement.

At first glance, it would appear as if our data corroborate this expectation. As indicated in Table 1, like Lofland and Stark's informants, NSA members characterize their preparticipation life situations in terms of various problems and tensions. Sixty-nine percent of the sample, for example, indicated that prior to or at the time of encountering NSA they were experiencing one or more "spiritual" problems, such as meaninglessness, a lack of direction or purpose, or a sense of powerlessness. Perhaps even more revealing than the specific problems alluded to is the finding that, on the average, core members reported at least three problems per person just prior to conversion (see column three, Table 1).

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7. Although it was not the senior author's intent to engage in secretive research, the nature of participant observation often militates against total candidness. On some occasions it is easy to forget that one is not merely a participant, and on the other occasions to announce one's identity as a researcher is to disrupt and contaminate a flow of interaction deemed natural both by the members and the researcher. Much research is both secretive and nonsecretive: "All research is secret in some ways and to some degree—we never tell the subjects everything" (Roth, 1962:283). For a more detailed account of the ethnographic stage of the research, see Snow (1976:1–38).

8. *The World Tribune* is published five times a week in Santa Monica, California. It was first issued in August 1964, and has been published ever since. It now has over 55,000 monthly subscribers and constitutes a useful record of the growth and history of the *Nichiren Shoshu* movement in America.

TABLE 1
Personal Problems Retrospectively Referred to as Characterizing Life Situation Prior to Conversion

Problems*	Number of Members Referring to Category (N: 504)		Number of Problems Referred to within Category (N: 1,580)		Average Number of Problems Per Member**
Spiritual[a]	(346)	69%	(526)	33%	1.52
Interpersonal[b]	(244)	48%	(309)	20%	1.26
Character[c]	(262)	52%	(284)	18%	1.08
Material[d]	(214)	43%	(255)	16%	1.19
Physical[e]	(151)	30%	(206)	13%	1.36

* The following problem categories are those used by members when recruiting and giving testimony.

[a] Problems coded as "spiritual" include meaninglessness, lack of direction and purpose, a sense of powerlessness, poor self-image.

[b] Problems coded as "interpersonal" include marital problems, child rearing problems, parental problems, and other relational problems.

[c] Problems coded as "character" include drugs, alcohol, self-centeredness, and various personality problems such as uncontrollable temper.

[d] Problems coded as "material" include unemployment, job dissatisfaction, finances, and school-related problems.

[e] Problems coded as "physical" include headaches, nervousness, chronic illness, obesity, lack of energy, and so on.

** This column is equal to column two divided by column one. On the average, members reported 3.13 problems.

Looked at uncritically, these findings, and the fact that they are consistent with those of Lofland and Stark (1965) and Richardson *et al.* (1978), suggest that a state of acutely-felt tension is indeed an important precipitant of conversion. Yet, in the absence of a control group that is representative of the larger population, such a conclusion is methodologically untenable. Until we know whether the problems experienced by preconverts are greater in number or qualitatively different from those experienced by the larger population, it is unreasonable to assume a causal linkage between prestructured tension and susceptibility to conversion.

Acknowledging this issue, Lofland and Stark (1965:867) suggest that while the problems experienced by preconverts and the larger population "are not qualitatively different," the former experience their problems "rather more acutely and over longer periods of time than most people do." Although they offer no evidence in support of this assertion, a number of studies and polls regarding the worries and problems of American adults suggest that Lofland and Stark are probably right on the first account. A 1957 University of Michigan survey of how American adults viewed their mental health revealed that roughly 41 percent experienced marital problems, 75 percent encountered problems in raising their children, 29 percent had job-related problems, 35 percent avowed various personality shortcomings, and 19 percent felt they were on the verge of a nervous breakdown at one time or another.[9] These and findings of similar surveys (Cantril, 1965; Chase, 1962; Gallup, 1978; Stouffer, 1955) suggest that Americans not only have an overriding concern with themselves and "their immediate environment," but also often "admit" to having "weaknesses and problems" (Gurin *et al.*, 1960:xxiv-xxv).[10] Since the kinds of worries and ten-

9. Although the sample consisted of 2,460 American adults over 21, the base for the above figures ranges from 922 for work problems to 2,455 for feelings of impending nervous breakdown. The figures were extrapolated from Gurin *et al.*, 1960: Tables 2.6, 3.4, 4.8, 5.8 and 6.1.

10. A 1976 survey of over 2000 American men and women about their feelings of well-being and distress suggests that Americans still readily avow numerous anxieties and problems. The study reveals that today people tend to be somewhat more anxiety-ridden and "unhappy about their communities and country, their jobs, and their interpersonal lives" than in 1957 (Institute of Social Research, 1979:4).

sions noted in public opinion polls and surveys are of the same genre as those alluded to by NSA converts and summarized in Table 1, Lofland and Stark appear to be correct in arguing that the worries and problems that plague most Americans are not qualitatively different from those of the preconverts.

However, what about the corollary contention that it is the magnitude and duration of stress, rather than stress *per se,* that render people differentially susceptible to conversion? This is a difficult question, especially since studies such as those cited above shed little direct light on the matter. However, our data do not indicate a state of acutely-felt and prolonged tension to be a necessary precipitating condition. Although many NSA converts typically characterize their respective preconversion life situations as being laden with several personal problems (Table 1), many others report that they were not aware of having had any severe problems prior to conversion to NSA. Consider the following statements extracted from members' testimonies during movement meetings or presented in the movement's newspaper:

> Male, Caucasian, single, under 30: When I joined I didn't think I was burdened by any problems. But as I discovered, I just wasn't aware of them until I joined and they were solved.
>
> Female, Caucasian, single, under 30: After I attended these meetings and began chanting, I really began to see that my personal life was a mess.
>
> Male, Caucasian, single, under 30: Now as I look back I feel that I was a total loser. At that time, however, I thought I was pretty cool. But after chanting for a while, I found out that my life was just a dead thing. The more I chanted, the more clearly I came to see myself and the more I realized just how many problems I had had.
>
> Male, Caucasian, married, over 30: After you chant for a while you'll look back and say, "Gee, I was sure a rotten, unhappy person." I know I thought I was a saint before I chanted, but shortly after I discovered what a rotten person I was and how many problems I had.

These statements indicate that, for many individuals, conversion to NSA involves either the redefinition of life before conversion as being fraught with problems or the discovery of personal problems not previously discernible or regarded as troublesome enough to warrant remedial action. In either case, these findings suggest not only that conversion can occur in the absence of preexisting strains, but also that the strains or problems alluded to by converts may indeed be a product of conversion itself—that is, of the internalization of a new interpretive schema and its attendant vocabulary of motive. Although this interpretation runs counter to what Lofland and Stark lead us to expect, it is quite consistent with the Meadian thesis that the past is not a static entity but is subject to change with new experiences and alterations in one's universe of discourse. It is also consonant with the corollary observation that one of the more significant consequences of conversion, religious or secular, is that it entails a total or partial reinterpretation of one's biography (Berger, 1963; Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Burke, 1965; Shibutani, 1961; Travisano, 1970). We would thus argue on both empirical and theoretical grounds that while a state of acutely-felt and prolonged tension may be associated with conversion, it is not necessarily a predisposing condition.[11]

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11. That prestructured tension or stress may not be a necessary precondition for conversion is also suggested by Heirich's (1977:666) finding "that stress, at least as measured here, is insufficient to account" for conversion to Catholic Pentecostalism. Here it is also interesting to note that Heirich's findings suggest that perhaps converts to Catholic Pentecostalism are not as inclined as are converts to *Nichiren Shoshu* to define their past as problematic and stressful. If this is true, it suggests either that converts to NSA are more "troubled" than converts to Catholic Pentecostalism or that whether converts see their past as stress-ridden is largely dependent on the newly acquired interpretive schema. As argued above, we prefer the latter explanation. This explanation is also consistent with Emerson and Messinger's more general observations (1977:23) about the natural history of personal difficulties or "troubles." Among other things, they note that troubles initially "appear vague to those concerned. But as steps are taken to remedy or manage that trouble, the trouble itself becomes progressively clarified and specified."

Parallel Problem-Solving Perspectives. Personal problems can be defined and dealt with in terms of a number of functional alternatives (Emerson and Messinger, 1977). Lofland and Stark suggest that the remedy chosen is partly dependent on the correspondence between the individual's problem-solving perspective and the remedial alternative in question. If the alternative is political, but the individual views the world primarily from a religious or psychiatric standpoint, then conversion to that alternative is not likely. If, on the other hand, the two are congruent, then the prospect of conversion is heightened. Accordingly, Lofland and Stark initially hypothesized that conversion to a religious movement is contingent on the possession of a religious problem-solving perspective.

While concurring with this hypothetical linkage between problem-solving orientation and susceptibility to conversion, Richardson and Stewart (1978) have sought to extend and refine the linkage by proposing several modifications. First, they suggest, in addition to the religious, political and psychiatric perspectives, a "physiological" perspective (e.g., drugs, alcohol, dieting, exercise). Second, they contend that Lofland and Stark have neglected the role of prior socialization in furnishing individuals with perspectives for defining problems and their solutions and thereby facilitating susceptibility to conversion. Drawing on the hypothesis that some religious traditions make people prone to frustration (Fromm, 1950; Pattison, 1974; Toch, 1965) and on the observation that some converts to the Unification Church and the Jesus movement came from a background of Christian fundamentalism, Richardson and Stewart hypothesize that prior socialization as a fundamentalist not only increases the probability of having a religious problem-solving perspective, but also renders those individuals more susceptible to participation in religious cults and movements.

Although this hypothesis with its emphasis on prior socialization is sociologically appealing, our observations suggest that it may be overstated.[12] In particular, we find no compelling evidence suggesting that converts to NSA were raised in a fundamentalist environment. Moreover, our data provide little support for the corollary proposition that the possession of a religious problem-solving perspective is a necessary precondition for conversion to a religious cult or movement. This is illustrated in the first section of Table 2, which indicates that less than 25 percent of the converts clearly fell into the religious problem-solving category prior to encountering NSA. In other words, more than three-quarters of the sample saw both the source and solution to problems, whether personal or social, as residing in forces or structures other than mystical, supernatural or occult. As one such member, a twenty-three year old female convert who viewed herself as a "political revolutionary" prior to joining NSA, relates:

> I've come from the revolution, but I've since learned that the real revolution is through NSA and its human revolution. It's not the superficial revolution of a culture or a government or an economic system. It's finally gotten down to the revolution of myself and others through chanting to the *Gohonzon.*

Similarly, a male convert in his early twenties describes his view of things prior to encountering NSA:

> Right up until I joined NSA I harbored hostility toward my parents, and had a cynical attitude toward society in general. I blamed my parents for my hang-ups and criticized the U.S.'s foreign policy, the President, and so on. I realize now that because I was miserable inside, I perceived the environment as miserable. And I also came to realize that if I wanted things to improve, I had to change myself first.

These statements, which are not exceptional, cast further doubt on the hypothesis that preparticipation ideological congruence is a necessary condition for conversion. They also suggest that conversion to NSA frequently effects a significant change in problem-solving perspective.

12. Our observations here are also consistent with Heirich's finding (1977:66) that conversion to Catholic Pentecostalism, as indicated by attending Mass, "does not result from previous conditioning."

TABLE 2
Percentage and Frequency Distribution for Orientation, Turning Points and Mode of Recruitment

I. Preconversion Problem-Solving Orientation	No.	%
Physiological[a]	117	35
Religious[b]	72	22
Psychiatric[c]	39	12
Political[d]	32	10
Mixed[e]	70	21
Totals*	330	100
II. Possible Preconversion Turning Points	**No.**	**%**
Unemployed/Lost Job	52	16
Divorced/Separated	46	14
Military/Draft	38	12
School Dropout	36	11
Institutionalized	34	10
Close Encounter with Death	15	4
Attempted/Contemplated Suicide	17	5
None Mentioned	92	28
Totals*	330	100
III. Mode of Recruitment	**No.**	**%**
Recruited through Social Networks	270	82
By Friends	(190)	(58)
By Relatives	(80)	(24)
Recruited Outside of Social Networks	60	18
Totals*	330	100

* Although there were 504 cases in our sample of testimonies, 174 of them did not include information pertaining to orientation, possible turning point or mode of recruitment. Therefore, this table is based on 330 rather than 504 cases.

[a] Physiological orientation includes references to being "into" or resolving personal difficulties through drugs, alcohol, dieting, exercise, sex and the like.

[b] Religious orientation includes self-designation as a religious searcher and/or identification of the supernatural or occult (God, unseen forces) as the key to resolving problems.

[c] Psychiatric orientation includes references to being "into" psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and groups such as est. Includes statements indicating that manipulation of the self or psyche is seen as key to resolving personal difficulties.

[d] Political orientation includes references to belief that life situation is determined primarily by political and social arrangements. Being "into" peace movement, political activism and civil rights movement.

[e] Mixed orientation includes self-designation as hippie, street person, wanderer or drifter.

Not only do converts to NSA reinterpret their past by redefining some aspects of it as more problematic than before, but also they frequently come to redefine or discover the source of blame for their more acutely defined or recently acquired problems.

Some might argue that these observations and findings do not necessarily preclude a causal linkage between prior religious socialization and conversion; the former may still influence which of the many groups, both conventional and offbeat, the potential convert will select or find appealing. With this we have no quarrel, since it seems quite reasonable to expect that those raised in a fundamentalist tradition might find the Unification Church or the Children of God more appealing than NSA or some other Buddhist- or Hindu-inspired movement. In either case, we still maintain that preparticipation ideological congruence is not a necessary condition for conversion in general. To argue otherwise is inconsistent with the logic of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It also ignores the fact that movements function as important agitational, problem-defining, need-arousal and motive-producing agencies. Social movements have traditionally been viewed as vehicles for the expression of prestructured beliefs and dispositions (see Cantril, 1941; Glock, 1964; Hoffer, 1951; Klapp, 1969; Toch, 1965). However, attendance at

an NSA meeting demonstrates that movements also function to construct social reality.[13] When this is the case, then ideological congruence, if and when it exists, constitutes a facilitative rather than a necessary precondition for conversion.

Religious Seekership. The final background factor that Lofland and Stark posited as a necessary precipitant of conversion is religious seekership. The prospect must come "to define himself as a religious seeker," as "a person searching for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve his discontent" (1965:868). Recently, Lofland (1978:12,20) has suggested that perhaps this dimension of the model is not as important as originally assumed, since "people not previously religious at all have joined" movements such as the Unification Church "in noticeable numbers" since the late sixties.

Although Lofland offers no substantial evidence in support of his recent observation, our data suggest that it is well-grounded. Specifically, if we take experimentation with other religious alternatives as an indicator of religious seekership, then, as indicated in the first section of Table 2, the vast majority of our sample were not seekers in the sense of "searching for some satisfactory system of religious meaning" (Lofland and Stark, 1965:868). We do not suggest, however, that religious seekership was not operative in the case of many preconverts. As one married female convert in her mid-twenties recounts:

> I have been a member of several religions, and try as I did to live by them I somehow fell away. I didn't realize then, but my reason for leaving was always the same. They all lacked something I was searching for. I read many books about different religions. But every way I tried I failed to reach the guidance and fulfillment I was seeking.

Seekership is also suggested by the fact that 22 percent of the sample could be classified as "seekers." Yet, the fact that 78 percent or more were not self-designated religious "experimenters" or "searchers" suggests that the linkage between seekership and conversion is not a necessary one.[14] Moreover, even when people do define themselves as religious seekers, we are again confronted with the problem of interpreting retrospective accounts. Did the avowed state of religious seekership actually exist prior to joining the group in question, or did conversion lead to a reconstruction of personal biographies such that converts came to reevaluate their lives prior to joining as ones seeking some ultimate authority?

Situational Factors

Turning Point. Situational factors refer to those conditions that lead to the successful recruitment and conversion of those individuals who are so inclined on the basis of the foregoing predispositions. One such factor is that prospects encounter the movement shortly after or at the same time as the occurrence of what is perceived as a "turning point" in life. That is, preconverts must come into contact with the movement at or about the same time as being confronted with the necessity or opportunity of doing something different with their lives because of the completion or disruption of old obligations and lines of action. The kinds of personal incidents and situations that Lofland and Stark (1965:870) allude to as turning points include objective changes such as loss of job; completion, failure or withdrawal from school; divorce; and residential change.

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13. This is also amply demonstrated by attendance at an Erhard Training Seminar (est) or an evangelistic revival, or by spending an evening at a Krishna Commune or with the Moonies, each of which we have done on one or more occasions.

14. Even though Balch and Taylor (1978) and Straus (1976) argue convincingly that many people who participate in contemporary religious groups and mass therapies are "seekers," we find no reason to modify our contention that seekership is not essential for conversion. Based on our observations, we think it is more reasonable to argue that while "there are undoubtedly personality types who are attracted to any movement," only rarely do they ever constitute "more than a small fraction of its members" (Turner and Killian, 1972:365).

Insofar as such specific events are taken as reliable indicators of turning points, then our data seemingly provide some support for the hypothetical linkage between turning points and conversion. As indicated in the second section of Table 2, 72 percent of the usable cases in our sample report personal experiences that might be construed as turning points. Additionally, if we include as being at a turning point the 21 percent who referred to themselves as "hippies" or "wanderers" at the time of encountering NSA, then roughly 93 percent of the converts in our sample were at a turning point in their lives sometime before or concurrently with their encounter with NSA. While these findings do not unqualifiedly indicate that a turning point is a necessary condition for conversion, they do suggest that it may be an important facilitative condition in that it appears to increase one's susceptibility to conversion.

Yet, looked at more critically, the concept of the turning point and its relation to conversion are, as Lofland (1978:20) has recently commented, quite "troublesome." The reasons are several. First, the turning point concept is ambiguous. Whether a particular situation or point in one's life constitutes a turning point is not a given, but is largely a matter of definition and attitude. There are few, if any, consistently reliable benchmarks for ascertaining when or whether one is at a turning point in one's life. As a consequence, just about any moment could be defined as a turning point. Relatedly, when seeking to establish the occurrence of turning points in the past, we again face the problem of retrospective reporting. Events once seen as routine or inconsequential may emerge as highly significant after one has adopted the world view of NSA. In addition, when NSA converts discuss turning points in their lives, they seldom refer to the kinds of objective major life changes emphasized by Lofland and Stark. As indicated in Table 2, such changes as divorce, unemployment, and completion of school are frequently mentioned, but not as turning points. Instead, this designation seems to be reserved for that point at which members come to align themselves with the movement emotionally, cognitively, and morally—seeing themselves at one with the group. Furthermore, this realization typically occurs during the course of their practice as a member, rather than prior to or at the time of encountering the movement. As one middle-aged convert, employed as a nurse and who was the mother of a seventeen year old, relates:

> Although I had been a member for some time, things weren't going well. I was beginning to lose my patience and motivation at work, and my son was going through some troublesome phases. I continued to chant, but it wasn't until the *Nichiren Shoshu* San Diego Convention that I began to develop a real faith in the practice and a sense of mission. . . . When I got home, things started happening. My whole attitude seemed changed. When I went to work I felt a real sense of confidence that was never there before. . . . As I look back now, the convention was the turning point in my life.

Similarly, an unmarried female convert in her early twenties, employed as a retailer in a clothing store, recounts how the turning point in her life came upon seeing President Ikeda, the movement's principal leader, during the movement's 1974 San Diego Convention:

> Prior to the Convention I felt a gap in my life. I loved NSA activities and devoted every spare moment to them, but something was missing in the world outside of NSA. In the month before the convention I came to realize I needed to capture the spirit of President Ikeda. . . . The opportunity came when the Convention Cultural Festival began and I found myself sitting five seats away from him. As I watched he turned and waved in my direction. Astonished, I waved back. And then he gave me the "V" sign. It was beyond my greatest dreams. Now I feel that I could follow him anywhere. At that moment I felt a real connection with President Ikeda that has opened up a whole new aspect in my life. . . . You stay in your nest until you're ready to fly. . . . This is the first time I've been out of the nest. I feel like I've been born again.

Such accounts, in conjunction with the earlier observations, suggest that the turning point concept may be related to conversion, but not necessarily in the way initially hypothesized by Lofland and Stark. We see two differences. First, rather than assuming that major objective life changes are necessarily perceived by converts as turning points (see Lofland and Stark, 1965:870),

we contend that what is defined as a turning point is largely contingent on the interpretive schema of the group in question. Thus, a turning point may be indicated by extramovement status passages or role changes, as Lofland and Stark assume, or it may be constituted by some illuminating insight or by heightened or renewed faith. In either case, it is subjectively determined rather than objectively given. The second difference follows from the first. Rather than occurring prior to or around the time in which the movement is encountered, the turning point is more likely to come after contact with the movement and exposure to its world view. Inasmuch as conversion involves the acquisition of a new or more clearly articulated universe of discourse and its attendant vocabulary of motive, then these observations are neither surprising nor unreasonable. Accordingly, the turning point might be conceptualized as an artifact of the conversion process, rather than as a precipitating condition. Indeed, the turning point may symbolize conversion itself, for converts are gripped by the realization that they are not the same as they were moments ago and that their life situation and view of the world have changed, and for the better.

Cult Affective Bonds. None of the hypothetical precipitants of conversion are regarded as more important than the development of a positive, interpersonal tie between the prospect and one or more movement members. However amenable an individual is to the appeals of a cult or movement, Lofland and Stark (1965:871) argue that for conversion to occur "an affective bond must develop, if it does not already exist." Such a bond may emerge during the course of movement-specific interaction between two former strangers, or it may be the result of a preexisting, extramovement, interpersonal association. Lofland and Stark found that once the initial bond between the founder and the first convert developed, nearly all subsequent conversions "moved through preexisting friendship pairs or nets."

Our findings tend to agree with those of Lofland and Stark. Examination of the conversion careers of the fifteen most active members of the chanting cell with which the senior author was associated revealed that an affective bond was not only discernible in each case, but that the bond was typically preexisting rather than emergent and movement-specific. Two of the fifteen members were recruited by a spouse, one by another relative, ten by friends or acquaintances, and only two by strangers. All but two of the most active members in the chanting cell were thus drawn into sustained contact with the movement by being linked to a member through a preexisting, extramovement interpersonal tie. Further investigation revealed that the same pattern was evident for the vast majority of NSA members brought into the movement's orbit of influence. As indicated in the third section of Table 2, 82 percent of our sample were recruited by members with whom they had preexisting, extramovement ties. Although the remaining 18 percent were recruited directly from the street by members who were strangers, firsthand association with such recruits suggests that their subsequent conversion was contingent on the development of an affective bond with one or more members of the cell into which they were recruited.

That an affective interpersonal tie between the prospect and one or more members might constitute a necessary condition for conversion is not surprising. Such a bond can function to bridge the information gap between prospect and movement, increase the credibility of the message and cause, and intensify the pressure to consider the message and the corresponding practice. We would thus argue that while conversion involves more than "coming to accept the opinions of one's friends" (Lofland and Stark, 1965:871), it is rather unlikely in the absence of such an affective bond to one or more members.[15]

15. In their study of participation in the Bo and Peep UFO cult, Balch and Taylor (1978) report findings apparently questioning the importance of group affective bonds to conversion. They note that "new recruits almost never established close affective ties with members of the cult before they joined," and that "even after a seeker decided to join, he got very little social support from members of the cult." *Yet,* they also note that "members of the UFO cult were not converts in the true sense of the word." Instead, they were "metaphysical seekers" who defined "their decision to follow the Two" as "a reaffirmation of their seekership . . .

Weak Extracult Affective Bonds. The third situational factor Lofland and Stark deem necessary for conversion is the absence or neutralization of extracult attachments. Given the fact that converts to the group they studied had few (if any) strong, proximal, interpersonal ties, and given the corollary finding that "conversion was not consummated" when extracult bonds were not weakened or neutralized (Lofland and Stark, 1965:873), such a proposition seems well-grounded. Moreover, it is consistent with the argument that extraneous ties and commitments can function as countervailing influences with respect to the interests, demands and ideology of a cult or movement (see Becker, 1960; Kanter, 1972).

However plausible the above hypothesis, both the work of Richardson and his associates and our own findings cast considerable doubt on its generalizability. In their work on conversion to a fundamentalist sect, Richardson *et al.* (1978:51) found that while "many members did not have especially rewarding" preexisting "ties" and while "most such ties were generally weakened or broken at least for a time after a person became a member of the group," the "sect members were not isolated from their society to the extent that Lofland and Stark found in their study." Even more significantly, they report finding a number of extragroup significant others, particularly parents, who felt positively toward the group and were even supportive of the convert's participation (Richardson *et al.,* 1978:51; Richardson and Stewart, 1978:37).

Our findings similarly provide little support for the hypothesis that either neutralized extramovement ties or social isolation constitutes a necessary condition for conversion. As noted earlier, 82 percent were recruited into the movement via preexisting, extramovement social networks. Moreover, our data suggest that conversion to NSA generally may lead to a strengthening of extramovement bonds, particularly among family, co-workers and classmates. There are two reasons for this. First, because NSA's interpretive beliefs include the karmic principle that one's present life condition is largely contingent on one's own actions, both past and present, converts come to blame themselves for their misfortunes. Consequently, they seek to change themselves rather than others, thereby improving rather than worsening extramovement relations. The account of an unmarried twenty-three year old female convert illustrates our assertion:

> I now realize that the reason I didn't get along with my roommate wasn't her fault, but my fault. Chanting and the *Gohonzon* made me realize that the things I criticized about her were the very faults I possessed. By chanting and changing my character we are now able to get along.

Or, as an unmarried male convert in his early twenties similarly recounts:

> I discovered that I was running from myself. I came to realize that everything I hated was part of me. This realization made me a better person, because I am now correcting what was wrong with me instead of blaming it on my parents, the school, and the country.

In addition, since NSA is a noncommunal, proselytizing movement that seeks to change the world by expanding its ranks, all nonmembers, and particularly extramovement familiar others, are defined as potential converts: as one informant put it, "like freshly sown seeds, [they] will eventually blossom if only they are tended to." Accordingly, members are constantly reminded to build and nurture extramovement ties in order to facilitate the movement's spread.

These observations suggest that affective ties to both movement members and nonmembers are not necessarily contradictory, and that extramovement affective ties may function to facilitate rather than to counteract conversion. There are at least two reasons why these findings are incon-

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as a logical extension of their spiritual quest." If the members of the cult *had* undergone conversion, then it was not to the UFO cult but to the metaphysical world view which came to function for them as a primary authority prior to encountering the Two and their followers. Because the conversion process was not involved in affiliation with the cult, it seems unreasonable to argue that Balch and Taylor's findings contradict either the Lofland-Stark model or our own conclusions about the importance of group affective bonds in relation to conversion.

sistent with those by Lofland and Stark. One is that the Unification Church they studied had a communal structure and NSA's is noncommunal. Because communally organized groups are generally more demanding (Kanter, 1972, 1973) or "greedy" (Coser, 1967), the neutralization or severance of extragroup ties and other countervailing influences may well be necessary in order to effect conversion. In contrast, such a break with the outside world hardly seems necessary for conversion to noncommunal movements such as NSA. The other reason is that the relationship between extramovement affective ties and conversion may also be influenced by the public reaction a movement engenders (see Turner and Killian, 1972:257–59; Snow, 1979). Conversion to movements that are publicly defined as "revolutionary" or "peculiar" or "idiosyncratic" may be contingent on the weakening of extramovement ties—in order to neutralize the stigma frequently associated with participation in such movements. In contrast, participation in movements defined as "respectable" may not be encumbered by resistance from nonmovement significant others. Hence, the maintenance of extramovement ties may not impede conversion to more "respectable" movements. Given the fact that NSA has made a longstanding and concerted effort to render itself respectable and legitimate in the public eye, such an hypothesis seems quite plausible (see Snow, 1979).

Intensive Interaction. While they regard the confluence of the six previous items (three predisposing conditions and three situational factors) as sufficient for the production of verbal conversion, Lofland and Stark contend that commitment remains only verbal, and that conversion remains incomplete, in the absence of intensive interaction with group members. Such interaction hypothetically transforms the avowed convert into a "deployable agent" by securing behavioral as well as verbal commitment, and they regard it as the final condition that rounds out the conversion process.

Our observations are not only in line with those of Lofland and Stark but suggest that intensive interaction is perhaps the most important factor in the conversion process once the prospect has been informed about and brought into contact with the movement. In the case of NSA, the interaction begins in earnest once the prospect has been persuaded to attend a cellular (district) discussion meeting.[16] Conducted four evenings per week, these meetings are highly organized affairs staged for the expressed purpose of giving "newcomers the best possible reasons for receiving their own *Gohonzon* (scroll) and to begin chanting."[17] If the prospect agrees to give chanting a try, he or she is formally initiated into NSA in a conversion ceremony (*Gojukai*) held at one of its regional temples and conducted by NSA priests. Following this and the enshrinement of the *Gohonzon* in the newcomer's place of residence, the new member typically becomes the primary responsibility of the member who was the recruiter. Referred to as a Junior Group Leader, this member constitutes the initial primary link between the novitiate and the movement. More than anyone else in the movement, the group leader is expected "to know the situation of the new member, what sort of hopes [he/she] has, and what [his/her] desire is to practice." Moreover, the group leader is to "strive to establish a warm and close relationship with the member [he/she] is taking care of."

The ultimate aim is to get the new member to "stand alone," to be a "self-motivated member," to be, in Lofland and Stark's terms, a "deployable agent." But a new member is only "at level one toward becoming an active, vigorous member of NSA," and has to be "brought along." It is here that the Junior Group Leader comes into play. Alternating between the roles of

16. We do not intend to provide in this paper a detailed account of the interactive process leading to conversion to *Nichiren Shoshu,* only a brief overview of the process is included below. For a detailed analytic description of the process, see Snow (1976:219–57).

17. This and the following quoted material are derived from the *World Tribune,* from members' comments during movement meetings, and from informal discussions with the senior author.

instructor, informer and confidant, the Junior Leader is charged with maintaining constant contact with the new member—answering questions, advising about movement activities, and nurturing faith. This leader is also responsible for taking new members on recruiting expeditions into public places; coaxing them to attend meetings; introducing them to other group members and movement leaders; and visiting them at home to "help them chant correctly." By performing such duties the Junior Leader is a role-model of what it means to be a member, of how members think, talk and act—not only in relation to NSA but with respect to the world in general. It is thus through the Junior Group Leader and through attendance at and participation in movement activities that the new member begins to learn what NSA is all about and begins to become oriented cognitively, emotionally and morally. Members are constantly reminded that "if the link between the new member and the Junior Group Leader is cut off," then "the new member is virtually left out of the rhythm of NSA and is likely to fall away."

In the absence of such constant and intense interaction, conversion to NSA seems unlikely. Since this observation is not only consistent with Lofland and Stark's work, but also is suggested by studies of Hare Krishna (Daner, 1976; Judah, 1974) and Pentecostalism (Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Heirich, 1977), it would appear that the salience of intensive interaction to conversion cannot be overemphasized.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have sought to extend our understanding of the conversion process by critically examining the Lofland-Stark conversion model. Our data, derived from a study of recruitment and conversion to the *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement in America, have not supported the model in its entirety. Our analysis has suggested that several components of the model are theoretically questionable, while others seem more defensible.

Our findings are especially at odds with the contention that personal tension, ideological congruence, and religious seekership are necessary predisposing conditions for conversion. These factors were present in some individual cases, but missing in many others. Moreover, even if they had been uniformly operative, such factors might be best interpreted as consequences rather than precipitants of conversion. Our argument is admittedly inconsistent with the longstanding tendency to approach recruitment and conversion to movements primarily from a social psychological-motivational standpoint which focuses on various prestructured tensions and cognitive orientations as the major explanatory variables (see Cantril, 1941; Glock, 1964; Hoffer, 1951; Klapp, 1969; Peterson and Mauss, 1973). But we believe that this traditional approach is itself empirically questionable and theoretically unfounded. It ignores the fact that motives for behavior are generally emergent and interactional. It also assumes that the explanations given by converts for their conversion were necessarily those that motivated or precipitated it in the first place. We question such an assumption because conversion involves the reconstruction of one's past, frequently including the discovery of personal needs and problems not previously discernible or troublesome enough to warrant remedial action. Hence, the old past and the new past bear slight resemblance to each other.

The findings and analysis here also call into question the necessity of two of the situational factors that were components of the Lofland-Stark model: that of the turning point and that of weak or severed extracult attachments. Their original conceptualization of the connection between the turning point and conversion is at best problematic. Because the identification of something as a turning point is largely a function of the interpretive schema in use, the turning point really cannot be known *a priori* or without familiarity with the world view in question. Therefore, instead of conceptualizing the turning point as a precipitant of conversion, it might best be thought of as a consequence that can function to *symbolize* conversion itself.

We found that recruitment and conversion to NSA were typically contingent on the *mainten-*

ance of extracult affective ties, rather than being associated with weakened or neutralized extramovement affective ties. Data were also reported suggesting that conversion to NSA may even function to strengthen some extramovement ties. These findings ran counter to what the Lofland-Stark model led us to expect, and we suggested that the difference was probably related to: 1) whether the groups involved were organized communally (as was the Unification Church) or noncommunally (true of NSA); and 2) whether the movements involved were considered "respectable" or not by the general public.

Although we have questioned many features of the Lofland-Stark model, our findings indicate that two remaining factors in their model—cult affective bonds and intensive interaction—are essential for conversion to NSA. We would even argue that conversion in general is highly improbable in the absence of affective and intensive interaction. Some critics (Lofland, 1978; Straus, 1976) might object to such a conclusion on the grounds that it views the human actor as a relatively passive agent whose outlook and behavior is unwittingly molded and controlled by various social factors. However, we are not arguing that prospective converts are empty and disinterested vessels into which new ideas and beliefs are poured. To the contrary, we take it for granted that most converts were initially interested in exploring the perspective or group with which they are currently associated. After all, aside from the deprogramming "business" (cf. Patrick, 1976; Shupe *et al.,* 1978), there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that the bulk of contemporary conversions are involuntary or coerced. But to suggest that an individual once had an interest in or taste for something is not to explain how that something—whether a philosophy, a life style or a form of music—became a burning preoccupation, in James' (1958:162) words, "the habitual centre of [one's] personal energy." The key to such a transformation, we contend, is in the process of intensive interaction between prospect and converts. Of course people may facilitate their own conversion, but before they can "go about converting themselves" (Lofland, 1978:22) they must be privy to a universe of discourse that renders such transformations desirable and possible. Moreover, when a virtual smorgasbord of transformative world views exists, the question arises as to how and why one alternative is selected over another: the answer again seems to lie within the process of affective and intensive interaction.

In summary, our findings and analysis not only question the generalizability of some key elements of the Lofland-Stark model, they also raise questions about related models of conversion that place considerable emphasis on prestructured tensions and cognitive states, and on prior socialization. The analysis also suggests that instead of being the same in all groups, the conversion process may vary, depending, for example, on whether the group in question is communal or noncommunal, and "respectable" or "idiosyncratic." Our analysis, finally, suggests that the interactive process holds the key to understanding conversion. Future research should emphasize understanding this process more fully and pay special attention to the extent to which it varies across groups differing in ideology, organization and public reaction.

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