growth of social science as a social movement.

I have been arguing that a concern for the nature, production, and recognition of reasonable, realistic, and analyzable actions is not the monopoly of philosophers and professional sociologists. Members of a society are concerned as a matter of course and necessarily with these matters both as features and for the socially managed production of their everyday affairs. The study of common sense knowledge and common sense activities consists of treating as problemmatic phenomena the actual methods whereby members of a society, doing sociology, lay or professional, make the social structures of everyday activities observable. The "rediscovery" of common sense is possible perhaps because professional sociologists, like members, have had too much to do with common sense knowledge of social structures as both a topic and a resource for their inquiries and not enough to do with it only and exclusively as sociology's programmatic topic.

ON MAINTAINING DEVIANT BELIEF SYSTEMS: A CASE STUDY

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The present paper explores some selected aspects of a belief system shared by a small group of "mystics" located in southeastern United States. Its major concern is the means through which these divergent beliefs are maintained in the face of a disbelieving larger society.

Data for the report were gathered from intimate association and many lengthy conversations with a prominent member of the group and from much briefer conversations with four other members. Pamphlets and newsletters of the group were also examined. Observations from a number of other fringe groups have also been drawn upon.

The concept "belief system" is here defined as the set of notions with which individuals and groups interpret the physical and social reality around them and within themselves. No classification of these notions, such as the psychoanalytic one of conscious vs. unconscious, or Parsons' distinction among cognitive, expressive, and evaluative symbols[1] will be made here since it is neither feasible nor necessary for the purposes of this paper. The term "system" will call the reader's atention to the important fact that beliefs do not exist as a heap of disconnected items, but are related into some kind of "coherent" and "consistent" pattern.

THE ESPERS

The group, which we will call Esper, has its headquarters in a semi-isolated mountainous area of Georgia. This location was picked partly for its relative seclusion and for the natural protection it would afford in the event of a nuclear war. Several members have sold their business and properties in other locations to settle here permanently. The buildings and grounds are extensive, including housing for perhaps two hundred people, ample garden space, springs, and

I am indebted to George J. McCall for many of the ideas implicit in this article and to Daniel Glaser for help in revision.

[1] Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe; Free Press, 1951, pp. 326-383.

so forth. Several other fringe groups which share many beliefs with Esper are located within a few miles and there seem to be institutional and informal ties with these other groups. However, multiple membership seems to be relatively rare. The ties seem to be based on shared beliefs, admiration of the same fringe heroes, shared knowledge of fringe literature, and similar attitudes of suspicion and benevolent contempt toward the culture at large.

The writer was unable to get exact figures on the size of membership of Esper. Estimates clustered around fifty full members and perhaps half a hundred marginal associates. About twenty-five of these lived in or near the headquarters and most other members lived in eastern United States. There were over three hundred subscribers to the Esper monthly newsletter; subscription price was five dollars per year. Membership dues were thirty dollars the first year and five dollars per year thereafter. The two other major sources of income for the organization and its salaried members were fees for the use of cabins, boats, etc., and fees charged for courses of training in psychic powers. Individual members made other monies through faith-healing, the practice of "natural" medicine, "reading" of an individual's psyche through photographs and signatures, etc.

At this point the reader may wonder about the possibility of fraud, the cynical manipulation of the membership by a few individuals for financial gain. The writer sought evidence for this possibility but concluded that there was no deliberate hoaxing involved. A number of the members earned their living through "mystic" work but their incomes would be judged barely above subsistence level by ordinary American standards. The Elmer Gantry type of personality seemed conspicuously absent and the leaders seemed to believe in what they were doing.

Members ranged in age from fourteen into the seventies and seemed to include roughly as many women as men. In some cases entire families were members but in other cases only one or two individuals from a family would be Espers.

The educational level of the group seemed average at best. However, the group was unmistakably far above average in amount and variety of reading. This included fringe literature, such as books and magazines on flying saucers, hypnotism, mythology, the health food publications of Rodale Press, the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, Pak Subud, and J. B. Rhine. Many of the members were also consumers of popular magazines, general paperback books, and "serious literature."

Most members seem to have had atypical life-histories. These included experiences such as loss of one or both parents, atypical relations with parents, parents who were themselves members of fringe groups, interaction with unusual significant others, and abnormal work-histories.

Such atypical life-histories, combined with breadth of reading, produce broad, though unsystematic, knowledge of the world. Among Espers and similar fringe groups, one may easily meet individuals acquainted with the Sanskrit poets, Norse mythology, medieval painting or German Idealist philosophy. However, they tend not to be "cultured" in the sense of having a broad scholarship in the humanities. They also seem to lack the rigor or critical ability which formal education tends to produce. Members seemed to be most inadequate in appraising the reliability of sources and in the forms of logical argument. At the same time, they possessed an inquiring attitude and openness of mind which would probably have delighted Bacon.

Espers interpret happenings in ways which would seem fantastic to the or-

dinary layman. Their view of human nature is an echo of the Hindu conception that Man is a creature blinded by external events, who is largely unaware of his real makeup or potentialities. Most of man's "spiritual" life goes on independently of the conscious individual and largely without his awareness. The world is peopled with disembodied spirits, good and bad, and with psychic manifestations of the living. All men possess psychic powers, at least in rudimentary form, and these may be cultivated and formally trained. Telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis, communication with spirits, reincarnation, mystical intuition, dowsing, the manipulation of events through faith and magical procedures such as pagan Hawaiian *hunna,* are real and everyday occurrences to the Espers and similar groups. Espers and similar groups are adamant in their disagreement with the world-view presented in conventional scientific and historical writings. Mystic enlightenment is considered a more valid source of knowledge than the techniques of science.

THE MAINTENANCE OF ESPER BELIEFS

The reader may wonder how individuals can continue to accept the truth of such a "crazy" belief system. For one who has been socialized into conventional American culture it may seem incredible that anyone could believe such things in the face of so much contrary evidence. As we explore some of the processes involved in confirming and maintaining Esper beliefs, it may become apparent that *all* belief systems are to some extent arbitrary and that the same mechanisms are involved in maintaining them.

The concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, first advanced by W. I. Thomas, is particularly useful in this exploration.[2]

First, as Bruner has pointed out,[3] we tend to select that part of the total influx of incoming sense perceptions which is congruent with our expectations. This may even involve the active supplying of perceptions which are "not really there," as in the case of geometric illusions. Also, most situations are only semi-structured, so that the individual has some degrees of freedom in structuring them to come "true."

Examples may clarify these points. I was sitting in a coffee shop with my main Esper informant when a young woman sat down at a table within conversation distance from us. Her hair was a neutral brown and short-cut, her features angular and her hands long and thin. The most striking aspect of her physical appearance was the bright shade of her lipstick and matching nail polish. My informant leaned forward with some agitation and told me in a low voice that she was a hunting demon who drained men of their psychic energy and left them empty hulks. Her true nature was reflected in her aura which he could plainly read. His distress seemed genuine when he asked me to extend psychic protection over him. A few minutes later a young man joined her at the table and we were able to overhear their conversation. They talked for perhaps three-quarters of an hour before leaving. A content analysis of the girl's conversation would reveal statements describing a wide variety of attitudes toward different social objects. But after they had gone, my informant cited, as corroboration of his judgment, only those statements which might bespeak a manipulative attitude toward the world. Other statements, which expressed admiration for certain people, an appreciation of music, and sympathy

[2] W. I. Thomas, "The Definition of the Situation," in Lewis Coser and Bernard Rosenberg, editors, *Sociological Theory,* New York: Macmillan, 1957, pp. 209-211.

[3] Jerome Bruner, "Social Psychology and Perception," in Eleanor Macoby, *et al.,* editors, *Readings in Social Psychology,* 3rd Ed., New York: Holt, 1958, pp. 85-94.

for the plight of the American Negro, seem to have been ignored by the Esper.

The second aspect of the self-fulfilling prophecy is more subtle, but it is a process which the writer has seen many times with Espers and other fringe group members. It might be described by the following paradigm:

A. Ego makes an inference about alter.
B. Ego acts toward alter in terms of this inference.
C. Alter makes inferences about ego in terms of his action.
D. Alter tends to react toward ego in terms of his inference.
E. Thus ego's inferences tend to be confirmed by alter's reaction.

This paradigm is merely a slight modification of many social psychological models of the interpersonal process,[4] but the self-fulfilling aspect of it seems often to be missed. If a situation is rigidly structured, the self-fulfilling aspect will, of course, be limited, i.e., it would be difficult to interpret and confirm a minister's actions at a funeral as a sexual advance. But, as Kuhn has pointed out,[5] all situations are to some extent flexible so that the actors have some freedom in defining them.

To choose an example among many possible ones, my informant rented a room for several days from a middle aged woman. After seeing her only briefly, and before he had spoken with her, he "intuited" that she was a warm accepting person who was filled with psychic strength and goodness. When he first talked with her a couple hours later, his manner was far more friendly and patronizing than usual. He showed interest in her collection of antiques, asked about her children, and ended up by saying he felt she was a wonderful person and he wanted to rent from her, partly because they would have a chance to talk together. During the next few days, the writer had a chance to question other tenants and neighbors about the landlady. They described a fairly caustic gossiper who was unreasonably strict about the use of electricity, and of her property and grounds. Her attitude toward the writer was taciturn. But she responded graciously to my informant's open friendliness. She sought him out to talk with on several occasions, she inquired if there was enough light in his room for late reading and supplied him with a table lamp, etc. In her behavior toward him, my informant's intuition certainly seemed correct.

It seems a safe generalization that no individual can maintain beliefs when a large amount of contrary evidence is *perceived.* This is perhaps why the layman finds it difficult to see how fringers can believe "all that crazy stuff" (or why the Russian people are so easily "duped" by Communist propaganda) when common sense so easily shows them wrong. The important point is that "common sense" varies rather arbitrarily from group to group.

Extending some notions developed by Rokeach, *et al.,*[6] we may say that groups and total cultures build up belief systems which tend toward a fairly coherent and consistent portrait of the world. To what extent do these portraits represent faithfully the "real world"? In past intellectual history, these judgments have usually been made ethnocentrically, in terms of the judge's own portrait. Now the institution of science has attempted to set up criteria for evaluating beliefs about reality which will be free of such biases.

Physics and engineering may have

[4] A classic statement of such a model is Cooley's "looking-glass self," C. H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order,* New York: Scribner, 1902, p. 184.

[5] Lecture by Manford Kuhn.

[6] Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind,* New York: Basic Books, 1960, pp. 31-71.

advanced to the point that assertions about building a bridge can be readily tested for their realism. But in the behavioral sciences the variance as yet unaccounted for is still so large that it is difficult to invalidate almost any assertion about human behavior conclusively.

To put it another way, confirming evidence for particular beliefs about social reality are sought and *found* because most situations are ambiguous enough to allow them to be *interpreted as* confirming evidence. We need not bring in fringe groups as examples, since this seems to be a more widespread mechanism. For instance, any Russian offer for disarmament is automatically interpreted as a propaganda move by the American press. Lack of information makes this interpretation possible, whether it truly and always represents the real motives of the Russian government or not. In fact, it is difficult to imagine what action the Communists might take which would be accepted as an honest move for peace by our people. It is also probably true that the Russians interpret any actions of ours similarly.[7]

It is difficult to break into this circle of confirmation, to re-educate an individual who is firmly entrenched in a particular belief system, because situations are *defined* by the very notions ego is seeking to confirm and alter is seeking to discredit. For instance, Espers define man as a spiritual being who possesses a psychic aura from which certain inferences can be made about his *spiritual* nature. One cannot demonstrate that individuals do not have psychic auras; in fact, it is ironic that modern science, with its sensitive devices for measuring organic electrical fields, has indirectly lent support to the Esper argument. Fringe group members have often cited such evidence in support of their claims, although the scientific findings are freely interpreted.

A further means by which the Esper is able to maintain his beliefs is through differential association and differential identification with Espers and relative insulation from non-Espers.[8] As an interacting group, Espers provide support for the individual member in his view of the world. As a number of fringe group members have put it, they feel they can be themselves only with kindred fringers. Members feel they are "at home" because they share a common language with which they can communicate about their views and problems to alters who share their meanings.

Communication within the group provides further confirming evidence for the belief system. For instance, several Espers will be able to "read" a given individual's psychic aura. In considering such confirmation through consensus, the reader might recall that many tests of validity in science rest directly or indirectly on intersubjective agreement. Thus, a psychiatric staff reaches agreement on the Oedipal conflict of a patient and a group of similarly trained sociologists agree that certain items measure "anomia." Often an individual's judgment is not accepted until he has been socialized into the group and has learned the processes for arriving at the "right" answer. This provides the group with a rationale for saying that those who disagree are not competent to judge. Thus the Espers explained that the ordinary layman could not read psychic auras because he had not been trained to do so and because he was not in touch with his own spiri-

[7] For a provocative discussion of this point cf. Erich Fromm, *May Man Prevail?* New York: Anchor, 1961.

[8] For a recent summary statement of the principles underlying this point cf. Daniel Glaser, "The Differential Association Theory of Crime," in Arnold Rose, editor, *Human Behavior and Social Processes,* Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1962, pp. 425-443.

tual powers.

With regard to this communication of shared meanings, we might note an incident which occurred several times when Espers were dealing with non-Espers. Those who were tolerant toward Esper views were, in every case the writer was able to observe, judged to be psychic themselves. Those who were indifferent or positively rejecting might be judged to be psychic themselves but if they were, they were judged to be evil. The Espers seemed to be unaware of this "latent criterion" for judging non-Espers.

Finally, Espers and similar fringe groups are aided in maintaining their beliefs by the ambivalence of the larger culture toward them. In our culture, a mystical worldview is a well established counter-theme to the more predominant rationalism and pragmatism. In describing Puerto Rican spiritualism Rogler and Hollingshead have noted, "if you ever talk to a Puerto Rican who says he doesn't believe in Spirits, you know what that means? It means you haven't talked to him long enough."[9] Tales of psychic happenings and of individuals gifted with extra-sensory perception are widely, although informally, told in our culture and a large number of Americans have perhaps been half-convinced that "there is something behind them" at one time or another. This ambivalence tends to soften the disbelief and verbal rejection by the non-fringe member when interacting with the mystic. The writer has questioned many non-fringe group members on their attitudes toward Espers and similar groups and the most frequent reply has been that, although they are a bit "crackpot," there may be something to their notions.

Fringe group members are usually keenly aware of the fact that the larger culture disagrees with their view of the world, however, and often adopt a defensive judgment of the layman as unenlightened. This judgment makes it easier for the fringe group member to disregard the rejection and derision of the unbeliever.

The Changing of Beliefs

In general, there seem to be only two kinds of argument one can make against a particular belief system.

1. Grant the "postulates" of the system and argue deductively that some notions are incompatible with others, or that the chain of reasoning in going from "premise" to "consequent" is questionable. (The words in quotation marks are not used in their strict formal logic meaning, but rather in the looser sense of a suggestive analogy.) For instance, Espers embrace the belief that man's future is his own to manipulate, but also notions of foreseeing an inexorable future (precognition), and of strict causal determinism. (This inconsistency should have a familiar ring to the social scientist.)

2. Point out events in the real world which challenge the beliefs. The major difficulty here is that both parties must have some minimum of agreement about what these events of reality are. Everyone must make some concessions to reality or he will not survive as an individual or group. As Kluckhohn has pointed out,[10] no culture has norms about jumping over trees. But here again one must be very cautious lest he dub his own culturally learned views as necessary orientations toward external reality. There actually are cultures with beliefs about the possibility of physical levitation over trees and the projection of the astral body through space.

[9] Lloyd Rogler and August Hollingshead, "The Puerto Rican Spiritualist as a Psychiatrist," *American Journal of Sociology,* vol. 67 (July, 1961), p. 21.

[10] Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man,* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949, p. 20.

But if there is a minimum of consensus about what goes on in the real world, one can question beliefs in terms of these happenings. For instance, Espers believe in reincarnation and they also recognize that the human and animal population of the world is increasing. Juxtaposing these two beliefs, the writer asked three Espers, where do more souls for the greater number of living bodies come from? The Espers recognized the inconsistency between the empirical fact of population growth and their belief in reincarnation and admitted that they could give no answer. My informant became quite interested in the question; he bought some books on Eastern religions and also planned to ask other Espers when he returned to the headquarters. (The writer may have unwittingly introduced a chain of events which will result in innovations in the Esper belief system.)

One other point should be made about confirming evidence for beliefs. To the extent that the beliefs are untestable, either because they are tautological or because they are non-empirical, they are safe from the challenge of empirical events.[11] Just how much of a given belief system is untestable in principle remains to be demonstrated, but the proportion may be fairly large.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has been concerned with the means employed by deviant groups in maintaining their beliefs in the face of a divergent and more or less disapproving larger society. The generalizations were drawn from the study of a small group of "mystics" and from observation of a number of other fringe groups.

The following processes or "mechanisms" facilitate the maintenance of divergent beliefs:

(1) Selective attention to those perceptions which are congruent with one's beliefs.

(2) Active structuring of social situations so that their outcomes support one's beliefs.

(3) *Interpretation* of ambiguous evidence as confirming one's beliefs.

(4) Differential association and identification with those who share one's beliefs, coupled with relative isolation from and disparagement of those whose beliefs differ.

(5) Ambivalence of the divergent larger culture toward one's beliefs.

These processes increase the difficulty of challenging a given belief system. A belief system may be thrown into question by pointing out major inconsistencies within it. Also, if both parties agree on certain "facts" these facts may be shown to contradict some of the beliefs. However, to the extent that the beliefs are non-empirical or non-testable, they remain value-premises which are susceptible only to the persuasion of competing value-premises.

[11] Parsons, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-367.