

DRUG ABUSE AND THE JESUS MOVEMENTS: A LABELING THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Many members of local drug cultures have been attracted to a variety of sectarian religious movements, and others drifted into religion as an alternative to drug use. One of the drug subcultures under study has almost completely converted to a religious sect with the leader adopting a priestly role to replace his previous role as the drug leader. He is called the *Wizard*. His group has developed a religious belief system and a set of rituals based on their interpretation of ancient Mayan culture. Such groups will be referred to here as "freaks." This phenomenon presents an interesting problem for labeling theorists (Enroth et al. 1972).

Labeling theory goes beyond structural approaches and identifies processes through which individual identities and roles are developed. This approach does not deny personal or social structural variables, but attempts to show how structurally determined predispositions are transformed into specific motives and patterns of behavior and given shared meaning by participants (Cohen 1965; Wilson 1973; Schur 1971). The labeling perspective suggests that behavior, including deviant behavior, is not the inevitable result of certain predisposing factors but gives equal focus to the emergence of motives and predispositions in the course of experience (Matza 1969)

The presence of a given kind of behavior is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behavior and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations which make the activity possible and desirable. (Becker 1953)

The basic research question and the link which ties individuals to particular patterns of behavior is resolved by Matza (1969), asking, "How well suited or attuned are phenomenon and subject to each other?" He uses the concept of *drift*.

Drift stands midway between freedom and control. ... the delinquent transiently exists between convention and crime, responding in turn to the demands of each, ... but postponing commitment, evading. Thus he drifts between criminal and conventional action ... those who lack the position, capacity, or inclination to become objects in their

own behalf I call drifters, and it is this category that I place most juvenile delinquents. (Matza 1964).

The major factor which "frees" the potential freaks and drug abusers to drift revolves around expressive role relations, and because of this, they are in Matza's terms, well suited or attuned to patterns of behavior normally associated with these roles. Once individuals "drift" into these activities, labeling processes tend to lock them into a deviant role and to cut them off from more conventional role relations.

Here, we will focus first on those who have become involved in drug abuse, and then consider Jesus movements. I will also refer to those who enter these movements directly without going through a period of drug abuse. The dynamics are similar in both cases. The reader should be aware that some studies of Jesus movements are critical of them, and biased by a moralist tone.

**INTIMACY VS ISOLATION:
BECOMING DRIFTERS**

The basic question of the labeling perspective, which assumes a degree of choice in deviant behavior, is: "Why do some persons take a particular path?" To answer it we must see the world through the eyes of the person who surveys the environment to identify behavioral alternatives which meet his/her needs. There are several ways to work through repressions, neuroses, or other identity problems. These are defined as experimental deviants (Simmons 1969). Others see personal advantages, or deviate because they have become alienated from conventional opportunity structures. Any of these can loosen controls associated with drifters.

There is evidence that the behavior exhibited by drug abusers and "freaks" is most prevalent among those who have developed a sense of alienation or isolation from conventional expressive goals and relations, and thus fall most often into the category of experimental deviants. Thus, the Meher Baba movement attracted youth who could not make the transition from humanist and personalist values

fostered in childhood to the instrumental values of adult occupational life (Robbins, Anthony 1973). By the development of *youth cultures* with humanist family patterns, the modern child:

is marked by values and by a consciousness that are empathetically personalistic ... he is likely to have a low "oppression threshold" when it comes to impersonal processes of bureaucracy. ... People today feel oppressed, "alienated" or even "exploited" simply by being subjected to bureaucratic processes ... that a generation ago would have seemed pragmatic necessities. (Berger 1970)

The basis for alienation according to Berger is the dearth of expressive communal relations and roles available for young people in the adult instrumental milieu. But this type of role confusion may result not only from limited opportunities for expressive relations, but also from earlier experiences which prevent adequate preparation for these relations. The ability to develop satisfactory results from experiences which enable one to fuse identity with others, for intimacy. The avoidance of such experiences because of fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self absorption (Erikson 1963).

DRUGS AND RELIGION: SHORTCUTS TO INTIMACY

According to the labeling perspective, individuals do not decide to become deviants such as junkies and freaks. Rather, they are ambivalent and are both attracted to and repelled by experimentation with deviant roles. They have internalized to some degree both conventional values and norms, and negative stereotypes associated with such activities. Initial steps into deviance are likely to be tentative and experimental. Often these initial efforts bring about strong internal negative reactions, and they drift into other areas. If the experiment is successful, fear of negative consequences is reduced and deviant options become more attractive. Those who are recruited into the role of drug user and freak find these alternatives attractive because 1) negative stereotypes have already been weakened by the sense of alienation; 2) the deviant role provides a positive experience as a shortcut to intimacy; 3) drug abuse or religious groups provide a basis for a new identity consistent with social and emotional

needs (Gordon 1974). Drug abuse and Jesus movements provide shortcuts to intimacy and are consistent with social and emotional needs of potential freaks and abusers because they permit bypassing certain phases and demands of intimate relations.

Learning to interact intimately with others embodies not only complex skills but different means of communication as well. One characteristic of drug abuse or religious rituals is that they emphasize a well-defined, very narrow set of communication or interaction modes. This is basically what is meant by the terms, *tuned in* or *turned on*. Persons under the influence of common stimuli are more attuned to each other, but are less able to interact with outsiders. Those attracted to such groups achieve intimacy by shortcutting these more complex patterns of interaction. While drug or Jesus movements fulfill intimacy needs, they also tend to inhibit the type of growth needed to achieve other expressive relations.

On an individual level, opiate addicts, when compared to opiate users who do not become addicts, are characterized by low self regard, poor social adjustment, depreciation or disinterest in sexuality, and inadequate skills in developing relations with others (Chein et al. 1964). Female alcoholics are characterized by a high incidence of frigidity, sexual disorders, ambivalence toward men, and exploitive male-female relations, including masochism (Kinsey 1966; Massot 1956). Thus, the drug dependent person seems paralyzed by ambivalence, both wanting and fearing intimate contact with others (Curran 1937; Schiller 1941).

These deficits indicate lack of experiences which enrich and expand fantasy. Heavy drug and alcohol users are likely to be externalizers who use drugs either to escape from poorly controlled internal fantasies (downers) or to find new external sensations (uppers). Lacking the ability to utilize fantasy in order to deal effectively with feelings, they become victims of external forces (Singer 1976).

One definitely slanted report shows almost identical characteristics among Jesus freaks: ... for the most part, the Jesus people seem disgusted by physical contact. ... I have never encountered such fear of human sexuality. ... I want to point out a kind of personal isolation, an acute estrangement from the emotion of other people

and finally from one's own feelings, which follows from a Jesus-and-me spirituality which excludes rather than includes normal interpersonal relationships. (Streiker 1971)

It is suggested that Jesus movements represent pseudo-solutions to the *identity vs role confusion* crisis, and are especially attractive to young persons having difficulty coming to terms with those intimacy problems centering around newly emerging sexual feelings:

The Jesus trip can be seen as an attempt to resolve crises of the onset of sexuality by denying sexual feelings. ... successful growth depends on the individual's ability to meet new needs and expand his identity without threatening the self. Rather than risk the trauma of this adjustment, the individual may resolve the crises in neurotic fashion; by establishing an ideal by which to deny his feeling. (Adams, Fox 1975).

Gordon (1974) observes that Jesus movements are well suited to the needs of individuals facing social and emotional identity problems resulting from conflicts between youth culture and conventional values. Jesus movements provide a new identity which *consolidates* to prior contractory identities by *adopting elements of both*. Conventional values are accommodated by turning one's life over to Jesus and adopting a strict moral code. Having turned one's life over completely to an external authority, the individual is free to continue many elements of the youth culture, such as manner of dress and anti-materialism.

FROM INTERNAL TO EXTERNAL

Individuals lacking the repertoire of interaction skills and the ability to develop adequate expressive relations drift from one role or group to another until they find a shortcut which bypasses the more complex demands of social interaction. This style is suited to the needs of the abuser or freak because it alters the usual means through which social and personal goals are achieved. If intimacy is achieved through drugs, the individual does not need or develop the skills required to achieve these states in the absence of drugs (Leonard 1971). Control of one's life is given over to a group, source of authority, or chemical agents which are often given magical or mystic powers. Similar patterns of behavior have been observed in other religious movements which emerge during periods of social unrest. It is claimed that the Oxford Group gathered

momentum because it:

.. shows certain bewildered people a way to interpret their world without endangering their status. It provides a psychological mechanism whereby they can *escape responsibility of dealing directly with conditions*. (Cantril 1941)

Messianic cults and magical Nativist movements represent frankly irrational flights from reality (Linton 1957). Such flights occur during periods of social stress and dislocation. The "Holy Rollers" flourished during the beginning of a depression not as a movement for social betterment but as a mechanism for allowing people to retreat from an evil world (Boisem 1957).

As a means to escape from a complex society, for the Jesus people:

Here the world is defused and de-politicised. Many ... feel useless and isolated. In these people there exists a desire to the simple life, religious ecstasy and justification, and a need to reduce the complexity of life as they see it to a more manageable form. (Marin 1972)

The typical Jesus freak is someone who could not handle his freedom prior to conversion ... rather than continue to risk disaster ... with such dangerous forces as drugs, sex, and violence, he surrenders his will to the internalized prohibitions ... as the individual increasingly surrenders control to something outside himself, he becomes less able to direct his own activities. As a sign in the kitchen of the Children of God proclaims, "There is no room for self here." (Streiker 1971)

Heavy drug users are significantly more "external" in perceiving that they have little control over their lives. However they did not endorse items keyed "external on perceived locus of control concerning drug-taking behavior (Obitz et al. 1973). General and specific I-E scores were not significantly related. Why do drug users perceive themselves as *not* having external control over their behavior in general but as having control over drug-taking behavior? The concept of *accounts* may offer an explanation (Scott, Lyman 1968). Accounts represent attempts to negotiate a positive self evaluation when behavior is called into question. These accounts may appeal either to external or internal circumstances as the excuse or justification for questionable behavior. Appeals to external sources generally address issues of causality or motivation. The person is responding to stress, circumstances,

conflict, or peer pressure. Internal appeals are more concerned with questions of identity, responsibility or intent. The individual claims illness, response to higher loyalties, ignorant of the facts, or intoxication. Individuals may feel that their lives are controlled largely by external forces, but for specific behavior this may be modified to a decision to follow Jesus, a commitment to new values, or as a strategy for coping with internally felt needs. In this case the individual may accept the role of freak or drug abuser, but deny that this implies loss of control over religion or drug taking behavior. To do so would imply that the individual is addicted, brainwashed, or conforms to the *medical* or *sick* model. Parents often find this model attractive and attempt to have their offspring deprogrammed or placed in therapy.

LABELING AND ROLE ENGULFMENT

It has been suggested that potential freaks and drug abusers have problems with expressive components of interpersonal relations and that they drift from one role to another. Drugs and Jesus movements meet these needs by providing shortcuts to intimacy which bypass the more complex, threatening modes of interaction. In terms of the paradigm outlined by Schur and Matza, factors which predispose individuals to drug and Jesus movements have been identified. To complete the analysis, it is necessary to show that these initial activities are transformed into specific motives and given shared meaning by those who drift into such activities. Labeling theorists refer to this stage as primary deviance.

Drifting and use of drug related or certain religious movements as shortcuts are socially unacceptable in a competitive achievement oriented society. While some adolescent deviance or experimentation may be tolerated, individuals are expected to develop definite career goals and socially acceptable life styles. Thus, those who outwardly disaffiliate with conventional values or groups become increasingly self conscious. They are aware of society's ban which stereotypes and stigmatizes certain activities, and this forces them to take seriously the deviant role. Commitment to deviant roles increases as the individual becomes more and more excluded from conventional roles, and becomes labeled

as a *freak* or *junkie*. But such labeling is not restricted to a single aspect of a person's identity. Rather, it is generalized to the whole person.

One will be identified as a deviant first, before other identifications are made. The question is raised, "What kind of person would break such an important rule?" And the answer is given, "One who cannot or will not act as a moral human being an therefore might break other important rules." The deviant identity becomes the controlling one. (Becker 1964)

Those who are labeled and who label themselves as generalized deviants become increasingly alienated from conventional roles and relations, and as a result, become more and more committed to deviant groups for structuring time, goals, and activities. This is described as a *retreat into a microcosm* or small worlds in themselves commanding total allegiance and totality of values and gratification, usually involving withdrawal from the larger world (Cantril 1941). One world collapses as the other is entered and compromise is impossible. As individuals depend more and more on these microcosmic groups, their capacity for expressive relations deteriorates and a dependency cycle is established. The cycle is established because individuals lacking interaction skills, have not developed the capacity for intimacy. They meet expressive needs through external sources.

The growing dependence on external sources for one's identity, and the progressive disjunction of labeling by self and others who represent conventional values leads to the phenomenon which labeling theorists call *role engulfment*. Role engulfment occurs when the individual assumes a new identity and internalizes socially defined labels. This has been called the need for *social and emotional* identity (Gordon 1974). *Social identity* comes from external sources and involves definitions by significant others. *Emotional identity* involves individual perceptions of the evaluations of others as well as previously internalize values, norms, and identities. These identities are reinforced by involvement in a universe of discourse which validates and reinforces self definitions. Thus, identity is fixed when it is validated from both social or external sources and emotional or internal sources.

The processes by which the new social role

and identity are fixed for the freak and drug abuser involves three major steps:

1) Dissocialization: The individual is no longer responsive to reinforcement from conventional groups. (Bacon 1973) This process is assured by the labeling process and retreat to religious or drug subcultures. It removes the individual from the universe of discourse which validates social identity and the subcultures locate emotional identity in external sources.

2) The pampering effect. Drugs and religion allow individuals to avoid more conventional roles and relations. The pampering function occurs in two ways. The individual completely turns his/her life over to some external authority — Jesus, the Wizard, or drugs. Or the individual denies the validity of any external authority, especially secular authority, and emphasizes subjective experiences as the only source of meaning or value.

3) Rationalizations. Adopting a set of rationalizations, justifications, or ideologies, which the alcoholics call the *alibi system* accounts for and protects the new identity and self image. This view of drug abuse is consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Goffman, Piaget, and others who view self and identity not as a fixed entity, but as a dynamic construction which changes in response to the demands of the situation. This approach explains why alcoholics and other drug abusers usually function adequately in institutions or controlled environments where such role engulfment is broken down, but relapse into what is seen as uncontrolled behavior when returned to the community (Paredes et al. 1973). It may also explain why individuals move readily from drug to religious subgroups.

DEVIANCE DISAVOWAL: THE RE-ENTRY RITUAL

This view of the process through which individuals become deviants also accounts for another role which Jesus movements play in the career of many drug abusers, as a re-entry ritual. Those who may have a wish to re-enter society must disavow their former selves. But there is a serious problem of credibility, because there is a belief that such people do not change. Once a junkie, always a junkie. Thus, acceptance of the Jesus movement represents a dramatic conversion which

publicly disavows previous behavior. The nature of the movement, with its total commitment to Jesus, asceticism and rigid conformity to doctrine gives credibility to the claim that the individual has truly changed. The Jesus movement represents an acceptable re-entry technique for resolving identity problems for the same reason that it meets the needs of persons unable to cope with expressive role relations. It provides a pseudo-solution to expressive needs.

Rather than developing behavior oriented towards reality, the Jesus freak flies into ideational, ideological abstractions to numb his awareness of his newly arisen needs. Spurning a reality that begins with individual feelings, he subordinates himself to peer approval. (Adams, Fox 1975)

Although the Jesus movement permits the individual to disavow previous deviant roles, it does not promote the development of interpersonal skills needed to meet expressive needs. Individual identity and expressive needs are met largely by fusing the self with some external authority. The individual may temporarily solve the problem by denying such needs, but it is anticipated that many will eventually drift to other activities. They may return to drugs, right-wing politics, fundamentalist religious sects, or other groups with simplistic solutions to individual and social problems. This is a growing pattern among former freaks and drug abusers.

SUMMARY

The pattern of behavior reflected in Jesus freaks and drug abusers emerges from the major developmental tasks of adolescents and young adults; identity and intimacy. The labeling paradigm is used to describe the processes through which individuals unable to come to terms with these developmental tasks, drift into externalized shortcuts to the solution of identity-intimacy crises. Involvement in these activities, in the face of the social ban and subsequent labeling of the individual lead to redefinitions of self, dependence on the pampering effects of drugs or religion, and adoption of appropriate ideologies to neutralize personal and social rejection. The labeling paradigm provides a framework for relating predisposing factors to the development of what is often defined as deviant roles. Individuals who cannot develop expressive

relations are attracted to these groups which permit them to resolve their conflicts by constructing or consolidating an identity from external authority. The new universe of discourse provided by religious and drug subcultures affirms this new identity and role. This perspective helps account for the frequency in which drug abusers move into religious groups, and for the fact that role engulfment disappears in certain institutional settings.

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