

Psychological Interpretations of Glossolalia: A Reexamination of Research*

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This paper reexamines a great deal of research that has dealt with psychological maladjustment and glossolalia, including more recent studies of tongue-speaking in middle- and upper-class groups. Issue is taken with the conclusion of some recent research that there is no relationship between psychological or personality factors and glossolalia. Some data commonly used to substantiate this conclusion is reexamined and found to support rather different conclusions, though many of the studies looked at are faulted on methodological grounds. Special attention is given to the much-cited but unpublished work of Lincoln Vivier. It is argued that misleading conclusions may have been drawn from this important study. Suggestions are made for further research on glossolalia that would allow more definitive conclusions to be reached.

Within the last few years much research has been conducted on the recent upsurge of tongue speaking or glossolalia.¹ This phenomenon, when it occurs among higher status groups, is referred to as the Charismatic Renewal or the Neo-Pentecostal movement. The research of Gerlach and Hine (Gerlach and Hine, 1968; Hine, 1970; Hine, 1969; Gerlach and Hine, 1970) and that of Kildahl (1972) and Samarin (1972) are examples of this increased interest in glossolalia. Close examination of some of this research reveals that there are some important differences of opinion about glossolalia. One important area of difference concerns the relationship of glossolalia to psychological maladjustment. The major task here will be to reexamine some evidence for psychologically related theories concerning glossolalia. It should be made explicit that this effort is not intended to discredit the research just cited; it is instead an attempt to build on this work.

¹ This paper is an attempt to review research that may help explain the causes of the Pentecostal (and especially the Neo-Pentecostal) movement. Therefore, much theological and historical writing on the subject of glossolalia will not be directly referenced. Impetus for this literature review came from research and unsystematic observation over several years of several groups practicing glossolalia. See Harder, Richardson, and Simmonds (1972) and Simmonds, Richardson and Harder (1972) for one such group. Research on other groups is in progress.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

There is ample evidence that Cutten (1927) was wrong in his conclusions concerning the association of glossolalia with hysteria and schizophrenia, and Hine (1969) is apparently justified in stating this fact. Hine's assessment of the research of Alland (1967); Boisen (1939); Kiev (1964); Vivier (1960); Wood (1965); Plog (1965); Gerrard and Gerrard (1966), is that "...available evidence requires that an explanation of glossolalia as pathological must be discarded" (1969: 217).² This also seems to be the judgment of most of those such as Lapsley and Simpson (1964); Kelsey (1968); Oates (1967); Plog (1965); Samarin (1972); and Hine who have investigated the more contemporary manifestations of tongue-speaking in middle- and upper-class groups.

It should be noted, however, that most researchers who reported *prior to* recent work such as Hine's, while discounting psychosis as associated with glossolalia, have certainly emphasized *psychological considerations* in attempting to explain why the phenomenon of speaking in tongues occurs. Kelsey (1968) has made an important contribution in this regard by presenting the largely unknown views of Jung on glossolalia. He indicates that Jung considered the experience of glossolalia to be "...a positive preparation for integration of personality" (1968: 199). After surveying the work of Jung and others, including Sargant (1949) and Vivier (1960), Kelsey (1968: 207-208) adds "Tongue speaking may well be an unconscious resolution to neurosis." He does, however, discount ties of glossolalia with hysteria, a form of neurosis. Oates (1967), in an analysis that focuses more directly on the verbalizing involved in glossolalia, seems to feel that the phenomenon of tongue-speaking may arise from deep-felt personality needs resulting from aspects of the cultural milieu.

Lapsley and Simpson (1964: 20-21), in an earlier report *not* cited by Hine, also stress the psychological aspects of the glossolalia experience. They believe on the basis of some research and an examination of other work such as Vivier (1960), that

Glossolalia is understood to be a regression in the service of the ego.... That is, regression controlled by the ego and for the purpose of maintaining personality, rather than a disintegration of personality. It is a genuine escape from inner conflict...[glossolalia] is likely to be of benefit to emotionally labile, disturbed persons who have internalized their emotional conflicts, in that it provides a unique kind of release.

Pattison (1968: 76), in another prior report not cited by Hine, admitted that his research is not systematic, but nevertheless claimed to have found a general tendency in lower and lower-middle class persons in both rural and urban areas for such glossolalists to demonstrate "overt psychopathology of a sociopathic, hysterical, or hypochondriacal nature." He claimed however, that his interviews with middle and upper-class glossolalists "demonstrated no psychopathology. They were

2. Noting the tenacity of the notion of pathology as a correlate of glossolalia, Hine (1969: 218) suggests that "future studies of [glossolalia] might usefully include an examination of possible bias on the part of nonglossolalic observers." This point is similar to the comment by Stark (1971: 172) that "...many social scientists are inclined to regard conservative religious beliefs as abnormal," because "...they find it difficult to imagine that a normal person could believe them." Stark does not mention glossolalia in his provocative paper, and one wonders whether he would include tongue-speaking as a conventional form of religious commitment.

well integrated, highly functional individuals who were clinically 'normal'." His report tells us too little about his research for a thorough evaluation. However, it does in part seem contrary to the view of Hine.

One study reported *after* Hine wrote also concluded that glossolalia has psychological implications. Kildahl (1972: 58), who focused on Neo-Pentecostalism, says, "Preoccupation with internal psychological factors seemed to create the necessary atmosphere in which a person was ready to speak in tongues." His research revealed that glossolalics tended to be submissive, suggestible, and dependent on authority figures.

Because of the ostensible differences of opinion between researchers concerning the relationship between glossolalia and mental health, a reexamination of some of the research cited by Hine and others may be fruitful. First, we will examine the research cited by Hine.

Most of the research cited by Hine can be criticized because the study designs were inadequate for the gathering of definite evidence.³ No piece of the research cited incorporated a time-series design, with control groups, that would be required to establish sound findings (cf. Campbell and Stanley [1963] for a discussion of this and other study designs). More simply stated, no research to date has assessed the personality characteristics of a set of potential converts to a tongue-speaking group, and then followed them up after conversion in order to assess (1) whether or not psychological changes had taken place, and (2) what types of changes had occurred.

Alland's work (1967) utilizes a "one-shot" design (cf. Campbell and Stanley, 1963: 6) with no control group, and while the findings are interesting and probably largely true, they do not represent strong evidence for Hine's conclusion. Alland says, "Receptivity to trance is most certainly influenced by personality differences" (1967: 92), and he earlier had made reference to "neurotic patterns emerging from guilt and anxiety in the Negro church community" which serve as a basis for personality traits associated with susceptibility to trance (1967: 90). Thus, although Alland emphasizes the fact that a simple learning model explains *how* the members of the Negro church participate in "possession," he seems to assume a psychological explanation to explain *why* the members participate.

Boisen (1939) also does not employ a complete design, although his research involves some comparisons with persons (all mental patients) outside the church group studied. His research does not allow personality assessment of participants *previous to affiliation*, or any changes that might have occurred in the participants' personalities. Wood (1965: 107) says that "Boisen...believes that all deep religious experiences spring from the drive to reintegrate the personality and the personality's relationships with people and values." Thus, we are forced to reconsider the meaning of the finding of Boisen that there was no evidence of mental illness in the tongue-speakers from the church. This finding says nothing about the mental health of the tongue-speakers *prior* to their tongue-speaking experience that led to entrance into the church. In fact, implied in Boisen's approach is the understanding that entrance into the church, with its accompanying experiences, did effect changes in the per-

3. This is not to imply that the research designs of other researchers not cited by Hine are better. Sound research in such an area as this is rare.

sonality structures of the participants. Hine (1969: 213) states that Boisen "...found that for the most part the experience was therapeutic..." which may imply some changes in the psychological structure of the participants.

The study of Kiev (1964b) that Hine cites also involves a comparison of "normal" Pentecostals with mental patients. His study does not allow definitive statements about the effect of conversion and participation on the immigrants who are his population of study. In another paper dealing with West Indian immigrants in England (Kiev, 1964a), he apparently allows for and assumes that participation can and does serve a therapeutic function, although he admits explicitly that he has no evidence that speaks to the question. A lengthy quote will illustrate the point.

Although there is no evidence that emotional instability is a necessary ingredient for participation in the services, behavioral patterns institutionalized in the meetings are sufficiently broad as to provide suitable channels for the expression of a variety of needs and personality traits. For the depressed and guilt-ridden the sin-cathartic basis of the ideology and services provides a useful guilt-reducing device; for the hysteric a socially acceptable model for acting out; and for the obsessional the encouragement of a reduction of inhibitions and increased emotionality. For the accompaniments of neurotic and real suffering as feelings of inferiority, self-consciousness, suspiciousness and anxiety, the social aspects of the movement would seem of value. [Kiev, 1964a: 135]

Kiev adds (1964a: 136) that since most of the West Indian immigrants involved had been exposed to fundamentalist beliefs from early childhood, their participation "seems likely to play a role in the reduction of anxieties." Thus, Kiev seems to assume some psychological reasons for participation by the West Indian immigrants in the Pentecostals sects.

The largely unreported research of Plog (1965), while representing perhaps the largest single study of Pentecostals (and one of the few focusing primarily on Neo-Pentecostals) that has been done to date (over 800 subjects), also does not allow a longitudinal analysis because his respondents all answered the questions only once—after they were participants in a Pentecostal group. He relies on retrospection (as do several others in this area), which is thought by some to be a weak method of gathering information with which to test hypotheses. Reliance on this method may be especially problematic in this instance because the ideology of the tongue-speakers constrains them to believe that they have undergone change through their affiliation experience. This constraint would probably compound the usual kind of selective perception error into a full-blown case of what Berger (1963: 54-65) calls the "reconstruction of biography." As it is, Plog does find some evidence for improved interpersonal relationships in the lives of group members, a finding with intriguing possibilities.

Wood (1965), who is given credit by Hine (1969: 215) for making "...an important and little-recognized point that his study provides no information about whether the 'Pentecostal type' is attracted to or developed by participation in the (Pentecostal) movement," raised some interesting questions with his research. He compared, using Rorschach techniques, members of a Pentecostal group with members of a non-Pentecostal group. He finds several differences between his Pentecostal group and the non-Pentecostal group members from the same general geographical area

and same cultural milieu. Realizing the tentativeness of his results, Wood (1965: 92-96) states his findings in the form of hypotheses, some of which will be quoted.

- H1 Pentecostal people lack an adequately structured value-attitude system.
- H2 Pentecostal people are mobilizing their inner resources to meet the strongly felt threat of instability in their value-attitude systems and their social relationships; they are in the process of reorganizing their basic perceptual patterns.
- H4 Pentecostal people have an uncommon degree of uncertainty concerning interpersonal relationships.
- H6 Pentecostal people have a strong drive to feel close fellowship with others but they are uncertain that these interpersonal involvements will be satisfactory.
- H7 Pentecostalism attracts uncertain, threatened, inadequately organized persons with strong motivation to reach a state of satisfactory interpersonal relatedness and personal integrity.
- H8 Pentecostalism provides patterns of behavior leading to personality integration, interpersonal relatedness and certainty.
- H13 Religious enthusiasm is one solution to sociocultural situations in which cases of personality disorganization are widespread.
- H14 It would be possible to predict from Rorschach protocols those people who would respond favorably to a Pentecostal campaign conducted in a socially disorganized, lower-class, southern, Protestant neighborhood.
- H15 Adherents of a sedate, legalistic Christian sect will reveal a Rorschach protocol different from the protocols found for Pentecostal adherents.

These tentative statements do not, of course, indicate that adherents suffer from severe mental disorders. However, it is plain that Wood does believe that there may be psychologically-based reasons for the participation of individuals in a movement such as Pentecostalism.

The work of Vivier (1960), which is also discussed by Kelsey (1968) and by several others, appears to be some of the best research done on glossolalia to date. However, the full potential of the study has not been taken advantage of by the author and others and what has been reported has been somewhat misinterpreted. Vivier uses two control groups: "... twenty non-tongue-speaking Pentecostals (or pre-tongue speakers) and twenty members of a Christian church who did not approve of or practice glossolalia" (Hine, 1969: 214). Results for these two groups on a great number of psychological and other tests are compared to those of an "experimental group" made up of twenty-four glossolalics. What Hine, Lapsley and Simpson, Samarin and Kelsey fail to report in their discussion of Vivier's work is that the control and experimental groups are *not independent* of one another. In fact, Vivier (whose research is an unpublished dissertation and must be obtained on microfilm) points out that *fifteen of the twenty-four glossolalics were originally members of the non-Pentecostal church which furnished subjects for the nontongue-speaking control group. Also, eleven of the members of the control group of pretongue speakers were originally members of the*

non-Pentecostal church. Thus, twenty-six of the forty-four pre- and postglossolalics studied came from one church, a church which was doctrinally opposed to speaking in tongues. This information causes a complete reconsideration of Vivier's results and the interpretations of them that have been presented by Hine and Kelsey. Vivier has, either by design or accident, completed the beginnings of a possibly classic study. He has gathered information (a great deal of it) on persons that are in various stages of the process of moving from one religious community to another that sanctions an activity (glossolalia) which was precluded in the original group. This interpretation is given some support by Vivier's statement that the control group made up of preglossolalics is significantly younger than the glossolalic group itself.

A number of questions arise with this realization. Why did certain persons select themselves out to start the movement from one group to the other? Which persons now members of the non-Pentecostal church will move into the Pentecostal church in the future? What factors are associated with this movement? What effect does movement from one group to the other have in terms of changing the lives of the participants? These and many other questions will have to await a possible follow-up report from Vivier—a report which this writer hopes will be forthcoming.

Some tentative answers to a few such questions can be garnered from the original study report, especially if one assumes the new perspective that would interpret the research from the "process" point of view, which would suggest that the glossolalics have completed the process of moving from the traditional non-Pentecostal church into regular tongue speaking (Vivier reports that eighteen of the glossolalics report speaking in tongues daily). These tentative answers can best be presented by material taken directly from Vivier. It should be noted that the material will appear somewhat at odds with the interpretations given by some reporters.

First, Vivier indicates that the Test Group (glossolalics) are from a home atmosphere which was more "disturbed," and in which there was more psychopathology present (he specifically mentions alcohol, epilepsy, nervous breakdowns, and admission to mental hospitals). He also notes that members of the Test Group had more initial problems in marriage, but that these problems were obviated by the joint conversion to Pentecostalism of the spouses. The Test Group was more anxious, had more difficulty in nervous control, was more superstitious, and, along with Group A (preglossolalics), was more instable. Contrary to the impression of the Hine report, the Test Group and Group A scored much higher on the Willoughby neuroticism test than did the members of Group B (nonglossolalics). The Test Group and Group A were "...more likely to use the mechanism of repression in frustrating situations" and "the factor of repression is associated with those people who 'Speak in Tongues' (1960: 343-344). Vivier, who analyzed his data according to frequency of glossolalia in the Test Group, says regarding the results of the TAT test that, "the 'frequency group' (daily) of glossolalics reflect a poorer frustration tolerance and a tendency to cling to objects in the environment for emotional support" (1960: 382). A lengthy quote from the conclusions section of Vivier's report will give the reader an overall feeling for the results of the research (1960: 432-433):

Dynamically (glossolalics) can be considered as a group of people who, psychologically speaking, have had a poor beginning in life. This has been reflected by their difficulty in adjustment in

the home situation in infancy and later adulthood. It can therefore be seen that they have been torn by insecurity, conflict, tension and emotional difficulties.

Being troubled by doubt and fear, anxiety and stress, they have turned from the culturally accepted traditional, orthodox and formalized, to something that held out for them the unorthodox, the supernatural; to an environment of sensitiveness for emotional feelings and a group of people bound with the same purpose and clinging to each other for support.

Implicitly, Vivier seems to be assuming that certain factors have led to the self-selection of persons from the non-Pentecostal church who chose to move into the Pentecostal group. There is evidence for this view in the data, but only more thorough follow-up work (particularly on those of Group B—nonglossolalics—who might decide to "switch") will disallow an alternative explanation that the movement into Pentecostalism may have contributed to some of the difficulties discerned through testing procedures employed by Vivier.

The study of Gerrard and Gerrard (1966) is not readily accessible, but a brief description of their results appeared later (Gerrard, 1968). It appears as most thorough, and exceptional care was taken in the analysis of the results. However, the point must be made that the study did not incorporate a thorough analysis of the possible changes of personality occurring in persons as they became associated with the group and over time became complete converts to the group. What the group members were like *before* they joined the cult is an unanswered question that looms large for anyone attempting to explain the etiology of such groups and movements.

The criticisms of the research cited by Hine can also be made of most other research in the area. Many of the reports of research do not contain enough information about design and data gathering to allow evaluation, or they appear so subjective that conclusions drawn are questionable. Without going into detail on specific studies, we would mention in this regard Lapsley and Simpson (1964); Kelsey (1968); Oates (1967); and Pattison (1968).

The work of Kildahl (1972) is somewhat better, in that two groups (one glossolalic and the other not) are compared on several standardized tests and through clinical interviews. However, the conclusions of the study, while intriguing, are based on a comparison of only the two groups (matched on some characteristics) of twenty people per group. This small data base, plus the fact that no time series data was used detracts greatly from the value of the study.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Our examination of the research dealing with psychological interpretations of glossolalia has shown that little of it is sound enough to allow conclusions to be drawn concerning the issues involved. Apparently the weight of *opinion* (and some evidence such as Vivier's) seems to be in favor of some sort of psychologically-based explanation for the phenomenon, although most reject the idea that serious mental health deficiencies are always present with glossolalia.⁴ Thus, Hine's statement

⁴ It should also be understood, of course, that even if definite ties between psychological conditions and glossolalia were established, this would not constitute a complete explanation of the phenomenon of glossolalia. A fuller explanation would probably require moving to another level of abstraction—that is, to structural analysis. This we plan to do in a future paper.

about the nonpathological nature of glossolalia seems acceptable, but we would not agree with what may be an implied lack of connection between the occurrence of glossolalia and certain psychological states in individuals.⁵

One major hindrance to resolving the question is the tremendous conceptual difficulty in this area. Stark's (1971: 167) comment to this effect is worth noting: "There are perhaps no more elusive and value-laden concepts in social science than mental illness, insanity, neurosis, inadequacy, and other terms referring to various forms and degrees of psychopathology." We would add that the line between some areas of what are usually termed psychopathology and simple psychological needs and drives that might serve as motivating factors for individuals is sometimes difficult to discern. The question of the part played by specifically psychological states in generating and sustaining the tongues movement is still an open one.

IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Throughout this paper we have criticized previous research in the area of glossolalia. Implicit in the criticism has been a call for sound research which would allow more definitive conclusions to be drawn about the phenomenon. Now we would like to be specific about what we feel would be the best ways to proceed with the research. Plainly the "one-shot" study design is deficient, and we must move far beyond it for more understanding. We thus strongly recommend longitudinal research designs that allow some assessment of change over time. Long-term studies would be preferred, but even follow-up work of several months duration might yield valuable knowledge. Adequate instruments about which there is intersubjective agreement concerning validity would, of course, be essential to any such project. The administration of such instruments even over a period of months might allow researchers to "catch" persons as they move from the "preglossolalic" stage to the "glossolalic," and from the "infrequent glossolalic" to the "frequent glossolalic." Personality changes associated with these significant movements deeper into tongue-speaking would thus be more readily ascertained.

An even more valuable way of proceeding would be to find a situation similar to that used (but not fully appreciated) by Vivier (1960) in his research. If a researcher could document that most of the glossolalics in a population of study were coming from one source, then this would allow the possibility of going to the source and administering instruments in anticipation of further movement into the glossolalic group. This type of research where potential glossolalics are isolated and studied could yield the most information about psychological variables associated with this type of movement. Perhaps Vivier will take advantage of the remarkable situation that he has uncovered, and do follow-up work on the groups involved. If he does not, then such a task will be left to others to accomplish.

5. Our conclusions are quite similar to those of Lewis (1971), who presents a comparative study of spirit possession and shamanism among "primitive" groups. His chapter entitled "Possession and Psychiatry" is insightful for the purposes of this paper, particularly if glossolalia is treated as one form of spirit possession.

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