

The Debunkers: Moral Identity in the Skeptical Movement

At 10:23 a.m., January 30, 2010, hundreds of people overdosed on pills outside of Boots pharmacies in the United Kingdom. The event, 10:23, runs annually with no reported casualties. The participants in what has become a mass overdose refer to themselves as skeptics and they want the public to know that homeopathic remedies constitute a harmful form of quackery, especially when used as a replacement for conventional medical treatment (Robbins, 2010). Moral outrage is a motivating factor for participation in the skeptical movement, linking personal integrity to a collective identity concerned about the emotional, social, and financial consequences of pseudoscience.

Emerging trends in the democratization of science emphasize inclusive research, scientific literacy, and education, but they tend to overlook the complex relationship between civic engagement and advocacy. Public participation in the production and use of scientific knowledge increasingly involves challenges to the moral legitimacy of scientific inquiry. While there is an urgent need to enable societal engagement in scientific discourse and practice, discourse can go astray, especially when science is drowned out by misinformation in the service of private interests (Cooper, 2012).

Skeptics play an important role in ongoing debates about legitimate science by responding to misinformation and helping citizens distinguish evidence-based science from pseudoscience and propaganda. Along with homeopathy, activist skeptics target psychics, faith healers, and anyone who makes extraordinary claims for which there is little or no scientific support.

Major skeptical organizations like the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) and the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry help to frame skepticism as a moral issue as much as a process of applying reason to the search for knowledge (Reger, 2004). While these organizations are important to the skeptical movement, most skeptics have limited contact with them, instead engaging in personal identity work directed at becoming better critical thinkers.

Participation in the skeptical movement occurs primarily at the individual level, but this should not be confused with the hyper-individualism of insular subcultures. Skeptics share a common mission to support critical thinking, scientific literacy, secular humanism, and freedom of thought (Kurtz, 2010). This collective identity provides an intellectual resource for skeptics even though movement goals are usually expressed through daily activities rather than overt political action.

Why do individuals participate in the skeptical movement? How does the skeptical movement build a collective identity and mobilize action? I will answer these questions while clarifying how skeptics live out their identities as critical thinkers, relating the skeptical movement to types of social change that are not beholden to the kinds of activism we associate with protest movements and electoral politics (Miller, 2005). To this end, I will employ a qualitative case study research design as it allows me to explore the skeptical movement in depth and is the preferred method to use when investigating a contemporary set of events (Yin, 2009). Pending university ethics approval, the data for my study will come from participant observation and semi-structured interviews based on a purposive snowball sample of twenty-five self-identified skeptics.

Most skeptics do not engage in sustained activism, but they do participate in social events like Skeptics in the Pub, which I have attended. I will observe and participate in meetings and events organized by the Centre for Inquiry Edmonton Meet-up Group and The Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society. Besides support groups, both traditional and alternative media play an important role in promoting the skeptical movement and facilitating community action (Farley, 2009; Wellman, 2001). I will perform a qualitative content analysis of official Internet sites, blogs, and publications associated with the skeptical movement, focusing primarily on the JREF website; tweets using the hashtags

#skeptic and #skepticism; and *Skeptic*, an international publication of the Skeptics Society. Recorded interviews and relevant textual data will be coded using qualitative data analysis software, which will help me make connections among themes (Bazeley, 2009).

One of the main objectives of case study research is to achieve a deep understanding of participants' self-concepts and contextual influences. Because of this focus on description, explanation, and prediction, case studies are often associated with theory building as opposed to theory testing; however preexisting theories are compatible with explorative case study research (Woodside, 2010). To structure my data in an informative manner, I will make use of existing theoretical contributions that emphasize the importance of lifestyle or identity-based forms of social change (Snow, 2004; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005).

Sociologists have used many theories to explain social movements, but most approaches define them as organized and politically contentious (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Social movement scholars have begun to move away from this focus on collective political struggle, instead emphasizing the role of private action, identity, and emotion in movements that target cultural practices rather than political institutions (Micheletti, 2003; Sandlin & Walther, 2009). The skeptical movement is one such *lifestyle movement* (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012) consisting of informal social networks, rituals, and events.

Practicing skepticism and adopting the skeptic identity links lifestyle change to social change, occasionally leading to collective action such as the 10:23 event. Following my investigation of the value-system embraced by members of the skeptical movement and how appeals to science constitute lifestyle actions, I will explain how skepticism affects motivation for activism and how the skeptical movement navigates its complex relationship with other secular movements (Smith & Cimino, 2012).

This study will be carried out as part of the requirements of the Doctoral program in Sociology at the University of Alberta. My research will be supervised by Dr. Stephen Kent, an expert on new and alternative religions and a past contributor to *Skeptic* magazine (Kent, 1998). There is an overlap between the skeptical movement and the anti-cult movement, in that both are concerned about deceit, manipulation, and the rejection of modern medicine. With this overlap in mind, Dr. Kent has agreed to provide me with access to the Stephen A. Kent and Gordon Drever Collections on Alternative Religions, which contains documents important to my topic, including extensive sources on skeptics' interactions with new religious movements and their attempts to promote a scientific worldview.

Under the guidance of my supervisor and committee members my approach to this topic will build on my SSHRC funded Master's research. My thesis, titled "Positive psychology as a scientific movement: A case study in scientific legitimacy," was informed by recent developments in scientific and intellectual movement scholarship and sociological approaches to self and identity (Frickel & Gross, 2005; Stets & Burke, 2003). As a first-year doctoral student I have also completed sociological course work in social theory and research design; ethnographic methods; and comparative and historical methods.

Given the importance of science to public policy and its effect on society, the vulnerability of an uninformed or misled public is of utmost concern to scientists, educators, and policymakers (Makgoba, 2002; Stocking, 2009). The organizational face of the skeptical movement is not unique in its concern with science education and consumer advocacy, but little is understood about the skeptic lifestyle choice as a tactic of social change. This research will contribute to our understanding of civic engagement in science, and how science advocacy operates outside of formal structures (Irwin, 1995). Following my doctoral studies I will publish a book based on my findings, laying the groundwork for future contributions to social movement studies and the growing field of secular and non-religious scholarship (Zuckerman, 2010).

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