How Religious Content Matters in Conversion Narratives to Various Religious Groups

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Even though considerable literature on conversions exists, there is a lack of literature comparing conversion processes in different religious groups. This paper is based upon an analysis of 50 conversion narratives to various religious groups using the narrative interview process of German sociologist Fritz Schütze. Narrative interviews are used to map the entire biography of a person, and its relation to the conversion experience. The interviews are analyzed using "constant comparison" according to "grounded theory." Based on this analysis, I propose that we consider personal biography, push and pull factors, religious content, life course agency, network influence, and the relationship between all these factors when interpreting conversion processes.

Key words: biographical trajectory; religious conversion; narrative interviews; grounded theory; conversion models.

While religious pluralism in the United States has received increased attention from scholars, little research on conversion has examined conversion processes comparatively across religious groups. Existing research has also tended to ignore religious content, explaining religious behavior by factors unrelated to the belief system itself, such as crisis experiences, social class or education (Gooren 2007:348; Smith 2008, 2007:166–67), with few exceptions (Allievi 1999; Rambo 1993; Smilde 2007).

My aim in this article is two-fold. Based on the detailed discussion of three case studies originating from an interdisciplinary comparative analysis of 50 narrative biographical interviews with converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses,

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Islam, Christianity, Unitarian Universalists, and Baha'i in the Midwestern United States,[1] and the data of this larger study, I intend to analyze first how converts' motives ("push factors") and reasons for conversion ("pull factors") (Allievi 1999) interact to form trajectories which differ from group to group. Secondly, some preliminary findings regarding "life course agency" and network influence are offered.

After a discussion of the state of research on conversion and a description of the methodology, the three case studies and findings from the larger study will be highlighted, followed by a presentation of factors that studies of conversion should take into account.

EXISTING CONVERSION RESEARCH

Conversion is a hotly debated topic in sociology and psychology. Whereas the classic conversion paradigm conceives of conversion as sudden and intrapersonal change, and has its roots in psychology, the contemporary paradigm is influenced more by sociology and centers on social influences on conversion processes, which are conceived of as gradual (Spilka et al. 2003:343–56). A related question revolves around the agency of the convert: whereas the classic paradigm was more likely to assume a passive view of the convert, the contemporary paradigm favors an active view (Richardson 1985). A focus on social influences is nevertheless predominant in much sociological conversion research (Smilde 2005), which contrasts somewhat with an interpretation of the convert as "seeker" (Strauss 1979).

Since conversion is conceived of differently in different religious traditions, such as Islam or Buddhism (Bryant and Lamb 1999), I use a broad definition of the phenomenon. Conversion encompasses "radical personal changes" (Snow and Machalek 1984:169) in a person's religious beliefs that can happen either suddenly or gradually. This comes with a different view of reality, of the world, and of self. Converts also reconstruct their biography as a consequence of their conversion in light of their current belief system (Snow and Machalek 1983:266–68). I include changes from one religion to a new one, a shift from no religious commitment to religious faith, and a renewal of one's religious faith within one religious group (Snow and Machalek 1984:171). However, with respect to the Unitarian Universalists and the Baha'is, not all of the subjects experienced a "radical" conversion. Some, having distanced themselves from their original religion, were looking for a religious group that reflected more closely what they already believed. The membership in their respective communities, though, also changed their sense of self, even if in a less radical way than was found among converts to Christianity or Islam.

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[1]This article is partially based upon the data gathered for my dissertation and represents a partial summary of it (Wenger Jindra 2005). It was first published in German.

In the sociology of religion, a relatively large amount of research is available about motivations and reasons for conversions, including a focus on seekership (Straus 1979), strain or deprivation (Bainbridge 1992), the influence of social networks (Snow and Phillips 1980), and the cultural context of conversion (Köse 1999; Wohlrab-Sahr 2006). Biographical factors prior to conversion are the main concern of psychological research. The most common variables considered here are stress, conflicts, feelings of alienation, and unhappiness with the self during childhood and adolescence (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Ullman 1989).

Even though considerable literature exists that examines motivations for and effects of conversions, there is a lack of literature comparing conversion processes in different religious groups (see also Gooren 2007:348; Murken and Namini 2007). The main exceptions to this are Ullman's (1988, 1989) and Murken and Namini's (2008) contributions, though other studies have also researched familial experiences among converts to various new religious movements, with some finding differences among them (e.g., Berger and Hexel 1981). Analyzing conversions to both traditional religions (Judaism and Catholicism) and non-traditional religions such as Baha'i and Hare Krishna, Ullman (1988) found that both types of converts had personal problems prior to their conversion, but converts to traditional religions reported a crisis because of external stress factors (such as rape or a serious illness), whereas converts to non-traditional religious groups experienced chronic personality problems prior to the conversion experience. Murken and Namini (2008), in a quantitative study, analyzed data from Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and members of the Apostolic church in Germany, and found that members of the Apostolic church had lost their fathers more often and that the Jehovah's Witnesses came, on average, from larger families than the remaining groups. All of this work is interesting and unique, though somewhat limited in its comparative scope, particularly because the researchers started with a fixed set of questions through which they examined the conversions (e.g., Ullman (1988) focuses specifically on "turmoil throughout childhood and adolescence," "depression," disorganized lifestyle and trauma prior to conversion, and perceived effects). More comparative studies are needed, however, precisely because different religious systems might attract people with different backgrounds, and there might be "a fit between the person and the group" (Murken and Namini 2008:29), or between "pull" and "push factors" leading up to conversion (Allievi 1999).

METHODS

In this analysis, I am looking at the entire process of conversion. This article will attempt to answer the following question: *What are the differences and similarities between conversion processes when considering conversions to various*

religious groups? Briefly, I will also highlight the issue of life course agency versus structural influences. In order to tackle these questions, I contend that narrative biographical interviews are most appropriate.

Narrative Biographical Interviews

The specific qualitative technique used here stems from German sociology, more specifically, the work of Schütze (1983, 1981). Narrative interviews are used to map the entire biography and life-world of a person, and its relation to the conversion experience. To achieve an understanding of a person's "biographical structure," the interviewer needs to let interviewees talk uninterruptedly about their past experiences. This way, narrators attempt to make sense of past experiences (both those already worked through as well as relatively untouched ones) (Bohnsack 2003:92–93), since it is not feasible for them to "break out" of the stream of experiences (Schütze 1983). At the same time, important life event data are recorded.

The process of analysis is as follows: first, a detailed biography based upon the life event data is constructed, along with a description of the interview situation. The second step distinguishes the narrative sequences in the interview from the non-narrative parts, and sequences the text into its various formal segments, which are then analyzed in terms of life course transitions/turning points, such as work or relational transitions, and high or low points (e.g., promotions, marriages, or divorces). A third step consists of an abstract analysis of these events (by paraphrasing the content as well as connecting it to historical, sociological information), which are connected together, until a view of the subject's full life course trajectory emerges. The interviewees' own patterns of presentation of their biography and identity are considered in another, fourth step. Fifth, by contrasting the constructed life course trajectory with the interviewee's subjective intentions, the researcher is able to understand where and when these contrast (or converge), and thus also understand how her overarching presentation of her story relates to the way her life unfolded (Popp-Baier 2001; Schütze 1983). One is also able to distinguish between an interviewee's initiation of a situation and her being controlled by circumstances. These issues are also about "life-course agency," a concept developed by Hitlin and Elder (2007:183), who define it as "the selection of various identities in the process of making (socially delineated) life course transitions." Finally, after the analysis of all the interviews, they are thoroughly compared and contrasted, using "constant comparison" according to the "grounded theory" approach. Its goal is an "emerging theory" (Strauss and Corbin 1990:21–2).

Some argue that it is not possible to analyze a conversion narrative in terms of reasons and motives, since these stories are not accurate, but represent reconstructions or "accounts" of earlier experiences that are influenced by the official doctrine of a group (Beckford 1978). It is certainly true that conversion narratives contain elements shaped by specific religious traditions (Yamane

2000). Conversion narratives also highlight or exaggerate prior crisis experiences (Smilde 2005). However, a number of researchers contend that the analysis of narrative interviews allows interviewers not only to reconstruct a consciously represented narrative, but also to gain insights into experiences that are only hinted at, even to discover contradictions between self-presentation and what actually happened (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999:486).

A recent article by Popp-Baier (2008) also gives us insights on how interviewees' personal views of their lives, shaped by a new religious perspective, relate to the structure of their life courses. She proposes that we look at three elements when evaluating religious conversion in the biographical context. These are (a) religious experience such as emotions and cognitions, (b) how religious experience is connected to the structure of one's narrative, and (c) theories about the self that can be related to religious interpretation and other life philosophies. Using a case study of a man converting to Hare Krishna, the author shows how the religious canon interacts with the person's experiences. This relationship between religious experiences, the narrative, and theories about the self (elements a, b, and c) and subjects' biographical trajectory (d) is key in this paper.

In selecting subjects, I relied on the strategy of "theoretical sampling" commonly employed in grounded theory. One does not focus on specific population groups or on random sampling, but on a variety of significant attributes of people. Therefore, my goal was to find subjects that diverged in regards to the religion they converted to and the one they were raised in gender, age, ethnicity/racial background, and course of conversion. Using this sampling technique, a relatively varied population was interviewed: the sample consisted of 26 women and 24 men, 39 whites, six African-Americans, one Jewish person, one Puerto-Rican, one Iranian, one African, and one South African of Indian descent. The youngest interviewee was 19 years old and the oldest 95.

Due to space constraints, this strategy and the way I selected the specific religious groups as well as the religious groups and their core ideas cannot be described in detail here.[2]

At this point, I examine three case studies in detail, followed by a proposal of factors that need to be considered in any comprehensive model that analyzes conversion experiences comparatively, derived from the analysis of all 50 interviews.

CASE STUDIES

The three narratives include a man converting to the American Muslim Society, a woman who joined the Baha'i, and a woman who became a member

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[2]For supplemental information, see *Sociology of Religion* online (http://www.socrel. oxfordjournals.org).

in a non-denominational, charismatic Christian church. In the discussion of these narratives, I first highlight the story as presented by the interviewees themselves, and then contrast it with the structural–biographical analysis.

Mr. Taylor: A Conversion to Islam: From Culturally "Wide" Surroundings into a Culturally Defined Belief System

His life story as described by himself Mr. Taylor is a 56-year-old African-American man, married, with children, who resides in a medium sized Midwestern city at the time of the interview. He grew up in southern Missouri and was raised by his grandparents because his mother was only 13 years old when he was born (his dad was put in jail for having sexual relations with a minor). He described a hard early life influenced by segregation, discrimination, and economic exploitation (the whole family worked in cotton fields) in the South. However, he also mentions that his extended familial and community relations played a major positive role in his early life, due to their working together in difficult situations, which implied a structured and community-oriented way of life. Their faith in God also gave them hope and united them as a community. In his childhood, his grandparents migrated from the South to the North, taking him with them. He needed to adapt to a different culture, and experienced the loss of close relationships and a sudden liberation from traditional customs:

> I think I was three, maybe five years old, at the time that my grandparents relocated from the South to the North, so this brought a new awakening because it was a tremendous cultural shock. Can you imagine a southern boy born, who wasn't used to wearing shoes, who was used to picking cotton, working on the plantation all his life and not having really a toilet in the house.

He talked about meeting his father only after his grandparents took him up north. During this time, he moved back and forth between his grandparents' and mother's house (in two different Michigan cities), and generally felt lonely. At the age of 16 years he could not deal with this situation anymore, and ran away to New York. He then told me that in this city he learned to fend for himself, learning about different religions from homeless people, while trying to find a sense of identity.

Around this time, he came into contact with the Nation of Islam, describing an interest in this group, but also studied the doctrines of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhism, and Judaism. The doctrines of the Nation of Islam addressed his experiences with racism, but he did not end up joining this organization at that time. Instead, he finished his high school diploma and went to the Marines afterwards. During his service in Vietnam, he describes experiencing the violence and racism perpetrated by Americans and developing feelings of hatred especially toward European Americans. After coming back, he joined the Nation of Islam in 1971, and was first under the leadership

. of Louis Farrakhan, and then, since Mr. Taylor moved to another state, of Elijah Muhammad.

However, 10 years after joining, he reported leaving the Nation of Islam, in his own words due to his disappointment about the death of the group's leader, Elijah Muhammad. He then describes how he realized after getting to know the Imam of the American Muslim Mission (a continuation of the Nation of Islam under Warith Deen Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's son, with a changed emphasis), that this version suited him far better than the earlier Nation of Islam. He felt that Islam was closer to the Bible than the Nation of Islam had been, and that it gave him clarity, feelings of calmness, and self-confidence, and helped him deal with his anger issues. Mr. Taylor mentions that he found the answer to his questions and the solutions to his problems when joining this group, and in the years afterwards, his life stabilized, he went back to college, got a degree, and is today an independent businessman.

Contrasting his biography with his self-presentation Comparing and contrasting Mr. Taylor's own story with his conscious self-presentation, it seems apparent that the two show some overlap, but there are also differences. He makes a distinction between his early life in the South and everything that came afterwards. His life in the South was associated with hardship, teenage parents that could not take care of him, and thus gave him to his grandparents, exploitation, and a certain sense of fear, but also with a strong sense of community, of extended family, support, and Christianity. This is perhaps exemplified in his saying there was a "beautiful set-up in the South" and his association of being in church with a sense of safety. The relocation to the North at an early age, on the other hand, is associated with cultural and familial disorientation, insecurity, despair, and loneliness. He initially seems to have relied on his Christian faith to get him through these years, but this failed.

This is my interpretation: Islam provided Mr. Taylor with a solution to his search for a cultural and also racial identity and a meaning-system that fit his circumstances after having been taken out of his Southern community. In his story, he highlights that Islam addressed his anger issues and that the clear rules gave him guidelines. However, the structural–substantial analysis revealed that his anger and confusion can be related to having been taken out of a culturally defined, close-knit, Christian environment at an early age and, in a later transition, his experiences with racism in and after the Vietnam War. A key concern of his (though he himself does not voice it as such) is how the two versions of the Nation of Islam that he was or is part of connect to his experiences. Due to his early relocation, he needed to adapt to a different culture, and experienced the loss of close relationships and a sudden liberation from traditional customs, and in the long run, this represents an "openness" which he could not handle, and which contributed to his "running away" to New York.

This cultural and, here, even racial and political issue re-emerges when he narrates his first conversion to the Nation of Islam. His experience in the Vietnam War was horrible and his attitude toward the military and toward

fellow white soldiers translated into a negative attitude toward white America as a whole. Upon coming back from the war, he talks about encountering persistent segregation which seems to have intensified these feelings, even though he also says he wanted to fit into mainstream American life again. Therefore, his initial conversion to the Nation of Islam was about his negative experiences in Vietnam, but this move also shows a deeper negative attitude toward American culture, which is visible in the underlined segment below and the word "but," through which he distances himself from fitting into mainstream American life. It is well known that the Nation of Islam is attractive to those African Americans who felt alienated from the larger society (see here Essien-Udom 1969):

> I said to myself, T., something is wrong with you because you can't become an animal, you know for a year in the war and come back among the normal human beings and be totally human. Find someone, in some kind of way, find out what your limitations are, your strengths and weaknesses, and find out, so you can fit back into the mainstream of American life, you know. But when I came back the same situation, if I may be permitted to be honest, a lot of the racism that existed prior to the time I left was still there when I came back, so people still made you conscious of the color of your skin.

After 10 years, he switched from the Nation of Islam to the American Muslim Mission, and he talked about Eljiah Muhammad's death and that the Muslim American Mission was closer to the Bible than the Nation of Islam. He was caught between finding a cultural or racial identity and his desires to not be completely alienated from mainstream America: the old version of the Nation of Islam was too militant and characterized by an extreme focus on African-American identity as different from the overall mainstream American identity. The Muslim American Mission lead by Warith Deen Muhammad is still culturally distinct, but not as aggressively so (e.g., the group invites Whites and is aligned with Sunni Islam) and is therefore to a greater extent based upon the teachings of the Qur'an than the teachings of the Nation of Islam. As an example of this, he highlighted the unity of all Muslims at several points and pointed out his respect for people of a different skin color and nationality. The fact that he got married to a Christian probably also helped deter him from the former group.

It is interesting to examine the narrative reconstruction of his experiences of believing in Elijah Muhammad in light of his current faith: he says that Allah led him to experience Christianity and the Nation of Islam first to make him stronger. But, importantly, this can be distinguished from what the Nation of Islam meant to him when he first converted (as discussed above).

Ms. Young: Becoming Baha'i: From a Culturally Enclosed Background to a Culturally Diverse Belief System

Her life story as described by herself Ms. Young is an African-American woman in her 40s, single, and without children. She started her story by

telling me about the location where she grew up, the "inner city" of Chicago, under the threat of violence and gangs, with a single parent and five siblings. She reported that she often suffered from feelings of meaninglessness and depression in her youth. She also described her relationship to her mother as tense and distanced, since her mother spent time in the hospital after her birth, which did not allow for the creation of a nurturing relationship. Her father suffered from epilepsy, and was sent to live with relatives early in her life. Though she reported being close to him in her early childhood, later on she hardly saw him.

Religiously, she distanced herself from the Baptist religion (her mother's religion; though her mother herself was not a devout church goer, in contrast her father) at the age of 15; the church was too close-minded and conservative for her. She started expressing some independence by reading books about religion and spirituality. Then, at the age of 16, she left Chicago, but came back after a few years. Upon returning, she visited a Holiness church in her neighborhood, and experienced a strong, emotional conversion within that church on her first visit, which her mother was not very happy about. However, she then gradually distanced herself again from this church as well, and as a reason she mentions the strict rules regarding wearing pants and make-up. During the next few years, she stayed in Chicago, but in her early 20s, she experienced a strong longing to leave, and decided to move to San Diego.

> So one day in about 1982 I started feeling this longing and like two distinct feelings I had, you know, like the longing. It was just – I don't know how to describe it, but I felt this longing and then I felt this other kind of feeling, but I just thought, oh, it was depression. I was in Chicago the winter of 1981–82 was the harshest winter I've ever experienced. It was so cold I almost got frostbite I don't know how many times and by this time I must have been about 24 or something – 25, and I didn't belong to any church or anything. But I still felt this emptiness and this longing – that's what it was. (...). So I didn't have this desire and I had to cope, and then all of a sudden I just decided I was leaving.

She then traveled first to Bermuda, and then to San Diego. Arriving there, however, she experienced a crisis; she had no job, did not know anybody, and felt lost. In this situation, she had a spiritual experience while praying with a neighbor in a hostel who suffered from depression. Afterwards, the woman felt better, and Ms. Young tried to make sense of the experience, attributing her desire to move to San Diego to God's will to meet and help this woman.

A little later, she left San Diego, and returned to Bermuda (she had met a man there earlier, whom she now married). At that time, she began searching for a spiritual community because she felt her "spiritual longing" coming back, and also because of a period of depression. She joined the Baha'i after looking through the phone book and calling them, establishing a connection with the woman who was in the Baha'i center at the time, realizing right away that she felt at home in this faith. She told me that she felt "overwhelmed with joy" after joining the Baha'i.

Contrasting her biography with her self-presentation Ms. Young's narrative shows opposite tendencies from the story of Mr. Taylor, while at the same time, like his, focusing on issues of cultural connectedness versus freedom. Her story is about the ambivalence she is experiencing toward her isolated urban African American background in Chicago, which is also connected to her ambivalence toward her mother.

In her interview, she makes a distinction between the old and the new—the old, her childhood environment, is associated with the African-American ghetto, with segregation, isolation and social problems such as poverty, violence, and single motherhood (as did Mr. Taylor, she started her interview with the description of her geographical/cultural background). Moreover, she makes a clear (though not explicit) connection of the "ghetto" environment, lifestyle and limitations to her mother, whom she describes as a gambler, rebellious, and only superficially religious, and whom she was not very attached to. On the other hand, her father is described as the one who was very religious, wanted to become a pastor, was close to her, but also the one who left her. Unsurprisingly, her parents also did not get along well in the years prior to his leaving.

In my interpretation, her continuous wandering (she seems to be unable to stay at a place for some time, since, at the time of the interview, she still moved from city to city) and her experience of a conversion in a Holiness church and then in the Baha'i faith are, on the one hand, attempts to escape the inner city, (associated with her mother), and to recreate the early time when her father was still close to her (and as we have seen, she connects her father to a strong sense of religiosity). On the other hand, she also identifies with her mother, whom she describes as similar to herself (as "not easily controlled"). This way, though, she is actually never satisfied, something is always amiss, and this is why she often moves on continually. To support this thesis, as mentioned above (in her self-description), she had distanced herself from organized Christianity at the time she was leaving her mother's house, but on her return, exactly when confronted with her mother (and the ghetto environment) again, she joined a charismatic Holiness church (which became too conservative for her after a while). However, it is not long before she develops a hatred for the "ghetto" and its associated segregation and cultural isolation again and also feels a strong longing, which can be connected to a longing for her father (identified with religion/spirituality). And as we have seen, she left Chicago, had a spiritual experience in San Diego, which affirmed her spirituality, but also her non-conforming personality. After this spiritual longing was satisfied, San Diego lost its allure, and she moved on to Bermuda.

Her own interpretation of her life in light of her current faith overlaps—up to a point—with the results of my analysis: as seen in the following segment (describing her initial encounter with the Baha'i), this faith is attractive for her because it transcends narrow cultural and racial boundaries:

And I finally said, 'oh, so, you believe . . . your high priorities, the elimination of prejudice?'
She said: 'yeah'. I said, 'so you have all kinds of people in your religion?' She said: 'yeah'.
Yeah, I know. I'm from Chicago and even as Dr. Martin Luther King said, Chicago was one
of the most segregated, even though he had been in the south, it was still one of the most segre-
gated places to be. And we in Chicago lived in invisible boundaries. You knew where you
could go and couldn't go. So I grew up in a very, not, no personal racist actually against me,
but a very racist and segregated society where you were limited. You constantly knew that.

But, as highlighted above, the reasons for her continuous wandering and her conversion to the Baha'i go deeper. She also feels a powerful attraction to the Baha'i because as a Baha'i, she can connect two conflicting desires; she values its "religious/spiritual component" (mirroring her father's values) and liberal aspects (representing her mother's values). Finally, the Baha'i allow her to continue her wandering life style, since, in that realm, they are a very tolerant group, inviting people of all cultural backgrounds and strangers in. However, especially because she moves around much, she does not have to establish long-lasting relationships and thus confront her underlying uneasiness.

Mrs. Pfeiffer: A Conversion to Christianity: Problems with the Self and Relationships

Her life story as described by herself Mrs. Pfeiffer, a White, married woman, was born in 1970 in a small town in Minnesota and grew up in a nominal Christian home (together with two siblings). Her father worked as a machinist, while her mother stayed at home. She describes her family relationships as neither completely happy nor unhappy. Her family had ties to a Lutheran church, though her parents were not very devout; they themselves did not go to church, but dropped their kids off for Sunday school. She had some experiences with a Baptist church since one of her close friends was a Baptist but, at the age of 15–18 years, she distanced herself from Christianity.

After a brief relationship with a young Christian, who left her because she did not share his faith, she dated another man, whom she describes as abusive. She became pregnant right away and gave birth to her first daughter at the age of 22. As a consequence of this relationship, she describes feeling increasingly depressed and also mentioned that her doubts about religion increased, also because her boyfriend was a nominal Catholic. She stayed in this relationship for a while, finally escaping him after her daughter was a year old. After the relationship had ended, she had contact with her ex-boyfriend's aunt who took care of her daughter sometimes. This woman was a strong Catholic and served as a positive role model for her.

Two years after this first long-term relationship, she met her current husband. As with the previous one, this relationship is characterized as rocky from the beginning; she narrates finding out that he was still married to another woman and had two children. He was also cheating on her with other women and they both drank a lot in the beginning of their relationship, but then she got pregnant. The following period is portrayed as one of

depression and despair. Then her strong, emotional conversion experience at the age of 27 (which happened due to her future mother-in-law promising them money for the rent if they would go to church with her) provided her with some hope:

> *I was either about to have my son or about to have my daughter. (. . .) So, anyway, I was big and fat and pregnant, and ah . . . and I, and I got saved, on Valentine's day. (. . .) It was, it was, I was filled with the Holy Spirit, ahm, it was an absolute overwhelming peace, and healing and so much all wrapped into one moment in time, and I gave my heart, I mean, I don't know if I ever gave my heart to God to begin with, but I certainly did that day, and I got saved.*

Afterwards, she became active in a charismatic, non-denominational church, with an emphasis on a personal relationship to Christ and on personal salvation. She felt like a changed person, but her boyfriend continued to drink and have affairs, and she started to think of leaving him. After a fire that destroyed their house and an unpleasant subsequent stay at her boyfriend's parents, she describes moving out and leaving him. He eventually repented and also changed. They were married shortly after, and she relayed how she was able to forgive him completely for cheating on her prior to the marriage.

Contrasting her biography with her self-presentation In my interpretation, Mrs. Pfeiffer's conversion to (non-denominational) Christianity was fostered by her feelings of neediness, dependency and her attempts to deal with those feelings. She started the interview revealing that she *"had a kind of, relatively normal, happy childhood"* which indicates that it could not have been totally blissful (the use of the words "kind of" and "relatively" relativizes the "normal, happy"), even though *"nothing traumatic happened."* It is also important that she sets out her narrative by mentioning relationships, not the socio-cultural background, in contrast to both Mr. Taylor and Ms. Young. She felt a strong need for acceptance and love prior to her conversion, and I attribute this to the fact that her parents never gave her the attention that she craved. When asked about her relationships to her parents, she said:

> *I had a good . . . I loved them both and I know they both loved me. Ahm, I think the hardest thing on me when I was little was . . . I was, I've been through counseling over that . . . was the fact that I never really felt that I was special.*

As the structural–substantial description of her biography revealed, a consequence of her social neediness, low self-esteem, and emotional dependency as a teen and young adult was that she repeatedly got involved in abusive relationships and was not able to leave them right away. In the relationship to her current husband, both heavy involvement and pregnancy happened very quickly.

In summary, her life prior to her conversion had been characterized by a downward course; she experienced two premarital cohabiting relationships,

had one child outside of marriage and was pregnant with another, and was abused.

The transforming effects of her conversion experience allow her to articulate these feelings of dependency and neediness in the context of her relationship to God, and thus to slowly change. Due to the love and peace she felt as a consequence of her conversion experience, she was able to rely on and base her sense of worth on her concept of Christ (instead of on abusive men) (see also Paul 1999). Here, one can also make a connection to Stromberg (1993), since she creates a link between her own personal experience (her neediness and her desire to do better) and the message of "following Christ." Thus, since she could articulate her social neediness and dependency, and her sense of agency increased. This process is visible in a segment in which she told me about her ability to finally leave her boyfriend. She recalls praying to God about letting her leave for some time, even before they had to move to her boyfriend's parents' house, and how, after an argument between her two-year-old and her boyfriend's father, she finally packed her bags and left:

> I still prayed every day for God to letting me leave, and He had stopped telling me to wait. He did not tell me to go, He just didn't say anything, He had stopped telling me. So, and I just . . . I just stayed with that for about a month, thinking, maybe I am just not hearing him, no, I think he was letting me make my own choice. And ahm, and the timing was right, because, he had gotten into trouble, that night, and the very next morning I got up and my son was two, and I . . . it must have been, yeah, I must have gotten saved the year that he was born, cause I had been saved for two years by then. Ahm, and he said . . . my son had gotten into an argument with my now father-in-law (. . .).

What is interesting about this quote is her recalling praying to God and receiving an answer, and later, no answer. In my interpretation, she is attributing her initial fears of leaving and loneliness to God's command not to leave. Later, her growing strength due to her faith enabled her to move out when the situation became too stressful.

In summary, in this story, we can see the influence of the Christian canon (emotional conversion experience, dependency upon God, a focus on sin) in her narrative. But it should also become apparent that the narrative interpretation of her life contributes to transforming her life.

FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED IN MODELS OF CONVERSION EXPERIENCES: A PROPOSAL

The case studies above are part of a broader base of information provided by the analysis of the 50 interviews from which we can conclude, I argue, that the relationships between various factors need to be considered in any model that attempts to understand conversions. To understand conversion, we need

FIGURE 1. A Two-Dimensional Model for the Study of Conversion Experiences
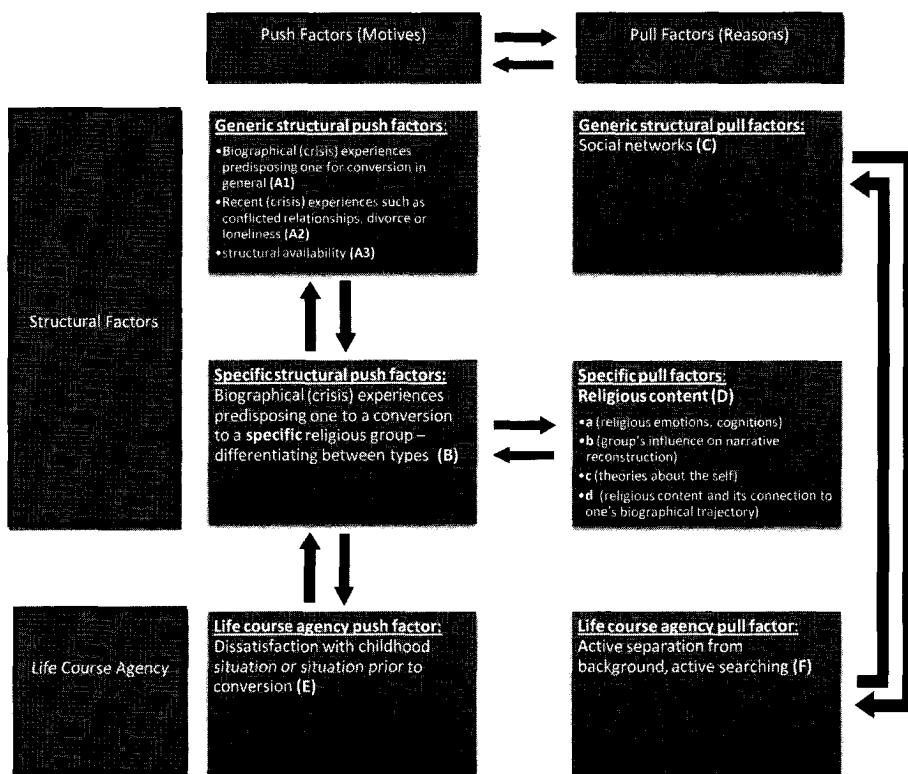
to first consider push factors (motives) and pull factors (reasons), which are listed in row 1 of Figure 1.

Generic versus Specific Conversion Push Factors (Motives) and Pull Factors (Reasons)

The analysis of the 50 narratives revealed that many converts shared some experiences that are also described in the existing literature on conversion (e.g., Ullman 1989), which I call generic (structural) push factors (A1, A2). These were emotionally and/or physically absent fathers, in some cases problematic relationships with mothers, and long-term crisis experiences (A1), or also more recent experiences in someone's life such as conflicted relationships, divorce, an illness, or change of location (A2). These factors (especially those described as A1) are structural because they signify events/circumstances that happen to the interviewees, and over which they do not have much control.

The three case studies above demonstrate some of this. All three had problematic relationships with their parents. In their biographies, the issue of absent fathers surfaced (most clearly with Mr. Taylor and Ms. Young, whose fathers were physically absent, but also visible in Mrs. Pfeiffer's narrative), and

relationships to mothers were conflicted as well (Mr. Taylor's mother was largely absent from his life, Ms. Young experienced tensions in her relationship to her mother and Mrs. Pfeiffer's narrative revealed a perceived lack of emotional nurturance from both parents). Further, a change in location and/or failing relationships, and/or loneliness and depression prior to converting were present for all three interviewees.

It is important here to highlight the difference between those who experienced a conversion within the religion they grew up in (type 6), and those who converted to a different religious group. The first group felt, in general, at home in their families, milieu, and religion of origin. They did not want to distance themselves from their parents' religious beliefs as had the converts in the other groups, and their conversions generally happened in their childhood years or early teens. Among this group, generic (structural) push factors (A1 and A2) such as problematic relationships to fathers were largely absent.

However, there are also differences between the trajectories of conversions to various religious groups, which are only visible upon analyzing them in depth. Thus, the present study also shows the importance of examining the totality of subjects' life-worlds. I initially expected to find specific variables (e.g., physically and/or emotionally absent fathers or crisis experiences, etc.) to constitute the key difference between conversions. And even though there were some variations regarding this pattern (e.g., type 6 individuals all reported physically and emotionally present fathers, in contrast to 73% of type 1–3 and about 28% of types 4 and 5), these variables alone could not explain the differences between various types of conversion trajectories, and new patterns emerged upon examining how specific patterns of relationships to parents were intertwined with subjects' religious or cultural/social experiences.

The key category emerging from the comparative study "move towards openness versus enclosedness" combines various specific (structural) push and pull factors (B and D) (and to a certain extent, also variations in the generic structural push factor [A1]) in explaining these varied conversion trajectories and thus constituting the types of conversion: If the familial, religious, and/or socio-cultural milieu was experienced as too narrow and enclosed, the person was generally attracted by more "open" conditions (this was found in types 4 and 5). If, on the other hand, one's familial and/or socio-cultural milieu was experienced as disorganized, more "enclosed" milieus were attractive (this was found in types 1–3). Thus, types 1, 2, and 3 are associated with subjects' journeys to relatively strict religious groups (in the moral and doctrinal sense). On the other hand, types 4 and 5, overall, consist of people who joined a more morally, culturally and theologically "liberal" or "open" religious group.

One of the main components in the model above is religious content (D). Overall, as was highlighted above, the contact with a new religious ideology (D) shaped converts' experience and emotions (a), the narrative construction

of the conversion experience(b), and theories about themselves (c) and vice versa (religious experience and theories about oneself were related to religious canons). We can now analyze how elements a, b, c, and d relate to the types 1–6 of conversion, to biographical trajectories, and to the model's other components. For example, I am interested in the influence the religious content (D) had on (d), a converts' actual biographical trajectory.

One contrast can be made between the conversion processes of types 1 and 4. They had similar religious (often Catholic or strict Protestant) backgrounds, and experienced them as rigid, all-encompassing, limiting, and meaningless at the same time (this is the specific structural push factor B in Figure 1). But whereas those of type 1 (Jehovah's Witnesses) converted again to a relatively rigid and clear belief system (D), those of type 4 (Unitarians) experienced their religious background as restricting, struggled with it, left it behind and highlighted their independence in religious matters (d) (D). Family and education mattered as well, as it was within the family, schools, or in church that subjects were exposed to religion. Among two of the five type 1 converts, an external religiosity could be seen, and all but one structured their narrative according to the metanarrative commonly given by Jehovah's Witnesses, such as a focusing on cognitive insight and one's own agency (which relates to factors a, b, c in Figure 1), as described vividly by Beckford (1978). However, some were able to connect their own experiences more to these doctrinal elements than others, and their lives were generally positively influenced by their conversion (d). Overall, three of the five showed little self-reflexivity in describing this process (and also more network influence). In contrast to type 1, type 4 individuals did not passively reiterate the doctrine of their respective group (b), but reflexively worked through and with it. Their interviews also revealed a higher degree of self-reflexivity and less network influence.

The converts of type 2 (Islam, also Jehovah's Witnesses, two Christians and one Baha'i) experienced cultural, social, and/or familial disorientation (this is the specific structural push factor, B) and searched for a connection to their cultural background or a clear social structure: two converts struggled with being taken out of a close-knit, culturally defined African-American environment. In the social arena, three male and three female converts experienced a severely chaotic childhood family environment. Sometimes in addition to family break-up, repeated moves, or having parents move away when one was older, four female converts were suffering from the uncertainties of contemporary gender relations and sexuality: one experienced sexual harassment, and three had been abandoned by a boyfriend or husband. The religion (D) they converted to provide them either with a way of dealing with their disorientation in the form of cultural connections, or with structure and clarity regarding gender roles and roles within the family (d). The case study illustrated above shows this: for Mr. Taylor, the issue was a too "wide" cultural background due to his dislocation from a rural African-American community in the South to the urban North, together with a certain extent of family

disorganization, leading to feelings of disorientation (B), for which his conversion to the Nation of Islam and later on the American Muslim Mission provided a solution (d) (D), on the subjective and narrative levels allowing him to deal with his anger issues and confusion (a, b, c).

Among type 2 converts, emotions associated with the conversion were a sense of peace, calm, and clarity (a). Converts to Islam commonly connected their journeys to the religious teachings by highlighting how Allah was directing their lives (b, c). However, in some interviews, this was much more pronounced than in others. The Jehovah's Witnesses of this type highlighted rational understanding of doctrines, similar to type 1 converts.

The narratives of the converts of type 3 (mostly converts to Christianity, but one convert to Islam) dealt primarily with problems in the area of family relationships and self. The analysis revealed feelings of having been emotionally neglected by their parents (this is the specific structural push factor, B) (one could say this is a milder form of family disorganization than the one experienced by type 2, additionally, relationships to parents (A1) were most likely described as problematic in this type). This feeling was connected to the "religious superficiality" with which they were raised—parents generally did not make religious upbringing a priority (B). As a result of the conversion, most converts reported emotions of peace and love (a, b, c), and due to their experience of a relationship with a religious figure (e.g., Christ) (D), they felt more at ease with themselves and increasingly also with others (d). In one case, that of a Hindu woman converting to Christianity in South Africa under apartheid, the feeling of not being accepted was not due to the perceived parental neglect, but due to her experiences of being a minority in her country of origin.

As we have seen, Mrs. Pfeiffer's conversion trajectory revealed a search for unconditional acceptance based upon her early experiences of lacking parental attention and her resulting involvement in several abusive relationships (B). The main draw of charismatic Christianity (D) for her was the experience and narrative incorporation of the "Holy Spirit" (a, b, c) and increasing sense of agency (d), which helped her improve her life.

Overall, six type 3 individuals showed moderate to strong emotions (a), and five of the narratives followed the Christian story of sin and salvation. But all but two converts (Mrs. Pfeiffer included) worked through it instead of passively reiterating it, that is, they connected their subjective experience to the religious canon (Stromberg 1993). In the two remaining cases, the official doctrine seemed to have a strong (external) influence on converts' narratives, including when it came to cognitively held beliefs such as evolution.

In contrast to those of type 2, the interviewees of type 5 (five of the converts to Baha'i) revealed feelings of ambivalence toward the cultural milieu (the location and the culture surrounding it, and one's extended and/or immediate family environment they grew up in (this is the specific structural push factor, B)). In three cases (two Afro-Americans and one Jewish man),

interviewees liked their extended families and religious activities when they were children, but experienced their surroundings and a relationship with a specific family member as less than ideal. Two white women had negative experiences with their upbringing in a white, middle class community, which was experienced as too rigid or success-oriented. The interviewees were looking for a way to deal with this ambivalence toward their environment (d, D). On a more conscious level, membership in the religious group allowed them to have contact with a more diverse group than before and gave them a sense of personal growth (a, b, c). The Ms. Young case study illustrated above belongs to this type. She felt trapped in a culturally enclosed African-American milieu in Chicago (B), and was attracted by a faith (D) that allowed her to deal with this ambivalence in her environment to an extent, to be spiritual, but also free and exposed to diversity (d).

In terms of the Baha'i doctrine's influence on one's narrative and reflexively working through one's past, three of the converts fit the pattern of type 4; having reflected upon their background experiences, they made the religion their own (instead of passively absorbing its doctrine). One of the Baha'i converts had worked through his experiences to a lesser degree and consequently often just repeated the official doctrines (e.g., unity, equality), while Ms. Young falls somewhere between these two poles.

Thus, in conclusion, how do the types 1–5 correlate with the religious groups people converted to? Five of the converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses were placed into type 1, most of the converts to various Islamic groups (6), some of the converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses (4), and one convert to Christianity and Baha'i each were placed into type 2. Seven converts to Christianity (various denominations) and one convert to Islam fit into type 3. One Christian convert fell between types 3 and 5. Types 4 and 5 were found mostly among the Unitarians and the Baha'i. Eight Unitarians and one former Unitarian were placed into type 4 (with one Unitarian falling between type 4 and type 6), and five of the seven Baha'i, together with the Christian convert mentioned above, into type 5. Type 6 consisted of converts to Christianity and one convert to the Baha'i (see here also Jindra 2008). Table 1 presents an overview of the various types, organized by religion to which people converted.

Some Preliminary Comments on the Influence of Structure versus Life Course Agency

If we are to follow Gooren (2007), it becomes clear that these initial comparisons could be extended. For example, some argue that sociological research neglects individual agency and that the main focus of conversion research is still on social influences, specifically social networks (and resulting pressures to conform), on the convert (Smilde 2005, 2007). The following question could be asked: *Do various conversion trajectories differ when examined in terms of "life course agency" and structural influences?* In my discussion, I will focus on "life

TABLE 1   Overview of Various Types of Religious Conversion Trajectories, Destination Religions, and Number of Converts

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6
Description of type	Religious background experienced as all-encompassing but meaningless—move toward enclosed religious group	Disorganized cultural, social, or familial background—move toward enclosed religious group	Problems with self stemming from inadequate nurturance during childhood/adolescence	Religious background experienced as too structured—move toward religiously open group	Ambivalence towards one's cultural milieu in childhood—move toward a culturally diverse and religiously open group	Feeling at home in one's milieu of origin—staying where one is
Factors from Figure 1 evidenced in type	**B:** meaningless, structured religious background **a:** feelings of clarity, focus on learning	**B,** also **A1:** cultural, social, or familial disorientation **A:** feelings of peace, calm, and clarity	**B,** also **A1:** inadequate nurturance by parents **a:** feelings of peace and love	**B:** religious background too narrow **a:** feelings of freedom	**B:** ambivalence toward one's cultural milieu **a:** increased connections to a diverse group of people, sense of personal growth	**A1:** absent **a:** happiness, belonging

TABLE 1 *Continued*

Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6
b, c: passive biographical reconstruction in light of doctrine in a majority of converts	**b, c:** passive biographical reconstruction in light of doctrine varied	**b, c:** passive biographical reconstruction in light of doctrine in a minority of converts	**b:** no passive biographical reconstruction in light of doctrine	**b, c:** narrative biographical reconstruction in light of doctrine in a minority of converts	**b, c:** narrative reconstruction of one's life in light of doctrine to various degrees
D: beliefs held by the Jehovah's Witnesses	**D:** Muslim beliefs	**D:** Christian beliefs	**D:** beliefs held by the Unitarian Universalists	**D:** beliefs held by the Baha'i	**B, E, F:** absent
d: improvement by living a more structured life	**d:** dealing with one's disorientation, gaining structure in life	**d:** improving relationship to oneself and to others, improved sense of agency	**d:** increased independence	**d:** dealing with ambivalence towards one's milieu of origin	**C:** strong early network influence
E: unhappiness prior to conversion	**E:** unhappiness prior to conversion	**E:** unhappiness prior to conversion	**E:** unhappiness prior to conversion	**E:** unhappiness prior to conversion	**A2/A3:** no structural availability, some short-term crises such as a severe illness visible among some

	C: network influence strong — A2/A3: crises prior to conversion and structural availability visible — F: active seekership rare	C: network influence — A2/A3: crises prior to conversion and structural availability visible — F: active seekership rare	C: network influence — A2/A3: crises prior to conversion and structural availability visible — F: active seekership rare	C: some network influence, but not strong — A2/A3: crises prior to joining and structural availability visible — F: active seekership visible	C: some network influence, but not strong — F: active seekership visible
Number converting to each destination religion					
Christianity	–	2	7	–	9
Unitarian Universalism	–	–	–	8	–
Baha'i	–	1	–	–	1
Buddhism	–	–	–	1	–
Islam	–	6	1	–	–
Jehovah's Witnesses	5	4	–	–	–
Total	5	13	8	9	10

course agency" because the narrative interview technique aligns itself well with it, and because the term "agency" is too broad.[3]

Adding to the above factors, I propose both life course agency push and pull factors (E and F), represented in row 2 of Figure 1. The analysis of the three case studies (and the 50 interviews as a whole, with the exception of type 6) indicated a connection between a general unhappiness with childhood experiences and/or the life-world before the conversion, and the conversions themselves, which could be termed life course agency push factor (E). What matters here is that the structural–substantial analysis shows interviewees' unhappiness with and their distancing themselves from their situations. Thus, the conversions may also signify an active search for a new life, which indicates life course agency pull factors (F).

The interviews with the three subjects revealed both factors E and F: Mrs. Pfeiffer first wanted a way to feel loved and later on to leave an abusive relationship, Ms. Young struggled with feelings of ambivalence, longing and depression periodically throughout her life and just prior to becoming Baha'i, and Mr. Taylor experienced cultural disorientation, anger, and depression throughout his youth and due to his experiences in the Vietnam War prior to joining the Nation of Islam.

Bringing both rows of the model together, one could then address the larger question of whether life course agency pull factors (F) or generic structural pull factors (C) (social networks) carry more weight in someone's conversion. In the same vein, one would need to research differences in converts' role in this process (e.g., to what extent do they welcome or resist other's influences on them, and are some more individually active than others?) (see also Gooren 2007:351). Archer (1995:184), for example, highlights reflexivity by contending that people think about their options in dealing with situations, that "no specific influence works as a hydraulic pressure, but is subject to reflective (if often imperfect) evaluation by agents." This is a huge endeavor and has been discussed in some of the recent literature (Gooren 2007; Smilde 2005, 2007). Therefore, the following observations should be regarded as preliminary.

The comparative analysis of the interviews revealed that besides active searching (F) and network influence (C), interviewee's unhappiness with earlier or current situations (life course agency push factor, E) and recent experiences sometimes leading to structural availability (A3) (conceptualized here as putting oneself into a situation in which contact with a new religious group is likely [see also Smilde 2005]) were of importance.

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[3]In Hitlin and Elder's view (2007), even though various sociologists have developed refined theories of the relationship between agency and structure (most notably Giddens 1984), the concept of agency has never been accurately defined, remaining "curiously abstract" instead. They aim to develop a social-psychological concept of agency, and end up differentiating between various forms, one of which is "life course agency."

Among type 6 interviewees (as we have already established), predisposing factors (A1, A2, B) and unhappiness with the milieu and religion of origin were not present (E); more than the other converts, they also were connected to their religious family and community, and experienced "network influence" only within their parents' religious tradition (C). The strong connection to their parents and milieu also prevented structural availability (A3).

Type 1 converts generally showed relatively strong network influence (C) (only one of the converts reported actively searching the Jehovah's Witnesses out, and that was after initial contact through her brother; in other cases, network influence happened through a wife, future husband, or friends and, as highlighted above, subjects were also relatively strongly influenced by the official religious doctrine). Predisposing background factors (A1, A2 and B) (as described above) and unhappiness with these previous or current situations were found in all but one case (E), and all stories revealed structural availability (A3) that was sometimes due to crisis experiences such as family issues or moving to a new place.

Predisposing background experiences (A1, A2, B) and unhappiness with them (E) were most pronounced among types 2 and 3. More than half of the type 3 interviewees and half of type 2 interviewees also revealed short-term crisis events prior to the conversion (A2) and, related to it, a certain amount of structural availability (A3) (e.g., they had had problems/weak ties at home or in current relationships, came to an impasse in their lives, or had moved away from home), and again, in some of these cases, their long-term experiences contributed to their current problems.

Overall, for types 1, 2, and 3, the level of closeness of relationships with existing group members (and therefore also the influence) varied widely, from meeting proselytizing strangers to becoming married to a member of a religious group or being married to someone who converted or being influenced by family members. However, it is unlikely that the interviewees would have converted if there was no desire for it apart from the relation. In other words, there needed to be a fit between their biographical experiences (A and B), what the religious group had to offer (C and D) and their dissatisfaction with their situations or background experiences (E).

For all three types combined, there was no convert whose story did not reveal predisposing long- or short-term factors prior to meeting a representative of the new religion. On the other hand, all but one convert mentioned a connection to a member of an existing group (C), and in this case, the person reported a strong conversion experience while already being a member of a church. Active seekership before meeting a representative was observed only among four converts.

On the other hand, all of type 4 (Unitarians) and three of the individuals of type 5 (Baha'i) explained that they actively looked for like-minded people (F), reflexively evaluated their previous beliefs, and talked about "coming home" once they came in contact with their present group. This does not

mean that the existing social contacts, background experiences, and structural availability did not play a role, though. Most type 4 converts revealed some social influence in their apostasy; in some cases, the college environment or a sibling confronted them with different ideas. Subjects got involved in Unitarian Universalism or the Baha'i either through singles' groups or groups on a university campus (C) and/or while traveling, by accidentally stepping into a fellowship or actively searching them out (F), as was the case in Ms. Young's narrative. Prompting the search however, was not so much an early crisis, but recent changes in their lives, such as a conflicted marriage, a change of location or a period of depression (A2), which can be tied to structural availability (A3). Overall though, the interviews of all of type 4 and of four of the five converts of type 5 showed stronger factors indicating "life course agency" than what could be found among most converts of type 1, 2, and 3, such as actively searching for religious organizations, reading books, and about half of them visiting without any pre-existing contacts.

Let me now turn to the three case studies that are summarized in detail above. The connection to the mother of her boyfriend (who took her to church on the specific day she experienced her conversion) played a role in Mrs. Pfeiffer's conversion (C), but it is doubtful that she would have experienced a conversion had there not been a clear need on her part (E), due to her previous experiences and the current crisis she was in (A1, A2, B). At the time of her conversion, she had reached a low point in her life (A2, E), and one could argue that her financial problems and current problems with her boyfriend constitute a structural availability (A3). The relationship to the future mother-in-law (C) was not deep, and there is no indication that she played a role in Mrs. Pfeiffer's spiritual development after that event.

Mr. Taylor met adherents of various religious groups on the streets in New York (such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhism, and Hinduism) and became specifically interested in the Nation of Islam (C), but did not become a member of this group until after the Vietnam War (B) and the unhappiness and seeking it caused (E and F). For his second conversion, he also started out studying different religious scriptures, including the Qur'an, indicating active searching (F) based upon his childhood experiences of cultural (and familial) disorientation (B, A), which took on a different light when he met the imam of the American Muslim Mission (C). In both cases, biographical problems coexisted with the influence of representatives of the group.

Active seekership (F), at least on the surface, was more pronounced in Ms. Young's narrative than in the other two stories. First of all, she distanced herself from her earlier faith and then, while staying in Bermuda, actively searched for a religious community to belong to, finding the Baha'i in the phone book. She wanted to be part of a religious group that fit her worldview (F) and gave her an answer for her biographical experiences of cultural isolation and problems in her family of origin (B and A1), but she also felt depressed due to an unhappy marriage and loneliness at a new place at the time (A2, A3).

One could now make the argument that more recent life changes (A2) can, in some cases, be brought on by the subjects themselves (for an excellent treatment of this issue regarding Venezuelan Evangelicalism, see Smilde 2005; Smilde 2007:178–83), and that these changes then sometimes lead to structural availability (A3). For example, in Ms. Young's story, the experience of a change in location and resulting loneliness can be traced back to her own initiative, since she wanted to leave Chicago and pursued the dream of moving somewhere else. The same could not be said about Mrs. Pfeiffer, whose narrative revealed that she got trapped in unhealthy and abusive relationships; something that her emotional problems contributed to. However, Smilde (2005:785–87) distinguishes between "structural and voluntaristic approaches to social action." In his study, converts to Evangelical Protestantism in Venezuela often played a role in getting connected to a network of evangelicals, but in only in a minority of cases did this happen with the intent of being exposed to network effects which contributed to the conversion. Using the concept of "life course agency," we therefore would need to distinguish between actions people consciously choose and those they do not. Thus, one also needs to differentiate between different levels of reflexivity, of "knowing one's own motives." Ms. Young's leaving to San Diego, on the surface, seems to be a clear case of "life course agency," but once we realize that it had to do with her unresolved conflicts and that the consequences of her actions were not necessarily intended, we are left asking to what extent her decisions involve more agency than those of Mr. Taylor, for example. Thus, this relates back to the tension between a person's biographical reconstruction and subjective theory of her life (b, c) and her actual life course trajectory (d), a distinction that should also be included in any model.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research provides an examination of factors that could eventually be developed into a full-fledged model of conversion, or could be connected to the existing models, such as Rambo's (1993). One should also add more dimensions to it, such as gender or cultural background (Gooren 2007). The main conclusion of this article is that religious content matters. It matters on several levels (e.g., on the level of religious emotions, the influence of religious doctrine on narrative), as Popp-Baier (2001) has pointed out; but, while considering these factors, my main findings relate to the relationship between religious content and a person's biographical trajectory (one's familial, religious, cultural background, and the effects of the conversion), since the types are, to a certain extent, associated with specific religious groups.

One final observation regarding religious content: Many academics, particularly in the social sciences, but also in religious studies, assume that religions' commonalities (key concepts, relationship to the sacred, and norms)

override their differences. In the same vein, religious phenomena are often explained by other variables, such as socio-economic background or education (Gooren 2007:348, Smith 2007). I contend that by ignoring the role of religious beliefs in conversion, scholars are in danger of assuming that conversion experiences to various religious groups are similarly motivated, since religious content itself would have nothing to do with these experiences (other than becoming passively absorbed into one's narrative, as correctly highlighted by constructivist researchers).

The interviews I conducted clearly reveal the appeal of different religions in this sample, not just on the telling of one's story, but as they relate to one's life course. In this way, the results of this study suggest that specific background factors (push) and religious content (pull) matter in conversion trajectories to various religious groups, that there is often a connection between the two. The findings also indicated that structural conditions, life course agency, and the degree of one's reflexivity in the process are important aspects of conversions, and that their relative importance might differ among converts to the various religious groups.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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