

# Current Research in Psychology and Behavioral Science (CRPBS)

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2022

## Article Information

Received date : 29 December, 2021

Published date: 18 January, 2022

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## Key Words

Conversion; Identity; Counselling

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# Perception of Identity and Religious Conversion

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## Abstract

Counseling psychology is a practice that focuses on how people generally function both personally and in their relationships. It also addresses the emotional, social, work, and physical health concerns people might have. For that reason, counseling psychologists help people with physical, emotional and mental health issues helping to improve their sense of well-being, relieve feelings of distress and resolve crises. This paper will focus on environment or situational influence of religious conversion into the self-identity of the convert and what kind of skills are needed for the counselor to guide this kind of clients when facing any kind of challenge. The meaning of conversion will be explained, then a relation with self-identity will be described later on how counselors could approach this kind of people will be recommended.

## Introduction

There are different researches about religious conversion, most of them explain or describe the stages or theories about it. For example, Baer [1] mention that conversion is a constant change is presented as a gradual process or a sudden and total change of belief. Also, is considered as a process that varies in speed, motivations, context and directions including deconversion (Paloutzian, 2014). Going through the researches it was found that conversion plays a role into the self-identity of the convert, it is interdisciplinary and creates many perspectives, Rambo (1993) defines conversion as a process of change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations whereas others characterize it as a radical change in one's identity, meaning, and life or in one's root reality. However, going through researches is also found that, "Contemporary scholars define religious conversion as a process involving a series of events rather than a stand-alone experience. From early on, scholars have resisted attempts to standardize the definition of conversion" (Jackson 1908). With this it is understood that conversion is a change that does not end and takes place in different dynamics or relations like, people, ideas, experiences, events this means that the study of conversion must take into account not only the personal dimension, but also the social, cultural, and religious dynamics in which a person is embedded [3]. On the other hand, conversion is a process of self-discovering, adaptation and acceptance. Joshua Iyadurai [4] in his article mentions that conversion is a major change of situation in one's life that creates an identity crisis where the convert forms a new identity based on one's conversion experience both identity experience and conversion experience have behavioral affect. Therefore, a new identity is formed based on a newfound relationship with God and the faith community. This means that the context of community is vital in conversion as a social dimension because it process plays a significant role in constructing a new identity. In this statement it is understood that while the person is dealing to adapt and discover himself there is a crash between identities, that the convert might not be able to see and understand. This paper will try to find and see the relation between conversion and how the identity could be perceiving and developed. Most of the researches describe and explain the meaning of conversion and mentions how identity is formed but it does not narrate how could it be perceived and understood by the convert himself, what kind of distress can this issue create.

## Conversion

The studies about religious conversion are increasing day by day most of them are focus on the stages of conversion or try to understand what make a person take such a decision for example in the Handbook of Religious Conversion the chapter of History and Religious Conversion Baer [1] wrote and describe the process of conversion to Christianity and Islam into four categories. He analyzed the conversion from the past and modern times and applied to term of conversion into the transformation of space concluding that over the time changes in individuals or groups, religious beliefs and practices, occur through processes of acculturation, adhesion or hybridity, syncretism, and transformation. Also, he mentioned that the four processes are illustrated by a particular group of Jewish converts to Islam and their descendants in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. On the other hand, Rambo, et al. [2] in their article Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation gives an overview of the four major psychological approaches used in the study of religious change. They explain the heuristic stage model of conversion consisting of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences which helps as a framework for integrating the research of these four approaches, providing a fuller understanding of the multidimensional processes involved in conversion. Additionally, in this study with the collaboration of China looked forward to explore important issues that emerge trying to understand conversion.

Based on those resources it can be understood that the theories of conversion have different stages that impact the search of identity from the outsider but not from the convert himself also the place of the researches are in Asia or Europe. Like it is showed in study made by Nieuwkerk [4] where describes the theoretical approach in which conversion is understood as a complex contextual experience and long-term process that involves the construction of identities, discourses, and a pious self. This study was based on the growing number of studies on conversion to Islam, Internet narratives, and fieldwork among Dutch female converts. At the end discussing the stages of conversion to comprehend it as a meaningful process she also mentions that it is important to understand on mix with it theories on identity which promote to do more research on perception of identity in a new context. Moreover, as mentioned before religious conversion is the process by which a person commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and shifts away from previously held religious beliefs (Stark and Finke 2000). There are multiple conceptualizations and definitions of religious conversion. In general, conversion as a process involving a series of events rather than a stand-alone experience [5]. Based on this statement the context or living in a new environment and the social interaction does have an impact and it will be very interesting to understand how a new environment creates or affect the perception of a foreign Muslim convert.



## Identity

Looking at the literature on identity where identity is a process that changes over the time as a result of social interactions. The most well known theory on the topic is Erikson's influential theory of psychosocial development where he describes that identity is developed from a lifetime of choices and opportunities that are afforded throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. On the other side, the self is found and it refers to an organized configuration of perceptions of who one is. Also, there is self-concept which is defined as an "overall vision (as an integrated, coherent, and stable individuality) transcending the experiential and event content of self-awareness" [6]. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that identity is a mix of representations and feelings, it is not just a vision of the cognitive system like the self-concept. To understand better, it should be known that the self is a mental activity that involves many phases and takes place over time, it is adding, deleting, and modifying an initial concept. For that reason, the self or identity is always updating itself. Valverde, Sovet and Lubart [6], in the chapter Self-Construction and Creative "Life Design" mention that the self is both individual and collective, personal and social. It expresses membership in communities and is an immediate part of consciousness, "I am I." This means that there is a reflection, where the person tries to understand, to seek internal coherence, consistency, and completeness of existence. Zaidi, et al. [7] said that: "Identity development is a flexible, spiraling process that occurs over the lifespan through interactions between contexts and individual experience. As self-concepts differ based on participation and identification with varied groups, it is critical to look at the multiplicity of identities to which one assigns and how these interact within social spaces that come with their own sets of norms and challenges. This may be particularly relevant for Muslims living in non-Muslim contexts as their religious identity is not supported within the conventional culture. An Islamic identity may be created in opposition to mainstream cultural norms".

Based on the authors which highlight that the space where a person in this case a convert is living and interacting creates an identity to be able to adapt to the culture norms the self-concept adaptation depends on the group which he interacts. While adapting the convert is creating or shifting from one to another identity, later one which one is the main one might be lost maybe because of lack of support or understanding. Researchers tend to explain or focus on variety of perspectives within social and developmental psychology. Although religion is one factor that provides a sense of belonging and purpose to many people, the development of a religious identity has not been explored as much as other social identities. Thoits [8] in the chapter Self, Identity, Stress, and Mental Health mentions: "The self" is that aspect of the person that has experiences, reflects on experiences, and acts upon self-understandings derived from experiences. The self is generally perceived as unified, singular, and whole. However, the self is also aware of and can behave in terms of its "social selves," also called "identities," "self-concepts," or "self-conceptions." These are more specific understandings of oneself and one's experiences in the world. As a conclusion the self is unified as a whole and identity being part of the self depends on the context and relations that deals with. The identity affects the self, giving it a meaning a direction, a behavior but at the end there is just one self.

## Conversion and Identity

Based on researches it is found that conversion and identity go through stages. That both of them are affected by different context and situations. The human being is trying to define himself and the identity of conversion could be one answer. One of the purposes of the religious conversion is to exalt humans toward a spiritual order of a divine source. Religious conversion as a reaction to self-doubt and insecurity that involves answering unresolved questions about one's identity, needs, and commitments [9]. For that reason, it could be seen that a spiritual awakening is actually the development of an identity. Moreover, human being is not just a physical being but also shaped by relationships. Downton (1980) explains that spiritual conversion and its commitment are very slow in their development. Conversion does appear to be a sudden change of awareness which can transform a person's identity and perception of reality. In the article by Valverde, Sovet and Lubart it is mentioned that identity construction, is a long-term process that involves several sub-processes: individuation or differentiation, identification, attribution, narcissistic valuation, conservation and process of realization [6]. In the construction of the self-identity is a multidimensional system, as suggested by Bardou and Oubrayrie-roussel (2014), structured around several dimensions: continuity, consistency (unity), valuation (self-assessment, self-esteem), internal differentiation (feeling of diversity), external differentiation (desire for autonomy), assertiveness, originality (uniqueness), and resilience (coping). Looking from the side of conversion Rambo and Bauman [2] in their article Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation gives an overview of the four major psychological approaches used in the study of religious change. They explain the heuristic stage model of conversion consisting of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences providing a fuller

understanding of the multidimensional processes involved in conversion. In conclusion with both of them, it seems that the person assimilates new experiences, by integrating them into an already reliable view of reality and by avoiding experiences which threaten to disrupt the sense he has made of the world in that way the new identity is created and the self is satisfied.

## Discussion

In the end it can be concluded that conversion is a route to self-discovery and self-formation conversion is a type of identity that gives the answer of who I am. Identity is a search for self-definition that builds on the continuity of self-consciousness despite the changes that occur constantly. In this process of looking the self can produce a distress to the person that sometimes is not able to identify. It can create reactions in converts ranging from passive acquiescence to conflictual unpredictability to personal dysfunction [9]. In this situation the counselor has to be aware that while at times clients will perceive a conflict between their personal needs and religious expectations, they will justify this tension as an ineluctable part of one's belief system. The new identity that they are trying to get in to and to understand. For instance, counselors are most effective when they try to illustrate how religion, the new identity can satisfy personal needs and how this identity could be the self that the client was looking for. The conversion may be a life changing decision that will always affect the main self and how to respond to new challenges, it will influence their perspectives. Now, the personal project is an "intellectual entity, a form of representation that integrates the current state of what the individual knows about himself and what he knows about the outside world" [6].

## Conclusion

In general, it can be concluding, that during the conversion there are shifts or identities the convert tries to adapt to the new environment, trying to apply the new beliefs, the new behaviors into his life and into his self is going through different identities [10-12]. The counselor can help to guide the new journey but the new main question is does this religious conversion, this religious identity will be the final and complete self that the person has been always looking for? Or finally the perception of his identity fulfills their perception of his self [13-15].

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