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Gender, Religiosity, and the Telling of Christian Conversion Narratives

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Abstract

Conversion is one important element of religion, the ways in which people shift from one religion (or none) to another, or deepen their commitment within a religion. This study explores the way Christian conversion narratives are told by college students. It considers whether factors such as gender, age, religious denomination, time passed since conversion, and measures of religiosity and orthodoxy influence conversion testimonies. Fifty-nine subjects gave in-depth interviews and completed several surveys, and research was gathered and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Deborah Tannen's *genderlect styles theory* and a *social constructivist perspective* on Christianity's overarching story line are put forth to interpret the findings.

KEYWORDS: gender, conversion, communication

Introduction

Academic interest in religion, including specific focus on Christianity, is increasing. Conversion is one important element of religion, the ways in which people shift from one religion (or none) to another, or deepen their commitment within a religion. This article developed out of a realization that literature about gender, age, denomination, measures of religiosity and orthodoxy, and the process of narrating one's conversion was largely missing, though much has been written about conversion overall. This study encompasses interviews from students representing various Christian colleges throughout the United States, and focuses on how factors such as gender, age, time passed since conversion, and religious denomination affect the telling of one's Christian conversion narrative. Besides assessing the telling of the conversion testimony

along these various dimensions, a religious commitment scale and a Christian orthodoxy scale were added.

After defining conversion, the literature on the social construction of conversion narratives, including the role of the rhetoric of the Christian story on conversion testimonies, as well as the role of genderlects in creating possibly gendered narratives will be reviewed. A final section discusses the findings and their implications in light of the theories set forth above.

Religious Conversion

Conversion, most generally, is conceptualized as a person's radical transformation in the religious realm (Snow & Machalek, 1984). These transformations include, at minimum, a different perception of reality, of worldview and of self. Conversion also leads to a "biographical reconstruction," what converts often call a testimony, and scholars generally call a conversion narrative (e.g. Snow & Machalek, 1983, pp. 266-268; Snow & Machalek, 1984). Conversion is commonly understood as a shift from one or no religious group to another religious group, but many scholars also include a strengthening of one's beliefs within one religion, or the move from no particular religious beliefs to an adherence to the beliefs of a specific group (Snow & Machalek, 1984, p. 171). In this study, conversion testimonies include stories about the experience of changes and shifts in religious experience toward greater commitment to Christianity. Some subjects shift to Christianity from no religion, but most strengthen a prior commitment to Christianity. Conversion testimonies are common among evangelicals, the Christian subculture of the various colleges campuses on which interviews were conducted. These testimonies represent accounts of how a person arrived at their current religious state.

Conversion Narratives as Social/Cultural Constructions

Research in the area of religious conversion has been conducted from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including sociological, psychological, and anthropological perspectives (e.g. Bainbridge, 1992; Buckser & Glazier, 2003; Dumanig, David & Dealwis, 2011; Hefner, 1993; Jindra, 2011; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Manglos, 2010; Smilde, 2007; Robbins, 2007). Research specifically on Christian conversion also exists (e.g. Gillespie, 1979; Hanks, 2010; Tomlinson, 2009). For our purposes, it is important to understand a conversion narrative not primarily as an objective telling of what happened, but as a social or cultural construction. Whereas prior to the linguistic turn, conversion narratives were treated mostly as accurate descriptions of what converts claimed to have experienced, since then the *social constructivist view of conversion* has become more and more important in this field (Popp-Baier, 1993). Several authors were/are instrumental in pushing this understanding of conversion to the forefront of the research scene (Beckford, 1978; Snow & Machalek, 1984, 1983; Stromberg, 1993; Ulmer, 1988).

A major focus in the study of conversion narratives, across religions, then, is on basic structure of narratives, highlighting a common structure that distinguishes time before and after conversion, the actual conversion experience, and its (generally positive) effects (Ulmer, 1988). Also important is the influence of a group's doctrine or belief system on conversion narratives (Beckford, 1978). In this view, the focus is on the "structure and logic of the narrative" (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999, pp. 489-490), and not on what really happened prior to conversion. "At some level, then, it is further assumed that all Christian conversion narratives will tap into the meta-narrative structure and will appear more similar than different regardless of individual differences that may exist between the converted" (Smith, 2001, cited in Knight, Woods & Jindra, 2005, p. 115). This approach could also show connections to work in cultural sociology, such as Ann Swidler's (1986) discussion of culture as a "toolkit," in the sense that culture provides and shapes "a repertoire of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action" (p. 273). It would also make sense to assume that orthodoxy and the degree of religiosity would strengthen the power of the overarching Christian narrative.

Conversion Testimonies as Gendered Testimonies

Given claims that sociologists of religion have paid insufficient attention to gender issues (Woodhead, 2007), this study seeks to add to the burgeoning literature on gendered conversion narratives. It is rare for a study to specifically focus on gendered processes in conversion (for commentary on this see Davidman & Greil, 1993; Gooren, 2007). Greil and Davidman (1993) argue that "few conversion studies pay attention to the question of whether and how gender influences the conversion experience. By ignoring gender, these studies implicitly assume that it is not a significant factor in the analysis of the process of conversion" (p. 84).

Fortunately, there are notable exceptions: Davidman (1991, 1990) and Davidman & Greil (1993) analyzed gendered processes in conversions to Judaism. While Davidman (1991, 1990) compares female converts to two different synagogues, Davidman & Greil (1993) research differences between men and women in terms of the processes by which they converted, reporting that women mentioned how friendships and contacts got them involved, whereas men more often talked about active seekership. Women's reports about their conversions focused on gender roles and family, and men's on work and ethical issues. A few studies focus on gendered communication and religion or conversion. Lehman (1993) asked men and women clergy to rank themselves along a series of dimensions that were expected to yield gender differences, such as "willingness to use coercive power, vs. "striving to empower congregations," a desire for "formal authority," for "rational structure," and general interpersonal style. He concluded that gender differences existed, but only in certain circumstances, and that race and ethnicity as well as the position in the hierarchy also played a role. For example, some sex differences showed up among white clergy, but not among minority clergy or among whites whose seminary training was after

1970, and so on. The author traces the last finding back to “the introduction of feminist concerns” into seminaries (Lehman, 1993, p. 5). Brereton (1991) analyzed gender differences in Protestant conversion narratives from nineteenth and twentieth century literary sources. These narratives shared a common structure, but the women talked more about their problems and the men generally highlighted the facts of their conversion (Brereton, 1991, p. 38).

Tannen’s Genderlect Style Theory

Research finds variations between men and women in the way they communicate overall, and more specifically, in the way they narrate stories (e.g. Canary, 1997; Johnstone, 1990, 1993; Tannen, 1990, 1994a, 1994b). One of the most important theorists on gender and communication is Deborah Tannen (1994a, 1994b, 1990). In *You Just Don’t Understand*, Tannen (1990) analyzes differences regarding status and talk in storytelling. Men are more likely to tell stories in ways that make them appear competent; women, on the other hand, often use communicative patterns that portray themselves as “foolish” (Tannen, 1990, p. 177). Women more often say “thank-you” and “I’m sorry,” whereas men engage less in these behaviors, which reinforces women’s lower social status. Men also receive attention from an audience more easily because they are perceived as dominant in demanding audience attention (Tannen, 1990, p. 136). Whereas women see themselves as interdependent with others and use “a language of connection and intimacy,” men focus more on defending their independence (Tannen, 1990, p. 42). Additionally, men will attempt to “report” talk and women “rapport” talk (Tannen, 1990, pp. 74-75). When engaging in “rapport talk” (or “relational communication” [Metts 1995]) one tries to connect with one’s conversation partner (Tannen, 1990, pp. 74-75). In contrast, “report talk” is much less personal, more like speaking in public. The speaker’s goal is to increase his/her self worth and to have others listen to him/her (Tannen, 1990, p. 77). Again, one can also call this form of speaking “rhetorical” motivation/intention (Metts, 1995). Applying Tannen’s theory of “report versus relational talk” to our study, the researchers hypothesize that conversion narratives from men might intend to gain status and/or establish a distance to the interviewer, whereas women might focus more on establishing relationship in the course of the interview (for a similar overview, see also Knight, Woods & Jindra, 2005, pp. 116-117).

These profound differences in communication styles between women and men ground the *genderlect style theory*, Tannen’s (1990) comparison of communication between men and women to communication between people from different cultures. In keeping with this theory, it is possible that, even given an over-arching meta-narrative that structures Christian conversion testimonies, gender differences still may shape how men and women narrate their conversion experiences. A study by Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005) involved 40 structured interviews with 20 male and 20 female undergraduate students at a small, private liberal arts Christian university in the Midwestern United States. Gender differences were found in conversion narratives with respect

to metaphor, characterization of self, and central character. Women were more likely than men to describe their conversions using peaceful metaphors, to highlight their own mistakes and problems prior to conversion, and to emphasize the roles of other people who guided them through the process of conversion. Men were more likely than women to choose exciting metaphors for conversion, and to describe themselves as clever or skillful in discovering God or Christianity, and to focus on the self as the main character in the story. The sample was limited, of course, by age and location. The present study is broader in scope, method and sample than the one by Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

Question 1: Is there a relationship between gender and the way Christian conversion narratives are told, when looking at college students from various Christian colleges and universities?

Question 2: Do other factors such as age, denomination, race/ethnicity, time passed since conversion, and measures of religiosity and orthodoxy influence the way a Christian conversion testimony is told?

Methods

Sample

We used a non-probability sampling procedure in order to select subjects. Faculty at a variety of Christian colleges and universities solicited participation of students who identified themselves as Christians and were willing to share their faith testimonies. Interviews were conducted by some of the authors as well as trained research assistants. Interviews were conducted at various sites (offices, dorm rooms, dining halls) and were audio-recorded. Subjects were not compensated, and participation was not linked to academic rewards such as grades or course requirements.

Fifty-nine students were interviewed (though surveys were filled out by 60 students; one interview was missing) on six Christian college campuses, some of which belonged to the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). An additional site was a semester program for CCCU students in Washington, D.C. Subjects ranged in ages from 18 to 39, though most were younger than 24 years old. Their academic standing included 12 freshmen, 10 sophomores, 19 juniors, and 18 seniors. The sample consisted mostly of Caucasians, but also one African American and three Hispanics. Subjects came from various Christian traditions including

Anglican, Baptist, Christian Missionary Alliance, Episcopalian, Evangelical Free, Mennonite, Methodist, Non-denominational, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and Reformed.

Qualitative Instrument and Coding

Instrument.

The structured interview guide used in the preliminary study (Knight, Woods & Jindra, 2005) was used to conduct the interviews in this study. Interviewers began by asking the question "Please tell me the story of your Christian experience," with follow-up questions geared towards specific categories described above, such as, "What would you compare this experience to?," "Did someone help you through this conversion experience?," and "Has your view of self changed as a consequence of the experience?" These interviews were designed to be in-depth, that is, they are constructed to invite detailed answers (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000, p. 122). Though this was not realized in all cases, this method gave interviewees a chance to share the depth and breadth of their Christian experience.

Coding.

All the interviews were transcribed. Afterwards, content analysis was conducted on all the interviews, with the intent of identifying possible gender differences in terms of the categories listed below. Also, content analysis identified additional categories or types of differences along with key themes and patterns that might emerge that were not suggested by other literature. The interview guide was used in the coding process. The researchers used a coding sheet based on the interview guide in the analysis of each interview, which was also used in Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005) (see Appendix). Each transcript was coded for: (1) specific language or metaphors used by each interviewee, (2) the portrayal of self, (3) the central character, (4) whether the conversion narrative had rhetorical or relational motivations, (5) whether the conversion was told as a process or crisis, and (6) order of the narrative.

To increase reliability, two independent coders were trained by the project coordinators to examine the transcripts according to the coding sheet. This was done in two consecutive sessions. Both coders coded all of the interviews with the exception of a few interviews per coder (one interview for coder 1, 5 interviews for coder 2). Afterward, the two independent coders' results were compared with each other. The overall percentage of agreement was 70%, demonstrating a fair level of agreement between the two coders. Disagreements among the coders were resolved by the first author based on her interpretation of the data.

Quantitative Scales and Coding

Demographic Variables.

The survey included basic demographic variables such as gender, age, year in college, denomination, race/ethnicity, and time passed since conversion.

Religious Measures We included Worthington et al.'s (2003) *Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10)*. Developed in the course of various studies with a range of populations of different religious backgrounds, this scale has high internal consistency, reliability, and validity scores. It consists of ten statements measuring the importance of religion to a person. Subjects respond to statements such as, "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life," and "I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith" on a Likert Scale from 1-5.

Also included was the *Christian Orthodoxy Scale* (Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982). It consists of 24 questions that measure the strength and importance of the Christian faith to the subject, and is measured on a Likert scale from -3 to +3.

Qualitative Coding.

In measuring the variable gender, a dichotomous variable, a 1 was given for male, and a 2 for female. The scores for the remaining variables were measured as a continuous variable: Religious Commitment Inventory and Christian Orthodoxy Scale.

Results

Qualitative Results

Results from the interviews were surprising. In contrast to Knight, Woods & Jindra's (2005) study that showed gender differences in three of the six coding categories, these data from a broader sample revealed no statistically significant gender differences. In some categories, gender differences are apparent, but did not reach the level of statistical significance. However, in the data, in almost all the categories, some ways of telling the conversion story were dominant, and this, we contend, indicates the power of the overarching Christian narrative.

Category 1: Metaphor
TABLE 1: Metaphor

		Metaphor				Total
		Adventu- rous	Comforting/ Peaceful	Journey	Other	
Gender	Male	5	8	9	5	27
	Female	5	7	12	4	28
Total		10	15	21	10	56

Men and women both used a variety of metaphors to describe their conversion experiences, including both adventurous and comforting metaphors. Five men chose adventurous metaphors to describe their conversion experiences including “getting hit by a semi-truck,” “running a race,” going on “a roller coaster,” “jumping into a cold river,” and “the great Chicago fire.” Five women used adventurous metaphors such as “a roller coaster,” and “scoring a goal in soccer.” Interestingly, one woman who compared her experience to a roller coaster also said “a kiddy ride, not the big thing,” in some ways diminishing the adventure dimension. Similarly, eight men and seven women used comforting metaphors such as “the perfect relationship” (male), “finding water in the desert” (female), “getting out of jail” (female), “receiving an undeserved gift” (male), and a “prodigal son/father relationship” (male).

The total number of adventurous and comforting metaphors, however, differed; subjects used more comforting/peaceful metaphors than adventurous ones overall. A relatively high number of students also compared their conversion experiences to a journey, a gender blind metaphor. In some cases, choice of metaphor related to description of self (category 2), in that some subjects chose metaphors that illustrated “cleverness” or, on the other hand, “weaknesses.” For example, when asked what he would compare his faith journey to, a male said: “Same as I always am, rational and logical ...” In contrast, a female compared her experience to “A turtle crossing the road, landing in the gutter,” emphasizing weakness and problems. There was no male student who emphasized problems or weakness in his chosen metaphor.

Gender differences were present in how subjects chose metaphors to describe their conversion experiences, but these differences did not rise to the level of statistical significance.

Category 2: Description of Self
TABLE 2: Description of Self

		Description of Self			Total
		Clever	Foolish	Both	
Gender	Male	12	12	5	29
	Female	10	9	11	30
Total		22	21	16	59

In this category, statistically significant gender differences in how men and women describe themselves in the course of telling their conversion story do not appear. In their testimonies, nine out of 30 women and 12 out of 29 men talked about mistakes, problems, and weaknesses, while an emphasis on success and accomplishments could be seen in the conversion testimonies of 12 out of 29 men and in 10 out of 30 women. Also, five men and 11 women described themselves as both “foolish” and clever at various points throughout the story.

Hanna, 21, describes herself as clever. Her mother is a professor at the university she attends, and she highlights the intellectual heritage of the Anglican tradition, of which she is part. She is talking about the life choices her two older siblings (who were not Christians) had made:

Yes, an adopted sister. She's older. And I have a brother, who's biological and he's older as well—3 years older, and Claudia is like way older. She was the first child and she was adopted when she was about 12 years old, after my parents were married for about two years. I don't know where my sister stands on her faith, but I wouldn't say she's an extremely ... She's made a lot of life choices and has had a lot of kind of traumatic things happen to her to kind of demonstrate that her Christianity is not what I would consider like a really strong Christianity. And my brother is not a believer and actually kind of announced his atheism his senior year in high school. I was a freshman then and that experience has sort of been influential in me to decide to pursue Christianity because my brother and sister, neither of them are strong Christians and their lives didn't seem to be taking productive paths, not necessarily productive but really satisfying or joyful or meaningful paths, and so I felt like the alternative must be the preferential option.

On the other hand, many men and women described themselves as “foolish” instead of clever, highlighting problems and trials in their journeys and so on. For example, Katie, 22, starts out her interview with the following words:

OK. I was brought up in a Christian home. My parents read the Bible once a day, very strong in faith. We attended church, for the most part, regularly, so I had that type of background. I had the Sunday School, teaching, knew who the characters of the Bible were, who Jesus was, but it wasn't

ever personal to use. It was kind of, this is what we believe for no reason. And then see people in they are encouraging: one was my Aunt Maggie, who was really strong in her faith and asked about us every day. Because of that, I remember once when I was younger, when I get older ...but no one's like me now, so or like her now, so "When I get older I'd like to be like her." A few months before I ended up going to a Christian conference, and there were a few other friends that I really saw a difference in their life and how they were living, like a Christian life, and there I heard the Gospel preached for the first time, even though I was attending the church for the very first time I heard the Gospel and really understood that I could have a relationship with Christ and that I really understood what the Trinity was. I don't know where I was in Sunday School, daydreaming, but.

Here, she highlights that she never understood the Gospel until she took part in a Christian conference with friends, at which point she highlights her own cleverness also.

The next quote illustrates a description of self as "foolish" by a male college student, Jack, 21, in which he highlights personal problems and issues he struggled with:

Yeah. Actually for three years, I would say, since I was a freshman or sophomore in high school, my mom and dad were having some real severe marital problems. You know, I'd go home at night. You hate going to school but then you kind of hate going home because every other day there would be these arguments. At times it was very intense and there's some times where the police got called to the house and things like that—not really physical but just verbal and things like that. That went on consistently for years, so that was part of what really kind of turned me to God as a solid place where I could go for strength, for help, and then at the end of my junior year, I was invited to the prom by this girl and I was kind of insecure about the way that I looked, and all that stuff, and I went to the prom with her, and then I was kind of interested in dating her more. She kind of rejected me so I was like, aahh, man.

This similarity between men and women in their descriptions of themselves diverged from Knight, Woods & Jindra's (2005) findings, in which men were significantly more likely to describe themselves as clever than women, who were more likely to emphasize problems and weaknesses throughout the course of their lives. It also diverges from Tannen's genderlects style theory that describes women as using deferential speech to establish rapport, and men as using dominant speech to establish status.

Overall, a description of oneself as foolish vs. clever was used to an almost equal extent, thus also not indicating a specific influence of the overarching Christian narrative.

Category 3: Central Character

TABLE 3: Central Character

		Central Character			Total
		Self	Other	Both	
Gender	Male	4	18	7	29
	Female	2	18	10	30
Total		6	36	17	59

There were no statistically significant gender differences in terms of describing oneself or others as central characters in one's story. However, the trend was in the expected direction, with more men than women reporting the self as the central character (though, of course, the difference was small). In terms of gender, four men concentrated solely on themselves as the central character, whereas 18 focused on others (such as family, friends, and youth group leaders), and seven described both. Only two women focused exclusively on themselves, 18 highlighted someone other than themselves as the central character in their testimonies, and ten described both themselves and others as central characters. This finding also contrasts with Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005), conducted on one evangelical Christian campus, where 15 men (out of 20) highlighted themselves and the majority of the women (11 out of 20) concentrated on someone else as central character.

Marc, a freshman in college (self as central character), starts out his story with the following words:

As far back as I can remember, it was in 4th grade where things started changing and where it went from like a time, I don't remember the exact period where my mind made that little light-switch change and changed lifestyles, but I remember one day I was doing all bad stuff in 4th grade and then one day I decided to start confessing everything, especially towards my parents and then shortly after that I was taken to our church in Clare, Michigan (northern Michigan) and I asked the pastor if I could be baptized. So I was baptized and whatnot, and I think that was a starter, so it's like I grew up in a Christian home. Then after that another ... period where there was swinging back and forth (I don't know the word; back-falling or back stepping or something like that), but I've seen it recently go up in Christian activity and like standing firm, especially my senior year of high school, probably thinking about the future and choosing which way to go that way, so.

On the other hand, Caleb, 21, highlights others as central characters in his interview, talking about a good friend who invited him to youth group, and about the social nature of the

youth group, which attracted him initially. Slowly, though, he got interested in their faith and some older students and a pastor served as role models.

Well, the first part of my conversion I didn't do anything. I simply sat back at youth group and let people tell me or preach to me whatever they wanted to. There was no feeding of myself. There was no, 'I need to figure this out.' It was just kind of, 'tell me whatever you want' and I didn't really have any sort of independence in my own, in what I learned about Christianity, what I learned about my conversion. I just kind of, at least for the first 6 or 7 months, just kind of sat back and let people—not decide for me—but tell me what they wanted to tell me. So I didn't seek knowledge necessarily—for a while at least. (...)

Carol, 19, describes others such as Sunday school teachers, her grandmother and her mother as important characters in her faith journey and answers the question about her own role in her conversion experience with the following words:

Um, probably since I was only a kid, not very much. I don't really remember much about my childhood before that point I don't think; I mean maybe little bits and pieces, but mainly what I remember about, especially going to church, was afterwards, got up into elementary school, so I probably didn't play a big role, but ...

On the other hand, Suzy, 20, describes herself as central character. This is how she talks about her role in her experience:

And, just since I have been to college, about two years ago now, I have just started to grow back into my stronger faith. And, it's different this time because it's what I have discovered myself and not anything that I have been taught and it's definitely a different experience. (...) I mean, cause this is something I have gone and done for myself and no one has taught me, so its my own faith (quote/unquote) and not what anyone else believes, just what I believe now.

Overall, more students focused on others as central characters than on self. This is of interest in light of the overarching Christian narrative, with a central focus on Christ and his sacrifice for us, and the view of conversion not as an achievement, but as a gift.

Category 4: Relational vs. Rhetorical Motivation

TABLE 4: Relational vs. Rhetorical Motivation

		Motivation			Total
		Rhetorical	Relational	Both	
Gender	Male	23	3	3	29
	Female	21	6	3	30
Total		44	9	6	59

In the course of telling one's conversion narrative, one can find different motivations or intentions in interviewees. As in Tannen's (1990) "report" (rhetorical) and "rapport" (relational) talk categories (pp. 76-93), interviewees used a rhetorical or relational style when talking about their conversion experiences.

Most of the subjects, male or female (23 and 21, respectively) used a rhetorical style throughout the interview. This means that they stayed in charge of the conversation without trying to establish a connection with the person who conducted the interview. Only six women and three men attempted to establish a connection with the other person while they were sharing their testimony (were relational). When the interviewees were relational they used tags such as, "*Know what I am saying?*" (Jenny, 19).

Among the interviewees, women are more often relational than men, but the difference is not large (nor is it statistically significant). Again, the data reveal a clear preference for one way of telling the conversion story (the rhetorical way of telling it), but there are no significant gender differences.

Category 5: Conversion as Crisis or Process

TABLE 5: Conversion as Crisis or Process

		Conversion			Total
		Crisis	Process	Both Process and Crisis	
Gender	Male	3	19	7	29
	Female	4	24	2	30
Total		7	43	9	59

Regarding telling one's conversion as crisis or process, most participants described their conversion as a process. (A process conversion here is defined as an evolution of one's faith, repeated experiences that led to a final decision to accept Christ). As with the other categories, there did not appear to be any differences between the men and women in this category, but again, we find a clear pattern, with students reporting process conversions to a much higher degree.

A conversion narrative in which conversion was told as a process was found among 19 men and 24 women. Only three women and four men explained that their conversion was experienced as sudden, or a crisis. Seven men and two women said it was both, a process with various crises or sudden moments. For example, Steve, 19, describes his conversion as a process:

Um, I think that that's been a process, and I think it continues to be a process. So no, I don't think I've always felt that way and at sometimes more than others, but I think the longer I'm a Christian the more I purposely seek to know God, the more He can change me.

On the other hand, Christa, 20, was one of the few describing her conversion as a crisis:

I don't know. I think I would relate myself to Paul in the sense that...I guess it would make more sense if you knew me before, but I guess before I was a Christian, like I said I was angry and bitter and in my high school, if you didn't like me, it didn't matter. You would still respect me; most people did because they feared me, but you know, I was just B with the itch. (laugh) Yeah, and then I became a Christian, it was just I finally had, I was just consumed. I finally had to ... and I finally had someone I could trust who promised to not let me down and although it took me a while to trust that, like the fact that someone said that I could trust them and was capable of never letting me down, it was like I was just so consumed with that, that nothing else mattered. I just completely changed, and like my mom says she saw it in me, that I just like completely flipped the switch and all of a sudden went from telling her off all the time to completely forgive her, that I knew that.

Category 6: Order of Narrative

TABLE 6: Gender and Order of Narrative

		Order			Total
		Linear	Conse- quential	Thematic	
Gender	Male	13	9	7	29
	Female	18	4	8	30
Total		31	13	15	59

Subjects may talk about their faith journeys in a linear, consequential or thematic way. In this sample, most subjects (31 out of 59) told their story in a linear way, though a few less men than women did so. More men than women told their Christian journeys consequentially, meaning they shifted from topic to topic in a non-linear way. Finally, seven men and eight women told the story thematically, which means focusing on a specific theme while telling one conversion story. Overall again, though there is a small difference regarding gender and linear vs. consequential way of telling one's story, the differences are not statistically significant. The findings regarding this category also do not differ from an earlier study conducted by the researchers (Knight, Woods & Jindra, 2005).

As most subjects did, Jenny describes her faith journey in a linear way:

OK. I started going to church when I was in first grade. I was at that same church until I came to college. (...) Yes. And I also started a Christian in 2nd grade, so I've always been very used to the Christian environment. I was taught a lot about Jesus and everything when I was young, so I don't remember the exact time I became a Christian or accepted Jesus. I was in 7th grade, I went through getting baptized, starting to take communion, and all that kind of stuff, so it became like I had to think about it more seriously, like what was true and I guess like right after all that stuff happened, right after I realized that I did want to be a Christian and it wasn't just that I was growing in a Christian home. Shortly after that, I always include this story when I talk about my faith because it really affected it. My uncle died and he was my dad's youngest brother. In middle school and like you're praying for something and like I had four young cousins who had lost their dad and I had prayed for a long, long time that he wasn't going to die—because he needed a transplant. And I was, told myself, 100% positive that God was going to heal him. This was how it was going to be. I think I got really confused after he died because it was like, why would God do this to my family, you know. I started realizing that God has different ways than us.

In contrast, Hilde, 21, follows a consequential style of telling her conversion story, by jumping from topic to topic.

OK. Christian experience. Well, my dad's a pastor, a Mennonite pastor, and for as far as I can remember, I've been going to church and so. I was born in Arizona and we went to a small church there and I have good memories of that. It was a very rich like small church, so there were; I guess we probably met in a room about this size—like a classroom—but there were people packed in there. It was a Hispanic church because we're Hispanic. It was just very warm going to church. I remember that feeling even though I was under five years old, because at five we moved here to Pennsylvania for my mom's job and started going to another church. I guess for four years I was going to this church growing up as a kid, making friends and stuff, and figuring "Oh, there's a God," you know; growing up in the church it's taken for granted, but at nine I was at Camp Spruce

Lake at one of the firesides for kids. There was a woman who was talking about just how you can be sure you're getting into heaven and your name is in the book of life if you invite Jesus into your heart and you know that He's alive and He's living in you. I remember thinking, "Wow, like this isn't just something that I can just say, 'oh, yeah, there's God and there's Jesus.' This is something that I have step into and He's very real." I've felt that sort of, "if he's real and this story about Jesus Christ is true, then I want it." So I invited Jesus into my heart.

Overall the qualitative results show a lack of significant gender differences in how men and women tell their conversion testimonies and a dominance of one aspect of a category over another. Next we turn to the results of the quantitative part of the study.

Quantitative Results

Chi square analysis was performed assessing differences between gender and the descriptions of the conversion narratives. This test is appropriate given that both gender and the elements of the conversion narratives are grouping variables. The analysis however, as indicated above, yielded no significant results; that is, there is no evidence of gender differences in the way conversion narratives were told.

Krusal-Wallis tests, nonparametric alternative to one-way analysis of variances, were performed to assess differences in conversion narratives as a function of orthodoxy and religiosity. This test is appropriate given that the descriptions of the conversion narratives are grouping variables (e.g., motivation was coded as "rhetorical," "relational" or "both") while the orthodoxy and religiosity variables are interval level data. Nonparametric alternative is also indicated here due to the small sample size as the Kruskal-Wallis test does not assume a normal distribution. No significant correlation was found between the *orthodoxy measure* and any of the categories. The only significant correlation in relationship to the religiosity measure was *religiosity* being related to describing *conversion as a process or crisis* ($p < .06$) such that higher religiosity is associated with narratives describing conversion as a process ($M = 4.06$) rather than either a crisis ($M = 3.78$) or both a crisis and a process ($M=3.68$). No other significant correlations between age, denomination, time passed since conversion, and the way conversion narratives are told were found.

Discussion

Gender in Religious Conversion Testimonies

In sum, the qualitative results showed differences between men and women in narrating religious conversion that were meaningful in some respects, but not statistically significant. In the results presented here, in general, specific aspects of categories were dominant regardless of gender. These results differ from Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005) in the first three categories

(Metaphor, Central Character, and Description of Self), but not the last three (Order of Narrative, Conversion as Process or Crisis, Relational vs. Rhetorical Motivation). In their article, Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005) discuss the “narrative expectations placed on the story-teller by the Christian faith and the Christian subculture of the University from which participants were selected” (p. 126), and conclude that gender differences seem to override those expectations in the first three categories, but not the last.

One reason for the differences to be much smaller (and not statistically significant) in this study could be the breadth of the sample. Christian colleges and universities, though similar in some regards, vary with respect to gender ideals, expectations and roles among students. It is possible that the single university used as a research site in the above study was more conservative, reinforcing gender differences in campus culture in general, which was reflected in stronger gender differences.

Thus, we propose that gender should be seen as context-dependent, in process, as a life-long development, influenced by power structures, and not as a fixed personality characteristic either due to biological reasons or early parental socialization. The context-dependent nature of gender could relate to various Christian campuses in the sense that some foster traditional meanings of gender more than others (in these settings, ‘tradition’ is construed as male headship and female subordination). This is most likely related to the degree of liberal/conservative theology, to sub-cultural tendencies on each campus, and so on.

Overall, these findings support the notion that gender is influenced by context and changes over time. The literature shows that gender is a strong variable in religious expression, influencing communication in the interpersonal and public realms. It may be possible that gender is more of a factor in contexts such as preaching, church leadership, marriage, and child-rearing, all arenas in which conservative Christian theology promotes male leadership and female subordination. However, gender difference is minimized, theologically, with respect to conversion, as the spiritual power at play in conversion is said to influence men and women similarly. So there may be reasons why gender matters strongly in certain religious communicative settings, and less in others.

It may also be fruitful to think about gender as something that is created through these narratives instead of seeing the narratives as simply recording pre-existing gendered backgrounds and ideals. This also brings to mind Ann Swidler’s (1986) notion of culture as a “repertoire” of “strategies of action,” which people draw on and which they use to navigate their daily lives, or theories of gender performance (as portrayed, for example, in Judith Butler’s work) within specific settings (which can not be pursued within the limitations of this article).

The Role of the Overarching Christian Narrative

Smith (2001) describes a prototypical Christian conversion narrative that focuses on repentance, encouraging the speaker to highlight problems and shortcomings and a subsequent

turn towards God. The prototypical Christian conversion narrative is also linked to the Bible and its metanarrative (creation, fall, redemption), which encourages consistency across testimonies even regardless of the social location of the speaker. As the above shows, we found a trend toward this prototypical Christian conversion narrative, in the sense that in the results, specific aspects of categories were dominant regardless of gender.

First, subjects commonly described conversion most often as a journey, followed by using a comforting or peaceful metaphor. In the Bible, spiritual development as a journey and peace are concepts that are mentioned often, reinforcing their importance, and this might be reflected in how converts describe their faith experiences.

Second, most speakers described others or both others and self as central characters in their journey. A focus on others reinforces the metanarrative of sin and repentance--that the convert was once struggling and in need--and was rescued with the help of God and others.

Third, a similar number of students described themselves as either clever or "foolish." Biblically, there seems to be an inherent tension regarding these concepts. On the one hand, believers are called to see themselves as weak (e.g. see Paul's letters), and to highlight repentance in how they came to, or strengthened their faith (Smith, 2001, see also Knight, Woods & Jindra, 2005). On the other hand, precisely because of their faith, they can also say that they are strong and self-sufficient (which could be related to the description of "clever").

Fourth, in this article, both men and women were more likely to use rhetorical communication. This may be because it was an interview setting, and the speaker was not trying to establish a relationship with the interviewer that would last beyond the interview setting. It may also be because religious conversion interrelates with dogma and, for evangelical Christians, absolute truth. The nature of religious beliefs may produce a tendency for speakers to use rhetorical communication to reinforce the absolute nature of their beliefs. Religion may shape or override gender tendencies that are more prominent in settings such as the workplace, friendships, or family.

Fifth, conversion was much more often described as a process than as crisis. Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005, p. 128) describe the narrative structure of the Christian faith as being "modeled in the gospels," and here, coming to Christ is often described as a process. For example, the disciples, according to Wallis (1981, p. 188) drew near to Jesus, made a decision to give up their lives to him, with which they followed through, felt that they belonged to Jesus, and adjusted to him, as he also adjusted to them. Knight, Woods & Jindra (2005) also called for future research to investigate whether the time passed since conversion and denominational affiliation, or levels of religious commitment make a difference regarding this category. As mentioned above, in this article, denominational affiliation, time passed since conversion, or levels of orthodoxy did not play a role in this category, however (nor in any others). However, *religiosity* was related to describing conversion as a process or crisis such that higher religiosity is associated with narratives describing conversion *as a process* rather than either a crisis or both a crisis and a

process. We think that degree of religiosity could be related to a higher degree of stability in religious families, which could influence how a conversion is told and possibly how it is experienced.

Finally, linear styles of telling the conversion were predominantly used. Again, here, the specific interview setting and the rules that structure narratives in general or conversion testimonies in general probably apply. For example, with regard to conversion narratives overall, Ulmer (1988) highlights a phase in which problems are mentioned, a turning point, and the subsequent resolving of one's problems. Smith (2001) does so regarding Christian conversion. This structure could override any possible gender or other individual differences (for a similar point, see also Knight, Woods & Jindra, 2005).

In conclusion, in contrast to other, earlier studies, this research does not indicate significant gender differences in any of the six categories, but points towards the power of the overarching Christian story-line in conversion testimonies. This reinforces a social constructivist perspective on conversion, as well as a view of testimonies of conversion as a "tool" and of culture as a "toolkit" (Ann Swidler, 1986) which people can draw on to make sense of the world. Future research should study how the idea of culture as a "toolkit" encompasses gender as well as the ways, the extent, and the reasons people incorporate elements of the overarching Christian narrative into their conversion testimonies, and analyze the relationship between the two.

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Appendix

Coding Categories

CATEGORY 1: Metaphor

Metaphors represent any word or short phrase used by the interviewee to make an explicit or implicit comparison to his or her conversion experience. After identifying metaphors present in each interview, I analyzed the metaphors listed and categorized them according to common elements. The metaphors were then sorted into their appropriate categories. For example,

metaphors such as “roller coaster ride”, “getting high,” and “a race” would be placed in the category labeled “Adventurous,” while “walk on the beach”, and “climbing into my father’s lap” would be placed in the “Peaceful/Comforting” category.

CATEGORY 2: Portrayal or Description of Self

Interviewees might describe themselves as foolish or clever. In “foolish” descriptions, individuals speak far less of themselves than others, act humbly, or somehow express their dependence on others to overcome hardships/difficulties. In “clever” descriptions, individuals talk about their abilities and accomplishments as it relates to coming to the faith, attempt to raise their self worth and often describe their self-ascent toward the realization of the “truth” by overcoming obstacles or other hardships on their own, usually through the exercise of some special talent or ability they possess (e.g., intellectual or rational abilities).

CATEGORY 3: Central Character

Central character refers to the main character in one’s personal faith testimony or conversion narrative. Central characters may be self-oriented or other-oriented. Over-reliance on self-identifiers (I, me, myself) are often indicative of self as central character. In self-orientation, the storyteller becomes the driving force or key figure in the majority of events or turning-points in the story. In contrast, in other-orientation, the story-teller references friends, family, or supporters more than self as the driving forces or key figures in the majority of events or turning-points in the story. The use of “we” as opposed to I, me, or myself, is further supportive of other-orientation.

CATEGORY 4: Rhetorical/Relational Motivations

An interviewee with rhetorical communication motivations tends to give advice to the interviewer, act as an expert, or share solely to inform. Rhetorical communication is less personal communication, sometimes considered public speaking, where the speaker attempts to raise self worth and be heard. An interviewee who is relational, on the other hand, tends to attempt to “connect” with the interviewer in some way; to ask questions of the interviewer in such a way as to draw the interviewer into the story-telling experience. The interviewee with relational motivations attempts to make the interview socially interesting and often asks questions such as, “Can you relate?”, or “Do you understand?”

CATEGORY 5: Conversion as Process or Crisis

If told as a crisis, there is some indication in the conversion narrative of a total change or turn-around in lifestyle or belief system. A crisis narrative is often dramatic in that it expresses a struggle of the will; a struggle or confrontation that occurs over a relatively short period of time leading to a peaceful resolution. If told as a process, there is reference in the conversion to an

ongoing event, that is, a series of events that occur over an extended period of time. Process conversions do not typically rely on a major event or time of change; rather, a process conversion is a gradual change or series of confirmations along the path of enlightenment.”

CATEGORY 6: Order of Narrative

Conversion narratives typically follow one of three orders. In chronological order, the narrative follows a step-by-step, linear process that continually answers the question, “and then what happened?” Second, some narratives follow a consequential sequence in that they jump from one major event to the next without reference to order or sequence, for example, “I was in a bad relationship in high school that opened me to how far I had strayed from God. My mom died when I was 10, which really made me question whether God existed. One year we took a family trip to Grand Canyon, where I had to come face-to-face with my salvation.” A third order is referred to as thematic. Thematic narratives revolve around common ideas rather than time or events, such as “immaturity to maturity,” “separation and reunion,” or “fellowship, fall, and redemption.” (David A. Knight, Robert H. Woods, Jr. & Ines W. Jindra. *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2) (2005), 113-134, © Religious Research Association, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved).

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