

Conversion performance as a ritual pre-commitment signal (Ethnographic fieldwork)



Jakub Cigán (Masaryk University) jakub.cigan@levyna.cz

Fieldwork

- ❑ Protestant Evangelical congregation in Brno, Czech Republic. Around 250-300 members. Ongoing research from February 2012.
- ❑ Methods: participant observation and informal interviews, textual analysis



Assumptions

- ❑ “Conversion”, as I understand the term, is specific to a particular group mainly of Christian Protestant origin. **Affiliation** refers to general process of one’s becoming a member or part of a group by meeting specific criteria of membership.
- ❑ Conversion and its acquisition is the part of affiliation process to the particular group, not mere description of the past process.
- ❑ Conversion performance is a set of relevant and mutually connected episodic autobiographical memories and personal facts embedded in the group conversion schema in the form of a narrative displayed by individual publicly.

Costly signaling framework and pre-commitment signal

- ❑ Through the religious rituals we communicate important information with other in-groups (Sosis 2006, 63).
- ❑ Newcomer has to express his commitment to the group and pay some initial costs for membership (Bulbulia 2009). Moreover, by paying these initial costs we form important bonds to the group and its members.
- ❑ Newcomers and members show their commitment through recognition constraints on which basis impostors can be ruled out by not producing characteristic signal – those who did not perform “authentic” conversion experience are excluded before baptism by preacher himself, who decides if one is ready or not for the baptism i.e. to be a member.
- ❑ Conversion as pre-commitment signal
 - There are other costly ways how to show one’s real commitment to the group – e.g. voluntary work for the group or evangelization on a street. Public evangelization, in the Czech Republic, is according to informants really tough.

How conversion works in the group?

From newcomer to group member:

- ❑ Conversion experience is the most important and distinguishing feature and group identifier of a member. All members are converts. Even adolescents who were brought up as Evangelical Christians must convert. Without conversion one is *not* “real Christian”, a full-blown member.

Not a private experience, but public affair:

- ❑ Conversion has to be displayed publicly, often in a **ritualized context** – prayer gatherings, Sunday services etc. The displaying of conversion story through witnessing is essential pre-baptism ritual action. The neophyte goes on stage in a front of other members and tells her well-rehearsed and arranged born-again experience story. After telling the story, one is baptized.

- ❑ Conversion is part of a **witnessing practice** as the most important testimony. Witnessing practice can be in-group or out-group (evangelization). In-group conversion testimony or reference to conversion is more often and very close to public prayers.

Conversion is acquired:

- ❑ The neophyte is gradually implicitly and explicitly learning what to express and how to be authentic about the conversion experience. Preparatory classes taken by the neophyte before baptism are crucial. Significant concepts such as “new-born experience” or “penitence” are explained and analyzed to neophyte.



What is costly about public conversion performance?

- ❑ Stepping forward in a front of other members and group leaders to give a public testimony is according to informants very stressful.
- ❑ Displaying of successful acquisition of the group theological knowledge.
 - Quotations from the Bible, referring to hours spent by studying the Bible, using Biblical analogies
 - Acquisition of hard to learn theological knowledge is a hard-to-fake signal of group affiliation, since it implies past investments (Bulbulia 2009:52–53).
- ❑ Sharing of sensitive personal information with others
 - Information about family and settings one comes from, state of health that can be used against member.
 - In a lesser extent this is also case of prayer.
- ❑ Self-blaming, expressing guilt and shame
 - Confessing one’s sins in a front of others, reporting embarrassing personal faults, highlighting one’s ignorance and arrogance in relation to God etc.
 - By expressing guilt and atonement in front of others, a subject may increase her own prosocial feelings and behavior towards the group (McKay et al. forthcoming).
- ❑ Emotionality
 - Crying during giving a testimony, dramatic events, referring to how one felt like etc.
 - By appealing to the emotional content of conversion story, one increases empathy and prosocial feelings in audience toward herself (Eisenberg and Fabes 1990).

Next steps...

- ❑ Differences in conversion story and performance in terms of “costs” by individuals,
 - who were brought up in the group – in-groups vs. real newcomers – out-groups (out-groups could pay higher initial costs than in-groups).
 - who are today in higher positions vs. those in lower ones.
- ❑ Differences in conversion testimony and other non-conversion testimonies within in-group witnessing practice
 - non-conversion in-group testimonies could have less costly features.