

# Abase yourself to convince others: Public Conversion Testimony of In-group and Out-group Converts



Jakub Cigán (LEVYNA – Masaryk University) [jakub.cigan@levyna.cz](mailto:jakub.cigan@levyna.cz)

## Fieldwork

- Protestant Evangelical congregation in Brno, Czech Republic. Around 350 members.
- Data analyzed: 35 public conversion testimonies (PCT)
- Methods: Content and thematic analysis



## Conversion in the group

### Public conversion testimony (PCT)

Public conversion testimony is a set of relevant and causally connected autobiographical memories and personal facts embedded in the group conversion schema in the form of a narrative displayed by individual publicly before baptism.

### What is PCT about?

In public conversion testimony **one tries to convince himself and others**, one is full-blown member of the group by ritual displaying of successful adoption of the group ideology through its utilization in individual autobiography and accomplish criteria for membership.

### Convert as a group member

Conversion is the most important and distinguishing feature and group identifier of a member. All members, even those who were brought up in the group, are converts.

### In-group and out-group convert

In-group convert is a one, who was brought up in the group. Out-group convert is one, who was not brought up in the group and became a member from "outside".

### Rite of conversion

Conversion has to be displayed publicly in a ritualized context. Public conversion testimony is essential ritual action before one's baptism.

### Conversion is controlled

The neophyte undergoes interview with one of the leaders and leader based on convert's answers will decide if one is ready for baptism. Then neophyte tell PCT to the group leaders and they give to neophyte advices how to correct his testimony.

### Conversion is acquired

The neophyte gradually learns authentic conversion experience in preparatory classes or by listening to testimonies of others.

## In-group vs. Out-group converts

According to group ideology there is no difference between in-group and out-group converts.

"No one is Christian just because one was born in Christian family." [baptism sermon]

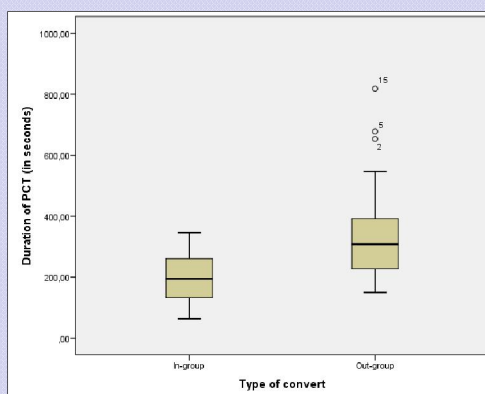
Although, identifying and displaying one as in-group or out-group convert is essential part in 97% of PCTs, it is a part of PCT schema.

Do out-group converts try harder to convince the group members?

### Are in-groups' PCTs shorter?

In a fact, briefest PCT was the one of a group leader's son. Is there difference between PCT duration of in-group and out-group converts?

An independent samples t-test found that the mean of in-group PCTs duration (M= 205,75; SD= 92,87) was significantly different from the mean of the out-group PCTs duration (M= 346,29; SD= 178,49);  $t(31) = 2,34$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ,  $d = 0,84$ ,  $r = 0,39$ .



### Do out-group converts abase themselves more and achieve higher self-enhancement in return?

In group conversion genre convert typically portrays his or her past in very negative way. Convert confess his sins, personal faults and disparage his past self as wrong, ignorant, sinful and depict his past life as problematic.

Higher abasement might be connected to higher efforts of out-group convert to convince.

On the other hand, disrespect to one's past might be linked to one's self-enhancement in present – more negative depiction of one's past self creates better and improved present self by showing the progress one made (Wilson & Ross 2003).

## PCT & autobiographical memory

In PCT one is using various tools for convincing himself and others about authenticity of his conversion. This can be done also through memories.

### Do in-group converts have more specific personal memories in PCT than out-groups?

In autobiographical memory research are specific personal memories (Thomsen & Brinkmann 2009) taken as more convincing for one who is remembering as well as for audience (Pillemer 2001). On the other hand specific memories with episodic details head toward forgetting faster than general memories (Conway 2005).

An independent samples t-test found no significant difference between mean frequency of specific personal memories among in-group converts (M= 19,43; SD= 11,05) compared to out-group converts (M= 19,33; SD= 13,41);  $t(31) = 0,22$ ;  $p > 0,05$ ,  $d = 0,01$ ;  $r = 0,00$ .

54,3% of converts framed conversion as specific personal memory in PCT, but type of the convert (in-group/out-group) was not significantly correlated to a type of the conversion memory (specific/general) as well.

### Do out-group converts place their conversion to group settings and events more than in-group converts?

48,6% of converts located their conversion to group settings and events (Sunday service, evangelization camp etc.) in PCT. Although type of the convert (in-group/out-group) was not significantly correlated to location of the conversion experience (in-group/out-group).

### Specific memory & group settings

There was a significant association between the conversion as specific personal memory and locating one's conversion to group settings  $\chi^2(1) = 4,804$ ;  $p < 0,05$ . Based on the odds ratio, the odds of converts with specific personal memory of conversion in PCT was 4,77 times higher for in-group settings or event than out-group.

Does convert encode and keep episodic details of conversion more easily in relevant group settings?



An independent samples t-test found that the mean frequency of negative self-portrayal of out-group converts (M= 20,45; SD= 6,66) was significantly higher than in a case of in-group converts (M= 10,34; SD= 5,83);  $t(32) = 4,17$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ;  $d = 1,47$ ;  $r = 0,59$ .