

THE ENDURING NATURE OF PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN THE
CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

by

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(Under the direction of BRADLEY C. COURTENAY)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine whether or not perspective transformations endure in non-life-threatening scenarios, specifically religious conversions, and how they are influenced by subsequent life experiences that may or may not be perspective transformations. A basic qualitative design was used to collect and analyze the in-depth interviews of ten recent converts to Christianity. Following an analysis of the data, the findings of this research included: 1) The role of meaning-making is important in conversion and is enhanced by learning, 2) Factors that influence how participants understand their conversion experiences are learning-centered activities, interpersonal relationships, spiritual encounters, and traumatic life events, and 3) Subsequent life events often strengthen conversion.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that perspective transformations in the context of Christian conversions are both *enduring* (persistent) and *evolving* in nature, and that the resulting characteristics of perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion may deviate from traditional ideas of what a “new perspective” should look like. The practical implications of this research are that adult and religious educators should consider the purpose, ethics, and outcomes of initiating perspective transformations, including conversions, within their audiences because perspective transformations begin an irreversible sequence of change that can be benefited and supported by educators. Recommendations for future research include studies that investigate perspective transformation in a variety of contexts and through a variety of subsequent life events, the characteristics of resulting perspectives in a variety of contexts, the convictional dimension of learning, perspective transformations perceived as developmentally positive or negative, and perspective transformations with a diverse range of socio-cultural influences.

KEY WORDS: Adult Education, Adult Development, Belief Systems, Christian Education, Conversion, Crisis, Faith Development, Religious Education, Perspective Transformation, Transitions

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B.S.Ed., The University of Georgia, 1995

M.Ed., Brenau University, 1997

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2004

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DEDICATION

To the glory of my heavenly Father,

Author of my soul

To my darling husband, Michael,

Faithful supporter, strong shoulder, keeper of my heart

and

to our precious daughter, Catherine,

Blessing of my lifetime

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout this research I have been keenly aware of its spiritual worth to myself, to those I have interviewed, and possibly to anyone else who may read it. It is through this research that I have come to better understand my own lifelong conversion and growing relationship with God. It has been no small feat to write about a subject so well documented in the Bible, yet so seldom researched in academia. For these reasons, I must first acknowledge the Original Author of conversion for creating in me a desire to fill the academic gap in our understanding of perspective transformation in the context of conversion. It is only through His grace that I have been able to complete this work and to learn so much from it.

Secondly, I must acknowledge my husband, Michael. I would have found my degree process unbearable without his encouragement. He has steadied me through all three of my degree accomplishments and has proven the Bible verse, “Love bears all things.” I wish all people were blessed with wonderful partners such as mine. I also wish to acknowledge my precious daughter, Catherine (age 3), who has sacrificed time with Mommy so that “homework” could be done and, by her very presence, reminds me of my blessings even at my most exhausted moments. To my wonderful parents, siblings, in-laws, and friends, I am honored by your love and support. You have aided me in this endeavor by babysitting, reading, praying, and encouraging. Without you, my life would be less fulfilling, less interesting, and much less fun. God bless you all.

Thirdly, I must acknowledge the participants of this research, who each shared their deepest life experiences for the sake of this research, all of whom add salt to the world. It

is through their stories that this research lives. Through their hardships, we gain understanding. I celebrate with them their transformations and newfound peace. By observing their conversions, we are able to participate a little, empathizing and transforming right along with them, learning and growing in our own acceptance of this phenomenon.

Next, I wish to acknowledge my committee who work so diligently in their efforts to help each of their students grow. Brad Courtenay, whose contribution is immeasurable, has faithfully aided me throughout these past five years as my committee chair. Brad, your integrity and generosity will endure through the many lives that you have touched. Sharan Merriam, Ron Cervero, Talmadge Guy, Wanda Stitt-Gohdes, and Richard Kiely have served as the remainder of my committee. Each of you has contributed in individual ways that have supported and improved this work. Thank you to each of my committee members for the difficult jobs you do in reading and re-reading our mostly boring and oft poorly written research in order to improve both it and us.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For years, researchers exploring fields related to adult development have shown that human beings often question their understanding of the world at different stages in their lives (Gould, 1980; Jarvis, 1993; Loder, 1981; Mezirow, 2000). Ultimately, adults develop their own personal reconciliation regarding difficult, seemingly unanswerable questions about the purpose of life by interpreting the experiences they encounter throughout their life span. These questions often arise first in childhood when belief systems are proffered through influential environments such as school, church, or the family unit.

Viktor Frankl describes this search for meaning as the central focus of one's life, stating that "the meaning of life differs from person to person and from moment to moment" (1959, p. 98) and it is, therefore, impossible for humans to define individual meaning for another person or to give some vague, general explanation of the process for all people. Even so, as people age, there exists an intellectual curiosity as to whether or not to adopt suggested beliefs as one's own or to seek out and develop new beliefs. Often personal experiences, like Frankl's imprisonment during World War II, force individuals to re-examine their belief systems when they can no longer accommodate past beliefs or when they are introduced to information that conflicts with their beliefs. A person's beliefs can therefore cause the formation and ultimately the reformation of his or her personal perspectives on life and the situations that guide it.

It's as if people carry their earliest learning (formative learning), including their beliefs, in a sack slung over their shoulder, adding a little here and there. They soon

discover that the accumulation of past experiences found in this sack become tools that can prepare them for the difficulties of life. More often than not, however, a past experience will not completely prepare a person for a future hardship. Therefore, in each new situation or encounter, the contents would have to be shifted, and often amended, to gain a better perspective for dealing with the situation. Eventually the constant addition of information makes the weight of the load too heavy to bear and the contents must be re-examined, reorganized, and some even discarded, before continuing down life's road with this sack of knowledge. Mezirow stated it best when he wrote that, "the formative learning of childhood becomes *transformative* learning in adulthood" (1991, p. 3, *italics added*), meaning that adults are capable of perspective transformations that allow new information to change the results of prior learning.

Personal perspectives are determined by filtering individual experiences through one's worldview, which is a culmination of assumptions, values, and beliefs and by accepting or rejecting the feelings that follow the experience. These perspectives are defined by Mezirow (1985, p. 22) as "meaning perspectives" as they encompass smaller meaning schemes made up of expectations and personal values. Put together, these perspectives make up the "personal paradigm." This represents the lens with which one views life and ultimately determines a person's ability to learn, grow, and act. Mezirow summarized this point as follows; "learning may be best understood as the process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experiences as a guide to decision and action" (1988, p. 223).

When people encounter new information that causes them to question their past learning and perspectives, a cognitive dissonance is created and the aforementioned

personal paradigm becomes primed for change. This occurrence is termed a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1988). In some instances the dilemma may occur over a period of time (known as an integrating circumstance) when one is gradually exposed to a stimulus that beckons one to cognitive dissonance requiring personal resolution. Mezirow elaborates on this cognitive dissonance leading to perspective transformation as being a result of either "an accretion of transformed meaning schemes resulting from a series of dilemmas" or "in response to an externally imposed epochal dilemma" (1991, p. 168). Life-threatening events can lead to perspective transformations; so can "an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, painting, or from efforts to understand a different culture" (1991, p. 168). His description of catalysts embraces the possibility of the introduction of non-life-threatening events such as religious conversions, transformative education, or emancipatory experiences, whether initiated through discussion, reflection, or reading.

Mezirow (1981, 1985, 2000) and Clark (1991) both surmise that religious conversion *does* entail a perspective transformation although this researcher was unable to locate any research that examines religious conversion as a perspective transformation.

Nevertheless, Bateson's (1972) theory of how adults learn, particularly Learning III, which is the category centered on the reformation of previous levels, has been associated with religious conversions. Mezirow states that "Learning III involves transformations of the sort that occur in religious conversion...These are perspective transformations, through which we can become aware that our whole way of perceiving the world has been based on questionable premises" (1991, p. 91).

Mezirow (1985) ties personal belief systems into what he considers a "personal paradigm" (p. 22) and it is only when an issue ranks very high within this paradigm that it

becomes more likely to be affected by a disorienting dilemma. Personal religious beliefs are deeply felt and defended, no matter the religion or lack thereof, and, according to Mezirow, should be considered as one of the issues that rank high enough to be most likely affected by the cognitive dissonance created by the introduction of a disorienting dilemma. In other words, conversion is potentially a perspective transformation that is either initiated by or is, itself, the cause of internal conflict, requiring resolution to some degree, resulting in a higher perception of understanding.

About the nature of a higher level of understanding, Clark (1991) concludes that “once achieved, a transformed perspective cannot be reversed” (p. 45), implying that once a person undergoes this process, the results *cannot be undone* even though a person may experience subsequent transformative situations and develop additional and/or different beliefs at a later time. Mezirow (1991) feels that perspective transformations provide the key to understanding how adults learn, make meaning, and develop following life altering situations and that the results extend forward, forever changing the person. Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, and Baumgartner (2000) also reached the conclusion that perspective transformations were irreversible, specifically in their study in which people have dealt with the diagnosis of HIV. This study emerged from an investigation conducted by Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves (1998) of the meaning-making process of adults who experienced a perspective transformation from a life-threatening event, the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS.

The studies followed the meaning-making process associated with the diagnosis, and later the successful treatment of, persons with HIV. Courtenay et al. closely examined how individuals derive their meaning from such an unexpected life event from two

studies involving the same participants. In the first study (1998), the researchers looked into the lives of eighteen HIV-positive adults who, as a result of their recent diagnosis, were found to have experienced a perspective transformation. Not only did the subjects experience changes in their beliefs and expectations, they desired to express these changes behaviorally and although the diagnosis presented many potential complications, they developed an increased concern for mankind which then resulted in deliberate altruism.

Two years later, Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, and Baumgartner (2000) wanted to know if the knowledge and beliefs acquired by their sample in the 1998 study had endured. That is, did the past perspective transformation hold over the two-year period? They conducted a follow-up study with the same participants to determine the lasting effects of their perspective transformations following the development of protease inhibitors that have been shown to substantially prolong, if not altogether spare, the lives of those inflicted with HIV. Fourteen of the original HIV-study participants were interviewed, lending insight into their increasing hope during a very difficult period in their lives. The purpose of the second study was to determine if the original perspective transformation had “stuck,” that is, whether or not the participants were either still at or higher than the level of perspective transformation that they had reached in the previous study. Kegan (1982) and Mezirow (1985) both assume that perspective transformations are enduring by design although this assumption was unsupported until this research. Courtenay et al. examined this while evaluating the meaning-making that resulted from the original fatal diagnosis and the process of how these individuals dealt with the learning that ensued from outliving a death sentence.

The researchers concluded that, for their sample, a perspective transformation is irreversible because “for all 14 participants in this study, there is evidence of the enduring nature of a perspective transformation” (2000, p. 113). This enduring nature was evidenced through the participants’ continued desire to live fully by maintaining a “heightened sensitivity to life” and by making a lasting contribution to the world and to other people. Although the researchers found that perspective transformations may be irreversible in this scenario, they questioned its duration under different circumstances: “we wonder about the staying power of perspective transformations that emerge from non-life-threatening events and encourage subsequent research in this area as a means of illuminating our understanding of the key ingredients of an enduring perspective transformation” (2000, p. 114). The authors also realized that the participants had not yet undergone a subsequent perspective transformation and therefore, could not detect any directional shifts in the original transformative experience. As Courtenay et al. were concerned with a life-threatening situation that led to a single perspective transformation, this leaves room for further investigation regarding the stability of perspective transformation in non-life-threatening scenarios and following subsequent perspective transformations.

Conversion is a non-life-threatening event that can be essentially defined as the shift of one’s basic assumptions about life from a belief system born in childhood and blended with adulthood experience to a new set of beliefs that surrender to another set of precepts. Religious conversion, in particular, a conversion to Christianity, the focus of this study, is like all perspective transformations in the sense that it is very deeply felt, even “epochal” as Clark (1991) puts it. Religious conversion begins with an interest in Christian

principles that leads to further inquiry whether introduced by reading, discussion, attending Christian church services, or personal reflection. This introduction of new information may conflict with past learning, thereby leading a person into a state of cognitive dissonance. In itself, this situation may signify a disorienting dilemma that draws a person into a perspective transformation. More dramatic scenarios do occur though; for example, a person may be confronted with religious beliefs in the midst of a life event such as the loss of a loved one or a personal illness that causes one to consider mortality and the meaning of life. Whether arising out of a dramatic life event or through quiet introspection, the discovery of a personal desire to initiate the religious conversion process is an example of a substantial disorienting dilemma as it generates considerable turmoil, exploration, and reflection.

Statement of the Problem

As adults search for meaning in their lives, they seek resolution for their uncertainties regarding personal beliefs. By examining one's life experiences, a person can eventually gain meaning regarding these experiences and ultimately utilize the gained information in assessing future situations. Occasionally a person encounters a life experience (sometimes life-threatening, sometimes not) that cannot easily be resolved cognitively, requiring greater reflection and exploration. This is known as a disorienting dilemma and marks the beginning of the process termed perspective transformation. Because this event creates a paradigm shift in one's understanding of the world, it overwhelms the meaning made from past learning experiences and thus requires a deeper search for meaning.

The focus of this study was to examine the theory of perspective transformation in light of the meaning made by adults who have undergone a perspective transformation that is not life-threatening, such as a religious conversion experience. This research focuses particularly on perspective transformations in the context of Christian conversions in which participants demonstrate a shift from non-belief in Christianity to the acceptance and espousal of a Christian worldview.

Claims have been made that perspective transformations are enduring in nature. One such illustration is the Courtenay et al. (2000) study, which provided empirical support of this enduring nature within the context of a life-threatening diagnosis. Motivated by finding little research regarding the enduring nature of perspective transformations, this researcher was most interested in whether or not a perspective transformation holds over a period of time, and what it looks like, following a non-life-threatening experience such as religious conversion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the enduring nature, or persistence, of a perspective transformation in the form of a conversion experience. The research questions considered in this study were as follows:

1. How do participants make meaning of their religious conversion experience?
2. What factors were influential in the participants' understanding of their religious conversion experience?
3. In what ways do subsequent life experiences alter the perspective transformation that resulted from the participants' conversion experience?

Significance of Study

It is clear that there are many unanswered questions regarding meaning-making in the adult religious conversion experience and its interaction with theories of adult development and perspective transformation. In the field of adult education, it has been suggested that perspective transformation is an effective way to instill lasting change within learners, that learning incurred from perspective transformations is greater than in other modes of learning, and that “changes in meaning schemes are always developmentally positive” (Courtenay et al., 2000, p. 117). This leads one to believe that meaning-making and learning are shaped within any context that *is significant to the individual learner* and that the more significant the situation, the greater the chance of a perspective transformation. Because adults undergoing conversion are transforming their entire belief system, the learning process is of great personal meaning as learners seek reassurance and solutions to complex questions. It is for these reasons that further research was done to provide theoretical and practical support for fields that deal with adults undergoing personal development through perspective transformations or religious conversion experiences.

The Courtenay et al. studies (1998, 2000) also suggest that perspective transformations endure over time in a life-threatening situation but no one appears to have conducted research regarding its nature in a non-life threatening scenario and the impact of significant secondary life events. This study adds to our body of knowledge about perspective transformation, adult religious conversion, and adult learning. It examines how these three areas cross paths and what that means to those in the midst of

momentous life changes while also informing the educators, counselors, authors, and pastoral ministers who may aid them during their struggle toward understanding.

This study also has practical implications in that it provides connections between conversion experiences and adult learning principles, such as how adults make meaning during transformational experiences, which will aid researchers, educators, and ministers in the development of materials for this specific population. Practitioners in fields related to these experiences may find this research beneficial in working with people in the midst of a conversion. It will better enable them by providing some background as to how adults make meaning and what to expect when subsequent perspective transformations occur. For example, a person considering Christian conversion may seek counsel from a knowledgeable friend, teacher, or minister. With these findings, the “counselor” may help the convert understand the likely stages of conversion, where he is among them, what he can expect in the future, and perhaps suggest activities for further reconciliation as conversion parallels the stages of perspective transformation. As this research provides an in-depth look at Christian conversion through the lens of perspective transformation, it considers how one undertakes personal change, adapts behavior, and makes meaning while undergoing personal renovation.

Furthermore, the more fundamental practical significance of this work is found in its implication for learning. If perspective transformations hold in non-life-threatening events, it confirms the strength of learning through a perspective transformation. If a reversion to old beliefs occurs following a subsequent perspective transformation, then the implication is that perspective transformations do not endure in non-life-threatening situations and the learning reflected in the original perspective transformation may be less

significant. On the other hand, if the original perspective transformation is changed following subsequent perspective transformations in the direction of personal growth and development, it implies that the learning in a perspective transformation not only endures, it is enhanced, and the strength of learning is once again confirmed.

Definition of Terms

This section is designed to offer definitions of terms utilized in this study.

Adult religious conversion experience refers to the shift in beliefs from a non-religious or non-Christian worldview to a belief system based on the tenets of Christianity.

Perspective transformation is “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; through a meaning reorganization reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1988, p. 226).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

As the journey through this chapter is undertaken, one should remember the purpose of this study was to examine the lasting effects of a perspective transformation from a conversion experience in converts who have experienced subsequent perspective transformations. It is, therefore, the goal of this chapter to provide a framework for this research while allowing readers to undertake this journey alongside its author toward a better understanding of the principles of perspective transformation. Sometimes the evidence sought presents a gap in the literature as in this case concerning conversion as a form of non-life-threatening perspective transformation. It is also imperative that this researcher answer several research questions in the course of this study. How do the participants make meaning of their religious conversion experience? What factors were influential in their understanding of the experience? In what ways do subsequent life experiences alter the perspective transformation resulting from the participants' conversion?

In studying perspective transformation theory, this researcher noticed how little of the literature refers to religious experiences while educational and emancipatory topics reign. Believing religious experiences to be both highly educational and emancipatory, this researcher considered it a worthy endeavor to help the world see perspective transformation through this lens, even if only for a moment. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, and Baumgartner (2000) studied the meaning-making found through perspective transformation as they evaluated its enduring

nature. It is likewise the goal of this researcher to understand how adults make meaning while in the midst of life-altering circumstances, how this endures over a period of time, and what happens to it following subsequent perspective transformations. The contribution made by this research is that this work focused on what the perspective transformation experience looks like in non-life-threatening scenarios, unlike being diagnosed as HIV-positive. Furthermore, this research examined what happens to a perspective transformation when confronted with a subsequent life experience that may or may not be a secondary perspective transformation.

The literature review is presented in five sections. The first two sections, entitled *Transformative Learning, Meaning-Making, and Adult Development* and *Transformational Learning and Adult Education*, provide an overview of how transformative learning relates to meaning-making and adult education, laying the foundation for the theory of perspective transformation. The third and fourth sections are more concise, *Perspective Transformation* and *Perspective Transformation and Context*, with emphasis on the transformative learning experience of perspective transformation, its enduring nature, and how it is found within the context of religious conversion. The final section is *The Religious Conversion Experience*. To aid her search for topics related to conversion and transformative learning, this researcher explored ERIC, the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), and related literature found at the University of Georgia and McAfee Theology Libraries along with many adult education texts and dissertations through Dissertation Abstracts International and the UGA Department of Adult Education.

Transformational Learning, Meaning-Making, and Adult Development

Transformational learning is defined by theorists in many ways and, although the term is recognized as an adult education theory, the concept has been utilized in various fields throughout the past several years. For example, this researcher has noticed the words “transforming,” “transformative,” and “transformational” to describe both people and events throughout religious, psychological, and educational literature. Specifically, these terms have been observed in the field of adult education as a means to describe learning processes that lead to changes in personal attitudes and behaviors. Mezirow describes transformational learning as "a praxis, a dialectic in which understanding and action interact to produce an altered stated of being" (1978, p. 15). Mezirow defines meaning simply as "an interpretation" and states that "to make meaning is to construe or interpret experience--in other words, to give it coherence" (1991, p. 4). He also believes transformational learning experiences to be central in how adults make meaning. He states that adults have the ability to actually strive for personal change and meaning through transformational learning experiences as long as they reflect on past assumptions with the goal becoming "one of either confirmation or transformation of ways of interpreting experience" (1991, p. 6). Altogether, Mezirow's ideas formulate a clear image of meaning-making that is dependent upon life experiences and personal reflection with the goal of either supporting or shifting one's past beliefs and behaviors.

Clark summarizes transformational learning as a process of individual change and meaning-making, referring to the case of Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, who believes that "life" is not a term that is generalized or vague, it is instead "unique for each individual" as is the meaning of life itself (1991, p.

2). Frankl (1959) explains that meaning formation is the key to understanding and being able to control our attitudes and actions, that a human's desire to make meaning is the primary motivation of life and central to all other human processes.

Clark (1991) further contributed to our knowledge of meaning-making as she studied how adults transform their understanding in response to real-life circumstances. She found that the process of meaning-making causes individuals to reevaluate and reinterpret their lives thus far. In her research, Clark also noted three distinct features of a transformational learning experience: 1) a psychological change, addressing how adults feel, 2) a convictional change, referring to what adults choose to believe and, 3) a behavioral change, the way adults act out these feelings and beliefs. These three areas of change are connected in such a way that learning is not successful without incorporating personal attention to all three components. In Clark's dissertation, nine adults who underwent transformative learning experiences displayed all three components. A case in point, one participant, Ruth Ann, when confronted with her own racist attitudes, began a cycle of deep reflectivity and growth, ultimately changing the way she feels, believes, and behaves about diversity, gradually becoming committed to the equality of the races. Clark's research recognizes that adults, in any given circumstance of personal significance, can experience profound change involving many levels, which leads to the construction of new meaning.

Mezirow (2000) gives Bruner (1996) credit for what he calls the four modes of making meaning, but says Bruner's list is incomplete as it doesn't take into account transformation theory. Bruner's modes are described by Mezirow (2000) as follows:

1) establishing, shaping, and maintaining intersubjectivity; 2) relating events, utterance, and behavior to the action taken; 3) constructing of particulars in a normative context—deals with meaning relative to obligations, standards, conformities, and deviations; 4) making propositions—application of rules of the symbolic, syntactic, and conceptual systems used to achieve decontextualized meaning, including rules of inference and logic and such distinctions as whole – part, object-attribute, and identity-otherness. (p. 4)

Mezirow (2000) completes Bruner’s list by adding what he calls the “crucial” fifth mode: “Becoming critically aware of one’s own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation” (p. 4). The fifth mode represents Mezirow’s transformational learning theory.

One such illustration of transformational learning and its connection between development and meaning-making is Perry’s study of how college students make meaning of their world (1970, 1981). In his research, Perry discovered that adults progress through stages of learning, growing in their knowledge and understanding of increasingly more complex issues. He concluded that the experiences of the students and the meanings that were attached to the experiences directly influenced their beliefs and understanding. Similarly, Hobson and Welbourne (1998) argued that adult development *in itself* is often transformative as people undergo changes in their worldview. A new consciousness is formed and change results from the reconstructed meaning formed by the learner. Much of Hobson and Welbourne’s writing is based upon the Riegel (1979) and Basseches (1984) notion that adult thought processes are dialectic and dependent upon a changing reality.

Valsiner (1996) compared the developmental theories of both Piaget and Vygotsky, relating them both to constructivist learning theory. Constructivism lends weight to transformational learning theory as it teaches that humans build knowledge based on personal experiences and past assumptions. This is important because constructivism, like transformational learning theory, assumes that people are quite capable of growth and change. The author felt that a reevaluation of the similarities was necessary to demonstrate how contemporary developmental psychology has evolved to include transformational learning. In keeping with the “constructive-developmental” tradition, Becker (1968), Clark (1991), and Kegan (1982) each tend to agree with Piaget’s approach, supporting individual learning that is based on the formation of meaning by the learner.

Becker (1968), Kegan (1982), and Valsiner (1996) all agree that the formation of meaning involves transformational learning and that the construction of meaning is often dependent on experiences that necessitate a cognitive shift in understanding. Mezirow (2000) elaborates on the constructivist approach:

Constructivists understand that knowledge is constructed by the mind and not by procedures, however useful procedures might be. Because they see the knower as such an integral part of the known, people who work out of this perspective do a lot of meta-thinking: they evaluate, choose, and integrate the wide range of procedures and processes they bring to the meaning-making process. (p. 90)

It is apparent that transformative learning theory finds itself in the path of developmental psychology as a means of how people construct personal meaning in real life. For those who subscribe to this approach, it is clear that, where beauty is in the eye

of the beholder, learning is in the mind of the beholder. What is significant to one learner may mean very little to the next and this significance is dependent on many factors. Just a few examples of these factors include timing (when an event occurs within the lifespan), openness (how prepared the person is to accept new information), and the influence of childhood (the previous understanding that a person brings with them into a situation). We must understand how we grow into our adult perspectives in order to better understand how we experience transformation as adults, therefore, a discussion of the progression from childhood to adult consciousness follows.

Gould (1978) researched the progression from childhood consciousness to adult consciousness and how adults must “reformulate our self-definition” (p. 25) from that of our childhood self-definition. Gould determined that there are several false assumptions from childhood that must be reevaluated in order for one to operate successfully within adult logic. This evaluative process involves intellectually revisiting personal beliefs and any problematic areas left over from childhood. The author concludes that this type of transformation, while deeply personal and often difficult, represents the very core of adult development and that it can be “hugely successful and liberating” (p. 223).

Once a person reaches adulthood, development is described by Mezirow (1991) as “an adult’s progressively enhanced capacity to validate prior learning through reflective discourse and to act upon the resulting insights” (p. 7). In the same paragraph, he also stated that “anything that moves the individual toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated meaning perspective” (1991, p. 7) is a catalyst in one’s development. This ties adult development directly into transformational learning theory and perspective transformation because, as shown, all three exemplify the aptitude that

adults have for change. Furthermore, Mezirow takes a definitive stance in regards to the specific place that perspective transformation holds in adult development: “It should be clear that a strong case can be made for calling perspective transformation the central process of adult development” (1991, p. 155). By succinctly stating his beliefs on the subject, Mezirow clearly establishes the relationship between transformational learning and adult development. He adds that subjective reframing of what individuals know or believe is “often an intensely threatening emotional experience” (2000, p. 6) as they transform their past assumptions and make new meaning. Dirkx named this experience “learning through soul” because it focuses “on the interface where the socioemotional and the intellectual world meet, where the inner and outer worlds converge” (1997, p. 85).

Other researchers also find a connection between transformational learning and an intense personal response. Tennant (1993) argues that, because of its intensity, perspective transformation is not merely a shift in one's understanding or a progressive stage in development. He states that it is even more revolutionary than given credit by Mezirow's early writings and, for this reason, is a fairly rare occurrence in adulthood. He feels that it is not a slowly progressive process, but a radical response to a deeply life altering catalyst resulting in a sudden, yet total, shift in beliefs. Other authors, however, lean toward a more gradual version of transformational learning as a way for adults to make sense of life. Daloz writes that “we grow through a progression of transformations in our meaning-making apparatus, from relatively narrow and self-centered filters through increasingly inclusive, differentiated, and compassionate perspectives” (1986, p. 149).

Jarvis (1987) concludes that adult development and meaning-making are often dependent on “disjunctions” similar to the disorienting dilemma or integrating circumstance of the perspective transformation theory. “There is no human growth without learning and so the human condition must always be one in which there is the potential for disjunction between biography and experience” (p. 81). Jarvis feels that learning that leads to profound personal growth happens only when this disjunction is “mastered” and personal meaning is made. He also acknowledges that for most learners, this process takes time and effort in order to enjoy the benefits of a resolved disjunction.

By exploring transformational learning and meaning-making, this researcher now understands that adults learn best through powerful, personalized experiences that create a change in the way they think, feel, and act. These learning experiences may occur suddenly for some people as Tennant (1993) suggests, but more slowly for others as suggested by Daloz (1986) and Jarvis (1987). By the same token, this research must also accept that conversion may create personal transformation more quickly for some people than for others.

To support the idea that transformation cannot be limited to a linear pattern nor subject to time constraints, Taylor (1996) wrote that adults undergoing transformation or transition should receive *encouragement* from psychological models rather than pressure to meet arbitrary guidelines for development. In other words, learners should consult with models to find information and support from research involving similar circumstances rather than to feel categorized or compared in the course of their development. In psychological models and in transformational learning theory, it is clear that most adults have a profound, innate need to self-develop and make meaning over the

course of a lifetime even if they never achieve “higher levels.” This connection has been demonstrated repeatedly in adult development research as well as in adult education literature (Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Valsiner, 1996).

An example of how transformational learning concepts are applied in the field of adult development is Wood (1995), who categorized adult development into four groups: transaction, transition, transformation, and transcendence. In transaction, the author describes the learner as going through personal, social, or biological events that may individually, or combined, create changes in one’s meaning perspective. In transition, the adult is critically reflective of life events that cause inner disturbances. Transformation is said to occur when the learner makes changes in or completely revises his or her belief system. The final category, transcendence, was said to involve an acceptance of the past, a building of beliefs upon the accumulation of changes, and a development of a sense of fulfillment. Wood’s model is cyclical, allowing each process to repeat again and again, each time in response to a different life event. She believed that these processes are unavoidable in normal adult development and that they, in turn, play an important role in adult education by enabling learners to gain and act upon new knowledge and make new meaning within each cycle.

It is clear that the concept of transformative learning plays a substantial role in how adults develop and make meaning of life experiences. Throughout this section, transformational learning, adult development, and meaning-making have been shown to be vital in understanding about how adults grow and change in the course of life events. As transformational learning theory is fundamental to the upcoming sections, it’s role in adult education and this research will now be singled-out.

Transformational Learning and Adult Education

In the case of studying conversion as a perspective transformation and how it endures over time and through subsequent perspective transformations, it is imperative to demonstrate the importance of my research to the field of adult education. Although one's perspective may not be instantaneously altered, the learning process is catalyzed by the dissonance created by the introduction of the first stages of perspective transformation. Transformational learning is, therefore, defined as a learning process, whether short or long-term, that contributes to one's individual development through changes in cognitive awareness, behavioral adaptations, and attitudes (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow first researched this possibility in an adult education study of women's re-entry programs (1978) and later, as he sharpened the concept, he paralleled it to how adults learn: "Learning may be best understood as the process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to decision and action" (1988, p. 223). He defined transformative learning theory specifically as "an adult learning theory that focuses on the frame of reference of the individual; explaining how one construes meaning from experience expressed in expectations, habits, and premises and how the reinterpretation of meanings of experience act as guides to decisions and action" (Mezirow, 1993, p. 17).

Dirkx (1998) tied transformative learning directly to the practice of adult education. He wrote that transformative learning theory can be viewed through four different lenses or theories. One perspective is based on theories of consciousness raising in which a person becomes more acutely aware of his or her understanding. The second lens is critical reflection in which one practices self-assessment at varying degrees. The third

perspective looks at transformative learning and adult development theory and how the two constantly intersect throughout a normal life span. Lastly, Dirkx investigated individuation as a possible explanation for the transformative learning process. Dirkx evaluated transformative learning as a substantive adult education theory that both lends support to other adult learning and development theories while, at the same time, being supported by them.

Freire (1949) insists that a final outcome of transformative learning must be the instigation of change within the socio-cultural reality via how a person is able to influence change within his environment. Freirian concepts are important in adult education because the transformative process itself is paramount in leading one toward behavioral change and social action. Furthermore, Freire believed that all transformational learning ultimately results in action, the principle he termed "praxis," and that without this external reflection (action) of internal paradigm shifts (beliefs), the process is neither complete nor effective.

Adult education acknowledges transformative learning as a major catalyst in the process of how some adults learn, especially during periods of transition or crisis. Ledford (1998) connected the theory to how adults deal with faith development and change during times of crisis. Cohen (2001) explored how women transform spiritually in midlife. Others have conducted research that connects transformative learning theory directly to adult education by linking it with adult development theory (Kegan, 1983, 2000), transitional factors (Hamrick, 1988), situated cognition (Clark, 1991) or self-directed learning (Taylor, 1991). These ideas play important roles in adult education because each contributes largely to how and why adults learn. Knowles (1984) fostered

andragogical concepts into practical application and, although he didn't speak directly to transformative learning theory in his early writings, he constantly reiterated the principle that learners derive their understanding from personal experience. As Clark (1991), Cranton (1994), Dirkx (1998), and Mezirow (1988) have all pointed out, experience shapes perception and perception shapes learning. This is the very essence of transformative learning theory in adult education.

Although in favor of the underlying psychological principles of transformative learning, several theorists argue for the inclusion of sociological factors in this adult learning theory. Dannefer (1984), Dowd (1990), and Cunningham (1998) believe that social context plays an integral role in developmental theory and in adult learning processes. Taylor (1993) adds his own contribution to Mezirow's theory stating that Mezirow attempts to "impose his 'Western' ways of knowing upon other cultures" (p. 58). Because of this, Taylor feels that Mezirow ignores the role transformational learning plays in becoming interculturally competent. Taylor goes on to say that Mezirow's perspective is an elitist and "somewhat class-oriented" approach as to who is able to achieve transformation because he "makes reference to the essentiality of critical reflection in transformative learning, implying it as a 'higher' form of learning not found in all individuals and cultures" (p. 59). Finally, Taylor agrees with sociologists in regards to the inclusion of social and cultural theories into transformational learning theory. "A different culture may share transformative learning theory, but it is culturally, socially, and historically contextualized based on the needs and views of learning within" (1993, p. 61).

Studies from the sociocultural perspective certainly are not over-abundant but they are, nonetheless, powerful. There is research investigating a variety of sample populations such as HIV-positive adults (Courtenay et al., 1998), ethical vegans (McDonald, 1998), South Asian women (Marshall, 1998), and male spouse abusers (Williams, 1985) that further establish the presence of transformative learning in a wider range of adults. Mezirow (2000) acknowledges context as a major contributor of transformative learning, however, he paints the picture of context in broad strokes rather than giving specific details in his own research. Further discussion on transformative learning and context will follow in a later section of this chapter.

As we gain insight into transformative learning theory, it must be considered that adults who undergo transformational experiences have experienced, in varying degrees, the process originally designated by Mezirow (1978) as perspective transformation. It is this process that linked this researcher's purpose to adult education and how adults ultimately make meaning while enduring personal conversion experiences.

Perspective Transformation

Perspective transformation was theorized by Mezirow in 1978 as the transformational learning process that adults undergo when confronted with intense personal change. Specifically, he studied a group of women who returned to higher education after an extended absence. He found that the women gained much more than college credits; they experienced a profoundly transformed perspective, an actual shift in the way they viewed the world. Mezirow (1978, 1988, 1990, 1991, 2000), throughout the past quarter-century and at present, continues to relate his theory to the field of adult education as an

extension of transformational learning, a process in which adults achieve newer and deeper understandings in their personal development.

Perspective transformation is a process set apart from other learning experiences because the learner experiences a complete paradigm shift of thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Perspective transformation is further differentiated from other types of learning by its somewhat unintentional nature. The initial exposure to a catalyst, known as the disorienting dilemma, is often unplanned by the learner, thereby creating an unavoidable cognitive dissonance that must be addressed in some regard, leading to personal change.

In many instances, the disorienting dilemma is not sought after, it just happens as seen in extreme examples where a person receives life-threatening news from her doctor or when a loved one dies. Not all cases are initiated by shocking news, however. Adults may intentionally set out to learn about a given subject and don't anticipate, or desire, to be exposed to information that challenges and changes the way they think or feel as a result. In some situations, an individual may actually seek a change through personal exploration such as that found in counseling, support groups, and self-help guides.

In their later writings, Mezirow (2000) and Cranton (2000) suggest that perspective transformation should be the *actual goal* of learning in some instances and that this process can be fostered into action through teaching methods, mentoring, reflective activities, and intense discourse. This ability to foster transformations is difficult to manage, however, as a teacher may not be prepared to aid the participant completely through the stages of a perspective transformation and the end results may not be what the teacher or the learner desires. It was best for the purpose of this research to acknowledge that regardless of how the process of perspective transformation is initiated,

whether the person is caught off guard by new information or actually plans a personal change of some kind, it is solely up to the learner to decide when and how to proceed in order to affect any meaningful personal change (Mezirow, 2000).

Perspective transformation is a potent element within how adults make meaning. It cannot be ignored when assessing our intuitive desire to make sense of life's conditions. As Mezirow says, "our need to understand our experiences is perhaps our most distinctively human attribute" (1991, p. 10). He goes on to say that, "learning means using a meaning that we have already made to guide the way we think, act, or feel about what we are currently experiencing" and that "meaning-making is central to what learning is all about" (1991, p. 11).

The process of perspective transformation is begun when people do not readily have a suitable meaning internally prepared for the situation. They begin to seek and create a new way to respond, resulting in an inevitable shift in their personal repertoire of meanings and consequently, their personal development. This is why Mezirow feels that his theory of perspective transformation is such an effective method of making meaning in adulthood. In fact, he states that "a strong case can be made for calling perspective transformation the central process of adult development" (1991, p. 155) because perspective transformation "can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective" (1991, p. 7).

To fully appreciate perspective transformation theory, we must become familiar with its components. Mezirow defines and utilizes the terms meaning *schemes* (also described as one's point of view) and meaning *perspectives* (refers to one's worldview, later termed "frames of reference" (2000, p. 16)) to describe one's habits of what he or she expects to

think, feel, or gain through experiences. Meaning *perspectives* are a compilation of smaller meaning schemes that encompass “higher-order schemata, theories, propositions, beliefs, prototypes, goal orientations, and evaluation” (1990, p. 2). Mezirow later characterized meaning perspectives further as being “composed of two dimensions, habit of mind and resulting points of view” (2000, p. 17).

Meaning *schemes*, on the other hand, are the smaller pieces in the puzzle and are made up of “specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that constitute interpretation of experience” (1991, p. 6). Meaning schemes group together to form what Mezirow refers to as “habits of mind” (2000, p. 18) that become expressed as a person’s point of view. According to Mezirow (2000), some examples of habits of mind include: learning styles, moral norms, customs, religious doctrine, personality traits, values, and attitudes. These are expressed as a person’s point of view by means of his personal practices along with verbal and written communications. The habits of mind coalesce with points of view regarding them to form a person’s worldview.

When persons are introduced to a point of view that is different from their own, they must decide whether or not to incorporate it into their internal habits of mind. The differing viewpoint is measured against the person’s frame of reference and will be judged worthy or unworthy of acceptance based on personal experience, expectations, and openness. Unless the new information challenges previous understanding, it can be ignored altogether. However, the more challenging it is, and the closer to home it hits in regards to personal values, the more attention will be given to resolving the discomfort it creates. It is the resolution of these challenges and the reshaping of these meaning

perspectives that lead to the transformation of an entire meaning structure within an adult mind, a paradigm shift from one world view to another.

A supporter of perspective transformation theory, Clark (1991) discussed how personal experiences and perceptions further impact how adults learn. She wrote about how a person may construct his or her belief systems and social attitudes through experiences and outside influences and how interventions in learning may change or enhance these existing views. By studying Freire (1949), Mezirow (1991), and Daloz (1986), Clark (1991) concluded that learning is a change in how conscious one is about his or her belief structures, whether personal or social, and how this change affects personal behavior. Pointing out that context plays an important role in how adults make meaning and experience learning, she further influences this research by specifying that convictional changes, such as religious conversions, provide an ideal environment for the occurrence of perspective transformation.

Clark (1991) further suggests that Mezirow's process of perspective transformation, "can occur suddenly and constitute 'an epochal transformation' of meaning systems, such as is experienced in religious conversions or in consciousness raising" (p. 43). She describes the "epochal transformation" as a sudden shift in beliefs brought about by some experience, whether of a charismatic religious nature or of some event perceived by the learner to be life-threatening. It is evident, from Clark, that researchers have made a connection between religious experiences and perspective transformation along with how adults develop and change following these experiences.

Another researcher who has studied the theory of perspective transformation is Cranton (1992, 1994, and 2000) who uses Mezirow's ideas in her books on how to work

with adult learners. Cranton studied the theory and process of perspective transformation in order to present it to adult educators as a method of practice. By fostering empowerment through consciousness-raising exercises and reflective techniques, she believes that learners could actually strive for a perspective transformation that would allow them to reach higher stages in learning. She suggests that perspective transformations are very individualized, with no two experiences being exactly alike. Cranton's concepts are applicable within the scope of this dissertation as to how adults gain personal insight from religious materials, sermons, reflective activities, and discourse. For example, a person at the cusp of a conversion experience may wish to seek guidance from reading materials, counselors, or religious meetings that may provide some answers to his questions or, minimally, an environment of support and reflectivity.

In order to recognize the potential applications of perspective transformation theory, it is important to outline the stages of Mezirow's model of perspective transformation. He identified the following stages as a result of his 1978 study of re-entry women into education and has continued to offer this model whenever discussing and/or defending his theory of perspective transformation. The stages are as follows:

- . A disorienting dilemma
- . Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- . A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
- . Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that other have negotiated a similar change
- . Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- . Planning of a course of action

- . Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- . Provisional trying of new roles
- . Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- . A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 1988, pp. 226-227).

The model is sequential in nature, being that each stage typically follows the one before it. Each stage is cumulative, bringing to it all the experiences from previous stages, and hierarchical, becoming more complex as the stages progress. Mezirow's model is not always invariant, though, allowing the stages to occasionally occur in a different order, or even to be skipped altogether, by learners who approach personal change in different patterns. To further acknowledge these deviations, Cranton says that "people, due to their psychological makeup, vary in how they experience the process" and even though adult education recognizes variations in learning styles, "we do not expect people to exhibit varied styles or preferences" when it comes to transformative learning experiences (2000, p. 190). Dirkx adds that transformative learning, especially in cases where mind habits (meaning perspectives) are changed, cannot be limited to a problem-solving model as shown by Mezirow. He says that the problem with relying on self-reflection as the primary means for change is that it "understates the affective, emotional, spiritual, and transpersonal elements" present in every transformation (1997, p. 81).

To convey perspective transformation as being highly transformative and developmental in all regards, Mezirow (1991) wrote that the "stages of life transitions" (p. 157), as depicted by Sloan (1986), were strikingly similar to the stages of perspective

transformation. The first stage, “shock and immobilization,” represents the beginning of a perspective transformation, the initial exposure to the catalyst that creates cognitive dissonance. Mezirow (1991) states that these feelings of shock and immobilization “may refer less to feelings leading to a decision than to those of being surprised afterward by what one has just committed oneself to” (p. 157). The transition from one way of thinking to another is achieved once the individual internalizes his commitment and moves through the next stages, which include the initial denial of and eventual experimentation with the new perspective, the attachment of meaning to it and, finally, the integration of it into one’s life. In the case of religious conversion, individuals may be exposed to the Christian belief system, begin to accept it, and experiment with their new role in it, all the while being a little surprised or awed at the changes they experience as a result. Whether by way of learning models or developmental schemata, a perspective transformation from one set of beliefs to another is not only possible, it is sometimes unavoidable when an individual feels compelled to internalize newly discovered beliefs.

Our ability to relate to real-life examples of personal transformation gives durability to the concepts of perspective transformation and transformational learning. It is imperative, however, that perspective transformation be distinguished from other types of learning as being the one that focuses on changing “how we know” not just “what we know” (Kegan, 2000, p. 50). Kegan draws further attention to his point when he breaks it down as *trans-form-ative*, emphasizing “form” because the form in which one learns is “itself at risk of change (and not just change but increased capacity)” (2000, p. 51). For example, conversions involve more than learning doctrine and scriptures (the *what*), it

deals with *how* adults make sense of deep spiritual concerns. If the *form of learning* is not considered, perspective transformation is at risk of becoming a term used to describe every little change in a person's point of view and may lose "its genuinely transformative potential" (Kegan, 2000, p. 47) or it would simply refer to the *what*, which would make the quantity of information learned of higher importance than *how* we make meaning of it. When conversion and its attached meaning are considered, the "form" (the *how* we know) would be horribly diminished by merely naming the individual parts of the process (the *what* we know) rather than looking at the whole, integrated outcome.

To show how adults make meaning and how meaning endures, we must locate research that explores this subject. The research most closely-related to this topic, the enduring nature of perspective transformation, are the Courtenay et al. (1998, 2000) studies regarding how adults deal with perspective transformations resulting from life-threatening situations. Over a period of three years, the subjects, who'd been diagnosed as HIV-positive and later successfully treated (a follow-up study), voyaged from a devastating diagnosis to an attitude of altruism gained through reflection, the pursuit of knowledge, and a supportive HIV-positive community. The researchers discovered that perspective transformations begun by a terminal diagnosis endured over a period of time. By learning more about their disease, its effects, and themselves, these subjects became empowered to ultimately reach out to others, effectively and confidently integrating their new perspectives into their lives. Their findings led the authors to question whether or not a perspective transformation resulting from a *non*-threatening life event would likewise endure and how a perspective transformation would look following any

subsequent life experiences, whether or not those experiences involved secondary perspective transformations.

The purpose of this study was to answer questions regarding perspective transformation in the context of adult religious conversion experiences to describe how adults transition and transform following their exposure to and the acceptance of the tenets of Christianity. Mezirow (2000) proposes that Christian belief united “the particular with the universal to become ‘worldviews’” (p. 17) for many during the Middle Ages and Reformation. This statement lays a foundation for the acceptance of Christianity as a worldview that, like other worldviews, may endure over time and actually be shifted with exposure to challenging life events. Specifically, perspective transformation is viewed as the major contributor toward lasting meaning-making within the context of a person’s conversion to Christianity and following it as subsequent life events occur. To further establish the relationship of context and perspective transformation, the following section will discuss the evolution of perspective transformation theory and the various contexts in which it may occur.

Perspective Transformation and Context

The criticisms of Mezirow’s concept of perspective transformation revolve around the context in which transformations occur and, in spite of each critic adding his or her own spin, the central issue for debate lies in the scores of diverse conditions that create ideal breeding grounds for perspective transformations. Mark Tennant (1993) challenges Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation as he believes that this particular type of personal development is not due to a progressively transforming process but is, instead, a result of a suddenly occurring total shift in personal beliefs and values. This is described

in his terms as a “new worldview” that enabled one to truly understand the world around them in a previously unknown light. An important critique by Tennant is that Mezirow’s theory is based on a cognitive development process that could potentially occur in any adult learner, even though not everyone reaches the higher stages according to Mezirow (1991). According to Tennant, this premise makes perspective transformation appear to be an expected, not a *transforming*, pattern of development. Tennant felt that true perspective transformation was an uncommon, unanticipated occurrence that most often happened as a result of some radical life incident, the *context* of learning.

Mezirow (1994) responded to Tennant and other critics by more closely outlining what he believed to be the stages of perspective transformation as a developmental process in adults. He related his theory to emancipatory learning and Freire’s theory of conscientization, in which the learner begins to own his or her new understanding, feels empowered by it, and eventually acts upon it. Mezirow (1993) agreed with Tennant’s argument that perspective transformation is uncommon but countered his argument that perspective transformation is usually sudden in onset with immediate results and is based primarily on context. Mezirow’s (1978, 1981, 1988, 2000) research shows that perspective transformations, while sometimes sudden, more often take some time to occur and that the results vary to extremes with some learners unable to achieve the higher stages.

Clark and Wilson (1991) further critiqued Mezirow by writing an article to suggest that perspective transformation theory is devoid of the situational context in which it happens for a person. The authors write that the context, whether social, historical, cultural, or political, is paramount in how and why perspective transformation occurs.

Their writing suggests that these contexts must be an integral part of the process and stages of perspective transformation in order for the theory to be complete. Mezirow (1991) responded promptly to Clark and Wilson in an article in the same publication to ensure that his theory was not misconceived. He reinforces that, while transformation theory does not exclusively define context, it cannot exist without its influence. He believes that culture and context are projected into the meaning perspective that is to be transformed.

Taylor (1993, 1994, 2000) argues that social and cultural influences on context play a larger part in perspective transformation theory than given credit by Mezirow. He states that “the influence of personal contextual factors on a perspective transformation is found in what is referred to by other studies as a readiness for change, the role of experience, and a predisposition for a transformative experience” (2000, p. 309). Taylor reminds adult educators that learners cannot ignore their own personal history that enables their transformative experiences. In his research regarding how intercultural competency aids transformative learning, he found that learners “were ready for change due to former critical events, personal goals, or prior intercultural experiences” (1994, p. 164). Daloz (2000) succinctly assesses the misconception surrounding the context of perspective transformations by stating that

transformation is often understood as a lonely and rather sudden event...This may be true in some cases, but as Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves (1998, p. 78) point out, the ‘catalytic events’ that often precipitate transformation are not isolated but rather ‘emanate from a support system of family and friends, support groups, and/or spirituality’. (2000, p. 106)

Collard and Law (1989) contend that Mezirow's original theory is incomplete because of the lack of context and that educators often place too much importance on perspective transformation as a common process for adult learners. Mezirow's response to his social context critics follows Collard and Law's article. He reasserts that his theory does, indeed, consider context and that there are "mediating factors" (1989, p. 172) that often prohibit the role that context plays in an individual's transformational learning process. He feels that the stages of perspective transformation encompass context, although it is not stated explicitly as such.

Mezirow goes on to further suggest that perspective transformations exist that encompass a variety of contexts. An example that is particularly relevant to this study is his belief that the highest learning "involves transformations of the sort that occur in religious conversion...These are perspective transformations, through which we can become aware that our whole way of perceiving the world has been based on questionable premises" (1991, p. 91). It was not only this researcher's desire to examine perspective transformation in a unique context, it was my explicit purpose to look at "the sort that occur in religious conversion" and "emanate from spirituality."

This research focused on the religious conversion experience as a form of perspective transformation. As would be expected in a Western society, the vast majority of literature in this area refers to Christian belief systems with Jesus Christ as the central figure. There are a select few studies from outside of this particular belief system that lend support to similar religious experiences taking place within non-Christian belief systems (Davies, 1990; Fowler, 1981). Because of the Christian basis of the majority of

the literature, this research limits its focus to studies within this context. Next, I will examine the specific context of perspective transformation found in religious conversion experiences.

The Religious Conversion Experience

It has become evident that adult religious conversion experiences are not necessarily a one-shot, lightning bolt experience that causes immediate, unrelenting changes in one's faith or belief systems. It is, also, a process that requires intense self-assessment often following a personal crisis, critical reflection, and the influence of God (Loder, 1981; Meadow & Kahoe, 1984; Ryan, 2000). This research must lay a foundation for the term "conversion" so that the reader will understand its application throughout the text. As will be shown, conversion is a term used in many ways ranging from a simple affiliation to a deeply personal shift in beliefs. To exemplify this point, some people may claim conversion as a method of fitting in to a social structure or to benefit in some way from the appearance of being converted (termed "pseudochange" by Ryan, 2000, p. 342). Others may yet convert to a level that is parallel to, not higher than, their current psychological state. Ryan (2000) refers to this as "alternation" (p. 353) because the convert is merely replacing his way of thinking with another that is equal in nature and finds it relatively simple to shift between the two and back again "without an increase in the differentiation or integration of one's cognitive structures" (2000, p. 353).

For the purpose of this research, the term conversion does *not* refer to pseudochange or alternation. It ascribes instead to Brauer's definition of conversion as "a profound, self-conscious, existential change from one set of beliefs, habits, and orientation to a new structure of belief and action" (1978, p. 227). Ryan (2000) further describes conversion

as “a tearing down of old cognitive frameworks and meaning systems, and the building up of new ones” that “brings with it dramatic change in one’s speech and behavior; new patterns of everyday living come into existence” (p. 344).

Conversions occur in many settings and through a variety of catalysts. Because this research is primarily interested in how learners makes sense of their conversions and whether the results endure over time and through subsequent perspective transformations, it is not important to this research exactly what has catalyzed the conversion process. In this section, I will briefly describe the central ideas of religious, specifically Christian, conversion experiences as described in theological literature.

In Christianity, conversion is said to begin with the individual’s disorientation, incertitude, or discontent with his or her current beliefs or lack thereof (Ross, 1993). The process continues when the individual seeks to understand this feeling of disorientation through critical reflection, discussions with others, attending classes or services, and/or reading about religion or related topics. The actual conversion takes place when a paradigm shift occurs within the belief system of the individual who begins to associate with Christian principles, for example, acknowledging the deity of Jesus Christ. Christianity is based upon a person’s *choice* to accept or deny the deity of Christ. Human choices require human thought and human thought requires a catalyst of some sort. Be it a crisis or a nudge from the Divine, this catalyst can provoke a profound moment of self-reflection, a time in which people decide, make a *choice*, as to what or in whom they places their faith.

Gillespie (1993) discussed the dynamics of religious conversion. The author suggests that conversion is a result of the impact of a transformational experience upon one’s

identity development. The experience, be it a life crisis or other disharmonious experience, leads to self-reflection and eventually the questioning of one's beliefs and values. According to Gillespie, a conversion may only take place once an individual realizes that his or her identity is reliant upon the combination of faith, self-value, and life experiences. Ryan (2000) describes this realization as "a collapsing of the distinction between front stage and back stage as the performance and the perceived real self converge" (p. 353) meaning that the person finally connects his interior self-image with his exterior performer-self to form a new person that can truly enact his interior motives.

Crysdale (1990) also suggests that religious conversion experiences are a result of disorientation found within an adult's normal development pattern. According to the author, it is expected and natural for adults to experience periods in which they self-assess their personal beliefs, morals, and behaviors. With many people, this self-assessment leads to the acknowledgement of a higher power, God. With others, the process is viewed as too difficult and they are unwilling to continue the search for answers to their questions. The author further suggests that context plays a role in the conversion experience because in many cases the conversion experience is catalyzed by some profound reflective process brought on by a traumatic life event.

To further this line of thought, Engel (1990) looked at those who had undergone religious transformations and questioned why they had chosen to convert to a belief system different than the one prior claimed. He found that converts were introduced to new beliefs via friends or religious establishments and through a process of analyzing their former beliefs, they eventually accepted the new system. The author acknowledges that, although, not all people originally belong to a religious belief system, religious

denomination, or faith in particular, the topic of religion and/or conversion is expected to be approached, albeit not always resolved, during the course of one's normal development. It is at this time that a decision regarding religious beliefs is made. If an individual acquiesces to a religious belief system, then a conversion is underway and will be eventually demonstrated through behavioral practices by the convert such as prayer, religious worship and study, and the application of religious principles as will be discussed shortly.

Conversion is billed as the "great transformation" by Hefner (1995). He came to that conclusion in a text that details how conversion experiences have been described throughout history as a process of great significance, both individually and culturally. Even though this research assigns a definition to the term conversion for the purpose of this study, Merrill (1995), in a chapter of Hefner's book, concedes

that no single, universally applicable definition of conversion is possible or even desirable. Instead, conversion is better conceived more relativistically. A relativistic notion of conversion acknowledges that different religions define and evaluate conversion differently. It also recognizes at least two perspectives in any conversion situation--that of the existing adherents of the new religion and that of the supposed converts--and that these perspectives can differ. (p. 154)

The implication is that conversion experiences are quite subjective and deeply personal, with no human having the right to draw conclusions about another human's experience—it is up to the individual convert to name his own reality, even when his personal actions may belie him to others.

In many cases conversion is a word used to describe circumstances other than the intended definition posed by this researcher. It may simply refer to an “affiliation to a Christian church, an explicit claim to Christian identity, or merely a borrowing or religious elements associated with Christian tradition” (Wood, 1995, p. 320). With this interpretation in mind, conversion may actually be used to “gain status or prestige” as in the case of the Khmer (Hefner-Smith, 1994) who claimed Christian conversion to get their children into better schools. Others may also convert to satisfy external needs as seen in Hefner’s look at Muslim Java (1995) who, for political purposes, desired to serve whichever god their leaders served. As shown, people may convert to a belief system for a multitude of reasons, such as political gain, peer pressure, or social involvement, not necessarily to quench an internal spiritual thirst. In these situations, conversion is limited to the understanding of those exposed to it and the methods by which they were exposed. Wood (1995) states that

the possibilities of conversion are tempered by people’s concepts of religious knowledge—whether such knowledge is or should be open to critical reflection; whether it is experienced as pervading life or is, alternatively, mostly contextualized; and whether it is a repository of timeless realities, or a conditional stage of understanding. (p. 319)

Conversion experiences, in any form, are among the few human experiences that intersect virtually all cultures and circumstances throughout history. Additionally, Christian conversion experiences are described throughout the literature as a personal conversation between the human mind and God. As this is the case, conversions may occur privately, without ever openly professing the change to another person although, by

definition of perspective transformation, the change will ultimately be evidenced by how converts view the world and respond to it following their transformation. Welton (1993) describes conversion as the “most human of experiences” and states that

we should by no means assume that Christian conversion is the culminating achievement, entry into a zone of eternal comfort. Conversion is an invitation to live life on the edge of the raft. The transformative journey unsettles the comfortable, subverts the ordinary and inverts the conventional. (1993, p. 107)

Gelpi (1999) describes conversion as a process that begins by passing from “irresponsible to responsible behavior in some realm of human experience” (p. 8) referring to converting from any one worldview to another, religious or not. He adds specifically for those converting to Christianity that “conversion begins to have a graced character when its motives invoke supernaturally revealed truths, realities, and values” (p. 8). He later expounds on this idea:

The realm of the supernatural results from God’s decision to not just engage in the ongoing creation of the world but also to intervene in human history in incarnate form in order to invite humans into the collaborative work of undoing the consequence of their own sinfulness. One can only respond to the gratuitous, saving, supernatural self-disclosure of God within space and time on the terms which that self-disclosure demands: in other words, one can only respond in faith. One experiences the Christian God through faith in his Incarnate Son and in the divine Breath whom the latter mediates. (1999, p. 8)

In other words, conversion does not happen merely because one chooses to convert, there is a second party to be considered: God. Conversions of beliefs unrelated to God, what

Gelpi terms “intellectual” and “moral” conversions, may occur naturally as do many other forms of learning or perspective transformation but, because God is the focus of Christian conversion, there is an element of the divine, the supernatural, that must not be overlooked. It is God’s intervention that, according to Gelpi, enables the non-believer to transform within and ultimately reflect this transformation behaviorally. Welton (1993) agrees when he states that “Christians affirm that Christ, the Light, mediates the transformational process” (p. 106).

Behavioral changes provide proof to others of an individual’s newfound Christian belief system. The behavioral evidence of Christian beliefs may include the unconditional sharing of personal attributes and provisions with those less fortunate, a personal narrative (testimony) as to one’s relationship with God, and the practice of the doctrine of one’s particular belief system such as participating in worship services, baptism, or communion.

Gelpi (1999) describes the sharing aspect as an “unconditional trust in God [that] seeks to bring into existence a community of universal sharing that excludes no one in principle and that opens its doors to everyone, especially those in greatest need” thereby breaking down “the social barriers that sin erects in human society: barriers of gender, race, class, greed, privilege, coercion, etc.” (p. 10). Gustavo Gutierrez (1978), a pastor to Lima’s poor, writes that

Conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ...To be converted is to commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly,

realistically, and concretely...not only generously, but with an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action. (p. 309)

The second aforementioned evidence of Christian conversion is the element of being empowered to tell others about your beliefs. Hefner-Smith (1994) studied the Christian conversion of Khmer (Buddhist) refugees and found that many believed strongly in the personal testimony aspect of Christianity. She quotes an American Baptist pastor working among the Khmer, “evangelical means that you have to have a personal experience...we stress the importance of the personal experience, of recognizing and admitting your sin and receiving Christ...we feel strongly evangelical and that also means we want to share the message with others” (p. 9). This ability to describe one’s conversion experience is of utmost value in the Christian belief system as converts are expected to evangelize non-believers.

Finally, the most commonly seen evidence of Christian conversion comes through the practice of the Christian doctrine. Although denominations vary in their practices, as do the practices of the churches within the denominations, a new convert will most likely ascribe to a prescribed set of beliefs outlined by an organized religious body. These practices, however, are modified depending on the church as well as individual preference but are still generally recognizable to an outsider. For example, baptism is a practice of all Christian churches, but for some it takes place by immersion in a lake or river, others are immersed using a baptismal pool indoors. Many churches utilize a baptismal font to symbolically baptize by sprinkling the head with water. Some churches baptize infants while others wait until the individual makes his own decision to be baptized. The ways to baptize are as numerous as the arguments behind them, but

regardless of the method, the indication to other people is clear, as with other related behavioral changes: this person is practicing a Christian principle.

Other commonly accepted Christian practices that are easily evidenced by others are: an increasing knowledge of the Bible and/or Christian principles, the use of prayer in personal life, the financial support of Christian institutions (whether through tithing or donations), and the acceptance of the Ten Commandments outlined in the Old Testament. Behavioral changes may be even more obvious to others when the convert *turns away* from outward behaviors such as racism, greed, drinking, gambling, etc., that are commonly accepted as non-Christian “sinful” behaviors. The acquisition of these new beliefs and their resulting behavioral changes vary from culture to culture and person to person, even though the above-mentioned categories are commonly accepted as evidence of Christian conversion.

An important caution in studying conversion is that the behaviors indicating personal change sometimes take precedence over the unknown internal processes in some cultures. For example, in cultures that are illiterate, beliefs cannot be discussed in terms of what individuals read in the Bible (or when the Bible is unavailable), they have to rely on the principles and behaviors of Christianity that are taught to them. Merrill (1995) found in his study about the conversion of Indians in Northern Mexico that converts were categorized by the missionaries as “good” or “bad” Christians based solely on behaviors. He concluded that “public displays of conversion unaccompanied by private acceptance should not be taken as examples of conversion, nor should cases in which people participate in a new religion and its rituals but do not change their preexisting view of the world” (p. 153).

It is important to recognize that conversion is both a “radical depth turn from sin and darkness, historically mediated, *and* entry into a transformative learning community sharing a common life and attuned to the least of God’s creatures” (Welton, 1993, p. 121, *italics added*). To further the point of how changes in belief are related to changes in behavior, Welton (1993) states that, “nothing in the gospel’s challenge allows us to separate faith, authentic love and praxis” (p. 120). This means that once a person becomes a Christian, faith begets agape love (willingness to sacrifice self for another) and this sacrificial love manifests itself in proportionately generous behavior. In other words, it was essential that this researcher recognize both the internal perspective transformation and the resulting external behaviors since the very essence of Christianity relies on evidence of both.

Before concluding this section, this researcher must acknowledge the influence of sociocultural concerns within the realm of religious conversion, just as Clark and Wilson (1991) applied sociocultural issues to perspective transformation. The culture in which one converts is a serious consideration, whether it is a culture in which the convert has little or no control, as in the case of oppressive societies, or a culture that is created or condoned by the convert, such as found in family traditions and values.

To illustrate how culture can be successfully integrated into Christianity, Vernon (1999) studied how several Native Americans came to convert to Christianity. She found that when missionaries and local churches actually broke tradition to incorporate Native values, the Natives were less suspicious of their motives and much more likely to accept the new belief system. This method required the church workers to admit “they do not know all there is to know about God” (p. 47) and undertake growth within themselves in

order to effectively witness about their beliefs to the Native people. They learned that, for the Natives, “their starting point for coming to faith in Jesus Christ is not a history imposed on them, but their own [Native] history first and their own understanding of the world and their celebration of God’s gracious act in creation” (1999, p. 22). This approach has enabled Christian Natives to worship in ways that they deem culturally appropriate while still incorporating traditionally accepted Christian beliefs and behaviors. Through this strategy “Christian Natives have brought different worldviews into creative contact” (p. 7). While the resulting beliefs and behaviors were ultimately quite similar, often identical, freedom to express these ideas culturally begets conversions shown to have staying power (Hefner-Smith, 1994; Merrill, 1995; Vernon, 1999).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research was to examine whether or not perspective transformations endure in non-life-threatening scenarios, such as religious conversions, and how they were influenced by subsequent perspective transformations. The goal of this chapter was to funnel the reader toward a comprehensive understanding of how conversion will be considered a perspective transformation by laying the theoretical groundwork for such a conclusion. Transformational learning theory reflects through the possibilities of how adults learn, develop, and make meaning through personal experiences, especially those rare experiences that create such personal upheaval that existing worldviews are shattered. Secondly, the reader is shown how adult education is benefited by the pursuit of understanding how and why adults transform, the reason that this work is important to the field of adult education. The third section defines perspective transformation and gives several examples of its application in the fields of

adult education and adult development. In the fourth section, the critics of perspective transformation theory make obvious the lack of research about the unique contexts in which perspective transformations occur, fueling the premise of this research-- perspective transformations in the context of religious conversions. The fifth and final review section speaks specifically to the religious conversion experience, its definitions, how it has played out historically, developmentally, and culturally, and what adds to our understanding of perspective transformations.

Throughout this chapter, giving vigilant attention to the term "transformation," I have found roads traveling from adult education to religion, from developmental psychology to cultural studies. These winding roads rise from such diverse origins and nevertheless intersect at a critical junction called perspective transformation. One cannot thoroughly explore any of these fields without passing through this intersection. This is the premise of this body of work, that perspective transformation, whether considered a sudden, epochal paradigm shift as suggested by Clark (1991), Tennant (1993), and Mezirow (2000) or an incremental process of reflective intentionality as offered by Mezirow (1991, 2000), is an adult learning process that is able to represent many, varied contexts including religious conversions.

As perspective transformation has yet to be studied through the lens of religious conversion, this researcher felt it necessary to do so for the advancement of adult education principles and practices. It was furthermore the objective of this work to assess the enduring nature of perspective transformations in non-life threatening life situations, such as conversion, and to see what happens when subsequent life events, including subsequent perspective transformations, follow. Since these scenarios have not yet been

explored, it is my desire to advance the study of perspective transformation to this point, providing a solid foundation for any future study of this subject matter.

The perspective transformation process, like a critical intersection, is most significant to those who come upon it. Which way a person turns and how long they continue on that path is of keen interest to me. More specifically, when a person commits to a belief in God, does this belief endure over time? Does this belief have any noticeable outward characteristics? What happens to this belief when hard times come calling? It was the hope of this researcher that some of these individuals, having been there, would share their stories, providing valuable information, a road maps of sorts, which will help others find their way.

The conceptual framework for the next chapter rises out of understanding the principles of transformation. These principles will be played out through the methodology of qualitative research. Qualitative methodology permits personal experiences to come to life by means of naturalistic inquiry. This enables the research to flow more freely with an emphasis on natural, holistic interviews that do not attempt to coax or control the participant. In order to effectively study those who have experienced perspective transformations, it was best to enable them to share their story in its entirety, without pressure, so that their life events will be analyzed and retold with honest representation, sensitivity, and the utmost respect.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Methods

Religious conversion experiences occur when individuals purposefully avail themselves to change from their previous set of beliefs to a new set of beliefs, in this case, Christianity. It was the purpose of this study to explore Christian conversion experiences in light of the adult learning theory of perspective transformation, and how enduring the experience is over time and through subsequent perspective transformations. This was accomplished by answering three research questions: 1) How do participants make meaning of their religious conversion experience? 2) What factors were influential in the participants' understanding of their religious conversion experience? and 3) In what ways do subsequent life experiences alter the perspective transformation that resulted from the participants' conversion experience?

Although the lasting effects of a life-threatening perspective transformation have been studied (Courtenay et al., 1998, 2000), there does not appear to be any research about the endurance of a non-life-threatening perspective transformation, such as a religious conversion. The methodology chosen for this research was a basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 1998) that explored perspective transformation in this context and how participants made meaning of their conversion experiences.

In qualitative research, the participants are given the opportunity to speak for themselves. As their experiences and perceptions are the central feature of this study, the method must represent them well. In this section, I discuss the general characteristics of

qualitative research and why this type of research best suited the purpose of this study, along with data collection techniques and the sample population of this study.

A basic qualitative research design was most appropriate for this study as it is focused on the processes involved rather than on the results gained from the research. Furthermore, this design focuses on the actual words of the learners which help to define and describe each category. This design was best suited for the participants in this study because it allowed them to share their stories, their perspectives, and their feelings (Merriam, 1998). As Clark (1991) described qualitative inquiry, it is “especially suited to the exploration of those aspects of human experience not yet extensively studied” (p. 51). Since I chose to explore a research topic that centers on perspective transformation and meaning-making, the qualitative research approach was a suitable method of inquiry because it allows for a more descriptive, learner-centered approach. Meaning-making is the foundation of transformational learning experiences and a qualitative design enabled me to seek its importance in the context of religious conversions.

Merriam (1989) credits qualitative research as contributing to the theory of perspective transformation as well as other concepts in adult education. She further concludes that this type of inquiry has the potential to actually broaden the horizons of adult education by including the why’s and how’s of conducting research. Because qualitative research is emergent, flexible, and meaning-oriented, educational researchers are finding it especially useful in representing their data. As this study helps to fill the gap in existing research on perspective transformation in non-life threatening scenarios, it benefits adult education by bringing into light empirical research about transformational learning in the unique context of religious conversions.

Design of the Study

For the purpose of this research, a basic qualitative research design was most appropriate as it allowed for individual construction of meaning (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1988, 1998) also reminds us that qualitative research is a process of discovery that must allow the researcher to be flexible in the qualitative approach in order to adapt to “unforeseen events and change direction in pursuit of meaning” (p. 37). Patton (1990) referred to qualitative research as naturalistic and dynamic. The attention is focused on process and change, which are “constant and ongoing” (1990, p. 40). Taylor (1993) wrote:

A qualitative research design is non-experimental and emergent in nature, because (a) meaning is determined to a great extent by context; (b) existence of multiple realities constrains the investigator from developing a design from only one perspective; and (c) what is ultimately learned and interpreted rest on the interaction between the investigator, context, and the participant. (p. 82)

The case has been made that qualitative research methodology should not be molded to fit a category or tradition but, should instead, be flexible, accommodating, and naturalistic in order to present the data most effectively. Taylor (1993) further described naturalistic inquiry as “where real-life experiences are allowed to emerge in an unobtrusive and uncontrolling manner before the researcher” (p. 82). This may not be possible in a predetermined “tradition” of research that requires the researcher to strive for certain characteristics and experiences to happen.

Other characteristics of qualitative, “naturalistic” inquiry include much about the flexibility of the design. Qualitative research cannot exist without an acknowledgement

of the context of the study. Creswell (1994) stated, “a methodological characteristic of qualitative inquiry is that the study is context-bound” (p. 59). This implies that this research, by being bound to the context of conversion, will be best served methodologically through qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, qualitative research is inductive, not deductive, which allows meaning to be drawn from the data without seeking predetermined answers. Merriam (1988) suggested that theories, also described as “holistic pictures,” or “generalizations,” are more often developed during the research process as opposed to deductive research in which the researcher sets about to verify or evaluate a previously known theory. Bogdan and Biklin added that “abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together” (1992, p. 31).

Because qualitative research is descriptive, more concerned with process than end result, and guided by data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992), it is the most appropriate method to be utilized for this study since I wished to understand how adults experience the process of perspective transformation. Furthermore, Clark (1991) stated “this style of inquiry is especially suited to the exploration of those aspects of human experience not yet extensively studied” (p. 51). This research explores the similarities of conversion and perspective transformation and how adults make meaning of these experiences.

Qualitative research allows both the researcher and the reader to hear directly from the participant. The words, feelings, and meanings of the participant are conveyed through the interview and observation processes using these methods. Merriam (1988, 1998) stated that qualitative research designs value meaning and process rather than outcomes or products of the study. She further wrote “the paramount objective is to understand the meaning of an experience” (p. 16). Brookfield (1990) would agree and adds

that the purpose of qualitative, phenomenological research is to enter another's frame of reference in such a way that the person's structures of understanding and interpretation, and the perceptual filters through which the person apprehends reality, can be experienced and understood by the researcher as closely as possible to the way they are experienced and understood by the learner. (p. 330)

Clark (1991) stated that "the overriding goal of qualitative inquiry is to understand the subjective reality of the participant—what meaning it has for them" (p. 53). In her research, Clark often referred to the importance of the construction and perception of meaning by learners. Bogdan and Biklin (1992) also addressed the construction of meaning. In their opinion, a major purpose of qualitative research is to understand the human experience and "the process by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p. 49). Merriam (1988), Taylor (1993), and Ledford (1998) likewise included the construction of meaning in their descriptions of qualitative inquiry. This premise is important as a rationale for selecting a qualitative research design since a major component for this research is how adults make meaning of their perspective transformations.

Sample Selection

In order to explore how perspective transformation endures over time in the context of religious conversion experiences, it was necessary to identify a sample of people who claim to have had a religious conversion experience. Purposeful sampling is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p.

61). A snowball effort, utilizing colleagues and friends, helped to identify a purposeful sample.

I began seeking participants through colleagues and friends by explaining a little about the study and the criteria for participants. I asked for referrals of potential participants and then asked the liaison to seek permission to call them. The snowball effort became effective when, during the screening interview, the initial candidates began recalling people in their lives who might qualify. Many even volunteered to contact their potential candidate on my behalf, which helped establish trust in the researcher.

I intentionally sought participants from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds who had experienced conversion between two and ten years ago and selected ten individuals from the initial screenings who claimed a religious conversion or salvation experience in which the tenets of Christianity were espoused. The participants also professed a transformation of beliefs and behaviors as a result of this experience. I attempted to interview a diverse range of ethnicities but two Asian referrals would not return my phone calls and the Hispanic woman I had selected chose not to participate at the last moment, leaving me with primarily Caucasian and African-American participants.

I also employed a criterion-based sampling technique. The first criterion was that participants have had a Christian conversion experience. Through an initial screening interview by telephone, I only selected people who professed to be Christians and self-identify with being transformed from a pre-existing set of beliefs to a Christian belief system and who have also experienced subsequent life-altering events. Terms, like “saved” or “born-again,” were some of the self-descriptors used by people who have

undergone a Christian conversion that helped to both locate and gain insight from the sample. Second, the participants each have had their religious conversion experience as an adult, sometime in the last ten years but not within the most recent two years. I selected these limits to allow for the clarity of memories from the experience, but I felt it necessary to exclude those who have not yet had ample time to critically reflect upon it or to have opportunities for secondary life experiences. One participant in particular, Daisy, exceeded the ten year limit for her original conversion by three years. She was originally included because I had mistakenly understood her conversion to be within the time limitations for this study. This actually turned out to be a *secondary* conversion and I retained her participation in this research because her story contributes a unique perspective on what happens to an original conversion when impacted by exposure to a secondary life event.

Third, participants have had what they consider to be significant life events sometime following the conversion experience to consider the effect of life events on their transformations. Fourth, I utilized a variation-sampling technique (Patton, 1990) to maximize heterogeneity and the inclusion of various ages, genders, races, and Christian denominations. This is important because individual differences within the experience may affect how one makes meaning from the conversion experience itself and to ensure that those differences have been accounted for. Because qualitative inquiry is context-based, variation-sampling was needed to explain the meaning-making process whenever context influenced or altered the story. I found variation-sampling to be especially challenging in the somewhat homogenous Bible Belt and so I intentionally sought participants whose backgrounds, ages, former beliefs, and life experiences varied widely.

Finally, I selected persons who are comfortable with discussing their conversion experience, personal beliefs, and life stories. It was important that participants be able to articulate with minimal discomfort any changes that have occurred in their lives as a result of their religious conversion experiences. This was accomplished by developing a rapport with the participant, by providing a comfortable, neutral environment, and by prefacing the interview with clear instructions.

In order to select the most purposeful sample, I conducted short screening interviews with prospective participants to confirm that they each fit the criteria set forth and to insure their ability to articulate their experiences (see Appendix A). I asked them to briefly describe their religious belief system prior to the religious conversion experience and then to briefly describe the conversion experience itself. Once the conversion experience had been established, I inquired as to how they believed themselves to be different from before the experience. I began talking to people about the subject matter before drawing any conclusions. Following the screening interviews, I determined whether or not to include the person in the final sample for the study based upon my sampling criteria. Participants' profiles are found in the following section along with a demographic table.

Participant Profiles

The purpose of this study was to examine the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the form of a conversion experience. Ten participants who underwent conversion as adults were interviewed. Each experienced his or her original conversion between two and thirteen years ago. Four women and six men from different parts of the country comprise the sample. The ages of the participants range from 30 to 70 years of

age and personal information is presented in Table 3.1. Pseudonyms were assigned and used in reporting to protect the identity of the participants. The table includes the participant pseudonyms, gender, race, educational level, current age, age at time of original conversion, religious orientation prior to their conversion, the event that precipitated their conversion, and their current church affiliations. This section will profile these participants in detail, discuss the meanings they have made through their perspective transformations, and examine secondary life events that have impacted their original conversions.

In giving a profile of each participant, it was my intention to share demographic information as well as more personal elements such as a sampling of their thoughts and feelings. In each profile, I attempted to allow the reader to sit in my chair for a moment, witnessing the humble tone and conviction that each participant shared. I was convinced of each person's sincerity in telling his or her story. In order to fulfill the purpose of this research, to examine the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion, it became essential that each person's life narrative should be considered in its own framework, through the telling of it by the one who lived it.

An extensive effort was made to represent a wide range of individuals in this research. Included are persons who were purposefully selected from both urban and rural regions, from European and African descent, from a variety of educational backgrounds and church denominations. In conducting the screening to locate participants, I also contacted individuals from Jewish descent and Asian descent; however, none would agree to complete the interview process.

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Education Level	Current age	Age at time of conversion	Religious orientation prior to conversion	Precipitating event(s)	Current church affiliation
Mary	Female	White	Bachelors	43	40	Mormon/ Atheist	Reflective reading and women's prayer group	Methodist
Sam	Male	White	Some college	34	27	Atheist	Discourse with friends/visiting churches	Baptist
Thomas	Male	Black	Finishing Bachelors	42	~36	None	Mother took him to a homeless shelter	Non-denominational
Bill	Male	White	Completed Masters	46	43	Catholic (non-practicing)	Physical collapse	Non-denominational
Micah	Male	White	High School	30	26	Catholic (non-practicing)	Men's conference	Baptist
John	Male	White	6 th Grade	70	66	None	Reflection/ Discourse	Non-denominational
Simon	Male	White	Some College	35	33	Lutheran then Mormon then None	AA...Reading/ Reflection/ Discourse	Baptist
Elizabeth	Female	Black	Some College	35	30	None	Divorce	Non-denominational
Grace	Female	White	Bachelor's	33	29	Catholic then Presbyterian then None	Discourse/ Self-Study	Baptist
Daisy	Female	White	Some College	32	19 then 29	None	Reflective Discourse/ Study	Non-denominational/ Shepherd's Chapel

To have a perspective transformation implies that there was a previously understood perspective in order for a transformation to be possible. The following participant profiles describe the formative years of the participants so that we understand their earlier perspectives. The following profiles share how each person experienced the perspective transformation of Christian conversion and the factors that influenced their eventual commitment to its tenets. Finally, the profiles touch upon the life experiences that have challenged, adjusted, or solidified their new belief system.

Mary

Mary is a 44 year-old Caucasian engineer from the mid-West. She was raised in a strict Mormon home and, as a result of prolonged sexual abuse from her father, turned away from the church as a teenager. She became an atheist for “shock value” and experienced further heartache when she gave a child up for adoption at 19.

In her twenties, Mary completed her degree and married a man who shared her atheistic view. The couple lived in a large city and she intentionally surrounded herself with people who also were non-believers, giving her no exposure to spiritual matters. Struggling with previously losing a child to adoption and a fear of parenting, she had two abortions and eventually divorced. Soon after her divorce, she met and married her second husband, a Christian. Through her interaction with him, along with counseling to deal with her troubled past, she was exposed to books with spirituals themes that led to a hunger for more information about what she considered to be “God and Truth.”

At the age of forty, Mary joined a small women’s prayer group and, for the first time, she felt she was witnessing sincerity in religion. She began to pray more, study more, and three years into her search for “Truth,” experienced a perspective transformation and

committed all aspects of her life to her new belief system. She soon made a public profession of faith in her husband's Methodist church and was baptized there. The biggest challenge to Mary's perspective transformation is a recurrent discussion with her brother, an atheist living in Japan. He argues against her beliefs and the changes in her life and she doesn't always have answers to his tough questions which sometimes creates seeds of doubt. Following each discussion, she has to work to overcome these doubts to restore and ultimately strengthen her beliefs. Surrounding herself with like-minded people helps her stay on track with her conversion, Mary told me. She stays actively involved in church, teaches yoga in a Christian facility, and home-schools her two children to preserve her family's beliefs.

Sam

Sam is a 34 year-old white construction businessman from a rural part of the Southeastern United States. Sam describes himself in his formative years as being "backwards" that is, tremendously uncomfortable in social settings or conversations. He says he was extremely shy and ill-prepared when taken to church on occasion as a child. He bought into the theory of evolution taught in his school and became a vocal proponent of it. As he grew up, Sam paid very close attention to people who claimed to be Christians and when they would make mistakes, he used this as a further reason not to believe in Christ. In his twenties he married and at 26 years old, his wife gave birth to their first child, a daughter. He says, "When I held that miracle in my hands for the first time, that's the first time I really said, there is a God." Although he acknowledged God's existence for the first time, he says it was "not out of love or desire to be saved, but out of fear for my family. I didn't want God to take away my wife, or my child."

Sam's perspective transformation began when his best friend got saved, quit drinking and swearing, and starting listening to gospel music. This astounded him and soon his friend, along with a second close friend, began to pursue him about getting saved. The change he had witnessed in the lives of his friends really drew Sam's attention. These were not "hypocritical" Christians. These were people he'd known and respected his whole life and suddenly they were talking to him about how God had changed their lives. He started to understand what Christianity was about and to feel convicted by God that he was lost. He began speaking with his friends about his spirituality and even attended a couple of church services that left him feeling further convicted. One day, when Sam was 27 years old, he and his friend visited the friend's pastor and before the visit was over, Sam had begun to weep. He knelt with the pastor and accepted Christianity as his new worldview. His perspective transformation was confirmed when he says he doesn't even remember the specifics because he was so overcome with emotion. He clearly remembers a drastic transformation though: "I knew one thing, when I got up, I was a different man than I was when I knelt down."

Two life experiences have further solidified Sam's beliefs. When his grandfather, who had helped raise him, was very ill and near to death, he appeared to Sam to be having visions of Heaven. This strengthened Sam's resolve that God and Heaven were real and that he would be with his grandfather in Heaven one day. The second experience occurred when Sam's wife was expecting their second child. Sam, being a serious outdoorsman, desperately wanted a son to share his interests with. One day, while in the shower, Sam asked God for a son and in that instant, Sam heard the Spirit of God answer yes. Sam wept like a child in the shower, knowing he would have the son he

longed for. Indeed, soon after, the ultrasound showed that his second child was to be a son. He considers his daughter “a gift of salvation” and his son “a gift of grace.”

Sam’s beliefs were recently challenged when his close friend’s wife lost her battle with cancer. He found himself angry with God as they had all prayed for her to be healed. He has since reconciled his anger and strengthened his faith because, with hindsight, he now understands how God used the situation to bring others to Christ. Sam has left his “backward ways” behind him and serves by teaching Sunday School and occasionally even filling in for the preacher. He is currently debating whether or not God may be calling him to serve full-time in ministry.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a thirty-five year old African-American from the rural Southeast with a technical degree. She is extremely attractive, articulate, and animated. Growing up, she believed that life was about completing a checklist: acquiring the right possessions, a husband, a son named “Jr.,” and she used her beauty and body to get where she wanted. Her belief system did not include a relationship with God. In her teenage years, she had an abortion that deeply troubled her and upon getting pregnant again later, she married the young father and gave birth to the “Jr.” she had thought would complete her personal checklist. Although a very committed wife and mother, Elizabeth described herself as feeling “empty.”

At the age of thirty, she confronted fears that her husband was unfaithful and the marriage ended in divorce. As her world crumbled, Elizabeth attended her aunt’s church and was so profoundly moved by the pastor’s message that she felt compelled to walk down the church aisle and dedicate her life to Christ. It was in this defining moment that

Elizabeth experienced a perspective transformation, realizing that she needed God to change her from the inside out. From that moment, Elizabeth changed her life dramatically by giving up things of her past and by involving herself in prayer, Bible study, and church activities. She became involved in a women's prison ministry and served faithfully in a tiny African-American Baptist church.

Elizabeth gradually began dating following her divorce and eventually conceived a baby with her boyfriend. Although happy to have another child, she was ashamed to have done so out of wedlock. Because of this stigma, she left her small church and moved to a slightly larger, multi-racial, non-denominational church. In keeping with Elizabeth's expressive nature, she selects churches that practice a broad range of spiritual expression including charismatic worship, speaking in tongues, dancing, healing, and fainting. This is important to know because Elizabeth's form of worship has opened doors to what some would consider the supernatural. She has experienced visions and spirits in many settings. On one occasion, Elizabeth was in a dentist office waiting room when she had a conversation with a man she is convinced was an angel of God, sent to bring her words of comfort. When she turned to thank him for his kindness, he had vanished, solidifying her belief that God acts in miraculous and mysterious ways.

She and the father of her child soon ended their relationship. Elizabeth felt that she had, once again, let herself down by relying on her looks and body to achieve her goals in life. This time in her life challenged her beliefs and her resilience as she described herself as a "whore" to have relapsed into her old patterns. She then became determined to find strength in God to break old patterns of behavior and was convinced that God would provide for her. Elizabeth has since struggled financially and in other

relationships but believes that God has used her difficult circumstances to guide her toward the right path for her life and has given her a powerful personal testimony to be shared with others. She says that through her experiences God has taught her a valuable lesson: “Because I believed that what I knew about God is that as long as I was good, then He was good to me. But, I found out through that, that even when I’m bad, He’s still good to me.”

Simon

Simon, a 35 year-old white male from a mid-size town in the Southeastern United States, was born in the mid-West with severe health problems that caused him to die briefly at eight days old and again at five years old, only to be revived. Simon was much smaller than the other children growing up and because of his size, his health problems, and a learning disorder; he became an angry young person who felt he could not rely on anyone or anything other than himself. Church likewise brought him heartache as he didn’t fit in with the other children and so he didn’t follow his parent’s Lutheran beliefs. Although in counseling throughout his early life, drinking had become a habitual part of his coping mechanism by the time he completed high school. He was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous at the age of eighteen but refused help after a few months.

As a young adult he continued to have terrible health problems but tried to live a normal life. He married a Mormon, moved out West, and converted to Mormonism, however in title only. He did not ascribe to the belief system and gradually the marriage was destroyed by his lack of commitment and adultery. He moved South to live with his parents and started a downward spiral of drug-use, drinking, and promiscuity. At one point Simon entered rehab, got sober, and was released to his parents only to slit his

wrists out of anger and remorse. He was discovered before he could bleed to death and, once again, his life was spared. He spent considerable time in the hospital and it was during this time that he cried out for God to help him.

Simon's perspective transformation occurred when, at 33, he reentered AA and developed an understanding of God and how his relationship with God is a daily effort. Simon's new worldview includes a deep relationship with God, who resembles himself, wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt and flip-flops, saying, "You're okay." As a result of his transformation, Simon no longer questions his sexuality or beats himself up over past mistakes. He embraces the Christian tenet of forgiveness and has released the anger that has gripped him since childhood. Simon lives his life today shuttling between doctor's appointments and dialysis for his failing kidneys, volunteer work, and his Baptist church.

Daisy

Daisy is a 32 year-old stay-at-home mother of two, soon to be three. She is from the rural Southeastern United States and was raised by a Baptist family. In her formative years, church attendance was a bargaining chip for being allowed to do other activities. When she was fifteen, Daisy became involved in an abusive relationship with a man. Although the relationship was highly dysfunctional and abusive, they soon married and she became pregnant. Due to the abuse of her husband, Daisy suffered a miscarriage. Over the course of the following year, both partners were unfaithful and Daisy conceived a child with another man. Her husband, in an attempt at reconciliation, agreed to call the child his own but continued the abuse toward Daisy.

When her baby was just one, Daisy realized that she could not risk staying with her husband. This decision followed a beating in which she was holding her child, trying to

protect the baby from his violence. Soon after the divorce, Daisy began attending church, this time in earnest and at the age of nineteen, she experienced her first conversion. She changed everything about herself, from her attitudes to her looks and before long, she met a Christian man that she would marry within the year.

Her new husband and his family were extremely involved in church and spent much time serving in various ministries. Daisy felt connected with this family and their church but battled internal demons that made her feel alone and confused at times. Soon Daisy sought professional help and learned that she suffered from bipolar disorder. In the course of receiving treatment, she learning she was pregnant again and gave birth to her second daughter. Throughout this period, Daisy also received her GED, attempted college, and served in ministry alongside her husband. She often felt overwhelmed and gradually learned to balance her bipolar disorder and her workload better.

Three years ago, Daisy's in-laws began a separate Bible study following the teachings of Shepherd's Chapel, an unusual offshoot of the Christian faith. Through them, Daisy was pulled into a new belief system that often conflicted with her previous understanding, leading to a conversion from her Baptist belief system to what she considers simply to be a heightened understanding of the Bible. Daisy actually feels that her first conversion to Christianity was based on falsehoods as she believes now that most Christians are either misinformed or outright deceptive in their presentation of the Bible. Daisy no longer attends a traditional church, or serves in the ways that she has for years, but instead has formed with her in-laws and several new members a weekly Bible study that endeavors to practice their new understanding. In addition, Daisy has personally apologized and written apologetic letters to people for her part in proselytizing the wrong message prior

to her current understanding. Daisy clearly has experienced two religious conversions, the second one challenging and ultimately altering the first. I retained Daisy in this research sample because I believe that her story adds to our understanding of what happens to conversions when secondary life events or perspective transformations follow them.

Micah

Micah is a thirty year-old Caucasian plumber from a large city. He was raised in a non-practicing Catholic home. With his brother, he grew up living for fun and adventure and the two boys became involved in drugs as teens. The tight-knit brothers moved into an apartment together and continued to party hard. In 1995, his brother was killed in a motorcycle accident and Micah hit rock bottom. He says that this event initiated his conversion although it took him awhile to realize it. At first, friends comforted him with drugs but, unlike before, he felt very alone and lost. Over time he met and married his wife, a Christian, who at one point encouraged him to attend a Christian men's conference in Tennessee. He attended the conference with an open mind and met a woman who would sit down with him and discuss God and life. At this conference, Micah experienced a perspective transformation by making the decision to change his life completely and embrace Christianity. He returned home, gave up drugs, and began to search for a church home where he could learn more about the God he had chosen to serve. He and his wife visited numerous churches of various size and beliefs. They eventually settled on a small Baptist church where they are active with the youth group and several activities.

A significant event in Micah's life that impacted his further development as an adult, and as a Christian, was the adoption of a third child. This child was the daughter of his wife's sister who had lost custody due to mental illness. Sadly, the state took custody of the child while she lived in the West and Micah's family lived in the South. The little girl, about two years old at that time, was raised in foster care by a loving black family for almost two years while her biological relatives, Micah and his wife, fought to bring her to their home. During this difficult time, the mother of the child, Micah's sister-in-law fatally shot herself. These experiences coincided with Micah's acceptance of God, the birth of his two biological children, and their search for a church home, causing Micah to rely on his faith more and more. Finally the couple gained custody and legally adopted the little girl, taking extra steps by receiving counseling to blend her successfully into their home.

Micah, four years after his perspective transformation, is working hard to balance his work and home life. A current challenge to his belief system is the daily grind of trying to make ends meet financially while enabling his wife to be a homemaker, something they believe is important in giving their young children the attention they need. Micah believes that these challenges have been a part of his conversion process. In his words, "conversion is...transforming who you are from being one way into another way...It's taking your life and making it better. No matter what your situation is, no matter how good you've got it, if you don't have God, it can't do anything but get better."

John

John is a 70 year-old white male from the rural South with a sixth-grade education. I was connected with John through a minister who stated that before his conversion, John

had a reputation of being one of the meanest men around. This intrigued me and so I made an appointment to screen John and then later to interview him. When speaking with John, I learned that he was a lifelong hunter, a hard-worker, and a man of few words. Furthermore, the generation gap between this elderly woodsman and this “young college girl” was evident as he seemed uncomfortable discussing anything that would reveal improper past behaviors on his part and so I did not push the issue. He impressed me as being a very gentle-natured person, speaking softly about his beloved wife, daughter, and two grandchildren. His demeanor made me question whether or not he had indeed been a tough guy as a younger man. He admitted, with some chagrin, that he used to have a “high temper.”

He told me about how his family had tried his whole life to get him in church and how all of his life he intended to go but found reasons not to, primarily hunting and drinking with his buddies. God was a concept that John understood. His brother was a preacher and spoke to him often on the subject. Understanding who God was didn't cause John to desire a relationship with him though, and it wasn't until he was 66 years old that he finally visited an evangelical church service and felt a spiritual pull to give his life to Christ. It was in this large, modern, non-denominational church that he quietly walked down the aisle and prayed with the pastor for Jesus to enter his heart. His wife of fifty years and family were “shocked” at his decision to convert after many, many years of trying to convince him and they openly wept in celebration. This marked John's perspective transformation from a man who for so long lived only for himself to a man who lives to serve God.

John became a regular at church services and functions, becoming a much beloved figure. His failing health causes him concern and when I asked if this challenged his faith, he said that “things will happen” even for Christians and seemed to have a positive outlook on how God is there for him even in difficult times. I asked him if he ever feels behind others his age as far as his spiritual growth or knowledge goes. He responded affirmatively, “They’ve got a lot more experience explaining stuff and things than you do with four or five years [experience].” He did say his conversion was very much “like education,” “even as old as I am, I can still learn things everyday.” John felt that, as a Christian, he should work on himself daily, control his temper, and be a gentle witness to people who are not Christians.

Thomas

Thomas is a 42 year-old African American from the South. His early life was tough as his father died while he was a baby and his mother married an abusive man. This marriage lasted until Thomas was eleven and when they divorced, she remarried for a third time, this time to a minister. Although his mother tried to keep her young children in church throughout their childhood, it meant little to Thomas but a fun time with friends. When his mother married the minister, this attitude did not change because he felt he was a loner and his new stepfather made little effort to bond with him. This led to problems in school, skipping classes, the use of marijuana and alcohol, and attempts to run away from home. His parents then sent him to a private Christian academy in a different state where he hung out with an older crowd and continued his adventures in alcohol and drug use. Although there were daily devotional lessons, Thomas says “It didn’t take hold of me.”

Following high school, Thomas joined the Army and was stationed in Europe where he found easy access to alcohol, pornography, and harder drugs. Thomas became addicted to all three and to fuel his habits, he started robbing people. The Army found out and charged him, but before he could face the consequences, he jumped on a plane to New York. Of course, the Army pursued him for being AWOL. Through a DUI, they were able to locate him and only a glitch in the system allowed him to be set free without further prosecution. Thomas carried his addictions with him for a long time. Crack cocaine became his life, “I woke up in the morning, crack, I laid down at night, crack, my whole day in between was crack.” Thomas spent the next five years in and out of prison for drug charges and robbing stores to pay for drugs. Even so, Thomas doesn’t blame crack for his actions, he said “I was that piece of crap anyway.”

During this period he dated a woman and they had two children together. His mother, like his girlfriend, continually condemned the drug use and bad behavior. Soon, he found himself homeless but it wasn’t until his mother actually gave him a bus ticket to a shelter for drug addicts that he decided he needed a place to lay his head. When he arrived, he met an old friend who was participating in the program and was introduced to counselors and ministers who spent time explaining to him how God can save him. A week into the program, Thomas experienced a perspective transformation by deciding he needed to radically change who he was by accepting Christ as his Savior.

He spent the next several months searching the Bible for answers, seeking guidance from ministers. This was his first real contact with white people and he felt very accepted. He moved to another, more permanent facility where he could live and work in the ministry. It was here that he really experienced the transformation of his previous

perspectives. He felt he was no longer a loner and for the first time, he had a sense of belonging and purpose. He was helping kids, leading worship services, praying throughout each day, and spending alone time with God every morning. Thomas ended up spreading himself too thin; working fourteen-hour days at the mission, serving in a variety of ministries and the service brigade, and his quiet time with God began to suffer.

He suffered a relapse into drug use as a result of the demands on his life. When he was promptly discovered, his relationship with the mission was severed. A pivotal moment occurred when, while feeling overwhelmed, Thomas was offered crack for the first time since his initial recovery and he felt the Holy Spirit urging him not to do it. Although he slipped back into crack use for a short period, that nudging of the Holy Spirit further solidified his beliefs and made him eventually come clean again. Soon he entered a new facility, knowing now not to overdo his work and ministry commitments. Slowly he began to journal, writing daily to God about his feelings. In time, Thomas decided God could use him as an addictions counselor to help others like himself. At the age of forty, he began college and will graduate this semester with a Bachelor's degree in counseling. He continues to live at the shelter and has given up living in the outside world because he knows that even though he is deeply committed to Christ, as a human being, the temptations are sometimes too great for him to resist. He ministers daily to those who have been down similar paths. Speaking to Thomas deeply moved me because clearly this man was not the person he described from his past. His demeanor was soft-spoken and respectful, often reflecting profound remorse for past behaviors. It is easy to see why he is able to successfully reach out to troubled young men.

Grace

Grace is a 33 year-old Caucasian professional in the travel/tourism industry from the Northeastern United States. Her formative years were primarily spent away from religion although she infrequently attended Catholic services with her grandmother or a local Presbyterian church on special occasions with her parents. She considered these merely to be social events. Throughout her formative years, she felt that there was perhaps a God but she had no personal connection to him and no desire to learn more about him. Her life, she felt, was hers to do with whatever she wished.

She was introduced to Christ at the age of twenty-nine through an on-going reflective discourse with a respected co-worker. On her own she began to study religious materials and purchased a simplistic children's version of the Bible, eventually graduating to an adult version. She found enjoyment in reading Bible study materials and often spoke to her supportive husband, a non-Christian, on the subject. Once comfortable, she and her husband attended the co-worker's small Baptist church and progressively became more active. Grace experienced a perspective transformation through her studies and conversations and soon, she and her husband committed to becoming Christians. Without her parents' support, she was baptized in an outdoor baptismal pool in a special service that touched her deeply. In a short time, Grace had changed her worldview from centering around herself and her needs to focusing on how she could grow as a Christian and better serve God.

Within a year, Grace was assisting in teaching Sunday School and involved in special programs. In the following year the couple felt more grounded and autonomous, moving their church membership to an unfamiliar larger Baptist church nearer to her home where

they knew no one but felt its proximity would enable them to be more active. The couple has long considered adopting a child but has decided instead to try for a biological conception first. In the course of discussing having children and in changing jobs, Grace has found herself relying on prayer more and more often to help make both personal and professional decisions.

In the past year, Grace has lost three beloved pets, her “children” to various illnesses. She found this to be very challenging to her beliefs as she discovered that she was angry at God for her pets’ suffering. Dealing with this anger, she says, has strengthened her resolve to believe in God even in difficult times. She has found comfort in envisioning her precious pets playing together in Heaven. Three years following her perspective transformation, she continually engages friends and family in conversations about her faith with hopes of introducing them to Christ.

Bill

Bill is a 46 year-old white male from the mid-West. He was raised in a Catholic home; however, he did not subscribe to these beliefs. He said he may have gone to church but he wasn’t really there. Early in life, Bill witnessed the accidental death of very close friend. From that time on, he “medicated his feelings” and became engrossed in drugs, alcohol, and women. He became dependent on alcohol, often consuming more than a half-gallon of hard liquor in a day, and spending some time in jail as a result. Carrying this into adulthood, Bill found himself married, then divorced three times in rapid succession due to his infidelity and alcohol abuse.

At the age of 43, Bill prepared to attend his sister’s birthday party. Trying hard to be sober for the event, he looked into a mirror and saw death looking back at him. It scared

him deeply because he was convinced that he was going to die soon. On the day of the party, in the presence of his entire family, Bill suffered a grand mal seizure that caused his mother to have to resuscitate him and he was left in a coma. When he awoke from the coma, he was transferred to a detox center because the consensus was that alcohol would most definitely cost him his life if he did not stop. From the detox center, he was moved to a live-in Christian rehabilitation center for men.

Within weeks of his arrival, Bill was faced with the fact that he needed Jesus in his life and he began to feel profound guilt regarding his former lifestyle. It was then that Bill experienced his perspective transformation. When I asked him what the difference was between the old Bill and the converted Bill, he answered, "I don't know who I was, but I know what I was. I was a drunk. I was mean. I was a thief. I was an adulterer." He has learned through his conversion and ongoing involvement with ministry that he is not that person anymore. Instead, he is a counselor who just completed his Master's degree in Psychology. He is a caring father to his two daughters. And for the first time in his life, he feels he is a good son, one who has apologized to his parents for hurting them so badly, so often. He ministers to other alcoholics and, with his calm tone and gentle manner, his life story touches people without addictions as well, people like me.

Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to examine the enduring nature of perspective transformation in a non-life threatening context, namely religious conversion. In order to accomplish this, I intentionally selected a qualitative data collection technique that would allow the words of the participants to guide the research and add "concrete, vivid meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader--another researcher, a

policy maker, a practitioner, than pages of numbers” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 15). Interviews are described by Patton (1990) as a one-on-one conversation with the purpose of collecting a specific type of data or information. The active interview is described by Holstein and Gubrium (1995) as unavoidably collaborative, with both parties making meaning throughout the interview. They suggested that researchers “acknowledge interviewers’ and respondents’ constitutive contributions and consciously and conscientiously incorporate them in the production and analysis of interview data” (p. 4).

The in-depth interview is the main type of data collection that I used in this study because it encourages participants to feel at ease during the process and allows them to speak freely, with thick description, about their personal experiences. Thus, the most appropriate data collection method for this research was the semi-structured, in-depth interview. The active in-depth interview was chosen for its ability to “draw our attention to the interactionally artful methods—the hows—through which meaning is produced and made visible” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 16) which speaks directly to the meaning-making aspect of this work. Furthermore, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) liken interview participants to “practitioners of everyday life, constantly working to discern and designate the recognizable and orderly parameters of experience” (p. 16). As this was seemingly true for the participants of this research, I felt it important to learn how they “discerned and designated” their conversion experiences. I audio taped each interview thereby “increasing the accuracy of data collection” (Patton, 1990, p. 348) and transcribed each interview word-for-word.

The interview itself followed a predetermined interview guide and was of a conversational style to encourage the participant to share anything they believed to be

pertinent. A complete set of interview questions can be found in the interview guide (see Appendix B). Furthermore, I took notes during the interview process as also recommended by Patton. I made efforts to keep my note taking to brief, fairly consistent intervals that would not distract the participants. Note taking during the interviews coincided with my interview questions and generally gave respondents' behavioral and emotional reactions to reflect their meanings more than reading their transcripts alone. I also privately kept a few notes as to what was said before and after the interview both by the participants and about them by their referrals so that I would have as much knowledge about the person as possible.

Data Analysis

Data analysis takes all of the data collected and systematically arranges it into significant patterns that reveal the underlying purpose for the research. Merriam (1998, p. 178) refers to this as “making sense” or “making meaning” out of the data collected. In the analysis of the data collected, I began by reading and rereading the interview transcripts so that I would really know the participants well. In some cases, I went back and listened again to portions of interviews so that I would hear their emotional inflections. I then began to formulate broad categories such as “behavioral changes” and “life events” and gradually narrowed the categories to focus more and more on answering the research questions. To best categorize quotes, I used a method of computer cutting and pasting to move narrative quotes to a table comprised of similar responses that later formulated the categories. By using direct quotes and emotional inflections from the participants, I found it possible to convey their meaning-making experiences while gaining evidence of the enduring nature of perspective transformation.

The primary method of analysis was the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 1997) that allowed me the opportunity to stop and reflect whenever necessary in order to draw comparisons and conclusions from the data. Specifically, I found that by using constant comparison, my interview probes became refined and focused more effectively on the participants' meaning-making process. Once the interviews were transcribed, the coding process allowed the constant comparative method to seek out key words, phrases, and events that indicated emerging categories. By employing audio taping, thorough note-taking during interviews, and consistent transcription and coding methods, I felt that the perspectives of the participants were accurately represented which was the ultimate goal of this data analysis.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are typically major considerations in any method of research. Internal validity in research ensures that researchers are “measuring what they think they are measuring” and that “the findings match reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 201). Reliability, on the other hand, “refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205). Whitt (1991) contends that validity and reliability can certainly be determined through using stable and appropriate data collection and analysis techniques that reduce the possibility of error and bias. She further stated that qualitative inquiry should be recognized as an “artful science,” due to its flexible design, and that it should be used to uncover the details of research that quantitative methods often ignore. Through the aforementioned qualitative design, I felt I could better ensure validity and reliability while also searching for the “details” of perspective transformation in the context of conversion.

The methods that were employed to ensure validity in this research are peer review (examination), member checks, and identification of the researcher's biases (Creswell, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 1997). The first method of ensuring validity for this research is found in seeking critique of my methods and findings from my major professor, committee members, and colleagues. This method is called peer review. The second method used is called a member check and occurred when I checked back with participants to ensure the accuracy of their words and meanings in the research. I did this on five occasions with different participants who gave me useful and encouraging feedback on my description of them in the profiles section, my use of their narratives in the body of Chapter Four, and my interpretations of their meaning-making and conversion processes. The third way to ensure validity was to account for all of the researcher's biases regarding this work by "clarifying the researcher's assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 205).

To ensure reliability in this research, I employed the methods of audit trail and the investigator's position. An audit trail draws a map for the reader, describing exactly how the data was collected and analyzed in the course of the study and how I came to any conclusions so that the reader will understand the researcher's progression. The last method, called investigator's position, allowed me to "explain the assumptions and theory behind the study" along with my position in regards to this and the participant group as well as "the social context from which the data were collected" (Merriam, 1998, p. 206). While considering validity and reliability, I also investigated any limitations to the study in regards to its methodology. Limitations may be prohibitive to finding the right participants or to the data collection. The limitations most obvious to me in this

research were based in the researcher's assumptions and planning. I found that I had to continually seek advice from colleagues and my committee chair to overcome my own assumptions regarding perspective transformation and conversion in order to effectively plan and conduct the interviews. Furthermore, I found it increasingly difficult to locate participants of a diverse range. Since the study was coincidentally situated in the Southern "Bible Belt," it presented a challenge in finding trusting participants from other cultures and belief systems.

Throughout the research I desired to be open to what Wolcott (1994) refers to as "something else, a quality that points more to identifying critical elements and wringing plausible interpretations from them, something one can pursue without becoming obsessed with finding the right or ultimate answer, the correct version, the Truth" (pp. 366-367) in case something new or unexpected presented itself through the data. It was my desire to leave the door open as to what would be found in this research rather than guide, whether consciously or not, the participants or the findings toward my beliefs. It is an understanding of how adults deal with their conversions and the life events that follow that I wish to pass on to my readers. In order to effectively do this, I realized that I must first flesh out my own biases.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Another important consideration in any study is researcher bias. The researcher must be open and clear about his or her assumptions and personal biases going into a study. In my case, I reflected upon and identified what my assumptions and biases are before, during, and after interviewing my sample population in order to prevent any biases from creeping into what may already be a highly-charged study for me. The idea for this

research came to me from the legal case of Carla Faye Tucker. As a young adult, Tucker committed felonies involving drugs and horrific murders. While in prison, Tucker became a Christian and appealed her case on the basis that she was no longer the person who committed those crimes, she had been transformed. Her claim interested me greatly as a Christian and an adult educator concerned with adult development. Was it merely a defense strategy or was it possible that a person could be completely changed from who they were into a new identity with a new worldview, especially when the developmental effects were so dramatic and positive?

Following the Tucker case, I began to evaluate my own beliefs regarding the conversion of adults to Christianity and other belief systems. I began to have serious concerns about emotional appeals and evangelical pressure for non-believers to be “saved.” Although I do believe that Christians and churches have a responsibility to share and practice their beliefs according to the Bible, I have come to believe that the traditional evangelical introduction of new people to conversion (or “salvation”) is ineffective. This is because I have encountered, through personal experiences while living in the Bible Belt and through research, very few evangelical Christian organizations that follow through with new adult converts to make sure they receive early Christian education designed for adults or counseling/support opportunities. This leaves the new adult convert on their own to learn about and seek support for this shift that is occurring in their worldview. With this in mind, it is not surprising that many church rosters are filled with names of people who walked the aisle in an invitation to accept Christ but haven’t been seen since. I became very interested in whether or not this type of conversion is sincere or lasting and this led to questions about how adult converts

seemingly become self-directed in initiating learning opportunities and support for their new worldview.

As a Christian from early childhood, I recognized my own bias toward Christianity and quickly learned not to assume the process to be the same for all people, much less adults with many, varied life experiences. My major assumptions were that Christianity is a “good” system of beliefs and that people *can* grow and make significant meaning out of their conversions with on-going practice and support, based on my personal commitment to God and Christianity. I also had assumed, based on my review of the literature and personal experience, that conversion would parallel the process of perspective transformation and have an enduring nature that might be affected by secondary life events or perspective transformations.

Smithmier (1996) reminded qualitative researchers to be cognizant of their power in representing the views of their participants. She referred to this as the “double bind” that creates tension between researcher and participant when the participant feels that his or her voice is misrepresented in the research due to bias or other influence. I have taken steps to avoid any double bind, whether intentional or not, in my research in order to fairly represent the voices of the participants through member checks and peer review. I further minimized bias by constantly checking myself to make sure I was not influencing the answers or attitudes of the participants by asking questions that are not guaranteed to show Christianity or Christians in a positive light and by considering the fact that my findings may not necessarily meet my expectations or personal belief system.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings for the lasting effects of a perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion. Ten participants were purposefully selected and interviewed so that their life experiences, primarily their perspective transformations of conversion, could be represented. Each interview was transcribed, coded, and analyzed through the constant comparative method of analysis to discover any similarities and differences amongst the group of participants. The findings in this chapter reflect my interpretation of how the participants answered the following research questions: 1) How do participants make meaning of their religious conversion experience? 2) What factors were influential in the participants' understanding of their religious conversion experience? and 3) How do subsequent life experiences challenge, adjust, or solidify their conversion/perspective transformation?

The findings are categorized according to the above research questions. The first research question will be discussed according to the responses of all ten participants. Comparisons will then be made in order to draw conclusions about any commonalities among the group as to how people make meaning of their conversion experiences. The second research question will then be addressed and the factors that have influenced the participants' conversion experience and their understanding of it will be examined in detail. Finally, I will look at the outcome of the third research question regarding the effect of subsequent life experiences on perspective transformation, whether the participant's newfound beliefs were challenged, adjusted, or solidified by the events of

their life. In each section, the participants own words will be used to illustrate their responses to best reflect how they think, feel, and believe.

It is important to remind the reader that conversion has been established in Chapter Two as an accepted form of perspective transformation. It is within the previous profiles that each participant's conversion process is discussed, drawing a time line from each one's formative learning to his or her present day worldview. In the participant profiles, the reader learns how each participant was introduced to Christianity, how each accepted this as a new worldview and the various life events that impacted each person's understanding and development.

Making Meaning of Conversion as a Perspective Transformation

In regards to how adults make meaning of their religious conversion experience, I first directly broached the subject in each interview with the question, "How do you make meaning of your conversion?" Almost every participant asked me to repeat or rephrase this question and my clarification ended up being, "Tell me what your conversion means to you, how you make sense of it?" In answer to this question, people responded similarly, reflecting a major shift in their previous understanding and beliefs in themselves and in religion. The meaning of their conversions included four categories: the realization of God's grace, the shift from self-centered practices to God-centered purpose, the shift in basis of decisions, and the commitment to lifelong conversion process. These categories are outlined below in Table 4.1. Following the outline is a discussion of each category supported with quotes from the participants.

Table 4.1 The Meaning of Conversion as a Perspective Transformation

- A. Realization of God's grace
- B. Shift from self-centered practices to God-centered purpose
 1. Christian identity
 2. Openness to others
 3. Responsibility to evangelize
- C. Shift in basis of decisions
- D. Commitment to lifelong change

Realization of God's Grace

The first category that explains meaning consistently found throughout the ten interviews is based on participants' perception of God's matchless ability to confer love, peace, patience, and forgiveness, a combination that Christians term "grace." For Mary, God's grace became about God's unique ability to love unconditionally. This is contrary to her Mormon upbringing, which taught her that God's grace was based merely on her own behavior. She explains:

I joined the prayer group...we ate and we talked and we prayed. And listening to these women pray, who really poured out their hearts to God, that was, and you know, towards each other, it was just a loving experience...That was my first real experience of that and that was very life changing. And then I got hold of a book called "Families Where Grace is in Place" and I read that I just had an overwhelming sense of God's love and acceptance. I think this was the first time I experienced God as someone who could accept us as who we are instead of how well we followed the rules. ...and of course, that definitely is, was a Christian Jesus Christ issue...through Christ's love that God could forgive us of our sins, the things that we did.

Following his perspective transformation, Sam found a sense of peace that had previously eluded him:

[Before converting] I believed religion to be something man created because he was afraid of death. I lived a hopeless life. The only gratification I could have on Earth was what I could accumulate or what fun I was having in the moment. But, as soon as that moment was over, that fun was gone. You had to look for something else. You know, it was a continual search for something to keep you, I guess, keep you occupied, keep you happy, keep you, you know, at peace with yourself, maybe. And now no matter what the situation, the circumstance, I'm at peace with myself and at peace with God. Now, you know, not always happy, not always joyful, but, at peace with everything.

Simon, who previously was a very angry person due to a combination of extensive medical problems, learning disabilities, and addictions, felt that he received God's grace at a time in his life when he needed it most. Because of his perspective transformation, he has resolved his anger and has learned to be less judgmental of others:

I think it's given me more patience because in the matter that God had patience for all of us. He's had patience with me, with everything I've done, or gone through. So, it's definitely if anything, it's given me patience for people. Even though I look at people and think, you're an idiot, or you're a racist. But...I know that I can't judge. Everybody's everybody.

Once the participants began to view themselves as Christians, they identified more and more with the Christian principles of forgiveness and love. By acknowledging their own misdeeds, they realized the depth of God's forgiveness and unconditional love. This left

them often feeling a sense of conviction about their judgment towards others. Although some wounds are more difficult to heal, such as Mary's childhood sexual abuse, Mary has found inner peace along with the ability to move forward with her life. She identifies herself as "a new person, a new creation in Christ." As is the case for others, previous feelings of conflict have been replaced with indescribable peace, as described by Bill:

Well, just to have peace in my... I'm alright, of course, now I've had peace in my life for three years. You know, I can look back and count everything as blessing. I look back at the thirty years I was a scumbag and that was what it took to get me here.

John, at age 70, simply credits his perspective transformation as being the reason for his sense of peace amidst difficulties and numerous health problems.

[Conversion] has made a lot of difference because you feel, there's something about it, you just feel like you got no worries or nothing about nothing...if something happens you'll be saved, that's the good part about loving God, that's the good part.

Known collectively as God's grace; the principles of love, peace, patience, and forgiveness are paramount to all other meanings made during the conversion experience. Their experiences of God's grace resulted in an inner peace that allowed participants to attain additional meaning from their conversions. Peace was a concept never really experienced by the participants prior to their conversions, they were amazed and humbled that God could actually forgive their troubled pasts. Once they realized the level of God's compassion towards them, they began to develop a more accepting, less

judgmental stance toward others. This ushered in a new consciousness toward their behavior and a more generous acceptance of others' mistakes.

Shift from Self-Centered Practices to God-Centered Purpose

The second category demonstrates meaning made as a result of the participants' belief that they have turned away from selfish behaviors and have a new purpose in life focused primarily on upholding their new beliefs and Christian principles. This category has three subcategories: 1) Christian identity, 2) Openness toward others, and 3) A responsibility to evangelize.

Christian identity. The development of a new Christian identity was especially meaningful to the participants and a big piece of their perspective transformations. This Christian identity encompasses a refocus of their purpose in life on God rather than self, involving how the participants think, feel, and behave. The participants expressed how their conversion flows into all aspects of their lives. An example of this is Mary, who sought to clarify the meaning of her conversion and found it to envelop every part of who she strives to be:

(Within months of her perspective transformation) I got up and took a piece of paper and I wrote, you know, what do I want in my life? What are my actual beliefs, what is important? And at the top of the page I wrote God and Truth and put a line around it...so that what I was writing for myself, what I wanted to believe. I wanted God and Truth to be at the top and to be covering everything...I want God to be God through everything. I don't want it to be, well, God for Sundays, God for saying prayers with your kids, I want it to be everything.

In many cases, this shift toward a God-centered purpose followed a specific path, like Bill who found his purpose in life in becoming a counselor to help other addicts:

Today, I have peace. Today, I have a purpose. Or, I know what my purpose in life is. My purpose in life is to serve God to the best of my ability. You know, to be in fellowship with Him. By doing that, that makes me happy, that gives me peace. ...I started praying. God, tell me what it is you want me to do. He made it real clear to me that my purpose in life is to help other addicts. Okay. I questioned it. I questioned God. I said, are you sure that's it? I said, I've never done anything like this, and I can't do that. But, He made it clear to me that's what I was supposed to do.

Micah simply describes his Christian identity following his conversion as a major shift in his priorities. Once being very “me-centered,” his purpose now ranks God and family above himself:

[My conversion] ranks probably, its got to rank number one...So, I mean there's just some things you just don't really understand until it happens to you. I don't know if I can make sense of what's happened in my life, it's just, where I would be now, compared to where I am now if I'd stayed on the same path would have probably been very different. Before, I was very me-centered. You know, just worried about myself and now I find myself worrying about my wife, my kids, you know, about God a lot more than I do myself.

Elizabeth finds new identity through her connection to God and the Holy Spirit inside of her. She no longer sleeps around, lies or fights but is committed to serving in ministry, raising her children in a Christian home, and evangelizing to friends and co-workers. Her

perspective transformation changed the way she views her own identity. Here she describes who she once was and how she can no longer relate to her former self:

I'll tell you exactly who I was before. I think I was a whore. I was a liar. I was a cheat. I was a purpose just waiting to happen...When you get into His Word, the Bible says, you are the head not the tail. You know, you're a conqueror, if you can just tap into that, just a mustard seed size, just a little bit. Just as convinced that I was a whore, I am just as convinced that I am now the Spirit of the Lord. It came through, it came through, me believing...So, I have touched and agreed with God that, even when I didn't feel like I was anymore than what the world said I was, I agreed with God, that I was more. That's how it has become to be such, it has taken on its own person inside of me. As I said, I can't even identify with the person I used to be. When I talk about who I used to be, it seems like, it just seems like it never existed. I have to remind myself, through my testimony that she existed because it doesn't even seem real to me anymore. ...I'm learning that we come to God, just as we are, and then He fixes us up. In that fixing up, He has to show you who you really are. I mean, he has to show you the side of you that is jealous, envious, greedy, angry, all of those things that we are as human beings. He has to show us those things, so that He can purge it out, so that He can put more of Him inside of us. Then, we can do the purpose of Him.

Grace likewise shared the difference in how she perceives herself, who she was before her conversion to who she has become. She expressed that her perspective transformation affected her language, emotions, physical wellness, and attitudes:

Ok, before I was a Christian, I probably spoke some “real nice” words. ...I didn't care as much about myself as I do now. Meaning...you should take care of your body. In turn, that takes care of your future, your family. I mean, I don't want to be weighing two-hundred pounds, and having a child, because that's going to affect them. Just physically. [My conversion] makes me watch what I think, because adultery is not just doing it. It's envisioning, or thinking of someone. ...I mean, just sinful, silly, things that you think, if you're not a Christian, are silly and ridiculous. More honest, I mean, honesty is a big thing. ...If someone asks me a question, if was going to, if it even related to, if someone asks me a question and it would make me lose my job, I would answer it honestly even though I lost my job. Before [conversion], I would lie, and save myself. It's less of, I think, as a Christian, it's less of saving yourself and saving face versus being honest, and realizing that you made a mistake. If you make a mistake, you make a mistake. You learn from it.

The participants found themselves shifting away from their previous self-centered practices toward a God-centered purpose. Early in their conversion, they decided that working to please God was more important, more worthy of their time and energy, than working only to satisfy themselves resulting in a new identity. This shift toward a new identity precipitated a change not only in the way participants viewed themselves, but others as well. Part of identifying oneself as a Christian is the need to reach out to others. Because the participants believe that the Christian lifestyle is the best alternative for everyone, the participants began to view all people as needy of God's love and all non-

Christians as potential converts. The shift in their identity thereby produced a new openness to others along with a responsibility to evangelize the gospel of Christ.

Openness to others. Due in part to a Biblical teaching of believers to proselytize, the participants expressed an obligation to share what they've learned about God with others. Once the participants realized that God was able to forgive and accept *them*, the meaning of their conversions was made clear to them. Without first understanding grace, participants would by no means be able to portray the tenets of brotherly love or forgiveness. The participants soon realized that salvation was intended for all people, that no one person or church denomination was less entitled to it than they were, especially considering their feelings of shame for past behaviors. So, the belief in evangelism actually ushers in the new openness toward others that will enable them to reach out.

An example of how a participant became affected by a change in attitude toward others is found in Sam's story. When Sam remembers how antagonistic he was towards Christians prior to his transformation, he says, "I've got [to] tote some heavy burdens today for some words I've said about the foolishness of beliefs." He believes that he is responsible for convincing some of the people in his past to never experience transformation. This has caused him great remorse and he is now involved in many evangelical programs that reach a diverse range of people.

Bill describes the differences in himself from prior to his conversion until now. A major difference is his new love for people:

I think I'm different. ...Back then, I was the scum of the earth. I mean, I'd sit here and lie to you in a second. Today, by accepting Jesus into my life, if I try to

tell a lie, I'm convicted right there on the spot. I can't do it. I love people, today.

I have a genuine love for my brothers, you know, for my sisters in Christ. You know, for everybody.

For Thomas, a greater openness to others happened when early in his conversion he began to attend a multi-racial Bible study group while in rehab:

It was the first time in my life I actually came into [close] contact with whites. It just flipped me out. I mean, you know, the way they accepted me at the church and everything. The schools I had been to had been mostly black schools until I got to high school. But, I didn't stay there for very long. The private school I went to, it was black. [After worshipping with whites] I started seeing things a little bit different. Sometimes racial issues come up right there on the property when I used to be "down with black." It wasn't that way anymore.

Following her perspective transformation, Elizabeth began to realize that non-Christians may have trouble understanding the change in her life. Over time, she has found herself compassionate toward these people, saddened that they are unconverted and unable to appreciate how positive transformation is. Elizabeth shares a recent experience:

I mean, the things that I used to get upset about, they don't bother me. A friend of mine came yesterday, and she permed my hair for me. She said to me, she said, honey, I'm sorry, I got to go. She said, my husband doesn't like when I'm around you. I said, what? I said, I just got through talking to him on the telephone, and asking, you know, were you on your way up here to come do my hair. He was really nice to me on the phone. She said, Elizabeth, I'm going to be honest with

you. He doesn't like you. He says you're a whore, and he doesn't want me around you. So, I need to hurry this up, and go back home to my husband. Any other time in my life, my response would have been, "Don't touch my head! You definitely get on back down there to your heathen, and no-good-for-nothing, and da, da, da, da, da, husband." You know what I said? It was so good. I said, "He doesn't know the price that I've paid for the oil that's in my alabaster box. He has no clue." The person that he's judging me by, is the person that I used to be. That is a, what he said, was a true statement. You know, I mean, it was true because he's in the world. So, he can only see me as a worldly way. You know, I was not upset. (Smiling, pleased) I was not upset.

Elizabeth realized that this man could only see her through a "worldly" lens and that his assessment of her former self was accurate. She believed his narrow view of her to be a result of his missing faith and she felt compassion for him rather than anger. Here, Elizabeth describes her newly acquired compassion for others:

You can't go to your enemy, and say to your enemy, the Lord loves you, when you're thinking to yourself, didn't you just do me wrong last week? That's so much of you in there, but when God comes into you, you start seeing that person through their spirit and ...you almost feel sorry for them. You feel sorry that they don't know God. You feel sorry that they're still in darkness. Your goal becomes, let me hold your hand and bring you over here into light. You know, and that part of us that wants to be human is the part of us that dies on a daily basis.

As the participants have demonstrated, their purpose in life has shifted from self-centered practices to focus on God's purpose for them. Many of them felt such relief in their own transformation that they felt sadness that not all human beings experience this kind of relief and transformation. This newly acquired compassion led the participants to a new openness toward other people. Bill, who claims to have been previously concerned only about himself, now says, "You know, the only thing I'd like to share with anybody who's out there listening, that Jesus is Lord, and you know, if [they're] not sure, I wish that they would come to know Him." This empathy toward the unconverted then led participants to believe they should evangelize about their perspective transformations.

Responsibility to evangelize. Not only did the participants develop a concern for others, especially the unconverted, they felt commanded by Biblical teachings to act upon their concern by sharing with them their own stories of God's goodness, known as a personal testimony or "witnessing." Even in situations where the participants felt unskilled or timid, they still believed that someone should evangelize to those they themselves could not reach. They discovered that they are now walking in the shoes of people who reached out to them in the beginnings of their conversions and they want to pass on the favor. These feelings generated empathy for "the lost" along with a responsibility to evangelize them and a willingness to support missions and ministries whose purpose it is to proselytize.

Sam feels that he must evangelize to others wherever he is. He says, "I want to impact people's lives whether it's behind the pulpit or just walking down the street." It is this commitment to evangelize to others that makes conversion a rather unique form of perspective transformation.

Grace believes that conversion is possible for everyone because “anybody can change.” She feels Christians should approach non-Christians gently as did her friend, Marsha, who spent time answering Grace’s many questions about religion and God prior to and following her conversion.

I honestly think if like, my husband and I can change...anybody could, but it’s just the fact, they have to be able to have it presented to them in not a forceful way, in a caring way. Not, I’m not saying a stranger won’t make a difference, but a soft heart and someone, you know, I mean, Marsha knew her stuff, but if I met somebody who maybe didn’t, it would make me find a Marsha, or something. Someone like her. Um, I think anybody can change. (Chuckles) They say it’s easier for kids under ten, isn’t it? ...[My conversion] made me want to listen to people more. It made me listen to their problems, because in a round a bout way, you can turn it around and say, “Well, do you have a personal relationship with God, because if you do, you will always have a friend.”

Following her perspective transformation, Daisy talked about how intensely compelled she felt to evangelize to others:

I talked so much about what I had found out that I went hoarse. My father-in-law, he laughed at me, he didn’t tell me that he had prayed that I wouldn’t be able to shut up. When I told him, I said, “I’ve witnessed to this person, and this person, and this person,” he laughed. When I went in the house, and told my mother-in-law, she started laughing. She said, “Well, we prayed that whenever you got it, you wouldn’t be able to shut up.” ...I went hoarse!

Shift in Basis for Life Decisions

The third meaning found consistently in the participants is the shift in how they made daily decisions. Prior to their conversions, participants made decisions solely based on what they felt would best serve their own interests. Following conversion, participants realized that God was their primary source of direction in making decisions. As Grace said, “I wanted [God] to come take control of my life. I wanted Him to tell me what to do.” The participants began to utilize prayer, Christian friends, and Bible study to guide them toward a more honest and “Christ-like” practice of work and family principles. This shift in the basis for decision-making led the participants to distinct changes such as increased honesty, more inclusion of God and prayer in decisions, and a feeling of conviction or guilt for making bad choices. Sam realized that God should be considered in all aspects of his daily decision making, including his business:

...I own my own business and in that sometimes I don't give God the regard that I should. I seem to think, “That's *my* business!” and God often reminds me that it's not. You know, He's “Well, let me just kind of let you handle this today and see how it goes your way.” Before the day's out you're thinking, “Aw, why'd I do that?” And, yes, as far as the ethics of my business and things, you know, I'm in the erosion control business now. And if I put in 285 feet of steel fence, I'm going to charge you for 285 feet, not 300. You know, like, because that's what I put in. And in that regard, yeah, He's very involved.

Using God to make decisions is a conscious effort that requires diligent practice and a close relationship with God. Referring to how he makes decisions, Thomas said, “I am

only as good as my quiet time with God.” For Thomas the basis of his decisions comes specifically from the effort he puts into his prayer and study:

I think the sense of it is once you start spending time with God, my days are different, when I spend time with God. I have to do a lot of praying. I do a lot of praying. When you’re in a situation, and you mention the name Jesus, and I’m telling you it just seems like, I guess that peace that is sometimes hard to understand. It’s hard to explain. You know it’s going to be okay.

Following the most difficult time in his life in which he was addicted to alcohol and crack cocaine, was kicked out of the Army, and spent time in jail for theft and drugs, Thomas experienced his conversion. He realized that the decisions he had been making up until now were all wrong and as a result, he completely transformed from being a “taker” who hurt others by stealing from them to being one who declined help even when it was offered. By using his method of daily quiet time with God, Thomas shifted his basis for decision making from what he wanted to what he thought God wanted. The shift in how he based his decisions surprised even him:

The more I seen that I done the things I was supposed to do according to what I was learning in the Bible, it just seemed like everything, it would just blow me away, how things would go. I liked that. I just couldn’t believe it. I mean, as far as my family, everybody that didn’t want to have anything to do with me, would all of a sudden want to hug me. People started offering me money and stuff to help me. I was turning it down. I couldn’t believe it. “No, I’m ok, I’m gonna be alright.” As I continued in that, I think what happened was my faith was growing.

The participants expressed that being a Christian doesn't mean that daily decisions always result in selfless or ideal outcomes. What matters most is their conscious effort to involve God in their decisions, even in situations when human nature steers them away. Here, Sam talks about how he sometimes makes decisions based on what he wants rather than what God wants and how he feels convicted for it:

I find God is more personal within just my daily decisions. I'm a different person today, than I was before. You know, just in the things I used to could do, that I can't do now. Even movies, TV, everything. Not that I don't struggle and do dumb stuff sometimes. Watch stuff that I shouldn't. But, if I do, I'm heavily convicted at the moment that I do some of these things. In anything, a white lie in the business industry, especially if you're in the construction industry, you're put in the position where you want to tell a little white lie. We'll be there tomorrow, knowing you not going to be there until the next day. You'll call tomorrow and say, man, something's come up. And I won't say that I won't do that now. But, when I do that now, I'm convicted and you know, it concerns me. It really concerns me that God may say, "Sam, that's enough of that. I'm going to have to punish you for doing that." And I understand there is punishment for that. Not that God doesn't love me. God loves me enough to punish me, he wants me to be perfect. He wants my life to be an impact on others. If I don't follow his each and every command, not that I can, but if I don't set out-if that's not my desire daily, then I'm going to come up way short of where he desires for me to be. And I guess that's the biggest impact on my life.

Following their perspective transformations, the participants realized that they were making their decisions in a new way. They had begun to incorporate prayer and God into their daily decisions. They grew to understand that making decisions based on their new God-centered perspective rather than their previous self-centered aspirations resulted in better outcomes, primarily a sense of peace.

It took practice for the participants to consider God's plans before their own. Each participant expressed that when they considered God's plans first, the outcome was better than when they made decisions solely based on their own opinion. The participants acknowledged that even though they are Christians, they are still human beings who require lots of practice before becoming adept at making their new beliefs part of their daily decisions.

As Bill put it, "Well, I mean, I have good days and I have bad days. I get in the flesh (referring to his former selfish, sinful behaviors), but I can recognize it a whole lot quicker now, than I used to be able to. I used to get in the flesh, and I would stay there for a long time. But, now I know what to do." Thomas adds, "With [his belief system], is an obedience that I'm always very conscious of. Sometimes I don't go there and I suffer for that. That's where the growth comes in." The basis for how they made daily decisions was affirmed through a variety of life experiences, resulting in a further realization of their shift from self-centered practices to a God-centered purpose. Because adept decision-making requires extensive practice, a commitment to long-term change is necessary.

Commitment to Lifelong Change

The initial conversion or transformation is not enough for these participants to consider their process complete. The participants all expressed the same sentiment, that the meaning of conversion is determined through daily effort and commitment. Conversion is not an easy task. The participants often reflected that, although currently practicing the tenets of Christianity, it takes a great amount of effort to continue and grow within their new identity. They insist that one must decide daily to “pick up his cross” and follow Jesus. It is not a matter of whether or not God is unfailing in his faithfulness to human beings, it is clearly human beings who struggle with their faithfulness to God.

The participants further expressed a belief in putting forth effort to maintain and cultivate their understanding of God, to build upon their initial decision to convert. Not satisfied with just knowing that they’re going to Heaven, they actually want to serve God, to work for him, to know him better. To continue improving their relationship with God means that the participants must be committed to long-term change, as found in the upcoming examples.

Sam reminds us that though he is still human and makes his share of mistakes, he is still transformed and dedicated to his growth as a Christian. He feels that when he does makes a poor decision that he shouldn’t get frustrated, he must get back up and try again:

Conversion means to me it’s a lifelong ordeal. Paul said you’re running a race. And, you know, I think you got to run the race...That’s not to say you won’t get off the track sometimes. But, I believe if you’ve truly been converted, you always come back. You know, you fall down but, you get back up.

Mary felt that her initial conversion was just the beginning of the changes within. She wishes to continually build upon her initial decision to convert, for her transformation to

grow deeper and deeper over time, until God is the central meaning of her life. Mary describes her conversion as a process that continually changes her over a lifetime:

It's definitely a lifelong process...I firmly believe that in conversion you get converted over and over and over again and further and more and I feel like my conversion has just barely touched the surface. I'm looking for, you know, a conversion that goes through all the layers of me...it's part way through, you know, but I want it to mean everything.

John is committed to working and growing in his faith for the remainder of his life. He feels that he will never revert back to his identity prior to his perspective transformation:

[Death] could be tomorrow, it could be ten years from now or twenty, I don't know. Well, I think if you really are saved, I think you'll always try to be a Christian and work and things. Now they's some people that don't and I think it's a real problem. It could be worked out if people would help them, would talk to them you know. But as far as [going backwards], no, I won't never go back like I was.

Thomas believes that his conversion will not be completed in this lifetime, as there will always be room for growth and positive change. When I asked him when he will finish his conversion process, he said, "Every time I get that question, I always say I won't be there until I see Jesus Christ, that's when I know it's complete. That's the only time [my conversion] will be complete as far as I'm concerned, when I see His face. So, I'll always be working."

Elizabeth realizes that she must rely on God for continued growth. She is committed to an ongoing conversion that is enhanced over time and through difficulties:

I can make tiny steps, and still get there, and that's the thing. I've learned that when I stop, thank God, He pushes me. He carries me. That's that footprint. So, I never actually stop growing. You know, even when I've failed in God, I thought, well Lord, you know, I'm at the bottom now, it's like I've fallen off of a level. Now, I'm at the bottom. God never, ever asks you to fall off levels. You don't fall off levels. You fall on *that* level. Then you get up. You don't fall back to where you were, because you will never be as naïve as you were coming into Christ.

Simon, although still facing overwhelming physical difficulties, believes that his spiritual growth will continue and even be enhanced by his illness. He believes that his difficulties will lead to positive change. When asked if he expects to continue in his commitment to his conversion, Simon said, "It's only going to get better as I go. Every day is a new day...my life's only going to get better. Though the physical challenges will get rougher...my spirituality will get stronger."

Sam discovered his conversion means much more than his initial salvation experience in the pastor's office, it means to be willing to do whatever God asks of him on a continual basis. Sam describes his lifelong commitment and how he expects God to use life experiences to teach him along the way:

[My life belongs to God] now to use and grow in that daily...I have to constantly work at it, if I teach Sunday School, if that's all I build my, I don't want to say faith but, if that's the only relationship I got between God is me and my Sunday School class, I struggle. I've done it before. Man, I'm teaching Sunday School, what else do I need to do? You know, but God, God desires for me to keep going.

To keep coming closer, to keep getting closer and closer and closer. You know and that's a conversion itself. You know, it's a daily change and hopefully, hopefully, nine years into my walk, I will have moved farther and farther towards him than I am today...And I think that's the way with every Christian walk, you know, it's the mountain top one day and the valley the next, and the mountain top the next. You know, we all got high emotional experiences. You know you want to sit in the presence of God all the time. But the times you learn the most about God, is the times when you seem like you're the farthest away from God. You know, that's when God is trying to teach you something.

After understanding how participants' life events challenged, altered, or solidified their conversions, I wanted to know where they thought their conversions would lead. As a result of all they've learned, what will their transformations look like down the road?

Sam feels that his conversion will lead him into full-time ministry.

Oh, my goodness. I almost hate to admit this on tape, I struggle with the ministry in a large degree. I've dealt with many struggles within my walk. I guess the ministry's my toughest. Deciding as to whether or not God's truly called me to the ministry. I guess I want that meeting on the road to Damascus type experience that Paul had. Something there is no doubt about. I know that God has more for my life. Whether it be in ministry, or whether it's just [teaching] my Sunday School. Really being more intent, I guess, or, more intense with my Sunday School. I really don't know. As far as my walk, I hope it's stronger five years from now than it is today. Because I know if it's not, I'm going to be like everybody else.

(Recently Sam informed me that he has accepted his spiritual calling to be a minister and has now begun seminary.)

Bill and Thomas both shared a desire to continue working as counselors in their field, with Thomas striving to graduate from college soon. The participants often expressed a desire to raise their children in Christian homes, even Grace was committed to this and she has yet to have any children. Here Grace summarizes several goals common to the other nine participants: greater involvement in church and service, an improved ability to witness to others, growth in knowledge, and a stronger relationship with God:

I hope I'm more involved, more active in church, more willing to witness. I have a hard time with that. Um, we have a Good News at Noon, the Good News Stand at church, that we stand in front of Wal-Mart, and we go out, and give out stuff on Jesus. I don't mind doing that, because these are people that I don't know. But when it comes to doing it to people that I know better, it makes me feel a little bit nervous. So, I have to get over that. I hope to be more knowledgeable. I know that you can witness, and not know anything, except for you believe in God, and Jesus, but I want to be a little bit more knowledgeable. Um, I hope I'm more active in a church. I hope if I have children that I'll be a godly parent. Um, I see my faith as growing stronger, because I want to have a child, and there's certain ways that they, I'm going to have them grow up. It'll be in a Christian school, I don't know, I mean, all those things, but I can see me being more "strict," but strict in a way that God would approve of.

As shown throughout this chapter, the participants were clearly committed to long-term conversion by making efforts to grow in their understanding through study, prayer,

and practice. It is this continued commitment that affirms the enduring nature of perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversions. Thomas put it very simply, “I’m still a work in progress and I understand that.” It is important to recognize that the participants are deeply committed to continuing their transformation and they are consciously pursuing ways to uphold and implement their commitment.

Summary

In summary, several distinct meanings are drawn from conversion as a perspective transformation including a realization of God’s grace, a shift from self-centered practices to a God-centered purpose, a shift in basis of decisions, and a commitment to lifelong change. These meanings emerge during the initial stages of conversion as the participants, regardless of the elapsed time from their introduction to Christianity, became keenly aware of their significance. The meaning made from conversion speaks directly to the purpose of this study, to examine the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of conversion, as meaning formation is the key to understanding how and why adults transform and if transformation endures over time. Especially important to the purpose of this study is the last category in which adults became committed to lifelong change as a result of their transformation.

Factors that Influence the Understanding of the Conversion Experience

In asking the question, “What factors influenced your understanding of conversion?” I found four categories: learning-centered activities, interpersonal relationships, spiritual encounters, and traumatic life events. Lastly, I will summarize the influence of the various factors and discuss how they are reintegrated into the new perspective.

Learning-Centered Activities

A key factor that influenced conversion in the participants was a variety of learning activities they experienced that focused on understanding their conversion process. Immediately following their initial conversion, the participants began to intentionally seek out learning experiences that will fill in the gaps in their knowledge about Christianity. Their learning activities are primarily informal and include church classes, reflective journaling, personal Bible study (including a variety of spiritual reading materials and discussions) and watching Christian television and listening to Christian radio. As Micah discovered, even time in his work truck could be used to learn more about God by “being able to listen to the preaching on the radio.”

Most of the participants became immediately involved in a church or organized study group to learn more about Christianity and to serve in it. This involvement led to many activities that influenced the understanding of their transformations. Daisy talks about how church became a substantial part of her lifestyle when she initially converted:

I knew that my sister-in-law and her husband went to a really good church, and they were really involved with their Sunday school class, and they done activities together like once a month...She would always tell us about the fun things that they would do. So, we started coming to church...We were involved and, you know, done the daycare, I mean the nursery, and started up the three to five year olds, and got involved with doing the monthly things with our Sunday school class. So, we were constantly busy doing things. Made great friends, and you know, we just fell into that, [it] was our lifestyle. Going to church, Sunday, Sunday night. Wednesday, Wednesday night, and then my husband's family was

still singing. So, we still traveled. Then, sometime, early in our marriage, I took up singing with them. So, we all travel around. ...We were very involved in church stuff.

Grace seeks opportunities to learn through several types of activities such as church worship services and Bible study in conjunction with reading materials that help her understand her new worldview:

I love Bible study books. Like right now, I'm reading like, step by step through the Old Testament, and I have a workbook for that, and step by step in the New Testament, because my goal is to read the Bible. Maybe not cover to cover, but read it through a work book that makes me realize that I've caught everything that's a highlight in the Bible. My pastor does help. Most of the time, sometimes I don't get as much out of church as when I do when I sit at home and use my workbook. The best times that I enjoy the most out of anything is a Revival, anywhere. Love'em, love'em. Even if they're the fiery, Hades talk, but ...they always have a point, and it really revives you. I love it, love it.

For two of the participants, Bill and Thomas, journaling became an essential learning activity that helped them analyze their own progress. Thomas describes journaling as quiet time with God. Through journaling, he has learned to identify and manage his emotions. He continues this practice every morning and finds this to be part of his ongoing growth process, making a day-to-day effort to further strengthen his conversion:

Well, what journaling does is causes you to have to really say who you are to Christ, if you're gonna be honest. Me feeling so guilty, I had to say that. Me feeling so ashamed, I had to say that. Me just feeling like crap, I had to say that.

Not wanting to be bothered with anybody, even sometimes to the point of cursing him, God. ...What happened was, here also we have to in our journal, we have to also journal about what we believe God is saying to us about these issues, too.

Bill also views journaling as significant to his understanding. He learned to journal through counseling and has found it to be instrumental in his relationship with God and his recovery:

Well, God speaks through other people, I believe. I hear God talk, you know, I don't physically hear Him speaking to me, but when I'm journaling, I know He's talking to me. As far as my life of recovery, that's something I have to do every day, for the rest of my life.

After Bill explained the importance of his journals, I followed-up with the question, "When you read your journals now, what exactly is reflected in them?" Bill gave an answer that shows he learns much about himself and God through his personal reflections:

Well, it would reflect the situations or the negative attitudes that I had that day. It would show what God is telling me I need to do about it, about those negative attitudes, how to change them around. If there was a particular problem that I had, that day or morning, sometimes He'll show me what to, how to handle the day.

For John, at age 70 and four years into his new belief system, his learning-centered activities were affected slightly by his age. Because of his age and health, John often watched preachers on television as he sometimes wouldn't go to church due to weather or

an inability to see well at night, “I listen. I listen to a lot of Charles Stanley and a lot of stuff on television and stuff.”

Although he’s older, John maintains a positive attitude toward learning. Like the other participants, he believes that personal growth and transformation can be achieved with a little effort and commitment regardless of how or when it began. He says:

I think it’s like education. I don’t think you will ever know it, even if you go back to school. You can go take classes and things but you still would learn stuff and that’s the same with out here working on the job, you’re still going to learn. Even as old as I am, I still learn things everyday.

Two of the participants pursued more formal learning opportunities to gain understanding of their conversion and to follow their new God-centered purpose. For Thomas it was the acquisition of a Bachelor’s degree in ministerial counseling. Because of his personal bouts with addiction, Thomas did his degree online and through the mail with a Christian institution:

What it is basically, I have to read the books and then I have to write papers, type papers on them and send them in. It takes a lot of work. Personally, I think I should’ve done been through with it [by now].

For Bill, his formal learning was pursuing and completing both a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in ministerial counseling. Here he describes how he managed working full-time while teaching rehabilitation classes and going to college:

I had to finish getting my Bachelor’s. I dropped out of [The University of] Georgia back in the early seventies. So, what I would do, I would help with the classroom, classes in the morning, here on the property. I would drive the

donation truck eight hours a day and then I would study at night. I got my Bachelor's Degree in Christian Counseling Psychology. And then just decided I would just go ahead and finish up my Master's.

Whether informal or formal, these learning activities further catalyzed the conversion process. As was discussed in Chapters One and Two, transformational learning is a major part of perspective transformation. Each learner takes with him or her portions of information that is most relevant and acceptable to them, in their own context, adds this to their understanding and then is able to move forward to another learning experience. A learning shift is reflected in the fact that each of the participants began to seek out opportunities such as church, Bible study, journaling, and reading materials that would broaden their understanding, offer support of their new worldview, and enable them to try on the roles they were learning about.

Interpersonal Relationships

For some of the participants, understanding their conversions revolves around relationships with other people. Micah was influenced most by the support of his wife and friends. He was and is still influenced by friends who have been a long-term part of his conversion:

I prayed to God for a long time to send [a friend] that is like me, has the same interests and everything else. God sent him my way, our way, my way. He helps me out tremendously. You know, he's always, I can call him during the day, during a real frustrating day and he'll read me a scripture or he'll just talk me through it or do something. You know, not, sometimes it doesn't even have anything to do with the Bible. Sometimes it's just friendship talk and which, you

know, you need that. You need good Christian men who don't always have to talk about the Bible or make it Biblically based. Even though, that's important, it's also important to be able to expand outside....that one area. So, I have him in my life, my mother-in-law, and I still have the lady in Chattanooga. I call her all the time. I go up there probably once, twice a year...

A feeling expressed by several participants is a "safety in numbers" philosophy when it comes to their new beliefs. Once their transformations were underway, participants began to seek support from other Christians that would help prevent them from making mistakes or from returning to former "bad" behaviors. For example, while Mary was influenced initially by reading spiritual books, she finds herself currently seeking more involvement with Christian friends. She explains:

I have a fear that if I get away from people who believe as I do, people that support that, about how strong I would be on my own. I've found myself pulling back from people who don't share that primary view and associating more with people that do.

The participants each expressed how influential certain relationships had been in understanding their conversions. For Grace, relationships provide ongoing support for her Christian identity. When asked what has helped her better understand her transformation, she responded:

Being active in children's activities at church. I mean, just going to church, and being with people, and I find out that I kind of want to be with people that are more Christian than not. I notice myself talking to my mother about church and God. My friend Virginia, I speak with her a lot, and she's now a Christian.

For Thomas, his addictions counselors helped him better understand his transformation. During an especially difficult period in his recovery, Thomas had a meeting with counselors in a Christian rehab center where he was confronted with his relapse into drugs. He recalls the meaning of having people in his life that cared so much they wept for him:

As we sat in there, everybody in tears, I wanted to cry. I knew I was in trouble. I wanted to cry and I couldn't even cry. Yeah. I knew I was in trouble then.

...You know, [them caring] was another reality for me.

Sam's interpersonal relationships often placed him in positions that caused him to grow in his understanding.

One of the greatest things that happened to me was that I was put into teaching Sunday School. It give me the opportunity...to grow. I was put into the church, and just pushed through. Every door that opened, somebody shoved me through it. And I thank God for it. There was a time in my life when I was thinking, "Would ya'll just leave me alone for a little bit and let me just sit out there and be like everybody else?" But, I'm thankful now that I've been pushed because I think I have a greater understanding of the God I serve...Maybe I'm fooling myself but at least I feel like I have a better understanding and what God really desires for a life of servant hood to be.

Participants found meaning and much-needed support for their conversion through their interpersonal relationships. The participants have continued to seek out relationships that aid their understanding of Christianity by surrounding themselves with like-minded people.

Spiritual Encounters

For these participants, a relationship with God (and Jesus) was sought after and acquired early on in their transformations. This was accomplished primarily through prayer although other experiences similarly bridged the gap between them and God. In this section, spiritual encounters will be discussed that include interactions with God or the Holy Spirit through prayer, supernatural experiences, or intuitions that have led participants to gain greater understanding about their perspective transformations through conversion.

Prayer is a central focus of Christianity and its significance as a spiritual encounter is demonstrated in illustrations from the participants throughout this work. Sam sums up the importance of prayer in being able to understand and practice one's beliefs:

...Prayer's a very, very, important part of your walk with God. If your walk starts suffering, I'll guarantee you one thing, your prayer life's suffering. And that's always been the case with me. Anytime my walk begins to suffer, if I'll sit back and I'll really start to think about my prayer life, it's because my prayer life suffered also.

The participants often expressed a use of prayer in daily life. An example of this is Simon, who practices daily prayer and meditation as an ongoing way to draw closer to God:

I have a morning meditation, twenty minutes every morning. I read something out of my big book of Alcoholics Anonymous. I have a couple of books...that I read. Then, I just give Him some quiet time. Then the reward after that is I can put on a Grateful Dead CD. Then, I start my morning. ...I give Him fifteen

minutes of my true soul, and then He gives me my day of doing His will through me.

An example of how prayer can act more noticeably as a spiritual encounter is found in Mary's story. Mary had experienced a very distant, formalized view of religion throughout her Mormon upbringing and had never effectively "bonded" with God until her conversion to Christianity. Early in her transformation she had a spiritual experience that reinforced her new belief system while she and her husband were arguing one day in the car:

I just had a real strong anger, a feeling of anger inside...I wasn't sure why I was so angry and it didn't seem to me to be a logical, rational kind of anger. It didn't seem to fit what we had been arguing about. As we were driving along, I just kind-of looked up and I said, "God, please take this anger" and immediately it just dissipated. So that really reinforced, one, my belief in God and, two, "Oh my goodness, maybe prayer can work!"

Other types of spiritual encounters include experiences or intuitions that are perceived as supernatural. These may include feelings, instincts, or unusual happenings that are credited as part of God's mysterious ways. A unique example of a spiritual experience that enhanced a participant's conversion experience is found in Elizabeth's story in which she encounters a saintly old gentleman during a difficult time in her life:

I went to the dentist, and ...as I started to get out of the car, I closed the door, locked it up, and started towards the door. God said, "Turn around and go get your Bible." I thought, "Well, that makes sense. I mean, I don't have anything to do but wait. So, yeah, I'll go get my Bible." I turned around and went and got

my Bible, and I came back in. ...When I got there, I checked in, and I turned and looked, and every seat was filled, except this hard bench that I cannot understand why it would be sitting in a doctor's office. A hard bench. This little old black man was sitting there on the bench. I asked him could I sit next to him. He said, "Yes ma'am" and I sat down. ...He said, "What is wrong with you today?"... I said, "Well, sir, I'm feeling kind of, kind of sad today." He said, "I can see it in your face... why don't you tell me what's wrong?" ...I said, "Well, you know, sir, my husband's free, my ex-husband he's free and he gets to do whatever he wants to. He's been mean to me. He does whatever he wants to our son. He just gets to party with no condemnation, no, no nothing. He just gets to do whatever he wants to. Quite frankly, I'm pissed, that everything I do, I feel like I paid for it, instantly. He can do whatever he want to. He is free." He said, "Why don't you open your Bible to the first chapter of James, the second verse." I flipped my Bible over to James, and I read it. I just started to cry, because he said that scripture said, I am free. I am free! ...He said, "I can tell you that your husband, ex-husband you called it, is not free. *You* are free." ...He hugged me, and I cried like a baby. As he turns me a loose and we're not embraced anymore in a hug, it occurs to me that this man has no teeth. He has no teeth, he's eighty-six years old, he obviously isn't driving, glasses were thicker than you can ever imagine. He says, he said, "I told you, you're free." God will always send people in and out of your life to give you what you need to get to the next level. They called my name. I got up, and I walked away. I thought, "Oh, my God, I just got to go back and hug him one more time." When I turned and looked. He wasn't there. I just

thought to myself, “Oh, God. You are an awesome God. You scared me to death this morning!” I never have had the experience somebody dropping in my life for a second, and then dropping out. I’m convinced that nobody else seen him but me. He’d told me he was there for me.

Elizabeth was convinced that God had sent this man to comfort and guide her, that no one else had witnessed this encounter although the dentist office was full of people. She gained, through spiritual encounters, an understanding of her conversion that personalized God to her needs and strengthened her belief:

God will always send people in and out of your life to give you what you need to get to the next level. God always drops somebody. Always. Always. That is how I been able to stay with Christ is because He loved me enough to drop people in my life. When I didn’t have the support from a family, when I didn’t have the support from a mama, a daddy, a brother, grandmamma... When I didn’t have that support system, He dropped those people in my life, just when I needed them. I mean, and He has always done that for me. That is how I’ve been able to stay on the right path. Even when I’m on the wrong path, He sends somebody.

Thomas had a spiritual encounter as he experienced a set back in his recovery from drug addiction. He believes that the Holy Spirit spoke to him about how a relapse would hurt those he loved. This encounter serves as a reminder to Thomas of God’s presence in his worst moments, helping him understand that God still cares for him even when set backs occur:

I remember the first time I was on my way to get the drugs, I can flat out remember, my kids come into mind, my job come into mind, how I would hurt

people come into mind, my mom come into mind and I believe...that was the Holy Spirit trying to woo me to look at what I was doing... See, that had never happened before. That's how come I know it's Spiritual. All the times before that when I got on that tail spin, wouldn't nothing like that ever happen. I had my kids, I had my mom, I had my family, and I didn't think about them.

About a year later, Thomas had a couple of significant spiritual encounters when he felt God was "calling" him to stay on at the rehab center as a ministerial counselor. When he asked God for a sign, he got two and, believing that God was using others to spiritually guide him, he made the decision to stay:

I was asking the Lord to give me a sign, what He wanted me to do. Then, [the ministry director] came in and he said, I couldn't believe it, he said he wanted me to stay. ...So, as I continued to pray and seek God about it, then it happened. He called me in his office back there *again* and he said, "Looks like the Lord has made a straight shot to you." So, then I thought I need to take this a lot more serious than maybe I was. So, I did. I ended up staying.

Bill had a spiritual encounter during the death of his father. This experience left a lasting impression on Bill and his beliefs were solidified as a result:

[My father] was continually getting worse and we all could see that. Soon as the Priest got there and they set up to do the Mass, my mom looked over and said, dad just smiled at her. And he passed on. You could feel God's Presence in the room. It's hard to explain. You know, he was a good Christian man...he knew where he was going. Well, you know, I think I have a strong faith base right now ...just the feeling of the Holy Spirit in the room at that time was so overwhelming.

I mean that just because nobody felt bad that my father died...It was more of a celebration. ...[He's] in a much better place.

As demonstrated in their experiences, the participants often expressed a use of prayer along with a spiritual belief that God sometimes supernaturally intervenes on their behalf. Through vivid life experiences, the participants have spoken to and heard from God and have witnessed what they believe to be God's intervention. These experiences have strongly influenced them to better understand their personal, spiritual connection to God.

Traumatic Life Events

Although this research is focused primarily on perspective transformations resulting from the non-life-threatening context of conversion, there were some rather traumatic situations that led the participants to better understand their perspective transformations. In other words, sometimes a traumatic or difficult life event becomes an unavoidable component of a person's conversion experience. In some cases the trauma occurs early on, perhaps even creating a disorienting dilemma that catalyzes conversion. Often in these scenarios, there are lasting effects of the trauma that continue to shine light on one's understanding well after the initial trauma is over.

An illustration of this is Bill, who suffered a physical collapse that served as a powerfully disorienting dilemma that brought him to the conclusion that he needed to convert his life and beliefs immediately. Although he persists in learning about his newfound beliefs through his rehab setting and daily prayer, he never forgets the collapse that brought him to his perspective transformation. He describes how his physical collapse continues to influence his decision to stay on the right track:

Once I came here, I said, I can't fix thirty years of destructive behavior and thinking in that short of time. So, I said, I've got to give it more time. [God] still continued, continued, continued to let me know, yeah, you're doing what I want you to do... There were times I said, I'm leaving. You know, I'm just gonna pack up and go. You know, that's Bill, Bill taking his will back. When I realized I was doing that, I was in danger because I was fixing to die again. If I would have left here, I know I would've been right back where I was. Each time it's progressive. Each time it gets worse. The last time out, I was comatose. I can't drink again or I'll be dead. I know God is telling me this...

Like Bill, Simon encountered addictions along with difficulties with his health. The combination of these factors strongly influenced Simon's conversion. From childhood up until his perspective transformation eight years ago, Simon was ensnared in a vicious cycle of drug and alcohol abuse along with life-threatening health problems. Tired of the cycle, he attempted suicide. Here he speaks of the suicide attempt and how it further catalyzed his transformation:

About six months into [AA] I did my fifth step, which is writing out your life story. Then, you tell your life story to your sponsor. Well, I was full of so much remorse and anger, and depression that two days later, I tried to kill myself. I punched out the glass in my room. My parents let me move back in the house with them, and then I slit my wrist, and locked my bedroom door. My parents found me, and they got me to the hospital...[Detox] was the best thing for me. I learned that if I just don't take this program seriously, but take it one day at a time, I'll be ok. As we're speaking now, I have eight years and some change.

Um, is my life getting better? Yeah, and my life also sucks, too. Two years into sobriety, I lost my kidneys. ...I guess a nervous breakdown. I cried. I threatened God. I hated everything about everybody and everything. But, I said at the end, "God, you gotta get me through this...I don't know what to do." Since then, I've lived on dialysis three days a week, four hours a day. ...I would like to be back to normal, as possible. But, I also know this is what He has planned for me today. That's all I got to remember about, it's today. ...What I do like is that I'm alive today, and that I can share my experience, strength, and hope with someone else.

Without their most difficult moments, Bill and Simon may not have opened themselves to transformation. Over time, both began to credit their perspective transformations to these traumatic life experiences and to view these experiences as positive steps toward personal growth. Several other participants had difficult experiences, similar to Bill and Simon, that are credited with reinforcing their conversion and can be considered influential factors to their understanding. One example in particular is in Elizabeth's story when she received a prenatal diagnosis of a very unwell baby, which at birth, turned out to be very healthy. Like the others, Elizabeth credits the experience with strengthening her conversion in the end.

At this point, they're telling me I could either abort the baby, or I could have the baby with Down's syndrome. I'm telling you, there was a period there when I'm thinking, abortion sounding pretty good right now. ...in two weeks, I got a call. He said, this is "Dr. Rosewood, I'm sitting on a beach in California, and through modern technology, I have the results of your test... Your little baby girl is fine." The tumor that we seen, which was another issue, the tumor was growing, that

they found in me, was growing at such a rapid rate, they called it the size of a cantaloupe. They said, it is growing so fast that it is pushing this baby out of your uterus. The Down's syndrome baby, it's pushing the Down's syndrome baby that's already needing to be in your body the full time. It's pushing this baby out of your uterus. When he told me that, when he gave me the report that the baby was fine, he also said, "And your tumor has shrank to the point to where we cannot find it on the microscope." I'm telling you that tumors grow with the estrogen in your body, and the hormones of pregnancy grow tumors. There was God. ...That tells me, that even when I wasn't praying, that the angels must have been praying for me. God still intervened and had people dropped into my life to carry me over those humps. That's how I know He's real.

Summary

In this section, factors that influence the understanding of perspective transformation due to conversion were discussed. First, I looked at learning-centered activities as an aid in understanding conversion experiences. Participants used a variety of informal learning opportunities to better understand the changes in their lives including personal study, church participation, and listening to Christian broadcasts. Two of the participants, Thomas and Bill even pursued formal learning in Christian institutions to further their God-centered purposes. Secondly, interpersonal relationships were examined as a means of gaining understanding and were found to be integral as well as supportive toward personal growth.

Next, I demonstrated how participants found spiritual encounters to be helpful in their understanding. Examples were given that portrayed prayer and God's supernatural

intervention to be essential elements in how participants made sense of their conversion. Lastly, traumatic life events were examined as being influential factors toward understanding. Although some of these events actually triggered the perspective transformation of conversion, the effects have been long-term and serve as a constant reminder to the participants of their new identity and beliefs.

How participants understand their conversion is integral to the purpose of this work. This section has shown a variety of life circumstances in which understanding is gained and enhanced. In all of the examples, conversion was shown to be strengthened through learning activities, relationships, spiritual encounters, and difficult life events. Even though some of the more traumatic or negative situations sometimes paused the transformational process temporarily, the situations generated a deeper understanding of their conversion and transformation resumed, often gaining momentum. This speaks to the lasting effects of perspective transformation in the context of conversion. The next section will discuss how life experiences can challenge or solidify one's conversion.

The Influence of Subsequent Life Experiences on Conversion as a Perspective Transformation

In considering the purpose of this research, to examine the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of conversion, I realized the story doesn't end with the shift of the worldview to Christianity. It is not enough that participants *say* they will continue in their transformed belief, I must look at the life events that have followed their conversions to see whether or not their beliefs held up under the weight of the event. If the new worldview did hold up, did it change at all? How do subsequent life experiences influence the original conversion?

I asked participants to tell me about any life experiences they have had since their conversion that challenged, altered, or solidified their original conversion. The participants shared some very difficult moments in their ongoing transformation. Because all of the life experiences discussed were considered to be challenging and especially meaningful in some way by the participants, I will focus on *how* the event impacted the original conversion.

In order for a life experience to solidify or strengthen the original conversion, it must reinforce one's understanding of Christianity prior to the new experience, enhance one's relationship with God, and/or provide an enlightening or uplifting incident that reinforces or enhances the participant's beliefs. More simply put, the participant must either learn something from the experience or be "blessed" by it emotionally or spiritually for their beliefs to be solidified or strengthened. In the following examples, participants show that even difficult experiences are opportunities for them to learn and grow, which leads to their belief that conversion is strengthened by life experiences. The examples are categorized into three sections: The impact of life experiences perceived to be positive, the impact of life experiences perceived to be difficult, and additional information.

The Impact of Life Experiences Perceived to be Positive

Life experiences in this work are perceived by the participants to be either generally positive or generally difficult. In this section, I will discuss how some participants view positive experiences to influence their understanding of conversion. Sam experienced two subsequent life experiences he felt were positive and further solidified his conversion. In the first, his grandfather who helped raise him, was dying and Sam, seated at his bedside had an experience that deeply impacted his life:

And I was up there this particular evening and he began to vomit blood. ...And I was standing over him wiping the blood, and I can remember the smell, it was so, it had an iron smell to it. ...He would look up at me and say, "Help me son. Oh, God, help me." And you know, I was wiping him off and everything. Then he said, "If I could just get me a drink of that living water." Now this was...a 79 year-old man that was illiterate, could not read or write. You know, and I said "Pop, I'll get you a drink of water." He said, "No, I need some of that living water." You know, and that in itself was one of those things that sent chills up and down my spine because it brought you back to the woman at the well and Christ talking about the living water. Him being the living water. Then, as I was wiping him off, he said-he made some other remark as to heaven or something. I said, "Pop, it's real." He said, "I know it's real." He said, I know. And it was almost as if he was in another realm or something. It was like he could see both here, and over there, too. With all the things- I guess you just really had to be there to totally understand that. But, it was like he was there. His eyesight was there, but it also was somewhere else. You know, he could see something that we couldn't see. You know, just that in itself, has impacted my life in a remarkable way because I knew this man intimately. I mean, I knew everything about him.

In the second experience Sam gave as being especially significant, he experienced the Holy Spirit of God which affirmed his previously held belief that God intervenes on behalf of the converted:

And I knew this was my last chance to have a little boy. I guess the reason I wanted that little boy so bad was so that I could have that same relationship with

him that my grandpa had with me. Because I had missed out a lot with my dad... I can remember a specific night that I was praying to God about a little boy. God, you know, I really want this son. You know, I know I've done nothing to deserve it but, I'm telling you what my heart wants. And I won't say it's an audible voice, but, it sounded like an audible voice said okay. You know, I can remember, I was in the shower at that time. I can remember just breaking down and crying. Just weeping openly. Just tears running. You know, it was the Spirit of God in the shower. You know, I didn't even want to move it was so powerful.

Through Sam's experiences, the death of his grandfather and learning that he would have a son, his conversion was solidified and strengthened as he felt that God was *reinforcing* his faith through the promise of heaven and a much-desired baby boy. These particular stories have become a staple in Sam's personal testimony to others.

Daisy encountered an experience that she considers to be positive and it influenced her to actually alter her Christian worldview. She had been deeply involved in her church when her father-in-law began a different type of Bible study that questioned her former beliefs as a Baptist:

Then, when he started studying on his own, and looking these things up, he realized that, you know, somebody's not telling me something. He just done his study. He didn't make a scene or anything. He still came to church. But, he done his studying on his own, also. After a few years, well, he told my mother-in-law, and she would listen, you know, but there was still that conflict. You know, this is what we were always taught, but why does it say this in the Bible? My husband, and his father, they were very close, my husband would go up there

every night and sit on the porch, and drink coffee with his dad. That was their time. He would tell my husband things. My husband got to looking, and they would study, and you know, I was resenting my father-in-law. This man that I had respected all these years. Because my husband was saying, well, it doesn't say that, it says this in the Bible, if you look at it. I was angry with him. So, that went on.

Soon, Daisy began to pay attention to the teachings of her husband and in-laws and over the course of one week, she experienced a secondary perspective transformation that causes her to accept this new worldview that portrayed her former beliefs as inadequate and inaccurate.

It took, my husband had left to go on a mission trip, and I was still at that time kind of undecided about, you know, what to believe. Because I'd always grown up Baptist, and you know, you just believe what the preacher says because he's gone to seminary school and things like that. So, you expect them to know what they're talking about. This, I have the book here that my father-in-law had ordered, and my husband kept wanting me to look at it. I never would, but when he went on his mission trip, I took it out, you know, I was at home during the day. I took it out, I would read it, and I would look it up in the Bible, and I could see the things. My father-in-law had been praying for me that when I got it, when it finally clicked, when I understood it, that I wouldn't be able to shut up about it. The day that my husband's mission group was going to the airport, I was riding with the van driver, a person that also went to this church, I shared with him. I think I shared with probably twenty people the week that my husband was gone.

...So, my husband, you know, he come back, and I was more willing to study the Bible. We done what a lot of people did, just, you know, you come to church, you bring your Bible, and your preacher might do, two, three verses of scripture, and then go talk about, you know, the things off the internet, or little stories, jokes, things like that. But, it was nothing ever in depth, teaching. So, we would come to church, and we would do our Sunday school lesson, and do the one hour church service, and everybody would be out, and everybody went to the restaurant...

Daisy had brought with her the Shepherd's Chapel lesson book that her father had given her. (I had accessed this book prior to our interview so that I would understand the differences in the teaching from the Baptist church to Shepherd's Chapel. Bible stories standard to Christian religions have been interpreted to include giants and UFO's, however the Christian tenets of forgiveness, upright behavior, witnessing, benevolence, etc. are still intact.) It was clear that Daisy accepted the Shepherd's Chapel teachings even though they varied greatly from her former understanding. This, she said, was positive because it added to her faith as she had a greater understanding of what God was trying to teach her. In Daisy's case, the introduction of new beliefs caused a secondary perspective transformation as she renounced some of her devout Baptist beliefs and ended her relationship with her much beloved church as a result. This is unlike any of the other participants who, through their own experiences, eventually drew closer to their *current* Christian worldview.

These examples regarding life experiences perceived to have a positive impact on conversion show that life events can create confusion that leads to the development of

new knowledge. In some examples, like in Sam's story about praying for a son, the event turned out to be singularly positive without any element of confusion or deconstruction of knowledge. In other examples, like in Daisy's acceptance of new beliefs, there was a clear deconstruction of her former knowledge, which led to the development of a new worldview (a secondary perspective transformation). Both scenarios are accepted and described as positive events with positive outcomes. This is not to say that positive life events cannot have negative outcomes, it only demonstrates that these participants at this time view their experiences as positive.

The Impact of Life Experiences Perceived to be Difficult

Difficult life experiences can create a cognitive dissonance resulting in a shift in understanding that may challenge or solidify one's previous beliefs. In this section, life experiences that are perceived as negative or difficult in nature are discussed. The events include health problems, relationship issues, addictions, and conflicts of beliefs. In some cases, a difficult life experience causes a pause in the conversion growth process while in other cases, the original conversion gains immediate understanding from the life event. Seemingly, perspective transformations have the capability to retract and expand, gaining new dimensions with each expansion. In the following examples, participants express some "retraction" of their beliefs during difficulties but, in every case, their Christian worldview was solidified and often strengthened as a result of their experience.

Thomas had a life experience that caused him to pull away from his newfound beliefs. Feeling that he owed something in return for his salvation, he overworked himself to the point of exhaustion in the ministry. Tired and confused, he relapsed into using drugs:

Eventually, where I think I may have made my mistake at, outside of that, is I was doing just too much. I was the guy that just came out of recovery. Maybe I shouldn't have been pressing myself like that. ...I was doing service brigade and the youth group. I shouldn't have probably been doing them. I probably should've been still strengthening myself and my relationship with God. I didn't understand that at the time. I didn't understand that may have been a place for me, down the road, but not right now. Eventually, I ended up relapsing. I didn't talk to anybody and I think that was the worse part. I did have a friend there...he was a counselor there. Later on, I think, after initial use, he started getting concerned about it. He started asking me, "Man, you all right?" He always was telling me that he felt like I was pushing myself or allowing myself to be pushed too much. Of course, me being gung-ho, and being a little embarrassing and hurt after that, because once you make that initial contact of users with drugs again, every thing that is built, is gone. What happened, I allowed myself to come back to that spiritual deadness that I was talking about.

Thomas' relapse was short-lived because he truly wanted to live clean. He confessed his relapse to the mission, knowing they had no choice but to terminate his employment and living arrangements. Because of the relapse, he went to live and work at a new mission that taught him how to develop a more personal relationship with God through journaling and daily quiet time. His relapse into drugs challenged Thomas' original conversion at first as it induced a short time of "spiritual deadness." However, because it led to a situation that created more opportunity for growth, he considers the experience to

have ultimately solidified his conversion. He entered a new rehab center that led to a strengthening of his beliefs:

I remember when I got to the bus station, it was raining and it was dreary. "Doc" came to pick me up at the bus station and he was trying to talk to me, and I didn't want to talk. I didn't. I didn't want to be bothered with anybody. I wasn't shaving or nothing. I talked to the head counselor. He said he believed the conviction that was in my heart because of the way I was and my whole demeanor. I remember [the Reverend] in class teaching one morning. He asked us, who all in here believe it's a God? And I did, and I raised my hand. What he was trying to get at during that time is those of us that say we're Christians, we don't act like it in the circumstance. I remember when he said that, it was like my heart stopped beating. Almost like I had woke up. Here I am on this pity party, and I say I love God, but not enough to believe that we're gonna get through this. So, then things began to change quite a bit.

It was at this time that Thomas learned to journal and communicate with God about his feelings. Through this experience, he realized that he is capable of failure and that he must be ever diligent in remaining faithful to his growth as a Christian. These realizations strengthened his conversion and gave him tools for a continued commitment to sobriety.

I think what I appreciate most of all is...scripture does tell us that Christ does chastise those that He loves. That's how I looked at it, after a while. I don't think my relapse--it wasn't about defeat. It was about how serious I need to be about my relationship with Him.

Micah has had his perspective transformation challenged similarly to Thomas, although less dramatically, by overextending himself working in a youth ministry. He recently excused himself from a large portion of his duties. He explains:

I think that through just spending all my effort and all my time with them I kind of lost where I needed to be with God. So, it's time to redirect back on to me, and my family and go from there and get stronger with God before I go back into helping with the youth.

Micah realized that he was spending more time than he could afford on youth programs and functions when his own conversion process began to suffer. To prevent complete burn-out on ministry and growth, he proactively sought to refocus his energies before losing touch with his new purpose in life: God and family.

Mary's belief system is challenged very directly through conversations with her closest sibling, who is anti-religion. As both had a very difficult childhood within a Mormon home, her brother questions her extensively at times about how she can be a "thinking, rational person" and adopt the worldview of a religion. She says:

I have to stop and think, "Well, okay, why do I believe in that? I don't accept the Joseph Smith story of Mormonism. Why do I accept the Jesus Christ story?" So, you know, the things that Jesus Christ went through are just as improbable as the things that Joseph Smith experienced. Why do I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, was crucified...arose from the dead, was resurrected? Why do I believe that and not that Joseph Smith found these old plates in the mountain, in the side of the hill?

Mary found that this questioning of her new worldview created inner turmoil that required a sense of resolution for her peace of mind. Due to her brother's challenging discourse, she would seek and receive support for her beliefs from the Bible and friends. She explained that her beliefs were strengthened by having to discern exactly what she believed in order to defend it to her brother. She describes the process, "I've been able to come back...take a step back and then take a step forward again...I have to go back and...kind-of recover from it to get back to the same, the same place that I was."

Another experience that has challenged Mary's beliefs was a disagreement with her preacher over a church matter. Following a personal investigation for a Biblical response to the conflict, Mary adjusted her belief system to account for the weaknesses of organized religion. This adjusted her new belief system because she had come to depend on the church for her learning experiences and she realized that this was not always wise. She learned that she would need to continue her own study in order to strengthen her conversion rather than allow human nature to interrupt her growth. She explains:

Any church you go to is made up of humans and humans are going to do stupid things. They are going to do things for the wrong reasons, they're going to be crazy, they're going to hurt you and damage you. Christians aren't perfect. And not everybody that goes to church are Christian. ...But it hasn't changed my belief in God and Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth found her conversion to be challenged during an especially tough time in which she experienced an unwed pregnancy filled with medical problems, financial difficulties, and a fiancé who was arrested just prior to their wedding. She describes how she sought to fulfill her need for comfort during this time:

When I found out that I was pregnant, I still had not learned the most valuable lesson that I've learned [up until] now. ...There are times when you need somebody. I couldn't make God real to me. Real enough, that in my time of need, my time of tears, my time of "just hold me." I couldn't make Him feel like He was right there. See, because I was trying to make God human. Instead of dealing with him on the spiritual level, I was trying to make Him a human being. So, through my many attempts at trying to make Him human, I realized just how human I was. I was with this guy that I loved. I said to God, bless this, bless this relationship. This man loves me Lord, and he holds me at night when you don't. He sends chills all over my body, when you don't. So, bless this, so that this can be right. What I was actually asking Him is to go against His word. Which, God can't do that... When I found out that I was pregnant, by him, I was so embarrassed, and so ashamed that I left the church. I was the head of the women's ministry at the church at that time. I had already stepped down from that position, because I realized that I was in a sinful situation. So, I stepped down from that position. Eventually, just walked away from God. I tried my best to make this man feel like God made me feel, but I was also trying to make God feel like this man was making me feel.

These events challenged Elizabeth's perspective transformation because she felt she had betrayed her new beliefs by regressing into former behaviors. As a result, she simply halted her conversion by "walking away from God." Gradually, however, she began to equate her life experiences to being specific lessons that God wants her to learn. In the end, Elizabeth has no regrets because the challenges she faced gave way to a deeper

understanding. She renewed her commitment to her conversion and her difficulties resolved over time with the help of prayer. This has led her to believe that her transformation was strengthened as a result of adversity:

...knowing that I didn't have to be perfect, and that He still blesses me, in spite of me, that has been the best thing, that has taught me. That helps you get through the battles. You start to say, Lord, if you were there for me when I was sinning, then if I keep your word, I know you're going to honor me now. So, that develops. That mistake, if you call it that, develops your character, it develops your integrity, and it causes you to develop a relationship that you can trust.

Life events, whether perceived as positive or negative, were believed by the participants to solidify or strengthen the conversion experience in most cases. When life events were positive, participants credited God with having their best interests at heart. When life events were negative, participants believed God was trying to teach them something of long-term value. Even in moments of doubt or anger, these participants retained their sense of right and wrong following their conversion and blamed themselves, not God, for personal failures and hardships. Even in Daisy's case where her conversion was altered by a secondary perspective transformation, she blamed herself and the church, not God, which resulted in a renewed commitment to deep study of the scripture. Elizabeth equates hardships to exercise, stating that the more a person experiences, the stronger they become:

That's how I've become to have such a strong belief in Him, now. That's what builds me. They say faith is like a muscle, and when you're trying to develop the muscle, you're going to have to lift some weights, and you go up higher, or you

go up higher reps. So, if you're going to have more difficult times in your life (not to say that it has to be a difficult time just because you have a relationship with God) but, whenever you are trying to be a different person, be growing to a different person, it's going to take some exercise. You have to exercise that faith muscle to get it to be able to carry you through the harder times.

The participants perceived their beliefs to be enhanced and strengthened by their life experiences. This, in turn, strengthened their perspective transformation and caused them, in most cases, to proceed with renewed strength and commitment. This is not to say that negative life experiences cannot lead to negative results, it only means that these participants at this time believe their negative experiences to be a part of their growth process and, therefore, see them as a necessary evil, a means to a positive end. Not one participant expressed regret about the learning they obtained from negative life experiences.

Participants use their new belief system to learn from their mistakes and reintegrate the lessons they learn into their lives. It is reiterated once again because participants have experienced substantial growth through the reintegration of information learned as seen in the above examples in which participants solidify or alter their new worldviews. These life experiences helped the participants identify more with their new self and less with their old self and see how these differences play out in real life.

Summary

In this section, subsequent life experiences have been discussed as being highly influential in the continued transformation of the participants. It was found that the original perspective transformations held up under the pressure of secondary events. In

the case of Daisy, where a secondary religious event significantly added to and somewhat altered her understanding of Christianity, the *basis* of her original conversion remained intact. In other life events, participants experienced setbacks in their recovery, health, relationships, and finances. Through their narratives, the participants demonstrated how they applied these experiences as opportunities to learn and grow within their new worldview.

Regardless of the circumstance, the participants often credited God with getting them through it and helping them become stronger as a result. The participants have furthermore expressed a deep desire to continue in their transformation to become more Christ-like by pursuing activities that provide opportunities for learning and personal growth. The participants have stayed on course toward their goals to transform their previous selves and, although the road has had a couple of bumps in it, the participants have found that their new identities have held up under the demands of life so far.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has recorded the lives and conversions of ten individuals. From their formative years, as described in the profiles section, to the meaning made of their conversions, these stories have shaped this research. Over its course, I have determined several key findings that have answered my research questions.

The first finding speaks to the research question regarding the meaning-making of conversion. It was demonstrated that there are several significant meanings made during Christian conversion. Much of the meaning made refers specifically to how participants have shifted toward a God-centered purpose in life, including becoming more open toward others. Conversion is shown to be transformational as it caused a shift in purpose,

a change in identity, a shift in the basis for daily decision making, and a lifelong commitment to conversion. The meaning made from their conversion experience primarily underpins the purpose of this research, the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of conversion, by demonstrating how adults own, practice, and commit to their new beliefs.

The second finding was that there were several common factors that influenced the participants' understanding of their conversion. Like the meaning made during conversion, the factors that influenced their understanding were found to have commonalities between the participants. These factors included learning activities, interpersonal relationships, spiritual encounters and traumatic life events. The factors often led to the questioning of former assumptions and caused the individuals to confront their formative understanding as well as any previous concerns that could possibly hinder their conversion process.

For these participants, factors such as their interpersonal relationships, continued learning, and spirituality are also commonly significant as they have reinforced and strengthened their perspective transformations. Through their learning experiences, they became committed to the endurance of their transformations and believe that continual exposure to and support from these key factors will foster the endurance they seek.

The third key finding in this chapter is how life events challenge, alter, or solidify conversion. Almost all of the participants experienced unforgettable life events that caused them to question their new worldview. Some were more traumatic than others, but, surprisingly, all had the same end result. In every case, the participants claimed that their conversion was ultimately strengthened, or solidified, by challenging life events.

The effect of difficult life events was that participants reaffirmed their worldview, their transformation. Participants typically blamed themselves, not their new worldview, when things went wrong and often felt they had to refocus their energies on trying to better practice their new beliefs. As for the enduring nature of conversion, it is clear that most life events promote personal growth as well as a greater commitment to their beliefs, two things that are essential in order for conversion to endure.

When I consider all of the findings, it makes a powerful statement about the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversions. It is evident that the participants believe that their conversions will continue to transform them from their previous identities into a new self. It is this belief that compels them to continue seeking opportunities for spiritual growth and striving for personal change.

Conversion is a perspective transformation with many layers. From the innermost conviction to the outermost behavioral reflection of it, no layer exists without the ones under it, supporting it. It is a process that begins deep within, invading first the heart (convictional learning), then the mind (psychological learning), and works its way outward toward observable change (behavioral learning). This was demonstrated as participants displayed a new sense of conviction in their lives and became committed to turning away from their old way of thinking and behaving to become increasingly more Christ-like. It is a process that, by definition, never ends as there is always room for improvement when human beings are involved. These findings clearly demonstrate the “how” and “why” of conversion. The “so what” will be discussed in the upcoming chapter as I draw conclusions, examine their implications for adult education, and make recommendations based on them.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion. This chapter reflects my interpretation of how participants made meaning of their conversion experiences and how this meaning will continue to influence their worldviews and practices. In previous chapters, I have demonstrated conversion to be a form of perspective transformation. This was accomplished by comparing and finding conversion and perspective transformation to be parallel in design and nature. I have provided a foundation of educational and religious literature that support how participants experience conversion as a perspective transformation and how they could potentially be impacted by such. I have examined the questions of whether or not conversions endure and how they are impacted by life events. This chapter will present my answers to these questions based on an analysis of the data. In this chapter, I will also explain the implications of this research as well as recommendations for future research and use of these findings.

Conclusions

The first conclusion drawn from this research is that perspective transformations in the context of conversion are enduring. This conclusion is supported by the meanings made during perspective transformations in this context and by the fact that participants have been shown to have a lifelong commitment to their conversions. The second

conclusion of this work is that perspective transformations are not only enduring in nature but progressive, or evolving, due to subsequent life events in conjunction with continued efforts to learn. The third conclusion is that perspective transformations in the context of Christian conversion, while similar to perspective transformations in other contexts in many ways, may challenge perspective transformation theory by demonstrating that participants may experience conversion without necessarily achieving the highest levels of transformation.

Conclusion One: Perspective Transformations in the Context of Conversion are Enduring

The findings of this research have demonstrated that perspective transformations in the context of conversion are enduring in nature. Welton (1993) describes conversion as a transformational journey, “an invitation to live life on the edge of the raft” (p. 107). The participants in this research chose to accept the invitation although it caused an upheaval of their past assumptions, required a concerted effort to learn about their new worldview, and ultimately lead them to a life entirely different than previously known to them. In studying how these participants navigated their perspective transformations, several findings became evident as providing critical support to the endurance of their conversions.

The Role of Meaning-Making in Conversion

For the participants, conversion meant transforming from his or her former self into a new self according to scriptural teachings. To successfully transition into their new Christian identities, participants realized several key meanings during their conversions: 1) the realization of God’s grace, 2) a shift from self-centered practices to God-centered

purpose including a new identity, an openness to others, and a responsibility to evangelize, 3) a shift in the basis for their life decisions, and 4) a commitment to life-long change. It is through these meanings that participants own, understand, and share their new worldview.

As Mezirow states “to make meaning is to construe or interpret experience--in other words, to give it coherence” (1991, p. 4). Transformational learning experiences are central in how adults make meaning and it is evident that the transformational experience of conversion has yielded significant meaning that has helped these individuals understand and practice their new beliefs. Because perspective transformation “can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 7), it has been previously assumed that the effects of meaning-making are lasting and that transformations endure. Since the meaning made from their conversions has led the participants to more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspectives that have lasted several years, it can be said that these results are enduring.

The only prior empirical research that examines the centrality of meaning-making on perspective transformations is the Courtenay et al. (1998) study that looked at how meaning is made through a life-threatening event, the diagnosis of HIV. Courtenay et al. (2000) followed-up their HIV study with a look at how their participants’ perspective transformation endured over time and found that the meaning gained from their original transformation remained intact after two years. Mine is the first empirical research to explore meaning-making from a perspective transformation resulting from a non-life-threatening event. The findings of this study affirm that the effects of meaning-making

are indeed lasting and, combined with other factors, meaning-making increases the likelihood that a perspective transformation from a non-life-threatening event will endure over time. Next, I will discuss how the specific meanings support the endurance of perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion.

The realization of God's grace. The first meaning made through their conversions led participants to embrace the Christian tenets of love and forgiveness as they experienced God's grace. This has helped them overcome most of their feelings of guilt and shame regarding past mistakes. Gelpi (1999) states "conversion begins to have a graced character when its motives invoke supernaturally revealed truths, realities, and values" resulting from "God's decision to not just engage in the ongoing creation of the world but also to intervene in human history in incarnate form in order to invite humans into the collaborative work of undoing the consequence of their own sinfulness" (p. 8). God's grace provides the foundation of their belief system by reminding participants of their worth to Him. This realization of God's grace led participants to make a decision with lifelong implications, the conversion of their beliefs to Christianity and this meaning has helped them maintain their transformation thus far.

A shift from self-centered practices to God-centered purpose. The second meaning made during conversion embodies traits that are more observable by other people. One of the most noticeable characteristics of new Christians is a shift in their life's purpose from serving self to serving God. The desire to serve God rather than one's self is conveyed to others primarily through behavioral practices. This happens when, during their conversions, new Christians are indoctrinated through church and Bible study to believe that they are "ambassadors of Christ" and obligated to represent him well.

This was reflected in the participants as they immediately began funneling energy into various ministries, abstaining from damaging behaviors, practicing a higher degree of honesty, and witnessing to others about their conversions. As Gutierrez says, “conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ...to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely...with a strategy of action” (1978, p. 309). Because of the depth of commitment required, this shift to a God-centered purpose in life created additional long-term paradigm shifts in the participants’ identities, their openness to others, and their feelings toward evangelism.

The shift from self-centered practices to God-centered purpose includes the development of a new identity. When participants began to view themselves as Christians, they could no longer identify with their previous selfish behaviors. Gelpi describes this shift as “passing from irresponsible to responsible” (1999, p. 8). In describing themselves, they often used terms like “before” and “after,” referring to how they viewed themselves prior to and following their introduction to conversion. Mezirow describes this as “a praxis, a dialectic in which understanding and action interact to produce an altered state of being” (1978, p. 15). Participants were committed to the continuation of their new identity to the point of zealous involvement in activities and relationships that are supportive of their changes, as John says, “I won’t never go back like I was.” This commitment to maintain their new identity supports the enduring nature of perspective transformation as Clark states, “once achieved, a transformed perspective cannot be reversed...It leads to a more actualized personal identity” (1991, p. 45). Ryan (2000) states

The self is always unfolding, changing, developing in response to its changing

perceptions of the world around it. Conversions, of course, represent momentous changes in the self. But the self is ever changing, in grand and small ways; it is always in the process of becoming. (p. 339)

Another meaning expressed was an openness to others. This meaning can be summarized as a compassionate acceptance of other people. As mentioned, one of the key components in the initial conversion is the element of forgiveness. In order for people to be forgiven by God, they are duty bound to impart similar mercy upon others. This allows them to view others, regardless of who they are, as worthy of God's grace.

Gelpi (1999) describes the openness of Christianity as an "unconditional trust in God [that] seeks to bring into existence a community of universal sharing that excludes no one in principle and that opens its doors to everyone" thereby breaking down "the social barriers that sin erects in human society: barriers of gender, race, class, greed, privilege, coercion, etc." (p. 10). This newfound openness allowed the participants to view Christians as humans instead of hypocrites and non-Christians as potential converts, enabling them to become more integrating, permeable, and inclusive in their perspective.

Bred by their new openness toward others, participants soon felt a responsibility to evangelize them. Even in cases where participants felt uncomfortable directly witnessing to another person due to a multitude of reasons, they still believed that Jesus died for everyone, regardless of background or ethnicity. The empowerment to tell others about newfound beliefs serves as further evidence of one's conversion. Hefner-Smith (1994) quotes a pastor working among the Khmer refugees, "evangelical means that you have to have a personal experience...we stress the importance of the personal experience, of recognizing and admitting your sin and receiving Christ...we feel strongly evangelical

and that also means we want to share the message with others” (p.9). The ability to describe one’s conversion experience is of utmost value in the Christian belief system as converts are empowered and expected to evangelize non-believers. The desire to evangelize demonstrates a long-term commitment to their transformation, one that means so much to them that they wish it upon others.

A shift in the basis for life decisions. A shift in the basis for making decisions is the third meaning made during conversion. In transformational learning, meaning is made that allows the individual to adopt a new perspective or frame of reference that will ultimately guide actions and decision-making in keeping with the new perspective (Mezirow, 2000). When the participants experienced a shift in the focus of their lives from self to God and then realized their responsibility to evangelize and display positive Christian behaviors, they began to incorporate these beliefs into their daily decision-making. Decisions regarding personal habits, parenting, and business ethics were influenced heavily by their transformations. Many examples were given in which participants made efforts to involve God in their day through prayer and daily decisions. Thomas summed it up by saying, “I’ve done seen both sides of life...it’s different when everything revolves around Christ.” It is through critical reflection that participants realized that they should incorporate God into every aspect of their lives, praying throughout decisions and difficulties. This meaning contributes to the enduring nature of perspective transformation because it demonstrates a commitment to a completely new purpose in life that requires an ongoing relationship with God.

A commitment to life-long change. The final meaning made by participants is especially significant to this research as it clearly supports the enduring nature of a

perspective transformation in the context of conversion. This meaning was developed through participants' understanding that they have been transformed by their religious conversion and that there will always be room for improvement due to a quest to become increasingly more Christ-like. They expressed a commitment to continue in their new worldview, to grow in their knowledge, and to never return to their former practices. It is this self-determination to lifelong change that enables their conversions to endure and grow over time and through subsequent life events. Courtenay et al. (1998) state that it is important in meaning-making to get beyond the initial reaction to an experience in order to transform one's understanding. The commitment to life-long change is an example of how participants move well beyond their initial reaction and plan for the future. This commitment to life-long change is a clear example of how fundamental meaning-making is to perspective transformation because without this meaning, opportunities to enhance the meaning of conversion could cease and conversion could lose some of its value.

Summary of Meaning-Making and Conversion

The type of meaning-making that occurs during conversion is what Gould (1978) describes as deeply personal and often difficult, because it represents the breaking away from former understanding but because conversion creates such momentous shifts in meaning, it can be "hugely successful and liberating" (p. 223). These meanings made during conversion represent an individualized change in meaning schemes essential to a complete perspective transformation. Since much of the meaning of conversion and transformation is outlined in the Bible and by the church, participants adopt a belief system that is somewhat calculated toward the meaning-making of its converts. Without the transformational learning processes that allow the meanings of conversion to be

individually defined and accepted, converts naturally would struggle with accepting such a pre-packaged worldview.

I contend that, while Christianity is a worldview that widely received, it is still up to the individual to determine their levels of belief and practice. In Chapter One, there is the example of how each person has a sack slung over his or her shoulder that holds all of his or her learning. As the course of life is traveled, new experiences are added, shifting and often discarding some of the previous contents. The perspective transformation of conversion is so intensely meaningful that much of the contents of the previous learning are rearranged and much formative learning is discarded and replaced with a new worldview with Christ as center. What is not discarded is the memory of what was believed and practiced prior to conversion. This “before and after” comparison serves as a constant reminder of incredible transformation for the convert. The transformation is then evidenced through behaviors and personal testimony that outwardly reflect innermost change. Similar to the Courtenay et al. (1998) study on how adults made meaning following a diagnosis of HIV, participants experienced changes in their beliefs and expectations. The meaning of their perspective transformations was conveyed through a shift in identity and purpose.

The combination of meanings made from the perspective transformation of Christian conversion point to the conclusion that perspective transformations in this context are enduring. Because of the meaning acquired by the participants, they grew to be transformed people as reflected in their new identities and their actions, that are determined to maintain their transformed worldview and continue in their growth. This exemplifies Mezirow’s definition of perspective transformation as involving “(a) an

empowered sense of self, (b) more critical understanding of how one's social relationships and culture have shaped one's beliefs and feelings, and (c) more functional strategies and resources for taking action" (1991, p. 161). These strategies for taking action became part of how participants view their ongoing growth in their conversion and will now be discussed in the second conclusion from this study.

Conclusion Two: Perspective Transformations in the Context of Conversion

Evolve Over Time

The findings lead to a second conclusion: perspective transformations in the context of conversion are not only enduring in nature but progressive, or evolving, due to 1) continued efforts to learn, and 2) subsequent life events, which may or may not be secondary perspective transformations.

Participant responses illustrate how their conversions were solidified and ultimately strengthened over time through challenges such as personal failures, losses, and health problems. Furthermore, the participants perceived conversion as a life-long process that never reaches a finite conclusion and is benefited by learning. Nor do the participants expect it to. They expressed that conversion is not a transformation that merely endures over time, it actually *calls for* endurance. As Sam says, conversion is a "lifelong ordeal...you're running a race." In order for the participants to effectively run their race, they learned that they must equip themselves for success by gaining understanding through learning opportunities and life experiences.

This is among the first empirical studies to conclude that perspective transformations in non-life-threatening contexts endure over time, as well as being a unique empirical representation of how perspective transformations are affected by subsequent life events.

It is also likely to be the first empirical research to suggest that individual perspective transformations actually *evolve* or advance over time as a result of learning opportunities and subsequent life events. The following sections will illustrate 1) how learning reinforces and advances the conversion process, and 2) how life events often strengthen conversion.

The Conversion Process is Reinforced and Advanced through Learning

The participants came to conversion through a series of events, or catalysts, which caused them to consider an alternate worldview. In some cases the catalysts were dramatic such as Bill's physical collapse or Thomas' entry into a homeless shelter. These situations triggered a disorienting dilemma that sent the participants into a whirlwind of cognitive dissonance, ultimately resulting in a perspective transformation. In most cases, however, the catalysts accumulated slowly through a series of less dramatic events, termed integrating circumstances, like Sam and Grace who were introduced to conversion through the influence of friends in supportive settings. Whether by disorienting dilemma and or integrating circumstance, participants soon felt a need to resolve their personal histories and start life over with a new worldview.

Once the conversion had begun, all ten of the participants sought a variety of learning opportunities to better understand and grow in their belief. Over the course of time, they have continued to seek out learning opportunities that will nurture their conversions as conversion itself is an ongoing learning process that requires daily effort. Clark (1991) states:

There are three dimensions of change in transformational learning: psychological, in which the structure or the understanding of the self is altered; convictional,

where belief systems are revised; and behavioral, in which life style is changed.

These dimensions are manifested in all transformational learning experiences, though usually one predominates. (p.127)

Although this research clearly speaks to the convictional dimension of change, a truly transformational learning experience such as conversion combines all three dimensions.

To further my point, I will briefly examine how the participants experienced each dimension. Because convictional change is the predominant dimension evidenced in conversion experiences, I will discuss this first.

Convictional change is evidenced by the participants' shift in beliefs from their prior understanding or lack of belief to a complete acceptance of the tenets of Christianity. This study has shown a revision of beliefs in all ten participants. They rejected their previous understanding of God to embrace conversion. In many of the cases, participants had completely denied or dismissed the very existence of God and now, they wholeheartedly seek to serve him. This is the dimension that "predominates" the others within transformational learning in the context of religious conversion.

Psychological change is the second dimension of transformational learning experienced by participants. It is imperative that psychological changes occur, as converts must discard many elements of their formative learning in order to accept a new worldview. Adjustments to one's previous knowledge must be made to accommodate new information, especially in areas as sensitive as what one believes about God, creation, heaven, etc. Moreover, psychological change is necessary because motivation is essential to conversion. The participants became internally motivated due to their

desire to please God and to change the way they view themselves, ultimately changing their identities and purpose in life.

The third and final dimension of transformational learning experienced by the participants is behavioral change. Once again, conversion requires this dimension. Behavioral changes are evidenced throughout the study. All ten participants gave examples of how they have changed their ethics and values based on their new worldview and that these values are then conveyed behaviorally. For the participants, there was a standard of behavior outlined for them through the church, other Christians, and the Bible. Examples of behavioral reflections of their new worldview found in their narratives include making a public profession of faith, including baptism; a decreased use of or abstinence from alcohol and drugs, profanity, and pornography; participation in prayer, worship, and Bible study; an openness toward others; and God-centered decision making.

These behaviors represent the observable tenets of Christianity, which help define conversion. Mezirow's definition of a perspective transformation goes as far as to say that the shift from one worldview to another is ultimately reflected behaviorally through how one "makes decisions or otherwise acts upon these new understandings" (Mezirow, 1988, p. 226). Without this behavioral reflection of belief, conversion is incomplete.

With the three dimensions of learning as a powerful backdrop for their conversions, the participants began to seek learning opportunities that would support their new worldview. Each of the participants sought a variety of learning opportunities through church classes, reflective journaling, personal Bible study (including a variety of spiritual reading materials and discussions) and watching Christian television and listening to

Christian radio. As they learned more, the participants began to try on new roles that provided even more learning opportunities such as leadership roles, evangelizing, counseling, and teaching in an “an attempt to carry the new vision of self and world into everyday life” (Ryan, 2000, p. 345).

Transformational learning involves deep personal change that “invites further transformation” (Batson et al. 1993, p. 107) because it “appears to be open-ended, reflexive, and tentative” (Ryan, 2000, p. 356). This is the type of learning involved in true conversion as evidenced by the participants’ willingness to evolve into whatever God wants them to be. As Mary said, “I firmly believe that in conversion you get converted over and over and over again and further and more and I feel like my conversion has just barely touched the surface.”

Subsequent Life Events Strengthen Conversion

Wood (1995) described perspective transformation as an adult development process in which a learner makes changes in or completely revises his or her belief system. Wood went on to describe transcendence as an acceptance of the past, the building of beliefs upon the accumulation of changes, and the developing of a sense of fulfillment. Wood’s transformation model is cyclical, allowing the developmental process to repeat again and again, building in response to a different life event. Wood’s model demonstrates how conversion can be revised and strengthened through life experiences.

In Ledford’s (1998) dissertation, he found eight out of nine of his participants’ faith development was strengthened through a crisis of faith that challenged their previous assumptions regarding their beliefs. Similarly, this research shows that participants claim their conversions are benefited, or strengthened, from challenging life events. In several

examples, life events solidified and often enhanced participants' understanding of their beliefs. All ten have experienced life events that created confusion and personal failure, and all ten blamed themselves for their inadequacies rather than blaming God. Their conversions were ultimately solidified by the life event, though it often took hindsight to realize the benefit gained. In many cases, God was actually credited with allowing a hardship, or intervening to prevent one, in order for them to learn from them, to develop their relationship with God. Thomas gives an example:

My God, look how I done lived, I'm even blessed I'm even here today, to be honest with you. I mean, I was tearing up, flipping cars and everything that I just didn't mention for time's sake. I mean, all that stuff is true. All those interventions, that I call interventions, like the Army letting me go without jail time and stuff. I believe all that was to tell the part of this story to you today.

For Mary, conversations with her brother challenged her conversion. In the end, she overcame her doubt and renewed her commitment to her conversion. For Daisy, exposure to a new view on Christianity challenged and revised her previous "church" understanding of God. For Simon and John, deteriorating health led them to a stronger reliance upon God. Ultimately, their subsequent life events, along a variety of other influential factors, created opportunities for their conversions to evolve into a deeper, more meaningful understanding. For these participants, their conversions were strengthened by small shifts in their meaning schemes: that God will not let them down, that they never have to go back to their identity prior to conversion, and that to continue their conversions requires a willingness to learn and evolve as a person. Comprised of these smaller shifts in meaning schemes, a larger meaning perspective developed and

proved to accommodate the introduction of new information gained from life experiences.

It is partly because of these subsequent life events that participants feel that conversion is an ongoing process. They realize that life is dynamic, never stopping, somewhat uncontrollable. Conversion must react to life. Mezirow (2000) reminds us that this new or converted worldview must accommodate subsequent life events by shifting slightly with each one, revising a little, often becoming stronger as a result. The ability of conversion to evolve or progress occurs because the new worldview holds up and is often enhanced by the challenge of subsequent life events as demonstrated in this research. Again, this conclusion is unique to this study as it is the only empirical research to look at the impact of subsequent life events on a perspective transformation.

Conclusion Three: Perspective Transformations in the Context of

Conversion Challenge the Characteristics of Mezirow's "New Perspective"

As I began to analyze and write about perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion, I began to realize that although I, along with Clark (1991), Courtenay et al. (1998), Mezirow (2000), and others, acknowledge religious conversion to be a perspective transformation, there are a few distinctions that set conversion apart as a perspective transformation. Perspective transformations in the context of Christian conversion, while similar to perspective transformations in other contexts in many ways, challenge Mezirow's traditional characteristics of what resulting perspectives should look like. This is primarily because participants may have experienced conversion without necessarily achieving, or even aspiring to, more permeable or differentiated beliefs.

When initially comparing Mezirow's view of perspective transformation to

conversion, I observed that the conversion process closely paralleled Mezirow's stage model. I became convinced that conversion was a straightforward perspective transformation and used the model along with Mezirow's ongoing defense of his theory to support this research. When analyzing my data, though, I quickly recognized a deviation from the characteristics expected from a perspective transformation. In Christian conversion, many individuals begin to experience conflicts with their growth toward becoming fully permeable and integrated. I believe this is due in part to the indoctrination that comes with continual exposure to a defined set of beliefs through organized religious experiences. This creates some dissonance within converts as they seemingly try to reach higher levels of meaning and acceptance through their efforts to learn while, at the same time, they are being indoctrinated to evangelize on the premise of "deliverance" above all else. It is here that a tension between perspective transformation theory and conversion develops and begins to illuminate some interesting variations within the results. An example of this tension is found in Sam's story when he discusses what bothers him about Christianity:

And I think the problem with most Christians is...the biggest problem with Christianity today is *we just want to save [people]*. You know, make them say [the sinner's] prayer and they're good. They're good. You know, we're going to check you off the list, man, and we're going to go after somebody else.

Sam goes on to say that because of this evangelical approach, many converts may not pursue additional meaning or growth of their conversions. This speaks to how some converts may be indoctrinated to evangelize even though they have experienced only a "narrative" or superficial conversion, rather than the deeper, lasting change discussed in

this research. Prior to his own conversion, Sam observed that some Christians were not transformed by their supposed conversions :

Being an atheist, you know, now this is kind of crazy, but, being an atheist, I would read the Bible so I could think, then I could argue, when an argument would come up. I would know what they were going to be trying to prove before they ever got there so I could have my line of defense lined up and I could fire away. And it amazed me how little [some] Christians actually knew. You know, it blows my mind. That people that have attended church for twenty years and they're no different than they were before they were saved.

This lack of change speaks to what Ryan (2000) refers to as a narrative convert, one who believes himself or herself to be doing and saying the right things as a convert yet not achieving a state of “real change” (p. 357). Ryan states that this often occurs when a “new reality is dogmatic” and converts are convinced that they’ve reached an optimal level of development. “Deeper transformation, on the other hand, ideologically invites further transformation” (Ryan, 2000, p. 356) and it is this deeper transformation that I can only assume has occurred, based on the participants’ expressed aspirations and lifelong commitment to change.

One may scrutinize the participants of this research as being fairly dogmatic and impermeable to the introduction of alternative beliefs following their conversions. This could be due to the evidenced belief in evangelizing others based on their new Christian worldview and the expressed need to surround themselves with like-minded people. I can attest, however, that although these are relevant facts, these individuals also expressed more integrated, discriminating, and permeable attitudes *than before* their

conversions by 1) listening to, reflecting upon, and applying new information, 2) consistently making new meaning from life events, and 3) making efforts to be more open, caring, and forgiving toward others. Daisy is an example of how new beliefs can be integrated following conversion. Although she accepted a more dogmatic view of the Bible and church in her second conversion, the fact is that she was “emotionally capable of change” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8), she was permeable enough to listen, reflect, and apply new beliefs.

As to the issue of converts surrounding themselves with like-minded people, it has become my opinion that their reasons are primarily to receive support and knowledge while also guarding themselves against the “bad habits” from their pasts. Again, Daisy illustrates this point as she formed a new Bible study group with Shepherd’s Chapel believers who would support her and help her grow in her new beliefs. Since these issues were not the primary focus of this research, I do not suggest that I have the answers for questions that may arise regarding how indoctrination affects transformation in the context of conversion. I can only say that these participants are committed to lifelong change, to reach the highest levels of human transformation regarding their conversions, and that they may in time, if they haven’t already, succeed.

As Cranton (2000) again reminds us, “people, due to their psychological makeup, vary in how they experience the process” (p. 190). The participants vary in where they are in their transformation processes; some embrace and express the higher stages of perspective transformation more than others. Dirkx states that personal transformations that involve shifts in one’s worldview cannot be limited to a problem-solving model as shown by Mezirow. He says that doing so “understates the affective, emotional, spiritual,

and transpersonal elements” present in every transformation (1997, p. 81). Perhaps it is better to consider conversion an illustration of “transcendence” (Wood, 1995) than transformation because in transcendence, individuals gains the capacity to go beyond the revision of their belief systems to achieve closure of the ir pasts, to build upon a new worldview, and to develop a greater sense of fulfillment in life. I think these points, especially this increased sense of fulfillment, represent the views of my participants well and should be considered when evaluating Christian conversion as a perspective transformation in the future.

Implications

The implications of this research point in two directions. One direction is the field in which the research was conducted, adult education. The second direction is much broader, encompassing anyone who considers perspective transformation or conversion to be topics of interest. As for the field of adult education, the implications of this research are both theoretical and practical.

The theoretical implications stem from the enduring nature of perspective transformation. Until now, only the Courtenay et al. (2000) study demonstrated the longevity of perspective transformation. The Courtenay study provides a follow-up on participants who had experienced an earlier perspective transformation through the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, HIV. A major difference between that study and this one is that this research focuses on perspective transformations from a non-life-threatening catalyst. The theoretical implication is that perspective transformations resulting from non-life-threatening catalysts have staying power just like those resulting from life-threatening catalysts, as was found in the Courtenay study.

A second theoretical implication goes to meaning-making in perspective transformations. As concluded earlier, meaning-making is extremely significant to the ongoing process of conversion because it is through the meaning-making of conversion that participants own, understand, and share their experience. It is because adults make such personalized meaning of their conversions that their conversions endure so well over time. This is encouraging to people who wish to convert or to initiate any other significant long-term changes in their worldview. It is also encouraging to theorists and practitioners who wish to utilize meaning-making in instruction because it demonstrates several factors, such as reflective discourse and journaling, as effective tools for helping one gain understanding.

A third theoretical implication exists because of the tension found in characteristics of conversion that may differ somewhat from the characteristics traditionally expected from a perspective transformation. As discussed in the third conclusion from this research, perspective transformations in the context of conversion may yield unique results due to a possible indoctrination along with the continued support found within Christian relationships. The implication is that the characteristics of conversion as a perspective transformation differ slightly from the expected results, perhaps intentionally, and that we as researchers and educators must consider that the end results of perspective transformation maybe contextualized rather than following a predefined pattern.

A theoretical implication specific to transformational dimensions is also present. Conversion incorporates all three dimensions of transformational learning, reinforcing the premise that, while all three dimensions are typically impacted during a transformational experience, one dimension predominates. In this case, the convictional dimension

appears to predominate because of the convictional feelings mentioned often by participants as guiding their thoughts and behaviors. Little is known about the convictional dimension of transformational learning and even less attention has been given regarding its occurrence as the predominant force in a transformational learning experience. This study illustrates how the three dimensions of transformational learning may play out in the context of Christian conversion.

The final theoretical implication of this research is that subsequent life events often reinforce perspective transformations. As in the case of conversion, people who experienced highly significant events, whether positive or negative, expressed an affirmation of their new worldview. Similarly, in the Courtenay (2000) follow-up study, participants' perspective transformations were affirmed throughout the introduction of life-saving medications. No longer were the participants condemned to their original HIV death sentence but they chose to maintain their new worldview anyway, realizing that life is precious and fleeting. Being given a second chance served to encourage them to be altruistic and open-minded as did conversion for the participants in this study.

In the context of conversion, participants who found themselves faced with secondary life events felt they were being challenged to continue their growth as Christians. It is the *interpretation* of an event that matters in its impact on one's worldview. Whether the participants viewed an event as positive or difficult, they chose to believe that the experience was meant to help them gain understanding. They blamed any negativity on themselves, not God, and they felt that their tribulations would serve to make them stronger in the end. This is perhaps the first research to actually seek out how people deal

with secondary life events and perspective transformations following a primary perspective transformation.

Also reinforcing Courtenay et al.'s findings is the fact that the shift in meaning schemes during conversion was, in every case, in a developmentally positive direction. Participants expressed an altruistic awareness of others, a greater desire for learning opportunities, a higher regard for family and community, and positive shift in ethics and behaviors. Although many of these could be considered as part of a natural maturation process, I deliberately selected participants from all stages of life to reflect how conversion impacts lives, regardless of age. To exemplify this point, 70 year-old John expressed the same changes due to his conversion as did participants half his age.

As for the practical implications of this research, it is obvious that educational materials and programmers are concerned with creating lasting change. The fact that perspective transformation in the context of conversion demonstrated a developmentally positive shift in meaning schemes implies that educators can intentionally design learning experiences to aim for this shift. Whether or not educators should design learning experiences that create change for their learners should be carefully regarded as an ethical dilemma for if long-term change is initiated, where do the learners go from there and who will help them?

An example of learning designed specifically to initiate a developmentally positive shift that speaks to these ethical issues is found in the church. As shown in this study, it often aims to expose people to their most basic need for forgiveness, to change them from the inside out. The church and its variety of ministries set out to teach people how to live responsibly by adding ethics and values to every aspect of life. Finally, the church aims

for its learners to behaviorally reflect these internal changes. In the ethical dilemma of whether or not educators should attempt to transform learners, the church, as an educational community, often replaces educational ethics with a philosophy of “deliverance first.” Deliverance, therefore, becomes the focal point of ministry and many churches simply seek to save people, to initiate conversion, and only hope that the conversions will endure. If religious educators consider the ethics of this approach, it will become more popular for churches to work harder to develop new converts instead of relying on converts to seek out learning opportunities on their own.

This research will benefit educators and practitioners, especially in the field of religion, by shedding light on how adults make meaning of conversion, how and why conversions endure, and what happens to conversions during secondary life experiences. Because this study also touches on transformational learning in the context of conversion, readers will hopefully seek further understanding of adult learning principles and practices that will aid their understanding. Finally, this research will benefit the practice of persons and institutions aimed at evangelizing others. Through this work it has become evident that, for converts to meet their goals, conversion requires more than a quick prayer or walk down a church aisle, it requires ongoing learning opportunities and support.

Conversions are ongoing, as demonstrated by this study. This means that teachable moments continue throughout one’s conversion. As with my participants, these teachable moments arise most expectedly during life events that challenge, alter, and solidify one’s beliefs. Remarkably, the participants often credited God as “teaching” them by way of their difficulties in effort to strengthen their faith. This means that participants were

keenly aware, whether during or afterwards, that learning was taking place. It would be useful for educators, counselors, and leaders to understand more about when and under what circumstances teachable moments occur, and how to ethically introduce new information during these times as will be discussed in the upcoming section.

Recommendations

Recommendations regarding this research stem directly from its implications. Because this is the first study to examine the enduring nature of perspective transformations in a non-life-threatening scenario, it is clear that more research should be conducted as to the enduring nature of perspective transformations in both life-threatening and non-life-threatening situations. As there is now only one empirical study per each of the two scenarios to my knowledge, more research should be done so we may learn what perspective transformations may look like over time in a variety of other contexts and through a variety of subsequent life events. It would be especially helpful for educators to know what happens to perspective transformations that occur in educational environments because little is known about the enduring effects of perspective transformation on educational theory and practice.

A second recommendation for further research involves an investigation of perspective transformations that may not reach the traditionally expected levels of discrimination, integration, and permeability. As was discussed, indoctrination may play a role in prohibiting converts from reaching high degrees of self-actualization, especially in more dogmatic contexts. Perspective transformations in a variety of contexts should be examined to determine how the end results and characteristics may or may not resemble Mezirow's ideal.

A third recommendation is that further research should be done to investigate the convictional dimension of transformational learning because I found so little in my search for information regarding this convictional dimension. As the convictional dimension refers to a shift in belief systems, not necessarily religious belief systems, future research should consider a wide range of belief systems including political, environmental, and ethical beliefs as part of the convictional dimension. Conversion does not always refer to a shift in one's religious worldview; it could also refer to a shift in similarly significant worldview. An example of this is found in McDonald's (1998) research about the shift from being a carnivore to becoming an ethical vegan. This research only looked at conversion from one worldview to the worldview of Christianity. As this is the case, this study could be conducted repeatedly within a variety of belief systems to further aid our understanding of the enduring nature of perspective transformations and the convictional dimension of transformational learning.

Conversion is generally considered to be a developmentally positive shift but what happens when a person converts to a developmentally negative system of belief? There are many organizations that hinder personal growth and encourage blind allegiance such as dangerous religious cults, anti-political movements, or racist factions. Although members may be learning and growing within the organization, their growth is not accepted as being positive on a larger scale and could not exist independently of the group. Because this research revealed the participants' perspective transformations to be developmentally positive, my fourth recommendation is that more research be conducted to examine developmentally negative shifts in perspective. Is it still considered a

perspective transformation if it creates any developmentally negative shifts? Does it endure over time and through subsequent life events?

The fifth recommendation is taken directly from the implications. Research should be conducted to determine how and why perspective transformations occur in learning environments and that educators should carefully consider the ethics of actively initiating perspective transformations in their students. Since little is known about the long-term effects of perspective transformations in learning environments, should educators and leaders aim instruction toward long-term shifts in their participants? If so, who will attend to needs that may arise from the shift long after the instruction has ended? Future research should investigate instructional methods and interventions that create a shift in understanding or belief and the ethics involved with this. Clearly, educators, psychologists, and church leaders would desire to reverse the effects of a developmentally negative experience in a learner's history, but how do we plan for this type of intervention, how can we safely administer it, and how do we measure the results?

The final recommendation of this research is that there should be future studies about perspective transformation to include a diverse range of socio-cultural influences. The way conversions are accepted and expressed will vary depending on their surrounding socio-cultural influences. In Chapter Two, there are many cultural examples of conversion, from the Khmer to the Indians of Northern Mexico, in which socio-cultural influences play large roles in how conversion is both received and conveyed to others. If

more aware of socio-cultural influences, educators, leaders, and missionaries will be better prepared to work within cultural settings that differ from their own. In researching this topic, however, I found very few empirical studies dealing with conversion in diverse settings.

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APPENDIX A

SCREENING QUESTIONS

- I. Are you a Christian? Do you believe that Jesus is the son of God, who died for your sins and was raised again? (a profession of faith)
 - A. When did you convert to Christianity? (At what age)
 - B. How old are you now?
 - C. Have you been baptized?
 - D. What are some practices that reflect your Christian beliefs?

For example:

 - Do you attend church regularly?
 - Do you practice regular prayer?
 - Do you study the Bible or other Christian materials?
 - Do you fellowship/study with other Christians?

- II. Have you had a significant life event since your conversion?
 - A. At what age?
 - B. Describe this event.
 - C. Describe how that event affected your life.
 - D. How has this event impacted your Christian beliefs?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- I. Tell me about your conversion experience.
 - A. How long ago was your conversion experience?
 - B. What does this experience mean to you?
 - C. What, if any, changes have you experienced as a result of your conversion? Tell me who you were before your conversion compared to who you are now.

- II. What individuals or situations helped you better understand your experience?
 - A. Did you pursue a greater understanding of your experience? What actions did you take to better understand your experience?

- III. Please describe the significant life events you have encountered since your conversion experience.
 - A. How long after your conversion did you experience this?
 - B. What did this experience mean to you?
 - C. How did this event change the way you think, feel, or behave?

- IV. In what ways has your belief system changed?
 - A. How do you now compare to the person you were before your conversion?

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in a research study entitled “The enduring nature of a perspective transformation in the context of Christian conversion” conducted as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Georgia by Andrea Griffin Cook (706-693-4562) under the direction of Dr. Brad Courtenay, Department of Adult Education, University of Georgia (706-542-4012).

The purpose of this research is to gain understanding of whether perspective transformations (in the context of Christian conversions) endure over time and through subsequent perspective transformations. The information generated may be used for academic purposes and/or publication.

This purpose has been explained to me. For this research, I will be asked to share my life story pertaining to my conversion experience and life events that have followed. The interview session will last approximately 2 hours. I understand that interviews will be **tape-recorded** so that the researcher may review them at a later time. Although there are no foreseeable risks or discomfort associated with participating, I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time should you become uncomfortable.

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. Confidentiality Statement: No information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission, except if required by law. I will choose or be assigned a pseudonym and an identifying number and this number will be used on all of the data pertaining to me. I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records. The audio tapes and master list of identities will be destroyed six months following the approval of the dissertation.

Andrea Griffin Cook will answer any further questions about the research, now or in the future, and may be contacted at (706) 693-4562.

Andrea Griffin Cook
Name of Researcher

Researcher’s Signature

Date

Telephone: (706) 693-4562
Email: AGCOOKUSA@hotmail.com

Name of Participant

Participant’s Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D. Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu