Summary

Addiction and Spiritual Transformation
An Empirical Study on Narratives of Recovering Drug Addicts’ Conversion Testimonies in Dutch and Serbian Contexts

The purpose of this study is to understand how recovering drug addicts employ testimonies of conversion and addiction to develop and sustain a sense of personal identity and create meaning from conflicting life experiences. The quest to undo the suffering and the affliction of addiction is seen as a spiritual attempt to reconfigure the addicted person’s ‘spoiled identity’. This research shows how individuals re-conceptualize their conversion and addictive experience to produce explanations for their recovery. It is therefore a study of identity reconstruction. Drawing on 31 autobiographies of recovering drug addicts I analyzed conversion and addiction testimonies in two European contexts (Serbia and the Netherlands, including a sample of immigrants). This comparative approach allow me to study the construction of meaning in the interaction of (sub)traumatic experiences, addiction, recovery, spiritual transformation, and the cultural and societal influences on coping strategies and the attribution of meaning in two European countries. It draws on the observation that addiction often (though certainly not always) develops in response to life crises or trauma and identity confusion, while spiritual transformation, including religious conversion, can foster recovery. The study focuses specifically on the role of testimony in reconstructing a viable narrative of the self, accounting for trauma, addiction, and conversion and embedding in different social, cultural, and spiritual contexts. This study then aims at developing an integrative understanding of the interaction of addiction and spirituality in light of both the individual’s biography and identity and its surrounding culture. There are three major comparative elements in the two cultures that the research focused on: 1) antecedents of addiction; 2) attitudes toward religion; and 3) attitudes toward drugs. The analysis further shows how existing frames of reference and self-understanding are undermined and/or developed. Narrative interviews were conducted to examine how participants create their testimonies of addiction and spiritual transformation and its impact upon their system of meaning. All this leads to the following primary question:

How do recovering drug addicts in Serbia and the Netherlands construe their testimonies of conversion and addiction?

Seven sub-questions follow from this main research question:

1) How do recovering drug addicts construct their stories of addiction?
2) How do recovering drug addicts construct their stories of conversion?
3) How do recovering drug addicts build their identities through these two processes and how do they interact?
4) What contextual differences influence the interaction between addiction and conversion stories?
5) How can we understand these differences?
6) How can therapy and pastoral care account for differences in culture and religious background?
7) How can religious aspects be integrated more adequately in helping professions concerning addiction?
In the introductory chapter I explained and introduced the research problem as a whole. Chapter 2, ‘Converting to a New Reality’ provided the methodological foundation for the rest of the book. The methodological aspect argues that a social constructionist perspective, particularly as it has apprehended the importance of narrative, is able to describe and interpret the interaction between addiction, conversion and religious identity formation in different cultures. I proposed a constructionist perspective for the analysis of conversion testimonies where speech, language, and narrative serve as foci for understanding spiritual transformation in terms of interpersonal relationships. A social constructionist understanding that works with a narrative perspective seems to be a suitable framework with which to expand an understanding of the conversion and recovery process. In view of this, I argued for the integration and meaningful relation of a multiplicity of epistemological, theoretical, methodological and practical aspects of empirical research on spiritual transformation. Such an approach has the ability to overcome the limitations of strategies of homogeneity, and is therefore able to keep in mind precarious tensions, mutual incommensurability, and reductionism.

Chapter 3, ‘Addiction, Narrative and Spirituality/Religiousness’, explored different theories and models in addiction research. In substance abuse practices and researches, both religious and medical traditions seek to provide wellbeing and health to addicts respectively, the approaches they use in recovery and therapy, and the epistemological and methodological foundations on which their ideas and practices rest, are often very different. In this chapter I have shown that a disease model is in danger of absolutizing one aspect of the addiction problem (the current medical-psychological-pathologizing of substance abuse) and thereby distorting a complete picture of addiction. Moreover, a pharmalogical approach to helping individuals overcome their addiction has been only partially efficacious, probably because this medical understanding of addiction does not account for all the factors. I therefore side with those researchers who advocate for a comprehensive theory of addiction that includes biomedical, psychological, socio-cultural factors, narrative and spiritual aspects.

Taking the social constructivist approach, Chapter 4, ‘The Black Side of the Spoon’, reflects on the interaction between religious conversion, narrative identity formation, and social support in the recovery process of drug addiction. By using the theory of narrative identity, I proposed both a conceptual framework and the analytical tools for identifying main indicators and contextual interpretative resources to narrative identity constructions in the recovery process. In this regard, I explored the social sources and ethical implications of constructing a new narrative identity, arguing that when recovering drug addicts articulate their testimonies, they participate in the canonical discourse that establishes them as ordinary people and helps them to deal with the fallout of a ‘spoiled identity’. The construction and reconstruction of narrative identity takes place in continuous negotiation with the audience and with new events occurring to the person. This perspective highlights the role of narrative agency and competence in identity development rather than focusing on epigenetic factors (although the influence of those factors is not denied).

Chapter 5, ‘The Emergence of New Life’, will critically scrutinize the concept of conversion from different angles. I displayed and reflected on the problem with diverse definitions and theories of conversion by looking at how the concept is constructed, defined and made use of. The focus was on past and recent conversion research, derived from the socio-psychological and religious sciences with particular focus on a narrative approach. I showed that religious conversion is always embodied, socially constituted and historically conditioned. In this respect, conversion is concerned with shared cultural ideas and conceptions, as well as cultural story-models that are used in the construction of the conversion narrative.
The aim of Chapter 6, ‘Testimonio as an Art and a Strategy of Narrative Identity’, was to present Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of testimony and to apply and evaluate the usefulness of Ricoeur’s insights for the empirical research of the conversion testimonies of the participants. I showed how testimony helps recovering substance users to construe a new religious identity, and helps them re-imagine the past as something that could be both overcome and redeemed. Understanding testimony as a performative discursive practice before an authoritative audience allows insight into the strategies recovering drug addict employ to negotiate their identities and meanings in recovery process. In their testimonial talks, individuals perform agency in construing and re-construing their identities through storytelling practice. In order to relate to this audience and account for their lives, participants turn to canonical language. Canonical language in this context means the dynamic interplay between an authoritative language of a particular faith community (e.g., liturgical and theological language) and the converts’ personal life histories. As such, it contains a specific meaning-making potential generated in a certain socio-religious context, allowing for the exploration of new stories when one encounters new audiences.

The empirical section begins with Chapters 7-8, which presents the research questions and the design and methods used in the study. The empirical sample was conducted with three groups of recovering drug addicts from Serbia and the Netherlands. In the narrative interviews the participants were encouraged to describe their experiences of addiction, their spiritual transformations, and the interaction between these dimensions. The next step presented the empirical results of the study, which are based on interview material. In this part, I presented a categorization and description of these narratives. The narratives were then categorized according to what they present as the key aspect for recovery. In the next step results were analyzed with regard to posttraumatic spirituality, religious coping styles, social support and the like. The narratives reflect participants’ description of a transformational experience that they had during recovery process. The testimonials provide a rich example of spiritual transformation, underscore the importance of the canonical language, highlight the communal and interpersonal dimension of their experiences, and convey the powerful ways that lives were transformed. Religious conversion support and improves participants’ psychological well-being giving them a new, coherent and continuous self-story to tell.

Chapter 9, ‘Faith, Hope, and Love: A Narrative Theological Discussion of the Empirical’ dealt with theological interpretations of the empirical data collected in this study. In this chapter, I theologically evaluated the practices in which participants involved. The three theological ‘virtues’: faith, hope, and love served as a basis for my theological analysis. The first part of this chapter introduced the multifaceted description of faith, hope, and love offered by the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner. Brunner’s idea of temporal experience characterized by the triad of the past, present, and future, plays an important role in his understanding of the three theological ‘virtues’. I therefore interpreted his account of Paul’s trilogy as an interconnectedness of three dimensions of time and its influence on a convert’s personal identity. In doing this, I showed how faith, hope, and love served as the time-markers demonstrating the importance of past, present, and future in participants’ accounts. Finally, I showed how the ideas Brunner develops are applicable to the practical-theological analysis of conversion testimonies of recovering substance users and how his notion of temporality can help us to understand their spiritual transformation.
In Chapter 10, the answers to the research questions were brought together and conclusions were drawn. Implications for religious studies and addiction research were discussed. Finally, suggestions for the helping professions were offered and issues for further research were identified.