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Religious Acculturation and Spirituality in Latter-day Saint Committed Converts

Kristin Hansen, Laurie Page, Lane Fischer, and Marleen Williams
Brigham Young University

This study examines religious acculturation and spirituality in committed Latter-day Saint (LDS) converts living in Utah. We conducted a qualitative analysis using interviews from a sample of 20 North American and 20 international Latter-day Saint converts attending or working at Brigham Young University (BYU)—a western LDS private university—of varying age, time since baptism, and country of origin. Of the 40 converts, 39 were classified as committed in their LDS religious affiliation using Henri Gooren’s (2007) Conversion Career Model. Based on our analysis of the interviews, several pertinent themes emerged: (1) converts recognize and choose to acculturate; (2) report positive changes in identity; (3) report that changes in identity are linked to a relationship with God; (4) rely on spiritual emotions to acculturate; (5) differ in their “fit” with the LDS religious culture; and (6) demonstrate a somewhat predictable psychological pattern in how they navigate their new religious culture involving initial idealization, then potential devaluation, and then integration of prior idealization and devaluation. Both a psychosocial and a spiritual process emerged, and in both cases, acculturation occurred in a relational context—one with the members of the LDS church and one with God. Although, most converts struggle to find their way in their new religious culture, their reported relationship with God and their associated spiritual feelings are described as a type of protective factor that help converts with the psychosocial challenges of the acculturation process.

Religious Acculturation and Spirituality

In the literature, debates have moved from a pure context-determined view of conversion, as in the case of brainwashing, where an individual passively takes on a new set of beliefs (Singer, 1979), to studies that have pointed out the role of volition, or agency, and its need to be considered in converts’ decisions to commit to new religious beliefs (Straus, 1979). While studies demonstrate converts’ use of agency and commitment, conversion does not occur outside of a social context (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004); instead, converts use their volition within a social context. For example, using a theoretical model based on rational individual choice that depends on the cost of switching and having the “right” religion, Barro, Hwang, and McCleary (2010) hypothesize that religious conversions are more likely to occur among the more educated in areas where religious pluralism flourishes and are less likely to occur in areas with government restrictions on conversion or a history of Communism. Conversion involves both the use of agency to commit and a context that encourages convert commitment.

Conversion does not end once an individual has become a member of a particular faith. Following conversion, individuals in a new church community continue to make decisions about ongoing identity development and commitment to the new community. In a sense, they must decide whether or not they will acculturate to the new religious culture. Gibson (2001) defines acculturation as “changes that take place in a social contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences” (as cited in Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 237).

For converts, post-conversion acceptance in their chosen religious culture requires that they leave behind values and cultural practices from their previous culture. Sometimes, converts find previous cultural values and practices to be of worth to them in spite of having recently adopted the values and practices of their new religious culture. Schwartz et al. (2010) refers to this bi-dimensional view as an interplay between the cultural values and practices of the heritage culture and the receiving culture. In the case of the new religious converts, the receiving culture is chosen, unlike a refugee or an asylum seeker. According to Schwartz et al. (2010), the degree to which converts acculturate into their receiving culture depends on the dynamic relationship between their heritage culture and their receiving culture’s values and practices, and how the convert identifies with each culture. While acculturation has been studied extensively in individuals living outside of their country of origin (immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, sojourners, international students, and seasonal farm workers; Sam & Berry, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010), in ethnic minorities (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990), and among all these groups with a focus on religious acculturation (e.g., Benson, Sun, Hodge, & Androff, 2011; Grigoropoulou & Chryssochoou, 2011; Russo, 1969), there is little in the literature exploring acculturation within religious communities. In a study that could suggest the presence of acculturating converts, Palouzian (1981) studies the perceived purpose of life in religious converts, noting an evangelistic move and found differences depending on proximity to conversion. Converts of less than one week had a very high score on this measure compared with converts who were one week to one month away from conversion. Interestingly, those who had been converted for longer than one month scored higher than the one-week to one-month group and almost as high as the less-than-one-week group. Palouzian suggests that this dip reflects “a period of reassessment of one’s decision to adopt the belief, during which time the convert gains understanding, reassurance, and stability of the decision” (Palouzian, 1981, p. 1158). We were interested if this reassessment period was also reflective of some predictable acculturability pattern that was occurring.

Current Study and Hypotheses

It can be assumed that the new evangelical转换s in Palouzian’s (1981) study were interacting with a religious community that was influencing their ongoing assessment of their new religious beliefs, rather than the shift happening in the individuals independent of the relational context. Finding little research, we decided to examine if some predictable patterns could be observed in studying how converts acculturate to a new religious faith post-conversion. For example, do they recognize that they are doing so; do they use conscious choice to engage in this process; what do they say about their interactions with members of their new church culture; and do they report changes in their identity both psychologically and spiritually? We decided to look at those con-
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Religious conversion is difficult to define and study. Researchers have debated its definition since William James wrote The Varieties of Religious Experience in 1902. In the past 60 years, there have been many theoretical pieces written on conversion (e.g., Gooren, 2007; Lolland, & Stark, 1965; Paloutzian, 1999; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999; Rambo, 1993; Snow & Machalek, 1983; Stark & Finke, 2000), mainly from within sociology, psychology, anthropology, and theology. Rambo (1993) uses the word ‘process’ to describe conversion. While on occasion religious conversion may be sudden, as was Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, conversion tends to be mediated over time through people, communities, groups, and institutions. Debates in the literature have moved from a pure context-determined view of conversion, as in the case of brainwashing where an individual passively takes on a new set of beliefs (Singer, 1979), to studies that have pointed out the role of volition, or agency, and its need to be considered in converts’ decisions to commit to new religious beliefs (Straus, 1979). While studies demonstrate converts’ use of agency and commitment, conversion does not occur outside of a social context (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004); instead, converts use their volition within a social context. For example, using a theoretical model based on rational individual choice that depends on the cost of switching and having the ‘wrong’ religion, Barro, Hwang, and McCleary (2010) hypothesize that religious conversions are more likely to occur among the more educated and are less likely to occur in areas with government restrictions on conversion or a history of Communism. Conversion involves both the use of agency to commit and a context that encourages convert commitment.

Conversion does not end once an individual has become a member of a particular faith. Following conversion, individuals in a new church community continue to make decisions about ongoing identity development and commitment to the new community. In a sense, they must decide whether or not they will acculturate to the new religious culture. Gibson (2001) defines acculturation as “changes that take place in a social context with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences” (as cited in Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 237).

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While acculturation has been studied extensively in individuals living outside of their country of origin (immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, sojourners, international students, and seasonal farm workers; Sam & Berry, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010), in ethnic minorities (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990), and among all these groups with a focus on religious acculturation (e.g., Benson, Sun, Hodge, & Androff, 2011; Grigorian, & Chryssostomou, 2011; Gongor, Borenstein, & Phalet, 2012; Navara & James, 2005; Russo, 1969), there is little in the literature exploring acculturation within religious communities. In a study that could suggest the presence of acculturating converts, Paloutzian (1981) studies the perceived purpose of individuals engaged in an evangelistic movement and found differences depending on proximity to conversion. Converts of less than one year had a very high score on this measure compared with converts who were one year to one month away from conversion. Interestingly, those who had been converted for longer than one month scored higher than the one-to-one month group and almost as high as the less-than-one-month group. Paloutzian suggests that this dip reflects a period of reassessment of one’s decision to adopt the belief, during which time the convert gains understanding, reassurance, and stability of the decision (Paloutzian, 1981, p. 1156). We were interested if this reassessment period was also reflective of some predictive acculturating pattern that was occurring.

Current Study and Hypotheses

It can be assumed that the new evangelical converts in Paloutzian’s (1981) study were interacting with a religious community that was influencing their ongoing assessment of their new religious beliefs, rather than the shift happening in the individuals independent of the relational context. Finding little research, we decided to examine if some predictable patterns could be observed in studying how converts acculturate to a new religious faith post-conversion. For example, do they recognize that they are doing so; do they use conscious choice to engage in this process; what do they say about their interactions with members of their new church culture; and do they report changes in their identity both psychologically and spiritually? We decided to look at those con-
verting to the Latter-day Saint (LDS) religion because we not only have personal experience with this faith but we think that it provides a unique environment to study religious acculturation.

Why does the LDS faith provide a unique environment to study religious acculturation? First, those converting to the LDS faith most often have had little prior exposure to it (although this has rapidly changed with the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential races but was not true at the time this study was conducted) and must acculturate to learn about the LDS faith and culture. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS church), also known as the Mormon Church, identifies itself as a Christian, American-born religious faith based upon the founder Joseph Smith's self-reported inspired translation of ancient scripture about Jesus Christ: the Book of Mormon. While the LDS religion claims to be a Christian faith, its unique beginnings and some of its beliefs and practices place it outside mainstream Christianity (Shipps, 2000). Although LDS church members assimilated into their American host culture mostly in the first half of this last century, since the 1960s, they have resisted the pull to assimilate with mainstream American culture due to the secularization of American culture and due to their desire to maintain a consistency in their practices and beliefs (Mauas, 2008). Thus the LDS faith maintains a relatively distinct culture from mainstream Christianity.

Second, the uniformity of religious practice and belief makes the LDS church a unique setting to study acculturation of converts. The LDS church provides consistent church practices and doctrine throughout the world because of its top-down organizational structure (Knowlton, 2008) and its underlying value of unity of belief based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Beginning with their baptism (the religious ordinance performed as a symbol of entrance into their new faith), individuals converting to the LDS church can attend church anywhere in the world and find members who espouse similar religious practices, such as valuing family, serving others, fasting once a month, and engaging in daily scripture study and prayer. While practice tends to be uniform, the local church culture varies from place to place around the world.

Given this uniformity of religious practice and belief, we were interested in what themes might emerge following a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews (Hill, Thompson, & Willams, 1997) across nationalities as converts join and participate in an already established community of practicing LDS members. We defined converts as those not born into the LDS church who chose to become members or to “convert” by being baptized. The converts we sampled varied in age, which addresses a concern in the literature that current conversion research does not look at a range of ages (i.e. Gooren, 2007). While religious culture can change across time, we used a cross-sectional analysis, given the uniformity and top-down structure of the LDS church. This means that when we refer to the new convert interviewees, they can be anywhere from a few months post-conversion to more than 10 years post-conversion.

We will now describe our methods and the themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis of the interviews of 39 converting converts acculturating to the LDS church. A quantitative approach was also employed to further analyze one of the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis, which will be detailed in the results section. The discussion has been merged with the results section to unfold our conclusions in conjunction with the presentation of the themes.

Method

Participants and Procedures

To gather our participants, we placed flyers across the Brigham Young University (BYU) campus requesting research participants that met the following inclusion criteria: subjects must be aged 17 or older; conversion occurred at the age of 12 or older and was not the result of a family converting together as a group but was initiated by the individual; they could not be born into or raised by an LDS family; and subjects were BYU students or employees. We had a large response to our flyer. Of the 60 calls we received over the course of the month, 40 baptized members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were randomly selected and interviewed. Of the 40 selected, 20 were from the United States and Canada and 20 were from 15 countries outside the United States and Canada. All participants, at the time of the interview, were affiliated with BYU as either students or employees. There were 23 females and 17 males between the ages of 17 and 54 (M=26.6), all residing in or near Provo. One male was dropped, which we will describe shortly. See Table 1.
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Religious Acculturation and Spirituality

They report experiencing positive changes in identity. They make idealizing, devaluing, and integrating comments in a predictable pattern. Converts recognize and choose to acculturate. Converts link changes in identity to relationship with God. They differ in their “fit” with the culture.

Table 2. Interview Questions Used to Guide Qualitative Interviews

How did you come to join the LDS church?
Tell me about your conversion experience. What was your previous religious/spiritual culture?
How is LDS culture similar/different?
Tell me about the process of adapting to the LDS culture. Was it consistently easy or hard, or did it vary?
Were there parts of your pre-LDS experience that you kept and parts you did not?
How did you make these choices?
How has your thinking changed? Your emotions/feelings? Your behavior?
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Classification of Converts as Committed

Studying acculturation after religious conversion requires some type of determination about which converts are truly converted, committed, and engaged in the acculturation process post-conversion. Paloutzian (1999), in reviewing the literature on personality change and conversion, suggests that stable changes in goals, behavioral adaptations, and identity in converts are more likely when conversion is preceded by an in-depth analysis of the religious choice rather than when conversion happens for superficial reasons and with less careful analysis. We hypothesized that acculturation to a new religion cannot occur outside of an ongoing commitment to the new religion. While all but one of the converts self-reported to be active participants in the LDS church, we wanted a means to classify the converts as committed beyond their self-report.

After conducting the interviews, we came across Gooren’s (2007, 2010) conversion career categories. He proposed, based on James T. Richardson’s (1978) term, the idea that individuals cycle through different phases of religious affiliation or have “conversion careers.” Gooren suggested five possible stages of religious participation: pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation (see Gooren, 2007).

Using Gooren’s classification, by consensus, two raters classified the converts into stages by requiring at least three factors for classification in his conversion category and at least three factors or patterns of rhetoric plus clas-
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Using Gooren’s classification, by consensus, two raters classified the converts into stages by requiring at least three factors for classification in his conversion category and at least three factors or patterns of rhetoric plus clasification in the conversion category for classification in Gooren’s confession category (see Gooren, 2007 for a detailed explanation of his classification system and definitions of his factors and patterns of rhetoric). Of the 40 converts, 39 were classified in the confession stage, which occurs when a person has a core member identity and high participation in the new church community while demonstrating strong evangelism outside it. One convert was classified in the disaffiliation stage. The disaffiliated convert was dropped from the study. The raters agreed that the findings were unchanged without the disaffiliated convert. This was consistent with the converts self-report of activity level in the LDS church.

Religious Data Analysis: Coding

The researchers examined the participants’ experience as reported in the semi-structured interviews using a variation of the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) inductive qualitative analysis (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). We drew conclusions based on the data via performing successive readings, engaging with the interview texts, coming to consensus about emerging themes, and repeating this process multiple times for both the North American and the international interviews. We avoided developing clear hypotheses in advance so that the data collected from the qualitative interviews could be analyzed with openness. Biases on the part of the researchers were reflected in the interview-guiding questions. We did assume that acculturation was occurring, but we were unclear about what specific patterns would emerge and how apparent the role of volition would be. We were aware that converts would most likely engage in some idealizing and devaluing rhetoric, but we did not know to what extent and how. We thought that some converts would discuss both the role of spirituality in the process and the positive and negative changes in identity; however, we were again unclear about how and what specific patterns would emerge. We focused our analysis on themes that emerged related to the acculturation process post-conversion and remained aware of our biases. We took them into account throughout the process so that we would be open to new themes and themes that contradicted our biases.

Using the previously described qualitative method, four raters first examined the data of the North American transcripts independently and then discussed their ideas until they reached conclusions that all raters endorsed as representative of the data. After the themes were identified, the raters discussed specific examples within each theme to create understanding and develop generalizations, which revealed comparisons, concept developments, and other relationships. We engaged in this process four times for the North American transcripts and then five times for the international transcripts, replacing two of our North American transcript raters with two new ones for the international transcripts. Two raters remained constant throughout the entire analysis. All raters are committed members of the LDS church by their own self-report, but each one had different experiences with conversion. For example, one was a convert, two had been inactive members for several years prior to reconnecting, and two were lifelong members, one of whom had been married to a convert. The raters’ different experiences with conversion lessened bias related to how conversion and acculturation might occur, since we had all had diverse experiences related to conversion and acculturation.

Our analysis was completed when we achieved consensus among the raters for both the North American transcripts and the international transcripts. Additionally, as a validity check, two of the original interviewers were asked to review our proposed themes for the American transcripts. Both agreed with the findings. Finally, an independent auditor was asked to review our themes for both the American and international interviews. Some changes were made by consensus in three more meetings to arrive at the present findings. The results that follow reflect themes that arose in several (sometimes in most) interviews from the 39 converts from our study (16 were male, 23 were female). The participants were classified, according to Gooren’s (2007) classification and by their own report, as being committed to their LDS religious faith and varied from each other in time since baptism, stage of life, and country or state of origin.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data with our 39 committed LDS converts related to converts’ recognition of the acculturation process and how they engaged in the process (see Table 3). These themes included the following: (1) converts recognize the need to and choose...
to acculturate; (2) converts report experiencing positive changes in identity; (3) converts link changes in identity to relationship with God; (4) converts rely on spiritual feelings and relationship with God to acculturate; and (5) converts differ in their “fit” with the culture. A some- what predictable pattern was revealed in a (6) linguistic analysis of interviewees’ idealizing, devaluing, and synthesizing (integration of idealizing and devaluing) statements. Converts first idealized their new LDS faith, then showed potential to devalue. They then integrated both their idealized and devalued experiences into a transcen- dent and integrated understanding.

Recognizing the Need to and Choosing to Accul- turate

Shore (2002) defined culture as shared meanings, understandings, or referents held by a group of people (Shore, 2002; Triandis, 1995). The converts in our study encountered a new culture with new terminology when they joined the LDS religious faith. They recognized that they needed to learn new terminology and new cultural rules in addition to religious beliefs and doctrine. All of the converts we interviewed discussed the continuing change in identity that follows conversion with respect to beliefs, emotions, behaviors, and inner construction of self in relation to doctrinal learning and encounters with the receiving culture. While many of our converts com- mented on the new terms they encountered, many also commented that the learning they did was a “process.” For example, a male convert from Mongolia who is 10 years post-conversion noted, “(I was) not just converted completely. It was a process.” We viewed the challenges with terminology and the description of what they were doing as a process, as evidences of the converts’ acknowledge- ment of acculturating.

Not only did converts acculturate, but they also per- ceived themselves as consciously choosing to do so and gave multiple evidences of such. For example, a male Caucasian North American who is 8 years post-conver- sion stated, in reference to giving up swearing and drink- ing coffee, “When it came down to it, [it] was my choice . . . that I could do it, and it was mine to make.”

Positive Changes in Identity

Converts spontaneously report positive changes in identity when asked how their thoughts, feelings, and be- havior changed post-conversion. Their reported changes include improved self-confidence, a shift in internal lo- cus of control (Rotter, 1966), more outward focus (i.e., less selfishness, more service-oriented), new positive ways of thinking by gaining an “external perspective,” posi- tive changes in behavior, greater access to emotion and its healthy expression, improved decision making, and a heightened awareness of previously felt spiritual emo- tions or the experience of new ones. These changes were consistent with changes in goals, behavior, spiritual intel- ligence, self-consciousness, and values. How the convert showed potential in the literature on personal- ity changes and conversion (Paloutzian, 1999; Palout- zian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Negative changes were not reported except for one convert who wanted to hold onto parts of her old religious identity, such as wearing a cross (something the LDS church discour- ages in their focus on Christ’s Resurrection rather than His death), and another convert who mentioned that he liked that he was more open-minded prior to joining the LDS church. Several others reported that they became less open-minded when they chose to live LDS doctrine but viewed this as positive because of the psychological and spiritual benefits. They viewed themselves as closing some options (such as not drinking alcohol or watch- ing movies with adult themes) in order to enhance their spiritual sensitivity. A male Vietnamese convert—eleven months post-conversion and formerly Buddhist—no- ticed a shift in internal locus of control and self-confi- dence that he made post-conversion when he said, “It’s the way I look at things now, not the world seeing me.”

Converts who become committed not only accul- turate but enculturate (see Grusec & Hastings, 2007, p. 547), which is the acculturating individual’s process of selectively deciding what to keep and what to discard from the heritage culture and what to acquire from the receiving culture. This process of sorting out priorities and values plays an important role in developing an in- ternalized identity, which is associated with a greater in- ternal locus of control (Kahleb, 1982) and is consistent with research that points out that converts who engage in central processing, or careful consideration, rather than more peripheral processing, such as persuasion from an attractive source, tend to experience more enduring atti- tude change following conversion (see Paloutzian, Rich- ardon, & Rambo, 1999).

Snow and Machalek (1983) observe that converts who “embrace the convert role” make changes in identity that allow them to be consistent with their new identity, such as changing their autobiographical history and refocus- ing their sense of meaning and purpose around a matter for which they feel a real relationship with God. In other words, converts felt that God had inter- vened in their lives, and this intervention was the source of their changes in identity.

Changes in Identity Are Linked to a Relationship with God

Many converts talked spontaneously about the role of their relationship with God in the changes they had made in their identity post-conversion. For those who previously had a relationship with God, their attachment to God seemed to be restructured. Those with no prior relationship described their newfound relationship with or attachment to God. In both cases, they consistently attributed these changes to a real relationship with God. They considered God to be an actor in their lives. For example, a Russian male who is 5 years post-con- version reported losing an undesirable self-conscious- ness: “I guess I didn’t think so much of what other people thought of me [post-conversion] because I knew my Heavenly Father was thinking of me as His son, and that He made me the way He wanted me to make me.” A male Caucasian North American who is 35 years post-con- version talked about how his relationship with God has changed his feelings and life.

When I came out of the waters of baptism I felt com- pletely clean. When I was confirmed I was filled head to toe with warmth, with love, and I knew that a Father had accepted my repentance and my efforts to keep the com- mandments . . . So your feelings change in the sense that one goes from insignificance to someone the Lord has died for, which changes your life.

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We saw a spiritual process at work in acculturation in LDS converts. In a sense, the converts were not accultur- ating alone but described themselves as having the help of “God” or “Jesus Christ” or the “Spirit” in the process. Memories of spiritual emotions or feelings gave converts a spiritual perspective that grounded their decisions to continue to acculturate and make changes in identity. We have labeled this spiritual perspective-taking. With their newfound relationship with God and spiritual perspec- tive, converts gained a new view of reality that enhanced their ability to acculturate in spite of some of the psycho- social challenges they faced. This is consistent with Em- mons (2000, 2001) who found that converts might have an underlying spiritual intelligence that draws them to con- version or that through conversion they have an oppor- tunity to increase spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 2000; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999) and the idea that religious transformation, given through religious/ spiritual teachings and resources, can give the convert a new sense of meaning and life purpose (Emmons, 1999; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003).

Degree of Fit

We asked converts about how they adapted to the LDS church post-conversion. Most of the converts fell into one of two categories. For some, belief systems were familiar, but the culture seemed strange. For example, a former “Christian who attended Catholic school”—a North American female who is 5 years post-conver- sion—stated, “It’s the social culture that’s been a little awkward, but spiritual culture fits perfectly.” For others
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Patterns of Acculturation

While converts attributed their conversion and desire for continued acculturation to the LDS faith to their spiritual experiences, their relationship with God, and LDS beliefs, the converts’ conversions occurred in the context of human relationships. Regardless of the uniformity in belief and practice, the LDS community members’ backgrounds and attitudes are more heterogeneous then converts may at first realize. There are subtle differences within different congregations depending upon the geographical location, the number of members in an area, or the degree to which LDS converts are in the majority or minority. As converts acculturated, they encountered LDS members with varying degrees of understanding of LDS beliefs and members who were motivated by an extrinsic rather than an intrinsic religiosity (see Allport & Ross, 1967).

As converts both acculturated and enculturated, they would sometimes idealize the membership and at other times devalue those they met in the receiving culture. In the interviews, we observed converts needing to make choices between receiving culture and heritage culture values when these values were in conflict. Many of the converts made comments that integrated idealizing and devaluing perspectives, showing an appreciation of the complexity of interacting with others who are also trying to interpret and practice a system of beliefs. To track if any patterns emerged from idealizing, devaluing, and integrating commentary and converts’ time from baptism, we identified and scored this commentary. We will first provide examples of each of these three types of commentary and then present the pattern that emerged in a quantitative analysis based on the converts’ time from baptism.

Idealizing the receiving culture and devaluing the heritage culture. We noted that 30 of our 39 converts made idealizing comments about the LDS church or its members. These comments were made while either describing their conversion experiences or their feelings at the time of the interview. For example, a male Vietnamese convert, 11 months post-conversion and formerly Buddhist, stated, “The people that I’m meeting are really, really friendly and very nice. And the doctrine is the same from everywhere, and that’s unique. I realize everyone has the same doctrine and talks about it the same way.” A female North American who is 5 years post-conversion stated, “My friend says, it’s not just me, seriously Church members are just like that and then I found out it was right . . . there was something about him, very charismatic but there was more than that; he had a kind of happiness.”

Idealizing comments sometimes went hand in hand with converts’ devaluing of their heritage culture. For example, a female Ukrainian convert who is eight months post-conversion stated, “A lot of people, most of my friends actually, would be . . . saying that you’re Orthodox or Catholic but not doing anything for it, like they weren’t even going to church or doing anything with no standards or no moral values. So, I didn’t like that.” Inappropriate sexual behavior, substance abuse, dishonesty, lack of interpersonal connection, and selfishness were some of the common behaviors and attitudes that they devalued in their heritage culture.

Additionally, as part of idealizing the LDS culture, some converts commented on their perceived inadequacy relative to LDS church members. A female Russian convert, 5 years post-conversion and previously Catholic, devalued herself relative to her lifelong-LDS BYU classmates who grew up learning LDS doctrine: “I felt embarrassed in my classes when everyone would raise their hands and answer questions . . . I was just sitting there . . . I was like, why did I join; like there’s no way; I could never keep up with someone who went to seminary [LDS religious education for adolescents] . . . I don’t know any of this knowledge.”

Devaluing the receiving culture and missing the heritage culture. Devaluing comments about the LDS church or its members were made by 29 converts. Devaluing comments reflected the converter’s disappointment with some aspects of LDS culture that followed an initial idealistic assessment of the culture. A female Caucasian American convert who is 5 years post-conversion reported the following:

People here [at BYU] tend to think I’m not a member because I wear a cross. [Like the LDS church members]. I don’t worship it; it’s just a cross . . . but then they try and become my friend real quick and try and get me baptized. And then they realize I am a member and then they stop being my friend . . . If I’m just different in my speech or language or approach . . . I feel almost discriminated against because I am a convert here.

Just as devaluing one’s heritage culture occurred with idealizing the receiving culture, missing aspects of one’s heritage culture occurred with devaluing the receiving culture. For example, the same convert as above showed this most clearly.

Sometimes it makes me sad because sometimes I’ll for get things about my old faith that are really, really good things to remember. Like one day I was in the car. I was listening to . . . the Christian station . . . and there is this one song that said something about the name . . . I was like, ‘Oh, I totally forgot.’ As an Evangelical Christian we are all about the name of Christ saving you.

Integrating comments reflect recognition of the tendency to idealize and devalue. In our sample, 34 of our 39 converts interviewed had at least one integrating comment in their transcript. Integrating comments show how a converter’s understanding transcends idealization and devaluation. Such statements usually demonstrated accepting the LDS beliefs along with recognizing that not all LDS members are practicing a particular belief or interpreting the beliefs in the same manner. It also demonstrated the converters’ ability to integrate former aspects of their identity with those parts that they chose to adopt from the LDS religion. For example, a male Caucasian North American, previously Catholic and 35 years post-conversion, stated, “I think the core of who a person is— their background and culture—is completely accepted and welcomed in the gospel. There is no limit on one’s culture or one’s background. You don’t leave that behind when you join, and in fact that’s the beauty of the gospel; it encompasses people all over the world, for it truly is no respecter of persons.”

A male Korean convert, 8 years post-conversion and formerly culturally Buddhist, stated, “All of the members of the church want to follow the example of Jesus Christ and live the gospel and LDS doctrine, but you know not all the members are active and obedient. So some members might not follow the doctrine, but they want to, and some people do not want to. And some people cannot follow.” This same convert further demonstrated how he integrated the LDS faith and culture with his previous Buddhist culture: “I think there are some similar features, similar attributes between LDS culture and Korean cul-
Religious Acculturation and Spirituality

Beliefs. Interestingly, a recent Pew Forum on Religious Influence converts’ desire to continue to commit to identity after is a complete transformation.”

Formerly Lutheran, explained, “Outright I would say every convert was like, why did I join; like there’s no way; I could never go back, but here [at BYU] I feel different all the time. I found out it was right . . . there was nothing about him, very charismatic but there was more than that; he had a kind of happiness.”

Idealizing comments sometimes went hand in hand with converts’ devaluing of their heritage culture. For example, a female Caucasian who is 5 years post-conversion stated, “A female Russian convert who is 8 months post-conversion stated, ‘A lot of people, most of my friends actually, would be . . . saying that you’re Orthodox or Catholic but not doing anything for it, like they weren’t even going to church or doing anything with no standards or no moral values. So, I didn’t like that.’”

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Integrating comments reflect recognition of the tendency to idealize and devalue. In our sample, 34 of our 39 converts interviewed had at least one integrating comment in their transcript. Integrating comments show how a convert’s understanding transcends idealization and devaluation. Such statements usually demonstrated accepting the LDS beliefs along with recognizing that not all LDS members are practicing a particular belief or interpreting the beliefs in the same manner. It also demonstrated the converts’ ability to integrate former aspects of their identity with those parts that they chose to adopt from the LDS religion. For example, a male Caucasian North American, previously Catholic and 35 years post-conversion, stated, “I think the core of who a person is—his background and culture—is completely accepted and welcomed in the gospel. There is no limit on one’s culture or one’s background. You don’t leave that behind when you join, and in fact that’s the beauty of the gospel; it encompasses people all over the world, for it truly is no respecter of persons.”

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This same convert further demonstrated how he integrated the LDS faith and culture with his previous Buddhist culture. “I think there are some similar features, similar attributes between LDS culture and Korean cul-
converts roughly 2.4–6.9 years in the church may be going through a devaluing phase given that they make more devaluing comments than those converts 0–2.3 years and 10+ years in the church. While converts make integrating comments as early as 0–2.3 years after baptism, it appears that converts make significantly more integrating comments after approximately 7 years in the church. Converts seem to acculturate to the LDS religion in a somewhat consistent psychological pattern.

We found that converts exhibited a pattern of psychological identity development that was related to their interactions within their new religious culture. They predictably began by idealizing it. When they encountered inconsistencies between belief and practice or when they encountered LDS members who professed beliefs that are not reflected in the LDS core teachings or that result from a lack of knowledge of core doctrine, they began devaluing members of the majority LDS culture. Some felt devalued themselves or found that some of their cherished values and beliefs were not valued, understood, or considered within the majority mainstream LDS culture. These observed inconsistencies led to a reassessment and, in the case of committed converts, recommitment to their new faith.

Although this study was conducted in Utah, converts did not seem to be reacting specifically to “Utah” LDS culture. While the converts saw it as different from LDS culture elsewhere, they displayed a range of both positive and negative experiences with it, which reflects that the psychological and spiritual patterns observed are not simply about acculturation to Utah LDS culture. Additionally, converts reported several experiences they had with LDS church culture prior to living in Utah that gave evidence of the idealizing, devaluing, and integrating pattern. However, the patterns observed in this study may have some relation to Utah LDS culture being the vehicle for disseminating LDS doctrine around the globe, given that 78% of lifelong LDS members live in Western states and 40% in Utah (Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life Survey 2012).

By choosing to continue to commit to their new faith, converts must be able to construct an integrated, faithful LDS identity through synthesizing idealization, disappointment along the journey, and understanding of their heritage and receiving culture and values. For the committed converts, the acculturation process that they go through is often viewed as an important trial of their faith, and they draw upon their relationship with God and the spiritual emotions they experience throughout the acculturation process. In a sense, converts’ spiritual experiences protect them from the vicissitudes of the acculturation process when connected to their new faith.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation relates to our ability to generalize. Most of our converts converted outside Utah, and they shared their process of acculturating outside Utah in their narratives. Given this, we believe that some generalizations across converts can be made. We do so with caution, however, because all of our converts were living in Provo, Utah, at the time of the interview, retrospectively recalling their acculturation process. There is also a limitation in our chosen use of a cross-sectional analysis (Paloutzian, 1999). Further research could be done in a longitudinal research design.

Another related limitation is that we have only observed committed converts. It would be useful to conduct the same study in persons exploring, converting to, or disaffiliating from the LDS church in comparison to our sample. When reviewing the transcript of the one disaffiliated convert baptized in Uganda five months prior to his interview at BYU, we noticed some notable differences. Unlike the committed converts, he was intrigued by the LDS religion but did not express a relationship with a transcendent being or any significant spiritual feelings or emotions that differed with his conversion. He also didn’t demonstrate a desire to acculturate to the LDS faith. His transcript lacked idealizing or integrating comments like the ones our committed converts had. When asked how he adapted, he stated, “I can’t say I’ve adapted . . . the Church thing is kind of tolerated; I’m going to school [at BYU] so I have to tolerate that.” His cognitive processing appeared to have been more peripheral (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). In contrast to the committed converts, the disaffiliated convert had neither a spiritual nor psychosocial acculturating experience that seemed integral to the experience of the committed converts. It would be interesting to see if the patterns observed in the LDS committed converts and in the disaffiliated convert would similarly be observed in committed and disaffiliated converts of other faiths.

A third limitation is that we were unable to discuss ethnicity and ethnic differences among the international converts with the small sample sizes of international ethnicity and ethnic differences among the international converts.

Figure 1. Mean idealizing score by groups (time from baptism)

Figure 2. Mean devaluing score by groups (time from baptism)

Figure 3. Mean integrating score by groups (time from baptism)
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Religious Acculturation and Spirituality

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converts from each country represented. In addition to using bigger sample sizes from various countries within our current BYU population, it would also be important to corroborate our findings by studying LDS samples of committed LDS converts in different regions. Special attention could be paid to regions where converts are more of the majority, relative to those born and raised in the LDS church, versus regions where they are in the minority to see if converts still engage in similar patterns of idealization, devaluation, and integration.

Additionally, further research could be done to explore the ways religious communities can help converts develop healthy identities that incorporate both heritage and receiving culture values and practices. While religions are meant to strengthen the spirituality of its members, and the converts interviewed in this study had that experience, more research can be done to understand the psychological experience of new converts and the relational context in which they find themselves.

Conclusion

Further research is encouraged to better understand the human psychosocial and spiritual processes involved in religious acculturation. Two independent processes were observed in post-conversion acculturation of committed LDS converts. One was psychosocial and the other was spiritual. First, committed converts recognize the need to acculturate to their new religious culture and make careful, thoughtful decisions about aspects of their new heritage and LDS church, versus regions where they are in the minority. Second, converts also undergo a change in identity that is based on the experience of spiritual emotions, reflecting a new or renewed relationship with God and LDS beliefs during and after conversion. Spiritual emotions, relationship with God, and beliefs underlie the converts’ attributions for identity change, giving them spiritual perspective-taking and commitment to acculturation in the face of psychosocial struggles with both the heritage and the receiving cultures. These spiritual experiences were powerful motivators for further acculturation, suggesting that spirituality may be a protective factor that transcends the human psychosocial processes involved in acculturation.

References


Religious Acculturation and Spirituality

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Additionally, further research could be done to explore the ways religious communities can help converts develop healthy identities that incorporate both heritage and receiving culture values and practices. While religions are meant to strengthen the spirituality of its members, and the converts interviewed in this study had positive experiences, more research can be done to understand the psychological experience of new converts and the relational context in which they find themselves.

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