

Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative

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The jail cell conversion from “sinner” to true believer may be one of the best examples of a “second chance” in modern life, yet the process receives far more attention from the popular media than from social science research. In this article, we explore prisoner conversions from the perspective of narrative psychology. Drawing on 75 original, life story interviews with prisoner “converts,” we argue that the conversion narrative “works” as a shame management and coping strategy in the following ways. The narrative creates a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal, imbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning, empowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God, provides the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness, and allows a sense of control over an unknown future.

The jail cell conversion from “sinner to saint” or from nonbeliever to true believer is a well-known, indeed almost clichéd character arch in feel-good fiction, history, and media accounts. Yet this dramatic example of a “quantum change”—a sudden identity transformation qualitatively different from the more common, incremental changes in human development (see Miller & C’deBaca, 1994)—has received relatively little systematic attention in the social science literature (Clear et al., 1992).

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Criminologists have explored related issues such as the controversy of whether “faith-based” treatment programs are effective in reducing recidivism (cf. Johnson & Larson, 2003; Kleiman, 2003), the link between church attendance and criminal behavior (Sumter & Clear, 1998), and the role of religion in coping with imprisonment (Koenig, 1995). Yet the topic of the jailhouse conversion remains largely unexplored in criminological research, a fact considered by Day (1987) to be a “profound and critical” (p. 245) oversight. Of course, the psychological study of religious conversion in general has a privileged place in the history of psychology (James, 1902/1985; Starbuck, 1899), but this topic has received somewhat scant attention in more recent times as well (see Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). This is somewhat surprising considering that the jail cell conversion may be one of the most impressive “second chances” in modern life.

The concept of a “conversion” is primarily a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim notion indicating a radical change in personal religious beliefs as well as in associated behaviors and social affiliations (Hiebert, 1992, p. 9; James, 1902/1985). “Converts” claim to experience a new-found or greatly revitalized faith accompanied by substantial changes in attitudes, thoughts, and self-understandings. Such claims can be met with considerable cynicism by both the general public and by sociologists of prison life (see, e.g., Mannheim, 1965). Prisoners who “find religion” are thought to be most likely putting on an act to impress parole boards, win plum assignments in the prison (e.g., working with the chaplain), or gain public sympathy. The radical nature of the transformation they describe appears to violate our assumptions about the way individuals change. Finding God behind bars seems somehow too convenient to be believable.

Although not sharing this cynicism, we also do not accept accounts of conversion “at face value” in the analysis that follows. Prison converts use a variety of metaphors to describe their new lives, from being “born again” to “feeling the hand of God in mine” and the like. We agree with Stromberg (1990) that “Any analysis based on the assumption that the conversion narrative may be taken to refer unproblematically to a conversion event is seriously flawed” (p. 42). Instead, we argue that conversion narratives are valuable, not for their descriptions of “historical, observable events” (Stromberg, 1990) but rather as self-narratives or “personal myths” (McAdams, 1993). Unlike the conversions themselves, the conversion narrative “is an observable event” that is “immediately available as evidence to the researcher” (Stromberg, 1990, p. 43). Research in the tradition of the “narrative turn” in the social sciences has begun to interpret conversion narratives not only in terms of their possible referential function but also as important objects of analysis in themselves (e.g., Popp-Baier, 2001; Rambo, 1993). In other words, the narratives tell researchers more about the individual’s present construction of personal identity than they tell us about the past (Snow & Machalek, 1983).

The discussion that follows is an exploratory attempt to help lay a theoretical foundation for better understanding prison conversion narratives as an example

of narrative identity change. Drawing on original, life story interviews with 75 prisoner converts, we ask what conversion narratives “do” or accomplish for the individuals facing incarceration: What is their purpose, role, function, and appeal? Sociologists have pointed out that “strong religious convictions have served to insulate the true believer against the assaults of the total institution” (Goffman, 1963, p. 91). How they do so and what makes religious conversion a particularly adaptive coping mechanism for the institutionalized is the focus of our analysis. Rather than testing specific hypotheses, the goal of this work was to generate new theoretical propositions through an inductive process of grounded theory (see Ragin, 1994). We utilize a rich database of qualitative interview material to develop a conception of prisoner conversions as an example of narrative identity development.

We contend that understanding how and why prisoners develop narratives of conversion can enhance the understanding of human development in general and the ways in which self-identity is negotiated in everyday life. After all, if it is true that modern adults are routinely involved in the redefinition of autobiography and self-identity in the light of new experiences (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1993), then conversion can be thought of as an example of this common process in larger-than-life form. This narrative redefinition and reflexivity are exaggerated for religious converts because they are constantly being asked and expected to “give witness” to their experience of how they have changed. (Indeed, our own research represents yet another occasion in which these individuals are asked to “tell their story.”)

Moreover, the setting of conversion research in the milieu of the prison creates an additional exaggeration of everyday social interactions. As an “extreme” environment, the prison provides a stark and vivid social context for exploring the conditions that allow for quantum personality change. Prison can be understood as one of the social contexts in which self-identity is most likely to be questioned. This questioning may occur as a result of mortification processes (Bettleheim, 1960; Goffman, 1963) that occur when a person enters a total institution such as removal from the home environment, loss of personal possessions, and identification by the use of a number or surname. Additionally, the prison environment constitutes what Berger and Luckmann (1966) termed a “marginal situation” where the basic parameters of everyday life are altered, and taken-for-granted assumptions are undermined. Marginal situations are powerful agencies of resocialization in which individuals are rendered particularly open to new ways of perceiving themselves and organizing their lives (Musgrove, 1977). Studying religious conversion in the prison context, then, allows one to consider both ways in which previous worldviews and conceptions of self are undermined and ways in which new ones are attained.

In the sections that follow, we first describe the empirical data on which we have based our grounded theory of prisoner conversions. Next, we outline our pri-

mary conception of prisoner conversions as an example of narrative change. We then explore in greater depth the phenomenological experience of imprisonment, outlining why individuals in this situation would be open to religious conversion. Finally, we demonstrate how the conversion narratives function so effectively as a tool for shame management.

METHODOLOGY

In our analysis, we draw on a diverse array of research literatures from anthropology, psychology, sociology, and criminology. In addition, we have conducted life story interviews with a sample of 75 individuals who self-identify as prisoner “converts.” Like other studies of conversion (see Staples & Mauss, 1987; B. Taylor, 1978), our sample is purely self-identified with no objective measure of “real” conversion being used in the selection process. Here, we agree with Staples and Mauss (1987) who wrote “because we view conversion as an inherently subjective phenomenon, we believe that the subject, and only the subject, is qualified to tell us who he or she *really* is” (p. 138). Additionally, like Miller and C’deBaca (1994), we interviewed “only the butterflies” and not the “caterpillars”; therefore, we have no reliable means of determining the reliability of these descriptions of past events. Our focus, however, is less on the past being described than on the “present” narrative being constructed. Likewise, as we utilized a cross-sectional design, we have no evidence for the duration of the changes described beyond the time of the interview. Therefore, we make no claims about the permanency of the changes described.

To be included in the sample, the participants had to describe themselves as converted, “saved,” or born again. Additionally, to be included in the sample, interviewees had to have reported first undergoing this religious conversion while in prison. Most research participants had very little experience of religion prior to imprisonment. Even those who did have prior contact with a church said that they had not previously regarded Christianity as something that affected their everyday lives or had any particular, personal meaning to them. Some had distinctly negative memories of church attendance as children.

Interviewees were initially identified either on the recommendation of a prison chaplain ($N = 25$) or else through a snowball sampling method ($N = 50$)—that is, starting from an initial set of contacts and then being passed on by them to others who in turn refer to others and so on (see Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In one case, for example, a single, highly charismatic prisoner was able to put the researchers in contact with dozens of prisoners scattered throughout the British Prison Service. The prisoner in this instance had received media attention for his religious efforts inside prison and as a result had built up a support base of other Christian prisoners through letter writing. In general, prisoner converts are well

known within individual prisons because of their work in attempting to convert others.

For purposes of theoretical coherence, all participants were male prisoners, and each had converted to some form of Christianity as opposed to other religious traditions. Future research could fruitfully investigate both female and male conversions to Islam and other religions (see, e.g., Hiebert, 1992; Woodberry, 1992) in a prison environment. Otherwise, however, the sample is deliberately diverse. About a third of the sample members were serving life sentences; the others were all at various stages of fixed-length sentences that ranged from 3 months to 7 years in length. The mean length of sentence being served was around 10 years. The mean age for the sample was just under 34 years old, but there was a wide variation in ages as well, ranging from 18 to 67. The mean age for beginning to undergo a religious conversion was around 31. Inmates had been convicted of a variety of crimes including murder, manslaughter, rape, possession of drugs with intent to supply, malicious wounding, arson, armed robbery, kidnapping, theft, and fraud. Almost half of the sample were serving their first prison sentence at the time of the interview. Another one fourth of the sample were on their second stay in prison; the rest had between 3 and 12 previous experiences of imprisonment. Only about one fourth of the sample reported having no involvement with narcotics; about one third considered themselves multiply addicted to substances such as heroin, alcohol, and crack cocaine. The sample is also international: 23 of the interviewees were incarcerated in the Texas correctional system (interviewed by Curran), and the remaining 52 interviews were conducted in a wide array of British prisons (interviewed by Curran and Wilson née Goodwin). For complete sample characteristics and sampling processes, refer to Curran (2002) and Goodwin (2001).

Interviews were semistructured and biographical and focused on recounting of the individual's life history with specific questions on the experience of imprisonment and religion. Interviews followed a roughly chronological order, beginning with open-ended questions about the individual's background, especially his early religious influences and exposure to religious stories and teachings. The interviews then moved into preconversion triggering experiences with numerous questions about the experience of crime, conviction, and imprisonment. Next, we asked interviewees to talk about the experience of conversion itself and their present lives (see Curran, 2002; Goodwin, 2001). The participants were, almost to a one, highly enthusiastic about the opportunity to share their stories as might be expected of this population (see Richardson, Stewart, & Simmonds, 1978). The interviews, lasting approximately 1 hr apiece, were tape recorded and transcribed.

Finally, we used analytic induction rather than a deductive process of hypothesis testing, as the goal was to generate a new conception of the prisoner conversion process (see Ragin, 1994). The 75 interview transcripts were thematically coded, and patterns across the diverse sample were noted. Although every inter-

viewee had unique story to tell, interviewees also shared a number of clear commonalities. These thematic trends we report following as the primary findings of this analysis.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN PRISONERS CONVERT

Conversion is a term that has been used to refer to a wide range of religious and nonreligious activities from the routine joining of a church to the emotionally charged experience of becoming born again. Attempts to reach a satisfactory definition of conversion and to distinguish it from those changes that are not conversions, however, have been largely unsuccessful. This failure to reach definitional consensus may account for the disparate conclusions of research into the origins of conversions (see Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989; Long & Hadden, 1983). Rather than asking what conversion is, then, Snow and Machalek (1983) suggested the more constructive question to ask might be “what is it that changes when someone converts?” (p. 265). On this question, there is considerable consensus in the literature. Research on spiritual conversion has suggested that this experience produces little by way of measurable change in a person’s dispositional personality traits, but instead, conversion seems to involve profound change in mid-level personality domains such as personal goals and self-identity (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Essentially, to convert means to reinterpret one’s autobiography or to experience a change in subjectivity.

The etymological root of the word *conversion* reflects the idea of cognitive reversal; it is derived from the Latin *convertere*, which in its simplest sense means to revolve, turn around, or head in the opposite direction. This transformation has been variously theorized as a drastic change in the individual’s “universe of discourse” (Snow & Machalek, 1983), “understanding of root reality” (Heirich, 1977), “symbolic universe” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), “informing aspect of one’s life and biography,” and the “pervasive identity” (Travisano, 1970, p. 600). Berger and Luckmann (1966) wrote “The old reality . . . must be reinterpreted *within* the legitimating apparatus of the new reality. This involves a reinterpretation of past biography *in toto*” (p. 179).

Individuals interviewed for this research described this change in worldview in very similar terms, emphasizing a shift in worldview (Int. = interview):

I honestly can’t describe it, I just know it’s changed me, . . . the way I think about things. (Int. 34)

I mean my outlook on life is totally different. (Int. 33)

I see the world in a different light . . . nature err, I mean you look at a tree and it's not just a big green thing that's in the garden or in the field, but you think it's all, you know it's just all part of God's plan to make the world beautiful for us, and so many people they, they never even looked at flowers, they can tell you oh that's such and such a flower but they never really look at them or animals and birds. (Int. 7)

Central to this new subjectivity is a process of attributional reconstruction. In the process of conversion, religious attributions defining and identifying the new self become master attributions, replacing the secular or peripheral religious attributions that existed prior to conversion (Snow & Machalek, 1983, pp. 173–174). A new meaning system is adopted. Becoming a born-again Christian then involves adopting not only the prescriptions of a newfound faith but also lexicon associated with that faith. When one becomes a convert, one adopts the lexicon of the Christian community. This new system of rhetoric provides an interpretative system, offering guidance and meaning to the convert (Gallagher, 1990). The framework of Christianity provides the master story that allows individual to “read” the world again. The interviewees for this research, many of whom attributed their conversion experience to deep, private reading of the Bible in their cells, described using the stories and lessons in the Bible as strategies for interpreting their lives and making sense of their own struggles:

If there's anything I'm stressed out about I just . . . start reading the Bible from where I finished off. And . . . there's always something that no matter what bit you read, there's always something in there that's relevant to how you're feeling at the time, no matter what bit I read of it. (Int. 18)

If I've got a problem . . . I usually read the Bible, not looking for an answer but usually there's something there that's for the situation. (Int. 7)

Learning, over time, to construe life and self in terms of canonical language creates a particular identity and becomes constitutive of experience. Reconciling problems in this way or vocalizing those that were previously unacknowledged and incorporating them into the self-narrative accounts for the self-perception of transformation.

The development of a conversion narrative, then, is central to the conversion process. Staples and Mauss (1987) argued that accounts, and the use of certain types of language, allow the individual to achieve self-transformation. Staples and Mauss (1987) took issue with Snow and Machalek's (1983) assertion that biographical reorganization follows, and is a marker of, conversion. Staples and Mauss argued that the conversion narrative is not a reflection of some underlying change in consciousness but a tool with which to achieve self-transformation. The

universe of discourse that becomes available through interaction provides a methodology for constructing biography. Conversion, therefore, is a process whereby a new universe of discourse is used to reflexively change the self. Likewise, B. Taylor (1978) argued, “In quite a literal sense, converts, in accounting for conversion, talk themselves into the experience of conversion in the past through engagement in the experience of accounting for conversion in the present” (p. 319).

Parallel processes of autobiographical reinterpretation are thought to be at work in even more mundane forms of identity development (e.g., Bruner, 1987). According to McAdams’ (1993) theory of the life story identity, the construction and reconstruction of one’s autobiography—or personal myth—integrating one’s perceived past, present, and anticipated future is itself the process of identity development in adulthood. McAdams argued that modern adults cultivate these life stories to provide their lives with unity, purpose, and meaning and hence, keep a creeping sense of meaninglessness or existential void at bay (see also Freeman, 1993; Glover, 1989). This may be particularly important during traumatic periods in one’s life (S. E. Taylor, 1989; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and few experiences are as traumatizing as imprisonment.

IMPRISONMENT AS A CRISIS OF NARRATIVE

Imprisonment contains countless, well-known “pains” (see especially Sykes, 1958), and individuals who are kept in these institutions face many crises. They are statistically very likely to lose their homes and jobs, become estranged from their families and friends, and struggle to reconnect with these social ties after their release (see Liebling & Maruna, 2005). One interviewee summarized this situation thusly:

I’ve always said what, when the judge sentenced me to six years what he should . . . have turned round and said I also sentence you to losing your home, to losing your girlfriend, to losing your child, to losing your self-respect, err, to losing everything you’ve ever worked for. I’m going to take everything, every single thing away from you, and that’s what I sentence you to. (Int. 23)

Prisoners also face a crisis of self-narrative. That is, if adults are motivated to find meaning, construct coherence, and generally “make sense” of their lives in ways that maintain self-esteem, prisoners experience a particular challenge in this regard.

Individuals typically maintain taken-for-granted ways of acting and living without questioning them as long as they prove relatively successful and adaptive. Only when something happens that cannot be dealt with through existing “recipes” for action will individuals’ accustomed life scripts be evaluated and alterna-

tives explored. This seemed to be the case for many of those who found themselves in prison for the first time or who had committed crimes they found difficult to cope with. Removed from their normal supports and in a situation that was not covered by their normal problem-solving knowledge or faced with the fact that previous orientations or ways of organizing life had failed, individuals found themselves in a crisis situation (Kox, Meeus, & Hart, 1991; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Rambo, 1993).

Prison sociologists have long documented this situation in terms of coping with imprisonment. Goffman (1961), for instance, wrote

The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. (p. 24)

Being imprisoned can cause individuals to see the fragility of the web of meaning they previously took for granted. This realization can lead to reflection on issues of existence, life, and death, which are usually bracketed from everyday consideration (Cohen & Taylor, 1972). Irwin (1970) argued

One's identity, one's personality system, one's coherent thinking about himself depend upon a relatively familiar, continuous, and predictable stream of events. In the Kafkaesque world of the booking room, the jail cell, the interrogation room, and the visiting room, the boundaries of the self collapse. (p. 39)

Interviewees described their initial experience of incarceration as involving something close to a feeling of physical paralysis:

I hated myself for what I did, for the first six months I was in prison I was virtually in shock err, hardly talked at all or anything. (Int. 2)

I didn't think about anything at the time, I was hurting, and everything was numb inside, so I didn't want to think about anything, it was just a matter of getting through the day. . . . I was an emotional wreck, the trauma of what I'd done basically. . . . I could respond to everything on a mechanical, physical level, but without emotion, everything was cut off, was empty and drained and it was a while before I started thinking and feeling again, initiating rather than just responding. (Int. 30)

The corporal nature of this shock was a common theme of the narratives:

At first when I got sentenced to five years it really shook me you know what I mean, really took the wind out of me. (Int. 14)

Utter despair, utter depression, terrible, terrible sort of, well it just like having a hole punched into you really. (Int. 32)

Individuals are generally considered to be more receptive to religious ideologies during periods when their self-identity is questioned, placed under strain, or threatened with annihilation (Lifton, 1961). This initial period of crisis at the beginning of a long prison sentence also manifests itself in the form of abnormally high rates of suicide, attempted suicide, and prison absconding (e.g., Gibbs, 1987; Liebling, 1999):

When I first got locked up . . . I was rock bottom and I remember leaning down in my cell and saying, "Alright come on then!" I had lost the missus [wife], lost the house, lost the car . . . I didn't want to go on anymore . . . I went straight across the vein. (Int. 35)

At the same time, few of the interviewed prisoners reported "seeing the light" in these initial months of shock; indeed, many of the interviewees did not convert to religion until late into their prison sentences or indeed, until their second, third, or even fourth prison sentence:

The most painful experience in my life was committing murder, the consequences of it. The second most painful experience in my life was actually looking at myself, warts an' all, no illusions, no vanity, look at the person I am, what's wrong with me, why is it wrong, what can I do to change it? . . . [this happened] when I'd settled down, we're talking perhaps three years after the offence. (Int. 30)

Although numerous studies have suggested that a degree of psychological unease and trauma can act as a catalyst for religious change (Gillespie, 1973; Rambo, 1993), numerous critics have questioned whether conversions are always preceded by "objective" or measurable life crises (see Anderson & Bondi, 1998; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997, p. 11; Greil & Rudy, 1983). Snow and Phillips (1980) argued that converts display an increased tendency to reexamine their biographies after conversion to find evidence of discontent or crisis and that this can be encouraged by the religious movement the converts have joined:

For many individuals, conversion . . . involves either the redefinition of life before conversion as being fraught with problems or the discovery of personal problems

not previously discernible or regarded as troublesome enough to warrant remedial action. (p. 435)

Even in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which popularized the “hitting bottom” idea of recovery, it is clear that a person’s “first experience of ‘bottom’ is unlikely to make him amenable to the AA identity” (Lofland, 1969, p. 252). The “dramatic white-light conversion” described by AA cofounder Bill Wilson has been criticized as an unlikely and unhelpful metaphor in understanding acclimation to AA (see O’Reilly, 1997, p. 103) or religious conversion (see Richardson, 1985).

The hitting bottom crisis described by converts, then, is probably best understood as a metaphor. The more important catalyst for conversion may be not so much a life crisis as an identity crisis: being forced to question who one really is. According to Gillespie (1973), “Wishing you were one thing and knowing you were another is severe and produces tension that may find release in the religious conversion experience” (p. 93). A period of psychological conflict is generally accepted to be “the sine qua non for the transformation of self through conversion” (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997, p. 118; see James, 1902/1985; Rambo, 1993). In the preconversion phase, the soon-to-be convert is thought to experience a profound psychological disgruntlement, a sense of unrest, dissatisfaction with the self, and a feeling of wanting something or of wanting to be something that is not clear to oneself (Coe, 1916, p. 51). James (1902/1985) described the “sense of dividedness” that dominates the preconversion phase, which was described as the contrast between what is and what might be me.

The prisoners interviewed for this research described experiencing a desperate need for a framework through which to start to interpret their experiences:

So what happened to me was, I was desperate. I was charged with murder, first time ever in prison err, my whole life had kind of exploded really. It was lying in pieces all around me, err I didn’t know whether I wanted to live or die. . . . I contemplated suicide, couldn’t do that. . . . I was praying, praying more than I . . . had ever prayed before in my life you know, err because I really needed some help, and err nothing seemed to be happening you know in a really kind of, in a desperate situation you want an answer and you want it now, no answer. (Int. 32)

In committing their crimes and going to prison, the research participants said that they had done something that contradicted previously taken-for-granted information about themselves and thus the self-story they were able to tell:

I would say I’m not a violent person, obviously the crime I’ve committed shows otherwise, but err I was one that would rather walk away from the prob-

lem rather than err coming to blows err, you know so it was a big shock to the system err, that I should commit such a horrific crime. (Int. 41)

Prisoners experienced confusion about whether they had ever been the person they, and others, thought they were:

In the past, I think I was quite sort of satisfied that I knew who I was and, you know when somebody would say, “Oh I think you’re really good at that” or “We appreciate you for this.” Then all this happens. The big crash, everything lying in smithereens, and all of a sudden I’m thinking, “Hang on a minute, the person who’s responsible for this cannot have been the person who all those people were saying nice things about, because he wouldn’t have done that.” So that takes some resolving. (Int. 66)

Reflecting James’s (1902/1985) notion of the “divided self,” the prisoners’ accounts demonstrate the break they perceived between the self that committed the crime and a self-in-process that existed subsequently:

It [committing the crime] shocked me yeah, I wanted answers as to why I could do something like that, you know. . . . I needed a sort of answer, you know I thought I’d done something so terrible that I couldn’t get me head round it you know, because it wasn’t me. . . . I’m asking myself these sort of questions like why and who, you know, how can you do it, and I sort of came to a realisation that there’s evil and good and dark and light and all these sorts of concepts flying about and . . . and I think I just had all those big questions out there and that was the starting point to it, they made me think intellectually. (Int. 8)

Central to the stigmatizing process experienced by prisoners is the loss of one’s identity as an individual and the transformation into a “type” or a member of larger, undifferentiated group: prisoner, offender, criminal, or murderer: “I used to feel like . . . I was the scum of the earth. . . . I used to hear ‘nonce’ ‘beast’ those words reinforced in me that I was the lowest of the low” (Int. 61). As such, participants described having to overcome a period of self-hatred and the internalization of shame: “I mean up until fairly recently [6 years after the offense], I didn’t really have many good things to say about myself because the bad things seemed to overshadow everything you know” (Int. 32). Self-hatred led to thoughts of, and attempts at, suicide for most, but it also prompted a search for answers about existence and the meaning of life:

You despise yourself so much that you contemplate doing yourself in. Most lifers if they’re honest have sat down and thought, “Well, what am I doing?

What's it all about? What's the point?" And they either do [commit suicide] or they get back and say well, for whatever reason, I've got to carry on. (Int. 8)

This existential questioning was, at least in small part, magnified by the fact that they had so much "idle" time to reflect on their lives inside prison.

When you're in a cell you do, you spend a lot of time thinking to yourself because you've got nothing else to do. (Int. 23)

I began to think about my life . . . because I was banged up [in cell] practically twenty three hours a day, asking myself these searching questions. (Int. 36)

Interviewees typically interpreted this chance to reflect as an opportunity, however, rather than as a burden:

I have learnt a lot in here, experienced a great deal, in all aspects of life, that one could never experience in a life time. It was all done for a reason: I think that may people outside haven't got the option to get that close because outside ones always busy. (Int. 38)

This finding is interesting considering that one of the original aims of the penitentiary system, now anachronistic, was to promote religious conversion through silent contemplation of what one had done (Morris & Rothman, 1995).

For sample members, then, imprisonment brought to the fore, in a very particular way, fundamental questions about life, death, meaning, and the individual's place in the world. Not only did they seek a framework through which to interpret and attribute meaning to the events they had experienced, they also sought one that would provide answers to their questions and give them ways to move forward and construct a new, positive life and self-identity:

I wanted to know how I could have done such a thing first of all, and I wanted to know what it was all about, what happens when you kill somebody, why you know, is there any purpose to life. (Int. 30)

After I was convicted I kind of . . . [was] trying to work out what it all meant, because I was still, I very quickly started to search for meaning in everything that had happened, because it's very confusing to find yourself in those circumstances. (Int. 32)

Prisoners reported looking far and wide for answers to these sorts of "ultimate concerns" (Emmons, 1999) and not just to the Bible:

Initially it was a case of me trying to come to terms with it internally, and err that involved for me reading, fringe reading, not the Bible, [but] metaphysics and mysticism—not mysticism err the clairvoyants, mystics kind of thing you know—and err trying to make some sense out of life and death and err the purpose of it all. (Int. 30)

It wasn't a religion thing, it was a personal quest if you like, a journey. . . . I've read Freud, I've read Jung. . . . Some of them made sense. . . . I realised that I'd got to look at everything that was available basically, so that's how I came round to, you know, to sort of God. (Int. 8)

The prime concern for sample members, once they had overcome the shock of committing their crime and adjusting to the physical shock of imprisonment, then, appeared to be trying to resolve some of the problems and questions surrounding their self-identity. Essentially, they sought answers as to how they could be in the place they were at and still be good and worthy human beings inside. Opportunities to do this and to construct a new, positive way of thinking about themselves, however, were constrained by the prison environment and their exclusion from mainstream, prosocial roles (as family providers, workers, etc.).

CONVERSION AS SHAME MANAGEMENT

Conversion to Christianity, however, offered a clear and socially acceptable path out of this state of identity crisis. For prisoners, religious conversion can be seen as an adaptive mechanism that helped to resolve psychological conflict, resolve “emotional ambivalence” (Stromberg, 1990), and unify a previously “divided self” (James, 1902/1985). One interviewee, for instance, said

I think only, in the last, probably, two years, . . . there's been a significant change in the way that I look at the factors which were around at the time the offence was committed, err which has helped me to kind of understand how I can feel good about myself even though I'm the person who was there at the time. (Int. 66)

Our analysis suggests that the religious conversion achieves this sort of shame management function in five distinct ways. The conversion narrative

- Creates a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal.
- Imbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning.
- Empowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God.

- Provides the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness.
- Allows a sense of control over an unknown future.

We discuss each function following.

Conversion and Social Identity

First, the conversion narrative allows the individual to maintain interpretive control over his life, warding off the stigmatizing labels that are applied externally by replacing them with a religious identity and universe of discourse. “Being a born-again Christian, that takes away every word that the world will ever want to call you. The Bible says I am a new person in Christ Jesus. Whatever God says I am, I am” (Int. 42). Of course, religious converts still have stigmatizing labels to contend with. In prison argot, converts are variously known as the “God Squad” or “Bible Bashers” and can be socially excluded and mocked (see Clear et al., 1992). Still, this marginalization within an already marginalized population can be seen as evidence that the individual is “better” than other prisoners. He is now able to say “I am not one of ‘those’ types, I’m one of ‘these.’ ” “I don’t feel like a prisoner no more, I feel like I’m set free” (Int. 46). Importantly, the social identity of the born-again Christian also provides one with membership into a well-established community outside of the prison that welcomes the new convert into the larger fold.

Creating a Purpose for Imprisonment

Second, religious conversion can help relieve a sense of psychological crisis because it can provide meaning in the face of meaningless and identity integration when confronted with circumstances that cause individuals to question their sense of identity (Beit-Hallahami & Argyle, 1997). In spite of their painful experiences in prison, almost all of the interviewees were now able to recast their imprisonment not as a personal crisis, but as a gift or opportunity:

Prison gave me a chance to sit down and think about things . . . get away from the drugs . . . clean up, time to think. (Int. 42)

Though I’m saying that I should have never been in prison, I’m pleased for the experience, even where I shouldn’t have been here I’ve been put here for a reason, and I think . . . I’m a better person for it—not for being in prison but for meeting the type of people, for meeting the Christians that I’ve met in prison, I’m a better person through it, everybody’s noticed that, me family have noticed that. (Int. 33)

There was a clear sense among converted prisoners that imprisonment was part of the “plan” that God has constructed from them, that it was a necessary and inevitable life episode:

I got twelve years . . . there must be a reason, God must want me here. (Int. 36)

I think one of the reasons he put me in here was to make me believe in him more you know. I know it’s a silly thing to say but I think while I’ve been here it’s like his way of like saying you know, “You’re going to join me” kind of thing. “You’re going to believe in me more.” (Int. 34)

Many said that God had brought them to prison to show them something about themselves, to prompt them to sort out their lives or so that they would encounter Christianity:

I genuinely believe that at that point God started to step in and speak to me and say, “Now, look, come on, I’m actually going to show you something you’ve never considered while you’re in here and that’s where I’m going to bring you to when you walk out that door.” (Int. 1)

Likewise, rather than the past representing a period during which one wasted valuable years, the time interviewees spent involved with criminality and addiction is recast as valuable experience for one’s missionary work (see also Maruna, 2001).

By emphasizing the benefits of their current situation, prisoners continue to believe that the world is a benevolent place and that they are worthy people. Appraising imprisonment as the “will of God” evidently allows inmates to find meaning in a seemingly incomprehensible situation. In drawing lessons learned from the experience, prisoners may reduce the trauma’s attack on their assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p. 123). Additionally, imbuing the experience of imprisonment with meaning and purpose in this way can be seen as a strategy for coping with the pains of imprisonment (see, e.g., Bettelheim, 1960). Considerable research has suggested that when individuals experience life-threatening illnesses or other serious traumas, they frequently seek to find some “silver lining” in the experience or otherwise convince themselves that some benefits have emerged out of their adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Prisoners who are able to construct similar “positive illusions” (Taylor, 1989) may suffer less psychological distress and be less prone to depression or suicidal thoughts than other prisoners (see Maruna, 2001).

Conversion as Empowerment

Third, the role of the born-again Christian is a highly empowering one. Several interviewees discussed God’s “call” for them to preach. The prisoner begins to view himself as an instrument through which God works for the benefit of others. This

position of power and influence that the inmate now assumes contrasts sharply with the common social position of prisoners as disenfranchised and powerless individuals:

God put it on my heart that he wanted me to, preach the Word of God. I said “Lord” like Jeremiah, Lord, I am too young to preach, I can’t do it and like Jonah, I ran scared from the presence of the Lord and I did it for a long time. . . . God is doing everything in me and through me. (Int. 74)

As a proselytizing religion, Christianity encourages all of its converts to assume the role of missionary:

My identity today is knowing that I am a man of God and knowing that He has called me to preach and teach the Word so I look at myself as a minister of God and that is my strength. (Int. 75)

This identity also provided prisoners with a sense that they were above the daily regime of the prison, allowing them to organize a stultifying routine with a higher purpose:

Before I go out to the [prison] yard, I say to God, I hope you can use today Lord . . . and then you get three guys coming up asking about the Bible. (Int. 43)

In me quiet times, I say, “Right Lord what do you want me to do today?” and sometimes you know I feel as though He says do this or do that and sometimes I feel as though he says right just go on with what you normally do . . . so I go and do whatever he wants me to. (Int. 22)

A Road to Forgiveness

Fourth, and perhaps most obviously, Christianity provides a stronger foundation for forgiveness than nearly any other meta-narrative available in modern Western society. Integral to Evangelical Christianity is the belief that in becoming saved, one’s past life has been “washed clean” and can no longer harm them (Richardson et al., 1978). Arnold (1987) wrote “Religious literature, particularly the Bible, is full of the life histories of individuals who went beyond the point where society can forgive” (p. 212):

You know, life can make you feel like I did which was totally worthless . . . and that everything you do was wrong, and I suppose one of the things that Christianity says to you is that . . . your sins can be forgiven, go away, start

again, because I not only believe that God forgives your sins but forgets them as well, and what it offers you is this enormous chance to, to start again, to put everything right. (Int. 1)

[The biggest benefit of Christianity is] I think, I probably think that the fact, the sense that I'm redeemable. I think that above everything else . . . I haven't done anything that hasn't been done before err, I'm redeemable as a person, as a human being you know, I'm worth something. . . . I think, I think more than anything else I learned about forgiveness which, I think that was the first thing that affected me, I was chatting to a nun once, and we chatted about the nature of forgiveness and I think I struggled with it initially, and then I realised that when people forgive you and you forgive other people then you become part of each other in a way you know because of that, that sort of connection. (Int. 8)

Forgiving themselves was particularly important for those interviewees who had committed murder. Most said it was only through reference to Christianity that they could achieve it:

Although I knew I'd been forgiven, I'd asked for forgiveness and I'd been granted it, err I had great difficulty in forgiving myself for what I'd done, and it would be some twelve, eighteen months afterwards that I was finally able to forgive myself and that was through err one of the ministers at [prison]. We sat talking and I was explaining to him that I couldn't forgive myself and he just said that I thought I was bigger than God. And, I said no way and he said, "Yes you do, you've just told me." . . . He says, "Well has God forgiven you for what you've done?" I said, "Yes, I believe so." He said, "Well . . . then you're saying you're bigger than God." And, it took me a couple of days thinking about it but then I realised that what he was saying was right and I was able to forgive myself and that lifted a lot of the guilt that I had. And, I mean it didn't make the crime right but it lifted it and since then I've never looked back err I've just accepted it, come to terms with it. (Int. 7)

The idea that they had been forgiven by God was what enabled many inmates to regain feelings of self-worth. For those serving sentences for serious crimes, the concept of equality played an important part in this process. That is, the idea that there were no "grades" of wrongdoing, that all people have sinned and all people need forgiveness and we are all children of God, were fundamental beliefs for those who had committed murder or rape:

You know, my faith tells me that everyone is a sinner, but everyone can be forgiven to the same extent and . . . there's no kind of levels of forgiveness, you

are either forgiven or you're not, and that everyone can be forgiven subject to acceptance of Jesus into their lives. (Int. 32)

Hope for the Future

Finally, the conversion narrative is also able to reduce the prisoner's anxiety about the uncertain future. The self-narrative contains within it a plan for the future as well as an interpretation of the past. White (1996) wrote, "By telling you who I am, I tell you my fate. To change my fate, I must redefine who I am; I must reconstruct my story" (p. 423). This may be especially true of the conversion narrative.

A major problem for those in prison, especially those serving life sentences, is the uncertainty about when, or even if, they would be released. Those serving determinate length sentences have an idea of how long they will serve, but the exact release date remains unknown and depends on decisions made by often anonymous others. The prisoner converts, however, were less concerned in this regard, as they said that God was directing their lives, and they presented evidence that this had happened in the past. This belief that God was intervening in their prison career on their behalf and with their best interests at heart allowed these prisoners a way out of the feelings of powerlessness and dehumanization that resulted from knowing that bureaucrats at the Home Office, or within the prison, had sole responsibility for making decisions about their lives:

I've accepted the Lord and I know that he will open the gate for me when he knows the time is right, and it don't matter what the Home Office say or what the prison Governor says but when the Lord knows it's right he will open the gate and he won't keep me in. (Int. 7)

Interviewees rationalized the length of their stay in prison with reference to God's will, work they could do for God while in prison, and various goals that they had been sent there to achieve:

I should have been released twelve years ago after I'd been to the judge, but err I'm here for a reason what the Lord wants me to be here and I'll be here for as long as he wants me to be here for, there's a reason for it. (Int. 10)

The conversion narrative also made release from prison less urgent, as the role of "doing God's work" is equally important and plausible inside as it is outside prison:

If, even if they said to me I'd never be released tomorrow I'd still be happy because to me prison is a mission field anyway, you know. (Int. 5)

Keep me in jail for the rest of me life! As long as Christ's with me they can keep me in jail all me life, I don't give a monkey's [arse]. (Int. 33)

Adopting religion as the master narrative of reference through which life was organized and self-defined allowed self-identity to be kept constant whether the prisoner was inside or outside the prison.

The conversion narrative also provides a sense of hope for the future (see also Peck, 1987) and reduces levels of uncertainty regarding the right course of action. "He almost set a set of guidelines down now that, that because I know He's there err, I know where I'm going sort of within those guidelines you know, me rule book of things" (Int. 6).

CONCLUSIONS

There are several aspects of the experience of imprisonment that can lead to the disorientation of an individual's self-narrative. Self-narratives are employed not only to make sense of the past but also to project individuals into the future. Part of the self-story, then, involves hopes and goals of what people might become. On imprisonment, especially when individuals are to serve long sentences, this projective aspect of the self-narrative may be shattered, with projections into the future now consisting primarily of further life in prison. This aspect of the imprisonment experience alone may give rise to appraisal of the self-narrative in the same way that the unexpected death of a life partner or a child might. Moreover, in the case of those people who have committed so-called situational crimes on the spur of the moment and not linked to any previous courses of criminal involvement (Cohen & Taylor, 1972), the individual may be confronted with a view of himself that was not previously incorporated into his narrative. When an individual is faced with the knowledge that he has done something he never thought himself capable of, the self-identity he previously took for granted is rendered problematic (Strauss, 1969).

In this situation, the conversion narrative makes considerable sense. The conversion narrative can integrate disparate and shameful life events into a coherent, empowering whole, renew prisoners' sense of their own personal biography, and provide them with hope and a vision for the future. Most of all, conversion narratives make sense because they are widely recognized and respected as legitimate narratives in Western society.

Yet religious conversion is not the only way to cope with the shame and stigma of imprisonment. Previously (see Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Ramsden, 2004), S. Maruna has analyzed a large sample of what might be understood as secular or nonreligious conversion narratives, which he labels "redemption scripts." These life-story accounts of former, persistent offenders who are now "going straight"

(interviewees had been out of prison and avoiding criminal behavior for an average of 2 years) share remarkable similarities to the conversion narratives we analyzed here yet drew on no religious language or imagery. Maruna (2001) found that the most consistent characteristics of reformed ex-offender self-narratives include a tendency to find some meaning in one's experiences of crime and imprisonment, a desire to "give something back" (especially to the next generation of young people in trouble), and a sense of hope and control over one's future. The most common self-narrative among these ex-prisoners then can be understood as a desire to put one's shameful past to good use by devoting one's future to helping others. Importantly, these narrative patterns seem to distinguish successful from unsuccessful ex-prisoners, predicting successful reform after imprisonment, in a variety of empirical tests (see Maruna, 2001, 2004). The religious self-narrative we identified in this analysis can clearly be understood as a subtype of this more generic (i.e., non-Christian) self-narrative.

One of the conclusions of that previous research has been that ex-offenders' opportunities for reconstructing their self-narratives were too limited. That is, there were too few plausible scripts or meta-narratives for them to model their self-narratives on. One of the conclusions of this research is that religious narratives, although possibly declining in their importance in much of the increasingly secular Western world, provide one such widely accepted script for exiting a criminal identity. As such, they might be thought of as "a God send" for prisoners confronting an existential crisis.

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