

Personality change following religious conversion: perceptions of converts and their close acquaintances

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This study focuses on how converts and their close acquaintances perceive changes in personality characteristics after religious conversion and possible demographic influences of these perceptions. Sixty Slovakian respondents self-defined as having experienced conversions rated themselves twice on measures of Big Five personality traits, self-esteem, and meaningfulness in life. The first rating provided retrospective information concerning pre-conversion conditions and the second rating obtained data reflecting the convert's present self-understanding. In addition, every convert was rated on the same characteristics by someone who knew the person well during both pre- and post-conversion times. The convert and the rater both provided demographic information (age, education, religiosity, relationship to conversions and converts etc.). Analyses showed that the converts perceived several personality changes: neuroticism decreased while self-esteem, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion increased. They also reported a large increase in meaningfulness. Perceived changes were in part related to education level and age for converts, and to religiosity in both converts and close persons, suggesting a retrospective bias.

Keywords: religious conversion; personality; Big Five; meaning in life; self-esteem; self-perception

Religious conversion has been one of the most fascinating phenomena in the psychology of religion (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). Authors dealing with this phenomenon agree that conversion brings some kind of change into the convert's life. There is significant discussion, however, concerning which psychological phenomena are changing as a result of religious conversion and whether the changes described retrospectively by converts reflect objective changes in psychological characteristics. Many papers and chapters investigate the effect of conversion on personal life and how this effect is perceived by the converts (e.g., Hood et al., 2009; Meadow & Kahoe, 1984; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Meadow and Kahoe (1984) reviewed publications on this topic and stated that the converts perceive the dominant effect of conversion in the form of increased positive emotions (e.g., happiness, calmness, relief) in the time shortly after conversion. Converts also reported changes related to mental health such as increased self-esteem and meaning in life, termination of drug abuse, decrease of neurotic distress, decrease of the

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depressive symptoms, increasing well-being, renewed vocational interests, and reductions in abusive behaviour (Herrenkohl, 1978; Ng & Shek, 2001; Paloutzian et al., 1999; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). These findings have led to comparisons of conversion and psychotherapy experiences (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1984). On the other hand, converts noted negative results of conversion such as doubts and the struggles related to changing former behaviours to align with their newly acquired belief system. These adjustments can be sources of stress and cause periods of indifference. While less common, conversion to some religious groups can promote even more intense psychological challenges such as extreme rigidity in thinking, emotional dependency, or even drug abuse (Meadow & Kahoe, 1984).

Paloutzian et al. (1999) focused on the question of changes in personality after conversion. After reviewing several studies on participation in new religious movements (e.g., Richardson, 1995; Weiss & Mendoza, 1990) they concluded that there is no reason to assume that basic personality traits (e.g., Big Five) change following conversion. They also pointed out that while there is no systematic longitudinal research in this specific area, longitudinal studies on stability of the big five personality traits reviewed by Costa and McCrae (1994) showed strong stability of traits in adulthood. Paloutzian (2005) holds the same opinion when he states that possible changes are only alterations in expression of the traits in a way consistent with new religiosity.

On the other hand, Piedmont (2001) found a significant shift in all of the Big Five dimensions, namely decreasing neuroticism, and increasing extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness in persons undergoing psychotherapy in a drug rehabilitation programme. That effect reportedly remained stable even after 15 months. Since the treatment programme included a spiritual intervention component, Piedmont suggested that similar changes can be enabled also by religious conversion.

To underline more frequent post-conversion changes, Paloutzian et al. (1999) use three-level model of personality by McAdams (1994). Level One comprises basic traits and temperament which operate regardless of the specific context. Level Two are characteristic adaptations – personal goals, values, self-definition – all operating in the specific situation – they are contextual. Finally, level Three is personal identity, narrative, meaning, and global self-definition. While level One is not affected by conversion, there is plenty of evidence for the fact that people are greatly changing at levels two and three due to religious conversion. The research confirmed that converts perceived changes in self-esteem and self-confidence (Ng, 2002; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998) as well as in the level of meaning in life (Paloutzian, 1981, Ng & Shek, 2001).

It is important to note that most of the reported research is based on converts' self-ratings, providing cross-sectional or retrospective data. Retrospective data have been questioned in personality research, where Costa and McCrae (1989, 1994) found that such data are not reliable assessments of personality change and similar questions exist within conversion studies. Snow and Machalek (1984) emphasise that converts tend to reinterpret their conversion according to their newly acquired beliefs or to bring their reported experience in line with the "typical" conversion process anticipated in the churches. Adherence to these normative narratives includes displaying the appropriate behavioural changes. This tendency of converts is a frequent reason for criticism of conversion studies using retrospective methodology and self-reported conversion accounts analysis (e.g. Beckford, 1978; Popp-Baier, 2003). Popp-Baier (2003) even suggests that the relation between retrospective data and actual conversions can be so problematic, that although retrospective accounts constitute interesting research material in and of themselves, they should not be mistaken for accurate data about the true event. It is clear that attempting

to recall details surrounding one's own religious conversion could be influenced by well-known psychological mechanisms such as self-distortion based on self-affirmation need (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Scher & Cooper, 1989) or self-presentation biases (Schlenker, 1975) that provide a defence against personal and public shame.

We located no longitudinal research of post-conversion changes that might help to determine whether the self-reported effects of conversion reflect real changes or biased perceptions. Robins, Nofhle, Trzesniewski, and Roberts (2005), however, argue against Costa and McCrae's (1989) conclusion about the unreliability of retrospective data. Among college students, they found a correlation between perception of change and actual change measured longitudinally. From a different perspective, while Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) acknowledge possible biases in the retrospective research of converts, they see similar problems in longitudinal designs. When testing the person at two different points in time, he or she might not be able to employ a common metric because it could change due to contexts. Zinnbauer and Pargament use an example from leadership training. Before training, a participant can feel like an average leader, but during training his or her understanding of the definition a good leader is subject to change. After training, a participant might rate his or her own leadership lower than the pre-training level, in spite of now having acquired more skill at leading effectively. Conversion can similarly influence a rating framework. For example, a person can have more strict demand in the area of interpersonal behaviour, therefore, retrospective rating using the same metric could sometimes reveal real change more precisely than can longitudinal research. In spite of the debate regarding converts' potential biases in self-reported post-conversion changes, the nature and degree of these biases remains unclear.

In the present study, we examined retrospective perceptions of conversion changes in two groups: converts and their close acquaintances. We focused on reported changes in personality traits (level One of McAdams' model), as well as self-esteem and meaningfulness (levels Two and Three of McAdams' model). We do not explore the extent to which this perception reflects actual post-conversion changes, but we highlight possible areas of agreement between the converts and their raters, controlling for demographic factors that could be related to intensity of post-conversion change perceived by both groups.

Method

Research design

For the purpose of this study, self-definition of person as a convert was used as a criterion for inclusion for the sample. Converts were recruited using a snowball methodology in Christian religious groups and churches; all participating converts had converted to some form of the Christian tradition. The converts were from all parts of Slovakia. All converts were asked to complete the set of questionnaires concerning personality. They were asked to rate their personality features twice, once with regard to their pre-conversion personality and once with regard to their present personality. Converts were asked to identify a specific person who had known them both before and after their conversion. The identified person was asked to rate the convert's pre- and post-conversion personality characteristics.

Sample

Of the 120 questionnaires distributed, 75 were returned, but only 65 successfully included data from both the convert and his or her rater. Five of the converts stated that their

conversion happened between eight and 12 years of age. This seemed to represent a form of religious development, therefore we decided not to include them in our sample. The sample subjected to analysis consisted of 120 persons: 60 pairs of converts and their raters.

Converts were 40 males and 20 females. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55 years ($M=27.3$). The time elapsed between the conversion events and completing the questionnaires ranged from six months to 13 years ($M=4.98$ years). The reported age of conversion ranged from 17 to 47 years ($M=22.3$). Concerning pre-conversion church membership, 42 converts were formally members of some church and 18 of them were not members of any church. Post-conversion church membership was as follows: Catholic church 50, Evangelical-protestant 1, Apostolic 8, 1 was not member of any church. We also asked them about their pre-conversion beliefs in God. Ten of them did not believe in God before conversion, 18 believed in "something higher," 22 believed in God, but their faith was passive, and 9 believed in God and were actively searching for deeper knowledge of God.

Among the people nominated to rate the converts, 23 were male and 37 female. About half (30) of them were family members, 29 were close friends, and 1 was "other." Their ages ranged from 17 to 65 years ($M=33.3$). Many (46) were members of the Catholic Church, 6 belonged to Evangelical-Protestant churches, 1 was affiliated with an Apostolic church, and 7 were not members of any church. Most (39) of the raters defined themselves as believers in a personal God, 18 as believers with passive faith, and 2 were non-believers. We asked these persons about their relationship to conversion event of the convert they rated. The majority of the raters had a positive attitude towards conversion: 18 of them "strongly" encouraged the process and 19 "somewhat" encouraged the process. An addition 19 were neutral, 1 "somewhat" did not support the conversion and 1 "did not" approve of the conversion.

Measures

To measure personality traits, we used a questionnaire developed by McCrae and Terracciano for the international *National Character Survey* (Terracciano et al., 2005). This questionnaire was derived from the well-known Big Five questionnaire NEO-PI-R and consists of 30 bipolar sets of adjectives measuring neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. We chose this questionnaire because it contains only adjectives and did not have to be reformulated for peer ratings. Psychometric analysis of the questionnaire based on the original international sample including Slovak subjects showed high internal consistency (alphas from 0.77 to 0.93) and adequate factor structure (Terracciano et al., 2005).

To measure self-esteem, the Original Self-esteem Scale (Lačná, 2004) was used. The scale contains 10 bipolar adjectives, referring to overall self-esteem (e.g. self-accepting vs. self-refusing; competent vs. non-competent). It was constructed for the purpose of this project and no previous psychometric characteristics are available.

Meaningfulness was measured by the Life Meaningfulness Scale (Halama, 2002), with 18 items referring to three components of meaningfulness: cognitive, motivational, and affective. A high score indicates a perception of life as meaningful, goal-directed, and fulfilling while a low score reflects the absence of meaningfulness and goals in life. The scale has shown high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.87$) and high correlations with other meaning measures (e.g. $r=0.81$ with Purpose in Life Test; Halama, 2002).

Results

Table 1 presents measure reliabilities (Cronbach alphas) for convert and rater evaluations of retrospective and present-day perceptions; most demonstrate sufficient levels near 0.70 or higher. Less internal consistency can be seen for openness scale both in converts and raters especially in the contemporary condition. Extraversion (rater: contemporary) and agreeableness (convert: retrospective) each have one particularly low reliability and their interpretations are considered tentative. Internal consistency is generally higher for retrospective rating than for present-day rating both in converts and close persons, especially in agreeableness.

Table 2 presents convert – rater correlations pre- and post-conversion. As seen, higher agreement is apparent for neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness, and smaller for self-esteem, openness, meaningfulness and agreeableness. This pattern could be related to the inherent observability of the traits (John & Robins, 1993). Extraversion, conscientiousness and neuroticism are more easily observable, because they are more explicitly expressed in behaviour than self-esteem or meaningfulness. Similar to lower inconsistency of the scales, lower self-other agreement is lower for the present-day rating and for the trait agreeableness.

In order to examine differences in the retrospective and actual perception of personality characteristics, we performed *t*-tests for dependent samples separately for converts and for close persons. *T*-tests were preferred to MANOVA because personality traits of big five were conceptualised as independent factors. Cohen's *d* was computed for

Table 1. Cronbach alpha of study measures.

Measure	Converts		Raters	
	Pre-conversion	Now	Pre-conversion	Now
Neuroticism	0.75	0.78	0.73	0.67
Extraversion	0.71	0.69	0.72	0.51
Openness	0.62	0.44	0.53	0.41
Agreeableness	0.72	0.34	0.70	0.64
Conscientiousness	0.83	0.64	0.86	0.71
Self-esteem	0.87	0.85	0.92	0.91
Meaningfulness	0.89	0.83	0.92	0.79

Table 2. Correlations between converts and their raters.

	Pre-conversion	Post-conversion
Neuroticism	0.56**	0.47**
Extraversion	0.52**	0.48**
Openness	0.39**	0.24
Agreeableness	0.32*	0.19
Conscientiousness	0.51**	0.47**
Self-esteem	0.33*	0.23
Meaningfulness	0.31*	0.34**

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

every variable to express the size of perceived change (see Dunlap, Cortina, Vaslow, & Burke, 1996, for the formula used). Tables 3 and 4, respectively, present *t*-tests and Cohen's *d* for convert and rater evaluations.

As seen in Table 3, there are significant differences in almost all variables, which mean that converts perceive distinct changes after conversion. Cohen's *d* coefficients show that strongest perceived changes are in meaningfulness (increasing) and neuroticism (decreasing), with lesser changes in self-esteem, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion. No significant change is observed for openness.

Similar findings can be found in the observations of the raters. They also report the biggest changes in meaningfulness and neuroticism, with lesser changes in agreeableness, conscientiousness, self-esteem, and extraversion, and the smallest change in openness. Comparing the *d* columns across Tables 3 and 4, although there are small differences in change perception of converts and their raters (i.e. smaller change in openness and bigger change in neuroticism and self-esteem perceived by converts) the profile of the changes for the two groups is quite comparable. This suggests that both groups perceive the changes after conversion in measured variables in a similar way, corroborating the findings in Table 2 that the two groups of people share similar perceptions of the convert's characteristics.

In the next step, we focused on variables that could be related to the amount of change perceived by the converts and their raters. We computed 14 variables to show the differences between pre- and post-conversion scores for each convert and rater (Pre-score minus Post-score). This showed the amount of perceived change. These difference scores

Table 3. Convert perceptions of personality characteristics pre- and post-conversion.

	Pre-conversion <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Post-conversion <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Neuroticism	21.16 (4.54)	13.14 (3.71)	-11.10**	-1.87
Extraversion	19.69 (4.55)	23.09 (3.45)	5.56**	0.79
Openness	21.93 (4.16)	22.81 (2.69)	1.95	0.23
Agreeableness	19.29 (4.44)	23.64 (1.93)	7.41**	1.21
Conscientiousness	17.76 (5.32)	23.02 (3.01)	7.37**	1.17
Self-esteem	44.05 (10.80)	58.67 (7.69)	8.72**	1.51
Meaningfulness	55.63 (12.48)	80.13 (9.08)	11.36**	2.00

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

Table 4. Rater perceptions of personality characteristics pre- and post-conversion.

	Pre-conversion <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Post-conversion <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Neuroticism	18.23 (4.68)	11.52 (3.21)	-10.22**	-1.59
Extraversion	20.37 (4.56)	24.09 (2.84)	6.87**	0.88
Openness	20.84 (3.62)	22.52 (2.61)	3.82**	0.50
Agreeableness	21.24 (4.06)	25.51 (2.45)	7.57**	1.19
Conscientiousness	19.23 (5.49)	24.79 (3.10)	8.25**	1.14
Self-esteem	45.09 (11.89)	57.74 (9.02)	8.17**	1.15
Meaningfulness	56.70 (13.66)	79.54 (6.30)	12.36**	2.00

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

next were correlated with the demographic and religious characteristics of converts and raters.

Table 5 displays the correlations between difference scores and various demographic variables as described above. For dichotomous variables (sex: 1 = male, 2 = female; pre-conversion membership: 1 = yes, 2 = no; post-conversion membership: 1 = traditional congregation, 2 = non-traditional), point-biserial correlations were computed. Among the variables expressing the amount of change, agreeableness has the most significant correlations with the characteristics of the converts. It correlates negatively with age (older converts perceive smaller changes in agreeableness), education (more educated converts see smaller change), time since conversion (more time passed since conversion means smaller change in agreeableness), and personal religiosity before conversion (higher religiosity before conversion means smaller change in agreeableness). In addition, converts who were currently active members of a non-traditional congregation reported larger increases in conscientiousness and self-esteem.

Differences perceived in converts by raters were correlated with the rater's demographic characteristics in the same manner (see Table 6). Most of the correlations are very low and non-significant. Meaningfulness, however, correlates with religiosity variables. Raters who are more religious, belonged to a church, or strongly supported the conversion perceive converts as having found more meaning. Raters with higher levels of personal religiosity also reported higher levels of self-esteem for converts in the period following conversion.

Discussion

The results of our study based on the perceived differences between pre- and post-conversion personality characteristics showed that both converts and their raters perceive robust changes in the converts. The strongest changes are reported in meaningfulness. The effect of conversion on meaningfulness was observed also in previous studies (Ng & Shek, 2001; Paloutzian, 1981). This finding also concurs with studies emphasising the meaning-making role of religion (Park, 2005).

Our research further showed strong effect related to perceived post-conversion increases in self-esteem for converts, again as rated by both groups. Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998), who also found increases in self-esteem after religious conversion, attributed these changes to the identification of person with a spiritual force in response to elevated stress. We can hypothesise that there could be other sources as this positive effect of conversion such as the support and encouragement receive from participation in a religious community.

Both converts and raters perceived changes in self-esteem and meaningfulness align with levels two and three of McAdams' (1994) personality model. Both groups also report pre- to post-conversion shifts in Big Five personality traits for converts. Contradictory with most psychologists' view on the possibility of change in personality (Paloutzian et al., 1999), converts see Big Five traits, especially neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness as malleable. This perception is shared by the raters of the converts, as the profiles of observed change size in individual variables are very similar for both groups.

Generally, these changes are in positive direction; both converts and their raters hold positive views of conversion outcomes for the lives of those converting. Both self-esteem and meaningfulness are considered important elements of positive mental functioning and

Table 5. Correlations between convert's perceived personality changes and demographics.

Difference scores	Sex	Age	Education	Age of conversion	Time since conversion	Religiosity pre-conversion	Pre-conversion membership	Post-conversion membership
Neuroticism-diff	0.03	-0.09	0.05	-0.10	-0.00	0.03	0.13	-0.21
Extraversion-diff	0.16	0.25	0.16	0.10	0.34*	-0.03	0.01	-0.05
Openness-diff	0.12	0.05	-0.13	0.06	-0.00	-0.18	0.05	-0.07
Agreeableness-diff	-0.18	-0.31*	-0.29*	-0.14	-0.37**	-0.38**	0.04	0.09
Conscientiousness-diff	-0.13	-0.23	-0.18	-0.18	-0.10	0.05	-0.24	0.36**
Self-esteem-diff	0.24	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.02	-0.10	-0.06	0.30*
Meaningfulness-diff	0.12	-0.01	-0.06	-0.03	0.04	-0.04	-0.08	0.18

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

Table 6. Correlations between rater's perceived personality change of converts and rater's demographics.

Difference Scores	Sex	Age	Education	Relationship to convert	Church membership	Personal religiosity	Attitude toward conversion
Neuroticism-diff	0.04	0.12	-0.03	-0.07	0.02	-0.13	-0.13
Extraversion-diff	0.12	-0.02	0.12	-0.11	-0.02	-0.03	0.14
Openness-diff	0.16	0.14	-0.02	-0.17	0.06	0.01	0.08
Agreeableness-diff	-0.06	-0.17	-0.14	0.13	0.25	0.21	0.17
Conscientiousness-diff	-0.09	-0.23	-0.00	0.14	0.14	0.22	0.21
Self-esteem-diff	-0.10	-0.15	0.17	0.14	0.09	0.30*	0.23
Meaningfulness-diff	0.07	-0.21	0.08	0.17	0.26*	0.35**	0.39**

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$.

protective factors of health (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & de Vries, 2004; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Big five personality traits were originally established as neutral, but the research shows that these traits are related to many positive and negative aspects of life. For instance, optimal functioning is characterised by low neuroticism, high extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness. This is sometimes referred to as a resilient personality profile (John & Srivastava, 1999). The overall concept of conversion reported by converts and their raters fundamentally matched this profile, suggesting that they see conversion as event leading to better adaptation and functioning.

In the next step, we employed correlational analyses to explore demographic variables as possible sources of the perceptions of personality change. For converts, the amount of change in agreeableness had negative relations with education, age, time since conversion, and religiosity prior to conversion. This means that more educated persons as well as persons further away from their conversion experience see less change in agreeableness. The negative correlations of age and time since conversion with perceived changes in agreeableness could be related to longer participation in a religious group. Paloutzian (1981) found in different groups of converts that perceived meaningfulness was highest immediately after conversion and then it decreased. This decrease could be an effect of unusually high levels of initial involvement. This effect could be hypothesised here for agreeableness, which, together with conscientiousness, is the personality trait most intensively related to religiosity (Ladd et al., 2007; Saroglou, 2002); longer participation can weaken initial radical involvement that demanded exceptionally agreeable behaviour.

The notion of religious norms could provide an interpretation for the correlation between agreeableness and lack of personal religiosity before conversion. Persons with at least minimal religious awareness before conversion could artificially adjust their social behaviours and perceptions to meet religious demands, so they might not perceive large changes in agreeableness post-conversion. People with no pre-contact with religiosity, however, might view the post-conversion state as much more dramatic.

Although the reason for the negative correlation of change in agreeableness with education is less clear, one possible explanation relates to the factors involved in cognitive processes of self-distortion assumed to be involved in change perception bias. As known from the self-assessment of body image (Palta, Prineas, Berman, & Hannan, 1982), education level can influence the accuracy of self-perception. In case of conversion changes, education could provide a kind of resistance to social norms or demands to engage in agreeable behaviour.

Another significant variable was the nature of the convert's church. Converts who are members of Apostolic churches (with non-traditional religiosity) perceived higher changes in conscientiousness and self-esteem than did members of traditional churches (Catholic and Evangelical). This may be an example of the retrospective bias described earlier (Beckford, 1978; Popp-Baier, 2003). Conversion in Apostolic churches may place more emphasis on increasing self-esteem and conscientiousness; deeper analysis of the spirituality in these churches should be done to confirm or reject this idea.

Concerning raters, similar patterns of perceived change were identified. In our research, we did not consider raters as neutral individuals, rather as involved persons with possible biases coming from their own religiosity or their personal relationship to a convert. Correlation analysis showed that religiosity of the rater is a major factor related to the perception of changes in converts. More religious raters and those with more positive attitudes toward conversion reported observing more change in the meaningfulness and self-esteem of the convert. This suggests that the process of interpreting change in converts according to standards of religious community (Beckford, 1978; Snow & Machalek, 1984) appears to hold true for raters as well as converts.

Although the retrospective methodology employed does not allow the equating of perceived changes to actual changes, it also does not preclude that possibility. As mentioned above, retrospective data have previously been considered evidence for real change (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Although changes in personality traits after conversion are suggested by Piedmont (2001), he does not specify why these changes could happen. The present work suggests two possible mechanisms.

The first is based on the shift in reported well-being after conversion. Increasing well-being and positive emotions as an effect of conversion is widely accepted (Paloutzian et al., 1999). From the Big Five traits, neuroticism (defined as negative emotionality) and extraversion (defined as positive emotionality) are dimensions closely related to happiness and well-being (Hayes & Joseph, 2003). Change of well-being in the sense of enhancing positive emotions after conversion could lead to experiencing lower neuroticism (less negative emotions) and higher extraversion (more positive emotions).

Another possible mechanism is related to religiosity itself. Saroglou's (2002) meta-analysis of the relationship between Big Five traits and religiosity showed that religiosity is systematically (independent of religious type) related to agreeableness and conscientiousness. He underlines that these traits are typical for intrinsic religiosity. Increases of intrinsic religiosity after conversion can influence changes in self-perception of agreeableness and conscientiousness. As these traits are generally considered character-related, they could be shaped by religious norms and demands. In both cases, situational-dispositional interaction could be an explanation for experiencing change (Murtha, Kanfer, & Ackerman, 1996) because new situations relating to religiosity and religious states are stimulating new behaviours and emotional experiences.

Conclusion

The results of our research suggest that converts and their raters perceive robust changes in personality including basic traits defined by Big Five theory. These changes are in an adaptive direction, potentially leading to better functioning. The self-reported religiosity of both converts and their raters is a particularly strong factor influencing the magnitude of perceived change. This suggests that retrospective bias based on religious standards and norms can colour the recollections of both the actual convert and the people who are

closely acquainted with that convert. Further research using different methodologies could provide more information on how this bias operates at discrete levels of psychological functioning and how it interacts with the perception of real (objective) changes following conversion experiences.

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