

Gender and Conversion Narrative in a New Zealand Context

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Abstract

Two articles, published in 2005 and 2012 respectively, have analyzed the narratives of converts to Christianity, and delineated the differences in storytelling style that have emerged between male and female study participants. Both articles borrow heavily from the work of gender theorist Deborah Tannen in how they structure this analysis. However, given that both of these projects were undertaken in the United States of America, and with largely Caucasian participants, there is significant scope for further research into the relationship between gender and conversion narrative. Thirty-two semi-structured interviews with recent converts to Christianity from secular backgrounds in Canterbury, New Zealand, are the basis for the original data presented in this paper. Referral sampling was used as a means of finding participants who were willing and available to share their story of coming to faith with the researcher. The data was analyzed in the same fashion as the North American projects, yet in some places yielded different results, particularly in the areas of relational connection with the interviewer, storytelling style, and central character. The inclusion of New Zealand Māori participants in the present study is one reason for this, and indicates the significance of ethnicity in determining individual storytelling style, an observation that is somewhat overlooked in the earlier projects. A seventh category, the need for experiential proof, is also offered as one further way in which male and female storytellers differ in how they narrate their conversion experiences.

Key Words: gender, conversion, communication, New Zealand, Māori

Stories of how modern individuals come to embrace a religious lifestyle provide much inspiration and intrigue for academics and laypeople alike. Stories such as these yield valuable information about religion in the modern world, both in the sense of how particular religions function, and in how current social values and norms may influence religious practice. This paper will examine the relationship between an individual's experience of converting to Christianity in Canterbury, New Zealand, today, and the bearing their gender or ethnicity may

have on how they narrate their experience. An examination such as this is rare in an Australasian context, but in assessing my own data, I use a framework developed in two North American projects that undertake a similar task, one of which was reported in a previous edition of this journal (Jindra et al. 2012). Using this framework in a New Zealand context has led to several points of difference between my own findings and those reported elsewhere, most notably that while gender does still appear to have some bearing on how conversion experiences are narrated in New Zealand, ethnicity seems to be the stronger factor in how it influences individual storytelling style.

Conversion Narratives

Academic and popular interest in conversion narratives in the modern world abounds. Many scholars study conversion narratives in an attempt to develop and test various conversion models or theories in diverse contexts (Rambo 1993; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Lofland and Stark 1965; Aguilar Jr. 2006; Taylor 2017). Theories developed in one location are often given greater nuance or complexity when they are tested elsewhere (McKnight 2002; Zehnder 2004; Iyadurai 2015). Key to the process of analyzing conversion narratives is managing the difficult balance of according due respect to the perspectives of research participants while also upholding a standard of academic rigor and commitment to the development and testing of theories. Due consideration must also be given to the social context from which these stories emerge. New Zealand-based research into modern conversion narratives is relatively rare (Finlay 2012), with the unique perspectives of New Zealand Māori converts to Christianity scarcer still, although some historical accounts do exist (Anderson, Binney, and Harris 2015; Moetara 2012; Arthur 2014).

Very few projects investigate both the nature of how conversion narratives are communicated by participants as well as also how participants' gender may influence this communication. The two studies with which I will be interacting in this article both seek to remedy this shortage (Knight, Woods, and Jindra 2005; Jindra et al. 2012). They do note the existence of some literature that discusses the interaction between gender and religious conversion, pointing out its rarity and the implicit assumption that such a gap implies — if gender were important to conversion, more people would write about it. Such an assumption is taken to be false by the authors of these studies, and they seek to demonstrate the complex interplay that occurs between gender and conversion narrative. Both studies rely on Deborah Tannen's *genderlect* theory for their framework, in which Tannen explores the differences between male and female communication in general.

Deborah Tannen's *Genderlect* Theory

Georgetown University professor of linguistics Deborah Tannen uses the idea of dialect — a form of language particular to a specific region or social group — when she discusses exactly how she has come to understand male and female communication habits. She argues that men and women often focus on fundamentally different topics when they speak, essentially communicating in two distinct *genderlects* (Tannen 1990:44-48). Tannen describes male speech as primarily concerned with issues of status and independence, wherein men are most interested in establishing their own position within the social order, and are willing to compete for a more central spot. In contrast, Tannen argues that women's speech is more often about connection and intimacy, and that women are much more concerned with how others might be feeling and how their own contributions to a dialogue may affect the feelings of the people around them (Tannen 1990:87-88). This means that men are often much more brash and declarative in public settings, whereas women tend to be more reserved and reluctant to share strong opinions. In contrast, Tannen suggests, the home environment sees a reverse of this dynamic: women now feel safe and want to share their thoughts and feelings, whereas men use the home as a base within which they can recharge, and thus are quieter and more withdrawn (Tannen 1990:89-90).

Tannen's theory can be seen clearly in her "report vs. rapport" schema. Men tend to talk in ways that enhance their social status, which they attempt to do by "exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as storytelling, joking, or imparting information" (Tannen 1990:77). Tannen terms this "report" or "rhetorical" type speech, given that it is so concerned with how an individual is portrayed. This dynamic also means that men are often less comfortable admitting failure or inability to others, and much more inclined to emphasize their skills and successes (Tannen 1990:61-65). Where possible, they prefer to appear "clever" in front of others. In contrast, women are much more comfortable admitting failure and weakness, as they do not see this as an obstacle to their social success. They may even be happier to appear "foolish" if it is perceived to be beneficial to do so. Tannen suggests that "from childhood, girls criticize peers who try to stand out or appear better than others" (Tannen 1990:77). The goal for women is "rapport," building a connection with the person or people with whom they are communicating.

One significant critique of Tannen's theories comes from American sociolinguist Alice F. Freed (1992). Freed argues that Tannen is woefully unaware of how male dominance in society affects language, and calls Tannen an "apologist for men" (Freed 1992:145). Freed sees some of Tannen's typologies as both entrenching and glorifying common male patterns of speech that are in truth fairly rude and domineering modes of discourse that need to be challenged, not simply codified and set in various schemata. Freed also outlines Tannen's bias in finding

examples that confirm her theory and ignoring any findings or ideas to the contrary. The idea that males and females are irrevocably locked into two quite different forms of communication is not universally supported. Other researchers, including Freed herself, cite studies of gendered communication where the differences observed are minimal or non-existent (Freed 1992:148). Freed also notes Tannen's apparently inconsistent view on the bearing that ethnicity may have on individuals' communication styles, a point which is significant to the present study.

Tannen does appear to be aware of some of these issues. In a 2003 article she discusses both the idea of power in speech and the role of ethnicity in how individuals communicate (Tannen 2003). She also cites earlier examples within her own work where these ideas were previously outlined, a point indicating a weakness within Freed's own critique, which focuses solely on one book. Tannen argues in this more recent article that certain kinds of speech, such as interruption, silence, and verbal aggression, can be, depending on the context, examples of *either* power or solidarity. In various cultures, the same discursive technique can be interpreted in different, and even opposite, ways. However, while this article does nuance and deepen Tannen's theories, it does not necessarily resolve all of the problems presented by Freed. Tannen is not particularly critical of the ways in which Western men do use some of the techniques she has identified to reinforce their power (Freed 1992:146). Neither does she acknowledge the possibility that male and female communicators may not differ much in how they communicate.

Gendered Communication and Christian Conversion Narratives

Two groups of American scholars have applied Tannen's theories in their examination of the conversion narratives of two different sets of American college students. The first examination, published in 2005, sought to interview 40 students at Spring Arbor University about their personal faith testimony (Knight et al. 2005). These researchers developed a six-point coding scheme through which they then analyzed these testimonies regarding gender and communication. The six factors they specifically looked for were:

1. Metaphors. The authors looked for moments where participants compared their conversion experience to something, or described their faith using picture language, and categorized it accordingly.
2. Portrayal or Description of Self. Following Tannen, here the authors looked for self-characterizations that were typically "clever," "foolish," or both.
3. Central Character. Here participants' testimonies were examined to see how other- or self-oriented the speaker was as they shared their story. Were other individuals mentioned? How often? And how much significance was attributed to their involvement?

4. Order of the Narrative. These researchers suggest that conversion narratives typically follow one of three orders: linear (that is, adhering closely to how things occurred across time), consequential (focusing more on the meaning or value of things that happened, with little or no time referent), or thematic (a central theme determines which information is included).
5. Conversion as Process or Crisis. Here the question of time as it related to one's conversion journey was charted. Was the change described as sudden, or gradual?
6. Rhetorical or Relational Motivation. This is the "report vs. rapport" category, within which participants were categorized based on their attempts (or lack thereof) to build a sense of connection with the interviewer as they told their stories.

These authors found significant gender differences in three of the six categories outlined above. The first of these was the metaphors used. Men tended to use more adventurous metaphors in describing their conversions, such as riding a roller coaster, while women preferred more comforting images, such as being embraced by one's father (Knight et al. 2005:121). The second difference was in the central character of the narrative. The majority of male participants spoke mostly about themselves, while a slight majority (55%) of female participants had others as the main character. Another 35% of female participants spoke of both themselves and others as main characters, changing across the course of the narrative. The third category where there was some difference in gender was in the description of self, although this was the least obvious. Here 55% of male participants described themselves as clever, while a further 35% used both clever and foolish language in their storytelling. Almost identical, yet opposite, results emerged for female participants: 55% described themselves as foolish, and another 30% blended foolish and clever self-descriptors into their narratives (Knight et al. 2005:122-123). As for the other three categories, no statistically significant differences emerged.

The second project which looked at the question of gender and conversion narrative used the same six-point coding list. In 2012, American sociologists of religion Ines W. Jindra, Robert H. Woods, Diane M. Badzinski, and Jenell Paris interviewed 59 American college students from six different Christian college campuses (Jindra et al. 2012). Students came from a variety of denominational backgrounds. While the method was much the same as that of the previous study, the results were quite different. Here, the authors note that none of the six categories investigated revealed any significant gender divisions (Jindra et al. 2012:16-17). This, they suggest, results from the different contexts being examined by the two projects, the former being the more theologically conservative setting of the two. But they also suggest that conversion narrative as a form of Christian communication can minimize gender differences, as "the spiritual power at play in conversion is said to influence men and women similarly. So there may be reasons why gender matters strongly in certain religious communicative settings, and less in others" (Jindra et al. 2012:17). My own use of these six categories is a test of these

conclusions, as well as a test of the claimed ubiquity of Tannen's ideas in general. Taking these theories and examining them in a New Zealand context, and amongst a more ethnically diverse set of individuals, will provide more information that illustrates the complex interplay between context, gender, communication, and spiritual experiences. Thus, I have followed the same six points in examining my own data, although, as will be seen, I added a seventh.

Defining Conversion

The term "conversion," as discussed in academic literature, has been defined in many different ways. There is not enough space here to fully track and arbitrate between these various understandings, but two comments are pertinent at this point. The first is a matter of research method. In assessing individual conversion experiences, how does the researcher choose which variables to include or exclude? Clearly, some working definition of conversion is needed to know exactly what is being studied. However, this does not necessarily need to come from the researcher. Here I follow British theologian Grace Milton, who notes that

problematically, there is no universally agreed definition of conversion. Conversion does not simply have to refer to a move from one religious group to another but can include more subtle changes in religious affiliation and commitment between denominations or even within the same faith community. As classical Pentecostalism teaches that every believer must be "born again" by faith alone and as there is no official way of "proving" this conversion, I allowed respondents of this study to share their testimonies in whatever terms they wished (Milton 2013:9).

I also allowed definitions of conversion to come from research participants, revoking any desire to let any personal ideas about what does or does not constitute a "conversion" influence individual participation in this project (See also Rambo 1993:7). However, I do still have my own ideas about what exactly constitutes a conversion. While interacting with the insights of psychological and sociological researchers in this area and remaining aware of at least some of the ways in which their ideas hone and nuance the term, I hold to a basic Christian theological definition of conversion as a turning towards God and away from some other way of life (Wells 1989:31-33).

Sampling Method and Sample Demographics

Initially, my approach in sourcing participants for this study was via the monthly gathering for the local youth pastors' network in Christchurch. As a former member of this network, I had a high level of familiarity and rapport with the attendees. These youth pastors then identified for me any young people whom they knew personally who met my research criteria:

1. Be currently (or at the time of the interview) aged between 18 and 28.

2. Have converted to Christianity at some point in their adolescent years (ages 13 to 19).
3. At the time of their conversion, neither of their primary caregivers / parents was a practicing Christian.

This is a process of referral sampling, wherein participants are sourced through a known intermediary. Such a sampling method is also a type of convenience sampling, in that it does not aim to interview every representative within a given sample (Hibberts, Johnson, and Hudson 2012:66-68). Rather, my aim was simply to interview the 30 or so participants who were able to meet with me within my timeframe. Participants were approached first not by me, a stranger, but rather by their youth pastor, when ascertaining their interest in participating in this project. When they gave a positive response, the youth pastor then provided me with their contact details and I contacted them to arrange a suitable interview time and location. This sampling method provided almost all of my participants for this study, although in a couple of instances friends of mine recommended participants to me. Participants were sourced entirely from within the Canterbury region, although one did come to faith in Westport (a 4-hour drive from Christchurch) and another in Hokitika (3 hours away). Both of these interviewees now live in Christchurch.

Demographically, my sample was not entirely consonant with the ethnic makeup of the Canterbury region. NZ European and other Caucasian participants made up 78% of my sample, 25 of 32 total participants, which is fairly close to the 84% European figure recorded for Christchurch in the 2013 census. However, I was unable to locate any Pacific Island or Asian participants for my project, despite their presence in the region. One explanation for the absence of Pacific Island voices in this research lies in the fact that many Pacific Island families have strong Christian roots and a fairly active, churchgoing faith, therefore few Pacific Islanders were raised without Christian parents or caregivers. As for Asian New Zealanders, who make up 9.4 percent of the Canterbury region, whilst there are some strong Christian links for Asians from particular countries (Wieland 2014), the overall absence is more difficult to explain. This could simply be due to the ethnicities of those youth pastors attending the local network meeting, and in turn, the ethnicities of the young people to which they most commonly minister. Only one of the youth pastors present at the meeting I attended was an Asian New Zealander, and his church was largely NZ European in makeup. Thus, an unfortunate by-product of my choice of sampling method was a potential omission of Asian voices within the project. I was able to find seven New Zealand Māori participants, despite their relatively small population (between 7 and 8 percent) in the Canterbury region.

Another feature of the sample interviewed in this project is their affiliation with Protestant evangelical churches of a certain size. This is due mainly to the makeup of the youth pastors who attend the local network meetings. Local Catholic and Protestant youth workers do not appear to interact regularly in Canterbury, more by accident than design. No Catholic youth workers, or other clergy or interested laypeople, were present at the network meeting I

attended, nor have I ever known any to attend. Thus, my participants were largely the product of Protestant expressions of both church and local missions. As for their evangelical nature, in New Zealand, a subset of Protestant congregations across almost all denominations are known in their regions to be evangelical in focus, characterized by conversionism, activism, Biblicism and crucicentrism (Bebbington 1989). It appears that in Canterbury, those churches that are large enough to employ youth workers and youth pastors exist within the evangelical expression of Protestantism rather than its more liberal or mainline iterations.

Qualitative Instrument and Coding

The interview style used in this project is that of a semi-structured interview (Payne and Payne 2011:132). Only one major question was asked (“could you tell me, in your own words, how you became a follower of Jesus?”), the answers to which provided me with the bulk of the data (see also Milton 2013:52-52). My interview sheet also contained a list of follow-up questions which I could ask if participants had not already provided enough detail about particular matters in their initial narratives. I used some of these in each interview. Interviews were recorded, and brief notes were also taken. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Otago ethics committee. Participants were informed about how long the interview data would be kept, the use of pseudonyms in the write-up of any findings from their interviews, and their right to request an amendment or removal of their data from the project. Interview transcripts were also reviewed and coded by two secondary coders, in order to ensure a greater degree of coding reliability. Overall agreement between secondary coders and the primary researcher was 72%, with the remaining disagreements resolved by the primary researcher based on his interpretation of the data.

The results of this project resemble the findings in Knight et al.’s work. However, the addition of New Zealand Māori perspectives to my data set creates some differences, particularly in the categories of relational vs. rhetorical motivation, metaphors or images used to describe conversion, and order of narrative. There is also a seventh category added at the bottom of this section, that of a search for experiential proof of God’s existence or relevance. I have included this because of its emergence as a significant point within my own data, and one within which there appears to be some difference pertaining to gender.

Relational vs. Rhetorical Motivation

Table 1: Relational vs. Rhetorical Motivation

Rhetorical vs Relational Motivation				
	Rhetorical	Relational	Both	Total
Male	5	5	6	16
Female	9	5	2	16
Total	14	10	8	32

Tannen suggests that males tend to use the “report” (rhetorical) form of communication more frequently than females do. The interviewees in my study did not support this claim; if anything, the pattern of their replies tended toward the opposite. However, there are a couple of factors that may contextualize these data. The first is the nature of the interviews. All 32 of the interviews were conducted face to face between myself and the participants. It is possible that my gender also had a bearing on how these stories were relayed (Rubin and Greene 1991; Liu and Stainback 2013). Female participants may have felt less comfortable building rapport in a one-on-one setting with a male interviewer. It is also important to recognize that interviews themselves are a fairly unique form of communication in which rapport is not necessarily a common component (Miller 2017). My central interview question is likely to have invited a more report-style answer.

There is another factor that also provides an important contextual aspect to the data gathered under this category. As can be seen in the chart above, 10 participants used “rapport,” or relational, communication aids when participating in my interviews. However, what cannot be seen in the chart is the ethnic distribution of those 10 individuals. Six of the 10 who used rapport-style communication were New Zealand Māori in ethnicity. Of the six Maori participants who used rapport style communication, four were men and two were women. This is particularly significant given that I only interviewed seven Māori participants in total. New Zealand Māori culture places a high value on interpersonal connection, and Māori dialogues often begin with longer introductions known as *mihi* or *pepeha*, which focus on an individual’s family and tribal background in an effort to establish this connection. This indicates the presence of a cultural framework that informs the report/rapport dichotomy, and which could exert even more influence on individuals than their gender.

Tannen’s research samples “have been criticized for being very similar, in that most are white, upper and middle-class Americans” (Knight et al. 2005:117). Sadly, neither of the projects that have applied Tannen’s theory to conversion narratives have provided much ethnic

diversity, also containing high majorities of Caucasian participants (Jindra et al. 2012:5-6, Knight et al. 2005:118). Knight et al. indicate a significant weighting towards report-style communication within their sample. Only 10 of their 40 participants made much of an attempt to build rapport with the interviewer. Jindra et al. note that even in their larger sample, “only six women and three men attempted to establish a connection with the other person while they were sharing their testimony” (2012:13). Neither project reports on whether any of their non-Caucasian participants were a part of these minority groups. It appears as though, at least in a New Zealand context, the presence of rapport-style communication within the context of a one-on-one interview may be influenced by the culture of the interview participant. Māori participants, as they engaged in dialogue with me, naturally worked from within their own cultural worldviews, and sought to build rapport as I asked them questions and listened to their stories. This was the case regardless of gender, and only one NZ Māori participant did not use this style.

Metaphors

Table 2: Metaphors Used

Metaphors					
	Adventurous	Comforting	Journey	Other/None	Total
Male	0	6	6	4	16
Female	0	11	2	3	16
Total	0	17	8	7	32

Here the primary metaphors participants used to describe their conversion and interactions with God were comforting in nature, particularly for female participants. For example, one female participant, Helen, became a Christian following the suicide of a close friend, and found comfort in her new faith. She recounts how her friend’s suicide was particularly difficult for her given that her father had committed suicide when she was a child:

When you experience something once and it's traumatic, and then you experience it again with someone who you'd known for eight years...it has the potential to throw you into a really dark place, and by coming to church and having friends and having those people around me to...share the gospel and the hope of God, then that kind of really shaped...that understanding that, I now don't know how people do life without God, because it was the make or break for me. I could have very well ended up in that very deep dark hole.

With respect to metaphors, there is some distribution along ethnic lines. Only six male participants used the language and metaphors of comfort to describe their coming to faith in Christ. However, three of these six were New Zealand Māori. Both of my female Māori participants also fall into this category. There may be several reasons why this is the case, however one compelling and disturbing reason is that for most Māori participants, their upbringings and childhood experiences were particularly traumatic. Māori in New Zealand are over-represented in many deprivation and crime statistics (Walters 2018). Thus, several Māori participants described the contrast between the pain they had experienced as children and the comfort they had found in Christ. For example, one male Māori participant, Rewai, said:

There is a God that really does care.... That cares so much that he'd reach out his arms for someone like me who was raised around [gangs], whose Dad was a patch member, whose family had a real bad name. A person who was addicted, bound, like, unforgiving, playboy, a dickhead, really. That there's a God who loves someone like me, that would choose someone like me, to do his works, just blows my mind.

Here Rewai describes a God who would “reach out his arms” and embrace someone whose life may be unusually negative and destructive. For Rewai, the metaphor of being held in God’s arms was greatly comforting. Other participants also used comforting metaphors such as being doused in a “shower of love” and hearing God describe Himself as a stream that would take away one’s tears. It seems that the image of a comforting God is much more compelling to those individuals whose own histories have contained significant deprivation and pain. It is also significant that none of my participants used metaphors relating to adventure when they described their conversions. This could be due to a slight difference in interview procedure between my project and the two cited in this article. In my interviews, I never specifically asked participants to compare their faith, or their conversion experience, to something else. Metaphors and images, when they were offered, were woven into answers given to questions other than about that. In contrast, both of the American projects noted that the question of comparison was often included in their interviews (Knight et al. 2005:119; Jindra et al. 2012: 6). This difference in method may explain the difference in results.

However, there were some differences in results between the two studies conducted in North America. The earlier project of the two noted a stark difference between metaphors used by male and female participants, noting that while “men used metaphors that represented forms of adventure,” most women “used comforting and peaceful metaphors” (Knight et al. 2005:121). Yet the more recent of the two projects indicates a much more even spread of answers between male and female participants; while there were some small gender differences in various categories, they were not statistically significant (Jindra et al. 2012:8). The authors of the second study attribute this to a difference in context. As has been seen in my own data set, context had a significant influence on this data, particularly for my New Zealand Māori participants. Most of my participants who used the metaphor of a journey to describe

their conversion were male; most of my participants who used the metaphor of comfort were female. It is the male Māori participants who bucked this trend, most probably due to reasons of deprivation, but possibly also due to patterns of discourse more common to Māori than to people of European descent.

Conversion as Crisis or Process

Table 3: Conversion as Crisis or Process

Conversion as Crisis or Process				
	Crisis	Process	Both	Total
Male	2	14	0	16
Female	1	13	2	16
Total	3	27	2	32

Here a high majority of my participants described their conversions as a process over a longer period of time. While this idea of conversion as a process has become something of a widely accepted truth within some conversion research (e.g. Rambo 1993), it is unlikely that any of my participants knew this. Rather, participants who described their conversions as a process sometimes did so as a contrast to crisis conversions, which they saw as more common or popular. For example, Simon pointed out:

I always...hear people say, "Oh, on this day, such and such years ago, I decided." I'm like, I don't have that. It was sort of, a big prolonged process and I was going to church for quite a while and I was quite involved before I even considered myself to be a Christian. I was just kind of there to help out.

Simon's words point to a dynamic that occurred for quite a few of my participants. Although they had been involved in evangelical churches and attended events that emphasized one-off, punctiliar conversions, and on occasion they themselves had stood in response to invitations to commit, most participants still saw their conversions as happening over a longer period. When they described this dynamic, Simon and several other participants seemed to see it as something that was quite different to what they had heard or been taught. It seems to be the case that conversion narrative as a genre in New Zealand evangelical churches has taken on something of a punctiliar bent, or at the very least something of a bias toward more sensational and dramatic accounts. Ryan, another male participant whose conversion happened over a two-year period, alludes to some assumptions around what makes conversion narratives compelling in churches:

There was never really like a definitive point, I guess. There's no like, you know, "I was in my rock bottom," or anything like that. I guess it was more of a gradual thing, and I probably can't look back and see when it happened, but, it did, I guess.

Ryan felt the need to point out that his narrative did not contain a "rock bottom" moment. This is likely because he assumes that the absence of such a moment in his story may make it less interesting to hearers, or perhaps he has heard many testimonies in various public worship settings that emphasize a specific moment of conversion.

There was very little divergence along gender lines in this category for my participants. This matches the results reported elsewhere. There is also a similar pattern of results in the American studies regarding crisis conversions, which tend to occur in the minority of cases. The 2005 study draws a link between crisis conversions and major life-changing events, whereby a shocking event would be a catalyst for participants to consider converting to Christianity. While many participants reported difficult life situations and major events as a part of their conversion narratives, and even in some cases made the point of highlighting how those events were a strong factor in their search for faith, most of these individuals still took their time deciding and shifting their allegiances. As mentioned above, one of my participants, Helen, became a Christian after the suicide of a friend. She went to church for the first time to attend the funeral. The trauma of this event and the painful memories it evoked for her of her own father's suicide some years earlier caused her to be more open to considering the value of God and the Christian faith for herself. Yet, despite this, Helen points out that

it was a long journey before I gave my life. I started attending...following the funeral of one of my friends. Ended up back at the youth pastor's place after that funeral and then it happened to be youth night so I came along and then from there I spent, I think, a good six months, in retrospect, grieving and giving things to God, before I then felt that peace and went, "Actually, yep, no, this is a thing, this is a decision that I want to make."

My data set has very few links between major life events and crisis conversions. In fact, of the three participants who did describe their conversions as punctiliar, only one of them described a recent, traumatic event.

Central Character

Table 4: Central Character

Central Character				
	Self	Others	Both	Total
Male	12	1	3	16
Female	6	2	8	16
Total	18	3	11	32

Three quarters of my male participants told their conversion stories in a style that referred primarily to themselves as the main character. Where other individuals were mentioned, it was either only after a follow up question prompted them to do so (such as, “Who were the key people who helped you come to faith?”), or these other individuals were described only as bit players who supported the individual in their overall quest. For example, Isaac described his burgeoning spirituality in the following terms:

Nothing really changed until that next year, I went to, went through a leadership kind of camp.... And I spent that whole time, I didn't really go...I randomly brought my Bible on the off chance that I'd find something. I spent the whole weekend actually in my Bible...I can just remember just like, learning so much about God within that time.

Isaac mentions attending a Christian leadership camp. The specific camp Isaac was referring to is attended by over 150 young people most years, and interaction and discussion between campers is encouraged. Yet, while he is clearly appreciative of the impact of the camp upon his faith, Isaac makes no mention of the other campers or any impact they may have had on him.

Female participants were more evenly distributed between those that focused on the self as the main character, and those that had mixed foci, alternating between the self and others across the narrative. Conversion stories where others were clearly and consistently the chief characters were rare. These stories tended to describe conversions that were strongly social in nature, where participants' changes of faith were highly contingent upon their choice of friends and social activities. One participant, Wade, made specific mention of this, as he reflected on a point in his story where he spent some time away from the church and faith:

I just feel like for me, it is like, my peers that I had were just like, I didn't have positive peers throughout those dark times, that we call it. I did not have positive peers at all. That was what dragged me down. I really just was with the wrong people, getting involved...with the Mob, stuff like that.

For Wade, both his time away from church and his eventual return were closely related to the people he was choosing to interact with the most.

While these data do have some consonance with the work of Knight et al., particularly around the larger cluster of male participants under the “self” category, it is also somewhat unique. This can be largely seen in the distribution of female narratives in this category, which are much less “other-focused” than might be expected. While the nature of the interview as a unique form of discourse may have some influence on this outcome, there could also be other factors at play here. One possibility is the slow increase in narcissism that has been occurring in the Western world over the last century. American psychologist Jean Twenge has tracked this trend, noting that

in the early 1950s, only 12% of teens aged 14 to 16 agreed with the statement “I am an important person.” By the late 1980s, an incredible 80% — almost seven times as many — claimed they were important. Psychologist Harrison Gough found consistent increases on narcissism items among college students quizzed between the 1960s and the 1990s. (Twenge 2006:69)

The impact of such a shift in social attitudes overall could have altered both male and female perspectives as it pertains to narrative.

Order of Narrative

Table 5: Order of Narrative

Order of Narrative				
	Linear	Consequential	Thematic	Total
Male	8	8	0	16
Female	8	8	0	16
Total	16	16	0	32

Neither my project nor either of the two American studies discovered any gender differences in how conversion stories are ordered by participants. Here I discovered an even distribution across two types of storytelling style, the consequential and the linear. No participants used thematic motifs or language consistently as they told their stories. This again could be a reflection on the nature of the conducted interviews. Most of my participants did not prepare anything in advance of the interviews and told their stories in an ad-lib fashion. Thematic motifs in storytelling would seem to require a greater level of premeditation and preparation.

Here also there is a significant point to be made regarding participant ethnicity and narrative order. Five of my seven New Zealand Māori participants told their stories in a consequential fashion. Former University of Otago classicist Agathe Thornton, in her study of

ancient Māori narratives, notes that a common narrative device employed by Māori storytellers is that of “appositional expansion...a narrative style in which the outcome of events is reached quickly first, and then the way to that outcome is explored and savored at leisure” (Thornton 1985:157-158). Thornton points out that this is a markedly different way of storytelling than that found in most modern Western histories, and it tends to play rather fast and loose with chronology. New Zealand anthropologist Joan Metge’s examination of Māori methods of learning and teaching does discuss storytelling, and although it does not deal with the question directly, many of the stories Metge cites follow a consequential form (Metge 2015: 211-237). Certainly in my data set there is less attraction to strictly chronological forms amongst Māori participants. Here a potential weakness in the two American projects is exposed: their limited exploration of non-Caucasian ethnic perspectives in their samples makes it harder to see some of their discoveries as particularly relevant outside of a primarily Caucasian context.

Description of Self

Table 6: Description of Self

Description of Self				
	Clever	Foolish	Both	Total
Male	10	3	3	16
Female	1	9	6	16
Total	11	12	9	32

The two projects examining these theories in an American context reported two quite different sets of results when they looked at the question of self-description in conversion narrative. In the 2005 project, a small majority (11 out of 20) of female participants described themselves using typically “foolish” narrative devices, and a similarly small majority (also 11 out of 20) of male participants “emphasized their successes and accomplishments rather than discussing their personal weaknesses, dependencies, or mistakes along the way to conversion” (Knight et al. 2005:122). However, these authors also note that their third category, which counted conversion narratives that used both “clever” and “foolish” self-descriptors, did contain a fairly even, and statistically significant, number of male and female participants. My own data set comports well with their findings. For example, Lincoln, a male participant, described his frustrations at the formal expression of religion practiced at his Anglican High School, and the response that this provoked in him:

The formal thing seemed like a really exclusive thing, and like a big barrier between people and God.... I remember like, because everyone would go up for communion in chapel, but I remember I stopped taking it for a while. 'Cause I felt that the institution of it was so wrong. And then Mum and Dad were like, when they came along for a chapel service, they were like, "You didn't take communion, everyone was looking at you." And I was like, "Well, I was angry."

A highly formative factor in Lincoln's conversion narrative is his philosophical objection to the way faith was practiced at his school. Lincoln is describing himself in such a way as to appear "clever"; he worked out not only what was wrong with his school's expression of religion but also a bold and meaningful way of opposing it. In contrast to this, Lincoln's sister, Marie, described her own conversion in a much more "foolish" way, admitting her own ignorance about what conversion to Christianity actually entailed:

I got to Dunedin [where her University was] and within like the first week of being in Dunedin I heard the gospel for the first time. Like I'd kind of been through church and Sunday school for like five years but never heard the whole gospel and never known that I needed to like, respond to it.... I kind of thought Christianity was like a, a nice cultural thing that you do and Jesus is a great teacher but like, not really sure past that. Marie freely admits her own "foolishness" in the above quote, noting that as far as she was aware, Christianity was simply "a nice cultural thing" headed by an inspiring moral teacher. Once she was informed about the gospel by someone more knowledgeable, Marie then went on to commit her life after being encouraged to do so by friends and mentors in her Bible study group. Significantly, the two participants cited in these examples are siblings, both of whom attended Anglican High Schools in Christchurch. While the Anglican church in Christchurch encourages women in leadership roles, this difference likely indicates some sort of culture of gender present within Lincoln and Marie's family, or another familiar social setting, that has led to such a clear difference in how they narrate their conversion stories.

As noted above, my results fairly closely mirror those of Knight et al.'s 2005 study. Here also there is no apparent cluster of Māori participants; they are distributed across all three of the above categories. Thus, it appears as though Jindra et al.'s 2012 project is made all the more distinct by my findings in this area. There, no statistically significant differences occurred between men and women regarding this category. They attribute these differences to the different research contexts of the two projects, noting that in the later project the student participants came from less conservative universities and churches, and thus were more likely to have a more liberal view on gender roles (p.17). This could have some bearing on individual perspectives, however, whilst almost all of my participants came from evangelical churches in Christchurch, a number of those are churches where a more egalitarian view on gender is both promoted and practiced. Even some of the male participants in my sample that described themselves using "clever" language currently attend churches where there are female ministers. For example, Lincoln was from an Anglican church in Christchurch, a diocese which, until recently, was presided over by a female bishop. Any argument as to the importance of

how these various institutions have influenced their members' self-concept regarding gender finds little support here.

The Need for Proof

Table 7: Need for Proof

Need for Proof				
	High	Low	Mixed	Total
Male	10	5	1	16
Female	4	7	5	16
Total	14	12	6	32

One other factor of conversion narratives that seems to show some divergence along gender lines is found in an individual's need for some sort of experiential proof that confirms God's existence. This is a factor that was not examined in either of the referenced articles that have examined gender and conversion narrative. However, Tannen does note that men often enjoy fixing things, as this "reinforces their feeling of being in control, self-sufficient, and able to dominate the world of objects. (This is the essence of Evelyn Fox Keller's thesis that the conception of science as dominating and controlling nature is essentially masculine in spirit)" (Tannen 1990:70). Tannen appears to be referring to Evelyn Keller Fox's *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985), although she does not provide a direct citation. This masculine trait seems to be that which is on display in the above chart: male participants were more inclined to desire and recount experiences that gave them a sense of confirmation about God. For example, Anaru notes that he first attended youth group as a fairly confident atheist, skeptical of any claims about a loving God existing in the face of a world that he perceived to be full of pain and disappointment. However, an experience of being prayed for led him to question his convictions:

I lost contact with my brothers. And I was on this mission trying to find them, I couldn't find them. And this boy who didn't even know me or my background was praying, and saying that, "You're going to." He said, "I just, I get the word 'brothers,' have you got brothers?" I said, "I do." He goes, "Yeah, that's right. God's wanting you to know that you're going to connect and you're going to find your brothers again." Like, how do you explain that? How the heck do you explain that? And I'm freaking out.

Anaru's journey began at one extreme end of the spectrum of belief (a cynical atheism) and ended up with him being a committed member of a Pentecostal congregation in Christchurch. Not all of my male participants who described a need for proof started off in the

same place as Anaru, but their commitment and belief did seem to be much more contingent on experience than those of my female participants. Also, most of my participants reported some level of opposition or questioning from family members when they found out about this change of faith. Seven of my interviewees noted that their strongest experiences of opposition came from their fathers or other primary male care-givers. While some participants did recount opposition from female caregivers, women whose children came to faith in adolescence tended to be more supportive and accepting of their children's decisions.

Conclusion

The conversion experiences of young people in Canterbury, New Zealand, do not sit neatly alongside some of the conclusions drawn by North American scholars in their discussion of gender and conversion narrative. Furthermore, pertaining to the relationship between ethnicity and storytelling, my findings indicate a significant weakness in both North American projects referenced, and also the original theories upon which they were based. This is due to the vast majority of research participants in the North American projects being Caucasian. However, even within this more limited frame, there is scope to extend and nuance the current theories around gender and storytelling. I see some weaknesses in the idea that views on gender are heavily conditioned by one's local religious institution. This was illustrated most clearly in the differences I found in style that emerged between the conversion narratives of a brother and sister who were both a part of an Anglican church in Christchurch that was strongly pro-women in its leadership structures. I also wonder if both the nature of a one-on-one interview as a fairly artificial form of dialogue, and my own gender as a male interviewer, may have had a significant bearing on how these stories were narrated. Again, any clear acknowledgement of how such factors may affect results is limited in the North American projects. Thus, while in some places my work confirms the discoveries of these earlier researchers, for the most part it challenges their conclusions and also some of the fundamental structural factors that seem to have exerted a far greater bearing on these outcomes than has been made clear in either of the previous projects referenced.

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