Bekering in bevindelijk gereformeerde kring. Een psychologische studie
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Summary

The subject of this psychological study is conversion among strict Dutch pietistic Calvinists, known as the ‘bevindelijken’. Conversion as a transformation of the self has always been a subject of study in psychology. By studying the processes that contribute to the transformation of the self, psychologists have expected to get a better understanding of the self. Our interest concerns the effect on church members’ faith and self-understanding of their devotional model of ‘the road of conversion’. Conversion among strict Dutch pietistic Calvinists precedes neither the process of becoming a church member (‘affiliation’), nor a shift between religious groups or churches (‘institutional’ or ‘tradition transition’). Instead, conversion takes place within the religious tradition they are a member of (‘intensification’).

In this study, besides gaining insight into the specifics of the strict pietistic Calvinist orientation in life, we examine the personal (faith) narratives of church members in order to gain insight into internalisation as the main process by which conversion takes place. Using a narrative psychological perspective, internalisation is made visible by studying both the plotting and the telling of personal faith narratives. The research process consisted of alternating periods of data-collection, studying literature and theory construction. The heuristic model described in chapter four is the result of these alternating periods.

In chapter 1 we describe the main findings and approaches in the psychological study of conversion. Secondly, three cases of ‘bevindelijk’ conversion are discussed. Starting with the discussion among James (1902/1985), Starbuck (1914), Coe (1916) and Pratt (1921) on the type of the transformation of the self, we then describe Rambo’s holistic model, in which the main emphasis is on the social, psychological and sociological aspects of conversion as a change in group-membership. Rambo (1993) defines conversion as a process taking place in time
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and shaped by the interplay of relationships, expectations and situations. The way the process takes place is the result of multiple factors. The holistic model consists of seven stages, each expressing an aspect of the process of conversion. The narrative approach to studying conversion pays attention to the formative aspects of the construction (the plotting) and the telling of a conversion-story.

Based on these findings and approaches, the general definition that conversion is a transformation of the self is specified by emphasising the processes through which the transformation takes place and by paying attention to the formative power of the construction and the telling of a conversion story.

Three cases of ‘bevindelijk’ conversion as a change in group-membership are analysed using categories from Rambo’s holistic study. It becomes clear that by using the Rambo model to analyse the cases we gain insight into the central aspects of conversion as a change in group-membership. However, the conviction of two of the interviewees that despite the change, they are not yet converted, cannot be understood from these analyses. One result of the analyses of these cases is that four aspects of ‘bevindelijk’ conversion are described that require another approach.

In chapter 2 we define a conceptual framework for addressing the problematic aspects of the psychological study of ‘bevindelijk’ conversion.

Starting from the reciprocal relationship between social reality and the individual we examine the relationship between group-membership and personal identity. Following Greenwood (1994a, 1994b), we describe three types of groups with reference to the meaning-structures they provide. Besides making a distinction between types of groups, two styles of group-membership are distinguished. Participation in a social collective with an internal structure is constitutive for the self only when a person is committed to and engaged in a moral career defined by the collective.

The constitutive aspect of engagement in a moral career comes into being through internalisation. Through the internalisation process the individual not only takes notice of the meaning-structure, but gains control over meaning as well. Whenever the individual has internalised rights, duties, conventions and agreements, he has gained cognitive and practical control of societal phenomena, structures and rules. He is able to use them in a competent way.

A prerequisite for internalisation is the relational and responsive nature of the human self. The relational and responsive nature of the self is conceptualised as consisting of both addressivity and answerability. In the dialectical and accountable relation between the social system and the individual involved in a moral career within the social system, the individual moves through the four phases of internalisation described by Jansz (1991): ‘ideologies’ personhood’, ‘personhood’, ‘selfhood’ and ‘self-narrative’.

Because the phase of internalisation becomes visible in the way the self-narrative is constructed and told, narrative psychological insights were added to the conceptual framework.
Chapter 3 is about the strict pietistic Calvinists and their tradition. The socially meaningful aspects of their lifestyle are discussed, as are the core writings and convictions. The structure of the devotional model ‘the road of conversion’ is also discussed. The ‘bevindelijk’ perspective on life, the structure of ‘the road’ as well as the core convictions and orientations are well known and well kept among strict pietistic Calvinists. The social collective provides all sorts of resources with which the individual is able to keep in tune with the orientation. These resources for personal piety are presented.

In chapter 4 a heuristic model for understanding self-transformation in ‘bevindelijk’ conversion is presented. In the model the conceptual framework is specified in terms of the characteristics and the content of strict pietistic Calvinist conversion. The heuristic model is preceded by an elaboration of a) the nature of the transformation of the self and b) the nature of a central feature of a strict pietistic Calvinist’s faith: ‘bevinding’.

a) In ‘bevindelijk’ conversion the transformation of the self involves a change in the identity project of the individual. By ‘identity project’ we refer to a set of convictions, principles and commitments that is of central importance in the way the individual is engaged in the world. The identity project of the individual is to be read from the way the individual tries to establish and maintain reputation and self-respect by commitment to different social collectives and moral careers. In ‘bevindelijk’ conversion the central notions of the relationship between God and human beings and the orientation in time and eternity become key notions in the moral careers the individual is involved in. This change in identity project is described as a change in employment of the self-narrative.

b) In strict pietistic Calvinists’ faith ‘bevinding’ is of central importance. ‘Benvinding’ is seen as a religious experience in which the individual perceives religious truths or has a revelation of God’s personal concern for problems in the life of the individual. The possibility of ‘bevinding’ is explained in terms of the theory of Sundén (1985) and the relational nature of the self. In conversion ‘bevinding’ is an essential element. Without ‘bevinding’ the conviction of conversion will not be established.

The heuristic model consists of the three phases of the internalisation-process Jansz described: ideologies personhood, personhood and selfhood. We do not consider the phase of the self-narrative to be a phase in its own right. We believe that in terms of commitment to a social collective, however preliminary, each self-narrative contributes to and is corrected by ‘ideologies personhood’. The internalisation process goes through three stages in terms of relationship to the ‘bevindelijke’ personhood:

- ‘gaining knowledge of’ the identity;
- ‘acting as if’ one had the identity
- ‘being a certain kind of person’.

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Complete internalisation is assumed to proceed through all the phases described. Commitment to a social collective does not necessary result in completion of the internalisation-process. In the description of the three phases attention is paid to three aspects of internalisation. The description of characteristic elements of the narratives typical for the phase of internalisation (A) is followed by a description of factors that enhance (B) or hinder internalisation (C). In the conceptualisation of specific elements of internalisation in the different phases, special attention is paid to responsibility (Aa) and employment (Ab). The description of each phase is completed by a characterisation of the content of the narratives (D).

In chapter 5 we discuss the data collection. The strict pietistic Calvinist social collective is a closed collective. Outsiders have a hard task to understand the arrangements, conventions and agreements and the specific language used to refer to spiritual life. In this study a qualitative experience-based approach is used. The data were collected during four and a half years of participation, interviews and literature-study, and provided the information necessary to construct the heuristic model.

The final data collection consisted of twenty five interviews with ‘bevindelijken’. Two of them no longer participated in a pietistic strict Calvinist community, while three others did not belong to the communities under study. The analysis is based on thirteen interviews.

In studying the internalisation process the self-narratives concerning conversion were analysed using the categories of a six dimensional approach to the narrative process developed by Ganzevoort (1998). In this six dimensional approach four dimensions concern the plotting of the narrative: narrative structure, perspective, experience and understanding, and role distribution. Two dimensions concern the telling of the narrative: interpersonal positioning and the audience. The analysis of each of the interviews is structured in terms of these six dimensions.

The results of the analysis contribute to the understanding of the internalisation-process. The characterisation of the phase of internalisation (A) is based on information stemming from the six dimensions. Specific elements of responsibility (Aa) per phase are based on the dimensions of distribution of roles and interpersonal positioning. Employment (Ab) is specified with reference to the dimensions of narrative structure and experience and understanding. Enhancement (B) and hindrance (C) in internalisation is specified in reference to perspective, distribution of roles and positioning in relationships. In the characterisation of the narratives per phase in terms of their content the main results of the analysis are summarised (D).

The ascription of interviewees to the different phases of the internalisation-process is based on self-reports in terms of ‘not converted’; ‘changed’; ‘converted’. In the devotional model a distinction is made between two stages: unconverted and converted. These stages are referred to as ‘states’. In our heuristic model we are not only interested in ‘states’ as positions describing results of development. Our main
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interest is in processes contributing to internalisation. We therefore characterise the ‘states’ of the interviewees in terms of progress in the process: ‘not yet converted’, ‘in change’, ‘converted’.

Chapter 6 concerns the analyses of the not yet converted. Internalisation in this phase is characterised as ‘gaining knowledge of’. Three cases are analysed.

The interviewees in this phase have cognitive knowledge of the devotional model and expectations about converted people and the way they should behave. They are convinced about the worth and the truth of the convictions proclaimed by the religious community but do not relate experiences in life to the devotional model. In other words they do not express their personal narrative in terms of the devotional model. The storyline of their personal narrative with reference to conversion is not process but state-oriented. The focus on their failing in affective commitment is excused by a ‘but’- construction, by which the weight of personal responsibility is weakened.

In chapter 7 the interviews of the interviewees ‘in change’ are analysed. Internalisation in this phase is characterised as ‘acting as-if’. Three cases are analysed.

The interviewees account for the transition to stage two by referring to the decision to act as-if as well as by referring to the insight that conversion is a real possibility in their life. In both accounts the conviction of the impossibility of conversion or the failure to understand it, is counterbalanced by a story of hope and progress. Acting as-if converted involves intensification of commitment to the tradition in terms of participation in religious practices both in public as well as in solitude. Furthermore, the individual learns to relate experiences in life to orientations proclaimed by the devotional model. Interpersonal contacts and rituals help the interviewees ‘in change’ to make use of the group-language for religious experiences: de Tale Kanaâns. In interactions with the ‘converted’ they learn to understand their experience in terms of this language.

In chapter 8 four interviews of ‘converted’ individuals are analysed. The internalisation-process is characterised as ‘being a certain kind of person’.

The interviewees in this phase are able to tell the story about their conversion in a competent way. They make use of the ‘Tale Kanaâns’ and cultural models of intelligibility that stem from the strict pietistic Calvinist tradition. The emphasis has shifted from reflection on personal experience, doubt and searching for words in stage two to telling a smooth story about central points of experience on the road to conversion in stage three. The story seems to be a reproduction of the model.

The storyline focuses on both the period preceding and the experiences of conversion and sanctification. Few words are spent on describing the religious life after sanctification. From the attention paid to this period it becomes clear that the conviction of faith is a continuing line but the liveliness of faith varies. In interpersonal relationships the ‘converted’ are asked to give witness, they help (and sometimes hinder) the ‘not yet converted’ in relating their life to the devotional
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model and they exhort the ‘not yet converted’ to make use of religious means to hasten conversion.

In chapter 9 we reflect on the study. First we summarise its contribution to the psychological study of conversion. Most studies on conversion concern ‘transition’ (between institutions or traditions) or ‘affiliation’. We classified ‘bevindelijk’ conversion as ‘intensification’. ‘Intensification’ was conceptualised as commitment to the moral career laid down in ‘the road of conversion’. The effect of this commitment becomes visible in a change in emplotment of the self-narrative. In ‘intensification’ generational relationships and the quality of the first relationships seem to be factors that enhance the internalisation process. Existential motifs and the experience of being known by God are of central importance. The contribution of this study to the Rambo model (Rambo, 1993) consists of a specification of processes described in the stages of interaction and commitment.

The second issue in the discussion is the transformation of the self. The transformation of the self is conceptualised as an internalisation-process. We summarise the characteristics of the narratives specific to the different phases in the internalisation. Special attention is paid to responsivity and emplotment as constitutive for and results of internalisation. Responsivity was supposed to be a two-directional process leading to both knowledge of God and knowledge of the self in relation to God. However, the ongoing self-reflective process was not clearly visible in the narratives. In the emplotment of the self-narratives, anticipation of experiences in accord with narrative structures typical of the devotional model is evident. Progression and hope laid down in the storylines derive from the devotional model. In phase two, the skill to relate personal experiences to the devotional model is acquired. In phase three, emplotment is heavily structured by central themes and experiences described in the devotional model.

Lastly, we discuss the evaluation of the theoretically based presuppositions about conversion. The self-transformation is described as stemming from a continual commitment to the moral career laid down in the devotional model. The self-transformation comes into existence by a change in aspirations that becomes visible in a change in emplotment of the self-narrative both in its verbalised form as well as in actions and commitments a person is engaged in. The conviction of the transformation has an affective quality. Uncertainty and searching induced by religious notions about divine election and hell turns into certainty and peace about one’s relationship with God and life after death. Central to the transformation is internalisation. This process takes place in (non)verbal interactions with real and symbolised others. These others can both enhance and hinder the transformation process. The most serious threat to transformation is located in the self. The individual often fails to sustain his commitment to the moral career. Other social collectives and moral careers may take relatively dominant positions in giving expression to one’s identity project. The relationship with God may then be neglected and should be re-affirmed. Misfortune, illness and suffering are then interpreted as God interfering and calling the individual to turn to Him again.