Chapter 14

Struggle for Inclusion:
The Narratives of Religious Converts from Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the struggle for inclusion at home and society faced by four young people when they quit the religion they inherited from their parents. Using life-story interviews, it discusses reactions of their families about their decision to quit religion. Furthermore, the chapter sheds light on the ways these young individuals coped with the social problems that they faced after they made a difficult, socially unacceptable choice of switching from their inherited religion. The promotion of symbolic violence in the field and its use by the agents around the participants of this study is discussed through Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field. The chapter aims to understand and highlight the dilemma faced by the participants due to their decision of conversion in a society which is still not ready for this.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on a research on the lives of people who switch from their inherited religion to another, or no religion, e.g. from Islam to Atheism, from Hinduism to Islam, etc., in Pakistan. I call them ‘converts’ generally. Atheists cannot be called converts in a strict sense, however, because they have converted from one ideology to another, they are also referred to as ‘converts’, in this chapter. I collected data through life story interviews from two female and two male converts.

The stories brought forward rich data on the attitudes and behaviour of family in particular and society in general towards these individuals. The interviews helped me discover that, in Pakistan especially, you are first your religious-self and then anything else. My participants are facing severe consequences for quitting the religion they inherited from their parents and for choosing one for themselves. The chapter brings forth the reasons behind their conversion, the support and encouragement that they received outside their family for converting, and other people’s behaviour towards them, after that. The chapter also captures the participants’ own views on their decision to convert.

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Overall, this is a research on issues of identity and inclusion concerning individuals who have chosen to either completely give up religion (to become atheists) or give up their inherited religion and adopt a new one, of their own choice. Bourdieu’s concepts of “habitus” and “field” can help us understand the symbolic violence experienced by the participants in this study, in particular exclusion from family in most cases.

BOURDIEU’S CONCEPTS OF HABITUS AND FIELD

“Body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 190). Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Field’ along with different ‘Capitals’ in it explains the former part of the idea, whereas that of ‘Habitus’ explains the latter, resulting in his famous conceptual triad – habitus, capital and field. Agents are formed out of the social structure and in return, they define the social structure.

Habitus is a disposition formed through socialisation of an agent in the force field. Although habitus keeps changing and developing throughout life, it has the greatest impact on early life socialisation. Change and choice are at the heart of habitus, even though choice is limited by social structures. The formation of habitus is also affected by the capital owned by the agent. Bourdieu considers all assets as agent’s capitals, ranging from education, language, friendship, religion, customs etc. including, of course, money and financial assets. Field is “the site of struggles” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 14). Jenkins (1992, p. 84) explains it further by mentioning that each agent aims at maintaining and improving his position by acquisition of more and more capital. Different kinds of capital are recognised by different force fields, for example, some capitals are considered significant in one force field but not in another.

All social agents have their conceptual triad in society, which positions them in the social field. The field positions the agents on the basis of the kind and degree of capital they and their family possess, and the agents also perceive the field and other agents in it on the basis of the kind and degree of capital each individual possesses. This, in turn, determines the habitus, a way of seeing and understanding the social world and its practices, of each agent.

Bourdieu viewed habitus “as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which (…) functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82-83). The method of construction of habitus, as discussed by Bourdieu (1977, 1990a), with the balance of structure and agency, make it both vast and vague. Bourdieu makes habitus accommodating and developing on one hand, and unpredictable on the other. However, it is made adaptable to the conditions of agents, in order to fit it in the complex social world (see Reay, 1995). The transformation and restructuring that helps enrich habitus is only possible through adopting and adapting, experiencing and internalising processes.

The flexibility and fluidity in the concept of habitus is significant for this study. It is flexible in allowing choice. However, usually it keeps choices limited by the field and capital possessed, which is in conflict with the participants here. “Choice is at the heart of habitus” (Reay, 1995, p. 355; 2004, p. 435). It is fluid to the extent of involvement and acceptability of capital and field, but not very strictly in the case of this study. Bourdieu (1991, pp. 230-231) explains the idea as:

The social field can be described as the multi-dimensional space of positions such that each actual position can be defined in terms of multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose values correspond to the values of the different pertinent values. Agents are thus distributed, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of the capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the