

THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC CULTURE IN  
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: PERSPECTIVE  
TRANSFORMATION AMONG CONVERT MUSLIMS

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The Role of Islamic Culture in Transformative Learning: Perspective Transformation

Among Convert Muslims

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspective transformation among convert Muslims and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in shaping Mezirow's transformative learning. Limited research has been conducted addressing perspective transformation and religious conversion. Therefore, this study contributes to understanding the effect of culture and religious conversion on transformative learning. This study uses Mezirow's transformative learning theory as its theoretical framework. To address this purpose, the study examines how convert Muslims perceive their perspective transformation in the context of their religious conversion. Five Canadian converts were selected through a purposeful sampling procedure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and constant comparative analyses were employed.

The findings of this study indicate that the participants experience perspective transformation as a result of their conversion, and meaning making is a major role in the understanding of their perspective transformation. The findings also confirm that Islamic culture and religious belief plays a significant role in the participants' meaning structure changes. From the findings, it is concluded that perspective transformation in the context of Islamic religious conversion is also enduring.

Two practical implications of this study are deduced: the first implication focuses on adult learning and secondly how religion serves as a lens through which reality is recognized and the second implication concentrates on the concept of an Islamic worldview. An Islamic worldview is one based on the concept monotheism (tawhid). Muslims are urged to unify knowledge of understanding self, the creation around oneself,

and untimely God and action in order to realize this worldview. This implication is especially important because of the great interest in religious extremism and religious practice in today's world, as it has been evident in recent years that religion has been used to create radicalism views contrary to real views of religion.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

This qualitative study explores the perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam, in order to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in shaping transformative learning. The chapter begins with a background to the research problem, followed by the problem statement, purpose of the study, significance of this research, definitions of terms, and outline of the study's organization.

### 1.0 Background to the problem

Transformative learning is "the social process of construing or appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow 1994, 222-23). Transformative learning theory as theorized by Mezirow (1978; 1981; 1988; 1990; 1991; 1994; 1997; 2000; 2003) is essentially a process of making meaning from an individual's experience. In this theory, the individual interprets new information encountered through the lens of his or her meaning perspectives (worldview). When the new information encountered cannot be assimilated into the individual's existing meaning structures, the individual is then in a position for perspective transformation. This process of transforming personal perspectives or worldviews appears to be what often occurs in religious conversions or when adapting to a new culture (Temple, 1999). Mezirow theory describes the process of transformative learning as one which usually results from a disorienting dilemma that an individual experiences. The individual then engages in self-

assessment by critically considering their assumptions and developing a plan of action. This plan of action includes acquiring new skills and knowledge, trying new roles and or turning to new religion. Finally, the learner integrates his or her new perspective into their lives. Mezirow's contribution to adult education is very evident from the interest his transformative theory had generated in the past three decades. This interest included international transformative learning conferences, centers for transformative learning and seminars in major universities of the world, and a scholarly journal dedicated to transformative learning.

The process of transforming personal perspectives or worldviews has often occurred in religious conversion or when adapting to a new culture (Temple, 1999). An Islamic worldview is a worldview of (*tawhid*) or monotheism. The principle of *tawhid* lies at the core of Islam and establishes the Islamic spirituality in all its diverse forms (Al Zeera, 2001). Islamic culture takes its principles from the Holy Qur'an and the prophetic traditions (hadiths or sayings). The Islamic culture is embedded in the religion of Islam of which human progress is the definite and avowed aim. Pickthall (1927), in summarizing Islamic culture, argued that:

Culture means 'cultivation' and, generally nowadays, when this word is used alone, it means 'the cultivation of the human mind.' Islamic culture differs from other cultures in that it can never be the aim and object of the cultivated individual, since its aim is not the cultivation of the individual or group of individuals, but of the entire human race. (p.1)

Religion is about making meaning, because it serves as a lens through which individuals perceive and understand reality. The view that undergoes transformation in religious

conversion is the individual's meaning system (Paloutzian, 2005). Change in personal meaning systems can be triggered by religious conversion as Paloutzian (2005) asserted "Religious conversion constitutes a change in the meaning system that a person holds" (p.333).

Meaning making is a process of seeing a situation in a different way and reassessing and changing an individual's beliefs and goals (Park, 2005). Mezirow's transformative learning theory places emphasis on making meaning and how it is developed, confirmed, and transformed. That is, in transformative learning, meaning is important and making meaning is crucial to learning in adulthood (Mezirow, 1991).

### 1.1 Problem statement

Adults' meaning perspectives (worldviews) are acquired and developed through schooling, acculturation, and socializations; however, these meaning perspectives are challenged when individuals encounter new or different perspectives which are not easily assimilated in their existing worldviews. The theory of transformative learning advocates that when adults are faced with such a dilemma they revise or transform their meaning perspectives (worldviews, personal paradigms) through critical reflection and discourse, and subsequently reinterpret their held perspectives.

The purpose of this research is to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in shaping transformative learning. This research particularly examines perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion to Islam and the nature of change in the participants' meaning structures. As such, this research hopes to integrate

the study of religious conversion and transformative learning in order to contribute to the practice of adult education by providing an understanding on how culture and religious conversion affects perspective transformation and shapes adult learning.

### 1.2 Purpose of study

The purpose of this research was to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture/religious beliefs in the shaping of transformative learning. In order to achieve this objective, four research questions were considered:

- 1) What is the nature of transformation that participants experience as a result of their conversion to Islam?
- 2) How do participants see this perspective transformation in relation to their conversion?
- 3) In what ways do perspective transformations among participants shape their learning?
- 4) What are the factors that participants perceive as influential in facilitating transformation in their perspective?

### 1.3 Significance of the research

This research is undertaken to contribute to the understanding of the effect of culture and religious conversion on transformative learning. Though transformative learning

theory has been researched considerably over the last three decades, culture and religious conversion are the least explored contexts of transformative learning theory. As Taylor (2007) asserts “the role of culture.... and transformative learning continues to be poorly understood” (p.178). In addition Temple (1999) suggests:

There has been little research addressing the issue of perspective transformation and religious conversion, and yet, the shift in religious and or metaphysical orientations often comprises one of the most visible and common perspective transformations in human experience. This would be true whether the conversion is Christian, Jewish, Islamic or in regard to some of new religious groups. While conversion has been studied extensively from psychological, sociological, and anthropological orientations, little has been done from the perspective of adult learning theory. (p.6)

This research contributes to the understanding of adult learning where there are few empirical studies on religious conversion and adult learning. This understanding will manifest itself in understanding how adults make meaning during perspective transformation experiences. This research will also benefit mentors in the fields related to religious conversion when working with individuals in the midst of conversion. As Cook (2004) suggests “It will better enable them by providing some background as to how adults make meaning and what to expect when subsequent perspective transformations occur” (p.10).

#### 1.4 Definitions of terms

Making meaning: refers to “becoming critically aware of one’s own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation” (Mezirow 2000, p.4).

Meaning schemes: meaning schemes are the specific beliefs, assumptions, values, feelings, and concepts, our habitual, implicit rules for interpreting (Mezirow, 1990b, p. 2).

Meaning perspective: Mezirow (2000) defines meaning perspectives as the overarching “structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (p.16).

Critical reflection: “Involves a critique of assumptions to determine whether the belief, often acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood, remains functional for us as adults” (Mezirow 1994, p.223).

Discourse: “Is that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for common understanding and assessment of justification of an interpretation or belief” (Mezirow 2000, p.10)

Transformative learning: “The process by which we transform our taken for granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide actions” (Mezirow, 2000, p.7).

Perspective transformation: perspective transformation “is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual

expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p.167).

Religious conversion experience: refers to the shift in beliefs from a non-religious worldview to a belief system based on religious beliefs (Cook, 2004).

### 1.5 Organization of the study

In Chapter One, an introduction to the study is provided and this included background to the problem, introduction to Islamic world view, problem statement, purpose of the study, significance of the study, and definitions of terms. In Chapter Two, a framework for this study is provided by reviewing the relevant concepts of Mezirow’s transformative learning and by reviewing the literature on religious conversion as related to perspective transformation. In Chapter Three, the research methodology that was used to conduct the study is provided. In Chapter Four, the context of converting to Islam is described and in addition, the findings of the study are presented. In Chapter Five, the conclusion, discussion, and recommendations are provided.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### 2.0 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of transformative learning. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to provide a framework for this research by reviewing the literature relevant to role of religious conversion as an example of transformative learning theory as framed by Jack Mezirow (1978; 1981; 1985; 1990; 1991; 1994; 1997; and 2000). Mezirow's theory concerns the individual and is based on psychocritical and psychoanalytic perspectives. Other theorists started working with this theory and developed it even more; these theorists include Laurent Daloz, and Robert Boyd. Daloz's approach of transformative theory is based on the psychodevelopmental perspective. According to Taylor (2008) "a psycho-developmental view of transformative learning is a view across the life span, reflecting continuous, incremental, and progressive growth. Central to this view of transformation is epistemological change (change in how we make meaning), not just change in behavioural repertoire or equality of knowledge" (p.7).

In addition to these approaches to transformative learning which are concerned with the individual, there are emerging sociocultural perspectives which include the social-emancipatory, cultural-spiritual, race-centric and planetary approaches. These views of transformative learning examine how learners in different cultural contexts construct knowledge as part of the transformative learning experience. In particular, these

approaches appreciate culturally related and spiritually grounded views to transformative learning (Taylor, 2000). Tisdell (2003) adds that cultural-spiritual view is concerned with the “connections between individual and social structures ....and notion of intersecting positionalities” (p.256).

Over the decades transformative learning and the role of culture and spirituality in transformative learning have been researched (Clark, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Tisdell, 2003; Cook, 2004; Cranton, 2006; Merriam et al, 2007; and Taylor, 2008). Cook (2004) suggests that adults who experience religious conversion transform their entire belief system and thus the learning process is of immense personal meaning. There is limited research of perspective transformation experience in the context of religious conversion; as Temple (1999) argues that religious conversion involves one of the most common factors for perspective transformation in human experience; however, little research has been conducted on the theory of perspective transformation in the context of religious beliefs and religious conversion experiences.

It is very important, therefore, for this research to explore religion and cultural effects on perspective transformation and how it shapes adult learning, by answering several questions which will contribute to the understanding of perspective transformation through the lens of religious conversion to Islam. The literature review is divided into five parts: (1) transformative learning theory and adult learning, (2) perspective transformation, (3) criticisms of transformative learning Theory (4) spirituality and religion (5) religious conversion and learning.

## 2.1 Transformative learning theory and adult learning

The theory of transformative learning was developed by Jack Mezirow in 1978. Since the inception of this theory numerous studies and reviews have been conducted and it proved to be a strong and relevant theory in the adult education and learning arena.

Kitchenham (2008) suggests “like all strong theories, it has been critiqued, tested, revised, and retested throughout the past three decades to arrive at a definitive framework for describing how adults learn best” (p.120). Transformative learning theory is an adult learning theory which explains the ways in which individuals learn and make sense from their experience. Mezirow (2000) defines transformative learning as:

The process by which we transform our taken for granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide actions (p.7).

Mezirow (1978) suggests that there is one kind of learning which can be fundamental for adult development and this involves learning how one is caught in one’s history and is reliving it. In this way of learning one becomes critically conscious of the cultural and psychological beliefs which have an effect on the way one sees him/herself.

Conflict created by sudden change and differences of beliefs, values, and social norms are typical in today society, to deal with these contradictions effectively, instead of just adjusting to the change by applying old ways of knowing, individuals need to find new perspectives in order to understand the change and gain a greater control of their lives. Individuals are more likely to learn to negotiate meanings, purposes, and values critically,

reflectively, and rationally rather than automatically accepting the social norms.

Transformative learning theory provides a description of the way adults do this (Mezirow, 1991).

According to Mezirow (1991) “normally, when we learn something, we attribute an old meaning to a new experience ....in transformative learning, however, we reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations” (p.11). This new set of expectations is attained through seriously reflecting on suppositions, beliefs, and other things that configure the old perspective. Furthermore, Cranton (2006) suggests that when something happens which is different from a person’s expectations, based on previous experience, the person has two choices either to reject or question the encounter. When the person critically examines his or her usual expectations, reviews them and acts on the reviewed points of views, transformative learning happens. For instance when an individual converts to or is about to convert to a new religion he/she reflects on his/her previous beliefs and tries to frame the newly encountered religion within their existing beliefs, that is examining the commonality between the existing and the newly encountered.

Drawing on ideas and terms such as paradigm (Kuhn,1962), perceptual filters (Roth, 1990), ideologies, and personal constructs (Kelly,1955), Mezirow developed the basis of transformative learning theory to describe the perspective change by defining meaning structures including meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. Meaning perspective includes “the structures of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience. A meaning perspective is a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic

models and that serves as a belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience” (Mezirow, 1991 p.42). Meaning schemes are those structures dealing with “the particular knowledge, belief, value judgment, and feelings that become articulated in an interpretation. Meaning schemes are concrete manifestations of our habitual orientation and expectations (meaning perspectives) and translates these general expectations into specific ones that guide our actions” (Mezirow, 1991 p.44).

Mezirow (2000) stated that “meaning perspectives are transformed through a critically reflective assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, and psychic distortions acquired through the process of introjection, the critical acceptance of another’s values” (p.14). Epistemic distortions are those associated with knowledge and how we use knowledge. Sociocultural distortions are those founded on social norms and cultural beliefs. And psychic distortions are those which involve how individuals see themselves-their self-concept, needs, and worries (Cranton, 2006).

Learning takes place when an individual is faced with a different meaning perspective and previous points of views are reassessed. This alternative perspective could be a dramatic event, what Mezirow calls a disorientating dilemma. In his later work (Mezirow, 2000) Mezirow acknowledged that learning can be also triggered by a gradual cumulative process. Mezirow (2000) defined learning which results from a dramatic event as an epochal, and that which results from a gradual cumulative process as an incremental. According to Mezirow (1991) adult learning may take any of the “following four forms: (1) learning through existing schemes, (2) learning new meaning schemes (3) learning through the transformation of meaning schemes, and (4) learning through the transformation of meaning perspectives (p.98)”.

Mezirow (1991) found a basis for transformative learning by drawing on Habermas's (1971) work on kinds of knowledge that result from learning. Habermas's identified three domains of learning: Technical knowledge, practical knowledge, and emancipatory knowledge. Technical knowledge allows individuals to control and manipulate their environment, including other individuals. This involves instrumental learning or strategic action in the event of manipulating people. The domain of instrumental learning mainly involves learning through task-oriented problem solving. That is, meaning is learned through logic in task-oriented problem solving by testing a theoretical meaning scheme that is believed to successfully influence a cause-effect relationship so as to allow a greater control over problem situation. Practical knowledge is related to communicative knowledge. Its purpose is communication: learning to understand what individuals mean and to share ideas through speech, the written text, plays, moving pictures, television, and art. Most important learning in adulthood takes place within this category because it involves understanding, describing, and explaining intentions, values, ideals, moral issues, social, political, philosophical, psychological, or educational concepts, feelings and reasons. Emancipatory knowledge is learning in which individuals critically examine their established point of view based on their experience, culture and background and become open to alternatives. It is different from knowledge gained from technical knowledge whose interest is in the objective world or practical knowledge whose interest is in social relationships.

Mezirow (1991) stated that “ the goal of adult education is to help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaning perspectives that

are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience” (p.225). In emancipatory learning, the individual is introduced to a different way of understanding feelings and patterns of actions; the old perspective is invalidated and is either replaced or restructured to include new understandings. Emancipatory learning can take place in any situation where learning occurs. For instance an individual who is undergoing religious conversion might change his/her point of view towards race relationship in his/her community as a result of learning about the new religion’s concept of equality within the human race. This knowledge learned might result in personal and social changes and thus the learning is emancipatory. Mezirow added that “Most adult learning is multidimensional and involves learning to control the environment, to understand meaning as we communicate with others, and to understand ourselves”(1991, p.89).

While there is room for all three domains of learning in adult education, Mezirow believed that emancipatory learning was transformative learning. Mezirow suggests that in emancipatory learning the learner is presented with an alternative way of interpreting, and as a result the learner’s current meaning perspectives are changed or restructured as new understandings. Therefore, the learner sees his/her new reality in an inclusive way and understands it clearly (Mezirow, 1991). Perspective transformation focuses on fostering the ability to think deeply to a point where the individual’s beliefs, ideas, and cultural norms are transformed. Thus Mezirow (1990) equated emancipatory learning to perspective transformation by stating:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more

inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives; and making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. More inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives are superior perspectives that adults choose if they can because they are motivated to better understand the meaning of their experience (p.14).

The core concepts of transformative learning that informed this research are: (1) meaning structures (2) critical reflection, (3) discourse, and (4) action.

#### 2.1.1 Meaning structures

Mezirow (1981) declares that people function within meaning structures. The author further divides these meaning structures into two types:

##### *(a) Meaning perspectives*

Meaning perspectives are the larger components of the meaning structures, and are typically learned in childhood through socialization and acculturation, most often during significant experiences with teachers, parents, and mentors. A meaning perspective refers to the organization of cultural theories within which new experience is understood and transformed by one's experience (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow (1978), continued by saying that there is one kind of learning which can be fundamental for adult development and this involves learning how one is caught in one's history and is reliving it, that is, what one makes of the world is a result of his/her views of his/her historical experiences. In this way of learning one becomes critically conscious of the cultural and psychological

beliefs that have an effect on the way one sees him/herself. This is referred to as learning about meaning perspectives. Mezirow (2000) added that:

Our frame of reference often represents cultural paradigms (collectively held frames of reference) - learning that is unintentionally assimilated from culture- or personal perspectives derived from idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers. We tend to embrace frames that complement each other. One's frame of reference may include intentionally or incidentally learned philosophical, economic, sociological, and psychological orientations or theories as well (pp., 16-17).

Meaning perspectives or frames of reference are the individual's overall view of the world, and play a central role in the learning process. Mezirow (1991) stated that "meaning perspectives act as perceptual and conceptual codes to form, limit, and distort how we think, believe, and feel and how, what, when, and why we learn" (p.34). Meaning perspectives are composed of two dimensions, a habit mind and resulting points of view. A habit of mind is a set of assumptions that individuals use to interpret the meaning of their experiences (Mezirow, 2000). A habit of mind is a way of viewing the world based on the individual's background, experience, culture, and personality (Cranton, 2006).

Mezirow (2000) distinguished between six kinds of habits of mind: (1) Sociolinguistic – these habits of mind are based on cultural expectations, social norms, and the way language is used. For example an individual who grew up in an environment where racial segregation is the norm, his/her habits of mind are clearly defined within those parameters. (2) Moral-ethical – these habits of mind include conscience and moral norms; moral-ethical habits of mind refers to how people define good and evil. (3) Epistemic- these habits of mind are related to how individuals' learning, learning styles, and

preferences are construed, for example an individual whose learning was formal, through learning institutions will have firmly held belief about that type of learning. And if that individual unwillingly gets involved in an informal way of learning and recognizes it as part of the greater framework of learning, then the individual will be questioning his/her initial belief and that will result in shift in his/her understanding about learning. (4)

Philosophical – these habits of mind are based on religious doctrine, philosophy, and transcendental world view; for example an individual who was born into a certain religion would have firm beliefs, values and behaviours. Now, if that individual convert to a different religion then his/her long held philosophical habits of mind are challenged and transformation in his/her worldviews, beliefs is encountered. (5) Psychological-these habits of mind relate to how people see themselves such as their self-concept, personality traits or types, needs, and anxieties, (6) Aesthetic—these habits of mind include people's values, tastes, attitudes, standards, and judgments. These habits of mind are mainly governed by social norms and culture of individuals. Cranton (2006) on the subject of philosophical habits of mind added that “the acceptance of a particular religious system, whether it is consciously chosen or assimilated from family, creates a powerful meaning perspective” (p.27). A habit of mind becomes expressed as point of view. A point of view includes clusters of meaning schemes (Mezirow, 2000).

#### *(b) Meaning schemes*

Meaning schemes are the smaller components of the meaning structures, they are sets of specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments that implicitly direct and shape a specific understanding and determine how individuals judge, and consider relationships, and what others will be like. Meaning schemes frequently function outside

of the individual's consciousness. They randomly determine what the individual can see and how he or she sees it (Mezirow, 2000). Meaning schemes are specific belief systems which become specific manifestations of the individual's frame of reference. People reject anything which does not fit comfortably into their meaning structures. However, they have, by nature, the need to understand the meaning of their experience so that they try hard to achieve viewpoints which are more functional, more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of their experience (Mezirow, 1994).

Learning can update or challenge existing understanding of meaning and in doing so, offer an opportunity for gaining new meaning or endorsing currently held views. Meaning and meaning making have numerous implications for learning; meaning schemes are collection of ideas, beliefs, value judgment, and feelings that constitute a specific interpretation. This influences the way people define, understand, and act upon their experience (Mezirow, 1994).

The second concept considered in transformative learning in this research is critical reflection. People's meaning structures are changed through critical reflection. Reflection is an examination of assumptions to decide if the beliefs acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood are still functional and effective in adulthood (Mezirow, 1994).

#### 2.1.2 Critical reflection

In adult education, reflective thinking is an objective of learning generally. Critical reflection, according to Mezirow, is an examination of assumptions to decide if the beliefs acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood are still real and functional in adulthood. Individuals' meaning structure is transformed by critical reflection (Mezirow,

1994). Mezirow's (1991) understanding of reflection was that "reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (p.104). Mezirow in his later work (Mezirow, 2000) differentiated between these three types of reflection and argued that only one type leads to transformative learning. Content reflection is thinking about the experience itself that is, reflecting on what is perceived, thought, and acted upon. While process reflection is thinking how to handle the experience, that is, assessing how to perceive, think, feel and act. Premise reflection involves exploring long-held socially constructed norms, beliefs, and values about the experience, that is individuals becoming aware of why they perceive, think, feel, or act as they do (Merriam, 2004). Cranton (2006) added "it is the premise reflection that has the potential to lead people to transformation of habits of mind" (p.35). Critical reflection on the content and or process being reflected upon may lead to transformation in individuals' points of view and this is an everyday occurrence. However, critical premise reflection can lead to transformation in their habit of mind. Transformation in the habit of mind can be epochal, as in sudden or incremental.

Reflection is not always critical (Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 1998). Critical reflection occurs when individuals challenge the validity of assumptions in previous learning. Becoming critically aware of their assumptions includes challenging their established patterns of expectation, and the meaning perspectives with which they have made sense out of their encounters with the world and others. In addition individuals may transform their ethnocentric habit of mind by becoming conscious and critically reflective on their generalized bias in the way they see individuals or groups other than their own (Mezirow,

1997). This point is relevant to this research because individuals who experience religious conversion have to overcome any previous biases held against the religion or cultural norms of their chosen religion. For instance, a female who converts to Islam has to observe the dress code for Muslim females, in doing so she has to reflect on her previously held assumptions and established patterns of expectation towards such dress code.

The most significant learning experiences in adulthood include self-reflection, that is reassessing the way individuals have posed problems and reassessing their orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting. Critical reflection requires a pause in which to reassess an individual's meaning perspective and to transform them if necessary (Mezirow, 1990). Transformative learning cannot occur without critical reflection, but critical reflection can occur without resulting in transformative learning. The third essential element for transformative learning considered in this research is discourse.

### 2.1.3 Discourse

Discourse is dialogue involving an assessment of beliefs, feeling, and values (Mezirow, 2003). People need to engage in dialogue in order to better understand an alternative perspective and assess its validity. Discourse involves participation and readiness to seek understanding and to reach reasonable agreement. Full participation in discourse requires feelings of trust, commonality, security, and understanding. Discourse is not based on asserting a point of view but involves accepting differences, finding

agreement and willingness to try other points of view (Mezirow, 2000). This means that discourse is about making personal understanding of issues or beliefs, through evaluating the evidence and arguments of a point of view or alternative beliefs, and making a personal decision based on the new evaluation of the information. In addition Mezirow (2003) stated:

Discourse involves topics referred to from the point of view of a particular frame of reference. Justification of a proposition must be assessed in relation to the particular frames of reference applied. To take the perspective of another involves an interpersonal process; drawing on the information one has about the speaker to form a model of the other. Perspective taking also involves an interpersonal dimension, using feedback to adapt messages to the other's perspective. What one talks about needs to be distinguished from what it means to the speaker and why he or she talks about it. Understanding depends on the nature and goal of the situation and its social relationship.... (pp., 59-60).

There are seven conditions for participants of discourse to realize in order to fully participate in discourse. Participants must: (1) have accurate and complete information; (2) be free from coercion and deception; (3) be open to alternative points of view; (4) be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively; (5) be critically reflective of assumptions and their significances; (6) have equal opportunity of participation; and (7) be willing to accept resulting consensus as valid. These ideal conditions for participation in discourse represent principles and may not be fully realized in practice. However, these ideal conditions might be partly or even fully recognized if individuals have an active

dialogue with each other placing an emphasis on active listening, domination free dialogue, mutuality and non-judgmental attitude (Mezirow, 2000).

Discourse, in the context of transformative learning theory, is the use of dialogue to search for a common understanding and assessment of a justification of an interpretation or belief. This involves examining alternative perspectives. Discourse leads toward enhanced understanding by using collective experience to arrive at the best judgment possible (Cranton, 2006). This concept of discourse is applicable within the scope of this research. For instance, an individual who is at the verge of religious conversion will seek information through religious meetings, friends and or person(s) with knowledge about the particular religion in order to answer any questions he or she may have.

#### 2.1.4 Action

Transformative learning is an action-oriented approach; taking action is a necessary aspect of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). For transformative learning to take place, individuals must act on their reflective understanding. Action involves making decision, changing meaning perspective, changing a point of view, solving a problem, or changing behaviour. This action may be immediate or delayed, or may result in rational reaffirmation of an existing pattern of action (Mezirow, 2000). The test for transformative learning is whether an individual acts upon the new perspective, and desires to fit the new perspective into the broader context of his or her life. Mezirow (1978) adds:

Moving to a new perspective and sustaining the actions which it requires is dependent upon an association with others who share the new perspective. Not only do you take their way of seeing for your own, but you must have their support and reinforcement to enable you to take action the new viewpoint reveals is in your interest. This sustaining relationship can be provided by others in a political party, a women's movement, a religion, a learning group or by a friend, therapist or educational monitor (p.105).

The concept of action is in the centre of this research; as individuals undergoing religious conversion to Islam have to perform the religious rituals, participate in the normally accepted actions such as dress code for both males and females, performing daily prayers five times a day, paying to charity and performing a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once a life time if one can afford it financially and is able to perform it physically.

As the literature on transformative learning theory is reviewed, it is evident that adults who undergo meaning structure transformation have gone through the process originally designated by Mezirow (1978) as perspective transformation. It is this process that linked this research's purpose to adult education and how adults ultimately make meaning while undergoing personal religious conversion.

## 2.2 Perspective transformation

Perspective transformation was theorized by Mezirow in 1978 as the transformative learning process that adults experience when faced with meaningful personal change. The theory is founded on constructivist assumptions, as Mezirow (1994) stated "the theory's [perspective transformation] assumptions are constructivist, an orientation which holds

that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is, central to making meaning and hence learning” (p.222). In the constructivism philosophy, meaning is viewed as more subjective than an objective fact. Because meaning is more subjective, individuals develop or construct their personal meaning from their experience and confirm it through communication with others (Cranton, 2006).

Perspective transformation originated from Mezirow’s (1978) study on a group of women who returned to college after a long absence. Based on the research’s findings the author identified perspective transformation as the main learning process occurring in the personal development of the study participants. Mezirow, concluded that the women who participated in his study, experienced a transformed perspective, a real change in the way they viewed the world. Mezirow (1991) added that:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (p.167).

Mezirow (1978; 1985; 1990; 1991; 1994; 1997; 2000; and 2003) continued to present his theory of perspective transformation as a learning process through which adults learn by undergoing a change within their personal paradigms. This transformation promotes deeper understanding of the adult learners’ personal development. Perspective transformation is a learning process which is different from other learning experiences because in this process the learner goes through a complete personal shift regarding his/her belief, judgment, feelings and action. Perspective transformation is distinguished

from other types of learning by its unintentional nature, that is, the initial introduction to a catalyst which encourages the transformation is often unplanned.

Perspective transformation can take place either through accumulation of transformed meaning schemes resulting from a series of dilemmas or in response to an externally imposed sudden dilemma, often unplanned by the learner, such as death, illness, separation or divorce. A disorienting dilemma that begins the process of transformation can also result from an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or from trying to understand a different culture with customs that oppose previously held assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Clark (1991) suggests that Mezirow's process of perspective transformation, "can occur suddenly and constitute 'an epochal transformation' of meaning systems, such as is experienced in religious conversions or in consciousness raising" (p. 43).

Mezirow's study (1978) of woman returning to college in re-entry programs concluded that perspective transformation often follows some variation of the following ten phases:

- 1) A disorienting dilemma
- 2) Self-examination
- 3) A critical assessment of assumptions
- 4) Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
- 5) Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- 6) Planning a course of action
- 7) Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- 8) Trying out new roles and evaluating them
- 9) Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10) A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective ( Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169)

Perspective transformation is an aspect of how adults make meaning. Therefore, it cannot be ignored when evaluating how an individual makes sense of life's conditions (Cook, 2004). As Mezirow (1991) declared:

Our need to understand our experiences is perhaps our most distinctively human attribute... learning means using a meaning that we have already made to guide the way we think, act, or feel about what we are currently experiencing" and that "meaning- making is central to what learning is all about" (p. 10-11).

If individuals are presented with a point of view that is different from their own, they must decide whether or not to include it into their internal habits of mind. This decision will include assessing the presented viewpoint against the individual's frame of reference and deciding to accept it or not based upon personal experiences, expectations, and openness of the individual.

The more challenging it is, and the closer to personal values it is, the more attention will be given to resolving the dilemma it creates. It is this resolution and the restructuring of these meaning perspectives that lead to the transformation of an entire meaning structure within an adult mind, that is, a shift from one world view to another (Cook, 2004).

Clark (1991) concluded that convictional changes, such as religious conversions, provide an ideal environment for perspective transformation to take place. The author described conventional changes as those changes in which belief system changes; this is a

type of change which occurs when an individual experience religious conversion. This change results in the core belief system change and thus triggers changes in the meaning structures which results in perspective transformation.

### 2.3 Criticisms of transformative learning theory

Over the years there have been many criticism of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. This section discusses criticisms of the aspects of Mezirow's transformative learning theory related to this study. These criticisms have included the concepts of perspective transformation, critical reflection, discourse, and the role of spirituality/religion. The criticism of Mezirow's perspective transformation has mainly been around the conditions which encourage perspective transformation. Tennant (1993) argues that perspective transformation focuses too much on the personal dimension and neglects the social dimension. He continues his criticism by suggesting that Mezirow's concept of personal development, as described in the theory of perspective transformation, is not transformative development, rather it is an expected pattern of development in any adult learner as he stated:

It is necessary to distinguish between learning experiences which are fundamentally transformative and emancipatory (involving some level of social critique) from those which are simply part of social expectations associated with different phases of the life cycle. While perspective transformation implies development, the converse is not true (Tennant, 1993; p.41).

Mezirow (1994) responded to Tennant by explaining more closely the steps of perspective transformation as a developmental process in adulthood by stating: "The

developmental process in adulthood centrally involves the process of transforming meaning structures. I see no good reason to differentiate between transformative adult learning and adult development, although there are obviously physical changes which occur as we age which have nothing to do with learning”(p. 228). The author added that “perspective transformation may or may not involve some measure of social critique or the transformation of comprehensive worldview” (p.229).

Clark and Wilson (1991) further critiqued Mezirow’s perspective transformation theory by arguing that it lacks contextual aspects in which the change takes place. The authors insisted that Mezirow’s original study of the re-entry programs should have included gender analysis and the historical context in which these programs were founded. The authors concluded that the theory “fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated” (p.90). In response Mezirow (1991) stressed that the authors misinterpreted this meaning and social context is in the learning process. He added that learning through discourse is social and includes others who represent the culture. In his later work, Mezirow (2000) stated the significance of context in his transformative theory by writing “the possibility for transformative learning must be understood in the context of cultural orientations embodied in our frame of reference, including institutions, customs, occupations, ideologies, and interests, which shape our preferences and limit our focus” (p.24).

In addition Newman (2012) considers perspective transformation as a normal transitional change in the course of individuals’ lives. He stated “we change during our lives, and some of the changes from child to adult, from single person to partner, from

novice to expert will be radical. But I still consider it wrong to talk about transformation in the course of our development as human beings" (p.44). Here Newman is arguing that changes that occur in the course of an individual's life are not necessarily transformational, but rather circumstantial change which is normal in the course of the human beings development.

The second concept related to this study of Mezirow's transformative theory which is critiqued is critical reflection. Taylor (2000) states that the theory of transformative learning emphasizes critical reflection as the means to achieving perspective transformation. The author adds that some studies confirm the essential role of critical reflection, while others concluded that critical reflection is granted too much importance and affective learning is not given enough recognition. The criticism that Mezirow's theory relies on critical reflection and rationality has prompted discussions about how individuals experience perspective transformation without critical reflection. One of the studies which resulted from these discussions is Taylor (2001) who explored the literature on neurobiology. He found that "non-conscious memory... has a tremendous influence on how we think and act" (p.228). Mezirow's transformative learning relies on rationality as the means of achieving perspective transformation and critics argue that rational thinking is a Western concept and not a universal concept (Taylor, 2001).

The third concept of transformative theory related to this study which is critiqued is discourse. Discourse is essential to the process of transformative learning. Taylor's (2000) review of the empirical research on Mezirow's transformative learning revealed that discourse is not only rationally driven as Mezirow portrays, but also dependent on relational ways of knowing. Relational ways of knowing of transformative learning refers

to the relationship between participants in the transformative process. Taylor's (2000) review of research on Mezirow's transformative learning established that relationship to be the centre piece among all the studies reviewed. This means that this learning process is dependent on creation of support, trust, and friendship with others. An example of perspective transformation as a result of relationship, in this research, is an individual who undergoes religious conversion as result of marriage. However, Newman (2012) in a critique of Mezirow's transformative learning called into account the ideal seven conditions that participants require to participate in discourse and agreed with Mezirow on five of them, but added that these are normal occurrences in any encounter with others; but disagreed with Mezirow on two, namely empathy and feeling of trust. Newman (2012) argued that not everyone deserves empathy and that trust is an absolute and it is not given to everyone one encounters during a life time.

Despite these criticisms, transformative learning continues to generate valuable research. I was introduced to Mezirow's transformative learning theory in one of my adult education classes and I immediately related to this theory. Forty years ago as a young man I left home in Africa to study in England, one can only imagine the cultural shock a young man from the midst of Africa can experience in the early 1970s in Europe. Dealing with this and treading through the unfamiliarity of the new culture led to some sort of learning which I only came to realize as transformative learning after my exposure to the theory. Reflecting on my transformative learning at the time I know that my meaning perspective was changed and Mezirow's theory made sense of it for me almost 35 years later.

Mezirow's transformative theory has been under scrutiny for the past three decades and its criticisms are well documented, yet I find it to be an intriguing and vital theory in which one can understand perspective transformation as it occurs. Experiencing meaning structure changes through cultural assimilation and learning about the theoretical aspect of it in my later life prompted me to embark on this research project. This research project is undertaken to contribute to the available literature on Mezirow's transformative learning in the context of religion and spirituality.

#### 2.4 Spirituality and transformative learning

Defining spirituality is a difficult task as it has different meanings to different people. Tisdell and Trolliver, (2001) stated that spirituality is related to all of the following:

(a) a connection to what many refer to as the Life-force, God, a higher power or purpose, Great Mystery, or Buddha Nature; (b) a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things; (c) meaning-making; (d) the ongoing development of one's identity (including one's cultural identity) moving toward greater authenticity; (e) how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes manifested through image, symbol, and music, which are often cultural (p13).

Dirkx (2001a; 2001b) and Tisdell and Trolliver (2001; 2003) examined transformative learning and linked it to spirituality. Dirkx explains transformative learning as a 'soul work'. Tisdell and Trolliver (2003) have noted that the recent discussions of the role of spirituality in transformative learning focuses on the role of spirituality in meaning making and its correlation to adult learning.

Spirituality plays a major role in an individual's formation of ultimate meaning. Spirituality is an attempt to make meaning of the self in connection to the outside world. Meanings are referred to by social analysts as culture, norms, understandings, social reality, beliefs, and worldview (Krauss, 2005). In addition, Tisdell (2008) suggests "even though spirituality is generally seen as an individual's experiences of what is perceived as sacred, how one frames or understands those experiences can strongly influence one's beliefs and behaviours (p.29). Krauss (2005) is of the opinion that meaning and meaning making have implication for learning and the author sees that this implication materializes in Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation, as Mezirow (1994) defined learning as "the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action (p.223)."

Although spirituality and religion are problematic as Newman (2012) stated "...some writers associated spirituality with transformative learning and spirituality is thrown into the mix as if its inclusion were unproblematic" (p.46). This research project interest is in the meaning-making dimension of spirituality, as religious conversion results in paradigm shift within the convert's meaning system. The main goal of this research project was to explore perspective transformation of convert Muslims and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of transformative learning. This was achieved by understanding how individuals make sense of their religious conversion to Islam. Religious conversion and learning is discussed next.

## 2.5 Religious conversion and learning

This research is mainly interested in how individuals make sense of their religious conversion to Islam and the role of this experience in the shaping of transformative learning. In this section, I will briefly describe the central ideas of religious conversion and how such an experience can be interpreted as learning. I will also briefly include in this section some of the available literature on Islam and learning. Religious conversion is a transformational experience that profoundly changes one's life. Psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have struggled with how to define religious conversion. In general, it is a process of religious change that occurs in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and experiences. The results of these factors are interactive and cumulative overtime. Thus, conversion in its largest sense is best seen as a complex process, not an event (Rambo 1993).

For the purpose of this research project religious conversion which reflects what changes (transformations) take place at the personal level are more relevant to discuss. Pargament (1997) suggests that the key psychological ingredients of religious conversion include change in self-system due to commitment to that which the individual believes to be sacred. Key to this will be the religious attribution for the change and how learners make sense of their conversion and the resulted change in their worldview.

People have needs for meaning, belonging, identity, and commitment to a religion is a way to satisfy these needs (Paloutzian et al, 1999). Religion and spirituality have the potential to offer stability of identity, and according to Cranton (1994) true learning influences one's identity as it transforms the ways in which individuals perceive themselves, the ways in which they experience the world and how they connect their

social setting. Transformative learning theory focuses on making meaning and how it is learned, confirmed, and transformed.

Meaning encompasses many psychological concepts such as goals, beliefs, well-being and satisfaction thus referring to the core of human existence. For this reason meaning can be considered central to understanding human nature. Religion is about making meaning, because it serves as a lens through which individuals perceive and understand reality. What undergoes transformation in religious conversion is the individual's meaning system (Paloutzian, 2005). Individuals' meaning systems are crucial to their everyday way of life and could be specifically important in handling difficulty. Normally, individuals lead their daily lives on the basis of personal beliefs that they have about themselves, other individuals, and the world at large (Paloutzian & Park, 2005).

Change in personal meaning systems can be triggered by religious conversion as Paloutzian (2005) asserted that "religious conversion constitutes a change in the meaning system that a person holds" (p.334). Mezirow (1994) views transformative learning as a process whereby the learner makes meaning of his or her experience as he stated "learning is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (pp.222-223).

A main component to any conversion or transformation process must be some element of uncertainty, or incentive to change; there is no motive to change an individual's belief system or worldview if he or she has no uncertainties at all about them. Therefore, spiritual transformations, religious and otherwise, take place because individuals are confronted with difference in life that requires them to construct a new meaning system because the previous one does not work anymore. When spiritual transformations take

place there will be significant change in identity, life purpose, attitudes and values, goals, ultimate concerns, and behaviour- that is the meaning system. This restructuring of the meaning system is what leads to perspective transformation (Paloutzian, 2005).

In their study, Paloutzian, et al. (1999), found that although religious conversion may not change an individual's character, "it can result in profound, life transforming changes in mid-level functions such as goals, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours, and in the more self-defining personality functions such as identity and life meaning" (p.1047). According to these scholars, "this seems to be so whether the process of conversion is sudden or gradual, active or passive, and to a traditional Western or Eastern religion or to a new religious movement" (pp.1048).

Meaning making is a process of seeing a situation in a different way and reassessing and changing an individual's beliefs and goals (Park, 2005). Mezirow's transformative learning theory emphasizes on making meaning and how it is developed, confirmed, and transformed. That is, in transformative learning, meaning is important and making meaning is crucial to learning (Mezirow, 1991).

## 2.6 Chapter summary

The purpose of this research was to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of transformative learning. The objective of this chapter was to build a comprehensive understanding of how religious conversion influences perspective transformation and the role of this transformation in shaping transformative learning theory. Transformative learning theory is an adult learning theory which

describes the ways in which individuals learn, develop and make sense of their experiences. The experiences of concern to this research are those which result in a complete shift of the existing worldviews of the individual through religious conversion. The first section of this chapter defined transformative learning and elaborates on the ways and reasons for adults' meaning structure change and links this change to adult learning. The second section described perspective transformation and outlined the circumstances in which it takes place and the various steps it takes an individual to go through for transformation to be encouraged. The third section reviews the criticism of Mezirow's transformative learning theory as related to this research. Mezirow's theory was criticized since its inception; the main criticisms were about the context and the lack of focus of this theory on the socio-cultural and cultural-spiritual circumstances which fosters the occurrence of perspective transformation. This encouraged more research in this regard, including the current study. The fourth section tackles religious conversion and learning, and places religious conversion within the core of meaning making literature. It describes how and why individuals' meaning system is transformed in the realm of religious conversion and links this transformation to transformative learning. The section also attempts to discuss this change in meaning system in the arena of adult learning and development.

Religious conversion is a context for learning, as we can infer from the literature that was reviewed, results in restructuring meaning systems which in turn lead to seeing a situation in a different way and reassessing and changing the individual's beliefs and goals-meaning schemes. Similarly, transformative learning has been shown in this chapter to occur when change in meaning structures take place. This research project hopes to

contribute to the literature of perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion. The next chapter covers the methodology used to examine this purpose.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### 3.0 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore perspective transformation among North American who convert to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of perspective transformation. This was achieved by answering the following research questions: 1) What is the nature of transformation that participants experience as a result of their conversion to Islam? 2) How do participants see this perspective transformation in relation to their conversion? 3) In what ways do perspective transformations among participants shape their learning? 4) What are the factors that participants perceive as influential in facilitating transformation in their perspective?

Since the purpose of this research is to explore the nature of perspective transformation experienced by the participants as a result of their conversion, it is important that participants be allowed to speak for themselves. This is accomplished by utilizing a qualitative research methodology. Clark (1991) asserts “this style of inquiry is especially suited to the exploration of those aspects of human experience not yet extensively studied” (p.51). In qualitative research the purpose is to understand how participants interpret their experiences, how they construct their world and what type of meaning they ascribe to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). In this section, I discuss qualitative research in general and the type of qualitative research selected for this study, together with sample selection, data collection and data analysis.

Qualitative research is a term that includes several theoretical orientations, the most common being interpretive, critical, and postmodern. There are several designs of

qualitative research, including basic interpretive study, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, narrative analysis, ethnography, critical qualitative research, and postmodern research (Merriam, 2002). Part of the broader qualitative research focus is to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participants' perspective. Merriam (1998) stated that, "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experience they have in the world" (p.6). There are several characteristics that underpin most qualitative research; qualitative design is mostly emergent, flexible, and responsive to the changing conditions of a research in progress and final product is descriptive.

Merriam (2009) characterized qualitative research by stating that "the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience"(p.14). Qualitative research is also characterized by the researcher being the main instrument for data collection and analysis. In addition, sample selection is generally non-random, purposeful and small. Qualitative research is inductive in nature rather than deductive, that is, the researcher gathers data to build concepts (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (1989) asserted that qualitative research methodology is a contributing factor in the development of adult education theories. In particular, she credits qualitative research as a means through which perspective transformation theory entered the field of adult education, as she declared "another concept to enter the field of adult education via a qualitative data-based study is that of perspective transformation" (p.163). Since the

inception of transformative learning theory; the studies conducted to explore perspective transformation and transformative learning theory have been mostly based on qualitative research (Clark, 1991; Taylor, 1993; Temple, 1999; Courtenay et al, 1998; Cook, 2004 & Brown, 2008). As the intention of this study is to add to knowledge that exists in the study of perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion, the best suited research methodology is qualitative research.

### 3.1 Research design

A basic interpretive qualitative research was applied for this research as it allows understanding and interpretation of how participants make meaning of their perspective transformation in relation to their conversion experience. As Merriam (2002) states interpretive qualitative research attempts “to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these” (p.6).

Merriam (2009) adds that interpretive qualitative research is conducted when the study is “interested in: 1) how people interpret their experience; 2) how they construct their worlds; and 3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p.23). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2007) adds that interpretive qualitative research “begins with individuals and sets out to understand their interpretation of the world around them” (p.22). While conducting this basic interpretive qualitative research, the aim was to seek, discover and understand the phenomenon of transformation in the participants’ meaning structures in relation to their religious conversion to Islam.

Therefore this design is appropriate for the participants in this research because it allows them to share their perspectives and stories and how they make meaning of their experiences. Meaning-making is the basis of transformative learning and this research uses transformative learning theory as its theoretical lens.

### 3.2 Sample selection

The purpose of this research was to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of perspective transformation. In order to explore perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion, it was necessary to find a sample of participants who claim perspective transformation as a result of their religious conversion to Islam. Thus the sampling method used to select the participants was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling refers to a selection of “information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton 2002, p.46). Information-rich cases (participants) are those from which one can learn a great deal about the central phenomenon; as they have specific information that is useful to the research. Creswell (2008) affirmed that in purposeful sampling “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand central phenomenon” (p.214). Merriam (2009) added that “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.77). Two purposeful sampling techniques were used in this study: criteria sampling and snowball sampling.

Criteria sampling refers to the selection of participants who meet the predetermined criteria of the study (Merriam, 2009). The criteria for this study were that participants must: a) have had a religious conversion experience to Islam as adults; b) acknowledge perspective changes as a result of their conversion; c) be comfortable about communicating the changes they experienced as a result of their conversion; and d) be born or raised in North America. Participants were recruited from the Muslim population in a major Canadian city, by approaching community leaders in the same region for prospective participants, all steps necessary were taken to make sure community leaders approached for recommendations did not know who agreed to participate. Through initial screening participants who met the criteria for the study were selected. Snowball sampling is a strategy which involves finding participants who easily meet the criteria for the study and asking these participants to refer other participants (Merriam, 2009). The snowball sampling came in to effect during the initial screening when I asked potential participants to recommend candidates whom they believed met the criteria set for the study.

Five convert Muslims who acknowledged perspective transformation and were willing to reflect and talk about their experiences were intentionally selected for in-depth interviews. The sample consisted of four men and one woman ranging in age between 30-60 years of age. Table 1 provides further details about the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned for confidentiality and anonymity. The table includes participants' gender, age range, and event that triggered their transformation. In depth analyses are important for qualitative research projects because, as Merriam (2002) suggested "if one thinks of what can be learned from an in-depth analysis of a particular situation or incident and how

knowledge can be transferred to another situation, generalization in qualitative research is possible”(p.28).

Table 1 Participants’ profiles:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Triggering event</b>	<b>Number of years as a Muslim</b>
Salah	Male	55-60	Racism	40 Years
Omar	Male	30-35	Sentenced to do community work	11 Years
Abu Ali	Male	40-45	Soul searching and quest for the truth	16 Years
Heba	Female	30-35	Death of a friend	13 Years
Bilal	Male	45-50	Jail	23 years

### 3.3 Data collection

Since the purpose of this research study was to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who have converted to Islam and to understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of perspective transformation, the data

collection technique utilized was one-on-one in-depth qualitative interviews. Creswell (2008) stated that “one-on-one interview is a data- collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time” (p.226). Patton (2002) argued that “we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (p. 340-341). Creswell (2008) stated that, “a qualitative interview occurs when researchers ask one or more participants, general, open-ended questions and record their answers” (p.225). The interviews used in this research study were semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In this type of interview generally, specific data is considered necessary from all the participants, in which case there is a more structured part to the interview. The largest component of the interview is directed by questions or issues to be explored, but neither the precise wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time (Merriam 2009). Follow-up questions are used to seek further clarification to participants’ answers. As Merriam (2009) noted “probes or follow-up questions can be as simple as seeking more information or clarity about what the person has just said” (p.101).

The participants’ answers were audio-taped with their consent in order to facilitate for the ease of interpretation and analysis. Each participant was given the option to choose the location for the interview in order to facilitate a comfortable environment for the participants to express themselves fully. Each interview lasted half an hour to an hour and this allowed the opportunity to collect as much information as possible. Follow-up interviews were conducted in two cases to clarify some of the answers provided in the first interview. The semi-structured interview questions asked included questions

pertaining to perspective change associated with conversion to Islam and questions pertaining to adjustment to the new culture (see Appendix A).

### 3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is a process of developing meaning from the data collected. As Merriam (2009) stated “data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read-it is the process of making meaning” (p.176). I started analyzing the data immediately and the analysis occurred simultaneously with the data collection by reading repeatedly each interview transcript and then formulating recurring themes and categories. Merriam (2002) stated that “in qualitative research, data analysis is simultaneous with data collection ... Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to ‘test’ emerging concept, themes, and categories against subsequent data” (p.14). The process was inductive in nature as Creswell (2008) concurs “it is inductive in form, going from the particular or the detailed data (e.g., transcriptions or typed notes from interviews) to the general codes and themes” (p.244). The process of categorizing continued until I felt that the research questions were answered and enough data reflective of the participants’ perspective transformation and meaning-making were categorized. After categorizing the data, a member check of the analysis was conducted with the participants for accuracy, reliability and interpretation of the findings. These member checks were conducted in order to rule out misinterpretation of the findings. As Maxwell (2005) suggested:

This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed (p.111).

### 3.5 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are concerns in any research study and can be mitigated by the way in which data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted as well as the way in which the findings are presented (Merriam, 2009). Internal validity or credibility in research depends on the meaning of reality. As Merriam (2009) stated “internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality. How congruent are the findings with reality? Do the findings capture what is really there? Are investigators observing or measuring what they think they are measuring?” (p.213). External validity involves the degree to which the study findings can be generalized (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) asserted that “the most common understanding of generalizability in qualitative research is to think in terms of the reader or user of the study...the person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation”(p.226). To increase the likelihood of external validity in qualitative research highly descriptive and detailed findings of the study are presented (Merriam, 2009).

To ensure validity and credibility I employed a process of peer review (examination), member checks, and of identifying my biases. To ensure validity and reliability of this study the first method, peer review, was accomplished through my thesis adviser who provided me with detailed feedback on every phase of this study. The second method,

member checks, was achieved by asking the participants to review their transcripts and confirm its credibility and they were also asked to add any information which was not in the transcripts or remove any part they feel was not consistent with their experiences. The third method, of identifying my biases as a researcher was accomplished by taking into consideration my biases regarding this study. As Merriam (2009) stated “investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken” (p.219).

### 3.6 Researcher bias and assumptions

Researchers’ biases are developed from their experiences, worldviews, and theoretical orientations to the study at hand (Merriam, 2009). From the readers’ point of view clarification of such biases and assumptions will allow them to better understand how the researcher interprets certain data. The idea of this research came to me after I came across the theory of transformative learning in my adult education classes. As a born Muslim who has lived most of his life in the Western hemisphere, I started wondering if perspective transformation takes place among North Americans who convert to Islam and what role would the Islamic culture/religious beliefs have in transformative learning. This interest made me evaluate my beliefs and how challenging it might be for a North American who converts to Islam to apply and live with the new perspective. Therefore their experiences, in my opinion, were worth exploring using transformative learning theory as a lens. Going into this study I was aware of my biases and assumptions, in order to prevent any of these biases from influencing my interpretation of the participants’ experiences, I reflected upon them before, during and after every interview I conduct.

As a born Muslim, I recognize the difficulty of researching Muslims and any bias that might creep into the study. This recognition allowed me to constantly watch myself and control my bias and reflect on how I might see responses/transcripts. I had to restrain from assuming that everyone had the same experiences as myself. My main assumption based on my experience, beliefs and understanding the literature on transformative learning was that conversion to Islam would encourage perspective transformation as theorized by Mezirow. This assumption had to be tamed, therefore to minimize any bias which might influence the participants' answers I made sure that the questions asked would bring out their experiences and not my personal belief or expectations.

### 3.7 Ethics

This research followed the ethical guidelines set by Memorial University of Newfoundland's policy on ethics of research involving human participants. This included, respect for human dignity, respect for free and informed consent, respect for privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. It also included participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any phase without any negative consequences. All information provided by the participants was considered completely confidential. Their names did not appear in this thesis; however, with the participants consent anonymous quotations were used. The data collected during this research is retained in a secured location and only the researcher associated with study have access to it.

### 3.8 Delimitations

This study was limited to the contribution of one culture and religious beliefs to transformative learning theory, rather than focusing on the wider notion of culture and spirituality. As a result it may not be generalized to the contribution of other cultures and or religious beliefs. Participants were delimited to convert Muslims who acknowledged perspective transformation, rather than born Muslims who have the culture and religious beliefs embedded in them from childhood in order to better understand perspective transformation from religious conversion context.

### 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the basic interpretive qualitative research used in this study. Participants were purposely selected and interviewed about their perspective transformation as a result of their religious conversion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis was inductive, deductive and comparative in nature. Reliability measures that were used in this study were also discussed in this chapter. The findings of the study are presented in the next chapter. Findings explore the process of perspective transformation and the role Islamic culture/religious beliefs play. Findings are influenced by the size of the sample and the information gathered. Even though the size of the sample in this study is small, the data gathered was very rich.

## Chapter Four

### Findings

#### 4.0 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of Islam and Islamic worldview from the perspective of those persons participated in the study, including researcher views. It will also present the participants' profiles and tell their stories in this journey. Also the chapter will present the findings of the research project. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with five participants who acknowledged perspective transformation as a result of their conversion. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through the constant comparative method of analysis in order to find similarity and or differences between the participants. The findings represent my understanding of the participants' answers to the research project's questions.

#### 4.1 Islam and Islamic worldview

The word 'Islam' means submission to God's will and obedience to God's law. It comes from an Arabic word meaning 'peace'. Thus, a Muslim is one who submits to God's will, and Islam and the Muslim communities are therefore, based on this act of submission to God (Akdere, et al 2006). Islam calls for submission to God by acknowledgment in word and deed. The word is the proclamation of the 'shahada' which is 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet'. The deeds are the duties obligatory on the believers and these are based on the five pillars of Islam: 1) Announcement of the Shahada; 2) Praying five times a day; 3) Giving alms to the poor; 4) Fasting during the month of Ramadan; and 5) Making pilgrimage to Mecca. In Islam

there are personal ethics required by Muslims to observe and these include the prohibition of gambling, consuming or handling alcohol, lying and stealing.

According to statistics from the U.N., Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity. It is also reported to be one of the fastest growing religions in the world. The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public reported recently:

The world's Muslim population is expected to increase by about 35 percent in the next 20 years, rising from 1.6 billion in 2010 to 2.2 billion by 2030. Over the next two decades, the worldwide Muslim population is forecast to grow at about twice the rate of the non-Muslim population—an average annual growth rate of 1.5 percent for Muslims compared with 0.7 percent for non-Muslims. If current trends continue, Muslims will make up 26.4 percent of the world's total projected population of 8.3 billion in 2030, up from 23.4 percent of the estimated 2010 world population of 6.9 billion (Pew research center, 2011 p. 4).

The Islamic worldview is a worldview of monotheism (*tawhid*). In this worldview God is considered the ultimate reality, and the source of existence. Monotheism (*tawhid*) is at the heart of Islam and is the confirmation of God as the One, Absolute, and Transcendental creator (Al Zeera, 2001). In Islam, meaning is constructed through the *tawhidic* (monotheism) paradigm by connecting everything in life—act, thought, and event—to the absolute reality—God. Islam helps individuals to make meaning on the premise that everything is purposeful because it defines the individual's fate both in this world and the eternal world after death (Abdullah, 2003).

Knowledge, Education and learning are central to the Islamic view of life. As stated in the Holy Qur'an, Allah (God) will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given (mystic) knowledge, by degrees (The Holy Qur'an 58:11). This verse implies that Knowledge will get believers closer to God and every Muslim should strive to gain Knowledge and assist others to gain mystical knowledge. In this regard, Merriam et al; (2007) suggest that communal learning is unique to Islam because it stresses the believers' responsibility to society.

#### 4.2 Participant's profiles

The following profiles describe how each participant experienced the perspective transformation through religious conversion to Islam, and the events that influenced their conversion.

- Salah

Salah is a 60 year-old African-Canadian businessman from a major Canadian city, who was brought up in a Christian household and as he puts it, religious values were ingrained in him from a young age. Based on repulsion he experienced as a result of racial discrimination he was drawn to the popular movement, at the time, of nation of Islam in his early 20s. Once he converted to Islam and learned about the religion, he found out that the movement was not practicing Islam as prescribed in the Holy Book. He then decided to part with the group and practice Islam according to its main stream teachings. He surrounded himself with like-minded individuals and stayed on track with

his decision. Over the past 40 years he worked hard within the Muslim community and he is one of the well-known figures in the community.

- Bilal

Bilal is a 51 year-old Canadian who grew up in an environment far from religion and who was a frequent visitor of detention centres from a young age. He converted to Islam in prison when a cell-mate gave him the Holy Qur'an to read and that changed his views and led to his conversion. Describing his meaning perspective, Bilal said:

“In my situation Islam was transformational; I did not have any other avenue other than to be a criminal and Islam gave me what I needed to overcome my self-destruction. Reflecting on where I was and where I am today, I could see the transformation I went through and that is a big deal”.

He has since returned to school, trained as a social worker and has counselled many youth to leave the life he once led.

- Heba

Heba is a 32 year-old American-Canadian teacher whose quest for faith based answers was triggered by a death of a friend in High school. She was raised in a practicing Christian household and when she embarked on her quest she naturally resorted to the faith she knew. She said that she was more confused than conciliated and once at that stage she turned to the only thing she knew best and that was prayers for guidance. According to her that was when God brought the religion of Islam to her. She then went on and studied the Islamic religion by reading and seeking information from anybody who could offer it to her. She finally converted to Islam despite resistance from her

family. One of the most difficult challenges she described during the interview was her mother not willing to be seen with her because of her Islamic dress code. She has been accepted by her family since and she assists new Muslims in her spare time.

- Abu Ali

Abu Ali is a 40 year-old native Canadian public speaker and youth counselor who came across Islam as a result of soul searching and looking for answers to deal with his mixed race background. After conversion he gave up his job with the liquor board and as a result had to endure financial hardship. He found help and support from his new community and because of that help he spends a lot of time and effort in helping within the community, especially with youth. He feels that Islam has given him inner peace and believes that all human beings, no matter what race, are here on this earth only to worship God. This realization brought him to terms with who he is and what is his purpose in life, as he asserts “this is [worshipping God] is my focus and this is what I am trying to move towards”.

- Omar

Omar is a 33 year-old African-Canadian, who came across Islam and Islamic teachings when he was sentenced to complete community service in an Islamic center as a result of a conviction with petty crime. According to him the community spirit within the center attracted him to the religion and once he learned about the religion he couldn't stop longing for more. After the completion of his sentence and converting to Islam he went back to college and he credits this to his new found faith because, as he puts it, the new

faith brought everything into perspective for him. He is a successful technician with a family of his own and avowed Muslim.

#### 4.3 Summary of findings

The findings were analyzed with the constant comparative method. This method involves comparing different parts of the data in order to establish similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were transcribed, coded for recurring themes and categories were built in response to the research questions.

In regard to the first and second research questions, every participant was asked to describe how they make meaning of their conversion experience to Islam. Their description of the meaning their conversion has was compared and categorized and common themes were extracted. As for the third research question, every participant was asked how their experience contributed to learning, and again their answers were compared and categorized with common themes being extracted. In order to get answers for the fourth question each participant was asked a series of questions regarding the influences that made their conversion and adaptation easier and/or harder. Their answers were again analyzed to find commonalities in order to draw conclusions.

##### 4.3.1. Making meaning of their experience

The participants' understanding of the meaning of their conversion was categorized and the following categories emerged:

- 1) Recognizing the oneness of God and submitting to God

- 2) The experience being awaking and enlightening
- 3) Shift from individualism to collectivism outlook

#### 4.3.1.1. Recognizing the oneness of God and submitting to God

The first theme explained the meaning the conversion experience has for participants and this consistently included was the recognition of God and Submitting to his will. For example for Salah, God recognition came about in the form of changes, as he puts it:

[Conversion is] an amazing experience; once you open that door and step into it everything changes its dimension, everything changes its looks, and everything has a different interpretation; life [has] a completely different meaning. Recognizing the oneness of God, recognizing the oneness of humanity and accepting that humans were created to worship; and understanding that God has created good and evil and that evil has a positive side and can be good if you view it in that perspective thus accepting and submitting to the will of the creator.

For Bilal, God recognition came about by recognizing God's mercy and seeking it as he states:

You cannot be a perpetrator and expect Allah [God] to have mercy on you. When I changed to Islam, I changed from doing bad things, from being a criminal, a thief, and a thug. I used to beat people up like crazy; I used to be very violent guy and then after sometime when I came to Islam it wasn't allowed to do those things anymore. The biggest change I saw in myself was being able to submit to the proper/true ideal of God and who the creator is. That become massively important

and something that really helped me to transform my life to a different tract than the criminal and all that stuff that I have been dealing with and what I have been taught previous to my conversion.

For Abu Ali, perspective transformation in this regard was to recognize God and obey his commands even though it caused him some hardship for example quitting his job with a liquor company. He said:

I met some religious brothers at that time; [and they inform me that] it is not permissible in our religion to sell or consume alcohol and [that] I must quit this job or basically I will go to hell fire. So by quitting my job, it made my father to kick me out of his house and this affected my life financially for many years. But As Allah (God) said in his Quran [Holy book] with hardship comes ease and that made stronger. He continued and said for us [Muslims] we only praise Allah (God), and submit to Allah.

For Heba, her perspective transformation in regard to this theme came about after she went on studying Christianity to find answers but ended up more confused, as she said:

I went to church and I noticed that everyone was praying to Jesus and this really confused me because when I read the Bible I never once thought that Jesus was God, I never once thought that he was son of God. I read the Old Testament and never once did God say I am three in one or anything of that nature.

This frustrated Heba and she decided to quit looking for answers, but before quitting she decided to make one last prayer, and she said in her prayers: "I quit and if you (God) want me to be a good person and you want me to follow the right way, you have to put it in front of me." She said two days later she was introduced to Islam by a class mate. This

brought the recognition of the oneness of God as God has accepted her prayers after she refused to associate any one with Him.

For Omar witnessing the commitment of the Muslims to their religion, prompted him to learn about the religion; this made him realize that this universe was created by a greater power (God) and that He alone is worthy of worshiping and submitting to. He said:

Working in the centre allowed me to see the commitment and brotherhood the Muslims exhibit and that made me look deeper into the religion and that opened a whole new world for me. A world where God is the centre of everything we do, and a world where the only thing which matters is pleasing Allah (God) and not seeking material rewards rather seeking rewards from the creator and hoping for the ultimate reward-paradise.

#### 4.3.1.2. The experience being awaking and enlightening

The second theme explained the meaning the conversion experience had for participants and this was described as awaking and enlightening. For Salah, the experience changed his perspective on human beings and awakened him to a new and different take on where he stands as a member of the human race, as he states:

[Conversion helped me] seeing myself as a human being with all of the ability and strengths as well as my weakness, as everyone else. Making it intentionally a level playing field for me to progress to the level that I need to progress to, as far as I

want to go to and seeing the world in light of the human beings, how they operate and how they are supposed to operate and trying to decide as of why they have gone off track in the way they have gone off track and what possibly motivated them and myself to go off track and how we can best deal with it trying to obtain a balance.

So the experience was an awakening to a whole new dimension of life”. Salah added “before, I was a confused young man filled with anger and rage not knowing where or why I had that anger or rage wanting to find answers. Coming into the religion (Islam) has given me the answers to it, a perspective of the anger/a perspective of the rage, as why it came up, how it came about, how it exists and how to deal with it. [This was in the form of] changing that negative perspective or that negative energy into a positive energy, moving forward rather than being destructive to be constructive for the benefit of humanity as whole and myself in particular.

For Heba her perspective transformation was emancipatory, she came to recognize what life was all about, as she said “ [conversion was] very enlightening, I feel like I have learned much more than a religious belief; that I have learned the purpose of life and the secrets behind many aspects of our lives. I feel like definitely a veil has been lifted”.

For Abu Ali, conversion to Islam was awaking and enlightening in the sense that he was convinced that this religion was the one which will provide all the answers he was seeking and soul-searching for. He said:

I was convinced 100 percent that Islam is the religion that would help transform everything and help me to understand why I was not created to bow down to any

man, to any God other than Allah, to any society, government or anything of that kind; [and] that I am a free being that has the right to worship God and be a good lawful citizen at the same time.

For Omar his perspective transformation in regard to this theme was that he discovered that commitment and helping others and being a righteous person was more rewarding than the criminal life he led; as he said:

When I converted to Islam and made the commitment to be a God-fearing person, I wake up to the reality of life and started to prepare myself for this world and the hereafter. I went back to school and Graduated and have a very satisfying job. As for the hereafter I studied the religion and still have a long way to go but I am working toward the ultimate reward-paradise.

Bilal describes his perspective transformation in terms of awakening as if it is a new beginning for a new born, as he declares:

It is as if you go from the womb and come out to this world. And when you were in the womb there were certain discoveries and when you come to this world there are a vast number of discoveries. And when you leave from this world the discoveries are different.

#### 4.3.1.3. Shift from individualism to collectivism outlook

Bilal describes his biggest transformational factor as his newly found collectivism perspective. He said:

I would say the biggest thing is the transformational factor of applying Islam and being able to be part of a group of people. My family was not about being relatives it was about the beliefs. We found brothers, sisters, we found other people, believers who would become very close, committed ourselves in doing good [well]. Committed ourselves in helping others, we committed ourselves in helping transformational process to take place for anyone who wanted it and to give them a fair shot at it. That was probably the most significant thing that happened to me.

Heba describes her shift from the individualism to collectivism outlook as something she attributes to her conversion. She said that:

Before converting to Islam I would only take care of my needs and that of close family, however, after converting I found myself thinking more about the Muslim community and how I can better their lives. For example, even though I am very busy with work and four children, yet I try to find at least a day to go and help within the community especially with new Muslim groups. This is not something I would have done before as non-Muslim.

Salah on the other hand sees that his worldviews has changed from self-centred to being inclusive. He declares:

My worldviews were essential and were isolated to myself, my immediate situation and my people. But after coming into Islam my worldviews became inclusive and I was able to see the dilemma that faces all humanity and that it should be tackled by us collectively.

Abu Ali was very emotional about being supportive to others within the community as he experienced the kindness of the community first hand. He said that:

When my father kicked me out of his house, this brother who did not have much himself took me in and opened his house for me. Coming from a culture where you do not open your house to somebody you just met, what that brother did was huge in my eyes and will stay with me forever. I have learned that the Muslim community is like one body and if one part hurts the rest of the body is in pain.

Omar's perspective transformation in this regard is based on his observation of the Muslim community while he was serving his community service sentence he actually thinks it was one of the main things which attracted him to Islam, he said:

The commitment of the community to helping each other was foreign practice to me and I being a non-Muslim I was treated and taken care of as one of them. Today one of the main thing I do in the community is that I am very active, such as helping out in any project to help others and to go and visit sick people in the hospitals as well as visiting jails and giving moral support to the inmates and helping them to re-integrate in the community.

#### 4.3.2. Perspective transformation shaping the participants' learning

It has been established in chapter two that religious conversion can lead to perspective transformation and perspective transformation is a major part of transformative learning. All the participants after their conversion became involved in formal and informal learning activities in order to understand their newly found religion. These learning included informal one on one, group settings and in some cases formal learning in classroom with instructors.

All the participants were asked if they felt that their conversion contributed to learning and all of them responded by saying that it definitely contributed to learning. However, every participant's learning seems to be the response to their triggering event/dilemma. For example, when Salah (triggering event was racism) was asked if his conversion contributed to learning his answer was:

The basis of Islam is learning and the greatest learning that we do is learning about ourselves. Once we know the nature of ourselves, how we are created and why we were created, then that knowledge pulls us forward to a greater knowledge of ourselves as we live in the environment around us and with the individuals around us. Knowledge is an essential key towards balancing ourselves as human beings, moving ahead and making progress as human beings.

Salah response to the question indicates that conversion helped him to understand and learn about human nature and thus he found the answers for his triggering event.

For Heba, her conversion contributed to learning by giving her the answers she was seeking in order to understand her confusion; as she puts it:

I wondered why God sent me to Study Christianity for two years and I then realized that I much better appreciated the teaching of Islam because it's very logical and I definitely had a lot to reflect on at that point. It [conversion] definitely made me realize that the greater power behind all this [life] and made me realize the purpose of everyone in life and when that purpose is over then we move on to the next life. I become more serious individual and mature.

Heba's conversion contributed to her learning about how life transitions from one phase to another and this learning addressed questions from her triggering event.

Bilal who converted to Islam in prison, the learning contribution from his conversion is based on knowing right from wrong and changing the wrong done in his life by teaching and counselling youth so that they do not fall into the same potholes he did. His description of the process of conversion and how it contributed to learning was:

Absolutely, it's a journey I am still taking. It is a journey I don't think you can complete at all. It [learning] was coming in terms with my humanity according to the new standards that Allah (God) has said, not to what I thought was right or my previously held concept or what I think was acceptable. My conversion was a whole learning process; and one of the ways I pass this experience to the youth is I help them discover themselves through sharing my own personal experience I was successful in doing that. One of the most successful things I do with the youth is that I take them through what I call a social awareness tour. This is taking them to five places which include a graveyard, jail, homeless shelter, mental institute and a mosque or place of prayer. This is a reality check for anybody who makes bad decisions because they see firsthand where they will end up before they end up in these places.

Bilal's learning experience as a convert Muslim prompted him into action to help others by sharing his experiences and thus helping them to avoid the same mistakes he made.

Abu Ali sees his learning as result of his conversion to be providing answers to his confusion:

Before my conversion, I was a little bit confused; I was looking for the truth for our being and why we are here. Islam gave me the answer and that is, we are all here

only for one reason that is to worship Him (God). This is my focus and it is what I am trying to move towards.

Omar is the only participant whose conversion led to formal learning in college to gain a profession. This provided him with a profession and transformed him to be a productive member of society a far cry from the petty criminal he was. As he said: "Conversion led me to realize that I was not created to be a criminal, rather to be a productive member of society. This realization directed me back to college and completed my education as a technician". Like the other participants, Omar feels that conversion has contributed to learning by dealing with his triggering dilemma.

#### 4.3.3. Factors facilitating perspective transformation:

This study of convert Muslims revealed that all participants' meaning-making system had been restructured. The factors the participants claimed facilitated their perspective changes were personal factors, social factors and faith. The personal factors were mainly that they felt their troubling/confusing questions were answered. The social factor was that all the participants have mentioned a support from the community and the individuals who were involved in their conversion. For instance Heba had a Muslim friend who gave her an article about hijab (head scarf) and this helped her with her perspective change as she puts it: "The article was very beautiful, it was about what is the purpose of the hijab and why it's good to wear; this helped me and made my transformation at least the visible one easy". Faith on the other hand once acquired and cemented in the hearts of the participants it was a major factor in their transformation. Salah puts forth this point elegantly by stating:

Once you understand the reality of Allah (God), that He has created your air and everything comes from Allah and everything returns to Allah. So your perspective is based on that you will return to Allah no matter what and this particular life that you are living is essentially just a movement, development or an education to moving you towards your final goal, which is to return to Allah. So this changes your perspective on putting too much importance on acquirement or gain in this life because all of it becomes a test to you. What you have doesn't really belong to you, how it is or what value it has. What you lose did not really belong to you on first place, but how you lose it and how you accept this lose is what is really becomes of value to you.

The following table illustrates the role of religious conversion in transformative learning as theorized by Mezirow. It indicates how every participant experienced each phase of Mezirow's transformative learning.

Phase in Transformation	Salah	Abu Ali	Bilal	Hiba	Omar
Disorientating dilemma	X	X	X	X	X
Self-examination	X	X	X	X	X
Critical assessment of assumption	X	X	X	X	X
Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared	X	X	X	X	X

Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions			X	X	X
Planning a course of action				X	
Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans	X	X	X	X	X
Trying out new roles and evaluating them	X	X		X	X
Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships	X	X	X	X	
Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2 the role of religious conversion in Mezirow's transformative learning

The above table illustrates how participants' experienced each phase in transformation during their religious conversion. The findings revealed that religious conversion played a role in 6 of the 10 phases in transformative learning for each participant. As could be seen from table 2 religious conversions affected all the participants during phases 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 10 and affected most of the participants in all the other phases with the exception of phase 5 which only affected one participant.

#### 4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter provided an overview of Islam and Islamic worldview from the perspective of the study participants. The Arabic word Islam, in the context of the religion, means submission to God's will and obedience to God's law. The Islamic worldview is a view based on monotheism, in this view God is considered the ultimate reality, and the source of existence. The chapter also presented the participants' profiles by telling their stories and the role meaning perspective change took in their transformative learning. The chapter continued to present summaries of the findings by revealing how the participants made sense of their religious conversion. Three main factors were found that answered the research questions.

The first finding was in respect to the nature of transformation and how the participants make meaning of this transformation. The main meaning of the participants' transformations was the shift to God-centered life and the submission to His will and commands. A shift in how participants dealt with others as well as a shift in their decision making was a major part of their transformation. A shift from self-centered identity to social/community-centered identity was found to be evident among all participants.

The second finding was that all participants agreed that their conversion contributed to learning. And this learning in their views was in the form of finding answers for their respective triggering event/dilemma.

The third finding was that perspective transformation was facilitated by three factors: a) personal factors; b) social factor; and c) faith. The findings in general prove that conversion and ultimately perspective transformation contributes to learning. This is shown by the conviction demonstrated by the participants to change their old ways of

doing and behaving to a more God-fearing and faith-based one. The next chapter will present the discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for further studies.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

#### 5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents my interpretations of the participants' perspective transformation and the role played by Islamic culture and religious beliefs. Also, it will address the implications of the findings from this research project on research and practice, and it will propose recommendations for future studies in order to expand our understanding of the process of transformative learning in the context of religious conversion. The purpose of this research was to explore perspective transformation among North Americans who convert to Islam and understand the role of Islamic culture and religious beliefs in the shaping of transformative learning. The following questions guided the research:

- 1) What is the nature of transformation that participants experience as a result of their conversion to Islam?
- 2) How do participants see this perspective transformation in relation to their conversion?
- 3) In what ways do perspective transformations among participants shape their learning?
- 4) What are the factors that participants perceive as influential in facilitating transformation in their perspectives?

## 5.1 Discussion

Three key points are drawn from this study. The first is that perspective transformation occurs in the context of religious conversion and that Islamic culture and beliefs played a significant role in the participants' transformation. The second is that the learning process is set in motion by a disorientating event/dilemma and mainly follows the phases outlined by Mezirow for perspective transformation, but not necessarily in the same order. The third point drawn from this research project is that the perspective transformation experienced by the participants in the context of their religious conversion is enduring. This last point is supported by similar research by Cook (2004) which concluded that perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion to Christianity is enduring.

- 1) First conclusion: perspective transformation of the participants centred upon their meaning-making of their conversion

The findings of this research reveal that perspective transformation takes place in the context of religious conversion. This manifested itself for the participants by transforming from their old perspective to a new perspective based on their newly found faith. The participants realized three different forms of meaning making during their conversion: 1) recognizing the oneness of God and submitting to the will of God; 2) conversion experience being emancipatory and awakening; and 3) shift from individualism to a collectivism outlook.

Meaning making is a process of seeing a situation in a different way and reassessing and changing an individual's beliefs and goals (Park, 2005). Transformative learning theory focuses on making meaning and how it is learned, confirmed, and transformed.

Mezirow (1994) viewed transformative learning as a process whereby the learner makes meaning of his or her experience as he stated "learning is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (pp.222-223). Mezirow's transformative learning theory emphasizes on making meaning and how it is developed, confirmed, and transformed. That is, in transformative learning, meaning is important and making meaning is crucial to learning (Mezirow, 1991).

The first meaning of the participants' conversion led them to the recognition of the oneness of God and submitting to His will. The Islamic worldview is a worldview of (*tawhid*) or monotheism. The principle of *tawhid* lies at the core of Islam and establishes the Islamic spirituality in all its diverse forms (Al Zeera, 2001). In Islam, meaning is constructed through the *tawhidic* (monotheism) paradigm by connecting everything in life-act, thought, and event to the ultimate reality-God. Islam helps individuals to make meaning on the principle that everything is purposeful because it determines the individuals' fate both in this world, and the eternal world after death (Abdullah, 2003).

According to Merriam et al; (2007) Islam is a complete way of life and it gives special attention to education and learning. In Islam, the purpose of seeking knowledge is to bring individuals closer to God and His creation. Since God is "the source of knowledge, by knowing more they felt they were drawing to God" (Husain & Ashraf, 1979, p. 11).

Cook (1999), in Merriam et al; (2007) adds that the Islamic idea of education assimilates the rational, spiritual, and social dimensions of a person.

The second meaning the participants made of their conversion led them to enlightenment and emancipation from their social and personal restraints. In emancipatory learning, the individual is introduced to a different way of understanding feelings and patterns of actions; the old perspective is invalidated and is either replaced or restructured to include new understanding. Mezirow describes emancipatory education as “an organized effort to help the learners challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, transform old ways of understandings and act on new perspectives” (Mezirow, 1990, p.18). Islam bases its values on knowledge and considers it a means to the personal liberation of the individual through the individual’s belief and dedication to the Oneness of God. Al Zeera (2001) adds to the literature of Islamic knowledge by stating that rightness, from an Islamic point of view, is associated with knowledge and action. This knowledge is not for its own sake; it is the true path for understanding the self, the universe, and ultimately God, for bringing one closer to Him.

The third meaning which the participants made of their conversion is based on a social cultural context. This was expressed in the change from individualism to a collectivism outlook. Collectivism requires conformity to group norms, compliance and unanimity. All participants expressed this meaning by acknowledging a shift in their traits from self-centered to community-centered characteristics. Merriam et al; (2007) suggests that the focus on the notion of communal learning is unique to Islam because it stresses the believers’ responsibility to society. That is education and the gaining of knowledge are

good only if as Cook (1999), in Merriam et al; (2007) propose “they serve to engender virtue in the individual and elevate the whole community” (p. 234).

2) Second Conclusion: Triggering event/dilemma contributes to perspective transformation and thus to learning

All participants felt a need to resolve an event/dilemma which led to their conversion, and as result of their conversion they all participated, in one form or another, in the process of learning the Islamic religion and thus embracing it as a way of life. This learning experience led to change in their perspectives. Clark (1991) suggested that Mezirow’s process of perspective transformation, “can occur suddenly and constitute ‘an epochal transformation’ of meaning systems, such as is experienced in religious conversions or in consciousness raising” (p. 43).

In Islamic culture, learning is a religious obligation prescribed on every Muslim. The focus of seeking and acquiring knowledge is one of the basic tenets of Islam, accentuating that those who have knowledge are on the trail of righteousness. As stated in the Holy Qur’an: “O mankind, We have created you from male and female; and We have divided you into tribes and sub-tribes so that you could know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you” (Qur’an 49:13). According to Shah (2006) “the aim of education in Islam is to prepare human beings for leading a life of righteousness in social context which underpins relevant conceptualizations on educational sites”(p.368). The Qur’an persuades and specifies that believers must use their intellect, to ponder and to know. Learning is considered holy and

mandatory for an individual as well as for community. In the very first verse of the Qur'an, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him, or PBUH) was instructed to read: "Read! In the name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exist). Read! And your Lord is the most generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. Has taught man that which he knew not" (Qur'an 96:1-5). The experience of learning Islam and embracing it as a way of life led the participants through truly transformative learning, this transformative learning was based on embracing knowledge of their fate, which included everything from physical to metaphysical, thus forming a well-developed perspective transformation.

### 3) Third Conclusion: Perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion is enduring

The third and final conclusion reached in this research is that all participants recognized that the knowledge gained through their conversion has transformed their worldviews and meaning perspective forever. All the participants expressed commitment to their new perspective and vowed to never go back to their old perspective. This was evident by the way the participants described their intention of seeking greater knowledge of the Islamic religion and by helping others in the quest for learning the Islamic religion.

Learning Islam helped the participants to develop meaning on the notion that everything is purposeful as it defines their fate both in this world and the everlasting world after death. This meaning making of the participants increased the recognition of the depth of their conversion and led to the realization that their experience is a lifelong experience and not a passing one. As Cook (2004) concluded "perspective

transformations in the context of conversion are not only enduring in nature but progressive, or evolving, due to continued efforts to learn..." (p. 151).

In Islam, learning is a lifelong process and knowledge is not elective but rather it is a duty upon every Muslim. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized the importance of knowledge and encouraged all his followers and all mankind to learn and teach knowledge as indicated through his saying (*hadiths*) "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" (Al-Bukhari, 2006). In another saying (*hadiths*) the Prophet (PBUH) tells his followers "seek knowledge even if it be as far away as China" (Ihsanoglu, 2003, p.19). Knowledge takes a central position in the Muslim's attitude towards life, work, and being. Actually, Daud (1989) writes that "knowledge forms the foundation in the search for truth, proper action, spirituality, and wisdom" (pp.64-75).

Analyzing the data through the lens of Mezirow's transformative learning and the core concepts on religious conversion based on the literature review, it was evident from the data collected that the participants have experienced the core concepts of Mezirow's transformative learning as presented in the literature review. In this research project, the transformation of meaning structures was connected to the religious conversion of all the participants. Meaning schemes and meaning perspectives collectively known as meaning structures refer to the beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgment used to understand experiences. Religious conversion helped the participants to transform these meaning structures and change their behaviour based on their meaning perspective, as Park (2005) stated that "religion as a framework for understanding experience can strongly influence individuals' initial appraisals, or assignment of meaning to particular events. For example participant Salah, on changing his meaning perspective says that "[coming into Islam]

made me see a life with a completely different meaning. I began to see the simple things like snowflakes from a different point of view”

All the participants interviewed for this study experienced a disorienting dilemma/triggering event (phase 1) and as result of these events they engaged in critical reflection. They looked deep into their situation and assessed their assumptions (phase 3), beliefs, values, and meaning perspectives. For example, Bilal said that he grew-up in an environment far away from religion, and learning about Islam made him reflect on that as he said “there was literally no idea of commitment- community commitment; the commitment was to yourself and to go beyond that was unheard of”. All participants described a self-assessment period (phase 2) and experienced a variety of emotions which led to either accept or reject the alternative presented to them. They all reported that their first encounter with Islam was through dialogue with others and discourse was the main way participants initially learned about Islam. This represents (phase 4) of Mezirow’s transformative learning; as in transformative learning recognition that one’s discontent and process of transformation are shared, is accomplished through discourse and dialogue with others. Three participants described experiences of having gone through exploring their options for their new roles, relationship and actions (phase 5). For example Bilal described that in order to part with his old ways he relied on higher powers (God) to guide him and appealed to God to direct him to the right path. Phase 6, planning a course of action is a difficult phase and only Heba had experienced it, when Heba’s mother kept on cooking food which Heba was not allowed to eat according to her new religion. Heba had to plan her course of action very carefully in order to stay true to her faith and please her mother; as she said “I kept telling my mom I love you, but I just can’t do this and

finally that helped in the end". All participants partook in informal and formal learning of their new religion and this represented the acquiring of knowledge and skills (phase 7). Learning the new religion contributed to an increased confidence in trying out new roles and actions (phase 8) such as observing the dress code and participating in the daily religious rituals without fear or shame.

Building self-confidence and acting in their new role (phase 9) was part of the learning they went through. For example, Heba had to master all her self-confidence in order to observe the dress code prescribed for females in Islam despite her family resistance. Another example of this was Abu Ali who had to leave his job with a liquor company in order to fulfill the role of a Muslim despite his financial loss. All the participants reported in their interviews that they integrated their new perspective (phase 10) into their life by changing their way of life.

## 5.2 Implication for practice

This study is one of few studies which examine perspective transformation in the context of religion conversion, in particular conversion to Islam. The implication of this study revolves around two points, one is the field of education and the other is Islamic worldview and its influence.

The theoretical implication originates from making-meaning and perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion. As concluded in the previous section, meaning-making is of utmost importance in continuous learning and understanding of one's conversion. Religion serves as a lens through which most people recognize reality, thus understanding how individuals make meaning through religious

conversion will contribute to our understanding of how adults learn in the context of religion and spirituality. This will be of help to researchers and educators who wish to use meaning-making as means to increase their understanding of the process and those who would like to incorporate meaning-making as a tool in their practices. This study also contributes to the literature of transformative learning in the sense that almost all aspects of transformative learning as theorized by Mezirow are demonstrated in the context of religious conversion. So the findings from this study confirm Mezirow's transformative learning in principle and theory in the context of religious conversion.

The second implication of this research suggests greater need to focus on the concept of Islamic worldview. This implication is especially important because of the great interest in religious extremism and religious practice in today's world. This issue is of importance as result of the U.S. attack on September 11, 2001 since that attack the Islamic worldview and Muslims became of great concern especially in the Western world. Therefore, to understand the contribution of religion to the actions and behaviours of people is an important matter. This study will add to the existing literature and efforts to understand the religious behaviours of Muslims. This study saw Muslims participants as individuals that make meaning of their religion and moderate the knowledge they acquired, not as part of any stereotyped group- fundamentalist, moderate, or extremist. The view presented in this research project will give a deeper understanding of what the study participants did with the knowledge acquired and or have. In the current study the knowledge acquired was utilized by the participants to make-meaning of their conversion and religious belief in a way which fit the Islamic worldview which they acquired through

their conversion, which is one which facilitates meaning making through the lens of God-centered life.

### 5.3 Recommendation for further research

The recommendations of this research are based on the implications identified for the practice previously. This research is one of the few that examine transformative learning in the context of religious conversion (Temple, 1999; Cook, 2004). This research involves a small sample; more research in this area involving a larger sample would be helpful to examine how meaning-making and perspective transformation in the context of religious conversion resembles Mezirow's model of perspective transformation even further.

A second recommendation is that further research should be conducted in order to gain greater insight on Islamic worldview and the positive actions and behaviour of Muslims which leads to meaning-making and change of perspective as shown among the participants of this research. Also, research should be conducted with the intention to understand the extreme behaviours of some Muslims and how meaning-making through the lens of God-centered life can be distorted to one which leads to extremism, radicalism and distraction. Even though Islam includes human rights among its basic tenets along with its great emphasis on duties of man towards fellow human beings; some individuals in the name of religion resort to violence against innocent people. Terror has no religious affiliation and those who claim to be Muslims and involved in such extremism are hijacking Islam (Sajid, 2001). The author (Sajid, 2001) continues in this regard and stated that "Islam is a religion of moderation; Holy Qur'an defines Muslims as the well-balanced

middle nation, a model for others (2:143) and advised them not to follow extremism in religious interpretation (4:171, 5:77, 22:78)” (p. 12).

In conclusion, this research project provided general support for Mezirow’s transformative learning. The research provided implications for research and practice in adult education and in understanding religious extremism. The findings imply that religious conversion should be considered when transformative learning is discussed, and adult educators should be mindful of the role of religion and spirituality when considering fostering transformative learning in their practices. Religion is about making meaning and learning is about finding meaning and taking action based on the understanding of our experience. The research project provided an Islamic worldview that facilitates meaning making through a holistic understanding of life that is God-centered. Therefore, Muslims must be understood as individuals who make meaning of their religion based on the Oneness of God. The challenge to society at large is to understand how individuals moderate the knowledge they have and base their actions on the moderation, whether religious or otherwise.

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## Appendix A

### Interview guide:

- 1) How long you have been a Muslim?
- 2) What work do you do?
- 3) How old are you?
- 4) What was your religious believe before conversion?
- 5) What influenced you to convert to Islam?
- 6) How did you feel after the conversion?
- 7) How do you think conversion changed your view of yourself and that of the world?
- 8) How would explain your values and world views before you converted to Islam?
- 9) How do you think you have changed since becoming a Muslim?
- 10) What factors caused this change in your opinion?
- 11) Do you think converting to Islam contributed to learning in any form? (Why? Why not? How?)
- 12) What do you think was the biggest adjustment in your adaptation?
- 13) What factors in your upbringing you think made your adaptation easier or harder? (Why? How?)
- 14) What influences in your context, (events, people, etc.), you think made your adaptation easier or harder? (Why? How? Who?)
- 15) Describe how you shared/discussed your conversion experience with others?

## Appendix B

### Information and Consent Form

Title: The role of Islamic Culture in Transformative learning: Perspective Transformation among convert Muslims

Researcher: Abdulrahman Yusuf, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Memorial University,

Telephone: 416-456-4712; E-mail: [a74aoy@mun.ca](mailto:a74aoy@mun.ca)

I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland conducting research under the supervision of Dr. C. Badenhorst. You are invited to take part in a research project entitled: *The role of Islamic Culture in Transformative learning: Perspective Transformation among convert Muslims*. This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not take part in the research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

**Introduction:** Transformative learning theory is an adult learning theory which explains the ways in which individuals learn and make sense from their experience. Perspective transformation can occur through changed beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions resulting from momentous incident. This momentous incident which triggers the process of transformation can be caused by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, divorce, death of loved one or from efforts to understand a different culture with customs that contradict our own previously accepted assumptions. Perspective transformation can take place during religious conversion.

The purpose of this research is to explore the type of transformation convert Muslims experience, and to explore the findings to better understand the process of transformative learning from a cross-cultural point of view. The data collected and analysis of the findings will be used in my Master's thesis.

**What you will do in the research:** As a participant in this research you will be interviewed by the researcher in a one-on-one interview. There will be several interview sessions which will be 30 to 60 minutes in length and held in a convenient location for you and the researcher. These interviews will be audio-taped. You may decline to answer any of the questions if you so desire.

**Possible benefits:** The benefits of participation in this research are limited to learning about the topic of the research. There is no other benefit to participation. However, it is anticipated that this research will contribute positively to the practice of adult education by providing understanding on how culture and religious conversion affects perspective transformation and shapes adult learning.

**Possible risks:** There are no anticipated risks to you as a result of your participation in this research.

**Confidentiality:** All information provided by you will be considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in the thesis resulting from this research; however, with your permission anonymous quotations will be used.

**Anonymity:** Direct quotations will be used in the thesis but your identity will be kept confidential and anonymous. Direct quotations must be used because this is a qualitative research and evidence of analytic themes is derived from direct quotes. The quotations used will be short excerpts.. Every effort will be made to ensure your anonymity. If you do not agree with the use of direct quotations you must not participate in this research. Should you decide to withdraw from the research at any time, all data collected before the withdrawal will be destroyed.

Member check will be conducted so that you will be able to edit your transcript for accuracy and reliability of the findings and interpretations

**Storage of data:** The data collected will be kept for 5 years in a locked cabinet with the researcher. Data storage will be consistent with Memorial University's policy on Integrity on Scholarly Research. All electronic files will be password protected. Only researchers associated with project will have access to the data. After 5 years the data will be destroyed.

**Questions:** If you have questions at any time during your participation in this research or for more information not included here you are welcome to contact the research:

Abdulrahman Yusuf, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Memorial University; telephone 416-456-4712; E-mail [a74aoy@mun.ca](mailto:a74aoy@mun.ca) or the principal supervisor Dr. Cecile Badenhorst, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Memorial University; Office 709- 864-7654; E-mail: [cbadenhorst@mun.ca](mailto:cbadenhorst@mun.ca).

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

#### **Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be destroyed.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

I have read and understood what this study is about and appreciate the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

- ☐ I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation at any time.
- ☐ I agree to be audio-recorded during the interviews
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio-recorded during the interviews
- ☐ I agree to the use of quotations but do not want my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date







