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# Religious Conversion as a Dialogical Transformation of the Self – the Case of Polish Female Converts to Islam

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## Abstract

Religious conversion affects converts' beliefs, values, practices, and social worlds. It is a process that entails profound changes in the content and structure of a self and is far from being confined to a single sphere of individual's functioning. For Polish women who embrace Islam it also involves specific challenges related to becoming a member of a marginalized religious group often perceived by the Polish majority as alien, backward and threatening. Using the Personal Position Repertoire – Focus Group data collection tool and data from in-depth interviews and participant observation we explored the dialogical in-group activity of Polish female converts to Islam. The results of our analysis identified salient features of the converts' self and situated them in a specific socio-cultural context of the conversion. We argue that the collective voices present in the internal and external dialogues conducted by converts are actively engaged with and appropriated. In this process, converts are able to move between different positions and negotiate their views and practices with the voices representing critical or hostile attitudes with a variety of outcomes, including silencing, rejection, acceptance, and making compromises. We discuss the applicability of the Dialogical Self Theory framework to the research on the dynamic, complex and embodied character of conversion and challenges related to the applied theory and methods.

**Keywords:** Religious conversion; Islam; Dialogical Self; Polish Muslims

**Religious conversion as a dialogical transformation of the self – the case of Polish female converts to Islam**

**Introduction**

In this paper we discuss the dialogical identity formation processes of Polish converts to Islam focusing on the internal and external voices dynamics and taking into account the specific historical, cultural and social contexts in which the religious conversions take place. We adopt the Dialogical Self Theory framework (Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon, 1992; Hermans, 2001a), in order to examine the re-organizations and accommodations of the self, manifested in converts' manifold dialogical engagements. For the Polish women who come to Islam, the reshaping of identities involves specific challenges related to becoming a member of a marginalized religious group, often perceived by the majority as alien, backward and incompatible with the Polish culture (Piela, 2020). Muslims in Poland comprise less than 0,1% of the whole population and outside large cities, they are rarely encountered. Particularly in the recent years, amongst the growing influence of the political right-wing populism in Poland and moral panics related to the migration crisis, they have been increasingly relegated to the position of threatening "Others" (see, for example, Krotofil & Motak, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2020). In popular imaginary, converts to Islam are often constructed as either dangerous traitors or naïve and immature victims (Narkowicz & Pędziwiatr, 2017). Especially women wearing religious attire are subject to increased discrimination and violence as visibly different and easily identifiable as Muslims (Šeta, 2016). At times, they have to deal with inquisitive looks and questions in public places, also during random, brief encounters. They are challenged or forced to defend their becoming a Muslim. These conditions have a significant bearing on the way Polish converts negotiate their identity and on the meanings they attach to being a Muslim. In

this paper we demonstrate how converts engage with the dominant interpretative repertoires popularised by media, embraced and reproduced by many public figures. As Birt (2009) notes:

> […] social identities are not simply reactive, formed through taking on dominant categories that circulate within hegemonic discourses and inverting their meaning and significance, but rather are creative, emerging through the fusion and cross-cutting of multiple identities and making new visions possible (p. 216).

In line with this view, we argue that converts actively engage with the collective narratives on Islam and trace this process in the internal and external dialogues conducted by our research participants. We demonstrate that in this process, converts are able to move between different positions and negotiate their views and practices with those representing critical or hostile voices in many ways, including silencing, rejection, acceptance, and making compromises.

The understanding of identity elaborated in our discussion is anchored in the Dialogical Self Theory (DST). This theoretical framework is particularly apt for the analysis of identity in the context of conversion, as it connects the individual, relational and collective processes of identity formation and change. In the following discussion we argue that from the DST perspective it is possible to approach conversion in a way that accounts for the complexity of the self-transformation process. The conceptualization of religious identity as one of many discrete categories making up the mosaic of the hybrid-like self is inadequate for capturing the depth of changes brought by the conversion concerning both the content and the structure of the self. As Sealy (2018) notes, "[…] hybridity and plural identities may have reductive consequences for the religious aspect of identities" (p. 18). We argue that the DST charts a path to an alternative approach, allowing us to capture the centrality of religious position in converts' identity and its

implications. Simultaneously this theoretical framework allows for inclusion of those aspects of the self that are not conforming with the ideal of a pious Muslim and thus, provides tools for critical engagement with ideological positioning of Muslims as being "all about Islam" (Jeldtoft, 2011, p. 1134).

In line with the DST, we assume that converts shape their identity through constant internal and external dialogues engaging with various voices. In our analysis, we explore the complexity of the dialogue around the theme of being a Muslim convert, as it unravels in the in-group interactions, particularly during the meetings of a group of Polish female converts to Islam. The observation of dialogical processes in this group provides very unique opportunity for identifying different positions relevant to the semantic field "being a Muslim (convert)" and exploring the constantly negotiated relationships between these positions and the role that the interpretative repertoires dominant in the Polish socio-cultural landscape play in the process.

### *The Dialogical Self Theory*

The conversion to Islam provides one of many examples of the complexity of globalized pluralism and its tensions and poses questions about the validity of many of the existing theoretical models of the individual embracement of new religious beliefs and practices. We argue that the conversion to Islam can be accounted for through the lenses of the DST. The theory draws on the classical distinction between the I and the Me proposed by W. James (1890/1950) and proposes that the self is a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-

positions[1] (Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon, 1992). The I is the self-as-knower and is characterised by continuity, distinctness and volition (or agency). The Me is the self-as-known and is composed of all the elements considered to belong to a person. This understanding of the self assumes a gradual transition between Me and mine and extends the self to all that the person can call his or her own, "not only his [sic] body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (James, 1890/1950, p. 183).

Importantly for our discussion, the I moves between different, sometimes opposed positions and has the capacity to endow each position with a voice. With these imagined voices dialogical relations between positions can be established. The meaning-making is affected through active dialogue of voices representing several different I-positions, and occurs not from one position, but between two or more positions in dialogue (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This theoretical framework proposes to conceive self as embodied, multivoiced and reaching beyond the boundaries of an individual body. Both internal and external positions are part of a self that is extended to the environment and responds to those elements of the environment that are perceived as "mine". In this conceptualization, the self and culture are inherently connected as a

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[1] The terms 'position' and 'positioning' reflect the more dynamic and flexible referents than the traditional term 'role'.

multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can be established (Hermans, 2001a). Through this extension of the self, the DST highlights the "collective voices, domination and asymmetry of social relations, and embodied forms of dialogue" (Hermans, 2001a, p. 243). The DST framework, therefore, accounts for the specific historical context in which conversions take place and gives insight into the oppositions and ambivalences in contemporary society reflected in the self, including the populist discourses presenting Islam as a main line of division between "us" and "them" in the ever-changing social worlds.

## Materials and Methods

### *Participants and Setting*

The analysis and discussion presented here is based on the fieldwork conducted among a group of Polish female converts to Islam and constitutes a part of a larger research project[2]. Our main sample consisted of 12 women converts to Islam who participated in a focus group interview and constructed individual Personal Position Repertoire matrices. Additionally, we conducted 49 individual in-depth interviews with women who self-identified as Muslim converts.  While we attempted to achieve diversity in our sample in terms of education, class

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background, age, marital/parental status, and Islamic affiliation of our research participants, we had to rely on the makeup of the already existing group. In the sample, for example, rural women, and women who do not participate actively in the convert community are underrepresented. The participants of the PPR-Focus Group discussion were aged between 20-52, the time since conversion ranged from 6 months to 30 years. Our participants included both recent converts as well as women who had embraced Islam in the early 90s and one Tatar woman[3]. The majority of the women who participated in the PPR Focus Group are active in Muslim converts' groups in the different parts of Poland where they live; some of them have the experience of living abroad for some time. All our participants periodically participate in larger gatherings organised in one of the mosques in Warsaw. The focal point of each meeting is a series of lectures and workshops on a chosen subject, such as, for example, marriage, sexuality, or ecology. The Warsaw meetings, born out of an independent initiative of the converts themselves, consist of formal lectures and workshop, as well as shared meals, group prayers and various informal social activities (e.g. shopping trips).

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[3] Tatars are Polish autochthonous Muslims. Their presence in Poland dates back to the 14th century; currently they comprise a small group with up to 4500 members. Over the years, many Tatars married Catholics or became secular, and so their religion remained a marginal issue in the national politics and media. Some prominent Tatars distance themselves from migrants' and converts' Islam which they perceive as radical or overtly influenced by the Arab culture.

The women attending the mosque gatherings are a close-knit group; many of them are bound by close and longstanding friendships. Disagreements and reconciliations, differences in opinions, shared jokes and anecdotes make up the dense fabric of this small community. The members know each other not only as Muslim converts, but also exchange stories about themselves as, for example, students, workers, wives or mothers. Therefore, in this particular social context they present themselves and perceive each other in a way that reflects the multiplicity of the self. The group of fellow converts offers converts a substitute for some of their "lost" relationships. Interactions with the group provide an opportunity to explore the aspects of their self that in other contexts might be overshadowed by their Muslim identity and facilitate their reflexive engagement with the religious identity in a way that challenges and transcends the interpretative repertoires prevalent in the wider society. Therefore, the research access to this group embedded in the locally specific context presented a unique opportunity to capture the dialogical negotiation of converts' identity in contemporary Polish socio-cultural context.

*Materials*

In choosing the methods of data collection for the sub-study presented here, we aimed at producing the type of data that can be validly analysed through the lens of the DST and that would enable us to overcome some of the difficulties encountered in the application of more traditional methods in the research on conversion to Islam. Our main data was obtained by the application of a modified Personal Position Repertoires (PPR) method (Hermans, 2001b) - the PPR-Focus Group version (Krotofil, 2016). The latter consists of transcripts of a focus group

interview and Personal Position Repertoire matrices constructed individually by 12 women. Each individual matrix includes a list of the most important internal and external I-positions identified by the participant and numerical valuations of the strength of the relationship between each internal and external position. The moderated group discussion which followed the construction of PPR matrices centred on the content of individual matrices. Additionally, we conducted individual in-depth interviews with 4 of the PPR-Focus Group participants. This data was supplemented by notes from participant observation carried out during three separate get-togethers for Polish women who converted to Islam organized in a mosque in Warsaw and 49 individual in-depth interviews.

### *Procedures – Data Collection and Data Analysis*

The procedure for the data collection using the PPR-Focus Group method started with obtaining consent from all participants and a short presentation introducing participants to the research topic[4]. The researchers explained the connection between the notions of self and identity, as they are framed in the DST and the purpose of constructing PPR matrices. Participants were also instructed on how to fill in the individual PPR matrix and given time and

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[4] All potential participants were given information about the study and the nature of their involvement. They were also informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they had a right to withdraw their consent at any time. The data was anonymised, the quotations given in the text are identified by pseudonyms.

one-to-one support to complete this task. This was followed by a moderated group discussion about the positions included in the matrices and their internal and external relationships, and more general comments about the experience of exploring the self by using the PPR method. On a separate occasion 4 women from the group participated in individual in-depth interviews conducted in the locations of their choices.

The data from PPR matrices was analysed using the principles described by Hermans (2001b). The strength of a particular position was assessed by calculating the average valuation score ascribed to a given internal position in relation to all the external positions listed by the participant (and *vice versa*). The meanings of the positions and the relationships between them were reconstructed in the qualitative analysis of the narratives produced by respondents during the focus group discussion and individual interviews. The transcripts of the focus group and interviews recording were coded by two researchers. We developed the list of codes in an inductive process, allowing the codes to emerge from our data and comparing the fragments of narratives with the same codes. Any discrepancies between the codings were reviewed and discussed, until a consensus was reached. In the next stage the codes were grouped into categories reflecting the main features of the convert' self corresponding to the subheadings of the next section (for example, the complexity of self and multiplicity of voices; the dominance of religious position and responsibility, etc.).

**Results and Discussion**

The number of positions included in the matrices varied; participants listed between 11-35 internal positions and 5-29 external positions. Table 1 presents the numbers of positions per participant.

[Table 1 near here]

The internal positions most often included in the matrices were I-as Muslim (N=11); I – as a woman (N=9); I- as a mother (N=8); I-as a wife (N=7); I-as a member of Muslim community (N=6); I-as a sister (N=6); I-as a daughter (N=6). The most frequent feature-like positions were: I-as religious (N=8); I-as a fighter (N=6), I-as resourceful (N=6). The highest relative significance reflected in the average individual valuation scores (range 0-5) was ascribed to positions I-as independent (4.4); I-as a fighter (4.4) and I-as a Muslim (4.1). The external positions with highest frequency were those representing a spouse (N=10); God (N=9); a mother (N=9); a father (N=8); children (N=10) and variously denoted members of religious community, such as Muslim friends (N=7); members of the *Ummah*[5] (N=4); Polish Muslims (N=5). The highest average valuation scores (range 0-5) were ascribed to God (4.5); children (4.0) and a spouse (3.8).

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[5] Here the term refers to the community of believers.

Participant's comments concerning the process of the construction of the PPR matrices reveal the difficulties inherent in the exploration of the content and structure of the self for research purposes. These are related to a way of every-day functioning which, for most part, does not meet the level of reflexivity required to complete the data collection procedure. For most participants, the task of examining the self was experienced as challenging and unusual. As this activity requires remaining in the elusive position of I-as a knower for a period of time, some women struggled to complete the exercise or expressed a degree of resistance against labelling their I-positions. These feelings were expressed and explored during the group discussion. Some comments suggest that the research procedure also provoked some disquieting experiences, similar to those described by Simão (2003). One woman stated:

> This was a difficult task, but the result did not surprise me. What I know about myself…all my life I could describe myself as a believer, but all my life I felt strong internal resistance towards defining myself for the outside. I have a strong need to belong to *Ummah*, and people from *Ummah* are close to me, but I don't like, I feel resistance against defining my spirituality and naming it somehow. (Maria)

Another challenge identified by the women participating in the study was related to adopting the "bird's eye view" and abstracting the internal and external positions from their mutual relations, as Anna explained:

> Generally it was difficult, because I chose so many aspects [of self], I still haven't finished it. Did I discover something new? Probably not. But it is difficult to put it in

tables, as numbers, all those aspects I wrote down. For me they are all interconnected and

when I have to delimit them somehow I feel this is not reliable […]. (Anna)

The everyday experience of embeddedness of I-positions in the larger structure evident in these

comments on the construction of the PPR matrix, for some participants was enhanced by a

temporal dislocation in space and time and revisiting positions that were relevant in some earlier

period of life but receded to the background of the current self structure. The confrontation with

the past, as still present in the self, was surprising for some of the women who devoted

considerable time and energy into constructing the boundary between the pre- and post-

conversion life.

Despite these difficulties, the participants engaged in the research procedure and provided

rich data in a form of PPR matrices and corresponding narrative data. In the analysis of this data,

we identified empirical indicators of the most silent features of the self, postulated by the DST:

the complexity of the self and multiplicity of voices participating in the dialogue processes; the

hierarchical structure with identifiable dominant positions; some conflicts between positions and

the dynamic nature of the self. In the following sections we discuss these features, as they appear

in our participants' matrices and narratives in more detail, with an emphasis on the most salient

patterns of meaning making related to the religious conversion identifiable among the

respondents, including the active engagement with the widespread anti-Muslim discourses.

*The Complexity of Self and Multiplicity of Voices*

The polyphonic novel metaphor, proposed by Bakhtin, with its disobedient characters (Holquist, 1990) sheds light on the way converts negotiate their unique position at the intersection of the Muslim and mainstream communities in Poland. Our participants referenced multiple interpretation repertoires regarding Islam and being a Muslim convert encountered in the external world. The diversity of discourses and perspectives requires converts to make choices; accept and assimilate some and reject other. During our data collection the women engaged in dialogue with each other, and argued from their different positions, which importantly, included the characters external to the group. The voices of parents, employers, friends, religious scholars and authorities, as well as people met during various casual brief encounters were brought into the discussion. Some of these characters were endowed with special authority, while other where considered less important, or even dismissible. In this process, the women collectively negotiated their own in-group narrative on conversion based on shared or similar experiences. This group narrative constitutes a very important collective voice in converts' stories; however, it is only one of many discernible voices. Other significant and commonly encountered voices represent negative or even hostile attitudes towards Islam and converts from non-Muslim majority countries (see, for example, Özyürek, 2015; Galonnier, 2018; Franks, 2000).

Most of the participants of the PPR Focus Group commented on the complexity of their personal repertoires, suggesting that their pre-reflexive, subjective sense of self is influenced by the common experiences of being subjected to unidimensional categorisations by others (see also Pędziwiatr, 2017). The act of creating the PPR brought many participants' attention to these

aspects of their self that are not functioning as identity markers, as illustrated by the following statements:

> Whenever somebody asks me who am I, I always have a reply prepared: yes, I am a Pole, Tatar, Muslim. And here suddenly it turns out that I am not only a Polish Muslim, I have a more complex identity. This is something I never gave a name to before. (Alicja)

In this example Alicja reflected on her habitual way of responding to the question about her identity, by listing the positions that are easily recognized by others and occupy the centre of the stage. The realization that she is "not only a Polish Muslim" seemed to provoke a positive emotional response. Similarly, Alexandra commented: "I discovered for myself that I am a human orchestra, I try to multitask. I began to realise this when I started doing this [PPR matrix]".

In line with the first quote, many of our participants identified I-as a Muslim, as the most significant and visible aspect of their identity. For some, this is an inevitable consequence of the hypervisibility of Islam in the public places in Poland. As Muslims comprise a small minority in Poland, women wearing Islamic attire easily attract attention in public. Reflecting on the visibility of her religious identity during the individual interview conducted in a café, Zofia, who wears a headscarf on a daily basis reasoned:

> Islam has to come first, it cannot be otherwise. You know, now we are among people, but if we were at home…I, for example, have no problem with alcohol-free beer. [It has been like that] for the last year, because earlier on I had a problem with that. Now, I don't. But not necessarily in a public place, because somebody might take a photo. (Zofia)

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For Zofia, as for some other respondents, the way she presents herself in the public domain has to be unambiguously congruent with what she perceives from the I-as a Muslim position as virtuous behaviour. Even though drinking non-alcoholic beer would not be a transgression, this behaviour could easily be misinterpreted by others and shed bad light on Muslims on the whole. For this reason, Zofia refrains from it. This example illustrates how converts engage in dialogue through their behaviours, strive to align them with their ideal and scrutinize the impact of their embodied practices on the way they are perceived as Muslims. The internalization of the gaze of the 'other' draws attention to the power relations reflected in converts' narratives. The experience of Zofia is reminiscent of the Panopticon which induces "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1995, p. 201) and obscures the complexity of the self. This pertains to the wider, highly politicized debates on the hijab. As Suleiman (2013) notes, "the undue attention paid to the hijab takes away from the inner journey, silent and invisible, on which every female convert embarks" (p. 3). The visibility of the religious identity, however, not only puts some constrains or demands on converts, but can also have a protective function and provide means for contesting the power relations:

> We are supposed to stand out, this is clearly said that we are supposed to stand out, so that people see – a Muslim is coming, or adherent of another religion, why should they not know? Let them know that I am a Muslim, that is does not befit for them to offer me something, you know. I, for example, don't like it when I go to a shop and they force upon me, during festive period…, or I go to a restaurant and I hear "would you like some wine?". I think that in Poland, first of all, if Muslims want to improve their situation, they

need to become public, stop hiding and start opening up to the society. They should

enhance their religious practice, show that we are among them. (Zofia)

Here Zofia argues for using the visibility of the religious identity by Muslims striving for

acceptance and negotiating their place in the mainstream society. This stance is in line with her

position: I – as an activist, and her active involvement in the local Muslim community. The

excessively fluid notion of identity obscures the subjects' agency in the process of making their

group identities concrete in some contexts, a process acknowledged in Spivak's (1990) "strategic

essentialism", or Werbner's (2013) distinction between objectifications and reifications.

Therefore, it is important to note, that in the dialogue with the non-Muslim majority, the new

religious identity becomes to some extent strategically essentialized. The strategic visibility and

protection of the good image of Islam comes at a price, echoed in the belief, that being a Muslim

in Poland is not for the faint hearted expressed by the participants. This is reflected in the PPR

matrices constructed by the women who ascribed high importance to positions that can be

associated with the inner strength, such as: I – as a fighter; I – as knowing what I want; I – as

strong; or I – as courageous, as well as positions suggesting high levels of autonomy: I – as a

rebel; I – as independent.

### *The Dominance of Religious Positions and Responsibility*

As evident in the PPR matrices constructed by our participants, for the majority of them,

I- as a Muslim is a dominant internal position within the self structure and has great influence

over other positions. The dominance of the I-as a Muslim position can fluctuate over time, but at

least at some stage of the conversion process it is very apparent. For pious Muslims, all spheres

of life are regulated by the religious prescriptions and prohibitions. As Zofia observed: "because it allows some things, but does not allow others, everything hinges on [Islam] all the time". However, as has been noted repeatedly in literature, observing such dominance researchers are at risk of reifying Islam as a basis for the principal identity and making converts "all about Islam" (Jeldtoft, 2011, p. 1135). In order to avoid this reductive conclusion, we focus on the dynamic and multivoiced nature of the self. In this dynamic structure of different I-positions engaging in multiple relationships, the probability of a given position to be foregrounded changes in different situations (Stryker, 1968). This raises important questions about when and how the position of I-as a Muslim becomes dominant and how meanings of religious teachings and practice are negotiated and integrated in converts' daily social interactions in non-religious contexts.

The dominance does not preclude dialogue and is largely shaped in the dialogical interchanges. As Hermans (2012) notes: "relative dominance is not alien but rather intrinsic to dialogue. That is, during the interchange some positions become more dominant than others[6], or different positions are combined and integrated in a new coalition" (p. 16). It is therefore in the dialogue with both, the religious sources advocating for the alignment of all spheres of life with the Islamic law and the exclusivist mainstream discourses rejecting Islam commonly reproduced

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[6] The implications of the dominant positions have been also highlighted in the research conducted from the social cognition perspective. These studies demonstrate that individual actions and feelings are directed primarily by those aspects of the self that are in working memory (Oyserman and James 2011).

by various groups and individuals, that the dominance of the I-as a Muslim position is maintained. For every convert, the history of encounters with these voices is different and so the position of I-as a Muslim is infused with unique personal and social meaning. What seems to be shared by our respondents is the sense of responsibility, as their Muslim identity transgresses the narrowly religious meanings and becomes a politicized social identity.

In this process, the political is not an addition to the religious identity, but emerges as sharing the same space for agency, located on a moral dimension, as highlighted by the notion of responsibility, occurring frequently in converts' narratives. Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) make a distinction between self-position and self-presentation, stating that the former concerns not only conveying a particular image of oneself, but is also a stance the individual takes toward themselves. For the converts who are recognised as Muslims by their religious attire, and "wear their new religious identities on their sleeves on an ongoing, everyday basis" (Winchester, 2008, p. 1770), the stance is realised by the sense of responsibility which at times can be felt as a burden, as Zofia and Alicja explained:

> This is sometimes a responsibility and perhaps it overwhelms, I don't know if "overwhelmed" is a good word… but you feel the responsibility, being a Muslim. The main characteristic [of you] should be being a Muslim. (Zofia)

In a similar way Alicja reflected: "Somehow it dominates in my self, because I am perceived as a kind of saint. When somebody sees me, they see a Muslim, although my identity is much more complex". In these fragments, Zofia and Alicja allude to the fact that Muslims in Poland are the subject of social scrutiny. Being identified as Muslims in public places endows them with the

responsibility for presenting a good image of Islam to the non-Muslim majority. The effort to be good ambassadors of Islam and the intensity and breadth of self-work involved in this undertaking is echoed also in individual interviews, as the following example illustrates:

> Who will show the Polish people what Islam is, if not us? This is our role, and we have to do our best. We have to show that Islam is changing us for the better, that we work on ourselves and that it is a hard work, because it is work on ourselves. But this is Islam; how we behave, how we talk, how we work, interact with other people, and express ourselves. (Edyta).

In this fragment, Edyta connects the public character of the Muslim identity with the development and cultivation of the moral self (Hitlin, 2011). She emphasises the role of embodied, everyday practices in the process. This is in line with observations made by Winchester (2008), who argues that the body is "the foundational principle" by which Islamic "practices of the self" (p. 1758), such as prayer, covering, and fasting are made possible. For our respondents, however, the significance of the body goes beyond religious practices and includes every day acts aligned to the ideal of good Muslim, such as being kind and helpful to strangers, being polite in everyday casual encounters, or reacting in non-confrontational ways to derogatory comments. These features are repeatedly mentioned in converts' narratives and constitute the shared behavioural expectations related to the I-as a Muslim position, often referred to as a role (see Stryker, 1968).

The related, but not synonymous label "I-as a convert" for most participants indicates a meta-position with relatively broad bandwidth (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Everyday life decisions on how to act in particular situations are made from this religious meta-position

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and shape the other I- positions within self, including the I – as a Muslim. This is well illustrated by Alicja, who notes: "Whether you are a mother, or a lover, for us this is all connected to Islam anyway". This statement reflects converts' commitment to the development of Muslim identity. This all-encompassing influence, however, is not universal, as the quote from an individual interview illustrates: "I'll put it this way: I do put the hijab on when I go out in public, but when I'm about to meet up with my Polish friends, I don't wear it anymore", stated Monika. She explained that she was not keeping her conversion secret – "I often share articles or pictures related to Islam on my [Facebook] profile, I also post greetings during our [Muslim] holidays, so that's self-explanatory" – but she preferred to move it to the periphery in same contexts. Her account challenges the theorization of Snow and Machalek (1983) who claim that for converts, the convert role is a "master" one that governs all situations and that "all role identities are subordinate to the identity that flows from the master role of the convert" (p. 278). Rather, the meaning and functions of the position I-as a convert is context-specific and changes over time.

The external position representing God plays an important role in the sustainment of the new content and organization of the self. Most of our participants identified God as one of the external positions within the self. The prominence of the position was reflected in the very high importance assigned to it by many women in relation to all internal positions. Reflecting on the strong relationship between God and other positions, clearly visible in her matrix, one participant stated:

> I noticed when I was writing it down, I was writing "God" in the biggest script, it means the most. I mean, this is what I concluded, I was writing automatically, so the relationship is the most important […] This relationship governs all aspects of my life. (Ela)

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The unambiguous dominance of God in the self structure revealed in most PPR matrices draws attention to the very important dimension of converts' identity that is often neglected, or at least not fully accommodated for, in studies focusing on the psychological and sociological understanding of Muslim identity (Davie, 2015; Sealy, 2018). The opportunity to note the significance of the relationship with God, as it is experienced by our participants and reflected in their PPR matrices and narratives enables us to "take faith seriously" (Davie, 2015, p. 63) in academic research. It sensitizes us to the often-marginalized observation that theological principles have a bearing on sociological and psychological accounts. The relationship with God shaping the interactions between many I-positions within the self is to a large extent individually negotiated by each convert. In this process, however, the institutional voices representing different theological discourses and providing prescriptive sets of beliefs play a significant role. Thus, when reflecting on their relationship with God, converts foreground the most important elements of Islamic theology: the directness of the relationship with God; God's mercy; the trust they place in God and their submission to God's will. The relationship with God is experienced and presented by many converts as key to understanding all their other relationships and overcoming conflicts between them.

### *Conflict Between Positions*

Contrasting perspectives represented by different I-positions meet within the self, and engage in dynamic power struggles (Hermans, 2001a; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). From the point of view of the DST, within the self structure, I-as knower fulfils the role of unifying principle that is organizing the different aspects of the Me, as parts of a continuous stream of consciousness, thus maintaining the continuity of the self. This, however, still does not

preclude the possibility of rivalry and conflict between different positions, or "standing by one of the selves" and "relinquishing the rest" (James, 1890, p. 309). During the group discussion our participants expressed a strong awareness of the conflicts between different I-positions and explored their meanings and implications. One participant, for example, speaking from the I- as a Muslim position, wanted to wear the headscarf, but the same person voicing the I- as a mother was more focused on protecting her children from Islamophobia and sustaining her job and argued against adopting this practice. In our sample, the most conflict-laden relationships were the ones between external positions representing parents and the internal positions I-as a child and I-as a Muslim. In most cases, the conflicts stemmed from parents' reactions to conversion, ranging from bewilderment, suspicion and hostility to lack of interest and neglect (Sealy, 2018; Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017). Converts often become "intimate strangers" for their close relatives (Suleiman, 2013, p.1). Emotions evoked by these parental responses are in contrast with the Islamic canonical texts which construct parents, and especially mothers, as objects of veneration deserving love, respect and the kindest companionship (Oh, 2010; Schleifer, 1996). The women we spoke to strive to fulfil the Islamic obligation of respecting and loving their parents; the external positions of the mother and the father retained high level of importance in almost all PPR matrices. The majority of converts maintain contact with their families of origin, however, some experience difficulties in the interactions with their parents, siblings or grandparents who struggle to accept their choices, including the decision to embrace Islam or marry a man from a Muslim-majority country. Therefore, for many Polish converts, negotiating their position I-as a Muslim with their families of origin is a process stretched over time and marked by temporal setbacks and acute conflicts. This is reflected in some of the PPR matrices in the significantly

lower level of importance of the internal position I – as a Muslim, in relation to external positions representing converts' parents.

The most important milestone in the process does not seem to be the decision to embrace Islam, or the moment *shahada* (declaration of faith) is taken, but the point at which converts become visible as Muslims. This is the time of adopting religious clothing, such as the hijab. The narratives of the respondents describing the negative reactions of their family members to their headscarf suggest that these are "intimately linked with the status of women in Islam as part of the Orientalist picture" (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017, p. 24). The parents are often worried about their daughters becoming oppressed, isolated, or radicalized. Converts wearing the headscarf and their parents are also sometimes directly confronted with external voices expressing various anti-Muslim positions and causing parental concern for the safety of their children. At times, the parents also become targeted directly, as one of our respondents noted:

> This is hard for my parents, because they are elderly and it is hard for them to accept. Even more so, because if somebody asks them [about my religious practice]…This is often the case. I am sorry that people ask them, instead of me. Because they do not know the answers, and they do not know what to say. They are simply sorry because they don't know and think that I am doing something stupid. If I was there, I could give my reasons and explain. (Zuzanna)

Other conflicts reported by the women in our study regarded the discrepancies between what they perceived as the ideal of a pious Muslim and the I-as I see myself. One of our participants summarized these types of conflicts by stating: "very often it is hard for me to

choose between what I want and what I should". Another woman agreed with this statement and explored the conflict between I – as a lover with I – as a pious Muslim. This example provoked a discussion about an individually constructed meaning of internal positions which resulted in some renegotiation of the supposed conflict:

> I am to be the lover for my husband, not a lover for just anyone, but for my husband. Just like the husband is to be the best lover for me. I have four children with him. See, as a Muslim I understand this only in one way. For me, this is the meaning of this word – a lover is a lover in marriage, for my husband. And I hope I proved myself. (Aleksandra)

Other positions involved in conflicts mentioned by the participants included I-as a traitor, I-as a doubter. As these examples demonstrate, the most significant conflicts are related to what converts see as aspects of moral dispositions. The DST allowed us to capture the elements of the self that do not conform easily to the reified ideal of a pious Muslim. Thus, we were able to avoid one of the biases increasingly noted in research on Islam, namely, the overemphasis on the "legitimate" ways of being a Muslim which reproduces "the particular ideological aspiration of Islamist and Islamic revivalist movements: the privileging of Islam as the supreme guideline of all fields of life" (Schielke, 2010, p. 2).

### *The Dynamic, Flexible, Embodied Self*

The religious conversion sensitises women who embraced Islam to the dynamic nature of the self. The women we spoke to highlighted that conversion was a journey extended in time. From a temporal point of view, the positioning and repositioning within the self is related to both collective history and personal development. As Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin (2011) note,

both internal and external phenomena can be considered as outcomes of historically and culturally negotiated, intersubjectively reached agreement. These agreements are subject to constant negotiation and dependent on social context, therefore we can assume that both, past and present relationships, remain salient in the process of construction of converts identity. Participants reflected on the current importance of the past relationships, including those which were "broken" with the conversion. Some women questioned whether somebody who raised them could still have influence on their more mature self. Alicja, quoted earlier, reflected on the changing importance of external positions in a shorter time perspective:

> The relationships with the people around me are changing all the time. Now, filling in the matrix, I see that the relationships with my close family are more important to me than the relationships within the Muslim community, not to mention my co-workers. But this is changing all the time. (Alicja)

The two tendencies emerging in the dialogue between participants were to highlight the importance of the past relationships in the process of their formation, or to deny their current influence. The continuity emerged as an important feature of the self that can be lost or achieved through different means. In this context, Zofia, quoted earlier, spoke about her decision to close her social media account:

> Later, I deleted my Facebook account for six months, which I terribly regret, because I lost many pictures and the continuity of history. I had my ex-boyfriends in my Facebook contacts, my female friends who would walk a mile for me and I had other Muslim women there. (Zofia)

The interplay between continuity experienced as maintaining the sense of being the same person over time and a break from the past at the point of becoming a Muslim is maintained in converts narratives in a creative way. As Hermans (2001a) argues, "the existence of unity in the self, as closely related to continuity, does not contradict the existence of multiplicity, as closely related to discontinuity" (p. 248). This process is firmly based on dialogue, as one of our participants succinctly summarized: „thanks to meeting people, having discussions, reading books and eternal dialoguing with myself, people and my readings, I came a long way in Islam, I got to know better myself and my place".

In the group we observed, the practices and self narratives have been shared and collectively negotiated in what can be seen as a process of building a blueprint for becoming a Muslim. The ways of cultivating the self with a strong position of I – as a Muslim were not only narrated, but also enacted and embodied during these meetings. The women helped each other to tie the headscarf, they exchanged items of clothing and tips about modest attire, discussed practicalities of fasting, ritual purity and ablution (*wudu*), and cooking conforming with the dietary restrictions in Islam. The body postures and body movements of the women participating in the gatherings were distinct and to some extent shaped by the physical features of the environment, such as, for example, the lack of tables or chairs that prompted them to sit on the floor. The embodied self was thus collectively learned and changed over time.

## Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the process of identity change in the context of religious conversion through the lenses of the DST. The data collected through the use of the PPR - Focus Group method, observation and individual interviews offered us some insights into the content

and structure of the self in the process of conversion. It also enabled us to explore the dialogical process of the construction of self narratives related to the religious conversion, their embeddedness in local discursive power structures and the multiplicity of voices participating in the process. During the analysis, the DST sensitized us to the richness of converts' experiences that exceeds the scope of what can be presented in a single paper. The most important features of the self that emerged in our data include the complexity of the self and multiplicity of voices participating in the identity dialogues, the hierarchical structure with identifiable dominant positions, some conflicts between positions and the dynamic nature of the self.

The backdrop for our analysis of the data is the socio-cultural and historical situatedness of Polish converts to Islam as a minority in the Christian majority context. In the Polish socio-cultural milieu, the religion of converts to Islam "makes them different" and easily becomes a marker of identity, as we argue above. As Oyserman and James (2011) note, "contexts not only make a particular identity salient, they also shape the content and behavioural consequences of identities" (p. 120). Drawing on Bakhtin, Hermans (2012) observes that struggles between collective voices unfolding on the level of the community shape the dialogues between the members of a minority group. This is apparent in the data presented here, where in the multiplicity of voices discernible in converts' in-group dialogues diverse, at times antagonistic positions are confronted and negotiated. To list just a few examples, the women were able to consider their beliefs and practices from a position of a devout Muslim, a visible "other", a mother, a daughter, an employee. The examples discussed in this paper also illustrate how agency takes shape in the process of appropriation of religious voices, when the proscriptions of

Islam are adjusted to the socio-cultural reality of contemporary Poland and converts' personal circumstances.

The multivoiced, extended and dialogical concept of the self provides tools for analysing the process of conversion in a way that avoids trapping converts in multiple dichotomies, a common challenge in scholarship on Islam in Europe (Fadil & Fernando, 2015; Fadil, 2019). This problem emerged early on in the course of this project and was brought to our attention by Sabina, one of our interviewees. Being a reluctant participant, she explained that her main reservation with regard to this type of project was the possibility of Muslim converts being labelled as either ultra-liberal, or very conservative. Conversely, the DST allows to recognise respondents' multiple selves and their manifestations, offering space for a spectrum of religious expressions, shaped by individual's active engagement with their social context.

The relative importance of the religious voice within the self of converts is evident in the PPR matrices constructed by our research participants and the comments they provided in the group discussion. From the DST perspective, it is possible to account for the unique status of a religious position within the self and its behavioural, emotional and motivational implications, as a legitimate way of being, without dismissing its significance, or presenting it as a problem to be solved. By adopting this framework, we avoid the over-emphasis on the individual praxis abstracted from its socio-cultural context, the framing of the religious self as fluid or restricting religiosity to a discrete category. Instead, we foreground the complexity of religious (aspects of) self and the dialogues between different voices, including those expressing anti-Muslim attitudes. As we demonstrated above, the centrality of religion in the self can result in the creation of a new, integrating position, I – as a convert, which has the potential to facilitate or

inhibit dialogues between other I- positions. The DST applied to conversion research allowed us to "take faith seriously" (Davie 2015, p. 63) and overcome the problems inherent in the notion of hybrid identities, namely, the trivialization of the multiplicity as a feature of identity, the glossing over asymmetrical power relations and uncritically assuming pre-conversion purity and unity. Tom Sealy (2018) notes that "the conceptualisations of hybrid, multiple or plural identities in the conversion to Islam literature are based on discrete categories" (p. 17). As such, Islam is often seen, as part of an "idiosyncratic mosaic, the separate parts of which would have to be ascribed to different categories" (Zebiri, 2008, p. 252). In this framing, religious identity is easily presumed to compete or be incompatible with other separate identities. This approach easily leads to conclusion that being or becoming Muslim dilutes (Zebiri, 2008; Jensen, 2008) or neutralizes other identities (Viswanathan, 1998).

The dialogues are shaped collectively, as women converts, who have in common some experiences related to the conversion, come together (online or face to face) and share their perspectives. In their discussion on the prominence of I-positions, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) note that in the post-modern self, personal freedom, autonomy and change are so strongly emphasised that the collective norms and values, as well as need for stability and continuity are neglected at the risk of fragmentation and loneliness. In the narratives of converts to Islam, the biographical continuity and a strong sense of belonging seem to be maintained, contrary to these expectations. These observations reinstate the importance of "Durkheim's concern with those social representations which bridge both a mind/body division (by acting on people's senses), and an individual/society division (by acting similarly on people who share a particular form of embodiment)" (Mellor & Shilling, 1997, p. 5).

To conclude, we highlight that for the women we spoke to, conversion entails significant changes of the structure and content of the self, affecting both internal and external positions. New positions are added, some are relocated to the margins, and the meanings of external positions representing individuals and groups in the society and internal positions reflecting the perceived internal characteristics and roles are reshaped in a way that requires dialogical engagement with multiple voices. By adopting inclusive and pluralistic interpretations of Islam, many women who embraced Islam resist and contest the simplistic dichotomies so often conjured in the debates on Islam in the West that are based on sharp divisions between the ostensibly liberal, modern and nonreligious and the conservative, anti-modern. For them, Islam remains their valued and chosen framework through which they enact the ideal of a religious self in a process constantly affected by their aspirations, capabilities, and ever-changing social context.

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## Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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