Exploring “spiritual” narrative identities: Implicitly atheist, agnostic, or religious?

Barbara Keller
Exploring “spiritual” narrative identities
Implicitly atheist, agnostic, or religious?

Faith Development Interview
Faith biography: Spiritual narrative identity
Mentalization in faith development
Self-identification in forced choice task
Agenda and outlook
Faith development interview

The Faith development interview, a semi-structured exploration of faith biography, covers

1. life review,
2. relationships,
3. present values and commitments,
4. religion or world view

(Fowler 1981, Streib 2005)
FDI

Life chapters
Marker events

Relationships
Crisis
Loss of meaning

Values and moral decisions

Current concepts

Life stories (McAdams 1993)
Autobiographical reasoning (Habermas 2010)

Attachment
Clinical assessment

Moral self across the life span (Narvaez & Lapsley 2009)
Faith development interview

The Faith development interview, a semi-structured exploration of faith biography, covers

- life review,
- relationships,
- present values and commitments,
- religion or world view, including

“Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual or faithful person?”
Deconversion studies: Johanna

German,
42 years,
female,
single,
social worker

Leaving Buddhist group
Johanna: German, 42 years, female, single, social worker

Chapters of Johanna´s Life:

I. Childhood
II. Moves and relocations
III. Escaping cruel reality: Music, glamrock, alcohol
IV. Love of my life, drugs
V. Punk, „No future“
VI. Miracle and turning point
VII. Spirituality (ongoing…)

(#N-01-13-1)
Johanna: Biography and spiritual identity

Johanna´s Life:

I. Childhood
II. Moves and relocations
III. Escaping cruel reality: Music, glamrock, alcohol
IV. Love of my life, drugs
V. Punk, No future
VI. Miracle and turning point
VII. Spirituality

(#N-01-13-1)

Spiritual Identity: implicitly…

…agnostic?

…religious? spiritual quest?

…atheist?

…reverse religiosity?

…mystic?

explicitly theist
Mentalization

“the mental process by which an individual *implicitly* and *explicitly* interprets the actions of *himself* or *herself* and *others* as meaningful on the basis of intentional mental states such as personal desires, needs, feelings, beliefs, and reasons“ (Bateman & Fonagy 2004, see also Fonagy & Target 2003).
Johanna’s life chapters:

I. Childhood
II. Moves and relocations
III. Escaping cruel reality: Music, glamrock, alcohol
IV. Love of my life, drugs
V. Punk, No future
VI. Miracle and turning point
VII. Spirituality

(#N-01-13-1)

Mentalization perspective

Lack of secure attachment and marked mirroring
Psychic equivalence and pretend mode difficult to integrate
Poor self regulation and self-destructive behavior
Self regulation, stability, secure attachment to God
## Turn to Buddhism: Marked Mirroring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message of Buddhism</th>
<th>Mentalization Perspective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life = Suffering</td>
<td>Mirroring of Johanna´s experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is no God</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You can meditate and cope with this</td>
<td>Response to Johanna´s distress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I: Do you consider yourself religious, believing, spiritual?
Yes
I: All of those? Or one?
It’s just words.
So, I think that you cannot really describe faith and God and all this. You cannot describe God, ahm, I think these are limitations. So, so, I believe that we as human beings are seeking, seeking…God, and the more you, and this is Carmelite spirituality, or my spirituality, the more you can detach yourself from these conceptions, the more you find it, is what I believe.

I: Halten Sie sich für religiös, für gläubig, für spirituell?
Ja.
I.: Alles? Eins davon?
Hach. Das sind einfach alles Wörter. Also ich denke, dass man eigentlich .. Glauben und Gott und das gar nicht beschreiben kann. Also so wie man .. Gott nicht beschreiben kann, und eh, ja, denk’ ich sind das eigentlich eher Begrenzungen.
So, so, .., ich glaube, dass wir Menschen einfach ja suchen nach, nach ..
... Gott und je mehr man, also das ist denn eigentlich wieder, wieder denn, ja so’n, so, so, ja karmelitische Spiritualität oder meine Spiritualität, je mehr wir loslassen können von diesen Vorstellungen, desto mehr glaub’ ich finden wir’s ..
Mark the statement below that most identifies you:

Ο I am more religious than spiritual
Ο I am more spiritual than religious
☒ I am equally religious and spiritual
Ο I am neither religious nor spiritual
Deconverts and members
Questionnaire data and FDI answers

Faith development interview
Different Methods…

Questionnaire / forced choice question

Mark the statement below that most identifies you:

- I am more religious than spiritual
- I am more spiritual than religious
- I am equally religious and spiritual
- I am neither religious nor spiritual

Faith development interview / Faith biography

- life review,
- relationships,
- present values and commitments,
- religion or world view, including “Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual or faithful person?”
Different Methods allow different semantics and invite different pragmatics

**Questionnaire / forced choice question: best fit option**

Mark the statement below that most identifies you:

- O I am more religious than spiritual
- O I am more spiritual than religious
- O I am equally religious and spiritual
- O I am neither religious nor spiritual

**Faith development interview / Faith biography: discoursive elaboration of options**

- life review,
- relationships,
- present values and commitments,
- **religion or world view**, including

“Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual or faithful person?”
Agenda for ongoing research

Update of FDI-Evaluation:

The FDI allows to study narrative „spiritual“ identity in the context of autobiographical narrative and reasoning. Current developmental psychological concepts, such as mentalization, will be used for the understanding of faith biographies.

Multi-method Approach:

Tying „objective“ data on religious self-identification back to negotiations of concepts in individual faith biographies may enhance validity. Data from different methodological perspectives will shed light on the semantics and pragmatics of „spirituality“.
Outlook

• What would Johanna tell me, if I met her again? Faith and faith biographies change across the life span. Longitudinal designs are needed to explore changes in terms of content, evaluation, and aspects of functionality.

• „No future“ was a slogan of the late seventies of the last century. Cohort-sequence designs allow comparisons of constellations, plots, and narrative strategies resulting in typical constructions of narrative identities, perhaps even dressed in vocabularies related to generation-specific spirit of the day or zeitgeist.
Thank you for your attention!

Barbara.Keller@uni-bielefeld.de

Research Center for Biographical Studies in Contemporary Religion
wwwhomes.uni-bielefeld.de/religionsforschung/
References


