Crisis experiences and the development of belief and unbelief

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ABSTRACT

Crisis and belief are - seen from a narrative hermeneutic perspective - processes, in which the interpretation and the attribution of meaning are central concepts. When crisis means that old interpretations fail and new interpretations are sought, the influence on the development of belief and unbelief becomes clear. Using results from Coping- and Socialization-research, as well as from specific investigations of the subject under discussion, we sketch the basic features of a narrative theory, in which two factors are necessary for the individual in crisis to hold on to an attitude of belief: an open frame of interpretation and an open social context. The meaning of the personal narrative as well as of the social context is discussed with regard to crisis and belief. A case study illustrates various aspects of this narrative approach.

INTRODUCTION

Many psychologists and theologians have contributed to research and publications concerning the fields of coping with crisis on the one hand, and religious belief on the other. Very few, however have tried to clarify the relationships. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the meaning of crisis experiences in the development of belief and unbelief. In order to do so our very first task will be to define the concepts we use. This is all the more necessary because there appears to be a wide range of meanings attributed to these terms. After having made some definitory remarks, we propose a model for understanding the process under discussion. This model is based on both our own and others' investigations and on theological and psychological literature.

THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM: SOME REMARKS

Before we can start discussing the major themes of this article, we have to clarify the concept of narrative. In recent years there has been increased interest within various disciplines including theology and psychology. Fundamental for this

narrative approach is the conviction that all perception and experience is structured in a narrative way. This narrative mode of thinking is different from the logical-argumentative (or paradigmatic) mode, in that it focuses on the particularity of the events instead of the universality. In doing so, the narrative mode anchors itself to the specific time and place of the event. When the experience of a specific event is put into language, it becomes a story. A story is not just a way of conveying information, it is a way of structuring and interpreting the facts. Every story attributes a certain meaning to the events it relates by putting the facts in order. In doing so we all create a frame of interpretation, we write the stories of our life, in which all the facts are given meaning. The central story of life is called the personal narrative.

Using a narrative approach, we cannot only clarify concepts like crisis, belief and the interactions between them, but also understand the role of the social context. We play a role in each others story, and together we live by and contribute to a 'shared story', being a cultural or religious frame of reference. (Ganzevoort, in press) The social context is not seen as a compelling influence, but as a powerful orientation or source of meanings.

THE CONCEPT OF CRISIS

Unlike how we talk about crises in everyday life, crisis cannot be defined in terms of events and circumstances. (Murgatroyd & Woolfe 1982) Similar events may evoke a crisis experience in one individual, and a continuous sense of well-being in someone else. (Ganzevoort 1989) We should therefore distinguish between an emotionally hazardous situation on one hand and the crisis experience in the individual on the other. (Morley 1970) Crisis can be described as a turning point in life, where the individual faces a problem that he or she cannot solve. (Aguilera & Messick 1970) In past years much crisis theory was based on the assumption of homeostasis. That is to say, Life is seen as a homeostatic system being threatened in crisis situations, whereas the solution of a crisis is found in a new balance. Although this model has the possibility of clarifying some issues in stake, there are strong arguments against it. Factors like growth, development and change are not easily explained, and human personality has been reduced to an automatic responder. (Taplin 1971) More useful is a model emphasizing individual interpretation and appraisal. Since the Nineteen Sixties, the American psychologist Lazarus and others have invested much in a model of crisis and coping. (Lazarus 1966; Lazarus & Folkman 1984) In their theory, coping is seen as the complex cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as threatening. One of the key-concepts is 'appraisal'. Lazarus distinguishes three forms of appraisal. Primary appraisal is the interpretation of a situation as damaging, challenging, threatening, or conducive to positive well-being. (Lazarus 1977) Secondary appraisal is the perception and evaluation of coping possibilities and resources. Re-appraisal is the change in interpretation as a result of a change in conditions. This re-appraisal is an outcome of the coping process.

A narrative theory of crisis

Using these concepts stemming from a cognitive psychological framework and working from a narrative hermeneutic perspective, we take crisis as a rather narrowly defined phenomenon. We see the human individual as an interpreter of his or her own life. All the experiences the individual encounters should be interpreted and given meaning. When we meet a new situation, we use the central story line of our personal narrative to tell us what this new situation means to us. As long as we are able to do so, the story line keeps intact, and is continued. When the situation is not interpretable within the central story line, there are only two possibilities. One is to deny the situation or the impact of the situation. The other is to change the story line. If the situation cannot be denied, and is too important to overlook, the story line is interrupted. This is what should be called a crisis.

In this narrative view on crisis experiences we are able to identify and describe both developmental and traumatic crises. While traumatic crises have been described above, by developmental crises we mean those crisis experiences as described by Erikson. (1968) In his theory, the individual life course can be divided into several stages. The transition from stage to stage is made through a crisis in which the conflict between two polar factors should be solved. Identity can then be seen as the cumulative crisis solutions during the life course. Each critical situation however can be clarified in a hermeneutic theory. When for example we look at the first crisis, the conflict is between basic trust and basic mistrust. This can be seen as a conflict of interpretations. Both trust and mistrust are possible interpretations of the facts of life. The infant has to interpret the given situation in the light of either trust or mistrust, or it may take a position somewhere in between the two poles. In doing so, it creates its own frame of interpretation, or -in other words- it writes a chapter of its personal narrative.

Every subsequent crisis in Eriksons theory can be seen as a new situation encountered in the course of life in which this personal narrative cannot adequately explain the facts as they are perceived. That is why a crisis occurs which should be solved in a new meaningful narrative. The Eriksonian concept of identity can thus be closely linked to Ricoeurs concept of the narrative identity. (Ricoeur 1988) That is to say: we do not just use narratives in order to find a meaningful interpretation, we are a narrative identity. We are -so to speak- the central character in our own story. Shortly, we define crisis as the experience that the personal narrative or frame of interpretation cannot adequately give meaning to new facts in the course of life, where the facts are interpreted as too important to neglect.

THE CONCEPT OF BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

The second concept that needs a clear definition is the concept of belief and unbelief. For the purpose of this article we take both belief and unbelief as religious attitudes. (Vergote 1984) Like others, Fowler (1981) distinguishes

between religion, faith and belief. He takes religion as the cumulative tradition of expressions of faith. Belief is seen as the adherence to certain (religious) convictions or ideologies, and faith is described as the attitude of an individual's heart and will, a sense of loyalty and trust. Some years later, Fowler (1987) took faith as the construing of the conditions of existence. He then mentioned three important kinds of construal involved: a patterned knowing (i.e. belief), a patterned valuing (i.e. commitment or devotion), and a patterned construction of meaning (including narrative). This description shows that faith is seen as the concept that includes belief. We tend to agree with Fowlers earlier definition of religion, faith and belief. It might be stated that religion is the more formal and social dimension, belief the cognitive dimension, and faith the affective and relational dimension. This relational dimension should include the relationship with God, just like in object-relation-psychology some have integrated the religious and social dimensions. (Kegan 1982, Rizzuto 1979) It is an object of the psychology of religion to investigate the interaction of these dimensions. Interesting in this respect is the study of Streib (1991), who combined the views of Fowler and Ricoeur, and found that both in religion and in identity the notion of 'responsiveness' can be used as a central concept. The interpretations we give are responses to the facts of life. These interpretations are formed and structured through the personal narrative.

We take belief to be the cognitive dimension of a religious attitude, in which human life is interpreted within a religious frame of reference, a central story line that says: 'God has something to do with it'. Unbelief, however, is in the same way a religious attitude. Unbelief means that human life is interpreted within a religious frame of reference, a central story line that says: 'God has nothing to do with it'. Brown (1987) states that belief and unbelief are processes of adherence to traditionally defined doctrines on one hand and experiences of reality on the other. Both belief and unbelief are central story lines that express an interpretation of the facts of life and give an answer to the questions concerning the relationship between God and our lives. Both attitudes address an ultimate concern and ultimate meaning of life, and thereby are fundamentally religious. (Winquist 1978)

A THEORETICAL MODEL

The subject under discussion is the interaction of crisis experiences and the development of belief and unbelief. Using the concepts as circumscribed above, we can formulate a narrative theory of crisis, belief and unbelief. The question to be answered is how the attitudes of belief and unbelief develop and what the influence of crisis experience can be. Common knowledge and clinical pastoral experience show that crisis experience can strengthen both belief and unbelief. A further question therefore is why crisis experiences in some cases support the development of belief, and in others the development of unbelief.

When we take belief and unbelief as interpretations within a religious frame of reference, and a crisis experience as the failure of the personal frame of reference

to give adequate meaning to the facts of life, then the basic features of this narrative theory emerge. The individual is constantly interpreting his or her own world, writing the personal narrative in which these fundamentally religous questions are to be answered. This means that identity as it becomes clear in the personal narrative and belief are very closely linked. Both belief and identity are dimensions of the personal narrative and contribute to the interpretations we make. Both tell us who we are. (Gillespie 1979) Crisis is the rupture of this personal narrative, asking for a re-writing and the attribution of a new meaning to the same facts. Through crisis experiences we come to a new interpretation, a central story line that may be quite different from before. In the new personal narrative the interpretations concerning the place of God in our lives may significantly change. It is possible that new interpretations of belief substitute old interpretations as in unbelief. This is the case in conversion. (Loder 1981) Several publications concerning conversion show the importance of crisis for conversional experiences or religious commitment. (Johnson 1978; Kox 1989; Ullman 1989; Jongsma-Tieleman 1991) This combination of crisis and conversion takes crisis experiences as an antecedent of conversion. Another combination is the theoretical parallel between crisis and conversion. Both phenomena can be described as fundamental changes in interpretation. This first type of crisis-belief relationships can be called positive conversion.

A second possibility is the situation where interpretations of belief are substituted in crisis experiences by interpretations of unbelief. We might call these situations conversions too, because the religious dimension of the personal narrative or frame of interpration in these cases is also thoroughly changed. We therefore call this type negative conversion. The third possible outcome is a change in interpretations where the fundamental narrative of belief or unbelief is not substituted by its counterpart. In this case we speak of stable belief or stable unbelief.

before crisis	BELIEF	UNBELIEF
after crisis		
BELIEF	stable belief	negative conversion
UNBELIEF	positive conversion	stable unbelief

That belief and unbelief may change in crisis experiences is not too hard to explain in a narrative theory. More important, however, and more difficult is the question why it changes the way it does. What are the factors involved that make crisis experiences change the belief / unbelief-attitudes? It is this question that is part of our investigations at the Utrecht research program on context and the attribution of meaning. Detailed conclusions are not yet available, but some comments can be made, based on preliminary results, and on research done by others. This paper will restrict itself to the discussion of the effects of crisis

experiences on a person with an attitude of belief, because the respondents of our investigations all have a religious background.

RESULTS OF COPING-RESEARCH

When discussing the significant factors in the influence of crisis experience on the development of belief and unbelief, we can learn from the psychological field of coping research. Coping being described above, we can turn directly to the results of numerous investigations concerning the significant factors in coping behavior and outcome. These factors can be divided into three groups: person-related, situation-related and context-related factors. (Moos 1986) The first group has to do with the personal frame of interpretation, natural sources like education, ability to relativize, positive character, etcetera. (Ganzevoort 1991) An important aspect is the Locus of Control. This concept distinguishes between individuals who tend to perceive situations as inside their capacity to influence it, and those who perceive it as outside. (Blanchard-Fields & Coleman Irion 1988) Situation-related factors have to do with the proximity, relevance, and controllability of a certain event. Situations appraised as incontrollable have been found to effect more emotion-focused than problem-focused strategies. (Blanchard-Fields & Coleman Irion 1988) As can be expected, different crisis-situations may lead to different threats to the personal narrative. We found in our research-program, that for example the divorce of parents may lead to a crisis-experience involving the social relationships that are of primary importance. Therefore the crucial questions in theses cases are relational and include difficulties in experiencing a relationship with God. In other cases, as in persons who became disabled, the fundamental questions are not relational but concern the content of the personal narrative, for example the question whether God is almighty and caring. Context-related factors involve the situation a person lives in, complications in terms of other problematic events or situations, and social resources. This last item has been investigated in the field of social support and network-research. There are basically two theories why social support is a positive influence to coping. One holds social support to be a factor increasing resistance to vulnerability, while the other takes social support to be a direct influence to a state of well-being. (Cohen & Syme 1985)

As stated, we propose a narrative hermeneutic theory concerning the influence of crisis experiences on the development of belief and unbelief. That means that interpretation, appraisal and reappraisal are the keys to a positive or negative crisis outcome. That is to say, an effective or ineffective coping. Although we cannot claim that effective coping stimulates belief and ineffective coping stimulates unbelief, it is here that the significant elements can be found. Effective coping means that a new interpretation is found to a situation or event formerly interpreted as negative or dangerous. This claim is both valid for active strategies (like finding a new job after a period of unemployment) and direct interpretive acts (like learning to enjoy the freedom of time). Both new action and new interpretation solve the problem in that the situation can be re-appraised, re-

interpreted as no longer dangerous. A second important element of Coping-research is the meaning of social support in crisis and in development.
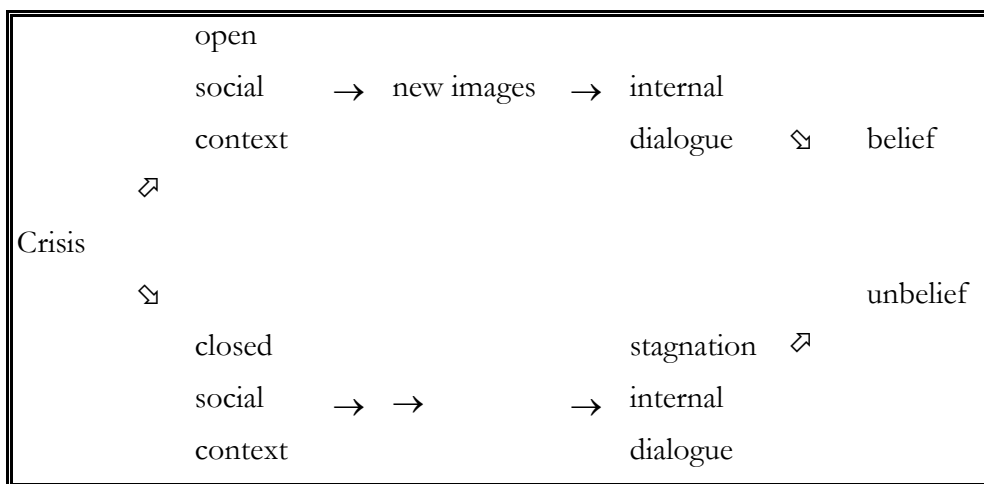
RESULTS OF SOCIALIZATION-RESEARCH

Another field of research we should note here is the investigation of socialization and religious upbringing. In theories of socialization, attention is given to latent and manifest influence on the development of an individual's personality by the social context-factors. (Klaassen 1981) Often the social role of the individual is emphasized. Dahrendorf claims that these roles are defined by society. According to Klaassen, this means that socialization is a compulsive process of influence. Others, like Sundén (1966) incorporate social interaction in the concept of role. Every social role implies the opposite role. More that that, the social role not only teaches the individual what to do, but also provides a frame of reference, that makes it possible to perceive reality. (Sundén 1975) In theories of religious socialization nowadays more attention is given to the individual's attribution of meaning. The social context is no longer seen as a compulsive source of meanings and attitudes, but as a frame of reference, a possible orientation for individual interpretations. In childhood, the horizon of this orientation will not exceed the small group of parents, family and friends, while in adulthood new horizons become possible, new frames of reference, giving the opportunity of finding quite different sources of meaning. (Ganzevoort 1987)

RESEARCH ON COPING AND RELIGION

We now turn to investigations directly concerning our subject. In his research on religion and grief, the most significant factor Van Uden (1985) has found was the personality of the individual. He compares two dimensions: coping with grief, and the functioning of a belief system. Combining these axes, he finds a typology of four groups. In each category, the outcome of coping and the functioning of religion are dependent of the personality and the individual life course. Van Knippenberg (1990) uses two other dimensions: a social and a symbolic one. In the symbolic dimension the poles are the christian and the personal interpretation of suffering, in the social dimension the poles are internal and external communication concerning suffering. Effective coping and the development of belief involves a de-stagnation of this double communication and interpretation.

In the research program of the theological faculty of the University of Utrecht we conduct an investigation concerning the multiple relationships between crisis-experiences and the development of belief and unbelief. Going through crises, some individuals state that their religious system of meaning provides them force and perspective helping them to cope adequately with crisis-experiences. Others however find themselves in a religious crisis as well. We try to locate the significant factors in these relationships. In order to do so we use biographical methods in a qualitative approach. The aim of this investigation is to formulate a grounded theory of crisis-experiences and faith development. The results so far

show that it is not a Life Event at itself that contributes to the development of belief and unbelief, but especially coping-factors like adequate social support within the religious context. Using Van Knippenbergs model and the data collected in our research program in which he participated, Van Eck (1990) has proposed the following model. When an individual in crisis meets an open social context, the opportunity is there of finding new interpretations, so that an internal dialogue can function and effect belief. A closed social context effects a stagnation of the internal dialogue and effects unbelief. He further claims that belief, in an open social context and further internal dialogue effects a positive crisis outcome, whereas in a closed social context and with stagnation of the internal dialogue it leads to a negative crisis outcome.

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                    open
                    social      →   new images   →   internal
                    context                          dialogue    ↘   belief
              ↗
Crisis
              ↘                                                       unbelief
                    closed                           stagnation  ↗
                    social      →    →               →   internal
                    context                              dialogue
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CONDITIONS FOR BELIEF

We have to come to a conclusion and formulate the outline of a theory in which both the aspects of interpretation and the social dimension have their place. When a person enters a crisis, his or her personal narrative is challenged, and interpretations should be found to give adequate meaning to the events of life. Because the personal narrative is challenged, the belief system is challenged as well. In order to find a new interpretation that makes it possible to continue believing, the following is necessary:

1. A personal narrative that has the possibility of giving meaning to contingency. (Leyener 1988) This involves a stable personality. (Van Uden 1985)

2. A social context that is able to give the support needed, and that can be interpreted by the individual as a channel of Gods support.

These conditions represent the social and symbolic dimensions of our experiences. In our narrative theory, the symbolic dimension of interpretation and appraisal is primary in importance. The complex relationship between crisis and belief is a fundamentally personal and hermeneutic matter that can be understood only from the personal narrative. However, we cannot overlook the social influences and consequences. A narrative theory incorporates this social dimension.

THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN CRISIS AND BELIEF

The first condition for the development of belief through crisis situations is a personal narrative that can give meaning. It is here that we find the influence of a religious frame of reference. As Van Uden (1985) has pointed out, an individual's personality is of principal importance to both coping and belief. Within our narrative approach we choose to speak of a person's personal narrative rather than of his or her personality. In the personal narrative we attribute meaning to events in our lives, and this narrative has a religious dimension as well. We found in our interviews at the Utrecht research on 'Context and the attribution of meaning' that it is not the content of the religious interpretations that makes a person able or unable to cope with crisis. Neither does this content define whether in crisis a belief system can remain or is rejected. Interviewees with very different religious views come to the same outcome, and identical views lead to very different outcomes.

Our data suggest that the most important aspects of a religious frame of interpretation are flexibility and reach. By flexible we mean that contingency in life should not be excluded in this belief system. A belief system that can attribute meaning to negative Life Events has more chance of remaining important through crisis periods than a belief system that can only explain positive events. The actual theological content may differ from Gods omnipotent providence to His powerless compassion, but there has to be a possibility of interpreting the perceived facts within the personal narrative and belief system.

By reach we try to identify how central religious beliefs are to the personal narrative. Some interviewees show a far stretching integration of faith and life, beliefs and interpretations. Everything they experience is interpreted and given meaning in a religious narrative. The reach of the belief system includes their whole frame of interprettation. Others show a more limited reach; beliefs then are part of their personal narrative, and sometimes only marginal. The more central beliefs are, the bigger the chance that they contribute to positive coping and the development of ongoing belief. We try to assess this reach by the life stories that are shared in the interviews

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN CRISIS AND BELIEF

The second condition mentioned is the religious social context. Basically, it is the social context that functions as a point of reference. The referential figures (or significant others) form a second horizon of understanding, thereby offering the opportunity of finding new interpretations. In crisis, where the personal horizon is under threat, this social horizon can give both the stability to survive, and the chance for new life. A social context able to relate to the transcendent is therefore very important for the development or maintenance of belief attitudes in crisis experiences. As stated earlier, the most important aspect of the social context is that it should be open for meaningful communication to foster the internal dialogue which is necessary in the re-writing of the personal narrative.

The social context can be a useful orientation in searching for new interpretations. On the other hand, it can also be a source of hermeneutic problems. As Gerkin (1986) shows, the world today is characterized by fragmentation. There is no longer a 'symbolic universe' to guide our interpretations; in every situation we have to make a choice between the various narratives we live in. A good example is the adolescent who shares the story of 'faith' on sundays, the story of 'boredom' on schooldays, the story of 'responsability' on a saturday job, and the story of 'fun' on friday nights, but without integrating these stories in a central story line. This fragmentation of the narratives the social context offers is of great importance in pastoral and psychological counseling.

In two more ways the social context can be problematic. In several cases, the crisis situation originates in the social context, as is the fact in grief and divorce. In these situations, the social context itself is part of the problem. The second way in which the social context is negatively involved, is when the whole social network is influenced. In many cases severe crises can cause a marriage to break down, thereby complicating the crisis experience. In other cases, members of the network cannot deal with the crisis situation and turn their back on the person in crisis. (Eckenrode & Gore 1981)

CASE STUDY: DESPERATELY SEEKING SENSE

Berend is born in the early sixties in an upper-middle-class family. Both his parents are well educated. His first seven years he remembers as warm and harmonic, but the relationships are not tight. As the family income increased, they moved to an expensive house isolated from the neighbourhood. Due to the fact that they only had each other, the atmosphere was more tense. His parents regularly had arguments among them, culminating in physical violence. Berend chose the side of his mother, and took the role of mediator. At the age of seventeen his parents divorced and Berend failed his yearly exams. In this period he experiences difficulties concerning his sexual development and medical problems concerning his neck. After having completed his school-education, he reports living in a more or less depressive state for over a year. Meanwhile he tries to study economics, but his physical problems force him to quit. After that,

he spends a year working and living in Israel, another year at an anthroposofic centre of education, and one more year studying art-history. Finally he starts working at a museum.

Ever since he was a young boy, Berend was interested in questions of meaning and religion. His grandmother was important in this respect because to him she symbolized a spiritual life. Because of this orientation, he chose to be a member of a liberal Mennonite church. When he is at the age of twenty-five, a friend invites him to a pentecostal service, and Berend is impressed by seeing a woman being cured on prayer. Because of his own problems, and the new found hope for a solution, he commits himself to this congregation for some years.

As time passes by, Berend discovers several topics in the religious life view and doctrines of this group, that he can not agree with. More than that, his problems (sexual, medical and relational) are not solved. It is then that he meets a few progressive-evangelical people living in a commune, and he decides to move in. The commune provides lodging and counseling for young people in distress, and Berend is one of the counselors. However, his own problems are not solved, and that is why, at the time of the interview, he has decided to move out again, planning to take up another study. In the meantime Berend has also sought psychological counseling, and he has undergone eye-surgery, but in both cases the hoped for and expected psychological rest was not the result.

Analysis

The story of Berend is one of seeking, finding, and disappointment. In every part of his life he tries to solve the problems he experiences by starting new things. Every time he is deeply involved, and subsequently disappointed. As we are discussing the relationship between crisis experiences and the development of belief and unbelief, that will be the focus of our analysis. Berends story shows a pattern of adhering to certain beliefs, and rejecting them as he finds out that they do not help him. The content of these beliefs varies from liberal mennonite to fundamentalist pentecostal. It would be possible to discuss the degree of maturity in his religious development, or to call his attitude extrinsic religiosity. However, it seems more fruitful to try to understand why Berend cannot find a new orientation.

As his story tells us, Berend has been interested in questions of religious meaning since he was a young boy. The pattern of seeking sense in different belief systems is part of his central story line. However, we have to go beyond matters of personality and maturity in understanding the social origins of his quest for meaning. The social context of Berend is fragmented from an early phase of his development and continues to be so. Not only are his parents opposed to one another, but there are no mutual friends to him and his brothers or friends. In other words, the density of his social network is extremely low. The consequenses of this low density are that there is a lack of clear values and interpretations that are part of a shared story, and also that practical and emotional support is insufficient. (Kadushin 1982) Berends seeking of sense then has lost the safe

social setting he experienced in his first years. When this social horizon could not provide a meaningful and secure narrative to live in, the incertainty of his personal horizon leaves Berend no choice but to continue seeking sense in changing social settings.

The story of Berend is an illustration of the functioning of the social context and the attrribution of meaning in a crisis experience. In Berends case, the development is in the direction of belief. That is to say: he is seeking for an interpretation of life in a religious attitude of acceptance. Berend wants to write his personal narrative in connection to God. However, due to the crisis experience in this specific setting, no real integration has been found, and Berend is living for the time being with fragments of a personal narrative, in which the central story line is not yet clear.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have outlined a narrative model of the relationships between crisis experiences and the development of belief and unbelief. Because our own research is not completed yet, we do not hold many claims at this moments. Still, we do claim that both religious content and social context are important in crisis experiences. In addition to that, we claim that a narrative approach is not only fruitful, but necessary to come to understand the various factors in specific individuals.

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