



A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON RELIGIOUS IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT AMONG TURKISH YOUTH

BY

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to extend theories on identity development by examining religious identity development in the Turkish context. The study adopts a socio-ecological approach to explore both micro and macro contextual factors in relation to the religious identity development of Turkish youth. Within this broad framework, a peace psychological approach was employed to explain religious identity development in a conflictual social context i.e., religious based socio-political conflicts, and religious versus secular social segmentations in the society. The research questions focus on the process of religious identity development, micro and macro influences on religious identity development, religious identity conflicts, and conflict resolution strategies among Turkish youth. A qualitative study was conducted adopting the elements of grounded theory methodology. Data were collected from a total of 34 (13 male, 21 female) Turkish youth, aged between 19 to 25 years, from four universities in Turkey. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, participants were asked to freely narrate their life stories with a specific emphasis on their religious development. The analysis focuses on the process of the youth's religious identity construction in relation to micro and macro social constructions within the Turkish context, individual identity conflicts, and ways of resolutions. The findings indicate that the process of religious identity development was primarily influenced by micro-contextual factors with family being the most influential especially during the earlier phases of development, while adolescent and early adult stages were characterized by purposeful individual religious inquiries. Apart from family, friends, and school, religious-based organizations appeared as one of the features that was particularly influential in the Turkish context of religious identity development. The findings also demonstrate direct and indirect impacts of macro contextual factors on religious identity construction. Reflections of socio-political religious-based conflicts were observed in the youth's narratives as an external source of religious identity conflict. The emerged theoretical model represented a detailed portrayal of the many micro and macro elements within the Turkish context in relation to youth's religious identity development, while at the same time demonstrating the interconnections between the contextual conflicts and individual identity conflicts. Religious identity types were categorized in terms of personal and social dimensions, while the kinds of religious identity expressions chosen could be seen as outcomes of the resolution strategies adopted in dealing with religious identity conflicts. Overall, the findings suggest that individual religious identity, as a dynamic phenomenon, is highly subjected to micro and macro context impacts. This can be seen in the variations of individual experiences of religious identity within the personal and social dimensions, and their expressions of religious identity as a way to negotiate and adapt to the prevailing social context. The discussion focuses on the major findings of the study in the light of religious identity and peace psychology literature. Implications of the present findings with regard to conflict resolution strategies for identity-based conflicts at the individual and societal levels as well as religious education, and positive youth development are considered along with recommendations for future research.

خلاصة البحث

هذا البحث يهدف إلى توسيع نظريات تطور الهوية من خلال دراسة تطور الهوية الدينية في السياق التركي. اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الاجتماعي البيئي لاستكشاف كل من العوامل السياقية الصغرى والكبرى فيما يتعلق بتطوير الهوية الدينية للشباب التركي. ضمن هذا الإطار الواسع، استخدم نهج علم نفس السلام لشرح تطور الهوية الدينية في سياق النزاع الاجتماعي، أي الصراع الاجتماعي السياسي على أساس ديني، والانقسام الديني مقابل الاجتماعي العلماني في المجتمع. أسئلة البحث ركزت على عملية تنمية الهوية الدينية، والتأثيرات الكبرى والصغرى على تنمية الهوية الدينية، وصراعات الهوية الدينية، وإستراتيجيات حل النزاعات عند الشباب التركي. وقد أجريت دراسة نوعية اعتمدت على عناصر منهجية التأسيس النظري. حيث تم جمع البيانات من ما مجموعه 34 (13 من الذكور و 21 من الإناث) من الشباب التركي، الذين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 19-25 عاما، من أربع جامعات في تركيا. وباستخدام طريقة المقابلة الشخصية الشبه منهجية، طُلب من المشاركين أن يروون بحرية قصص حياتهم مع التركيز بشكل خاص على مفهوم الديني. ركز التحليل على عملية بناء الهوية الدينية لدى الشباب فيما يتعلق بالتشكيل الجزئي والكلبي الاجتماعي في السياق التركي، وصراعات الهوية الفردية، وسبل الحلول. أشارت النتائج إلى أن عملية تطور الهوية الدينية تتأثر بشكل أساسي بعوامل صغرى سياقية حيث أن العائلة كانت الأكثر تأثيرا خصوصا خلال المراحل الأولى من التطوير، في حين اتسمت مراحل المراهقة وأوائل سن الرشد بالاستفسارات الدينية الفردية ذات غاية. وبصرف النظر عن الأسرة والأصدقاء والمدرسة، ظهرت المنظمات القائمة على أساس ديني باعتبارها واحدة من العوامل التي كانت مؤثرة لا سيما في السياق التركي فيما يتعلق بتنمية الهوية الدينية. وأظهرت النتائج أيضا التأثيرات المباشرة وغير المباشرة للعوامل البيئية الكبرى على بناء الهوية الدينية. وقد لوحظت انعكاسات الصراعات القائمة على الدين الاجتماعية والسياسية في روايات الشباب باعتبارها مصدر خارجي لصراع الهوية الدينية. يمثل النموذج النظري الذي ظهر في هذه الدراسة صورة مفصلة لكثير من العناصر الجزئية والكلية في الإطار التركي بما يتعلق بتنمية الهوية الدينية للشباب، بينما في نفس الوقت يدل على الترابط بين النزاعات ذات العلاقة بالبيئة وصراعات الهوية الفردية. وقد صنفت أنواع الهوية الدينية في هذه الدراسة من حيث أبعادها الشخصية والاجتماعية، في حين يمكن أن ينظر إلى أنواع التعابير المختارة للهوية الدينية المستقاة في الدراسة أنها نتيجة لتدابير متبعة لحلول للتعامل مع صراع الهوية الدينية. وبشكل عام، تشير النتائج إلى أن الهوية الدينية الفردية، كظاهرة ديناميكية/تفاعلية، تخضع بشدة لتأثيرات السياقات الصغرى والكبرى. ويمكن ملاحظة ذلك في اختلاف التجارب الفردية للهوية الدينية للمشاركين في الدراسة في إطار الأبعاد الشخصية والاجتماعية، وتعابير الهوية الدينية المستخدمة كوسيلة للتصالح والتكيف مع السياق الاجتماعي السائد. يركز جزء مناقشة النتائج على النقاط الرئيسية لنتائج الدراسة في ضوء الهوية الدينية والكتابات في مجال علم نفس السلام. التطبيقات ذات العلاقة بنتائج البحث الحالية فيما يتعلق بطرق حل النزاع على أساس الهوية والمستويات الفردية والمجتمعية، فضلا عن التعليم الديني، وتنمية الشباب بطرق إيجابية تم الأخذ بها في الاعتبار في نهاية البحث بجانب نقاش بعض التوصيات للبحوث المستقبلية.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*To my dear Mother Nurnihal Morgul
To my dear Father Avni Morgul*

*To my dear sisters, Ayse and Esma
To my dear brother Ahmet*

and

*To my lovely niece and nephew
Zehra and Ihsan Selim*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Defining one's self is a fundamental quest in human life, thus the question of identity has been a fundamental issue in many of the social sciences and humanities. Especially in social and developmental psychology since Erik Erikson's (1968) pioneering work, research into the formation and functioning of psychological identity has gained much attention. Erikson (1968), in his developmental theory, defines identity as "a sense of personal sameness and continuity" (17) perceived by one's self and recognized by others. Following Erikson, identity has been largely conceptualized as a mixture of both personal and social contextual processes, with a strong emphasis on the person-context relationship (Bosma, Graaafsma, Grotevant & de Levita, 1994; Flum & Kaplan, 2012; Kroger, 2004; Kunnen, Bosma & Van Geert, 2001; Nurmi, 2001; Schachter, 2002, 2005; Sica, 2009; Visser-Vogel, Westerink, de Kock, Barnard, & Bakker, 2012). Religion, on the other hand, has been largely considered as an essential component of personal and social identity (Collins, 2001). Although Erikson (1968) considers religious identity as a core component of psychological identity, it has not been sufficiently studied and has been largely overlooked (Bell, 2009). Deriving from the developmental psychological approach, religious identity may be defined as a process of individual exploration and commitment to a set of religious beliefs and practices (Waterman, 1993).

The present study focuses on the identity-context relationship in the specific domain of religious identity. The majority of research in the literature on religious identity has been posited from a Christian perspective and using Christian subjects (e.g.,

King, 2003; MacCullough, Enders, Brion & Jain, 2005; McCullough, Tsang & Brion, 2003; Smith & Sikkink, 2003; Queen, 2008), while very few studies have examined Muslim subjects (e.g. Ahmed, 2003; Gregg, 2007; Peek, 2005). Nevertheless, the 9/11 incident has raised attention on Muslim minorities in the West and their religious identity (e.g., Ahmed, 2003; Bilici, 2008; Chaudhry, 2012; Inayat, 2002; Kamal, 2012; Peek, 2005; Schmidt, 2004; Tindongan, 2011). Since then, there has been an increase in the number of research focusing on religious identity in this particular group (Bectovic, 2011; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Duderija, 2008, 2010; Gregg, 2007; Ketner, Buitelaar & Bosma, 2004; Moinian, 2009; Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal & Katsiaficas, 2008; Schmidt, 2004; Small, 2008; Smith, 2010), and also on the effect of religious minority status and marginalisation on overall identity development (e.g., Ahmed, 2003; Bilici, 2008; Fischer, Greitemeyer & Kastenmüller, 2007; Inayat, 2002; Jeldtoft, 2011; Maliapaard & Phalet, 2012; Peek, 2000; Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011; Tindongan, 2011; Zimmerman, 2013). Hokelekli (2006) argues that in the contemporary era, establishing a link between religion and the modern world is problematic in modern secular societies. Modern secular ideologies have attempted to overcome this problem by totally isolating religion from social life, yet religion still remains as an important component of life for many individuals and societies (Chaves, 1989; Collins, 2001). Nonetheless, modern life practices and institutions still influence individual lives, leading to difficulties for individuals who want to remain traditionally religious in a non-religious society (Hokelekli, 2003). Currently, in a number of Western countries (e.g., France, Germany, Belgium, U.S), adhering to religious identity practices, especially among Muslims—for instance wearing headscarf or veiling—are seen as directly connected to national security and have raised political concerns by the Westerners and secularists (Beydoun, 2009; Elver, 2012; Noor, 2009). Secularly

established laws addressing the place of religion in government have led to the prevailing controversies and socio-political phenomena such as Islamophobia (Beydoun, 2009). As a result, Muslims living in such societies are struggling with the existential dilemma of integrating with their respective societies (Hokelekli, 2003), and dealing with stigmatization (Abdullah, 2009; Abo-Zena, Sahli & Tobias-Nahi, 2009; Kunst, Tajamal, Sam & Ulleberg, 2012; Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011). Hence, religious identity is becoming an important phenomenon to be explored, especially among the Muslim population.

Unlike many Christian dominated Western secular countries, many Muslim nations do not distinguish between religion and state, and try to prevent secularization (Fischer, Greitemeyer & Kastenmüller, 2007). Turkey, as a secular state with a predominantly Muslim population (99%, United States Library of Congress, 2006),¹ provides a unique context to explore religious identity development. For a better understanding of the current context, information on Turkey's socio-historical background is needed. Since the emergence of reformist movements in the last century of the Ottoman Empire, the ambiguities in cultural structuring like the debate on Westernism, nationalism and Islamism have caused both economic and socio-cultural problems in Turkish society (Karaman, 1997; Kula, 2001). At the same time the ambiguous conditions have posed serious challenges for the youth who are trying to build their perspectives of life (Kula, 2001; Tas, 2010). Throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey, the modernist projects endeavour to secularise education, politics,

¹ Unfortunately, Turkish Statistical Institute has no research on religion (<http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>). The latest statistical information on religious minority in Turkey is provided by United States Foreign Ministry in "2010 Human Right Report: Turkey," <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/eur/154455.htm>> (accessed April 9, 2011). According to that report less than 1% of the population in Turkey are non-Muslims. Apparently, 99% Muslim majority in Turkey is accepted as a fact that taken for granted so, Turkish national intuitions see it unworthy of research.

everyday life practices and social spaces (Gole, 2003). Within the present Turkish society, those processes of secularisation and their implementations on social life continue to bring forth unique challenges for the youth who want to choose and maintain a religious identity (Hokelekli, 2006). Among such legislative implications, the most remarkable is the headscarf ban at universities which has been reported to have resulted in social and economic constraints, marginalisation, psychological damages and interpersonal difficulties of those who have been subjected to the ban (Akbulut, N., 2008; Akbulut, S. Z., 2011; Genel & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; HAZAR, 2007; Hokelekli, 2006; İşiker, 2011; Kejanlioglu & Tas, 2009; O’Neil, 2008; Rankin & Aytac, 2008; Seggie & Austin, 2010; Yilmaz, 2013). Recent studies on Turkish youth also demonstrate the ongoing tension between the secular and Islamic poles in the society as a source of identity conflict among the youth (Hokelekli, 2003; Genel & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Komecoglu, 2009; Kula, 2001; Mabokela & Seggie, 2006). However, to the knowledge of the researcher there is no in-depth study examining religious identity development processes of Turkish youth in relation to the conflictual socio-historical context they live in. The present study, therefore, attempted to provide further understanding into the struggle of contemporary Turkish youth in constructing their religious identity, within this larger socio-historical context. To be more specific, the study aimed to contribute to social developmental theory by shedding light on the identity-context relationship.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Developmental theories on religion and spirituality (see Fowler, 1981) emphasize much on the personal factors and often do not take social context as an important factor for religious development. Yet, as a social phenomenon, religious identity is highly related

to the person's relationships with her/his immediate surroundings, as well as the macro social context. Religion may also provide a developmental context that endorses identity formation (King, 2003). The importance of contextual factors on individual's identity formation (also referred to as identity construction or configuration) has been largely emphasized in the literature (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Adams, 1998; Adams, Ryan & Keating, 2000; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Bosma et al., 1994; Côté & Levine, 1988, Erikson, 1963, 1968, 1980; Kroger, 2004; Marcia, 1966, 1987 1993; Phinney & Goossens, 1996; Schachter, 2002, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Swanson, 2010). According to Baumeister and Muraven (1996), identity is best understood as an adaptation to a particular developmental context. Adopting a social developmental approach, Adams and Marshall (1996) point out the linkage between macro- and micro-environmental influences on identity. They argue that every society and culture contain points in development when rites, rituals, institutional expectations, or regulations cause individuals to reflect on their behaviour and identity. Thus, individuals construct their identity in a context that entails both macro and micro-environmental facets.

In addition, more recent literature argues the challenging characteristics of our contemporary postmodern context of globalization and multiculturalism as a source of identity conflict, resulting in multiple (or hybrid) identities that manifest also in religious identity (Coymak, & Dogruyol, 2007; Erkan, 2013; Filoramo, 2003; Gole, 2000; Hokelekli, 2006, Jenkins & Gottlieb, 2007; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010; Moinian, 2009; Schachter, 2002, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Sidorenko, 2013; Sirin & Fine, 2007; Shankar, Elliot & Fitchett, 2009). For instance, Schachter (2004), in his conceptualization of identity configuration, illustrates the ways in which individuals merge the multiple elements of their identities into meaningful wholes in order to cope

with the identity conflict caused by the constantly changing multiple contexts of the postmodern era.

In the literature on religious identity development, family (Armet, 2009; Arslan, 2006; Bader & Desmond, 2009; Boyatzis et al., 2005; Dinc, 2007; Gungor, 2012; Kaya, 1998; Kilic, 2012; Ozorak, 1989; Schachter and Ventura, 2007), peers (Arslan, 2006; Gunnoe & Moore, 2002; Martin, White, & Perlman, 2003; Ozorak, 1989) and religious education (Arslan, 2006; Bayar, 2012; Çakır et al., 2004; Gunnoe & Moore, 2002; Kilic, 2012; Onay, 2004) have been emphasized as the most influential micro-contextual factors, with the family as the most important factor. Among studies with Turkish subjects, there are those that have focused on the relationships between parental attitudes, religious affiliation, religious socialization and religious development (Arslan, 2009; Dinc, 2007; Gungor, 2012). There are also studies examining different factors along with family influence, such as friends, religious education and media, in relation to religious orientation (Onay, 2004) or religious identity (Kilic, 2012) among Turkish university students. Studies also have focused on the influence of socio-political conflict at the macro level or the religious secular division in the society (Akboga, 2014; Akpınar, 2006; Cesur & Paker, 2012; Coymak & Dogruyol; 2007) and the impacts of secular implementations (Akbulut, N., 2008; Akbulut, S. Z., 2011; Elver, 2012; Genel & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Isiker, 2011; Komecoglu, 2009; Rankin & Aytac, 2008) on Turkish youth. A review of the literature on Turkish youth's religious identity development suggests that the majority of these studies focused on the influence of micro-contextual factors or the influence of socio-political dilemma at the macro level. To the knowledge of the researcher there is no in-depth study examining the religious identity development of Turkish youth in relation to both micro and macro-context influences, and examining the interactions between the micro and macro contextual

levels. This study aims to fill in this research gap by providing an integrated model of religious identity development, showing the interactions between micro and macro-social contexts and their influence on Turkish youth's religious identity development.

In the light of these contemporary arguments on identity and the postmodern context and the research on Turkish youth (Coymak, & Dogruyol, 2007; Hokelekli, 2006; Genel & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Gole, 1997, 2000, 2003; Kula, 2001; Mabokela & Seggie, 2006; Rankin & Aytac, 2008), this study posits that Turkey's prevailing socio-political climate and positioning of Islam as antithesis to a secular based regime presents provoking practical challenges and conflicts for the youth while forming their religious identity. This may cause Turkish youth to make certain choices to avoid having conflicts with the social order. Some individuals develop multiple identities as an attempt to adjust to the surroundings they live in. As a result, it is quite common to see those youths who are trying to find a place in the social life by identifying themselves with multiple identities such as "Muslim-nationalist," "Muslim-follower of Ataturk," "Muslim-secularist," "Muslim-modern." On the other hand, it is also common to see secularly identified youth occasionally using religious references (Hokelekli, 2006). Hence, Turkey offers a privileged terrain for observing the relation between micro- and macro-environmental influences on one's identity quest by exploring the interplay between secularists and Islamists competing over definitions of religious identity, tolerance and public sphere (Gole, 2003). In this unresolved on-going conflict or tensions between the Islamists and secularists, it is timely to question how Turkish youth construct their religious identity in such a context. Thus, this study is intended to contribute to the understanding of identity formation, particularly religious identity formation among Turkish youth who are living in a secular environment by examining the factors and processes influencing their religious identity formation. The purpose of

this study is to illuminate ways in which Turkish youth speak about their religious identities to depict how micro and macro social contexts influence their religious identity formation. By doing so, this study is aimed to expand social-developmental theory regarding the formation of identity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How is the process of religious identity formation among Turkish youth?
- 2) What are the possible micro and macro factors influencing religious identity development among Turkish youth?
- 3) What kind of identity conflicts do Turkish youth experience in the process of their religious identity development and what strategies do they employ to deal with the conflicts?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- 1) To examine the process of religious identity development among Turkish youth.
- 2) To identify and examine the possible micro and macro factors influencing religious identity development among Turkish youth.
- 3) To identify the conflicts experienced by Turkish youth in the process of their religious identity development and ways in which they cope with the conflicts.