

Religious identity in different cultures sociology essay



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We argue that it is possible to empirically test some of the postulates of the classical distinction between an intrinsic and an extrinsic religious orientation: we investigated how people perceive the difference between an individual and a social religious identity, between a central versus a peripheral religiosity, and which are the different motives effectively underlying these different forms of religious identity. Using an ecological measure based on four types of participants' self-categorization, results from a longitudinal study across six countries provided a new framework for interpreting religious identity. In particular, religious identity was mainly categorized at a social level by European respondents, whereas nonwestern respondents mostly rated it at an individual level; religious identity was perceived as equally central at the individual and social levels of categorization. Last, we compared the strength of different identity motives underlying these different forms of religious identity. In the conclusions, we discuss the importance of investigating the different ways of being religious, and how they differ according to the specific experience of religiosity in a particular national context.

Keywords: religious identity; identity motives; religious orientation; cross-cultural.

The Categorization of Religious Identity in Different Cultures

"Is there a single form of the religious sentiment?" This question was the first interrogation of Allport's seminal book *The individual and his Religion* (1950, p. 3): it is clear even in everyday life experience that individuals differ radically from one another in their ways of being religious and that each

person endorses the religious identity with a different accent. Some years later, Allport and Ross (1967) developed the well-known distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations. In this framework, the intrinsic orientation is typical of an individual who lives religiosity as something personal, mainly consisting of private expression, central in life and satisfying the individual need for meaning; on the other hand, the extrinsic oriented individual mainly lives the social aspect of religiosity, considering religion as something peripheral in his/her existence and that responds to social needs, such as the need for belonging or for high social status. Even if it has been widely used, many scholars pointed out the weakness of this definition and the debate on how to define religious identity is still open.

Here, we focus on two parts, which we investigated in a cross-cultural study of late adolescents. The first aspect concerns the level of categorization of religious identity: in the intrinsic orientation, religiosity is personal and endorsed at an individual level, whereas the extrinsic type is mainly associated with a social level and thus with group belonging. Does this distinction correspond to real life experience of religious identity? Is it possible to distinguish between an individual (or personal) versus a social (group belonging) religious identity?

The second aspect deals with the structure of identity: for an intrinsic orientated individual, religious identity is central and of primary importance, while it is peripheral and superficially endorsed in the extrinsic one. Does the distinction between individual and social religious identity entail a difference between a central versus a peripheral religious identity?

In sum, this empirical study investigated in an ecologic framework if some people perceive their own religious identity as an individual characteristic, whereas others as a group belonging, and the implications of this difference for the understanding of religious identity.

The Level of Categorization of Religious Identity: Individual and Social Religious Self

According to the delineation of the religious orientations provided by Allport and Ross (1967), some people live religiosity as something personally chosen and individually endorsed, whereas other people live religiosity mainly as a belonging to a social group. In the literature, research into religiosity sometimes consider the individual aspect of religion, for example solitary personal prayer (e. g. Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010), while at other times consider the social side of religiosity, for example the feeling of belonging to a group and the commitment toward this group (e. g. Vekuyten & Yildiz, 2010).

Cohen, Hall, Koenig, and Meador (2005) argued that the importance of social aspects in religion can be viewed as a cultural characterization of certain religious denominations (see also Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin, 2003; Hall, Meador, Koenig, 2008); for example, the emphasis on communitarian aspects (praying together, feeling a sense of belonging) is stronger in certain denominations, whereas in other denominations the emphasis is more on individual religiosity (e. g. beliefs, conversion, personal prayer). Another possible explanation for the different emphasis put on the individual versus social side of religiosity can be found in general culture: the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures might also affect

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differences in religious identity (Triandis, 1995). The six countries included in the present study all have a Christian historical background (paired with Islam in Lebanon), but they differ in levels of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995). Thus, we explored the question about the individual or social characterization of religious identity in a large sample of different cultures, allowing to compare between individualistic and collectivistic countries.

To our knowledge, no study to date has investigated with an ecologic approach what people actually feel about their religious identity. A first purpose in the present study is to look at what people say when they think about their religious identity. In particular, we proposed to look at four possible levels of categorization, drawing on self- categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987): an individual level, a relational level, a small group level and a large group level. We expected that some people perceive their own religious identity mainly as a personal characteristic, whereas others perceive it as a group belonging, etc. Therefore, we examined which level of categorization people associate their religious identity with if directly asked, without any sort of priming (e. g. without influence by instructions or by item formulation).

The Structure of Identity: Central and Peripheral Religious Self

The question about the centrality of religiosity in the individual self is assuming growing importance in the literature. In fact, it is argued that the individual differences in centrality of the religious self may also result in different degrees of integration of religion in life, and thus to different

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outcomes (Pargament, 2002). According to Allport and Ross' (1967) theorization, intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity imply a different degree of centrality of religion in the individual's life: the intrinsic orientation entails centrality in life, i. e. subjective importance of religion, and it is seen as a more mature form of religiosity, whereas in the extrinsic form religiosity is a more peripheral part of life. Given that the authors consider intrinsic form of religiosity mainly as individual religiosity, they also assume that the individual religious self is more central than the social (extrinsic) religious self, which is seen as more peripheral.

Nevertheless, this clear-cut opposition is questioned from many parts (e. g. Pargament, 1992; Burris, 1994). Flere and Lavric (2007) argued that intrinsic religious orientation is a culturally specific American Protestant concept and concluded that it is time for scholars to approach the question of the "authenticity [italics added] of non-intrinsic religious orientation, including social extrinsic orientation not just as sociability, but as a legitimate path for achieving grace and salvation" (p. 529).

Therefore, we argue that research into the perceived centrality of different types of religious selves would gain clarity by being investigated cross-culturally, comparing across cultures the perceived importance of religiosity in the individual, relational or social self.

In the present study, we investigated the centrality - measured as perceived subjective importance - of religious self in identity in a cross-cultural sample from six nations, including both western and nonwestern countries. We examined if people who define their religious identity more in terms of

individual versus relational versus social self also show different degrees of centrality of that religious identity. According to the evidence provided by Cohen and colleagues (2005), and Flere and Lavric (2007), the social aspects of religiosity can be perceived equally important as the individual aspects by the person herself; thus, we expected to observe equivalent degrees of centrality at all levels of categorization.

The Present Study

This study is based on secondary analysis of a data set of a broader longitudinal study into culture and identity (Becker, Vignoles, Owe, Brown, Smith, Easterbrook, et al., 2012). For the purpose of the present research, we examined six different cultural contexts: three European countries from different parts of Europe (UK, Belgium, Italy) and three non European countries, specifically a Middle East country (Lebanon), one in East Asia (Philippines) and one in sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia). These countries represent six very different cultural contexts in which religious identity can develop, with varying levels of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995): the UK, Italy and Belgium have similar high rates for individualism, while Lebanon, Philippines and Ethiopia are all collectivistic countries (Hofstede, 2001). We hypothesized that in all these contexts people can perceive their religious identity at different levels of categorization, with implications for the centrality of religious identity and for the motives underlying each type of religious self.

In the previous sections of this paper, we accounted for the distinction between individual and social religious self; then we exposed the centrality or non centrality of religious identity and the multiplicity of motives that can

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be at the basis of religious identity. The study reflects this pattern and provides answers to three research questions: (1) Are there individuals who categorize their religious identity as individual and others who categorize their identity as relational or social? Our hypothesis, following Cohen et al. (2005), was that participants define their religious identity both as individual and as social. (2) Is the individual religious self the most central religious identity? Our hypothesis, consistent with Cohen et al. (2005) and Flere and Lavric (2007) findings that both individual and social motives can have the same importance in religious identity, was that, irrespective of culture, the perceived centrality of religious identity is equivalent at the individual, relational and group level of identity.

Method

Participants. Participants were a subsample of the broader research project, constituted by secondary school students in the UK, Belgium, Italy, Lebanon, Philippines, and Ethiopia. A total of 1,793 participants took part in the study. The mean age was 17.5 (SD 1.1); 257 were residents in the UK, 194 in Belgium, 187 in Italy, 300 in Lebanon, 250 in Ethiopia, and 300 in the Philippines.

Demographic information regarding age, gender, general religiosity (mean rates for "How important is religion to you?", from 1 "not at all" to 5 "extremely") and religious belonging in each national sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participants Characteristics and Religious Belonging by Sample.

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Sample

Belgium

Ethiopia

Italy

Lebanon

Philippines

UK

Mean Age (sd)

17. 7(1. 1)

18. 1(1. 0)

18. 1(0. 8)

17. 3(0. 5)

17. 9(1. 3)

17. 1(0. 8)

% Female

57

45

61

46

66

75

Religiosity (1-5)

2. 14

4. 77

2. 69

3. 73

4. 03

1. 92

% Christian

45. 4

97. 1

77. 8

34

89. 3

34. 1

% Muslim

6. 0

1. 2

1. 6

61. 3

0. 7

0. 8

% Other

1. 2

-

3. 8

2. 0

8. 7

2. 4

% no relig. belonging

46. 6

1. 6

16. 8

2. 7

1. 3

61

Procedure. The research was introduced as a study about "opinions, thoughts and feelings"; participants were recruited through schools and were not compensated in any way. As the present study is based on secondary analysis, the research team members who supervised the completion of the questionnaire were unaware of the research's aim, so participants were not influenced about religion/religiosity. A questionnaire was filled out at the beginning of the school year (time 1) and, after a period of approximately six months, another questionnaire was completed (time 2). In nations where this was an ethical requirement, parental consent was obtained in advance.

Measures. Measures were included within a larger questionnaire concerning identity construction and cultural orientation (see Becker et al, 2012; Owe et. al, 2012). The questionnaires were administered in English in UK and Philippines, and they were translated from English into French (Belgium), Italian (Italy), Arabic (Lebanon) and Amharic (Ethiopia) in each country. Independent back-translations were made by bilinguals who were not familiar with the research topic and hypotheses. Ambiguities and inconsistencies were identified and resolved by discussion, adjusting the translations. Only the measures relevant to this article are described here. <https://assignbuster.com/religious-identity-in-different-cultures-sociology-essay/>

Generation of identity aspects. First, participants were asked to generate freely ten answers to the question " Who are you?" (hereafter, these answers will be referred to as identity aspects), using an adapted version of the Twenty Statements Test (TST, Kuhn & McPartland, 1954, see Becker et al., 2012). This part of the questionnaire was located at the very beginning of the questionnaire, so that responses would be constrained as little as possible by theoretical expectations or demand characteristics. The ten aspects generated by respondents at time 1 were re-presented at time 2 and participants re-evaluated them after the time lag.

Self-categorization of identity aspects. (Vignoles et al., 2006). Participants were asked to indicate for each identity aspect the category that best fitted their identity aspect, by circling a letter (possible choices: I, for individual characteristic, R, for relationship with someone, SM, for belonging to a small group, LG, for belonging to a large group). We adopted four categories in order to maximize the ecological approach and let respondents choose between more than a dichotomous alternative.

Identity centrality. (Vignoles et al. 2006). A question measured the perceived centrality of each identity aspect within participants' subjective identity structures (How important is each of these things in defining who you are?; scale anchors were 0 = not at all important, 10 = extremely important). The same item was answered both at time 1 and at time 2.

Identity motives. (Vignoles et al., 2006). Participants were asked to rate each of their identity aspects on the six identity motives. The questions measured the association of each identity aspect with feelings of self-esteem (How

much does each of these things make you see yourself positively?), distinctiveness (How much do you feel that each of these things distinguishes you-in any sense-from other people?), belonging (How much does each of these things make you feel you "belong"-that you are included among or accepted by people who matter for you?), efficacy (How much does each of these things make you feel competent and capable?), continuity (How much does each of these things give you a sense of continuity-between past, present and future-in your life?), meaning (How much does each of these things give you the sense that your life is meaningful?). Scale anchors were 0 = not at all, 10 = extremely.

Results

After collecting data, we read all the identity aspects and selected the identity aspects referring to religion, coding them as 1 and all other aspects as 0. All the aspects that mentioned God, Religion, belonging to religious organizations, etc. were coded as religious identity aspects. Examples are: Christian, Religious, God fearing, Member of the Church, etc. The percentage of people who mentioned at least one religious identity aspect in each country were: Ethiopia 47%, Philippines 33%, Italy 13%, Belgium 9%, Lebanon 7%, UK 6%. Most of the following analyses, except where indicated, were conducted selecting only participants' religious identity aspects.

Self-categorization of religious identity aspects. The questionnaire item, as described before, allowed to choose between individual characteristic, relationship with someone, belonging to a small group and belonging to a large group. The percentages of selected categories differed in each country sample. As we can see in Figure 1, European participants mainly categorized <https://assignbuster.com/religious-identity-in-different-cultures-sociology-essay/>

their religious identity aspects as 'group belonging', while non-European participants labeled their religious identity aspects as 'individual characteristic' in the majority of cases; 'relationship with someone' and 'small group' were chosen by a minority of respondents. A Chi-square test indicated significant differences between countries, $\chi^2(15, 232) = 47.981$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .263$.

We then checked if the differences in categorization were connected to general culture. We tested if it was a general tendency of western respondents to define all their identity aspects as "group belongings", but we found that this categorization is specific to religious identity aspects: a Chi-square test conducted on all identity aspects of the European samples indicated a significant difference of categorization between religious and non religious identity aspects, $\chi^2(3, 1) = 33.645$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .320$. Conversely, the same Chi-square test indicated no significant differences of categorization between religious and non religious identity aspects in the nonwestern samples, $\chi^2(3, 1) = 665$, $p = .881$.

Figure1.

Figure 1. Percentages of self-categorization of religious identity aspects in each sample.

Centrality of religious identity in the different levels of categorization. We tested the hypothesis that religious identity aspects would be perceived as more central (i. e. rated as more important) in an individual religious self (aspects labeled as individual characteristic) than in a relational (aspects labeled as relation with someone) or social religious self (aspects labeled as <https://assignbuster.com/religious-identity-in-different-cultures-sociology-essay/>

small group belonging or large group belonging). However, the ANOVA comparing the means of the four groups revealed no significant differences in the centrality of the religious identity aspects ($F(3, 202) = 1.61, p = .189$). Mean centrality for each level of categorization is reported in Figure 2. Thus, all levels of categorization of religious identity are associated to the same degree of importance for the person who endorses one of them.

Figure 2. Mean identity centrality of the religious self by level of categorization. Numbers in parentheses report standard deviations.

Centrality was significantly different between countries ($F(5, 202) = 6.40, p < .001; \eta^2p = .14$). However, the Category X Country interaction was non-significant ($F(14, 202) = 1.01, p = .447$), meaning that, even if participants from different countries perceive different mean levels of centrality, the differences in perceived centrality between categories are not affected by the cultural aspects of each national sample.

Discussion

Our aim was to explore different forms of religious identity in different countries. The study measured the occurrence of religious identity with an ecological procedure, where participants freely generated aspects of their identities. In countries with a higher mean religiosity, a higher number of participants listed a religious identity aspect in their identity. We first investigated the level of self-categorization (Turner et al., 1987) that participants choose for the religious aspects of their identity. Interesting between-country differences were observed: most Western participants rated their religious identity as group belonging, whereas nonwestern

participants rated it as individual characteristic. This pattern does not match the traditional individualist-collectivist distinction (Triandis, 1995), and it cannot be explained by general culture (as tested by the comparison with other, non-religious, identity aspects of the same participants), but probably reflects something more specifically connected with religious traditions and habits. These results are in line with Cohen et al. (2005) and add to the existing theory the specification that the importance of social versus individual aspects of religious identity varies not only by religious denomination but also by the specific experience of religiosity in a specific national context. It could be, for example, that in Western countries, where religion is not so widespread, people who experience religiosity necessarily have this experience by means of affiliation with a particular group. On the contrary, in countries in which religion is more widespread, individuals can live a religious experience individually and without entering a specific group.

The second aim of our study was to compare religious identity centrality at different levels of categorization: literature about intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation suggests that a more personal level of categorization would coincide with a more central (i. e. perceived as important) religious identity (Allport & Ross, 1967). However, we predicted, following Cohen et al. (2005) and Flere and Lavric (2007) that the perceived importance of religious identity should be the same for individual, relational, and social religious identity. In support of this hypothesis, there were no significant differences in the mean rates of identity centrality at the four levels of self-categorization. Thus, this disconfirms the distinction between an extrinsic religiosity that is peripheral and based on group belonging, and an intrinsic religiosity that is

central and pertains to an individual level. In fact, both individual level and group level religious identity have the characteristic of centrality that was a prerogative of the sole intrinsic orientation.

Conclusions and Implications

A first implication of these findings is the irrelevance of a distinction between a 'first class' ('real', authentic, ...) and a 'second class' (peripheral, instrumental,...) religious identity reflecting the personal-social distinction. In fact, even if it is possible to differentiate between different levels of religious identity and to distinguish between a more personal religious identity associated with sense of meaning and a more social religious identity associated with need for belonging (as can be predicted by the traditional intrinsic-extrinsic distinction), each type of religious identity is central for the individual who lives it. Thus, we agree with Flere and Lavric (2007) that the authentic religious expression cannot be confined into the intrinsic-individual orientation but should also include the importance, for the individual, of social and relational aspects of religious identity.

A limitation of this study lays in the theoretical opposition between individual and social self: even if it was a necessary option for a first disentanglement of the different ways of being religious, we think that the two selves are not alternative and that an individual could have both a salient individual religious self and a salient social religious self. Indeed, some recent studies combining the two levels - measuring at the same time the individual and social side of religious identity - show promising findings (see for example, Brambilla, Manzi, Regalia, 2011; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2010).

What should also be further explored, is the impact of the minority or majority status of religious groups in a given country on the individual perception of religious identity. In fact, the unexpected observation, in our sample, of the prevalence of self-categorization of religious identity as a "group level identity" among the western participants, elicits new questions. The impact of different denominations has already been investigated (e. g. Toosi, & Ambady, 2010), but less is known about the influence of religious history of each country: it could be the case that in more secularized countries the religious identity is connected to belonging to a specific group, whereas in more religious nations individuals can practice their religion as something ordinary, pertaining to the majority of people (see also Gebauer et al, 2012; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Another aspect of possible influence is the interconnection between people's religious identity and the way in which they enter in contact with a religious tradition, for example their religious group/community and its specific practices (attendance of services, solitary prayer, volunteering for an association, etc.) and, before, the transmission of faith within family (see for example Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan, & Friedman, 2005).