

Summary

When Shared Humanity is Anchored in Identity Centrality: Self-Categorizations and Identity Motives in Alevis as a Minority

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The assumption that minorities develop radical belief and behavior patterns is common in the studies of intergroup relations. Deschamps (1982) notes that for a group to exist as a distinct entity, it must share a common symbolic universe of values. Humanitarian values, accessible to both majority and minority groups, play a key role in this “symbolic universe.” This article proposes that some minorities develop belief systems centered on humanity to define their identities, especially under conditions of extreme discrimination and violence. These beliefs provide security by allowing minority members to be seen as human by the majority. However, a significant question arises: Are these beliefs simply be used as material for public discourse to prove that minority members share the same “symbolic universe of values” with the majority, or do they occupy a centrality in identity definitions of the minority members driven by some specific motivations over the long term? The present study seeks to answer this question by focusing on a group endorsing a belief system based on an inclusive notion of humanity, namely, Alevis, an ethno-religious minority in Turkey that has sustained its struggle for existence against collective victimization and structural stigmatization for centuries.

Identity, as an answer to “*Who am I*,” involves affect and behavior but is mainly a “definition process” (Verkuyten & DeWolf, 2002; Vignoles et al., 2006). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), identification is a core socio-cognitive process (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identity centrality explains identification by reflecting the significance and importance of group membership (Cameron, 2004; Leach, 2008). Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) suggests individuals categorize themselves at three levels: (a) interpersonal (personal identity), (b) intergroup (social identity), and (c) superordinate (shared humanity) (Turner et al., 1987).

From the classical perspective, superordinate identities foster positive relations between conflicting subgroups by establishing a common goal (Gaertner et al., 2000; Sherif, 1958). While shared humanity is the highest self-categorization in SCT, other conceptualizations, such as identification with all humanity (McFarland et al., 2019), also exist. This can transcend differences, emphasizing commonalities and leading to positive outcomes like enhanced collective efficacy for social change, and increased empathy (Subašić et al., 2011; Vollhardt, 2015). Although self-categorizations based on shared humanity often appear in idealized contexts, their everyday emergence typically requires strong situational triggers (Turner et al., 1987) or authority influence (Allport, 1954). A perspective is needed that recognizes how disadvantaged groups may internalize such inclusive values as genuine identity elements, not just strategic tools. Deschamps and Brown (1983) argue that while superordinate goals facilitate communication and cooperation, but their effectiveness depends on maintaining group distinctiveness. Thus, simply setting a common goal does not automatically reduce conflict; social identity implications must be considered. Meeting the majority under a superordinate identity could create ambivalence for minorities, especially those whose distinct identities are suppressed in social life. For groups with concealable identities (e.g., LGBTQ+, religious groups), this ambivalence stems from a constant threat to distinctiveness. Withholding identity may help to avoid conflict and test majority attitudes (Dobai & Hopkins, 2022), but may also lead to distress, alienation, and reduced belonging (Newheiser et al., 2017). Under extreme victimhood and stigma, adopting a humanitarian belief system can help cope with identity risks.

The search for the dynamics that lead minority group members to self-categorize in terms of shared hu-

manity can be traced to the motivational sources of identity. The socio-motivational foundations of identity have long been a key focus in social psychology, yet they have often been simplified to a single motive, namely, self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). However, other theoretical frameworks, including but not limited to self-esteem, have also emerged. Motivated Identity Construction Theory (MICT) posits that individuals are driven by six core motives (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012; Vignoles, 2011; Vignoles et al., 2006). (i) *Self-esteem* can lead individuals to align with groups that enhance their self-worth/regard, while (ii) *distinctiveness* may drive them to differentiate themselves from others. (iii) *Belonging* reflects the fundamental human need for social connection and acceptance. (iv) *Meaning* pertains to the search for purpose and significance in one's identity. (v) *Continuity* emphasizes the importance of maintaining a coherent sense of self over time. (vi) *Efficacy* reflects the desire for competence and the ability to effect change in one's environment.

To examine shared humanity as a self-categorization shaped by humanistic beliefs within this motivational framework, *Alevis(m)*, as a minority group that has struggled for survival for centuries, may offer a unique example. Alevis are an ethno-religious minority in Turkey, with substantial populations in the Balkans and a large diaspora in Western Europe (Procházka-Eisl, 2016). Characterized by its "syncretic" and "heterodox" features, Alevism differs from the orthodox frameworks of Shi'ism and Sunnism (DABF, 2008; Mélikoff, 1993). The legacy of massacres as collective trauma, and ambivalence toward modernity are central to understanding Alevis(m) and their movement (Aydin, 2017; Yalçinkaya, 2005; Yıldız & Verkuyten, 2011). According to Ertan (2016), Alevis have a unique discourse on humanity, which, similar to Sartre and Arendt's assessment of Jews between the two world wars, focuses on coexistence in line with universal concepts such as equality and secularism. This discourse has helped Alevis cope with violence by emphasizing collective identity at a superordinate level, often concealing group identity. The Alevi Revival since the 1980s, marked by identity reconstruction, is shaped by various socio-political factors (Massicard, 2003; van Bruinessen, 1996). Institutional discrimination, such as compulsory religious education, fuels the Alevi identity struggle for equal citizenship (Geçmez, 2015).

Although limited in number, studies have shown that shared humanity is not merely an archaic narrative based on Alevism as a heterodoxy but a value/idea/performance for Alevis (see Hopkins, 2011; Karlıdağ & Göregenli, 2017; Karlıdağ & Kuşdil, 2021; Kuşdil & Çağlar, 2011). These findings seem to be compatible

with the belief characteristics of Alevism (see Sürücü, 2020). Thus, it is pertinent to examine the dynamics of shared humanity by analyzing the motivational principles that guide the identity struggle of Alevis, considering their socio-historical context and belief-theosophical characteristics.

This study aimed to investigate whether superordinate identity elements are internalized by members of a long-oppressed minority. To do so, we collected responses to the question "Who are you?" from Alevis living in Turkey's metropolises and analyzed how different levels of self-categorization (superordinate, social, and individual) appear in their self-definitions. Using MICT (Vignoles, 2011), we explored the motivations that best predict the identity centrality of each level of self-categorization in self-definitions.

In the context of identity struggle, the production of meaning in response to uncertainty, along with the ability to exert power and control, can guide individuals from oppressed minority groups toward a superordinate identity understanding. Given that the "meaning" and "efficacy" motives (Greenberg et al., 2014; van Zomeren et al., 2008) are more functional for minorities in harsh societal contexts with high inequality and limited civil rights, we hypothesized these motives would better predict the superordinate identity-centrality of Alevis' self-definitions compared to other motives. Although the focus was on the superordinate level, the same procedure was applied to interpersonal and social self-categorizations, enabling comparison of motivational bases across all three levels.

Method

Participants

A total of 142 self-identified Alevi participants (64 women; age range = 19–70, $M = 37.4$, $SD = 12.6$) were recruited in Istanbul ($n = 112$) and Izmir ($n = 30$), where Alevis are relatively densely populated, using purposive and snowball sampling through the first author's contacts as well as through formal institutions such as *ce-mevis* and associations (for participant information, see Table 1).

Materials

Generation of identity elements. We followed the implementation method of Vignoles et al. (2006) through a standard guideline, encouraging participants to freely list their own identity repertoires by declaring 8 identity elements about themselves.

Perceived centrality. Participants rated how central each of the 8 identity elements was to their identity using

two 7-point items (see Table 2; Vignoles et al., 2006). The items were strongly correlated ($r = .78, p < .001$), their average forming the centrality score.

Identity motives. Identity motives were measured in six questions (see Table 2; Vignoles et al., 2006) with 7-point scales for each of the 8 identity elements.

Demographics. Participants' gender, age, ethnicity, city of residence, religious orientation, and political orientation were collected through a socio-demographic form.

Procedure

After ethical approval, the first author conducted individual surveys in quiet, comfortable environments, informing participants of the study's purpose and obtaining consent, with measures following the outlined sequence. Prior to analysis, a two-step process was conducted to organize responses. First, 142 participants provided 1136 elements in response to "Who are you?". After recategorizing identical elements, the list was reduced to 422. Each element was reviewed by three individuals and categorized as interpersonal, intergroup, or superordinate. A Fleiss' Kappa Analysis showed high inter-rater agreement ($\kappa = .86, p < .001$). Second, centrality and motivation scores for each identity element were calculated, averaged, and used in analyses with socio-demographic variables.

Results

Pre-Findings for Identity Elements

After coding the status of the identity elements in accordance with the categorization level decided, a frequency analysis showed that 139 out of 142 participants had at least one interpersonal identity element ($f = 637$ [*I am* 'a film-lover'; 'a person who likes to have dialogue and conversation']), 126 had at least one social identity element ($f = 384$ [*I am* 'a teacher'; 'an advocate of children's rights']) and 73 of them expressed at least one superordinate level identity element ($f = 109$; [*I am* 'human'; 'a person who does not care about a person's language, race, or nation']). Details of the frequencies and representative examples of identity elements are given in Table 3. Of the 142 participants who participated in the study, 64 expressed 66 elements (5.8%) in their subjective identity repertoires that refer to 'Alevi identities' in a vocabulary manner (e.g., *I am* 'a Hubyar Alevi'; 'a Kurdish Alevi'; 'someone who comes from an Alevi culture'; 'from an Alevi family').

Correlational Findings

A Pearson Correlation Analysis revealed that the

strength of correlations varied across the three self-categorization levels (see Table 4). At the superordinate level, the meaning motive ($r = .69$) strongly correlated with perceived identity centrality, while belonging ($r = .31$), efficacy ($r = .37$), self-esteem ($r = .42$), distinctiveness ($r = .50$), and continuity ($r = .55$) showed weak to moderate correlations. In social self-categorization within intergroup relations, self-esteem ($r = .62$) and meaning ($r = .68$) were strongly correlated with perceived identity centrality, with moderate correlations found for distinctiveness ($r = .48$), belonging ($r = .46$), efficacy ($r = .47$), and continuity ($r = .50$). In interpersonal self-categorization, self-esteem ($r = .60$), belonging ($r = .62$), meaning ($r = .67$), and continuity ($r = .68$) were strongly correlated with perceived centrality, while distinctiveness ($r = .49$) and efficacy ($r = .58$) showed moderate correlations (all values, $p < .01$).

Predictors of Identity Centrality According to Self-Categorization Levels

Hierarchical multiple regression (2-block enter method) tested predictors of perceived identity centrality across three self-categorization levels (Table 5). Gender, age, and political and religious orientation were included as control variables in Step 1, followed by identity motives as MICT in Step 2. Tolerance (.28-.95) and VIF (1.05-3.55) values indicate that there is no multicollinearity issue in the models and that the variables contribute independently. The results were as follows:

Superordinate level. MICT explained 50% of the variance in perceived centrality ($R^2 = .50, F_{(10, 62)} = 8.19, p < .01$). Meaning ($\beta = .51, p < .01$) and continuity ($\beta = .24, p < .05$) were significant predictors, with age showing a marginally significant effect ($\beta = .18, p < .10$).

Social level. MICT accounted for 55% of the variance in perceived centrality, ($R^2 = .55, F_{(10, 121)} = 16.37, p < .01$). Self-esteem ($\beta = .22, p < .05$), distinctiveness ($\beta = .20, p < .01$), belonging ($\beta = .15, p < .05$), and meaning ($\beta = .30, p < .01$) were positive predictors.

Interpersonal level. MICT explained 61% of the variance ($R^2 = .61, F_{(10, 128)} = 22.71, p < .01$). Distinctiveness ($\beta = .13, p < .05$), belonging ($\beta = .27, p < .01$), meaning ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), and continuity ($\beta = .28, p < .01$) were significant predictors. Gender also predicted centrality ($\beta = .14, p < .05$), with women reporting higher perceived centrality.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the Alevi, an ethno-religious minority in Turkey, who have sustained their drive to survive amid collective victimhood and structural stigmatization. Grounded in SCT and MICT, it explores whether shared humanity, as superordinate identity-centrality,

serves as a discursive tool to signal value alignment with the majority or genuinely anchors the identity repertoire of minority members through specific identity motives.

As detailed below, the presence of superordinate identity elements (e.g., “I am human,” “I am a friend to all living things”) in about 10% of the Alevi participants’ identity repertoire suggests that the notion of “humanity” reflects not only Alevi theological traditions but also identity motivations and orientations toward universal values (see Table 3), consistent with previous findings (Hopkins, 2011; Karlıdağ & Göregenli, 2017). This use of superordinate elements is linked to the motivations of “meaning” and “continuity,” serving fundamental functions for Alevi identity. Furthermore, using MICT, the study compares motivational bases across self-categorization levels in terms of perceived identity centrality (see Table 6). Social self-categorization was predicted by self-esteem, distinctiveness, belonging, and meaning, and the interpersonal level by distinctiveness, belonging, meaning, and continuity. These findings indicate that motivational principles of different self-categorization levels may vary in a group. For instance, “belonging” functions as a group-based motivation at the social level, aiming for harmony with the group (Brewer, 1991), while also shaping interpersonal relations (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The question arises whether Alevis internalize shared humanity as a superordinate identity-centrality or conceal their group identity. In response to collective victimhood, Alevis may prioritize shared humanity over their group identity as a form of identity management. This strategy is also shaped by the Alevi community’s historical-political context (Ertan, 2016; Koçan & Öncü, 2004; Yalçinkaya, 2005) and the unique theosophical-belief characteristics of Alevism (DABF, 2008; Sürücü, 2020), which emphasize humanity. Concealing one’s identity is a complex phenomenon with both psychosocial benefits and harms (Camacho et al., 2020; Dobai & Hopkins, 2022; Newheiser et al., 2017). In this study of 142 Alevi participants, 5.8% of identity elements were Alevi in-group-related, while 9.6% were superordinate identity elements. The mean identity centrality was higher for superordinate identities (6.53) than for in-group identities (5.92). These descriptive findings suggest Alevis prioritize superordinate identities, though they do not entirely conceal their in-group identities. This shift in emphasis reflects a re-evaluation of Alevi identity, shaped by the humanist and philanthropic values associated with Alevism (Karlıdağ & Göregenli, 2017). Thus, emphasizing shared humanity may still carry traces of Alevi identity. Concealing identity through superordinate self-categorization could indicate a paradox, but the strategy of maintaining identity without assimilation

suggests that superordinate identity-centrality is tied to the need to exist within a common symbolic universe of values (Deschamps, 1982).

In line with Staerklé et al. (2011), belonging to a low-status group strengthens a communal-collectivist self-concept, emphasizing non-conflict, pro-social equality, and peaceful coexistence within a superordinate collective identity. At this level, identity construction offers an alternative to the negative status quo, serving as a strategy for social change and the demand for equality and recognition (see Boyraz, 2019; Koçan & Öncü, 2004; for critiques of multiculturalism in identity politics, see Göner, 2005). Our findings indicate that when shared humanity is anchored in identity centrality, it provides *meaning*, making life more predictable, while linking the past, present, and future through *continuity*.

As expected, meaning was a strong predictor, while continuity motivation, rather than efficacy, emerged as a key factor. Meaning and continuity dominate the superordinate identity-centrality for Alevis, overshadowing efficacy, self-esteem, belonging, and distinctiveness motives. However, this study focuses on the ‘definitional’ dimension of identity, suggesting that motivations in other dimensions, such as identity enactment or affective dimensions (see Verkuyten & DeWolf, 2002; Vignoles et al., 2006), may also be relevant for future research. It is crucial for a community or ethno-religious group to be motivated by continuity and meaning to persist in their identities over time. For example, research linking perceived historical collective resilience to collective continuity (Selvanathan et al., 2023) shows that continuity is important for mobilization. While anticipating efficacy, the prominence of continuity is justified by its ability to link historical collective resilience to present-day action. Studies on cultural continuity show that communities maintaining their cultures have lower youth suicide rates (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), highlighting its importance in preserving identities across generations (Ryabichenko & Lebedeva, 2017). Meaningful existence requires individuals to believe in a cultural worldview and self-concept that provides life with significance and buffers anxiety (Greenberg et al., 2014).

This study explores how members of an ethno-religious minority engage with the notion of shared humanity as part of a broader socio-motivational categorization process shaped by historical and structural conditions. By integrating SCT with MICT, it extends identity research beyond self-esteem motives and the minimal reality of laboratory conditions (Jung et al., 2018). Its method of generating identity elements (Becker et al., 2017; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) reveals the subjective repertoire of Alevi individuals. While the quantitative design helps clarify motivational predictors of identity

ty centrality across levels, future studies should adopt qualitative and comparative approaches to examine how minority and majority groups construct identity at the superordinate level.

Ultimately, in the context of identity struggles and various theoretical foundations, examining *shared humanity* within social psychology and social sciences holds world-making significance, particularly in strengthening prosociality and social solidarity. This study explores shared humanity from a social psychological perspective through SCT and MICT. For an ethno-religious minority group like Alevis, who have faced collective victimization for centuries, shared humanity plays a key role in self-categorization, anchoring identity centrality through the motivations of meaning and continuity.