Gender Differences in Identity Processing Style and Islamic Religiosity in an Iranian Undergraduate University Sample

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Abstract

The goals of the present study were twofold: to examine gender differences in identity processing styles and religiosity and to examine relationships between the two in an Iranian undergraduate university sample. Two gender differences were found: Women scored higher on the normative identity style scale and on the religiosity scale. Normative identity style was positively correlated with the religious rituals and general religiosity scales.

Identity has both subjective and objective components and comprises one's private and public social self-concepts (Baumeister 1991, 1997). Identity is linked with the varied categories into which one can be placed (e.g., sex, body type, temperament) and affects social roles, values, and friendships, (Berzonsky 1990; Erikson 1970; Marcia 1966). Another important aspect of identity that embodies both private and public self-concepts centers on religion.

Religion is a system of reliance on the existence and verity of a superior transcendental being (Hill et al. 2000; Wulff 1997). Religion encompasses dimensions of belief; religiosity is the practice of this belief. *Religiosity* is a term that is used to refer to the numerous aspects of religious activity, prayer, dedication, and religious doctrine. While identity and religiosity have received significant attention in the literature, the study of these concepts has taken place largely within Western culture. They have not been studied in as great detail in Eastern, particularly Middle Eastern, cultures (Khodarahimi and Bait-e-Mash-Al 2003; Khodarahimi and Jafari 1998; Koenig 1998; Pajević, Sinanović, and Hasanović 2005; Sahami and Khodarahimi 2008; Vafaye-Borbor 1999). This article will examine identity processing style and religiousness in an Iranian undergraduate sample.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Identity

People's definitions of themselves begin to form in infancy (Lewis and Ramsay 2004) and continue to evolve throughout their lives (Markus and Nurius 1987). Various psychosocial theories of development emphasize the impact of external factors, parents, and society on identity and personality development from childhood to adulthood (e.g., Erikson 1968). According to Erikson (1970), personality is the product of psychosocial development through eight stages, which span infancy through old age. Psychosocial conflicts can occur in any stage when a person does not advance healthfully through that particular stage. When these conflicts occur and are not successfully and adaptively resolved, maladaptive traits can result (e.g., mistrust, inferiority, despair). The person's personality development is arrested, and he or she will continue to be preoccupied by that interruption in development.

Extending Erikson's work, Baumeister (1997) suggests that there are two types of crises: deficit (i.e., instances in which an identity is either ill formed or underformed and must be strengthened or abandoned to resolve the crisis) and conflict (i.e., instances in which two identities clash and at least one must be altered to resolve the crisis). In contrast, Marcia (1966) proposed four types of crises. Marcia suggested that the two crucial elements of identity formation are

exploration and commitment. Specifically, people should explore the aspects of their identities before committing. According to Marcia (1966), if a person does not explore possible alternatives and experience conflicts before making a personal commitment to his or her identity, then one of four outcomes is possible: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. Diffusion refers to a person's lacking both exploration in life and interest in committing even to the unwanted roles that he or she occupies. Foreclosure refers to a person's not exploring the past but being willing to commit to some relevant values, goals, or roles in the future. Moratorium refers to a person's displaying a kind of flightiness, ready to make choices but unable to commit to them. Finally, achievement refers to a person's making identity choices and committing to them (Marcia 1966). In sum, identity exploration has been viewed as a crucial component of identity formation (Grotevant 1987). A key component of identity exploration that is the focus of the current research is identity processing style.

Identity Processing Style

Berzonsky's conceptualization of the social-cognitive processes underlying identity exploration asserts three identity processing styles: *information-oriented, normative,* and *diffuse-avoidant* (Berzonsky 1990, 1997, 2003; Berzonsky and Sullivan 1992). Having an information-oriented style refers to being proactive, thorough, and broad-based in one's identity exploration. Individuals with this style construct their identities by seeking out and evaluating self-relevant information; "they are self-critical, open to new information, and willing to revise aspects of their identity" (Luyckx et al. 2007: 1100). This identity style relates to a number of adaptive traits, such as high levels of cognitive complexity, decisional vigilance, need for cognition, problem-focused coping, autonomy, and cognitive persistence (see Soenens et al. 2005 for a review). Individuals who have the information-oriented style display high levels of identity commitment, cognitive complexity, and self-reflection (Berzonsky 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 2003; Berzonsky and Ferrari 1996; Berzonsky and Kuk 2000). Having a normative style refers to showing a heavy reliance on significant others' expectations as well as those of society. Individuals with this style are characterized by being closed to self-exploration and new information. They have a tendency to rely on social norms and expectations when facing identity-related decisions. This style is also related to a number of adaptive traits, such as conscientiousness. Having a diffuse-avoidant style refers to showing a general avoidance of personal conflicts and identity-relevant problems. Individuals with this style tend not to make substantive long-term revisions of their identities; instead, they continue to switch and accommodate themselves and their identities to blend with current social

demands and consequences. These individuals tend to avoid personal issues and tend to procrastinate on decisions until situational demands dictate their behavior. This style is related to a number of maladaptive traits such as neuroticism, disagreeableness, and low levels of conscientiousness (Dollinger 1995; see Soenens et al. [2005] for a review).

Researchers have examined gender differences among these three identity processing styles (Berzonsky 1992b; Luyckx et al. 2007; Soenens et al. 2005), and results have been mixed. The general conclusion is that gender differences, when present, are small. Luyckx et al., (2007) found that men scored higher on the information-oriented style subscale of the Revised Identity Style Inventory (ISI-3; Berzonsky, 1992b). Soenens and colleagues (2005) found that males scored higher on the diffuse-avoidant style, which is consistent with the findings of Berzonsky (1992b). Soenens and colleagues also found that females scored higher on the normative style and on autonomous orientation; see also Deci and Ryan (1985) and Wong (2000). It is important to note that, regarding the majority of the aforementioned research, subject pools did not include subjects in the Middle East. Considerable cultural differences exist between Western and Middle Eastern conceptualizations of gender, thus making broad extrapolations of gender differences found in Western countries difficult. For example, with regard to Islamic countries, the Quran prescribes theology as well as politics, economics, law and justice, and social behavior. As such, religious as well as other cultural components directly and indirectly influence prescriptions for gender and identity development. The first goal of the current study is to examine gender differences in identity processing styles in an Iranian undergraduate university sample. The second goal is to examine relationships among identity processing styles and religiosity in an Iranian undergraduate university sample.

Religiosity

Wink and colleagues (2007) describe religiosity as demonstrated by belief in a deity, an afterlife, the power of prayer, and regular attendance at a place of worship. Similarly, Saucier and Skrzypińska (2006: 1260) describe it as involving reliance on authority (e.g., a trusted scripture or church figure). This authority represents a shared point of reference for an organized group of religious followers. Cornwall and colleagues (1986) also identified six dimensions of religiosity relating to cognition, affect, and behavior.

Mehran (2003) explored religious education and identity formation in Iranian schools. He suggests that

> Islamization and purification of the soul have thus become the primary goals of post-revolutionary Iranian education, aiming at creating pious Muslims . . . .The

ultimate goal of Iranian education is the formation of a politicized Shi'i identity that requires a young pupil to actively practice his/her religion; obey the Islamic decrees on all aspects of his/her public and private life; become a firm believer in the governance of the religious jurisprudent; and struggle to defend his/her faith against an ever present enemy that threatens Islam from inside or outside the country. (Mehran 2003: 43)

An analytical study of religious studies textbooks in Iran highlights a deliberate attempt on the part of educational authorities to create a distinct religious and political identity among the schoolchildren. There is an emphasis on collectivity among these Shia who live in an Islamic state, which is marked by a close link between religion and politics as embodied in governance by religious jurisprudence (Ministry of Education 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). With the knowledge that a central focus of education in Iran is on religion and on developing a religious identity, it is important to explore this component of identity development as well as relationships among this and other identity components during late adolescence and early adulthood. The current study will examine two components of identity in an Iranian sample of self-identified Shia university students: identity processing style and religiousness.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 200 self-identified Shia undergraduate university students from the Islamic Azad University, Eghlid, in the city of Eghlid in the province of Fars in Iran. This sample consisted mainly of Persians from middle-class backgrounds. The mean age was 22.16 years (standard deviation = 1.02; 51.5% men, 48.5% women).

Procedure

Participants were randomly selected from the university's student body. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. After being given brief instructions, the participants reviewed and signed a consent form before completing the questionnaires.

Questionnaires

Islamic Religiosity Orientation Inventory. The Islamic Religiosity Orientation Inventory (IROI), which assesses Islamic religiosity in Iranian Muslims, was created by Hashemi in 2005. Originally, the IROI included fifty items; following

factor analysis, these were reduced to thirty-eight items. Participants were administered the IROI, which comprises two subscales and one overarching scale: rituals (twenty-seven items, e.g., "*Islam helps me lead a better life, The five prayers help me a lot in all of my life*"), ethics (eleven items, e.g., "*I follow the commands of my faith because I do not want to feel like a failure*"), and total religiosity (thirty-eight items). All items are rated on a five-point Likert type scale on which 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas for total religiosity, religiosity rituals, and religiosity ethics were .81, .78, and .79, respectively.

Identity Styles Inventory. Participants were administered the Persian version of the Identity Style Inventory (ISI) (Berzonsky 1992b), which consists of three subscales: information-oriented style (eleven items, e.g., "*I've spent a great deal of time thinking seriously about what I should do with my life*"); normative style (nine items, e.g., "*I prefer to deal with situations where I can rely on social norms and standards*"), and diffuse-avoidant style (ten items, e.g., "*I'm not really thinking about my future now; it's still a long way off*") subscales. All items are rated on a five-point Likert type scale on which 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Berzonsky (1997) has reported alpha coefficients ranging from .64 to .76 for the three identity processing styles, with test-retest reliabilities over a two-week period ranging from .83 to .87. The validity and reliability of the ISI have also been demonstrated in several studies in Iran (Ardekani 2004; Hashemi 2005; Piri 2004; Pour-Dehghan Ardekani 2004; Seadati-Shamir 2004). In a recent study of university students in the province of Fars in Iran, the Cronbach's alphas were .85, .87, and .72, respectively (Hashemi 2005).

RESULTS

To examine gender differences, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with gender as a between-subjects variable and all other variables as dependent variables. An overall multivariate effect was found (Wilks' k = .77; F (5, 195) = 11.148; p < .0001) and indicated that females, on average, scored higher on normative identity style, ritualistic religiosity, and total religiosity. There were no significant gender differences on information-oriented style, diffuse-avoidant style, or the ethic subscale of religiosity. Table 1 provides descriptive and comparison statistics.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Mean Differences by Gender

Variable	Total Sample Mean (SD)	Gender Differences		F Ratio	P	Eta
		Males Mean (SD)	Females Mean (SD)			
Information-oriented style	35.69 (5.38)	35.93 (5.53)	35.42 (5.25)	.445	.505	.002
Normative style	17.07 (3.39)	16.25 (3.24)	17.94 (3.35)	13.054	.0001	.062
Diffuse-avoidant style	26.34 (7.67)	26.84 (7.33)	25.79 (8.02)	.936	.334	.005
Religious rituals	72.66 (12.64)	67.68 (14.13)	77.94 (8.04)	39.188	.0001	.165
Religious ethics	32.52 (4.16)	32.61 (3.85)	32.41 (4.49)	.114	.736	.001
Religiosity	105.17 (13.82)	100.29 (15.26)	110.35 (9.780)	30.372	.0001	.133

$N = 200$; SD = standard deviation; effect size = η^2.

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which the variables covaried. Information-oriented style was positively related to normative identity and diffuse-avoidant identity styles as well as religious rituals and general religiosity. Normative identity style was positively correlated with religious rituals and general religiosity. Diffuse-avoidant style was not significantly related to religious rituals, religious ethics, or general religiosity. Religious rituals and religious ethics were positively correlated with general religiosity. Table 2 lists the correlation coefficients.

Table 2: Correlations Among All Study Variables

Variables	2	3	4	5	6
1. Information-oriented style	.328**	.190*	.194**	.072	.199*
2. Normative style		.126	.324**	.086	.323**
3. Diffuse-avoidant style			.066	−.006	.059
4. Religious rituals				.131	.954**
5. Religious ethics					.421**
6. Religiosity					

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The current research adds to the literature in that it (a) explored gender differences among identity processing styles and religiosity and (b) examined correlations between identity processing styles and religiosity in an Iranian undergraduate university sample. Regarding the first goal of this project, findings were both consistent and inconsistent with the relevant literature. We found that women scored higher on normative identity style, ritualistic religiosity, and total religiosity. There were no significant gender differences for information-oriented style, diffuse-avoidant identity style, or the ethic subscale of religiosity. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Soenens and colleagues (2005), who also found that women scored higher on the normative style scale. Our findings are inconsistent with previous research (e.g., Luyckx et al. 2007), as we did not find significant gender differences for information-oriented style or for diffuse-avoidant style (see Soenens et al. 2005; Berzonsky 1992b). The current findings also add to the somewhat mixed literature examining gender differences in religiosity. For example, Simpson and colleagues (2008) found no gender differences for overt religious behavior (i.e., attending religious activities and private religious activity such as prayer meditation and study of scripture), while others (e.g., Mahalik and Lagan 2001; Ozorak 1996; Reich 1997) have found consistent gender differences for religiosity. For example, a 1998 Gallup poll concluded that in the United States, women tended to place more importance on religion, were more likely to belong to a church or a synagogue, and thought more about their relationship with God and their religious faith than men did (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). The current research adds to the literature in that we found the presence of gender differences in religiosity among self-identified Shia Persian Iranian college students. Future research should examine which of the cultural and religious variables may be contributing to the gender differences observed in this population. Future research also should explore the extent to which women and men differ on these two important aspects of identity throughout the life span.

Regarding the second goal of this project, both information-oriented and normative identity styles positively correlated with support and endorsement of religious rituals and with overall religiosity. Correlations were stronger (almost double in magnitude) for normative style compared to information-oriented style. Because having a normative style refers to relying heavily on significant others' expectations as well as those of society, a plausible explanation for the presence of a positive relationship between normative identity processing style and religiosity could be the following: Individuals with the normative style are characterized by being closed to self-exploration and to new information; they have a tendency to rely on social norms and expectations such that they may be

more inclined to adopt without question and then strongly adhere to their family's and group's religion. Therefore, people who score high on this style scale might also score higher on religiosity. Higher scores on the information-oriented scale indicate a proactive, thorough, and broad-based approach to one's identity exploration that might not correlate as strongly with stricter adherence to religion and religious tenets. In contrast, higher scores on the diffuse-avoidant scale indicate a general lack of personal responsibility for one's own identity development and growth. Because higher scores here are indicative of procrastination until situations dictate one's decisions and behavior, higher scores on the diffuse-avoidant scale might not correlate with stricter adherence to religion or religious tenets.

To sum, because the current research is the first to examine identity processing style and religiosity in a group of self-identified Shia Persian Iranian college students, it contributes to the literature the exploration of these variables in a less-studied population. The current research supports and extends existing literature by demonstrating gender differences in identity processing style and religiosity and by exploring correlations among these variables. Future research should aim to replicate and examine the extrapolative quality of the current results. Future research should examine identity styles, multiple dimensions of religion, and other variables in both private and public (governmental) universities as well as other groups in the Middle East.

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