Collective Identity Development of Bulgarian Adolescents: A Three Wave Longitudinal Study

Mandy Verleijsdonk

Tilburg University

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be sent to

m.c.d.verleijsdonk@tilburguniversity.edu
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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine developmental change in ethnic, familial and religious identity and to explore differences between Bulgarian mainstream and Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescents. A total of 208 students aged 12 to 18 completed ethnic, familial and religious identity scales at three time points. Results indicated that Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on Turkish ethnic identity than on Bulgarian mainstream identity across all time points. Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on religious identity than Bulgarian adolescents whereas Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on Bulgarian and familial identities than Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents across all time points. There was no developmental change in ethnic, familial and religious identities, which remained stable over time. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: ethnic identity; familial identity; religious identity; longitudinal, Turkish-Bulgarian minority.
Collective Identity Development of Bulgarian Adolescents: A Three Wave Longitudinal Study

There has been little work on the development of collective identity and on the role of social identities among youth with ethnic minority backgrounds (Lopez, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2011). The present study investigates the scarcely considered relations among ethnic, familial, and religious identities (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, Bender, & van de Vijver, 2012). Identity components have a significant influence on wellbeing (Dimitrova et al., 2013; Fuligni & Flook, 2005), so it is important to know more about identity formation, which is the most important task of development in adolescence (Erikson, 1986). First, general identity theory and research will be discussed followed by a conceptualization of collective identity as it has been used in this study. Second, collective identity development will be discussed before presenting the study.

According to Erikson's life-cycle theory (1968), there are eight developmental stages in identity, which are biologically determined, but shaped by the environment. Each of the stages is associated with a crisis that the individual must resolve to go to the next stage. The crisis in adolescence is identity versus confusion. Adolescents must select personal, occupational, sexual and ideological commitments to form one’s identity, like the choice of a university education. Identity formation is characterized by progressive changes in being committed to one’s choice of identity (Klimstra et al., 2010).

The most commonly used conceptualization of Erikson’s theory is Marcia’s identity status paradigm. Marcia (1966) distinguished four different identity statuses: (1) Identity diffusion indicates that the adolescent has not yet committed to a specific developmental task and may or may not have explored different alternatives; (2) Foreclosure indicates that the adolescent has committed without much exploration; (3) In moratorium the adolescent is exploring and has
not made commitments; (4) Identity achievement indicates that the adolescent has made a commitment based on active exploration. A review of Meeus (2010) demonstrates that the identity status continuum develops from diffusion to moratorium, to foreclosure and then to achievement. In a study of African American adolescents some adolescents progressed and developed their identity in a good manner, while others regressed or remained constant across time periods (Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006). Thirty-three percent developed from a lower status to a higher status (moratorium at time 1 and achieved at time 2). Thirty-nine percent remained in the same identity status across time 1 and time 2. Twenty-eight percent of the participants moved from a higher status to a lower status (achieved at time 1 and in moratorium at time 2).

The present study builds on theory of identity development to examine more specifically collective identity. The focus is on three aspects of collective identity, namely ethnic, familial and religious identity. Specifically, adolescents in this research are from Bulgaria, a post communist country hosting nearly one million of bilingual Turkish-Bulgarian minority, hardly investigated in prior research.

**Collective Identity Development during Adolescence**

The term ‘collective identity’ has been introduced to capture different components that are related to belonging to different groups (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Elements of collective identification are self-categorization, evaluation, importance, attachment and sense of interdependence. Self-categorization is the positive or negative attitude that a person has toward the social category in question. Evaluation is the degree of importance of a particular group membership to the individual’s overall self-concept. Importance is the emotional involvement felt with a group. Attachment and sense of interdependence are the degree to which
a particular collective identity is embedded in the person’s everyday ongoing social relationships. Central is the question how people define themselves in relation to a social group. A brief review of research about ethnic, familial and religious identity development will now be discussed.

*Ethnic identity* encompasses how one relates to his or her culture. For example, individuals can feel good about being a member of an ethnic group and have high collective self-esteem. Individuals can also search or explore what it means to be a group member (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). Most research about ethnic identity development is done in America. For example, two components of ethnic identity, group-esteem and exploration, have been found to increase for African American, Latino American and European American adolescents over three years. The minority African Americans and Latino Americans were lower in group-esteem but had greater increases than majority European Americans (French et al, 2006). Related research has also found a growth in ethnic identity in minority African, Hispanic, Asian and American Indian youth in US. Ethnic behaviors and practices also rose by the end of their first year of college (Saylor & Aries, 1999) as well as exploration and commitment to ethnic group belonging among diverse ethnic groups (Syed & Azmitia, 2009).

Different patterns among adolescents ethnic identity growth were found by Huang and Stormshak (2011). The sample comprised European American, Latino/Hispanic, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian ethnic groups. The majority of adolescents (41.8%) displayed growth in ethnic identity over four years, followed by 30.1% whose high levels of ethnic identity remained stable and than by those who experienced moderate decreases in ethnic identity (10.8%). Another class of adolescents (7.3%) showed significant declines in ethnic identity, followed by 5.5% of adolescents with significant increases and finally by 4.5% of adolescents with low stable levels of ethnic identity. Adolescents with
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Latin American, Asian, and European backgrounds did not report developmental changes in their ethnic exploration and belonging during high school (Kiang, Lisa Kiang, Witkow, Baldelomar, & Fuligni, 2010).

Another identity domain that is of importance to this study involves religion. Religious identity regards the significance and meaning of religious traditions to an individual and how people explore their own beliefs and values. Does religious identity develop among adolescents? Youth endorsing self-descriptors indicative of a religious identity are more likely to report that they have a meaningful framework that offers direction and fulfillment to their life. Religious identity can therefore help youth in giving direction to their lives when they grow up. Another reason why religious identity could develop when older, has to do with the strong relation between religious identity and prosocial personality (Furrow, King, White, 2004). Greater opportunities to experience prosocial activities in older youth, could lead to a higher religious identity.

With regards to familial identity, there are hardly any studies that investigated the development of this identity during adolescence. Familial identity is defined by the salience and importance of what the family represents for individuals (Bennett, Wolin, & Mcavity, 1988). The family is one of the primary contexts by which adolescents interpret and make sense of larger social categories such as ethnicity. Families are also the core of religious socialization. This might be particularly true for ethnic minority groups, because they often value family relatedness and commitment more strongly (Fuligni & Flook, 2005). Immigrant parents often promote more traditional types of parent–child interactions, such as higher levels of family assistance from children and a stronger emphasis on harmony (Zhou, 1997).
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In this study three components of collective identity are studied, namely the feelings of belonging to an ethnic group, familial and religious community. Only adolescents will be considered, because especially adolescents get an increasing awareness and better understanding of their multiple identities (Dimitrova, Bender, Chasiotis, & Van de Vijver, 2013). Although there are different patterns of findings regarding development of ethnic identity, in most previous research about ethnic identity, there is lack of comparisons between mainstream/majority and minority groups. Only few studies compared minority with majority groups. For example, in the Pacific Northwest, White majority adolescents scored lower in ethnic identity than did members of four ethnic minority groups and the mixed racial group (James, Kim, & Armijo, 2000). Phinney (1992) also reported that Blacks, Asians and Hispanics in the United States have stronger ethnic identity than Whites. This study attempts to fill in the gap of most studies by comparing Bulgarian majority with Turkish-Bulgarian minority.

The Present Study

The present study focuses on Bulgarian mainstream and Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescents’ collective identity within the Bulgarian context. Bulgaria is an Eastern European country with a high proportion of ethnic minorities of Turks against whom there have been inconsistent policies (Bojkov, 2004). Ethnic relations models adopted by the Bulgarian governments have been wavering between laissez faire and outright assimilation. In the late ‘80, for example, there were assimilations’ campaigns aimed at destroying Turkish ethnic, religious and cultural identity and substituting it with a Bulgarian one. With the end of the communist period in 1989, the status of Turkish-Bulgarians improved in terms of political visibility and minority rights (choice of names, practice of the Islam and use of language). Still, socioeconomic inequality exist as Turkish-Bulgarian communities are predominantly rural and have less access
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to infrastructure, to labor resources and to good educational and health-care facilities (Maeva, 2005).

The present study focuses on Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescents with the age range between 12 and 18 years. The core research question is if there’s a difference between majority Bulgarian adolescents and Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescents in their ethnic, familial and religious identity and if the different identities grow over time. Specifically ethnic minority youth face the challenge of negotiating their ethnic identity in a bicultural setting. Therefore, youth’s endorsement of a Turkish and/or Bulgarian ethnic identity is investigated. In examining associations among components of ethnic identity, specific patterns might emerge for the Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents. Ethnic heritage identity can be expected to be pronounced in minority groups that have been subjected to assimilation pressure. Therefore, the expectation is that Turkish-Bulgarian youth endorse their Turkish identity more strongly than their Bulgarian identity (Hypothesis 1). Also, the familial and religious identities are investigated. Because mainstream Bulgarian population scores low on religious group identification (Dimitrova et al., 2013), it was hypothesized that Turkish-Bulgarian youth endorse their religious identity more strongly than the Bulgarian adolescents (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore it is expected that ethnic, familial and religious identity will increase for Turkish-Bulgarian, but not for Bulgarian adolescents, because Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents could experience a greater impulse to explore and commit to their ethnic group because of being a minority (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Sample
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A total of 208 adolescents were recruited for this study. Their age ranged from 12 to 18 years. There were 85 Turkish–Bulgarian adolescents with a mean age of 15 \( (SD = 1.55) \) of which 45.2% were girls. There were 123 Bulgarian adolescents with a mean age of 15 \( (SD = 1.71) \) of which 46.6% were girls. Ninety six percent of the Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents were born in Bulgaria. Eighty percent of them had the Turkish nationality, sixteen percent had the Bulgarian nationality and four percent had a dual nationality. Data regarding religious affiliation were provided by 95% of the pupils. All Turkish-Bulgarians were Muslim and all Bulgarians were Christian Orthodox.

Measures

All participants completed a short questionnaire assessing their ethnicity, nationality, gender, age and place of birth.

Collective Identity. The Ethnic Identity Scale (Dimitrova et al., 2012) reflects the collective identity domains of self-categorization, attachment, evaluation, importance and behavioral involvement (Ashmore et al., 2004). The scale includes 42 items of which 21 items refer to Turkish heritage and 21 items to Bulgarian identity. Participants were asked to rate their answers using a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. Sample items are “I consider myself Turkish/Bulgarian” and “I participate in Turkish/Bulgarian cultural practices”. Internal consistencies for the scale were \( \alpha = .91 \) (Turkish) and \( \alpha = .91 \) (Bulgarian).

The Familial Identity Scale (Dimitrova et al., 2012) was created following the same format and domains as the ethnic identity scale. Examples of the 21 items constituting the scale are “I see problems of my family as my problems” and “I have a strong sense of belonging to my family”. Internal consistencies for the scale were \( \alpha = .95 \) (Turkish) and \( \alpha = .93 \) (Bulgarian).

The Religious Identity Scale (Dimitrova et al, 2012) was developed, following the previously
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reported structure of ethnic and familial identity scales. The 21 items refer to religious self-categorization, attachment, evaluation, importance and involvement. Sample items are “I see myself as a member of my religious community” and “I have spent much time exploring my religious group (e.g. rituals, history and traditions).” Internal consistencies for the scale were \( \alpha = .92 \) (Turkish) and \( \alpha = .94 \) (Bulgarian).

Procedure

All measures were translated from English into Turkish and Bulgarian by five bilingual speakers while adhering to the standard guidelines to ensure linguistic equivalence (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). In addition, a pilot questionnaire in Bulgarian and Turkish was administered to 152 Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents. Only a few items were removed or modified. In the subsequent data collection, the questionnaires were presented only in Bulgarian, because all pupils in the pilot study chose the Bulgarian language version. This could be because Turkish-Bulgarian pupils acquire literacy skills in Bulgarian (Rudin & Eminov, 1993). Participants for this study were recruited from the capital Sofia and six public middle and high schools, covering three major regions from Southern Bulgaria: Krumovgrad, Haskovo, and Mineralni Bani. Prior to data collection, local educational authorities and school personnel were informed about the purpose and methods of the study to assure their participation. Pupils were recruited in classrooms during school hours. In addition to written instructions at the beginning of the questionnaires, detailed oral instructions were given in each class. Pupils were informed that participation was voluntary and confidential and that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time. They were also offered pens and pencils for their participation. A letter was sent out to the parents detailing the content of the study. Data was collected at the end of each school year in May/June in 2010, 2011 and 2012.
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Plan Analyses

The first prediction was that Turkish-Bulgarian youth endorse their Turkish identity more strongly than their Bulgarian identity (Hypothesis 1). This was tested by conducting a dependent t-test which included ethnic Bulgarian and ethnic Turkish identity at three time points as dependent variables. The other predictions were that Turkish-Bulgarian youth endorse their familial and religious identity more strongly than the Bulgarian adolescents (Hypothesis 2) for all three time-points and that ethnic, religious and familial identity will increase overtime for Turkish-Bulgarian and Bulgarian adolescents (Hypothesis 3). A repeated measures MANOVA was used to test hypotheses two and three. The dependent variables were ethnic Bulgarian, familial and religious identity, at all three time points and group (Turkish-Bulgarian or Bulgarian) was the independent variable.

Results

To test the first hypothesis, a dependent t-test was conducted to compare Bulgarian and Turkish-Bulgarian identity for Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents. There was a significant difference in identities scores at all-time points. Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on Turkish identity than on Bulgarian identity. Means and standard deviation are listed in Table 1.

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to test the second and third hypothesis to compare scores on ethnic, familial and religious identity at Time 1, Time 2 and Time 3. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Hypothesis two was partly confirmed. As expected, Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents scored significantly higher than Bulgarian adolescents on religious identity scores at all time points, Wilks’ Lambda = .34, $F (3, 204) = 11.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$. Also as was expected, Bulgarian adolescents scored significantly higher
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on Bulgarian identity at all three time points than Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents did, Wilks’ Lambda = .34, F (3, 204) = 48.68, p < .001, η²=.19. Contrary to the expectations, Bulgarian adolescents scored significantly higher on familial identity at all three time points than Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents did, Wilks’ Lambda = .34, F (3, 204) = 219.45, p < .001, η²=.52. Similarly, for Turkish-Bulgarian and Bulgarian adolescents, there was no significant change over time for the different components of collective identity (Hypothesis 3). Both Bulgarian and the Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents did not show significant change (Wilks’ Lambda = .98) in their Bulgarian, F (6,201) = .49, p = .61, η² = .01, familial, F (6,201) = 1.08, p = .16, η² = .01 and religious identity, F (6,201) = 0.18, p =.82, η² = .01 (see Table 2).

Discussion

This study focused on Bulgarian majority and Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescent’s development in their collective identity encompassing ethnic, familial and religious identity. The findings regarding the first research question dealing with Turkish identity versus Bulgarian identity showed that Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents are more identified with their Turkish identity than with their Bulgarian identity. The strengths of ethnic and mainstream identity vary depending on the support for ethnic maintenance and the pressure for assimilation (Phinney et al., 2001). Minority groups attach themselves to their ethnic community as a reaction to pressures to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Mainstream (Bulgarian in this study) identity is then often weak. Prior work has also found that mainstream identity is lower for immigrant and ethnic minority groups and largely independent from their ethnic identity. Devos et al. (2010) showed that Caucasian Americans displayed a stronger mainstream identification than Latino Americans. In line with this, this study found that Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on Bulgarian identity than Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents.
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The findings regarding the second research question dealing with differences in ethnic Bulgarian, religious and familial identity showed that Bulgarian and Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents differed significantly. Bulgarian majority adolescents report weaker religious identity than Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescents. This is consistent with prior work documenting centrality of religion in minority adolescents, as well as the generally low religious group identification among the mainstream Bulgarian population (Dimitrova et al., 2013). Turkish-Bulgarians seem to emphasize their religious identity as an additional social identification and source of strength in the face of social discrimination. Also as expected, Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on Bulgarian identity than Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents did. Contrary to expectations, Bulgarian adolescents scored higher on familial identity than Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents did. Families are the core of religious socialization, so maybe ethnic and religious identity are more important for minority adolescents than familial identity (Fuligni & Flook, 2005).

Collective Identity Development

Contrary to expectations, Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents did not increase significantly in their different identities over time. This is not in line with prior research (French et al., 2006), reporting that mainstream, religious and familial identity were more established in older than in younger adolescents. That is why an increased involvement in issues related to adolescent’s ethnic, religious and familial environment with age was expected for the present sample of adolescents. However, the results of this study conform to additional work showing lack of developmental increase in identity. Similar to the results of this study, ethnic identification has been found to remain consistent of 6th, 7th and 8th grades for about 60% of the students of Asian/Pacific Islander background (Nishina, Witkow, Bellmore, & Nylund-Gibson, 2010). Also,
no uniform growth pattern in belonging to an ethnic group was found in Black and Latino adolescents displaying equally high levels of ethnic identity over time (Pahl & Way, 2006). Among youth with Latin American, Asian and European backgrounds, religious identity remained stable across high school, whereas religious participation declined. Greater identity change likely occurs at prominent points of transition, such as the transition to adulthood, encountering work and developing long-term romantic relationships. These features occur all after high school. Further, changes in religious identity were associated with changes in ethnic and familial identities, suggesting important linkages in the development of these social identities (Lopez et al., 2011). Lack of developmental change was also found for familial identity. Previous research suggests that when individuals become more involved in a family role, they will develop an identity attached to that role. For example, having kids when older, can lead to a strong familial identity (Aryee & Luk, 1996). The sample of this study had not developed a familial role yet, because they were still at school. Possibly, familial identity is more pronounced after adolescence, when own families are formed and the personal identity is stabilized already.

Being safely in their minority developmental context, such as the school or neighborhood, may produce less reason for continuous exploration for Turkish-Bulgarian youth (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). It may be that the stability of adolescents’ social environments across high school results in few challenges to their existing religious and familial identities. Then, there is little need to explore the extent of one’s identification with a religious or familial tradition (Lopez et al., 2011).

Limitations and Conclusions

The findings of this study are relevant for understanding Bulgarian mainstream and Turkish-Bulgarian minority adolescents’ collective identity processes. However, the study has
some shortcomings. First, it would be useful to test the impact of discrimination and segregation more directly, as these can influence identity. It may be that perceived discrimination strengthen a perception of incompatibility between ethnic and mainstream identities, which may lead to difficulties in integrating identities into a cohesive sense of self (Huynh, Devos, & Smalarz, 2011). Another shortcoming regards the capture of Turkish-Bulgarian minorities from Southern Bulgaria, where most Turkish-Bulgarian people live. Other regions of Bulgaria may be different from the area where the study was conducted.

Based on these limitations, the results should be interpreted with some caution. Still, the findings of this study are relevant for understanding adolescents’ collective identity development among majority and minority adolescents. Strength of the study is that the previous knowledge is almost entirely based on Western European and American samples and also barely longitudinal.

In general, more longitudinal research is needed to know more about development of identity, especially to compare minority and mainstream youth. Also, more studies about familial identity are needed. In conclusion, the findings highlight the importance of multiple identities among minority and majority groups. The findings and implications of this study are not only relevant to understanding Turkish-Bulgarian adolescents’ collective identity processes but can also advance the understanding of mainstream, religious, and family factors of other minority groups.
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References


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Table 1

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<th>Turkish</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>identity</td>
<td>identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1, M (SD)</td>
<td>3.51 (.78)</td>
<td>3.20 (.99)</td>
<td>3.03 (130)***</td>
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<td>Time 2, M (SD)</td>
<td>3.68 (.65)</td>
<td>2.79 (.75)</td>
<td>10.07 (143)***</td>
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<td>Time 3, M (SD)</td>
<td>3.61 (.66)</td>
<td>2.80 (.70)</td>
<td>10.13 (145)***</td>
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*** p <.001.
Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations for Turkish-Bulgarian (n=85) and Bulgarian (n=123) Adolescents Across Three Time Points*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Time 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Bulgarian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
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<td>3.69&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt; (.79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
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<td>3.31&lt;sub&gt;f&lt;/sub&gt; (.69)</td>
<td>3.13&lt;sub&gt;e&lt;/sub&gt; (.83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Means with different subscripts differ significantly among groups at $p < .001$. 