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A qualitative study about transmission of religious issues

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Abstract

Throughout the childhood, with the help of social, familial and educational agencies, together with views about self and outer world, an individual acquires religious perspective. The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover the individuals' constructions of current life experiences, related psychological outcomes and emotions based on the religion education process. University students in Ankara, were interviewed about their current and past life experiences on religion education process. Findings of this study are thought to point out the importance of parents' and educational agencies' religion education practices in relation to individuals' current life experiences and psychological outcomes.

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1. Introduction

In the process of forming the perceptions towards self, others and the world around, an individual is influenced by a variety of factors. As studied very frequently, religion can be one of the factors that can contribute to the way a person perceives and experiences the self and other outer realities. In the literature, despite the supportive role of religion on the psychological health outcomes of individuals (Schludermann, Schludermann, Needham, & Mulenga, 2001; Maltby, Lewis, Freeman, Day, Cruise, & Breslin, 2010; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; & Hommel & Colzato, 2010); there are also many studies revealing the link between religion and negative psychological outcomes (Gunderson & Mccary, 1979; Sargin, 2010; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000). It can be inferred that not only the religion itself but also the way it is learnt from both familial and educational atmosphere can be related with the past and current life experiences of individuals' and their inner emotional worlds. Therefore, this study aims to discover the young adult's religious or spiritual beliefs, their perceptions of God and any possible relevancy of these constructs to their life satisfaction, through the transmission of familial and educational issues.

2. Review of Literature

Although religion is considered to be one of the characteristics of the individual, it is acquired through the process of early socialization within the nuclear and extended family (Bengtson, Copen, Putney, & Silverstein, 2009). Social learning and modelling can be the theoretical explanation for the transmission of the religion from

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parents to children. Through the modelling, parents enable children to internalize the religion related values (Flor & Knapp, 2001).

Moreover, when supportive role of religion was investigated, it was revealed that, good adjustment and prosocial behaviour was found to be the positive outcomes of religion. The specific experience of these religious perspectives in means of holding “intrinsic” religious beliefs, having compassionate attitudes and “close” God image were found to be critical in directing the path towards positive psychological outcomes (Schludermann, Schludermann, Needham, & Mulenga, 2001; Steffen & Masters, 2005; Maltby et al., 2010; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Hommel & Colzato, 2010). On the contrary, the path towards negative psychological outcomes is found to be through “extrinsic religiosity” and “discontent”, “remote” and “not loving” God images (Bradshaw, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2008; Braam, Schaap- Jonker, Mooi, Ritter, Beekman, & Deeg, 2008; Swanson & Byrd, 1998). Specifically, feelings of discontent towards God were found related with hopelessness, depressive symptoms and feelings of guilt (Braam et al., 2008) that has been found to be an emotion associated with negative psychological outcomes like depression and suicidality (Sargin, 2010; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000). Not only depression and suicidality but also obsessions, self- blame, scrupulous symptoms and actions of anger were found to be among possible negative results of religious actions (Nunn, 1964; Siev, Baer, & Minichiello, 2011).

Since religion seems to be important in many aspects, the current study aims to discover any possible transmissions of religious issues through familial and educational agencies and to understand individuals’ experiences and emotions related with religion.

3.Method

3.1. Design

Phenomenological studies focus on how people make sense of an experience and convert those experiences into their consciousness (Patton, 2002). People’s feelings, perceptions, descriptions, judgements, and thoughts are all important in making sense of lived experiences, directly experienced phenomenon and talking with others about their experiences (Patton, 2002). Since the present study aimed to describe university students’ experiences of a phenomenon that is transmission of religious issues, this strategy of qualitative inquiry was found more appropriate to use. Before conducting the study, in order to clarify and revise the questions, a pilot interview with two university students from Middle East Technical University-Ankara was conducted. After the revision, final interview form, consisting 23 questions, was structured.

3.2. Participants

Convenient sampling of fourteen university students in Ankara was selected. Ages of the participants in the present study were between 21-32, ranging between undergraduate and doctorate degrees. Thirteen of the participants were female while one of them was male. All of the participants reported taking religious courses throughout their education.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

At the beginning of the interview, an interview protocol in means of giving participants an inform consent about their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw at any time, their consent on audio- record was introduced. As an ethical consideration, the participants of the study were guaranteed about anonymity in means of keeping all their views, experiences and ideas about the issue confidential and their ideas were not reported to anyone. The semi-structured interviews were audio- recorded following the verbatim transcriptions. Inductive process of open coding to analyse data was conducted. Moreover, participants’ individualistic understanding of religion and God, emotions evoked by transmitted religious issues and their overall evaluations about their lives were discovered through extracting specific themes and patterns from the data, categorising them and finding explanation to them.

3.4. Trustworthiness

Non-directional and structured questions were directed toward participants by avoiding socially desirable questions. Direct quotations were given place by using rich and thick description for presenting accuracy of data. All these can be considered as acts toward assuring trustworthiness and credibility.

4. Findings

When the interview data was analysed, two themes emerged namely “Religion Based Orientation” and “Non- Religion Based Orientation”. “Views”, “Experiences”, “Emotions” and “Transmission” were emerging codes under each theme.

In terms of Religion orientated views, participants drew an image of God having both positive and negative sides. Cleverness, creativeness, humorous, strong, protective, compassionate, forgiving, wise and sacrificing was the participants’ positive descriptions of God. Together with those positive sides, being authoritative, inconsistent, unfair, passive, selfish, rigid, punisher and frightening were attributed to God as negative. Participants constituted positive image of God resembling a figure of lovely grandparent, compassionate mother, powerful father, cheerful Santa Claus, Greek Goddess holding rod, or in the shape of heavenly white light, cloud, cotton and sky. Only one participant reported a negative God image formed in the figure of an authoritarian and coercive grandfather.

Moreover, participants’ reports of religion-oriented experiences were included under familial and non-familial constructs. Religion based familial experiences were reported as to be free of pressure and obligations and participants reported their parents being permissive about their own choice of religion. Most of the participants reported that, they experienced religion issues within a broadminded atmosphere, not via direct teaching from parents but by emphasizing reasoning. While mentioning about an open-minded environment, when they are asked about their familial atmosphere, some participants reported an authoritative salient figure of family member such as one of the parents or grand father. Beside those familial experiences, non-familial ones constructed including the religion courses throughout participants’ education. Participants reported negative memories about content of the religion courses while positive experiences were remembered based on the approach of the teacher.

When the participants were asked about religion-evoked emotions they reported hope, being accepted, cheerful, safe, peace, happy, motivated as to be positive while evaluating regret, shame, guilt, hopelessness, disappointment, suspect as to be negative religion-evoked feelings.

In terms of religion transmission, the interview data was interpreted under familial and educational constructs. Participants attributed their own levels of religiosity to their families’ religious orientation. The way of these transmissions were tried to be understood based on love and fear. Most of the participants mentioned about the love based transmission of religion from their family emphasizing the accepting, loving, forgiving and protecting role of God. On the contrary to the love based transmission, fear based transmission was emphasized by mentioning about punisher, frightening, authoritarian and unfair role of God. Moreover, when participants were asked to describe the image they would create in their children’s minds, they preferred to draw a God image that is accepting, loving, compassionate, wide open and protective instead of a frightening and punishing figure, like their own image of God.

In terms of educational transmission of religion, university students explained that throughout their education, the religious issues were tried to be taught them through rule-based, retention-focused and history-like religion courses that they found to be ridiculous and ineffective. Examples of religion based orientation themes and their specific codes were given below by stating quotations from the participants.

Participant 1 (P1): “ My belief in Allah helps me to live my life in a meaningful way and gives me a reason for my existence” (Experience)

P2: “My religion gives me the sense of everything will end and the impression of a meditation” (Emotion)

P3: “My belief in religion sometimes make me feel guilty, but generally enables me feeling peace, meaningful, enthusiasm and hope” (Emotion)

P4: “Religion courses remind me the fear, fear of God and fear of hell” (Emotion & Transmission)

P4: “I believe in reality based religion. Individuals should search for the reality to decide what to believe in” (Transmission)

P5: “We do not make any specific choice related with religion in our country, when we are born, if our family is Muslim, then we become Muslim” (Transmission)

P6: “When I do something inconsistent with my belief, I feel anger and guilt” (Emotion)

P1: “I visualise God as white, filled with white heavenly light, enlightening...Making you think that you will be loaded with a positive energy” (View)

P7: “God is like a white-bearded grandfather who owns you... Accepting and understanding...”(View)

P9: “I used to believe in God and in that days it made me feel like I’m not alone...Like there is always someone for you...”(Emotion)

P12: “In my mind, God is compassionate but frightening people for nothing... Is confused, does not know what to reward and what to punish and is passive, does not intervene all these bad things...” (View)

P14: “In my family religion was always questioned...Everybody was rebellious towards religion, they were talking about how stupid it is to go pilgrimage to Mecca since there are many other people who needs this money...Or how non-sense it was to salaah, or not to drink alcohol...I have taken them as models” (Transmission)

When we come to “Non-Religion Based Orientation” views, participants evaluated their selves and their lives as positive, specifically peaceful, happy, motivated; together with negatives by reporting feelings of anxious, worried and depressive towards their life and their selves. All of the participants evaluated their lives as to be satisfying.

Participants reported their non-religion oriented experiences basing on their moral ideas and evaluations. Despite some participants reported not believing in religion, they mentioned that they felt guilt, regret and restless when they do something inconsistent with their moral standards. They also added that having a set of moral standards help them arrange their actions accordingly and enable them feeling stable and safe.

About the non-religious oriented transmission, participants explained that their familial atmosphere was effective for them to from their own moral standards together with the influence of their experiences and information they gathered.

P4:”I do not like any ideology build upon fear” (Transmission)

P8: “I do not believe in religion, it is feminist ideology directing my life” (Experience)

P10: “Religion is not needed to be a good person” (Experience)

P13: “My family did not teach me any religion. It was more like a transmission of culture for things to do” (Transmission)

P11: “I do not believe in religion. What I give importance makes me a more compassionate and a good person” (Emotion)

5. Discussion & Implications

In the light of reported experiences of participants, familial atmosphere seems crucial in means of creating individuals’ own standards either by exploration or coercion. As a parent approaching a child in an open minded manner and with acceptance may enable the children to approach the thing they are motivated since it gives the child the opportunity for elaborating different alternatives. Beside this familial approach, a family environment, which is build upon the coercive, dominative, and restrictive religion convection may create an unquestioned owning of the knowledge. This kind of transmission may direct the child to be alienated, withdrawn and reactive toward the related religion orientation. In addition to the familial environment, educational agencies may also act as a restrictive, dominative and coercive source for a child towards the religion orientation. This may increase the tendency of the child to evaluate it negatively and contingently become distant from that orientation.

As participants reported, at schools, it is suggestible to conduct religion courses based on a questioning approach. In order to help children to create a love-based approach to religion, it will be important for those courses to emphasize the philosophical sides of religion rather than dictating the rigid religious rules and must-do prayer behaviours.

It is stressed that, the meaning of the religion for the child and the child’s religious behaviour are transmitted from their parents based on the parents’ own religion and religion related desire for their children (Flor & Knapp, 2001). Therefore, it is worth mentioning that, in the present study, participants preferred to create a figure of God in their children’s minds like their own image of God. Based on this, it may be inferred that, the image they

would prefer to create for their children may originate from their image that was created by their parents for themselves. Therefore, this may imply an intergenerational transmission of religious issues within the familial environment.

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