The Identity Repertoire of Alevis and Shared Humanity

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Summary
In light of the challenges and issues involved in defining Alevi identity, the concept of an "identity repertoire" may be proposed within the framework of social psychological approaches to better read and articulate identity. As demonstrated in one study, the notion of shared humanity—understood as a motivated identity construction, an identity management strategy, and a self-categorization shaped by the belief-theosophy of Alevism and its oral cultural heritage—holds a significant place in the identity repertoire of Alevis. Furthermore, adopting an intersectional approach to ethnic identity and mother tongue, along with attending to the diversity of social representations within the ingroup, appears to offer valuable insight into this repertoire.

Keywords: Benlik Sınıflandırması, Kimlik Repertuvarı, Kimlik Yönetim Stratejisi, Motivasyona Dayalı Kimlik İnaşası, Paylaşılan İnsanlık, Sosyal Temsiller

The Dilemmas of Defining Alevi Identity

Is Alevism a sect within Islam / an authentic expression of Turkishness / a genuine Anatolian form of Islam / or an early socialist or anarchist view that emerged in Anatolia? Such questions steer respondents toward particular definitions and generate normative frameworks about what Alevism should be and how it ought to appear. Attempts to define Alevism-and, in parallel, Alevi identity-have proceeded in contentious and debated ways, both in political power

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contexts and within the social sciences (Karlıdağ 2019a). Positivist approaches cloaked in the guise of scientific objectivity and political neutrality, along with reductionist and nationalist perspectives, or essentialist interpretations (such as portraying Alevism as the true form of Islam), are fundamentally products of modernity's regulatory task, characterized by writing, hegemonic control, and forms of epistemic violence. Because such attempts fail to enter the realm of "the spoken," they cannot offer readings that are sensitive to Alevism's oral tradition (Yalçınkaya 2005, 33-40).

As Aslan (2015, 75) states, "every definition creates its own micro-power." While conceptualizing Alevism as a "religious," "cultural," or "political" identity in line with normative assumptions is often a necessity and can offer certain clarifications, it also carries the risk of pushing the polyphonic, contextual, and subjective dimensions of identity into the background. For instance, a proposition such as "Alevism is a political identity" not only requires an explanation of what is meant by "political," but also tends to render the identity static. Ethnic identity, mother tongue, geographical affiliations, and place identity may all be determining factors in the grounding of Alevi identity. However, assuming that these elements operate in the same way for every Alevi individual may render diverse identity experiences invisible. For example, although Alevism cannot be reduced to a specific ethnic category (that is, it does not constitute a single ethnic entity when considered in terms of Arab, Kurdish, Turkish, or Zaza identities), some individuals may ground their Alevi identity precisely as an ethnicity. A demographically based perspective such as "coming from an Alevi family" may, at first glance, appear to be a valid criterion and foundation for being Alevi. Yet a person may not identify with such lineage-based affiliations-that is, with a fixed and ascribed form of belonging-or may attribute a different meaning to them and reimagine their identity accordingly. In particular, reductionist approaches and the essentialist origin myths that accompany them may, in attempting to explain Alevi identity, obscure it rather than

clarify it and/or exclude certain forms of belonging.

As observed in Tol's (2016) study on Alevi youth, identity construction is shaped not only through cultural or religious references but also through neighborhood-level socialization processes, everyday life practices, and diverse political orientations. According to Gültekin and Yeşiltepe (2015), *Dersimlilik* corresponds to a cultural and political identity domain that encompasses Alevi Kurdish ethno-religious communities. Moreover, in the Dersim-centered construction of Alevism, the historically shifting nature of the minority-majority binary, as well as specific dynamics such as the historical (and/or shifting) equation of Turkishness with Sunnism in the eyes of the Dersimlis, points to the possibility that place identity and geographical attachments may acquire a constitutive role for Alevi identity. Examining the "trajectory Alevism has followed through history," Aydın (2017) has demonstrated that there is no frozen or static Alevi identity in history; rather, it is possible to identify major turning points. When the Alevi Awakening, which can be read as a process of rediscovering or reconstructing identity, is considered in relation to urbanization and internal migration, the Alevi diaspora and the European Alevi movement, shifting connections with leftist ideologies, the positions of political Islam and the Kurdish movement (Ertan 2017; van Bruinessen 1996), and, in addition, recent developments such as the Alevi Workshops/Opening aimed at containing Alevism within an "acceptable" framework (Ecevitoğlu 2011), the influence of socio-political conditions on identity becomes apparent. In this framework, Alevi identity can be approached as a fluid, heterogeneous, and polyphonic "repertoire"[1], rather than a static, homogeneous, and monolithic formation, by taking into account the specific effects of ethnic identity and geographical affiliations, their intersections, and the socio-political ethos in which identity is shaped. This enables the adoption of an approach that transcends the limitations of reductionist definitions marked by epistemic domination.

Identity Repertoire: From Meta-Theoretical

Foundations to Social Psychological Approaches

These evaluations of Alevi identity can be addressed through frequently encountered axes of debate in identity research and theoretical grounding, such as personal-relational-collective, discovered-constructed, and stable-fluid (Vignoles et al. 2011). Behind every attempt to define identity lie ontological and epistemological assumptions, such as conceptions of human nature or claims to objectivity, whether these are made explicit or remain implicit. An ideal approach to understanding and representing the identity of a social group requires a reflexive orientation that goes beyond externally imposed definitions and instead interrogates how identity is constituted relationally, historically, and socially. Accordingly, one may argue for the necessity of an emic perspective, such as "giving voice," which enables the study of Alevi identity from the standpoint of Alevis themselves, along with a social psychological approach (Howarth 2002; Zadeh 2017).

On the other hand, this approach requires an ethical sensitivity regarding representation. "Giving voice" points to the recognition of Alevi subjects not merely as "speakable" objects but as agents who speak, make meaning, and represent. However, as Spivak (1999/2020) warns, any attempt to represent the voice of oppressed or marginalized subjects inevitably frames that voice within a particular epistemological structure. Therefore, in this context, "giving voice" should be understood not as enabling the subject to speak directly, but rather as an approach that exposes the conditions under which the subject has been silenced. In this regard, it must not be overlooked that every attempt to define identity is open to interrogation on ontological, epistemological/methodological, and ethical-political grounds. Rather than aiming to define Alevi identity, efforts should focus on interpreting and conveying it, keeping both the social psychological foundations of identity and critical approaches sensitive to the problem of representation at the center.

Identity formation has long been a significant subject of

inquiry in social psychology (see Karlıdağ 2019b). In general terms, identity-conceived as a response to the question "Who am I?"-is often treated as a process of definition, encompassing affective and behavioral dimensions as well (Vignoles et al. 2006). According to the Social Identity Approach, identity is grounded in three fundamental socio-cognitive processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Individuals classify the self at the interpersonal level (*personal identity*), the intergroup level (*social identity*), and at a superordinate level of abstraction (*shared humanity*) (Reicher et al. 2010). In a complementary vein, the Social Representations Theory offers a strong theoretical foundation for explaining self-categorization processes through its emphasis on context, historicity, and practice (Elejabarrieta 1994). Social representations not only play a central role in the interpretation, evaluation, regulation, and reconstruction of identity and intergroup relations, but are also shaped by social identity and the formation of psychological groups (Breakwell 1993).

From this perspective, the phenomenon of identity can be addressed in terms of both *process* and *content*, and although not a well-established concept, the notion of an "identity repertoire" can be seen as a functional framework that enables the joint consideration of identity processes and content. From a social psychological perspective, an identity repertoire can, on the one hand, reveal the level at which individuals classify the self (Turner et al. 1987), and on the other, make visible the shared reality and systems of values, ideas, and practices embedded in the social representations of the ingroup (Moscovici 1988). In this context, instruments such as the "Who Am I? – Twenty Statements Test" (Kuhn & McPartland 1954) and the "Social Identity Inventory" (Zavalloni 1973) may be interpreted as classical methods developed to examine individuals' subjective identity repertoires. It is also possible to trace the measurement and analytical techniques underlying such approaches in the contemporary literature (e.g., Lo Monaco et al. 2017;

Vignoles et al. 2006).

An Example from Empirical Research: Reading 'Shared Humanity' in the Identity Repertoire of Alevis

From this perspective, the aim of "reading" the identity repertoire of Alevis around the questions "How do Alevis define their own identity?" and "How do Alevis describe the social group they belong to and their ingroup identity?" appears to be a meaningful endeavor. Below, five fragments/passages drawn from the findings of a study conducted for this purpose are presented as illustrative of the Alevi identity repertoire. The research was carried out in Istanbul and Izmir, two cities in Turkey where the Alevi population is relatively concentrated. A total of 142 participants were reached, with diversity in terms of ethnic identity, place identity, age, and the degree of affiliation with Alevi institutions, among other variables. Each participant was asked to provide eight identity elements in reference to themselves (as a form of response to the question "Who am I?") and four associative expressions referring to the Alevi ingroup (as a form of response to the question "Who are we?"), based on which a survey was administered.[2] Details regarding the sample, data collection tools, analytical procedures, and theoretical background can be found in the published studies (see Karlıdağ & Kuşdil 2021; Karlıdağ & Kuşdil 2025).

(i)

While all participants self-reported membership in the Alevi social group, most expressed diverse ethnic identities; notably, 17 participants described themselves as Alevi also in ethnic terms. This constitutes a concrete indicator for discussions on "taking other ethnic identities into a grand parenthesis" through Alevi identity (Aydın 2017). Some participants described their ethnic identity in non-ethnic terms, such as "citizen of the world" or "simply human." Additionally, for some participants, their reported ethnic identity did not align with their stated mother tongue-for

instance, some who identified as ethnically Kurdish did not indicate Kurdish as their first language. Although not subjected to detailed analysis, these socio-demographic data highlight tensions between theoretical expectations and everyday social realities.

(ii)

Content analysis of self-categorization levels reveals that, when the participant group is considered as a whole, the frequency of identity elements at the interpersonal level (personal identity: 40.9%, relational identity: 15.1%) totals 56%. At a general level, the combined proportion of identity elements at the intergroup and superordinate levels (i.e., social identity and shared humanity identity), which amounts to 44%, is notable-especially in spite of the dominant spirit of the modern and neoliberal age. (If role-based relational identity elements are included in this category, the proportion rises to approximately 60%.) Despite the distancing effect of urbanization and modernization on Alevis and Alevism (Ecevitoğlu 2011), it appears that Alevis have not been fully driven toward an overwhelmingly individualistic identity repertoire, and that the notion or idea of "humanity" occupies a significant place in identity construction.

(iii)

The use of the category of humanity in both self-definition and ingroup representations was reflected in participants' subjective identity repertoires through various vocabularies. Taking into account both the identity elements at the superordinate level of self-categorization (e.g., expressions such as "I am human," "I am a friend to all living beings," or "I am someone who does not judge people by their language, race, or nation" [9.6%]) and the category "Alevis with a Humanity-Based Identity and Ethical Stance" in the ingroup social representations (e.g., codes such as "anti-discriminatory and peaceful," "humanist," "benevolent," "tolerant," or "equally distant to all living beings" [28.35%]),

it becomes evident that the notion of humanity occupies a considerable place in the Alevi identity repertoire. There were participants who simultaneously presented both a subjective identity element and an ingroup representation grounded in shared humanity. Furthermore, even among those who did *not* refer to shared humanity at the superordinate level of self-categorization for oneself, the notion or idea of humanity nonetheless emerged in an externalized form when they articulated representations of their ingroup-that is, of Alevis. In simple terms, one can say that when participants were asked both "Who are you?" and to describe their ingroup as members of the Alevi community, shared humanity consistently revealed itself.

The statement "My Kaaba is the human being," along with references to "regarding the seventy-two nations with the same gaze," the ideal of the *insan-ı kâmil* (perfect human being), the notion of a virtuous society/*rıza şehri*, and the broader oral cultural heritage, all make it clear that the notion of humanity holds a distinctive position in the belief-theosophy of Alevism. However, it is a significant finding that humanist beliefs associated with the notion of humanity-as reflected in self-categorization and social representations-are not only rooted in the ancient doctrines of Alevi faith-theosophy but also manifest directly in the subjective identity repertoires of Alevis living in today's urban environments, even within a sample that can be considered heterogeneous. To reduce Alevis' attachment to shared humanity merely to a faith-based phenomenon, or to regard this orientation as an innate quality-something embedded in their "essence," "nature," or "spiritual fabric"-risks falling into an essentialist perspective. In contrast, it is possible to offer several non-mutually-exclusive readings of shared humanity as an element anchored in the Alevi identity repertoire:

According to the statistical analysis findings of the study, identity centrality at the superordinate level is predicted not by the motivations of self-esteem, efficacy, belonging, or distinctiveness but rather by meaning and continuity. In

other words, the background to Alevis' self-definitions centered on shared humanity is shaped by identity motivations such as providing orientation and a sense of purpose in life (*meaning*), and establishing a collective memory by bridging past, present, and future (*continuity*). In this regard, the notion of humanity, as expressed in the idea of "global citizenship" (McFarland et al. 2019), is not merely a matter of public discourse but constitutes a concrete dimension of self-categorization and exemplifies a case of motivated identity construction (Vignoles et al. 2006).

Among the descriptive findings is that participants declared identity elements grounded more in shared humanity than in Alevi collective identity (e.g., "I am a Hubyar Alevi," "I am a Kurdish Alevi," "I come from an Alevi-rooted family"). Moreover, in the section on ingroup representations, the most frequent category is also "Alevis with a Humanity-Based Identity and Ethical Stance." In light of the collective/historical experiences of victimization also reflected in the ingroup representations, the tendency of Alevis to set aside group identities to prioritize shared humanity can be interpreted as an "identity management strategy" (Reicher et al. 2010). This interpretation aligns with Ertan's (2017) analysis of Alevi politicization, which argues that Alevis, in the face of a history of massacres, cling to universal values and a "discourse of humanity" (e.g., secularism, equal citizenship) as part of their struggle for existence. As is well known, Alevism is a historically concealed identity that, at various points in history, had to be hidden. Although participants did not avoid ingroup-based elements in their subjective identity repertoire, the more visible emphasis on shared humanity suggests that this socio-historical reality may still leave traces in the present as a reflection of collective victimhood. As Aslan (2015) states, the effort of an oppressed group to prove that it does not pose a threat to the broader society and to gain legitimacy is understandable under conditions of repression, including those that amount to necropolitical violence. In this context, overcoming the Alevi-Sunni or us-them social category opposition by "engaging with a shared universe of symbolic

values” (Deschamps 1982)-that is, by anchoring in shared humanity-can be interpreted as a strategy for survival and for becoming legible.

The specific role of shared humanity can also be interpreted as a re-evaluation of the theological heritage of Alevism, the Alevi ingroup identity, and the content of collective memory. For Alevi individuals, social representations of Alevism point to humanist and cosmopolitan cultural values such as “human-centeredness,” “love for people, nature, and living beings,” “standing with the oppressed,” “social justice,” and fraternity (Karlıdağ & Göregenli 2017). Accordingly, although it does not appear as an ingroup identity, the emphasis on shared humanity may also be examined as a form of self-categorization that bears traces of Alevism’s theological and oral cultural heritage. From this perspective, it may be argued that Alevi identity, in certain respects, imparts its color to a superordinate categorization based on shared humanity.

Thus, the emphasis on shared humanity becomes salient in the identity repertoire of Alevis as a multidimensional construct encompassing socio-motivational, strategic, and theosophical-cultural layers. From a holistic perspective, this orientation-initially a strategy of identity management in response to collective victimhood-may, over time, have evolved into an internalized and motivationally driven form of identity, potentially transforming into a conception of self that is nourished by Alevism’s theological and oral cultural heritage.

(iv)

Some findings of the study support the view that an image of Alevism as a homogeneous and monolithic identity is inaccurate. Among Alevi participants, the frequency of using identity elements associated with shared humanity, social identity, and personal/relational identity varies depending on the variables of “ethnic identity” and “mother tongue.” In all ethnic identity categories except for Kurdish Alevis, more than 50% of the expressed identity elements in the

repertoire were located at the interpersonal level; in contrast, this rate was 43.5% among Kurdish Alevi participants, falling below 50%. (A similar result from the analysis also applies to Kurdish and Zaza in terms of mother tongue, distinguishing them from other categories.) In relation to the intersectionality of identity, being both Kurdish and Alevi signifies a “more disadvantaged status” even within the already low-status Alevi social group in power relations. Güler-Selvi (2019) defines this status as “multiple minority.” It is plausible to suggest that being a member of an oppressed minority group reinforces a communal-collectivist self-concept that promotes peaceful coexistence and solidarity in the face of conflict and discrimination (Deschamps 1982; Staerklé et al. 2011). In this context, while self-categorization based on shared humanity is understandable across Alevi participants in general, its more pronounced presence among Kurdish Alevis gains significance in light of this multiple minority status. This comparative framework was examined only in relation to ethnic identity and mother tongue in the study; however, it is important to expand the intersectional lens to include other dimensions such as gender and sexual orientation (e.g., Akkaya 2015; Yıldırım 2023).

(v)

Alevi identity and self-categorization processes do not unfold in a vacuum. For instance, distinctions drawn from the structure and characteristics of Abrahamic religions-particularly Islam-and comparisons with Sunni-Islamic understandings prominently shape the social representations of Alevism (Karlıdağ & Göregenli, 2017). In the present study, five categories emerging from the social representations of the ingroup reflect not only the connection Alevi social agents establish with the notion of humanity and their shared cosmopolitan views but also include shared perspectives on the socio-cultural background (e.g., being enlightened and open-minded), social status and political engagements (e.g., supporting human rights and standing with the oppressed), personal

traits (e.g., being friendly), and religious practices and/or characteristics (e.g., going to a *cemevi* instead of a mosque). Among these representational categories, codings related to collective/historical experiences of victimization, the diversity of political engagements, and ingroup-favoring emphases are particularly notable. While the overall tone of participants' evaluations in their ingroup social representations tends to be more positive than average, some associations with negative connotations and self-critical characterizations have also been observed-for example, being status quo-oriented, degeneration and alienation, fragmentation, and weak solidarity ties. Accordingly, the shared values, ideas, and practices expressed in these ingroup social representations appear to offer illuminating insights into the content of Alevis' identity repertoire.

Conclusion

In the face of essentialist and reductionist risks inherent in efforts to define Alevi identity, it is important to draw attention to the polyphonic, contextual, and subjective aspects of identity. Rather than defining Alevi identity as a static, homogeneous, and monolithic structure, this study proposed the concept of an "identity repertoire" to offer a framework aimed at interpreting and understanding identity through a process- and content-oriented approach. Within this framework, an example from empirical research (Karlıdağ & Kuşdil 2021; Karlıdağ & Kuşdil 2025) focused-through the "giving voice" approach-on how Alevi individuals construct their identities and examined the Alevi identity repertoire from various angles: (i) the disjunction between theoretical expectations and everyday/social reality, (ii) a non-individualist identity repertoire, (iii) the meaning and role of the notion of shared humanity, (iv) the necessity of an intersectional perspective, especially regarding ethnic identity and mother tongue, and (v) shared values, ideas, and practices reflected in diverse ingroup representations ranging from collective victimization to self-critical connotations.

Shared humanity-elaborated through the concepts of motivated identity construction, identity management strategies, and self-categorization grounded in traces of Alevism's theological and oral cultural heritage-emerges as a particularly noteworthy phenomenon within the identity repertoire of Alevis. Of course, the notion of humanity can also be addressed through different theoretical orientations within (social/political) psychology (see McFarland et al. 2019). In the example from empirical research presented here, shared humanity was predominantly grounded in the Social Identity Approach and the Social Representations Theory, without resorting to generalizing-positivist claims and in dialogue with the literature on Alevism. In this context, beyond the socio-motivational explanations in terms of "meaning" and "continuity," it seems worthwhile to explore both the underlying dynamics and the outcomes of shared humanity in relation to Alevis, particularly around themes such as collective emotional orientations, collective well-being, and collective action. In this way, it becomes possible to develop ways of interpreting and understanding the Alevi identity repertoire beyond external and reductionist definitions.

Endnotes

[1] The concept of repertoire can be used metaphorically across different theoretical strands, ranging from symbolic interactionism to discursive and social/political psychology-for example, behavioral repertoires, repertoires of collective action, explanatory repertoires, and socio-psychological repertoires.

[2] In the survey implementation, 142 participants read a standardized instruction accompanying the question "Who are you?" and each provided eight self-descriptive statements, resulting in a total of 1136 identity elements. Each of these statements was individually evaluated and measured in terms of identity centrality and identity motivations. In the part concerning social representations, each participant generated four verbal associations referring

to the Alevi ingroup. Due to the nature of qualitative data analysis, some expressions overlapped with multiple categories; therefore, 20 associative expressions were multiply coded, leading to a total of 589 codings. The percentage values mentioned in the following sections of the text refer to these total counts.

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