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## The Mediating Role of Religion-Based Beliefs in the Relationship Between Microaggressions and Ethnocultural Empathy

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the mediating role of individuals' religious worldview in the relationship between microaggressions toward mental illness and ethnocultural empathy. Microaggression is generally associated with low empathy and unconscious biased attitudes, referring to individuals making discriminatory or demeaning statements without being aware of it. The study explores how individuals' religious worldviews shape the impact of microaggressions and their relationship with ethnocultural empathy levels. The research was conducted with 312 participants aged 18 and older, and data were collected using the Religious Worldview Scale, the Ethnocultural Empathy Scale, and the Microaggressions Toward Mental Illness Scale. The analyses revealed that microaggressions do not have a direct significant effect on ethnocultural empathy; however, religious worldview plays a mediating role, indirectly influencing this relationship. The study's main hypothesis suggests that religious worldview mediates the relationship between microaggressions toward mental illness and ethnocultural empathy, significantly shaping the effect of microaggressions on empathy. In this context, the findings are expected to provide valuable contributions to promoting social cohesion, fostering acceptance of cultural differences, and developing strategies to reduce the impact of microaggressions.

**Keywords:** Religious worldview, microaggressions, ethnocultural empathy, social interaction, prejudice

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## Introduction

Living in a society with different cultures requires social adaptation. Thus, being able to empathize between groups becomes important (Shunchao, 2023). These societies are called multicultural societies. Multicultural societies can be defined as social structures that include various races, religious beliefs, languages, and social lives (Islam & Bozdağ, 2021). While this diversity causes positive effects such as cultural richness in many areas of society, it can also cause prejudices and negative thoughts towards these differences by society (Hutabarat, 2023). Microaggressions, which represent these negative thoughts and prejudices, can cause psychological pressure and difficulties towards individuals with differences (Mensitieri et al., 2025). Although overt discrimination is the subject of many studies, microaggressions are a difficult situation to detect, affecting individuals' well-being, interpersonal relationships, and social skills (Mohammad Vali Samani, 2024). Microaggression includes words and behaviors that are made towards individuals from different cultures, who are in the minority, and that negatively affect them, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Güleç & Özden, 2019; Schraub, 2023; Webster, 2018). Similarly, Torino et al. (2018) and Adedeji et al. (2023) describe microaggression as “demeaning insults or belittling behaviors directed at members of an oppressed group.” If microaggressions are not taken seriously by society, issues such as interpersonal skills and the sense of belonging among individuals in society can be negatively affected, while problems such as alienation from oneself can arise (Williams et al., 2021). Although microaggressions are often perceived as demeaning, they differ from overt and intentional acts of racism. Since they are done unconsciously, their individual and psychological effects can sometimes be ignored (Campbell & Manning, 2014). Over time, these unnoticed effects can combine and cause many negative feelings such as worthlessness, exclusion, and lack of belonging, which seriously harm the psychological health of the individual (Idle et al., 2025). In addition, negative effects such as loss of self-confidence, anxiety, depression and alienation from social life are seen in individuals in minority communities (Starling, 2024). Microaggressions can also cause chronic stress that harms the psychological integrity of the person (Sue, 2005). Such situations can affect areas such as the person's social and academic life and cause the functionality in their life to deteriorate (Adenusi et al., 2025). These negative effects do not only harm the individual, but can also disrupt the peace and structure of society (Farber, 2021).

In combating microaggression, empathy is one of the most powerful keys to awareness and change (Jana & Baran, 2023). Defined as "feeling what another person feels," empathy has been a subject of debate in philosophy for centuries regarding its role in social and moral development and has also become a key concept in contemporary psychology (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1990). The concept of empathy is sometimes used to refer to a cognitive process similar to perspective-taking (Deutsch & Madie, 1975) and at other times to an affective process that also includes cognitive elements (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1990). Goldstein and Michaels (1985) viewed empathy as a process that serves a communicative function of gathering information. Empathy is crucial for human relationships and serves as a fundamental component of all psychological phenomena (Duan & Hill, 1996). According to Dyche and Zayas (2001), empathy is one of the foundations of prosocial behavior and a sense of justice.

While empathy is an effort to understand the emotional state of the other person without losing one's objectivity (Watson et al. 2022); ethno-cultural empathy is the ability to understand individuals from different languages, races and beliefs by using empathy in relationships (Valieva & Fazlitdinova, 2023). In other words, ethno-cultural empathy is the effort of the concept of

empathy to understand individuals who experience cultural diversity. While the basic concept of empathy tries to understand the emotional processes of individuals, ethno-cultural empathy deepens this understanding and offers the opportunity to understand the individual who has differences (Fernández-Corbacho et al., 2024). To describe the concept of intercultural empathy, various terms have been used interchangeably, such as ethnocultural empathy (Ridley & Lingle, 1996), multicultural empathic awareness (Scott & Borodovsky, 1990), and ethnic perspective-taking (Quintana et al., 2000 ; Wang et al., 2003). In this context, it can be thought that ethno-cultural empathy will have an important effect in combating microaggressions. Ethno-cultural empathy is an important concept that helps understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of individuals from different identities (Kapıkıran, 2023). Individuals with this skill know how words and behaviors will affect individuals with different identities and pay attention to this in interpersonal communication (Moffit et al., 2022). With the increase of this empathic skill, people not only contribute to eliminating the negative effects of microaggressions, but also support individuals who are exposed to microaggressions (Singleton-Gonzalez, 2025). Ethnocultural empathy is a tool that can help reduce individual prejudices and promote equality and inclusivity in society. In particular, fostering mutual understanding among individuals from different ethnic and religious groups can help mitigate the impact of microaggressions and contribute to building a more inclusive society (Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008). Therefore, developing ethno-cultural empathy is a fundamental step toward establishing more inclusive, respectful, and healthy social relationships in multicultural societies.

Empathy or ethno-cultural empathy alone may not be enough to deal with microaggressions. This situation is especially evident in societies with different cultures and deeply held beliefs. When these beliefs are shaped by religious views, perceptions of darkness are affected by these thoughts (Cuevas & Dawson, 2021). Religious views provide a framework that guides people in making sense of life and are an important phenomenon that directs interpersonal relationships by determining the individual's moral and ethical choices (Suryani & Muslim, 2024). A religious worldview influences not only how individuals perceive themselves and the world but also shapes their expectations, goals, motivations, and emotions through various psychological processes (Goplen & Plant, 2015). As a result, individuals with a strong religious worldview may adopt different strategies to maintain their beliefs when encountering other groups. This can sometimes lead to biased and discriminatory reactions (Greenberg et al., 1997; Major et al., 2007) and, in some cases, even acts of aggression toward other groups with the intention of suppressing or eliminating alternative worldviews (Goplen & Plant, 2015).

The influence of religious beliefs on social behavior and cultural norms that shape society is well-known (Sele et al., 2024). In many societies, religion serves as a fundamental reference point in defining right and wrong, the distinction between “us” and “them,” and the value of others. These religious frameworks can play a mediating role in shaping how individuals relate to microaggressions and ethnocultural empathy. On the one hand, religious teachings can reduce the incidence of microaggressions by promoting tolerance, compassion, and understanding (Hall, 2023). Conversely, some religious teachings can be said to be effective in the development and maintenance of negative thoughts and behaviors towards minority groups, albeit unconsciously (Gupta, 2024). In this context, religious beliefs have the potential to reduce or increase both the occurrence and impact of microaggressions.

The mediating role of religion-based beliefs in the relationship between microaggressions and ethnocultural empathy is a complex and multifaceted issue. Religion can influence both the expression of microaggressions and the development of empathy, depending on the specific religious values, interpretations, and practices individuals adhere to (Pentaris, 2018). For example, in some religious traditions, there is a strong emphasis on charity, kindness, and respect for others, which may encourage individuals to practice empathy and avoid behaviors that could be perceived as discriminatory or harmful. In contrast, other religious beliefs might reinforce an "in-group" mentality, where individuals are more likely to dehumanize those outside their religious community, making microaggressions more likely to occur.

The aim of this study is to examine the mediating role of individuals' religious worldview in the relationship between microaggressions toward mental illness and ethnocultural empathy. The main hypothesis of the study suggests that religious worldview mediates the relationship between the level of microaggressions toward mental illness and ethnocultural empathy and that this mediation significantly influences the effect of microaggressions on empathy. In this context, the findings are expected to provide significant contributions to social cohesion, the acceptance of cultural differences, and the development of strategies to reduce the impact of microaggressions.

## **Method**

### **Research Model**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the mediating role of religious worldview in the relationship between microaggressions toward mental illness and ethno-cultural empathy. In this context, the research was conducted within the framework of the predictive correlational model, which is one of the descriptive research methods (Şata, 2020). Predictive correlational research is defined as a research model that aims to determine the interaction between multiple independent variables and the level of relationships among these variables (Karasar, 2014).

### **Population and Sample**

The population of this study consists of individuals over the age of 18 who do not have any disabilities. The sample was selected using the convenience sampling method, a type of non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher. This method is often preferred in exploratory research or when random sampling is not feasible due to time, cost, or logistical constraints (Ahmed, 2024).

Initially, the sample included a total of 350 participants. During the data cleaning and examination process following data collection, 18 individuals with missing values were excluded from the study. Subsequently, an outlier analysis was conducted, identifying 20 individuals with extreme values, who were also excluded from the study. As a result, the study was conducted with a total of 312 individuals. The study sample consisted of 312 participants. In terms of gender, 66.7% were male and 33.3% were female. Regarding age distribution, 18.6% were aged 22 and under, 30.8% were between 23 and 25, 21.4% were between 26 and 28, and 29.2% were aged 29 and over. Concerning education levels, 7.1% had completed primary or secondary school, 16.3% had a high school education, 64.1% held an associate or bachelor's degree, and 12.5% had completed postgraduate studies. In terms of marital status, 24.7% were married, 62.5% were single, and 12.8% were in a relationship. When it came to perceived income status, 31.4% reported their income as being less than their expenses, 53.8% stated it was equal to their expenses, and 14.8% reported earning more than their expenses. Regarding parental education levels, 45.8% of

mothers were illiterate, 34.6% had completed primary school, 8.0% had a middle school education, 7.4% had finished high school, and 4.2% had a university degree. For fathers, 15.4% were illiterate, 40.1% had completed primary school, 21.8% had a middle school education, 12.2% had finished high school, and 10.5% held a university degree. The socio-demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on participants' socio-demographic information

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	208	66.7
	Female	104	33.3
Age group	22 years and under	58	18.6
	23-25 age	96	30.8
	26-28 age	67	21.4
	29 age and over	91	29.2
Education level	Primary/Secondary school	22	7.1
	High school	51	16.3
	Associate/Bachelor's degree	200	64.1
	Postgraduate	39	12.5
Marital status	Married	77	24.7
	Single	195	62.5
	In a relationship	40	12.8
Percieved income	Income < Expenses	98	31.4
	Income = Expenses	168	53.8
	Income > Expenses	46	14.8
Mother's education	Illiterate	143	45.8
	Literate/Primary School	108	34.6
	Middle School	25	8.0
	High School	23	7.4
	University	13	4.2
Father's education	Illiterate	48	15.4
	Literate/Primary School	125	40.1
	Middle School	68	21.8
	High School	38	12.2
	University	33	10.5
Total		312	100.0

When Table 1 is examined, it is observed that the majority of participants are male and fall within the age range of 23-28. Regarding educational levels, most participants have an associate or bachelor's degree, while the least common education level is primary or secondary school. In terms of marital status, the majority of participants are single. When examining perceived income, it is found that most participants have a moderate income that is equal to their expenses. Regarding maternal education levels, the majority of mothers are illiterate, whereas most fathers are literate.

### Data Collection Instruments

**Religious Worldview Scale :**The Religious Worldview Scale, developed by Goplen and Plant (2015), consists of 19 items and is administered using a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree). In the original study, the internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated as  $\alpha = .97$ . For validity analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted, and fit indices such as RMSEA, CFI, and TLI were examined. The factor loadings demonstrated high correlations, ranging between .60 and .85. In the reliability analysis, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found to be .95, and

the test-retest reliability was .92 (Goplen & Plant, 2015). The validity and reliability studies of the scale in Turkey were conducted by Kuşat and Bulut (2016). The scale consists of 19 items and two factors, namely meaning-making of the afterlife and this world. The Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was determined to be .88, and the split-half reliability coefficient was .86.

**Ethno-Cultural Empathy Scale:** Originally developed as a 31-item, 6-point Likert scale, the Ethno-Cultural Empathy Scale was adapted into Turkish by Özdikmenli and Demir (2014) and revised to a 5-point Likert format. As a result of item analysis, item 16 was removed due to low item-total correlation. For validity analysis, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted, revealing a three-factor structure, which includes: Empathic Feeling and Expression, Empathic Perspective-Taking, and Acceptance of Cultural Differences with Empathic Awareness. The CFA results indicated that the scale had fit indices of RMSEA = .06, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, demonstrating a good fit. In the reliability analysis, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was .91 for the total scale, while it ranged between .78 and .87 for the sub-dimensions (Özdikmenli & Demir, 2014).

**Microaggressions Toward Mental Illness Scale:** The Microaggressions Toward Mental Illness Scale, developed by Gonzales et al. (2015), consists of 17 items and four sub-dimensions. The scale follows a 4-point Likert format, with higher scores indicating higher levels of microaggression. Validity analyses were conducted using CFA, confirming that the four-factor structure was appropriate. The fit indices were found to be RMSEA = .07, CFI = .94, and TLI = .93, indicating an acceptable fit. In the reliability analysis, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was .89 for the total scale, while it ranged between .75 and .86 for the sub-dimensions. The test-retest reliability was calculated as .88 (Gonzales et al., 2015).

### **Normality and Reliability Analysis of Data Collection Instruments**

To determine the distribution characteristics of the data obtained from the measurement instruments used in the study, skewness and kurtosis coefficients were examined. Additionally, descriptive statistics were calculated to present the general characteristics of the data. To assess the reliability of the measurement instruments, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated, and reliability analyses were conducted. The descriptive statistics and reliability values obtained from the measurement instruments are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Skewness and Kurtosis Statistics and Reliability Values of the Measurements Obtained from the Instruments

Variables	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}$	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach $\alpha$
Religious Worldview	23.00	87.00	63.95	9.57	-0.65	1.56	.91
Ethnocultural Empathy	65.00	117.00	93.51	7.35	-0.62	1.97	.89
Microaggression	17.00	64.00	42.38	6.94	-0.53	1.99	.85

When Table 2 is examined, it is observed that the skewness values of the measurement instruments used in the study fall within the  $\pm 3.00$  range, while the kurtosis values remain within the  $\pm 10.00$  range. This result indicates that the data follow a normal distribution (Kline, 2015). Accordingly, the measurement instruments were accepted as having the characteristic of normal distribution.

Additionally, the obtained reliability coefficients were found to range between .85 and .91. In the literature, reliability coefficients of .70 and above are considered to indicate high reliability levels (Salvucci et al., 1997), while values between .60 and .70 are considered acceptable reliability levels (Griethuijsen et al., 2014). In this context, it can be concluded that the reliability values obtained from the measurement instruments used in this study generally indicate a high level of reliability.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was designed in accordance with the research objective. First, descriptive statistics were calculated, and skewness and kurtosis values were examined to assess the distribution of the data. To determine the reliability of the measurement instruments, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated. To analyze the mediation effects, which form the core of the study, a mediation model was applied. While evaluating the model, the 95% confidence interval of indirect effects was taken into consideration (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). To test the significance of the indirect effects, the bootstrapping method was applied using 10,000 bootstrap samples. The data analysis process was conducted using SPSS (Version 25) and Jamovi (Version 2.6.13) software.

### Ethic

The research was carried out with the approval of Van Yüzüncü Yıl University Social and Humanities Sciences Ethics Commission dated 07/02/2025 and numbered 2025/03-20.

### Findings

As part of the study, the relationships between variables were first examined, and the findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlations between variables

Variables	Religious Worldview	Ethnocultural Empathy
Religious Worldview	--	
Ethnocultural Empathy	.23**	--
Microaggression	.44**	.11*

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

When Table 3 is examined, it is observed that the variables within the scope of the study have statistically significant relationships. The relationship between ethnocultural empathy and microaggressions is positive and low ( $r = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while its relationship with religious worldview is also positive and low ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The relationship between microaggressions and religious worldview is positive and at a moderate level ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

After examining the relationships between variables, the mediating effect of religious worldview in the relationship between microaggression levels toward mental illness and ethnocultural empathy was tested. The findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mediation analysis

Path	Effect	b	%95 Confidence Interval Lower	Upper	$\beta$	p-value
Indirect	MA $\Rightarrow$ RW $\Rightarrow$ ECE	0.10	0.04	0.17	0.10	<.001
	MA $\Rightarrow$ RW	0.61	0.47	0.75	0.44	<.001
	RW $\Rightarrow$ ECE	0.17	0.08	0.26	0.22	<.001
Direct	MA $\Rightarrow$ ECE	0.02	-0.11	0.14	0.01	0.816
Total	MA $\Rightarrow$ ECE	0.12	0.00	0.24	0.11	0.045

Note: MA = Microaggression, RW = Religious Worldview, ECE = Ethnocultural Empathy

Upon examining Table 4, it was found that the direct effect of individuals' levels of microaggression toward mental illnesses on their level of ethnocultural empathy is statistically significant (total effect,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The level of microaggression toward mental illnesses is also a positive predictor of the level of religious worldview (direct effect,  $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When the effect of the level of religious worldview on the level of ethnocultural empathy was examined, it was determined that religious worldview is a positive predictor of ethnocultural empathy (direct effect,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ). When the mediating variable (religious worldview) was included in the model, the level of microaggression toward mental illnesses was found to have no statistically significant direct effect on the level of ethnocultural empathy (direct effect,  $\beta = .01$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Accordingly, it was found that the level of microaggression toward mental illnesses has an indirect effect on ethnocultural empathy through the mediation of religious worldview (indirect effect,  $\beta = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A graphical representation of the tested model is provided in Figure 1.

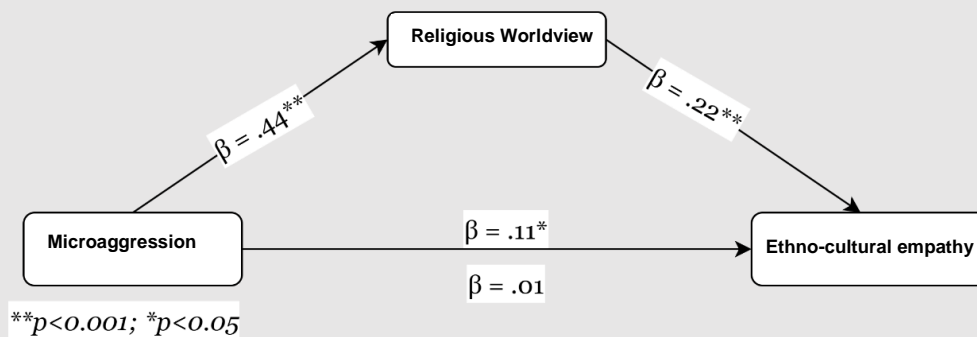


Figure 1. Tested mediation model

## Discussion and Conclusion

Microaggressions generally involve discriminatory and exclusionary behaviors and verbal attitudes that are unknowingly made towards individuals in minority groups. This can cause an increase in psychological distance in all individuals and weaken empathy skills (Sue et al., 2019). For some individuals, being exposed to these behaviors can cause them to be more sensitive to social equality and increase awareness on this issue, thus providing an opportunity to develop ethnocultural skills by developing empathy skills towards others (Chao et al., 2024). This suggests that self-awareness and sociocultural sensitivity can enable negative experiences to become opportunities for empathy development. As a result, whether microaggressions hinder or enhance ethnocultural empathy may vary depending on how individuals process these experiences and the support systems or belief frameworks they have. In this context, religiously based beliefs may play an important role in both microaggression experiences and the acquisition of ethnocultural skills. Individuals with strong religious beliefs, especially those emphasizing compassion, justice, and the inherent dignity of all people, may tend to evaluate microaggressions within the framework of understanding rather than hostility (Moss, 2020). Such attitudes can reduce the negative effects of microaggressions and foster a deeper understanding and relationship towards different identities.

Firstly, according to the results of the analyses, it was revealed that microaggressions do not have a significant relationship on ethnocultural empathy. It was concluded that microaggressions alone cannot be sufficient to affect empathic skills towards differences (Peifer & Taasobshirazi, 2022; Williams, 2019). The fact that there was no significant relationship between microaggressions and the dependent variable ethnocultural empathy provided insight into the fact that different intergroup variables and emotional understanding skills can be affected by very different dynamics (Hess & Philippot, 2007; Mackie & Smith, 2015). Although microaggressions are often associated with negative outcomes such as stress, alienation, and decreased psychological well-being (Choi et al., 2022), the lack of a direct effect of these on ethnocultural empathy suggests that the development of empathy towards different cultural groups is shaped by deeper and more complex mechanisms. The existence of possible mediating or moderating variables that determine how individuals respond to such experiences is important in this context. Rather than directly increasing or decreasing empathy, microaggressions may act through more complex psychological or social processes, such as religious beliefs, coping mechanisms, or cultural identity; these processes may either moderate or strengthen the impact of microaggressions (Anderson, 2022).

The findings reveal a nuanced role of religious worldview in the context of microaggressions and ethnocultural empathy. The moderate positive relationship between religious worldview and microaggressions suggests that individuals with stronger religious convictions may, at times, engage in or justify microaggressive behaviors—possibly as a result of rigid interpretations of religious doctrine, in-group favoritism, or a moral framework that inadvertently marginalizes those who differ from their beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1997). This finding of the study revealed that although there are situations where religion can direct prosocial values, sometimes when religion is treated in an exclusionary manner, prejudices and stereotypes towards minorities can develop (Kiper, 2023). The significant positive relationship between religious worldview and ethnocultural empathy shows that individuals with a religious worldview can have compassion, respect for their differences and empathic understanding towards individuals who are different from themselves. It can be stated that while religion can both strengthen microaggressions and also develop understanding and empathic skills towards social differences, it reveals the complex nature of religion (Day, 2009; Hall, 2023; Roszak, 2021). In addition,

religious worldview can be considered as an important factor in individuals being more sensitive to differences socially and culturally (Taiba et al., 2023). These results refer to the value of how individuals interpret religious worldview and how they transform it into behavior.

### **Implications**

Practitioners, educators, and community leaders can plan to incorporate religious terminology such as human dignity, compassion, interdependence, and understanding of human value into various educational programs to build social empathy with minority group members. Faith-based perspectives can play an important role in promoting social peace by focusing on tolerance and respect for differences among minority group members based on their human nature. It is thought that it would be important to implement intervention programs that are sensitive to individual differences by emphasizing the importance of individuals' belief systems in social empathy. Psychologists and clients working with individuals who are victims of microaggression can investigate the functionality of religion in increasing psychological resilience and apply technical and theoretical knowledge in this direction. The development of psychoeducation programs that investigate the functionality of religion in increasing the psychological well-being of individuals is also considered very important. Longitudinal and in-depth studies with multiple variables can reveal in more detail how these variables relate to each other and how religion interacts with microaggressions over time and in different socio-political contexts.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

There is no conflict of interest for the study. The author conducted the study alone.

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### **Ethic**

The research was carried out with the approval of Van Yüzüncü Yıl University Social and Humanities Sciences Ethics Commission dated 07/02/2025 and numbered 2025/03-20.

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