COMPARISON OF ETHNIC MINORITY AND NATIVE MAJORITY YOUTH IN THEIR PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS IN LIFE

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Abstract

This study investigated ethnic similarities and differences in the perception of success in life among Belgian adolescents. A specifically developed scale (Perception of Success in Life scale) was administered to 1726 participants. Respondents rated the importance of 20 success-items. The dichotomy individualism-collectivism was employed to better understand differences between both groups. According to this dimension Muslim ethnic minority youth has a rather collectivistic background, whereas the culture of majority youth is typically Western individualistic. As expected ethnic minority youth valued a more traditional (collectivistic) perspective of success, in which family life plays a central role, combined with self direction (individualistic), whereas majority adolescents specifically favour perceptions related to autonomy (self direction).

Key Words: *Ethnic minority youth, success in life*

JEL Classification: I31

1. INTRODUCTION

Halfway through the 1960s Belgium signed bilateral contracts for labour force from mainly the Mediterranean Sea area. It was an era of prosperity and wealth due to important economic development in the industrial sector. However, a decade later the labour market got saturated and in 1974 a migration stop was proclaimed. It is difficult to calculate the size of the actual Islamic population. The number of Muslims in Belgium is estimated between 350.000 and 380.000 Muslims. The exact number of adolescent Muslims is even harder to determine because by birth they are registered as Belgians. Muslim ethnic minority cultures are what (Ronald) Inglehart calls "traditional societies", referring to the fact that they are "relatively authoritarian and strongly emphasize on religion and on preindustrial values such as male dominance in economic and political life, respect for authority and relatively low levels of tolerance for abortion and divorce" (Inglehart and Baker, 2001, p.17). The image of ethnic minorities is often characterised by causing trouble, criminality, failure in education, or long-term unemployment. Furthermore, ethnic minorities are often reduced to Muslim minorities referring more specifically to Moroccans and Turks (Talhaoui, 2000). On top of it, the media spreads out the stereotypes concerning this population group at great length (Shadid 2005), namely the matter of the headscarf or the high unemployment rates. Scientific research tends to follow the same direction: deprivation of ethnic minority in higher education (De Meester & Mahieu, 2000), allochthonous populations on the fringes of the labour market (Tielens, 2005), criminality and ethnic minorities (Van San, 2001)… Media and science spread a clear message: ethnic minorities do not fare well in life… at least from a western perspective. Education is often referred to as the main reason for inequality. In turn a myriad of factors and explanations to determine the causes of the educational gap between native

citizens and immigrants have been proposed. Common heard explanations for inequalities are family background (Crul, 2000; Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003), socioeconomic status (van der Veen, 2001), (subtle) racism (Kailin, 1994), level of acculturation (Berry, 1997), differences in achievement motivation (Mc Clelland, 1961) or self-fulfilling prophecy induced by teachers (Brown, Palincsar & Purcell, 1986).

However, as the previous makes clear, the image of being successful tends to be infused with a Western bias and raises several questions. Should ethnic minority adolescents only be judged by Western standards referring to typically Western cultural traits? Is it not possible that ethnic minority youth just want different things in life? Does ethnic minority youth give a different interpretation to striving for success? The current study attempts to answer these questions. It focuses on the perceptions of being successful in life from an ethnic minority point of view: is there a noticeable discrepancy between Muslim ethnic minority youth and non-Muslim Belgians?

Individualism versus collectivism

Cultural variation between European and American culture and most non-Western cultures is often *traced back* to individualism versus collectivism (Kim et al., 1994), a concept that was first introduced by Hofstede (1980). This distinguished contrast between two society types is a theoretical one that is highly valued in cross-cultural studies. Individualism and collectivism are often treated as two independent constructs: an individual is either individualist or collectivist. Recent researchers (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Triandis et al. 1988) however believe the context plays an important role suggesting that a person who is highly collectivistic is not necessary low in individualistic behaviour and vice versa. Hence, as a contrasting framework this broader view is explicitly useful since it offers an opportunity to better understand possible differences. In general, collectivism attaches more importance to group goals and needs; whereas in individualistic cultures individual goals and needs are most highly valued. From a geographic point of view: the West puts an emphasis on individualism, whereas the East and South prioritize mainly collectivistic behaviour and values (Triandis, 1990).

This Individualism-Collectivism dichotomy involves differences in religiosity, family bonding (or familism), power and achievement (status), solidarity, benevolence, and the importance of politics in adolescents' lives. Some of these differences that are relevant to the study carried out are briefly outlined.

First, religious commitment is presumed to be part of a collective-oriented domain (Cukur, de Guzman & Carlo, 2004, Burroughs & Rindfleish, 2002). As religion is a recurrent topic in cross-cultural research, it is important to highlight that Muslims in Europe are not a monolithic group. In this matter, two tendencies occur: on the one hand a trend towards a firm holding on (even stronger than the first generation of immigrants did) to the Islamic roots, and on the other hand the tendency towards an individualisation of religiosity with a more personal interpretation of Islam (Savage, 2004; Phalet & Ter Wal, 2004). Controversially, research in the Netherlands and Belgium revealed that more than 50% of the young indigenous respondents defined themselves as being not religious at all (Phalet, Van Lotringen & Entzinger, 2000; Dobbelaere, 2003).

Second, with regard to family bonding, collectivistic cultures are assumed to have stronger ties with their family and are more likely to give prominence to family solidarity, respect and commitment than individualistic cultures. The latter are more likely to be autonomous and independent from there in-groups (Triandis, 2001). However, family orientation takes a rather

contrasting place in individualism-collectivism research. Many researchers argue that collectivists place higher value on belonging to their family (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Others argue that familism is not an exclusively collectivistic characteristic but is important across cultures (Schwartz, 2007). Gaines and collegues (2005) even treat familism as a distinct construct, which exists separately from the concept of collectivism.

Furthermore, autonomy, personal boundaries and independence are also differently valued in individualistic and collectivistic societies. Whereas independence and self-direction are highly encouraged in the first, collectivistic cultures mainly emphasize interdependence (Triandis, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Kagitçibasi, 1994). Phalet, van Lotringen and Entzinger (2000) found evidence for quite some similarities between ethnic minority and majority youth. They both prioritise autonomy, but the minority adolescents are more conformist than their majority peers. Furthermore, autonomy is considered not typically individualistic but exceeds the dichotomy (Chirkov et al. 2003; Grotevant & Cooper, 1998). According to the Self-Determination Theory autonomy is a basic need shared by all cultures (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Value domains of achievement and power are individualistic traits, whereas benevolence self-transcendence goals serve collective interests, as they are oriented towards the welfare of others (Kapoor, Comadena & Blue, 1996; Cukur, de Guzman & Carlo, 2004). Dutch research reveals that ethnic minority (assumed to be collectivistic) and majority (individualistic) adolescents both seem to prefer equally achievement. Achievement is however more important to the first group of adolescents (Phalet, van Lotringen & Entzinger, 2000). Solidarity, being helpful, preserving and enhancing the welfare of people ought to be characteristics of collectivist cultures (Schwartz 1994). Concern for the welfare of nature or the welfare of others not belonging to the in-group, is seen as a more individualistic trait (Feather, 1986). On the other hand, the concern for the well-being of people to whom one is in close contact with is typically collectivistic.

Finally, regarding political involvement no univocal picture emerges. It appears to be rather low for young people in general, but even lower for Islamic ethnic minority youth in particular (Phalet, van Lotringen & Entzinger, 2000). Other research revealed no differences in political interest between ethnic minority and majority youth, except for Moroccans (Zeijl, 2003).

The Present Study

The goal of the present study is to determine differences in how Muslim ethnic minority youth and native (non-Muslim) Belgians perceive being successful in life. The study is exploratory in nature as there is no extant theoretical evidence to support an eventual hypothesis. Nevertheless, based on the individualism-collectivism paradox it is assumed that Muslims are more likely to prioritise family and religion as success perceptions whereas non-Muslims are expected to indicate higher levels of autonomy and status.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 1726 young people between 14 and 25 years old with an average age of 17.8. When one or two parents of the respondent were born in a non-Western (traditionally Islamic) country, the respondent was categorized as being a member of the ethnic minority group; otherwise they belonged to the majority group. Within the ethnic minority group,

1020 respondents reported to be Muslim, only 37 claimed to be non-religious. More than 50 % of the majority group reported being not religious.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents*

Demographic characteristic	Total sample		Ethnic minority (N= 1069)		Ethnic majority (N= 657)	
	Number*	%	Number	%	Number	%
Gender						
Boys	743	43	499	46.7	244	37.1
Girls	982	56.9	569	53.2	413	62.9
	1725	99.9	1068	99.9	657	100
Age Group (years)						
-15	599	34.8	363	34	236	35.9
16-17	632	36.6	364	34.1	268	40.9
+18	492	28.4	340	31.7	152	22.6
	1723	99.8	1067	99.8	656	99.4
Education						
Vocational education	586	33.9	408	38.6	178	27.1
Technical education	279	16.2	176	16.7	103	15.7
General education	594	34.4	313	29.6	281	42.7
Higher or Un education	221	12.8	129	12.2	92	14.0
	1680	97.3	1026	96.1	654	99.5
Religion						
No religion	379	21.9	37	3.5	342	52.1
Islam	1020	59.1	1020	95.4	-	-
Catholic	301	17.4	-	-	301	45.8
Other	10	.7	-	-	9	1.4
	1710	99.1	1057	98.9	652	99.3

*the sample size varies because of differing valid responses

2.2. Instrument

The Perception of success in Life scale (PoSiL) (Mertens, Lombaerts, Verté, 2007) was used to examine how individuals perceive success in their lives. The 20 relevant items pertaining to success perceptions were evaluated to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The instrument represents four distinct dimensions labelled Traditional Orientation (e.g., "being a good son/daughter"), Self Directive Orientation (e.g., "acting autonomously"), Self Transcending Orientation (e.g., "doing something for your fellow man") and Status Orientation (e.g., "having power"). In order to be able to compare two ethnic groups, a revised version of the PoSiL scale was employed. One item "Success means to me, doing something for other migrants" was removed from the questionnaire because of its irrelevance for native Belgians. Exploratory factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation yielded 4 interpretable factors, similar to these found in the original scale development. Only two items were dropped. First, the item "Success in the meaning of living a long lasting life" was originally classified in the Status Orientation dimension, but Belgian youth do not seem to attach the same meaning to it. Indeed, for Muslims seniority is related to status because of the respect they attribute towards the elderly. Second, the item "Success in the meaning of belonging to a group" was dropped out of the

scale because its factor loading was below the .30 criterion for inclusion. As a test of one type of reliability of the revised PoSiL Scale, internal consistency scores (Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient) were calculated for the minority group (n= 1069) and the majority group ($n = 657$) as well as for each of the subscales. Cronbach's alphas for the revised orientations of the PoSiL instrument were satisfactory and ranged between .69 and .77 for the ethnic minority group. For the majority native group, it ranged between .64 and .75 (table 2).

Table 2 Internal Consistency data for the Success in Life Orientations

	Ethnic minority	Ethnic Majority
Self Directive Orientation	.72	.64
Traditional Orientation	.77	.63
Self Transcending Orientation	.69	.65
Status Orientation	.76	.75

2.3. Data analysis

Ethnic differences were examined by comparing mean scores using the Student's *t*-test and Mann Whitney U-test. Next, the answers were ranked in priority order for both ethnic groups over the four orientations on an item level. In a final phase, influences of origin were included. Four linear regression analyses were performed to determine the additional contribution of origin in predicting the four orientations of success in life. In each analysis, a first run entered only sex and education as independent variables, a second added origin to the demographic measures.

3. RESULTS

When exploring individual scale items, significant differences were found on all items. (For that reason these results are not reported here). However, due to the fact that minority respondents scored significantly higher on all items, it was opportune to examine the rank orderings of both ethnic groups.

The ranked list (Table 3) shows that within the top 5 mean responses provided by the ethnic Muslim minority and the native majority youth, 3 similar items occur. The most important items for the majority youth group are related to autonomy ("Being able to decide autonomously" and "Being able to stand up for yourself"). The Muslim group gives the highest priority to perceptions related to family ("Having a long lasting marriage" and "Having good contacts with family members"). "Getting a good certificate" comes for both on the third place. Religion takes up a rather modest seventh position for the ethnic minority group, but gets the lowest score in explaining success by the majority youth group. Two out of the three least important perceptions are similar: success in the meaning of "being active in politics" and "having power". All the items except one of the Self Transcending Orientation dimension didn't make it to the top 10. Marriage seems to hold the highest priority for the minority group and has to settle for the 6th place for the ethnic majority group. "Being able to decide autonomously" is ranked in the second best position for majority youth, but takes only a modest 8th position for Muslim youth.

Examining the orientations ranking revealed a different pattern both in the ethnic minority and in the majority group. For the minority group a preference for Traditional Orientation (M= 4.60, SD= .62) was noted, closely followed by Self- Directive Orientation (M=4.54, SD= .59). For the majority youth the highest mean was noted for Self Directive Orientation (M= 4.39, SD= .51) with Status Orientation coming second at a large distance (M= 3.51, SD= .69).

Although the Self Transcending and Self Directive Orientation equations are significant, they explain only 0.6 and 0.7 percent of variance, respectively. Another significant R^2 was found for Traditional Orientation where a low 3% variance was explained.

Table 3 Means, standard deviations and ranking scores of the Perception of Success in Life items

Posil, scale and item scores	Minority (n=1069)			Majority (n=657)		
	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank
Self Directive Orientation	4.54	.590	2	4.39	.511	1
Being able to stand up for yourself	4.56	.802	5	4.49	.740	1
Being able to decide autonomously	4.43	.852	8	4.40	.758	2
Getting a good certificate	4.65	.739	3	4.34	.807	3
Having perseverance	4.48	.801	6	4.33	.698	4
Status Orientation	3.87	.835	3	3.43	.804	3
Earning good money	4.12	.973	11	4.02	.876	7
Having your own business	3.71	1.139	15	3.02	1.151	14
Having an important job	4.30	.924	9	3.74	1.028	10
Having power (being powerful)	3.35	1.341	16	2.96	1.152	15
Self Transcending Orientation	3.59	.803	4	3.04	.702	4
Being able to express yourself creatively	3.87	1.086	13	3.65	1.066	11
Being active in politics	2.82	1.348	17	1.93	1.074	16
Making a difference in the world	3.78	1.074	14	3.38	1.008	12
Improving the world	3.92	1.116	12	3.19	1.052	13
Making a difference for your fellow man	4.17	.966	10	3.84	.911	9
Traditional Orientation	4.60	.617	1	3.48	.666	2
Having good contacts with family memb	4.65	.708	2	4.12	.865	5
Being a good son or daughter	4.60	.763	4	3.92	.941	8
Being a good religious person	4.46	.990	7	1.78	1.013	17
Having a solid and long lasting marriage	4.66	.757	1	4.10	1.046	6

Education is the sole demographic item with a significant (negative) beta, indicating that the less educated a person, the more likely he/she is to opt for a more Traditional perspective of success in life. Concerning Status Orientation, sex and education explained 8% variance, with the latter being the leading predictor. In other words, those who are less educated are more likely to perceive success in terms of status and achievement. In general, sex plays a rather insignificant role in predicting success in life perceptions. Entering the variable 'origin' into the original equation causes an overall increase of total explained variance. Interestingly, origin becomes the leading predictor in three out of four success orientations. Education continues to be the leading predictor in its relationship to Status Orientation. A small rise of explained variance has been found in the Self Directive Orientation but a rather large (up to 11%) and enormous increase (43%) occurred within the Traditional Orientation.

Table 4 Effects of education, sex and origin on PoSiL Orientations[1]

	S O beta	P^2	STO beta	P^2	SDO beta	P^2	TO beta	P^2
Education	-.233	***	-.058	*	-.005	n.s.	-.170	***
Sex	.142	***	.047	n.s.	-.085	**	-.017	n.s.
R^2	.079	***	.006	**	.007	**	.029	***
Education	-.212	***	.016	n.s.	.012	n.s.	-.086	***
Sex	.128	***	-.020	n.s.	-.096	***	-.096	***
Origin	.166	***	.330	***	.135	***	.645	***
R^2	.106	***	.113	***	.025	***	.434	***

[1] sex = dummy coded as 0=male, 1= female; education is dummy coded as 0= low, 1= high; origin is dummy coded as ethnic minority= 0, ethnic majority = 1

[2] *** = significant at <.001, **= significant at <.01, * = significant at <.05, n.s. = non significant

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A comparison of means and rank orderings of the Perception of Success in Life orientations between Muslim youth and non-Muslim youth showed substantial differences. Ethnic minority youth scored significantly higher on all orientations representing their perception of being successful. Item rankings within these orientations also differed interestingly.

The data confirmed the assumption that the rank order of individuals' different success perceptions would yield different orderings across the cultural groupings. It seemed apparent that the two groups differ in mean scores on the four orientations and on most of the items. Since the Muslim group scored significantly higher on almost every item, it was considered crucial to examine the rankings of single items in order to facilitate interpretation.

The employed scales seemed to conform to some extent to the Individualism-Collectivism dichotomy. In this perspective, the Status and Self-Direction orientations were seen as individualistic and the Self Transcending and Traditional orientations as rather collectivistic. It was predicted that the rank order of PoSiL items would yield different orderings across both cultural groups. Considering the data for both ethnic groups, a picture emerged of two groups mixing over the collectivistic and individualistic domains to a greater or lesser extent. However, a remarkable distinction was noticeable. The ethnic minority group valued family commitment the highest followed by autonomy variables, aspects relating to status and last elements of self-transcendence. The fact that ethnic minority youth focused more on tradition (family and religion) than their indigenous peers who have mainly a non-religious background is in line with previous research (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Bond, 1988). In the majority youth group the Self-Direction subscale scored highest, followed by Tradition, Status and Self-Transcendence. It is important to perceive that contrary to the situation of minority youth a large distance is noticeable between the Self Directive and the Traditional Orientation. This more unanimous priority regarding Self-Direction as an explanation of being successful in life by indigenous youth and a more divided tradition/self direction preference by ethnic minority youth was also found by Phalet and colleagues (2000). Autonomy can be seen as the key explanation of native majority youth to consider themselves successful in life, whereas for ethnic minority youth a combination of tradition and self direction was valued. These two different perceptions of being success in life (e.g. family interdependence and personal independence) may seem to be in conflict from a collectivistic viewpoint. However, from a bicultural perspective it is understandable. Indeed,

combining both perspectives seems to indicate that ethnic minority youth try to internalise the best or the most important issues of both worlds. It also points out that the experience of living in two cultures is complex and multidimensional.

That both ethnic groups attributed the least importance to power and politics is consistent with the existing literature (Cukur, de Guzman & Carlo, 2004; Phalet, van Lotringen & Entzinger, 2000).

Sex hardly influenced the choice of perception. Furthermore, the level of education did predict partially Status Orientation: the less educated, the more likely one is to opt for a Status Perception of success in life. This agrees with literature indicating that low educated adolescents attach more important to status and prestige than better educated adolescents (Hermans, 1994). Findings also revealed an important relationship between Traditional orientation and origin. More specifically, ethnic minority youth are more inclined to adhere to a traditional perception of being successful. They are more likely than native majority youth to define success in terms of having a solid marriage or having good contacts with their family members. Origin is also a significant predictor of the Self Transcending Orientation. That is, ethnic minority youth tend to score higher on deeds of solidarity than the majority, for which Islam probably offers an explanation. The obligation of Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, implying charity towards those who are less wealthy, is an indication of this solidarity. Kindness (or the Qur'anic translation Ihsan) is a crucial value in Islamic tradition (Schuon, 1998). However, it is important to nuance: the high(er) concern for others is often limited to members of the in-group (Hui, 1988; Feather, 1986).

Although interesting tendencies regarding the perception of success in life predominate, some important remarks must be formulated in order to place the results in a broader context. The concept of how individuals perceive success remains difficult to interpret since it is related to a variety of constructs such as values, life domains, aspirations, etc. Future research is necessary to clarify this matter. Also, an assumption should be made with respect to the categorization of both groups. Based on prior research and similar rankings by Hofstede (1980), Muslims were expected to be collectivistic and native Belgians to be highly individualistic. However, we did not measure individualism and collectivism directly. Ethnic minorities were considered to be collectivistic based on their culture of origin. Nevertheless, living in Belgium it is not unthinkable that they adopt majority characteristics based on individualistic elements. In order to compare both groups more precisely direct measurement of the individualism-collectivism should be related to the PoSiL scale. This could be envisaged a priority for future research in this field.

Furthermore, differences in interpretation can play a role in the interpretation of the results. In this perspective, it seems crucial to explore whether both ethnic groups ascribe the same meaning to the PoSiL-items. The use of qualitative research could offer the possibility to rule out such potential discrepancies in conceptual meanings.

Third, this study narrows the respondents down to two groups that are both treated as homogeneous entities. For example, within the ethnic minority group the two largest ethnic groups are Moroccans and Turks but notwithstanding their similar migration history and migration experience (Lievens, 2000) these groups cannot be readily compared. More research on success perceptions and comparisons with other cultural groups are needed for further validation of the instrument. Also, measurement issues might influence the outcome of the present survey. An important question that needs to be addressed is whether the data obtained are reliable. Good internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's alpha) show that the estimates for the non-Muslim group are systematically less than those for the Muslim group. Since the scale was originally

developed for ethnic minorities, and with the small numbers of items in each of the scales, these internal consistency estimates are not surprising. Nevertheless, they are a warning that the PoSiL scale can still be further refined. Thus, a greater effort needs to be made to improve the instrument's psychometric properties if ethnic comparisons are to be performed in this important domain. Also, since the scale was specifically designed for ethnic minority youth, some interpretation difficulties arose when using it on indigenous adolescents. The finding that the scores of the first were significantly higher on almost all items makes one wonder whether particular responding styles may be responsible for this result. It is not that a disproportionate accumulation of responses at the top of the response scale was discovered, ethnic minority youth just score averagely higher and rather positive on most items. However, native youth's answers also tend to the more positive side of the scale, just less positive than Muslim youth. In this research, this issue was partially countered by employing the ranking method, but in the future it is advisable to explore the precise impact of possible different responding styles, which will further establish the value of the PoSiL-instrument.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the current research adds crucial information to the issue of minority and majority differences concerning occupational and educational issues. These results suggest that ethnic group variations warrant further investigation to refine the nature and the meanings of the differences found in this research.

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