Self-identity Development, Self-esteem Formation and Psychological Wellbeing of Blind Twin Musicians in Türkiye: The Case of Kerim-Selim Altınok

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Abstract

Self-identity development is an umbrella concept that covers various theoretical themes. Self-esteem, on the other hand, reflects an individual's overall evaluation of their feelings and 'worth'. This manuscript aims to explore the identity development and self-esteem formation of Kerim Altınok (KA) and Selim Altınok (SA). The twin brothers are well-known and celebrated blind musicians in Türkiye. In Türkiye and elsewhere, blind people tend to experience significant life difficulties, and suffer from low self-esteem and dented self-identity. We used qualitative methods to conduct this study. Utilizing semi-structured questionnaire, we carried out in-depth-interviews with the twin brothers. Specifically, we focused on how the participants have constructed the notions of 'Me' and 'I', and successfully developed strong self-identity and high self-esteem. The first interview took place at a local restaurant in a leafy suburb of Istanbul in 2019. We conducted the rest of the interviews online because of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak in 2020-2021. We transcribed the interviews, and the data were subjected to thematic analysis. Our findings suggest that Kerim and Selim developed high self-esteem and strong self-identity over the decades despite becoming blind at a young age. They encountered and overcame major life challenges from childhood to adult life. Their life narratives are remarkable and there is a real opportunity to learn from their lived experience, and how they have developed strong self-identity and high self-esteem despite living with a primary disability.

Keywords: Kerim Altınok, Selim Altınok, Self-identity, Self-esteem, Blindness, Türkiye

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Türkiye'deki Görme Engelli İkiz Müzisyenlerin Öz Kimlik Gelişimi, Öz Saygı Oluşumu ve Psikolojik Esenlikleri: Kerim-Selim Altınok Örneği

Öz

Öz kimlik gelişimi, çeşitli teorik temaları kapsayan bir şemsiye kavramdır. Öz saygı ise bireyin duygularının ve 'değerinin' genel değerlendirmesini yansıtır. Bu makale, Kerim Altınok (KA) ve Selim Altınok'un (SA) kimlik gelişimini ve öz saygı oluşumunu incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İkiz kardeşler, Türkiye'de tanınmış ve ünlü kör müzisyenlerdir. Türkiye'de ve diğer yerlerde, kör insanlar önemli yaşam zorlukları yaşama eğilimindedirler ve düşük öz saygı ve zedelenmiş öz kimlikten muzdariptirler. Bu çalışmayı yürütmek için nitel yöntemler kullandık. Yarı yapılandırılmış anketler kullanarak ikiz kardeşlerle derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirdik. Özellikle, katılımcıların 'Bana' ve 'Ben' kavramlarını nasıl oluşturduklarına ve güçlü bir öz kimlik ve yüksek öz saygıyı nasıl başarıyla geliştirdiklerine odaklandık. İlk görüşme, 2019'da İstanbul'un bir semtindeki yerel bir restoranda gerçekleşti. 2020-2021'deki koronavirüs salgını nedeniyle görüşmelerin geri kalanını çevrimiçi olarak gerçekleştirdik. Görüşmeleri yazıya çevirdik ve veriler tematik analize tabi tutuldu. Bulgularımız, Kerim ve Selim'in genç yaşta kör olmalarına rağmen, yıllar içinde yüksek öz saygı ve güçlü bir öz kimlik geliştirdiklerini göstermektedir. Çocukluktan yetişkinliğe kadar büyük yaşam zorluklarıyla karşılaşmış ve bunların üstesinden gelmişlerdir. Hayat hikayeleri dikkat çekicidir ve yaşanmış deneyimlerinden, birincil bir engelle yaşamalarına ragmen, nasıl güçlü bir öz kimlik ve yüksek öz saygı geliştirdikleri konusunda gerçek bir öğrenme fırsatı vardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kerim Altınok, Selim Altınok, Öz Kimlik, Öz Saygı, Körlük, Türkiye

1. Introduction

This manuscript explores how blind twin musicians from Türkiye, Kerim Altınok (KA) and Selim Altınok (SA), have constructed successful notions of 'Me' and 'I' despite living with a major disability. Publicly available materials (documentaries, written materials, TV and social media products) suggest that the twin brothers have developed strong self-identity and high self-esteem, which enabled them to live independent life. The purpose of this research is to identify the mechanisms through which the twin brothers developed successful self-identity and effective self-esteem from qualitative perspectives. The second aim is to understand the psycho-social process that allowed the twins to maintain good psychological wellbeing over many decades.

There are several reasons for choosing the Altınok brothers as the subject of this research. Kerim and Selim are among the most prominent and successful public figures in Türkiye. They were born during a period when awareness of the needs of blind people was low in the country. Against all odds, they created an "integrated" self-identity through effective social and inter-personal interactions. Through engagements in different public activities, interactions with NGOs, with educational institutions and cultural events, they have made an enormous contribution in the field of disability and blindness in Türkiye. Initially, the twins struggled in their education because their teachers could not offer alternative arrangements for blind school children, or did not realize that the brothers were visually impaired until much later. Nevertheless, Kerim and Selim have built high self-esteem and celebrated self-identity over the years to become such high profile and highly respected professional musicians, performers, motivators and advocates in Türkiye. Analyzing factors which helped them to overcome the challenges linked to stigmatized disability identity will inspire many others in similar life situations.

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2. An overview of the theories of self-identity and self-esteem

According to Baumeister (2011), 'the self' begins with the physical body, and with the awareness of its distinctness from others. It is this distinct form that gives the self a meaningful content. Identity, on the other hand, is defined by one's place in a specific personal, social and cultural system (Baumeister, 2011). To focus on self-identity, it is necessary to understand the person's life development stages from childhood to adult life, and the places in which that life is spent. The "self" is developed in relation to others through significant symbols, situations, relationships, and so on. The psychologist Herbert Mead (Mead, 1934, cited in Burton, 2000) was among the earliest researchers to explain the concept of 'symbolic interactionism'. Interactive symbols create meaningful and instrumental factors that link past events to the present and future ones. In this context, the "I" and "Me" are referred to as social constructs and behavioral process of the mind (Burton, 2000). The "I" and "Me" are tools and pathways that allow one to link past, present and future events, factors and events which are also used to develop "self-identity".

Building on the self-identity and identity formation concepts, researchers, such as Mead (1934), asserted that "the self" is a social object which arises through interactions with others. However, more contemporary researchers, such as Baumeister (2011), elaborate the self as the interface between the physical body and the social system. The self is seen as having many peculiarities. Firstly, it is a knowledge structure that depends on a reflexive consciousness. Through self-awareness, people store a variety of information about themselves. Secondly, it is an interpersonal being, as the self emerges from interpersonal relations. Lastly, the self is an agent with executive functions, which is concerned with making choices, initiating actions, and controlling the environment in which one lives, as well as regulating its own responses and inner psychological processes. On the other hand, Fadjukoff et al. (2016) proposed that identity is liquid rather than fixed since biological and psychological factors and specific circumstances all affect the formation of the self, self-identity, and self-development. Self-development processes are mostly dominant in early childhood stages because the biological, sociological and psychological processes influencing the development of the "self" are mostly supervised and conditioned during childhood and early adult-life periods.

As we shall see below, the identity formation of disabled blind individuals is a complex and multifaceted process. A related concept which also will be explored in the paper is "self-esteem". Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall evaluation of their worth as well as their feelings toward themselves. Self-esteem is often constructed from being a group member (Hewitt, 2009). High self-esteem, which provides advantages in many areas of life, is even more important for disabled individuals, such as Selim and Kerim Altınok. Researchers identified several factors which are seen critical in developing and maintaining high self-esteem for disabled persons, factors which we will explore in the following sections.

2.1 Disability Identity Development

Forber-Pratt's et al. (2019) carried out theoretical revisions into the current literature and identified several theoretical models related to disability identity development. Examples of

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these theoretical models include Gill's disability-identity development stages, Frank's rhetoric of self-change, Caldwell's disability-identity themes, Weeber's positional model and Forber-Pratt and Zape's model of social and psychosocial disability-identity development. These theoretical works attempt to understand disability identity formation in stages: Denial (first stage), followed by pre-acceptance stage (stage 2), then acceptance stage (stage 3) and, finally, post-acceptance competence (stage 4). Some models added further stages in which individuals use a newly acquired disability identity to empower marginalized communities who experienced similar stigmatized life situations. For instance, from Caldwell's disability-identity themes (Caldwell, 2011; cited in Forber-Prat et al., 2019), there is the "initial resistance" to disability identity and this resistant theme is followed by a softer acceptance. The third theme is where the person fully accepts disability identity with confidence. Theme four involves "externalizing oppressive feelings" where the person not only accepts disability identity but also develops strong personality. Finally, the person uses the newly acquired high self-esteem and strong personal character to promote social justice for stigmatized and marginalised communities (theme 5).

2.2 Social theory, identity development and disability

Forber-Pratt and Zape's theoretical model of disability identity development consist of four stages: acceptance, relationship, adoption, and engagement (Forber-Pratt's et al., 2019). Acceptance refers to the situation where the individual accepts disability identity (phase 1) and then creates bonding relationship with other groups in similar disability status (phase 2). The adoption phase (phase 3) is about becoming a group member, and adopting the values and norms that come with group membership. As we described early, the fourth phase alludes to empowerment processes where the disabled person feels obliged to advocate for their community as a way of "giving back" the support they received from them. In other words, individuals derive a sense of self-esteem and self-identity from group identities besides personal traits and personal qualities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This follows that individuals with disability identity status and who joins groups with similar disability experiences are most likely to foster effective self-identity, which then leads to the formation of high-self-esteem (Amiot & Aubin, 2012), all of which mitigating the negative impacts of stigmatised disability identity (marginalisation, aloneness, idleness, stereotyping, humiliation and so on). Dirth and Branscombe (2018) showed that positive representation of disability and advocacy within the disability community can empower disabled individuals and foster a more positive self-identity, while negative stigmatization has dire implications for disability identity development. Moreover, Botha and Watermeyer (2025) emphasized the concept of "othering", which is about how society perceive blind disability identity as differing 'otherness' who are lesser people than abled people. This process of societal stigmatization towards blind people can lead to toxic personal internalization, which then can destroy both the construction of a healthy self-identity and the formation of good self-esteem.

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2.3 Disability and Psychosocial Wellbeing

We are also interested in how the twin brothers maintained remarkable psychological well-being against the odds of experiencing both child and adulthood life adversities. We know from the psychological literature that people who are exposed to traumatic life situations at early stage are likely to develop a range of psychological problems later in adult life (Warfa et al., 2022). One of the most known psychosocial theorists, Renos Papadopoulos, constructed three domains in which the person's "totality" can be understood. These are intra-psychic dimension, which is connected with the person's inner experiences (feelings, fears, hopes and wishes); inter-personal relations, which refers to the interactions that take place between the person and other people; and finally the socio-economic factors which can minimize or maximize psychological wellbeing (Papadopulos, 2007). We will investigate how Selim and Kerim Altınok (2011) negotiated through these different psychological processes and dimensions to cope with difficult psychological events emerging from an "imposed" disability identity. Aydın and Yıldız (2023) discusses how society forces people with disability to acquire a "disability identity" against their will, and how disabled people resort to a range of coping strategies to protect their wellbeing from the risks linked to such an "imposed disability identity". Moreover, Ryff (1989) developed a multidimensional psychological well-being framework which has six dimensions: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, environmental mastery, and positive relatedness (Ryff 1989, cited in Ryff & Keyes, 1995). When someone has high scores on these dimensions it means that they have a high level of self-esteem and better psychological well-being.

3. Methods

Kerim and Selim Altınok are blind musicians who are public figures and are widely recognized in Türkiye as famous and successful professionals. They were born in Istanbul in 1963 where they still live. Their father was an accountant and their mother a housewife. Selim lost his sight during his last year at middle school, completely. Kerim lost his sight a few years later. During these years, Kerim and Selim's family and friends assisted them through everyday difficulties. Both completed high school education and grew up in a proactive and safe environment. After high school, they received bachelor's degrees from the Department of Law at Istanbul University and completed master's and PhD degrees in the same field, as well as undertaking and completing various voice training and music courses over the years.

In this study, our main methodology is qualitative. We chose qualitative methods to have direct access to the narratives of Selim and Kerim rather than through secondary data. Qualitative methods are particularly helpful when investigating unique personal experiences that have specific context and meaning. According to Warfa et al., (2006), "qualitative methods offer the possibility of allowing informant to explain their experiences from their own point of view and they provide rich descriptions of the meanings that are attached to these experiences" (Warfa et al., 2006, page 505). We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with Selim and Kerim to capture complex life events in rich cultural, personal and situational contexts. Qualitative methodology permits broad perspectives to be generated from specific situations, and these perspectives are also open to multiple interpretations. Unlike the quantitative

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methodology, which is based on the philosophical principle that there is a single reality which can be objectively measured through structured scientific tools, qualitative methodologists believe that there are multiple realities which can be investigated and captured through unstructured scientific methods. Although the use of semi-structured questionnaires has been on the rise in recent years, these semi-structured instruments are still seen as a 'helping tool' for focusing on key research questions, rather than as a primary research measure. We carried out qualitative interviews with Selim and Kerim to access their own interpretations of their lived experiences, as well as capturing their insights into everyday life narratives.

3.1 Pre-study meeting and interviews with KA and SA

We held a 90-minute pre-research planning meeting with KA and SA in 2019. The meeting took place at a local restaurant in a leafy suburb of Istanbul. This was the place KA and SA chose to meet. It was a modern local place where staff would have known KA and SA, providing an extra layer of safety. They felt at ease and safe to be there and talk with unknown researchers whom they had not met before. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the possibility of conducting this research with KA and SA. The interview started with questions to SA and KA about conducting this research as participants. KA and SA noted that they talk with lots of people and professionals and are happy to support a research project that sheds light on the needs of blind people in Türkiye. KA and SA gave verbal consent to conduct the research during this meeting. We received ethics approval for the research from Maltepe University, Istanbul, Türkiye.
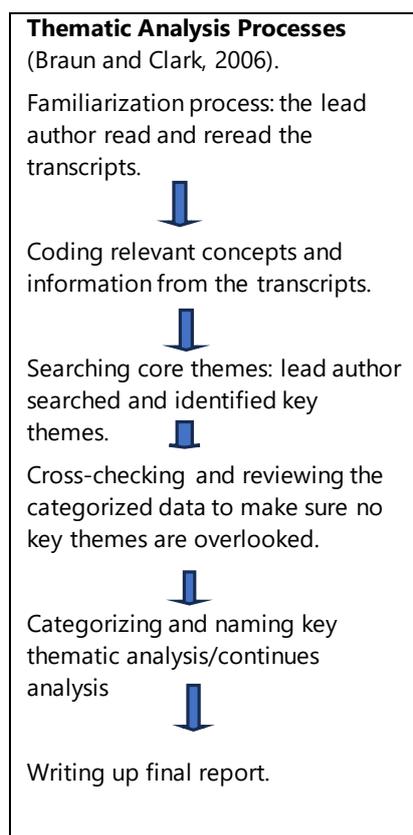
Soon after the pre-research meeting took place, there was the worldwide COVID outbreak, which significantly slowed down our research project and processes. In the first year following the outbreak, everything was uncertain and the priority was placed on people's health and safety over everything else. To minimize the risks of COVID exposures, we changed our plan to hold live interviews. Instead, we conducted 5 in-depth interviews with KA and SA via Skype in 2021, lasting between 55 and 102 minutes. As noted above, we compiled a comprehensive semi-structured questionnaire for this study, to help us stay on our key research themes and domains. The semi-structured questionnaire we developed covers the following domains: background information, socio-economic experience, life histories and autobiographical narratives (see appendix 1).

In addition, we used the book Karanlığın Rengi Beyaz ('The Color of Darkness is White', Altınok & Altınok, 2011) for refining our questions. The lead author also had an opportunity to watch a play named after Kerim and Selim's book. In this play, which brings different artistic components together such as dance, music and humour, Kerim and Selim performed on stage. While this play sheds light on the lives of disabled people in general, it also aims to raise awareness of the needs of disabled people in Türkiye. Information covered in the book and in the play both informed and shaped our background information and general discussion.

3.2 Data Analysis

We created the semi-structured questionnaire to gather and organize rich life narratives and experiences of the research participants who successfully overcame the constraints of a major

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life adversity, blindness. We conducted our interviews in Turkish. Then, the corresponding author transcribed the interviews. Secondly, the first and the second author read and re-read the transcribed interviews. Thirdly, we used an AI tool (Google Translation) to translate the Turkish transcripts into English. Fourthly, the first and second authors, who both are fluent in English, independently checked the English translated transcripts against the original Turkish transcripts. We analysed the English version transcripts using the Thematic Analysis Method. The thematic analysis method is used to summarize and classify data from qualitative research within a thematic framework and well-defined procedures (Ritchie & Spencer 1994). The thematic analysis method consists of several stages including familiarization with the transcribed interviews, coding interested materials, searching and identifying key themes, naming and indexing them, reviewing and carrying on with continued analysis until the final report is written. The different steps of the thematic analysis methods are described in this box.

Thematic Analysis Processes
(Braun and Clark, 2006).

Familiarization process: the lead author read and reread the transcripts.

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Coding relevant concepts and information from the transcripts.

↓

Searching core themes: lead author searched and identified key themes.

Cross-checking and reviewing the categorized data to make sure no key themes are overlooked.

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Categorizing and naming key thematic analysis/continues analysis

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Writing up final report.

After all the three researchers became familiar with the data, the researchers searched and selected the themes and concepts we identified as most related to our research questions. Subsequently, we categorized and named selected themes and then selected relevant quotes to illustrate and unpack named and categorized themes:

• Early Childhood Education and Blindness Experience

• Family and Social Support

• Higher Education, Career Development & Employment Opportunities

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- Blindness, Identity and Self-esteem Development
- Blindness, Discrimination and Awareness Raising
- Psychological Wellbeing

3.3 Limitation

Because of the nature of qualitative research, the information covered in this study cannot be generalized beyond SA and KA, although many lessons can be learned from the life histories and narratives. This study was conducted just before the Coronavirus pandemic shut down the higher education sectors, among other industries. This also impacted on our study duration and completion targets, as well as resorting to online interviews, rather than conducting one-to-one interviews in person. Partly because of this, we resorted to use an AI tool to do the translation of the transcripts from Turkish language into English, since not all the researchers could speak Turkish. After we used the AI tool for the translation process, two Turkish and English speaking researchers checked the AI tool translated materials against the original Turkish transcripts, to make sure that the information we gained through the AI tool are as accurate as those obtained from the original transcripts. From our experience, we encourage the use of AI as an auxiliary tool but recommend that when AI is used in research context, the researchers must evaluate and perform checks and verifications to aid the authenticity of the AI produced research materials.

4. Findings

4.1 Early Childhood Education and Blindness Experience

From this data set, we explored the lived experiences of the two musicians. And were able to map out how the twin brothers constructed successful identity formation and high self-esteem through family support, higher education achievements, effective career pathways and positive community links and various other strategic public interactions.

The twin brothers were born into a supportive extended family and grew up as happy children, leading to having a successful early child education:

"I'm looking back. We grew up in a really safe family environment". (SA Interview 2)

"We have always been good students". (KA Interview 1)

Even though the visual impairment problems were identified at the age 4, the implications of the twins going blind were not fully realized. A situation which later affected their school education:

"That was the thing we had the most difficulty with... I have experienced this problem in many exams. We are visually impaired. We cannot write. We need to learn Braille. Our teachers were not aware of this at the time". (SA Interview 2)

"We studied with valuable teachers. But since we didn't have that knowledge, that awareness, none of them told us, you guys are visually impaired". (KA Interview 2)

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Later on, KA and SA received critical support from their teachers and were able to complete their school education successfully, despite their sight deteriorating throughout the school years:

"We entered primary school in 1970. Graduation in 1975. Secondary school ended in 1978. Since our visual impairment had progressed in those years, we received a report and at least had the opportunity to take oral exams instead of written exams". (KA Interview 1)

4.2 Family and Social Support

SA and KA had solid structured family support which helped them fill in the vacuum created by their schools' lack of ability to assist the twin brothers:

"Our mother supported us until the end of high school... Our father steps in at university time". (SA Interview 1)

"My father was also reading all the notes we wrote. At home, we were transcribing them on a regular type writer. My father was reading them to us on tape from morning to evening for two days. That was the era of cassette tapes". (KA Interview 1)

Family support was also coming from the extended family:

"My grandfather bought me my first violin because I wanted a violin. Our grandfather's daughter, (she was also a dentist) took great care of us. We had such side supports other than our parents". (SA Interview 1)

"Our grandfather, who taught us chess, bought us the first big accordion, helped us while studying... He even gave us positive motivation and advice regarding master's and doctorate degrees". (KA Interview 3)

4.3 Higher Education, Career Development & Employment Opportunities

After graduating from high school with lots of structured support from SA and KA's immediate and extended families, SA and KA pursued university education and obtained first, second, and third degree qualifications:

"We studied together at the Faculty of Law at Istanbul University. Since it was our first choice, we won that place when we both got good scores. We did our master's degree together and completed our doctorate together in the same Financial Law Department". (KA Interview 1)

After graduation, the twin brothers started to make music and spent time on doing internships:

"We were doing internships after graduating from the law school. We didn't get a job".

(SA Interview 4)

"We earned our first money from music, interestingly enough before law". (SA Interview 2)

It seems that the twin brothers struggled finding jobs as lawyers and only managed to secure freelance law work after doing intern work:

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"First of all, working as a lawyer in a city like Istanbul is difficult for everyone. ... It is more difficult for a disabled individual because Istanbul is large. Especially in our office, the courthouses were much more dispersed. So, the life of a lawyer is quite difficult in Istanbul".

(KA Interview 2)

Even when they secured employement in the law industry, they were earning more income from music-related work activities:

"I worked as a lawyer for 8 months... And I earned my money from the music business".

(SA Interview 2)

Music was a fullfilling career for the brothers. Music allowed them to generate adequate income within an environment where they also enjoy life to its fullness, and was seen far less stressful as the law employment:

"Let's think in terms of music. You make music and have fun; and you also earn money".

(KA Interview 2)

"We work at home and release new songs. We have had a musical life of more than 30 years. We always thought of lawyers as people who could talk a lot. That's why we didn't prioritize the lawyer part too much. We loved being musicians more". (SA Interview 2)

The twin brothers acknowledge that being blind and a lawyer in Istanbul was difficult, although they felt blindness was not the main reason why they abandoned their law profession:

"I think the reason we don't practice law is not because we don't see it. We could not embrace being a lawyer as a profession". (SA Interview 2)

Abandoning the law career was more to do with the uncertainly and unacceptable stress generally associated with the law sector, with Kerim describing it as "brutal":

"The freelance period of law, especially in Istanbul, seemed very brutal to us". (KA Interview 3)

They enjoyed other disciplines much more than the law profession:

"After working at that municipality, we started working at Bakırköy Public Education and taught special visually impaired classes - computer education, English education, classical guitar education etc. - they gave us great pleasure". (KA Interview 3)

Selim adds that he does not identify himself as just a musician but as a multi-disciplinary professional:

"I would say it's more music and art we make from the heart. I don't feel like I'm 100% a professional musician either. We actually have love for all: law, music, chess, motivational speeches". (SA Interview 3)

4.4. Blindness, Identity and Self-esteem Development

The twin brothers' self-development and self-esteem was boosted after they completed school education (which they struggled) and entered in the higher education system. At university, they entered and completed rehabilitation and Braille training programmes which helped the brothers to lead an independent life (for the first time since finishing school education):

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"That was the most critical thing for us during our school time: the lack of clarity about our situation. We were trying to get into writing; I can't write; I mix up the lines". (SA Interview 2)

"It was a very important turning point in our lives, we wanted to emphasize it. So, just finished high school. As the stage of blindness progresses, we have difficulty walking alone because we have lost a lot of eyesight, etc. In order to reconnect and adapt to life there, that rehabilitation training is walking with a white cane - what we call independent movement - plus learning the Braille alphabet – braille". (KA Interview 1)

KA also felt going blindness made the brothers especially close to each other, boosting their friendship and confidence:

"Maybe it could be due to loss of vision; we are very close to each other. We have so much production and time spent together, both as friends and working partners". (KA Interview 2)

Selim has a different opinion on this matter:

"I think it may be our genes that unites us rather than blindness". (SA Interview 2)

When faced public criticism of being blind, the brothers responded positively and with confidence:

"What should be, what can be, is about blindness, which is actually a serious physical difficulty for us. It is a challenge that pervades our entire lives and continues at every moment. Many friends say are you following the developments? Maybe your eyes will be opened. But we're not overly concerned about that. Because we do not think that this is a problem that can be solved immediately". (SA Interview 4)

They also get so much confidence and self-esteem development from their music career:

"When I make music there, it's like I'm taking pieces from my own past and present. There is a sense of self-confidence and happiness in being able to still do them and perform".

 (SA Interview 4)

Overall, the brothers' self-identity, self-esteemed and independent life began to flourish during the time they spent at university. They received consistent professional support from a caring higher education environment.

4.5 Blindness, Discrimination and Awareness Raising

There was no evidence that the brothers experienced much discrimination at personal levels. There was lack of awareness of their conditions among school teachers and it was not until they graduated from high school they received the suport they needed to realise their expectations and life dream. However, the brothers discussed generic discrimination experience that disabled people in Türkiye face as well as acknowledging the progress and improvements made over the past few decades:

"Discrimination is made both against disabled groups and other groups. For example, when we consider the issue of disabled people, compared to abroad. We have a 2% employment obligation in our law. Not in America. It seems to me that there is a little more discrimination in our country". (SA Interview 2)

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"There is change in Türkiye. In the 2000s, disabled units began to be established in municipalities. This first happened in our metropolitan municipality, as far as I know. Then, of course, announcements are made after it is established: in which areas do you have talent? In which field do you want to work? So that had some impact". (SA Interview 2)

Having to struggle with such major life changing expereinces, and since they managed to overcome numerous obstacles that had the potential to "disrupt" or even "end" the twins' life dreams, SA and KA set out on a long journey to make significant improvements in the lives of disabled people in Türkiye:

"Disabled people actually have life, perform normal actions like every human being, have joys and sometimes sadness. We are trying to explain that they are people who eat, drink and socialize". (KA Interview 2)

"There is an issue with educational institutions. For example, when I go to educational institutions to give a speech, I always ask: are there any disabled students at school? Because schools are places where people get involved in social life at a young age". (KA Interview 2)

4.6 Psychological Wellbeing

Over the years, and because of the various activities they have been involved in, the twin brothers have developed a robust psychological wellness:

"Time passes unnecessarily fast. We say let's take it and play two songs. This is truly our favourite thing. If we can do that, we are happy. ... Let's do a chess activity. Or watching a good movie, listening to a good book, reading a good interview, etc. relaxes us". (SA Interview 4)

"We are always doing something. I either listen to music or read a book. Either one relaxes me a lot. I try to keep music in our lives. Sometimes, of course, it may be talking on the phone with friends. I think going out is actually the best thing... That's how I try to keep my mood fit".

(SA Interview 4)

This does not mean that the brothers do not experience challenging situations that are stressful. They do and have narrated in detail how different various situations cause them psychological stress. What is impressive about the brothers is how they respond to these difficult life experiences, resorting to different types of coping strategies to protect their psychological well-being:

"The most important thing is to take refuge in what you have: art, music, chess, books… Reading books is not something you do just because you love it very much. Sometimes it really clears your mind and takes you away". (KA Interview 5)

"I think that music still has the most important place in our lives. And so does chess. Now, I can say that the excitement we will experience for a week in the tournament we will go to is great". (SA Interview 4)

The brothers also do routine exercises to promote psychological wellbeing:

"Another thing comes to my mind about the methods of coping with stress. I can say sports. Here is a sports system. I'm setting it up. I'm starting to exercise. Believe me, with those hopping, jumping, squatting, standing up, etc, it really feels very good". (KA Interview 5)

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5. Discussion

5.1 Inter-personal Relations & Disability Identity Development

As celebrated public figures in Türkiye, Selim Altınok (SA) and Kerim Altınok (KA) constructed strong self-identity and high self-esteem, and thus successful life narratives despite becoming blind during an early childhood period. Going blind at a crucial life stage, Kerim and Selim felt their future lives were 'ruined' before they developed positive disability self-identify, supporting each other over the next decades to overcome the negative consequences associated with "acquired disability", which Adler et al. (2021, p. 88) allude to as an "interruption in the temporal coherence of one's unfolding life story."

The process of transforming from sighted persons to blind individuals did not seem to have caused a great trauma as the sight loss was not sudden but gradual. On the contrary, bonding between the twins became stronger over the years. According to Selim, while in high school, the twin brothers decided to live life to the fullest, and Kerim noted that life is wasted if one doesn't do anything useful. From this perspective, it is possible to agree with the brothers that they merged two different identities into one, for example, if KA is selected for the national chess tournaments and SA wasn't, then KA would prefer not to participate in the tournament; and vice versa. This exemplifies the solid bonding established between the twins, and how they have supported each other to build strong personal and interpersonal relations and high self-esteem. Even when these intermingled identities were separated, their personal characteristics and identities remained closely interconnected, as KA puts it,

"Maybe because of the loss of vision, we are very close to each other. I mean, if we were two brothers who could see, we might not have been this close... I think not being able to see increases the intimacy a little more... the two of us sometimes become like one person... we're that close". (KA, interview 2)

While questioning the reason for their closeness, Selim asked:

"I wonder if we are closer to each other because we are twins or is it because we are blind; or for some other reasons?". (SA, interview 2)

Furthermore, in order to exemplify the interconnectedness of the twin brothers, Selim made statements based on the bonding he and his brother established with music:

"Kerim plays the guitar which is a polyphonic instrument. I play mandolin and violin. I am more interested in the superstructure, the song part of the work. He takes care of his infrastructure. This is a very clear difference between us". (SA, Interview 2)

In Dunn and Burcaw's terms (2013), forming "strong solidarity" and "connection" with each other helped the twins to create "a positive sense of self". On the other hand, the life narratives of the twin brothers sometimes challenge existing theoretical models, particularly the social comparison theory (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Upward and downward social comparisons are made when a person with disability compares themselves with either those who are more resourceful and have better personal and social status (upward strategy) or those who they consider are weaker than them (downward strategy). Selim and Kerim's life experiences do not

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easily fit into these theoretical models as the twins resorted to neither the upward social comparison strategy nor the downward one to "derive or enhance" their identity and self-esteem (John Turner in the 1970s, Forber-Pratt et al., 2019). Instead, they supported each other as equal individuals, embracing a major life change together, and creating a unifying disability identity status.

5.2. Blindness, Self-Identity and Self-esteem

If self-identity is constructed through symbolic interactions and autobiographical histories, the identity formation of KA and SA offers a unique insight. Although they became blind during childhood life stages, this experience of childhood adversity has contributed to a successful identity formation and high self-esteem in later adult life, and through many different symbolic interactions. Specifically, the twin brothers have constructed and enjoyed celebratory music and chess career (among others) which enabled them to overcome the perceived concept of a "lesser" disabled blind identity (Botha & Watermeyer, 2025). Overcoming society's construction of "otherness" through a supportive university environment allowed the brothers to develop strong self-identity and high self-esteem.

In addition, we can conceptualize from their life experiences that they have built an effective disability identity and maintained high self-esteem through consistent working life, working as not only musicians and public performers but also as educators. The twin brothers have come across as extraordinary individuals who can be exemplary role models for humanity. Having lost sight at such an early childhood life stage, they constructed a viable self-identity and high self-esteem against all the odds, overcoming various life barriers and obstacles since they went blind. This type of severe disability is framed in the literature as a devastating entity which is seen to "end one's future" (Adler et al., 2021).

However, instead of blindness ending their future plans, Selim and Kerim embarked on a long path to develop strong self-identity and high-self-esteem, often with the support of their families and friends. Going blind and blindness was supposed to have adverse impacts on Selim and Kerim's educational status, "employment opportunities, career and general achievement" (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Selim and Kerim overcame negative expectations and successfully completed their school education, and then went on to achieve undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (including the highest possible degree that can be achieved, PhD) from the prestigious Istanbul University.

Over the following decades, the twin brothers curated effective employment opportunities as musicians, performance artists and chess players. They did not allow blindness and stigmatised disability identity to hinder educational attainment and celebratory career pathways. The plans to develop positive self-identity and good self-esteem have not disintegrated because of becoming blind but flourished despite of possessing a disability identity (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Following their higher education achievements, the twin brothers went on to formulate "integrated" and well respected self-identity, creating bonding inter-personal relationships and highly effective societal interactions over the next few decades. In a sense, their life experience validates the theoretical concept of time being "the foundation in the production of normalcy" (Kafer, 2013, cited in Adler et all., 2021, p. 88).

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5.3. Blindness, Self-Identity, Life Satisfaction and Psychological Wellbeing

The constructs of self, self-identity and self-esteem are shaped by multifactorial intra-psychic and inter-personal psychological processes with features that are peculiar to each construct. For example, SA and KA's self-concepts are shaped by how others interact with them. However, the construction of self-identity through psychological and sociological processes is complicated when dealing with interactions between sighted and blind people. An example would be when SA or KA ask for directions. Since they cannot see, a mere description of places and street names would not be appropriate for them. Instead, SA and KA rely on the verbal descriptions of others until they reach their destination. Thus, the self-concept and self-esteem of SA and KA are developed within these ambiguous symbolic interactions. Nevertheless, several factors enabled the Selim and Kerim to achieve so much despite living with a stigmatised disability identity. Having supportive environment from early childhood stages, securing highest educational attainment possible, well-thought interactions with cultural and educational institutions, creating trusting links with community groups and NGOs and establishing coherent and consistent strategies to engage with the wider public were among the factors enabled the twins to develop high self-esteem and "undisrupted" positive self-identity, all providing high levels of life satisfaction and robust psychological wellbeing.

As a result, they have become prominent figures who inspire others in similar situations. They are also celebrated public figures and are recognised as ideal role models in Türkiye because of their life achievements and efforts to overcome the barriers and obstacles associated with a life of disability, which was presumed to "end" and "disrupt" (Erikson, 1968; cited in Adler et al., 2021) their future plans and life dreams. Against all the expectations of a negative disability identity, going blind and blindness led Selim and Kerim to have an integrated and celebrated self-identity, high self-esteem and a life of happiness.

There is significant body of literature which links high self-esteem to better psychological well-being whereas low self-esteem is linked with a range of psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety and substance-misuses (see, for example, Krauss et al., 2020; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). The twins have developed positive life outlooks over the years as a result of having high self-esteem (intra-psychic dimension). Besides, they have developed strong interpersonal competencies and relations (inter-personal dimension) through effective social-cultural and political interactions (for example, campaigning for the rights of disabled people). In other words, developing strong self-identity and high self-esteem helped Selim and Kerim to avoid the kind of psychological difficulties associated with having a core life disability status and low-self-esteem (Trani et al., 2020).

5.4 Stigma, Discrimination and Disability Self-identity

The relentless pursuit of an independent life could be one reason why the twin brothers formed strong identities as successful public figures in Türkiye. Although blindness tends to be perceived as a tragedy, the case study of KA and SA shows that it can also be a source of motivation for creativity and success, and that the ability to thrive in life and should not always be seen as a tragedy. Their life history shows that people living with disability can develop

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positive self-esteem and enhanced self-identity if they are allowed to interact with the wider society without being subjected to prejudice and discriminatory practices. Having access to unwavering and uncompromising support for each at work and at home enabled the twins to reduce the adverse consequences attached to stigmatized identity, and therefore, increased their bonding relations, life satisfaction, "agency and adaptability" as well as achieving successful career fulfilment (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). From our interviews, there was not much evidence to claim that the two brothers experienced horrific discrimination practices, although they discussed the common discrimination faced by disable people in Türkiye, whilst acknowledging the progress that has been made in the past three decades or so.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored how two famous blind Turkish musicians have developed strong and successful self-identity and self-esteem through ambivalent social interactions, and in the context of traumatic life challenges. Moreover, autobiographical events and narratives allow one to continuously compose and revise self-identity and identity formation. Considering the autobiographical narratives of Kerim and Selim, we can learn many lessons. They did not perceive their blindness as an obstacle in becoming pioneer musicians and performers. They have been able to play lead roles in various public activities including documentaries and TV programmes and becoming positive role-model celebrities in the process. Part of their success emerged from the caring and loving support they received from family, friends and supportive professionals. They became resilient and overcame the many barriers commonly associated with blindness. It took them many years to train as lawyers and at the same time they could not find employment in the legal sector, partly because of discriminatory practices and the toxic attitude towards blind people in Türkiye. They responded to these types of setbacks by retraining in different disciplines until they found a profession that satisfied them, becoming nationally celebrated musicians and motivational speakers. Building on resilience and effective coping strategies were other factors which enabled the twin brothers to become prolific writers, music performers and prominent public figures in Türkiye. To this end, Selim and Kerim's life narratives illustrate that with the right supportive environment and societal understanding, blind and disabled people can pursue a successful and happy life.

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Nasir Warfa ⓘD I Design; Data collection/analysis; Interpretation of data/findings; Drafting; Critical; Literature review; Supervising; Final approval and accountability. General contribution rate: %30.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1: Background Information

Background	KA-59. Male. Turkish. Always lived in Istanbul.
Education	B.S./MSc. And PhD in Law.
Diagnosis blindness	Lost sight during first year of high school. KA could see a little.
Psychology of blindness	Being twins unite us. Being blind improves twin relationship
Childhood adversities	School education was difficult as teachers didn't understand the twin' vision problems. In the early years when the twins used to go to school, they had a lot of difficulty because there was no Braille at schools. They spent their childhood in a protective and safe environment.
Family relations	Father was realistic. Mother was emotional. To start music education, their mother was more encouraging. The protective approach of the family continued in the later years of the twins. Their mother and father have been always helpful. Mother more so until the end of high school and father after high school (starting from university) Both parents were crucial in helping their educational needs. The twins' father read the lecture notes aloud to the tapes starting from twins' undergraduate education until the end of their PhD. The twins' parents never saw the children's visual impairment as a disability.
Social relations	They have a lot of friends because they are engaged in different occupations. But they have a few very close friends.
Discrimination and Prejudice	The twins faced significant discrimination and prejudice. For example, they wanted to become academicians. However, they could not find a place in academic life due to discrimination against blind people. According to Kerim, there are both positive and negative discrimination against the blind. Depending on the context, Kerim can also complain about positive discrimination. Kerim said that he and Selim were discriminated while looking for positions in their careers in law.
Professional status	Worked as a lawyer for four years. He worked in the municipality for 12 years. Professional chess player. Musician. Performing in various pub music events. Chess Player.
Psychological wellbeing	Individually, very happy with past and present Sometimes emotional, sensitive. Having a high motivation for life as there is so much to do (even sometimes motivating Selim for things to do. Reading books is a mechanism to cope with stress since reading is a passive process.
Self-development	Excited, a little hectic, still in the process of maturing and learning. Devoted to life, loving life. He loves reading books and listening to music. There is an excessive sense of responsibility. Perfectionist. He loves to work. He likes to deal with technical things, things, especially computer. He likes mathematics more than Selim.

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Background	**SA-59. Male. Turkish. Always lived in Istanbul.**
Education	B.S./MSc. And PhD in Law
Diagnosis blindness	Lost sight during first year of high school.
	SA had completely lost sight.
Psychology blindness	I think it may be the twin gene that unites us with Kerim, rather than blindness. But I'm putting it here as a question mark.
Childhood adversities	Selim's vision problem progressed faster than Kerim. Because of this, he even considered dropping out of school as a child.
	According to Selim, lack of awareness of teachers about visually impaired students was a big problem in those years.
	Classes in primary and secondary school have always been very difficult.
	They spent their childhood in a very secure family environment.
	They had a secure circle of friends.
Family relations	Father was realistic.
	Mother was emotional.
	To start music education, their mother was more encouraging.
	Their mother and father have been always helpful.
	Mother more so until the end of high school and father after high school (starting from university)
	Both parents were crucial in helping their educational needs.
	The twins' father read the lecture notes aloud to the tapes starting from twins' undergraduate education until the end of their PhD.
	The twins' parents never saw the children's visual impairment as a disability.
Social relations	Not being able to go out of the city enough is a deficiency in their lives.
Discrimination and Prejudice	The twins faced significant discrimination and prejudice. For example, they wanted to become academicians. However, they could not find a place in academic career due to discrimination against blind people.
	He thinks that there is a prejudice in Türkiye that blind people cannot work in many jobs.
	He sees retiring at the age of 15 as a bad example of positive discrimination.
	Selim stated that he faced prejudices in workplaces where he and Kerim applied to become lawyers when they were young. This happened because of blindness.
Professional status	Worked as a lawyer for four years. He worked in the municipality for 12 years.
	Professional chess player
	Musician
	Performing in a musical
	Performing in various pubs, musicals
	Performing to organizational events.
	Chess Player
Psychological wellbeing	There is a peace of mind that depends on the completion of the work to be done. There is a constant rush, leading to psychological stress. Work stress.
	Memorizing a new music, composing something new, writing something new are more active.
Self-Development	More relaxed and easy going, compared to Kerim.
	At some points, more perfectionist than Kerim
	More concerned with daily house practices and households, compared to Kerim.
	Selim is likely to listen to music more often compared to Kerim.
	Always open to improve his skills and abilities.
	He also makes self-criticism as he thinks he pushes his limits too much and this makes him tired.

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Appendix 2: Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview Questions

1) Interviewed Person:
2) Time/Place of the Interview:
3) Gender:
4) Age:
5) Place of birth:
6) Mother/Father

(Place of birth, Educational status, Occupation, Working or retired)

1) Are you single or married? (If married and divorced, when did it happen? How long were you married?)
2) How was your childhood? Could you please tell us your childhood experiences?
   - When did you become totally blind?
   - As a blind person and a musician, have you ever experienced any discriminations or negativity? What do you think about being a blind musician in Türkiye? Is there any disadvantage?
   - As a person and twin, how do you define yourself and "us"?
3) Could you tell us about your educational background? From which high schools, universities, and certificate programs (in available) were you graduated or trained?
4) How did you develop a tendency towards music? Could you please tell us about your music education background?
5) Did your family support your orientation to music? How did they approach?
6) Are there any persons in your family playing any instruments or singing?
7) What kind of music used to be listened in your family during your childhood?
8) What kind of music do you listen to? Which musicians are you following in your family?
9) Which music style did you specialize in?
10) What is your job? How do you define your occupation(s)?
11) How do you express your job satisfaction? How would you mark it on a scale from 0 to 10? Why?
12) How do you express your satisfaction from life? How would you mark it on a scale from 0 to 10? Why?
13) How do you live on? (What kind of activities support your economic needs?)
14) Do you remember the first time you earned your own money? How old were you? What was the activity?
15) What are the most exciting professional activities you were involved in? Why?
16) What are the most exciting non-professional activities you were involved in? Why?
17) How do you define your professional working conditions in Türkiye?
18) Are you trying to improve professional working conditions in Türkiye? How?
19) How do you define the living conditions in Türkiye? Why?
20) Are you trying to do something to improve the living standards for blind people in Türkiye? How?
21) How do you define success in life? (After the first part is answered) Do you think you are a successful person or not? Why or why not?
22) What are your likes and dislikes? How did you develop your tendencies for them?
23) If you were born totally blind, do you think it would make a difference in your preferences? How?
24) Do you compose music? What is your motivation behind it? How do you define your creativeness?
25) What kinds of activities are you involved to improve your musical skills?

Job Related Questions

26) Do you have a regular job?
27) Is it your own house or do you live in rent? (If you rent it) How much do you pay per month? (Dues also need be added)
28) Do you have any property ownership? If so, what are they?
29) On which district do you live in İstanbul? What is the reason to choose this district?
30) What is your monthly wage when you consider your all income? From which sources/jobs are you paid?
31) Do you think your monthly income is sufficient? Do you think Do you think that the wage you received showed enough change over the years?
32) Have you ever experienced financial difficulties? If so, how did you cope with them? Did your family or brother help you? How did they help?
33) Are you a member of professional associations as a musician? If so, which institutions / structures?

Questions related to İstanbul and Music

1) How long have you been living in İstanbul? Why? Was it your own choice to live in Istanbul?
2) What are the opportunities that Istanbul provides you as a blind person and a musician? What are the positive / negative effects of the city on your profession and life?

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