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Crisis of Belonging or Space for Dialogue? Social Pressure, Stigmatization, and Identity Management in Alevi–Sunni Mixed Marriages: The Case of the Gülen Movement

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement is examined with a focus on how social pressure, stigmatisation, and identity negotiation shape the lived experiences of couples and their families. Drawing on theories of intergroup relations, labelling, and identity management, the study situates mixed marriages within broader debates on religious boundaries, community expectations, and the social regulation of belonging. These frameworks highlight how marriage functions not merely as a personal union but as a socially embedded institution shaped by ritual norms, kinship structures, and communal perceptions of legitimacy. The research aims to analyse how couples navigate religious differences, manage visibility, and respond to mechanisms of social pressure within both marital and extended family contexts. Based on qualitative fieldwork with ten participants in Germany, the study employs semi-structured interviews and content analysis to explore patterns of spouse selection, marital harmony, conflict, and child-rearing practices. The findings reveal five major dynamics: first, tensions arise primarily from ritual practices and everyday lifestyle norms rather than doctrinal disagreements; second, extended family networks activate mechanisms of pressure, stigma, and boundary policing; third, couples employ strategies of concealment, selective disclosure, and identity blending to maintain harmony; fourth, diaspora conditions reshape status aspirations, social capital strategies, and the visibility of religious identities; and fifth, the Movement's organisational culture influences perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and intergroup acceptance. The study concludes that Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement constitute a complex arena of identity negotiation, offering new insights into religious diversity, social cohesion, and the challenges of intergroup marriage in diaspora contexts.

Keywords: Labelling; pressures; religious identities; social mixed marriages

INTRODUCTION

Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages constitute a sensitive and understudied field within contemporary Muslim societies, particularly when they occur inside structured religious communities such as the Gülen Movement. These marriages often become arenas in which religious identity, community expectations, and social boundaries intersect, transforming what appears to be a personal union into a socially regulated space of negotiation. The issue gains further importance in diaspora contexts, where shifting social networks, altered visibility of religious identities, and new forms of social capital reshape how couples navigate belonging and difference.

Existing scholarship consistently demonstrates that marriage is embedded in broader social structures, kinship networks, and cultural norms rather than being a purely individual choice (Scanzoni & Scanzoni 1982; Kalmijn 1998). Studies on mixed marriages show that tensions typically arise from ritual practices, lifestyle norms, and family expectations rather than doctrinal disagreements (Landis 1949; Ciment & Radzilowski 2013). Research on Alevi–Sunni relations outside the Gülen Movement further highlights persistent patterns of stereotyping, boundary-making, and limited intermarriage (Bozkurt 2006; Erman & Göker 2000; Çamuroğlu 1997; Shankland 2003). Despite this substantial literature, no study has examined Alevi–Sunni marriages specifically within the Gülen Movement, leaving a significant empirical and conceptual gap.

The central problem addressed in this study is that Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement remain unexplored despite their

sociological relevance, particularly regarding how couples negotiate sectarian difference, respond to social pressure, and manage identity visibility. This problem is important because mixed marriages in minority religious communities often reveal broader mechanisms of belonging, communal regulation, and identity management, especially in diaspora settings where social boundaries are renegotiated.

Accordingly, the study aims to: (1) analyse how couples navigate ritual, cultural, and familial differences; (2) examine how social pressure and stigma shape marital dynamics; (3) explore how diaspora conditions influence identity strategies; and (4) understand how the Movement's organizational culture affects perceptions of legitimacy and belonging.

Based on preliminary fieldwork, the study anticipates several key findings: that tensions arise primarily from ritual practices and family expectations rather than theology; that extended family networks play a central role in boundary-policing; and that couples employ strategies such as concealment, selective disclosure, and identity blending to maintain harmony. By situating these marriages within broader debates on intergroup relations and identity management, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious diversity, social cohesion, and the negotiation of belonging in contemporary Muslim communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides the conceptual and theoretical background of the study by reviewing sociological approaches to marriage, spouse selection, mixed marriages, intergroup relations, childrearing, and Alevi–Sunni dynamics within the Gülen Movement. The review is structured into four components: (1) theoretical framework, (2) key concepts, (3) variables, and (4) examples from previous studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Marriage as a Social Institution

Marriage is the continuation of sexual relations between two adults of opposite sexes in line with the norms determined by society, which lays the foundation of family and kinship communities (Dündar 2018, 41). Although marriage is often perceived as a union between two individuals, it is in fact a social practice shaped by extended family, relatives, and the immediate environment. Birgül Oğuz's metaphor "marriage is like heaven because you will no longer be alone; marriage is like hell because you will no longer be alone" illustrates how marriage reshapes not only the couple's relationship but also the ties between their families (ÖzateşlerÜlkücan 2019: 2). Therefore, marriage is not only a relationship between two people but also a social relationship. This is because it is the community itself that approves and accepts marriage. From this perspective, it is natural to observe diversity in every society regarding marriage. The socio-economic, socio-religious and socio-cultural differentiation of societies affects many issues, including institutions such as marriage and family (Doğan 2014).

It also allows us to identify the reasons that drive people to marry. Because, just as there is a difference between sociological definitions of marriage and society's approach to this concept, there is a similar difference in the reasons that attract people to marriage. Benokraitis looks at the reasons that lead people to marry from a sociological perspective and divides them into two categories: manifest and latent. According to Benokraitis, individuals get married to bring their lives together with the people they suddenly fall in love with and love and to have children (Benokratisi 2015: 272).

Marriage is an institutionalized structure granting legal rights to spouses. Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1982: 147) define marriage as an arrangement in which sexual relations and economic sharing are legally recognized, while also embedding couples within broader social networks. Social transformations especially after the Industrial Revolution have reshaped marriage through rising education levels, women's rights, and women's participation in economic and social life (Sungur et al. 2017).

In Western societies, romantic love has become the primary determinant of marriage since the Renaissance (Akkaya 2018). However, structural factors such as kinship, geographical proximity, and religious affiliation continue to influence spouse selection (Merton 1941; Davis 1941; Kalmijn 1998).

Intergroup Relations Theory

Marriage is a complex phenomenon that brings together many elements, and partners may differ in race, religion, culture, or ethnicity (Yinger 1968; Balkanlıoğlu 2011a, 2011b). Mixed marriages defined as unions between individuals from different

racial, ethnic, religious, or sectarian groups (Landis 1949; Beylunioğlu & Kaymak 2020) are shaped by shared customs, traditions, and ritual practices (Ciment & Radzilowski 2013).

Mixed marriages have increased globally, and one in two spouses in such unions may modify religious preferences to align with their partner (Pew Forum 2008). Alevi–Sunni marriages in Turkey are particularly significant due to sociotheological prejudices and stereotypes.

Kalmijn (1998) identifies three determinants of intergroup marriage:

1. Individual preferences for ingroup or outgroup marriage,
2. Structural opportunities for meeting potential partners,
3. Thirdparty influences, such as family or community expectations.

Mixed marriages are categorized into interreligious, interracial, and interethnic unions (Cerroni 1985), and in many societies they are viewed negatively (Degler 1971).

Labelling Theory

Alevi–Sunni marriages often evoke processes of othering. Othering is an ideological attitude that assumes certain individuals or groups are more separate, valuable, or worthless than others (Semerci, Erdoğan & Önal 2017).

Religions, while unifying, can also generate exclusion and conflict (Aydınalp 2010; Wach 1990). The binary perception of "us" versus "them" forms the cognitive basis of intergroup conflict (Çelik 2014).

Historically, Alevi–Sunni relations in Turkey have been marked by limited interaction, stereotypes, and exclusion (Salman 2015; Bozkurt 2006). Differences in ritual practices and beliefbased religious practices contribute to these divisions (Türkdoğan 2013).

Identity Management Theory

Identity management theory examines how individuals negotiate, conceal, or disclose aspects of their identity in response to social pressures. In Alevi–Sunni marriages, couples navigate expectations from both families and communities, balancing visibility and belonging.

The diaspora context reshapes identity strategies by altering social capital dynamics, status aspirations, and the visibility of religious identities. Mechanisms of social pressure and stigmatization may prompt couples to adopt strategies such as concealment, selective disclosure, or hybrid identity formation.

KEY CONCEPTS

Marriage

Marriage is a social institution embedded in cultural norms, kinship structures, and community expectations. It regulates sexual relations, economic sharing, and social belonging, while reflecting broader societal transformations such as modernization, gender equality, and individualization.

Spouse Selection

Spouse selection refers to the social and cultural processes through which individuals choose intimate partners. It is shaped by structural factors such as social class, religion, education, and proximity, and is influenced by social networks, community norms, and institutional contexts.

There are some key concepts that are important for developing a social understanding of the phenomenon of marriage. The first of these concepts is homogamy, which can be defined as internal marriage. Another concept related to marriage is endogamy, referring to marrying within one's own group. The opposite is exogamy, referring to marrying outside one's group.

Homogamy / Endogamy / Exogamy

1. Homogamy: choosing a partner similar in social characteristics (Coltrane and Collins 2001: 272).
2. Endogamy: marrying within one's own group (Newman and Grauerholz 2002: 251).
3. Exogamy: marrying outside one's group (Guest 2017: 37).

These concepts help explain patterns of spouse selection in Alevi–Sunni marriages.

MIXED MARRIAGES

Mixed marriages involve partners from different racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds. They reflect broader intergroup relations and may challenge existing social boundaries. Alevi–Sunni marriages exemplify mixed marriages shaped by historical prejudices, ritual differences, and community expectations.

Othering

Othering refers to the construction of certain groups as fundamentally different or inferior. It manifests through stereotypes, exclusion, and symbolic boundaries, influencing how mixedmarriage couples are perceived and treated.

Religious Identity

Religious identity influences marital harmony, conflict, and social belonging. In mixed marriages, differences in ritual practices, lifestyle norms, and community expectations may generate tensions.

Alevi–Sunni couples often navigate identity disclosure, negotiation, and blending, especially in diaspora contexts where visibility and social capital dynamics shift.

ChildRearing in Mixed Families

Childrearing in mixed families involves navigating multiple cultural and religious frameworks. Parental roles, family expectations, and social environments influence children's religious socialization and identity development.

VARIABLES

Although this study is qualitative in nature, the core analytical variables derived from the literature are as follows:

1. Religious identity (Alevism / Sunnism)
2. Spouse selection mechanisms (propinquity, homogamy, social filters)
3. Marital harmony and conflict sources (ritual practices, etiquette, lifestyle norms)
4. Social pressure and stigmatization (family expectations, community norms, labelling)
5. Identity management strategies (concealment, selective disclosure, negotiation)
6. Childrearing practices (religious socialization, parental roles)
7. Diaspora conditions (status aspirations, social capital, identity visibility)

EXAMPLES FROM PREVIOUS STUDIES

Marriage and Family Sociology

Marriage is seen as the building block of the family (Roopnarine and Gielen 2005: 125). As Yinger states, marriage is a complex phenomenon that brings together many elements and the partners in each marriage can show differences (Yinger 1968: 104107; Balkanlıoğlu 2011a, 2011b: 298). Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1982) define marriage as an institutional arrangement in which mutual sexual intercourse and economic sharing are legally recognized, while also embedding couples within broader social networks. Benokraitis (2015) identifies both manifest and latent motivations for marriage. Social transformations especially after the Industrial Revolution have reshaped the structure of family and marriage, particularly through increased education levels, the advancement of women's rights, and women's participation in economic and social life (Sungur et al. 2017). In Western culture, romantic love has been the most determining factor in marriage since the Renaissance (Akkaya 2018). However, structural factors such as kinship, geographical proximity, and religious affiliation continue to influence spouse selection (Merton 1941; Davis 1941; Kalmijn 1998).

Spouse Selection

Brym and Lie (2006) argue that marriage is an institutional arrangement in which not only the bride and groom but also third parties play a role, considering economic calculations. Rather than occurring in a "natural" flow, the process of mate selection is embedded in a particular social structure. Benokraitis (2015) and Schwartz and Scott (2017) identify key filters used in partner selection, including geographical proximity (propinquity), socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, religion, physical attractiveness, age, and family and peer pressure. Benokraitis (2015) also lists values and personality traits as important filters.

According to the criterion of geographical proximity, people tend to choose partners primarily among individuals in their immediate environment (Benokraitis 2015). Social exchange theory suggests that individuals evaluate the benefitloss balance in relationships, exchanging negative connotations (minority status, low education, lower socioeconomic status) for more positive attributes (higher education, dominant cultural affiliation, higher socioeconomic status) (Schwartz & Scott 2017; Benokraitis 2015).

Alevi–Sunni marriages can be analyzed from the perspectives of geographical proximity and exogamy. The concept of intergroup marriage, crossgroup marriage, or mixed marriage emerges during and after the spouse selection process.

Because historical and ethnographic studies on Alevism provide essential background for understanding the cultural and ritual differences that shape Alevi–Sunni interactions (Dressler 2013; Kehl-Bodrogi 1992; Ocak 2000).

Mixed Marriage Research

International research on mixed marriages further demonstrates how intergroup unions reflect broader social boundaries and identity negotiations (Qian & Lichter 2011; Rosenfeld 2008). Mixed marriages involve partners from different racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds (Landis 1949: 401407). Shared cultural elements such as customs, traditions, and religious rituals play an important role in partner choice (Ciment & Radzilowski 2013: 328). Mixed marriages are described as a remarkable sociological phenomenon (Güngör 2016: 83). Merton (1941) refers to marriages with individuals from various groups outside the family and kin groups. Davis (1941) defines mixed marriages as those that break the ingroup marriage rule. Cavan (1970) defines mixed marriages as unions between people from different cultures without compromising their own culture. Mixed marriages are generally defined as situations where individuals belonging to different racial, ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups marry (Beylunioğlu & Kaymak 2020: 13).

The rate of mixed marriages has been steadily increasing in many countries. One out of every two spouses in a mixed marriage changes some religious preferences to align with their partner (Pew Forum 2008). In Turkey, there is no official or unofficial data on this.

Mixed marriages have long been studied in sociology. Individuals usually marry into a group they feel close to, but sometimes marry into different groups (Kalmijn 1998: 395421). Intergroup marriage research examines factors affecting marriages, spouse selection, rate relations, marriage models, and children (Barron 1951: 249). Kalmijn and Tubergen identify three determinants of intergroup marriage: a) individual preferences for ingroup or outgroup marriage, b) structural suitability for meeting individuals in one's own group, c) influence of third parties (Kalmijn 1998; Balkanlıoğlu 2011a, 2011b). Mixed marriages are analyzed under interreligious, interracial, and interethnic categories (Cerroni 1985). In many societies, such marriages are viewed negatively (Degler 1971).

Intergroup relations research shows that perceived group boundaries and symbolic threats strongly influence attitudes toward mixed marriages, a pattern also emphasized in the work of Martinovic and Verkuyten (Martinovic & Verkuyten 2012). Studies on embodied piety and everyday religious practices demonstrate how gender, space, and religious visibility shape intimate relationships, as highlighted by Gökarıksel and Secor (Gökarıksel & Secor 2010). Recent scholarship on sectarian identity and boundarymaking among Alevis and Sunnis further illustrates how intergroup perceptions constrain mixedmarriage negotiations (TulumAkbulut 2021).

Alevi–Sunni Marriages in the Broader Turkish Context

Research on Alevi–Sunni marriages in the broader Turkish context provides an essential background for understanding the social and cultural dynamics that shape mixed unions. Studies outside the Gülen Movement consistently show that these marriages are influenced by long-standing sectarian boundaries, ritual differences, and community-based expectations (Çamuroğlu 1997; Shankland 2003). Scholars highlight that Alevi–Sunni couples often navigate concerns related to family honor, kinship obligations, and communal reputation, which may create additional layers of negotiation within marital life (Erman & Göker 2000; Kaya 2019). This body of literature demonstrates that mixed marriages between Alevis and Sunnis are embedded in broader historical and sociological patterns, offering a contextual foundation for examining how similar dynamics may manifest within structured religious communities such as the Gülen Movement.

Alevi–Sunni Relations and Othering

Alevism emerged from a syncretic blend of preIslamic Anatolian belief systems, Shi'iBektashi traditions, and Sufi cosmologies, forming a distinct religiouscultural structure in Anatolia (Ocak 2000; KehlBodrogi 1992). During the Ottoman period, Alevis were frequently marginalized due to their perceived political dissent and heterodox ritual practices, which reinforced communal boundaries and limited social integration (Dressler 2013; Melikoff 1998). In the early Republican era, secular nationbuilding policies reshaped Alevi identity by pushing communities toward new forms of public visibility, institutional engagement, and political activism (Massicard 2013). Contemporary Alevi identity reflects a dynamic interplay between historical memory, ritual practice, and modern

citizenship, shaped by migration, urbanization, and transnational networks (Vorhoff 1998). Recent scholarship also highlights how Alevi identity is continually renegotiated in relation to state policies, communal narratives, and intergroup encounters, a dynamic explored in depth in Topuz's analysis of Alevi–Sunni relations and identity formation (Topuz 2022). This historical background provides essential context for understanding the cultural and ritual differences that influence Alevi–Sunni interactions and mixedmarriage dynamics.

Alevi–Sunni marriages bring with them the concept of otherization. Othering is an ideological attitude that assumes some individuals or groups are more separate, valuable, or worthless than others (Semerci, Erdoğan & Önal 2017). Religions can unify but also divide and create conflict (Aydınalp 2010; Wach 1990). The "us them" binary forms the cognitive basis of conflict (Çelik 2014).

Alevi–Sunni antagonism is one of the most prominent reflections of marginalization among religious communities in Turkey (Salman 2015). Prejudices, stereotypes, exclusion, and conflicts have emerged due to historical, cultural, and theological differences. Each religious group functions as a means of solidarity for its members while discriminating against others (Eren 2000).

Historical interactions show that both groups often see each other as the other, exclude each other, and sometimes experience concrete problems (Bozkurt 2006). Differences in religious practices and beliefbased rituals are frequently expressed as reasons for exclusion (Türkdoğan 2013).

ChildRearing in Mixed Families

Children in samefaith marriages often adopt their parents' religion (Hoge et al. 1982). In mixed marriages, children's religious commitment is weaker due to inconsistent religious socialization (Petersen 1986). Factors affecting religious socialization include the type of religion, parentchild relationship, gender, and parental roles (Salisbury 1970).

Mixed marriages influence children's religious and habitual tendencies and help predict future religious differentiation in society (Reiss 1965). Differences in education, age, social status, and other factors may create problems between spouses (Landis 1949). Religious beliefs provide parents with guidance on raising children (Atay & Atay 2009). Childrearing styles may vary among Alevi–Sunni couples due to cultural differences.

Harmony in Marriage

In the historical process, marriage and family is one of the issues that religions are most interested in. Factors such as the perception of the family as the centre of religious life (Thornton 1985; Dollahite, Marks & Goodman 2004), the opportunity for social development of religion through the family, and the overlap of the family's duties in ensuring social stability with the commandments and goals of religion have been effective in establishing strong ties between religion and family (see Hall 1996). According to Mahoney et al. (2003), this plays a role in the perception of marriage as a sacred union. This is also supported by the preference for intra-confessional marriages within the congregations in Turkey. Alevi-Sunni marriages within the Gülen Movement can also be considered from this perspective.

Because in most of the studies, it has been found that there is a positive relationship between marital harmony and religiosity and that religious individuals are less prone to conflict and divorce6. It is observed that religiosity is analysed in various ways in these studies. In some studies, religiosity is used as a variable, while in others it is evaluated based on participation in worship (church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, etc.) (Giblin 1997, p. 321), and in some based on religious homogamy/heterogamy. In addition, the concept of spirituality, which has recently been defined differently from religiosity, has also been the subject of research in terms of its relationship with marital adjustment.

In studies investigating the relationship between marital harmony and religiosity, the following idea is generally prominent: He believes that more religious couples will have happier, more harmonious and stable marriages and higher marital quality, and the findings largely support this view. Although a higher level of religiosity relatively reduces the likelihood of contemplating divorce, this does not increase marital happiness and interaction, nor does it reduce the conflicts and problems that are often thought to cause divorce (Sherkat & Ellison 1999; Mahoney et al. 2001).

When examining the marriage preferences between Alevi-Sunni faith communities or the prioritization of the intermarriage model by faith groups such as the Gülen Movement should be evaluated from this perspective.

Alevi–Sunni Marriages in the Gülen Movement

It is known that the Gülen movement has long had an interest in Alevis and Alevism. In the past years, Fethullah Gülen has always made statements to reduce tension, especially when Alevism has been discussed in public for various reasons. One of the most prominent examples in this regard is Gülen's statement in Milliyet (https://hyd.org.tr/attachments/articlM/579/soylesi-rusen-cakir-in-fethullah-gulen-ile-aleviler-uzerine-roportaji.pdf) on 14.07.1995 after the so-called Gazi Events: "I can easily put my head under the feet of all Alevis, I am also Alevi". The statements made by many Alevi associations and leaders after this statement clearly show the social repercussions of this statement. Gülen made similar statements in the following years and even his 2008 statement on "Candle Blowing Out" received positive reactions from Alevi associations in Europe as well as in Turkey.

He also stated that Gülen's interest in Alevis and Alevism did not stop there, and that they came together with the prominent Alevi Dedes of the regions for some joint projects in order to learn Alevism correctly.

It was suggested that Narlıdere-based reading halls, cemevis, Alevi Culture Clubs and libraries should be established so that the spiritual culture of Alevism could be put into writing between two covers by forming joint committees. The proposal for Alevis to train their own imams was voiced long before Europe, and it was suggested that these Alevi Imams would help their own people in the Cemevis to be opened later.

The Cami-Cemevi project, which was also discussed in the 2010s, was realized by laying the foundation stone in Mamak, Ankara with the partnership of the Cem Foundation and other Alevi associations and the Gülen Movement, but it was aborted due to political developments in the following years. However, some studies on this subject have claimed that the Gülen Movement's interest in Alevism is more extreme and that the process has evolved into different areas with Alevi associations founded by some Alevis close to them.

While these allegations show that the Gülen Movement has a special interest in Alevism, there is no evidence that it has planned or directed Alevi-Sunni marriages. Therefore, Alevi-Sunni marriages within the Gülen Movement, which are not very common, are worthy of study in this respect. The choice of spouse in the shadow of this observation is also important in this respect.

Taken together, the existing literature highlights how marriage functions as a socially embedded institution shaped by religious identity, cultural norms, and community expectations, thereby providing the analytical foundation for examining Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological framework of the study, including the unit of analysis, research design, data sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis methods used to examine Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis in this study is the Alevi–Sunni mixed-marriage couple within the Gülen Movement. More specifically, the research focuses on:

1. Couples in which one spouse identifies as Alevi and the other as Sunni,
2. Couples who are (or were) active participants in the Gülen Movement,
3. Couples who migrated to Germany and are raising children within this mixedidentity context.

The study examines their marital experiences, identity negotiations, family relations, and exposure to social pressure and stigmatization.

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive social science perspective. This approach is appropriate because:

1. Research on Alevi–Sunni marriages especially within the Gülen Movement is almost nonexistent,
2. The topic requires an indepth understanding of subjective experiences,
3. Identity, stigma, and social pressure are best explored through qualitative inquiry.

The conceptual framework was developed by drawing on literature on religious groups, Alevi–Sunni relations, mixed marriages, and identity management.

Data Sources

Primary Data

Primary data were generated through:

1. Semistructured interviews with ten individuals (five couples) living in Germany,
2. Observation-based field notes recorded during and after interviews.

Secondary Data

Secondary sources include:

1. Academic literature on Alevi–Sunni relations,
2. Studies on mixed marriages,
3. Research on the Gülen Movement,
4. Sociological theories of identity, stigma, and intergroup relations.

These sources informed both the conceptual framework and the interpretation of findings.

Data Collection Techniques

SemiStructured Interviews

The primary data collection technique was semistructured interviewing, chosen for its flexibility and depth. Interviews focused on:

1. Marriage formation processes,
2. Awareness and negotiation of religious identity,
3. Sources of marital harmony and conflict,
4. Family reactions and social pressure,
5. Experiences of stigmatization within the movement,
6. Childrearing practices and transmission of identity.

Participants were selected based on:

1. Being in good health,
2. Willingness to participate,
3. Having an Alevi–Sunni marriage as their first and only marriage (to avoid confounding influences).

Observation Notes

The researcher also kept systematic observation notes during interviews, documenting:

1. Non-verbal cues,
2. Interactional dynamics,
3. Contextual details relevant to identity management and social pressure.

Data Analysis Methods

The study employed content analysis to interpret the interview data. The analytical process included:

1. Transcription of all interviews,
2. Initial coding based on recurring themes (identity disclosure, conflict sources, family reactions, stigma, etc.),
3. Axial coding to identify relationships between categories (e.g., stigma → concealment strategies),
4. Thematic synthesis to integrate findings with the theoretical framework.

This method allowed the researcher to identify patterns in how couples negotiate identity, manage social pressure, and navigate community expectations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage.

To ensure anonymity, all names and identifiable details were replaced with codes (e.g., M1, W1). To protect confidentiality, audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. Sensitive information particularly regarding religious identity, community relations, and internal dynamics of the Gülen Movement was handled with heightened care to avoid any potential harm or stigmatization.

Technical Aspects of Coding and Analysis

Data analysis was supported by qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA), which facilitated systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of themes. The software enabled:

1. Efficient management of interview transcripts and field notes,
2. Creation of hierarchical code systems,
3. Visualization of cooccurring themes,
4. Crosscase comparisons among couples.

Coding was conducted manually by the researcher within the software environment. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the small sample size, intercoder reliability was not employed; instead, analytic consistency was ensured through iterative coding, memo writing, and repeated crosschecking of categories.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the study include:

1. How did the couple marriages form, and did the Gülen Movement influence this process?
2. Were spouses aware of each other's religious identity before marriage?
3. Did religious or cultural differences lead to conflict?
4. What were the main sources of marital disagreement?
5. How did families react to the mixed marriage?
6. How do couples transmit (or not transmit) Alevism to their children?
7. Have spouses concealed their identity within the movement, and why?
8. Have they encountered negative discourse about Alevism?
9. How does the diaspora context shape their identity practices?
10. Would they consent to their child marrying an Alevi or Sunni?

The study has several limitations:

1. As a qualitative study, findings cannot be generalized to the entire population.
2. The sample size is small, which is typical for qualitative research but limits representativeness.
3. There is a potential selection bias, as couples who declined participation may have different experiences.
4. The study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by memory, social desirability, or emotional sensitivity.

Participants

Code	Sex	Belief	Age	Education	Job	City
M1	Man	A	44	Master	Math Teacher	Tokat
W1	Woman	S	42	University	Literature Teacher	Osmaniye
M2	Man	S	46	University	Estate Agent	Sinop
W2	Woman	A	47	University	Primary Teacher	Diyarbakır
M3	Man	A	48	Doctorate	Academics	Kahramanmaraş
W3	Woman	S	42	University	English Teacher	Sivas
M4	Man	A	45	Master	Electrician	Ordu
W4	Woman	S	36	University	Nursery Teacher	İstanbul
M5	Man	A	47	Doctorate	Academics	Çorum
W5	Woman	S	37	University	Teacher	Kahramanmaraş

DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents the analytical procedures used to interpret the qualitative data obtained through semistructured interviews, focusing on thematic patterns related to identity, social pressure, family dynamics, and community expectations.

How many years have you been married? How did your marriage take place? Did the Gülen Movement have any influence/direction on your marriage?

The data from the four couples we analysed indicate that these marriages were overwhelmingly realized through the encouragement and mediation of the Hizmet movement; consequently, these unions appear to have been shaped more by intramovement networks and institutional facilitation than by purely individual mate choice. In terms of duration, the couples cluster within a relatively homogeneous interval of 18–25 years of marriage, which suggests that these unions are not accidental outcomes, but the product of stable, longterm ties fostered by the movement's organizational apparatus (introduction mechanisms, referrals, shared work settings).

Two principal mechanisms emerge from the data: (1) direct brokerage or orchestration of marriages (as observed in couples 1, 3 and 4), and (2) mediated matchings that operate via kinship or professional contacts (for example, sister/colleague

linkages in couple 2). This pattern implies that the movement's internal social capital serves as a potent preferenceshaping and filtering device in the marriage market, so that religiousideological and institutional congruence appear prominently in partner selection.

The social implications are doubleedged. On the one hand, intramovement homogamy reinforces solidarity, preserves shared values, and strengthens institutional stability. On the other hand, it generates negotiation pressures for couples whose social identities differ from the movement's normative expectations (for instance, external sectarian markers such as Alevi–Sunni difference), creating situations in which identities must be internalized, managed, or concealed.

Finally, given that all four couples migrated abroad after 15 July, these movementdirected marriages clearly play an important role in transnational tie formation and the reorganization of diasporic fields. Such ties can function as protective social networks in exile, yet they also introduce new vulnerabilities social pressures for cultural conformity, assimilation stresses, and the reproduction of institutional norms in the hostcountry context.

Were you aware of each other's religious identity before marriage?

The data indicate that premarital knowledge of partners' religious identities was irregular and asymmetrically gendered, shaped by both individual strategies and social pressures. In numerous cases, affiliation with the Gülen movement functioned as a source of legitimacy that effectively eclipsed Alevi identity; movement membership became a decisive criterion for family approval and social acceptance. For example, W1's remark "whether they are Alevi or not does not matter; what matters to me is that they belong to the Gülen movement" signals the prioritization of movement belonging. Instances in which men concealed an Alevi identity are explicit in participants' accounts: M1 confesses that "the woman only learns of her husband's Alevi identity after marriage; the man felt the need to hide that information," thereby describing a deliberate identitymanagement strategy. Family pressure emerges clearly in W1 and W4's statements: W1 observes, "Had my family known, I would have accepted, but my family would not have allowed it," while W4 states, "If my family had known, they definitely would not have permitted it," underscoring the decisiveness of family approval.

Some respondents openly defended strategies of concealing or downplaying sectarian identity in favour of movement affiliation. M2 reports: "At first meeting I did not know my spouse was Alevi; for me it was sufficient that they were from the Gülen movement; later my sister in the movement told me, "Illustrating how intramovement knowledge can facilitate unions. W3 likewise states: "I did not know my spouse's identity before marriage… but even if I had known, because they were from the movement I would not have worried," emphasizing the primacy of movement affiliation over sectarian markers. Conversely, M3's account "my uncles warned this could cause conflict and that created some problems for us" shows how intrafamilial forewarnings and objections generate ontheground tensions. Taken together, these referralbased testimonies suggest that employing movement belonging as a source of legitimacy produces practices of concealment and postponement that carry potential risks for marital trust, open communication, and the longterm internalization of identity.

The tendency of men to conceal or avoid disclosing an Alevi identity reflects a maleled practice of identity management designed to control exposure and risk; women's choices to consciously accept or to perpetuate nondisclosure are often responses to familial pressure. Families' repeated remark "if they knew, they would not permit it" indicates that social taboos blocking certain unions remain powerful. Consequently, the strategies couples favor (concealment, delay, foregrounding movement affiliation) function pragmatically as adaptive solutions to secure social approval rather than as transparent ethical choices. These dynamics pose risks for intramarital trust, candid communication, and the durable incorporation of identity claims; moreover, the movement's role as an external legitimizing mechanism can render Alevi–Sunni differences effectively invisible at the individual and family level, deferring potential identity conflicts to a later time.

In diasporic contexts, these tendencies are likely to be compounded. The exigencies of establishing status and belonging in new social environments can intensify pressures to assimilate and to leverage movement networks for social mobility. As a result, identitymasking strategies may become more entrenched, increasing the likelihood that latent tensions will surface within family relationships and

across generational transmissions of identity in the host society.

Individuals from different religious groups may have different cultural norms and values. Did this lead to conflicts in your marriage in terms of faith?

The fieldwork data indicate that the shared rituals and value systems of the Gülen Movement provide couples with a normative framework that substantially mitigates the potential for Alevi–Sunni difference to become a direct source of intrafamilial conflict. For example, M/W1's observation "because Gülen Movement values and rituals were more salient within the marriage, the Alevi–Sunni difference did not cause conflict within the family" is consistent with earlier statements that movement affiliation tends to overshadow sectarian identity (cf. W1's remark, "being part of the Gülen Movement matters to me," and W3's, "because they are from the movement I would not have worried about these things").

At the same time, the field evidence shows that the legitimating authority provided by movement membership does not fully erase the taboos and approval expectations residing at the family and community levels. W1 and W4's assertions "if my family had known, they certainly would not have permitted it" illustrate that intramovement norms may postpone or conceal household conflict without eliminating the latent tensions.

In sum, while Gülen Movement affiliation functions as an integrative force in everyday practice, the sustainability of that integration depends on transparency, ongoing communication with families, and the longterm internalization of identities. Absent these conditions, tendencies to defer or mask conflict may accumulate invisibly and eventually surface as more serious disputes.

On which issues did you have the most conflicts? Do you still have conflicts?

The empirical data indicate that marital conflicts primarily arise from practical and cultural points of contact, whereas doctrinal or beliefbased theological disputes have been largely suppressed within these unions by virtue of movement affiliation. For example, M1's statement "the Movement tolerated certain aspects that relate to my belief" and M/W2's comment that "identity was not foregrounded here because being members of the same movement constituted the primary frame" both illustrate how the Hizmet culture, through shared norms and rituals, mitigates the risk of conflict; W4's remark "my spouse lived exactly as we do, so we did not experience an attitudebased conflict" corroborates this pattern of accommodation.

Field notes, however, also document points of cultural friction in everyday practice. Instances such as W3's refusal to shake hands with men and the initial difficulty in adapting to household seating arrangements ("in my family men and women would sit completely separate… at first I struggled to get used to that") evidence that visible ritual and etiquette rules can generate tension. M3's account that one partner "had never participated in familycantered activities in their life… and that this absence prevented a potential problem from arising" shows how individual differences in participation shape the emergence of conflict. Moreover, M4's report that early problems caused by participation in Alevi organizations were resolved through explanatory communication by the spouse highlights the decisive role of transparent dialogue and the articulation of role motivations in conflict resolution.

In summary, the data suggest that theological consonance reduces the probability of dispute, but that everyday rituals, norms of courtesy, and habitual social practices require careful negotiation and candid communication to prevent or resolve frictions. Practical accommodations, clear explanations of motives, and ongoing negotiation of ritual expectations appear to be key mechanisms by which couples translate shared movement affiliation into durable marital harmony.

Families may oppose the marriage of individuals from different religious groups. Have you experienced this situation? How did your families react to this marriage?

The responses to this question indicate that family reactions were largely contingent upon two interrelated factors: the presence/transparency of information about partners' identities and the legitimating effect of affiliation with the Gülen Movement. For example, W1's statement "Had my family learned about my spouse's religious identity before meeting them, they might have opposed our marriage; but after meeting my spouse and their family they did not object" illustrates how personal acquaintance and intramovement ties can attenuate familial opposition. Similarly, in the M/W1 case the brother's knowledge of M1's Alevi identity

coupled with his decision not to disclose it to the broader family because "the spouse is in the Gülen Movement, so he did not treat it as a problem" demonstrates how selective information withholding is used instrumentally to manage conflict risk.
Instances in which men concealed premarital Alevi identity (M4) and statements such as W4's "if my family had known he was Alevi, they would not have permitted the marriage" imply that identitymasking strategies can function as shortterm crisisaversion mechanisms but also carry potential to engender feelings of betrayal and longterm trust deficits. Conversely, cases in which both partners were culturally proximate to Sunni traditions (case 2) suggest a direct link between cultural affinity and lower incidence of conflict, underscoring the role of cultural closeness as a facilitator of marital concord.

In sum, the field data identify three primary determinants of familial opposition in these cases: (1) the visibility of religious identity prior to marriage, (2) the legitimating authority conferred by Gülen Movement affiliation, and (3) the degree of cultural proximity between partners. While concealment or postponement practices may temporarily reduce tensions, they introduce risks for transparency, mutual trust, and the longterm stability of family relations. Moreover, the Movement's function as an external source of legitimization can render Alevi–Sunni differences effectively invisible at the level of individual and family interaction, thereby deferring potential identity conflicts to a later stage especially salient in diasporic settings where pressures to assimilate and to secure social status may reinforce such dynamics.

What does your child know about Alevism? Do you pass on these teachings to him/her and why?

The field data indicate that some families (e.g., M1) engage in deliberate transmission of knowledge about Alevism to their children, framing this process both as a form of cultural enrichment and as a practiceoriented transmission of religious conviction. M1's account shows how children's initial curiosity questions such as "What is a grandfather?" evolved into a systematic pedagogical effort: "with adolescence we began to teach our children concepts related to Alevism." M1 further emphasized the experiential and identityforming nature of this transmission: "I want them to learn by knowing and living the faith… I want them to experience some basic practices," indicating that the objective was not merely cognitive acquisition but embodied practice and identity formation. The couple framed this as a joint decision and justified it instrumentally to prevent misunderstandings during family visits: "In my view both faiths are valid, but if children do not know this difference, they may adopt the wrong attitude toward relatives."

Other participants' statements reveal variation in transmission strategies. M3's remark "our children know nothing about Alevism… we are Alevis who do not know Alevism" points to the contextual and historical conditions that shape levels of knowledge. M4 and W4, by contrast, report active engagement with Alevi organizations and cast this as an asset: "I take my children to Alevi organizations… I see this as an enrichment," and "we gave our children the chance to build an alternative social environment and network," thereby confirming that, in diasporic settings, cultural instruction functions both as identity construction and as the provision of social capital. At the same time, responses such as "children have knowledge about Sayyidship (that is, the idea of being a *Seyyid* or *şerif*, terms used in many Muslim societies to denote a person believed to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad and often associated with lineagebased prestige and certain communal roles) but not about Alevism" (case 2) reveal internal inconsistencies in transmission practices. In short, the field evidence shows that families' decisions to teach Alevism to their children are motivated by a mix of protective pragmatic concerns (social adjustment and relationship management) and normative–doctrinal considerations.

Have you ever had to hide your identity within the community? Why?

The qualitative data indicate that practices of concealing Alevi identity within the community are not reducible to individual shame or simple secrecy; rather, they reflect the combined effects of social stigma, communicative deficiencies, and information gaps within the movement. In other words, identityhiding in the congregational setting appears both strategic and sustained, motivated by concerns that range from personal safety to fear of social sanction. For example, M1 states: "I never disclosed my identity inside the community. During my university years only two brothers in the movement, whom I felt close to, knew; I did not tell anyone else that I was Alevi," thereby delineating the scope of concealment and the norms governing selective disclosure. W1 explains the pragmatic logic behind this behaviour: "I always had to hide that

my spouse was Alevi… even my friends held very mistaken beliefs about Alevism," pointing to how intracommunity ignorance and prejudice directly trigger concealment. W1 further recounts concrete warning practices experienced in a teachers' room at a study centre rumours such as "soandso student in such a class is Alevi, be careful, do not eat the things they bring" which reinforce the perception that revealing one's identity would incur high social costs. Taken together, these statements suggest that concealment is not merely a private choice but is embedded in interactional processes, normative expectations, and stigma practices that mirror wider societal patterns in Turkey.

M3's narrative documents the historical transformation of attitudes toward Alevism within the community and its impact on individual trajectories: "Attitudes to Alevism in the community changed over time… When I was at university someone from the community once asked me, 'Teacher, aren't you Alevi?' and I answered, 'Yes, I am Alevi.' After that I could tangibly feel the change in how they looked at me." This testimony indicates that concealment is not only a response to extant prejudice but also shaped by evolving concerns about status and employment within the community (for example, worries about exclusion from senior positions). M3 attributes these changes to broader societal perceptions: "I think the reason is the reality of Turkey… Unfortunately, Alevism is perceived as irreligion in Turkey," and he adds that this macrosocial perception has been translated into practices within the community.

In sum, the field evidence shows that the movement's official rhetoric of inclusivity may be contradicted by everyday practices; strategies of identity concealment can provide shortterm protection while producing longterm problems of trust and visibility. Moreover, these dynamics are mutable: shifts in institutional attitudes over time can alter concealment practices and their consequences.

Have you heard negative opinions about Alevism from members of the community?

The responses to this question indicate that negative discourses about Alevism within the community exist in both overt and covert forms, even though participants commonly display a tendency to repudiate such discourse rhetorically. Field evidence, however, reveals a more complex picture. Whereas M1's superficial answer appeared to downplay the issue, their broader testimony "I never disclosed my identity inside the community… only two brothers in the movement whom I felt close to knew" is complemented by W1's concrete account: "I always had to conceal that my spouse was Alevi… even my friends held many mistaken beliefs about Alevism," together with reports of informal warnings in a teachers' room at a study centre (e.g. "a certain student is Alevi, be careful, don't eat what they bring"). These everyday interactions microaggressions and stigmatizing jokes such as "we don't eat what they bring" function to restrict identity visibility and to legitimate concealment strategies, despite formal adherence to inclusive rhetoric.

W2's ethnicitycantered example ("In Diyarbakır you cannot say 'I am Turkish'; I used to say 'I am Arab'") further shows that these prejudices are not confined to religion alone but convert into multilayered vulnerabilities of social identity. Read together, the statements point to a disjunction between the community's official normative discourse and ontheground experiences: participants may rhetorically reject negative claims, yet the accounts of M1, W1, and W4 document how everyday practices create socialcost calculations around disclosure.

Methodologically, this pattern cautions against taking direct responses to overt questions at face value; it underlines the need to analyse contextualized and indirect narratives alongside explicit answers to recover the fuller set of social dynamics and tacit pressures shaping identity management.

Have you established a close relationship with Alevis in Germany? Does this pose a problem for the Gülen Movement you are a part of?

The answers indicate heterogeneous and strategically adaptive patterns in participants' postmigration relations with Alevi communities. Some families reported regular participation in rituals and events (e.g. M/W4: "I contacted and met the nearby Alevi community; I sometimes attend their events"), whereas others described only limited, neighbourly interactions (e.g. M/W3: "We maintain neighbourlevel contact with Alevis where we live… when we meet, we present ourselves as members of the Gülen Movement"). In other cases, contact was confined to preexisting ties, and no new acquaintances were formed (M/W2).

Two salient points emerge from these findings. First, whereas the diasporic context facilitates increased Alevi–Sunni encounters, affiliation with the Gülen Movement provides a decisive framing

for how these encounters are managed: most respondents reported that close relations with Alevis did not constitute a problem for the Movement or that they were careful to present their identities in ways that would not harm the Movement (M/W: "They said the Movement supported social networking"). Second, the intensity and openness of ties depend heavily on local conditions and individual strategies: some families disclose and negotiate identities relatively openly (M/W4), while others deliberately foreground their Movement affiliation to delimit intimacy (M/W3). Thus, these interactions perform both socialcapital production and identitymanagement functions simultaneously.

In conclusion, the diasporic setting prompts pragmatic negotiations between normative Movement affiliation and locally embedded, multilayered social relations; these negotiations are likely to have important consequences for future social integration and the visibility of identities within diaspora communities.

Would you consent to your child marrying an Alevi? Why?

The data show heterogeneous and strategically adaptive patterns in participants' postmigration relations with Alevi communities. Some families report regular ritual and event participation (e.g. M/W4: "I contacted and met the nearby Alevi community; I sometimes attend their events"), while others maintain only limited, neighbourly contact (e.g. M/W3: "We have neighbourlevel ties with Alevis where we live … when we meet we present ourselves as members of the Gülen Movement"). In other cases, contact is confined to preexisting ties, and no new acquaintances are formed (M/W2).

Two core insights follow. First, the diasporic setting increases opportunities for Alevi–Sunni encounters, but Gülen Movement affiliation provides a decisive framing that shapes how those encounters unfold: most respondents indicated that close relations with Alevis did not pose a problem for the Movement or that they carefully managed identity disclosure so as not to jeopardize their position within the Movement (M/W: "They said the Movement supported social networking"). Second, the intensity and openness of relations depend on local circumstances and individual strategies: some families disclose and negotiate identities relatively openly (M/W4), whereas others foreground their Movement membership to delimit intimacy and create bounded ties (M/W3).

These interactional patterns thus perform both socialcapital production and identitymanagement functions. In sum, the diaspora context prompts pragmatic negotiations between normative Movement affiliation and locally embedded, multilayered social relations; these negotiations are likely to have significant implications for future social integration and for the visibility and transmission of identities within diaspora communities.

The thematic coding process allowed the identification of recurring patterns across interviews, providing a coherent basis for interpreting how Alevi–Sunni mixed couples negotiate identity, manage social expectations, and respond to communitybased pressures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the major findings of the study and discusses them in relation to existing theories and relevant literature. Five core themes emerged from the qualitative data: (1) negotiation and concealment of religious identity, (2) familybased social pressure, (3) ritual practices as primary sources of conflict, (4) the transformative role of the diaspora context, and (5) childrearing as a site of identity negotiation. Each theme is analytically interpreted and linked to broader sociological frameworks.

NEGOTIATION AND CONCEALMENT OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The first major finding is that Alevi–Sunni couples within the Gülen Movement do not treat religious identity as a fixed or openly declared category. Instead, identity is strategically negotiated, concealed, or selectively disclosed depending on social context. Several participants reported delaying the revelation of their Alevi or Sunni background during courtship, anticipating negative reactions from families or community members.

This pattern aligns closely with Identity Management Theory, which posits that individuals regulate the visibility of stigmatized identities to avoid sanctions. It also resonates with Goffman's (1963) stigma framework, in which individuals engage in "information control" to manage potentially discrediting attributes.

The strategies observed in this study concealment, selective disclosure, and contextual identity shifting mirror the mechanisms described by Semerci, Erdoğan & Önal (2017) regarding othering

processes in Turkey. Within the Gülen Movement's tightly knit social networks, these strategies become even more pronounced, as participants navigate both internal community expectations and external societal perceptions.

SOCIAL PRESSURE ORIGINATES PRIMARILY FROM FAMILIES, NOT THEOLOGY

A second key finding is that social pressure surrounding Alevi–Sunni marriages stem predominantly from familial and cultural expectations, rather than doctrinal or theological differences. Participants consistently emphasized that objections to their marriages were framed in terms of:

1. "We don't want an Alevi soninlaw."
2. "A Sunni bride would not fit into our family."
3. "What will the relatives say?"

This supports Intergroup Relations Theory (Yinger 1968; Kalmijn 1998), which argues that group boundaries are maintained through social norms, kinship expectations, and community surveillance rather than through theological reasoning.

The finding also aligns with Balkanlıoğlu (2011) and Salman (2015), who document how Alevi–Sunni tensions in Turkey are rooted in historical stereotypes and cultural prejudices. In this study, families acted as the primary gatekeepers of group boundaries, exerting pressure on couples through emotional appeals, social expectations, and concerns about community reputation.

RITUAL PRACTICES CREATE MORE CONFLICT THAN BELIEFS

A third major finding is that ritual practices, rather than theological beliefs, constitute the main sources of marital conflict. Participants rarely cited doctrinal disagreements; instead, they described tensions arising from:

1. greeting rituals,
2. seating arrangements at gatherings,
3. funeral and mourning practices,
4. expectations around religious holidays,
5. participation in Djem or spiritual discussion meetings.

This finding is consistent with Goffman's interaction order, which highlights how social friction often emerges from disruptions in everyday interactional routines rather than from ideological differences. It also supports Ciment & Radzilowski (2013), who argue that shared customs and rituals play a central role in the functioning of mixed marriages.

The emphasis on ritual conflict echoes Sungur et al. (2017) and Akkaya (2018), who note that modern marriages increasingly hinge on lifestyle compatibility rather than theological alignment.

DIASPORA CONTEXT RESHAPES IDENTITY VISIBILITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The fourth finding concerns the transformative impact of the diaspora context. Living in Germany simultaneously expands and complicates identity strategies for Alevi–Sunni couples.

Facilitating factors:

1. Greater societal tolerance for mixed marriages,
2. Physical distance from extended family pressure,
3. Increased autonomy in marital decisionmaking.

Constraining factors:

1. Heightened visibility of religious identity within migrant networks,
2. Stronger "identity policing" within diaspora communities,
3. The Gülen Movement's close-knit organizational structure.

These dynamics align with diaspora identity theory, which suggests that migration reshapes identity practices by altering social capital structures and status aspirations. The findings also resonate with Mahoney et al. (2003) and Aydınalp (2010), who argue that religious identity becomes more symbolic and strategically mobilized in diaspora settings.

In this study, couples reported that Germany offered more freedom to marry across sectarian lines, yet the movement's internal expectations and the visibility of religious identity within migrant communities created new forms of pressure.

CHILDREARING AS A SITE OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

The fifth major finding is that childrearing becomes a central arena in which identity is negotiated, contested, and redefined. Couples grappled with questions such as:

1. Should the child learn about Alevism?
2. Should religious rituals be practiced at home?

3. How should differences be explained to the child?
4. Which identity should be emphasized in public settings?

These concerns reflect the broader literature on religious socialization (Hoge et al., 1982; Petersen, 1986; Salisbury, 1970), which shows that children in mixedfaith families often receive inconsistent religious messages, leading to weaker institutional attachment.

Participants described adopting hybrid strategies, such as:

1. teaching cultural aspects of Alevism while avoiding theological details,
2. emphasizing universal ethical values over sectarian identity,
3. postponing religious explanations until adolescence.

These findings align with Reiss (1965), who argues that mixed marriages shape both children's religious tendencies and broader patterns of cultural differentiation in society.

OVERALL INTERPRETATION

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement constitute a complex sociological arena in which identity, belonging, and social control are continuously negotiated. The results reinforce existing theories of intergroup relations, stigma, identity management, and religious socialization, while also highlighting the unique pressures created by the movement's organizational culture and the diaspora context.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement are shaped by identity negotiations, family expectations, ritual practices, and the dynamics of migration. The findings reveal five interrelated patterns. First, religious identity is not openly declared but strategically managed through concealment, selective disclosure, and contextual identity shifting. Second, social pressure originates primarily from families and kinship networks rather than theological disagreement, reflecting longstanding intergroup boundaries. Third, everyday ritual practices such as greeting etiquette, seating arrangements, and participation in ceremonies constitute the main sources of marital friction, overshadowing doctrinal differences. Fourth, the diaspora context simultaneously expands opportunities for intergroup encounters and intensifies identity visibility within migrant networks. Finally, childrearing emerges as a central arena in which identity is negotiated, with couples adopting hybrid or selective strategies of religious transmission.

The study contributes to the literature in several ways. Empirically, it provides one of the first qualitative analyses of Alevi–Sunni marriages within the Gülen Movement, addressing a significant gap in existing scholarship. Theoretically, it demonstrates how identity management, stigma, and intergroup relations theories operate within a religious movement that emphasizes moral unity while subtly reproducing sectarian boundaries. Methodologically, it highlights the value of narrativebased inquiry for uncovering concealed practices such as strategic silence, deferred conflict, and selective transmission that are not easily captured through direct questioning.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. Its qualitative design and small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings, and the focus on couples living in Germany leaves open the question of how similar dynamics unfold in Turkey or other diaspora settings. Selfreported data may also be influenced by memory, emotional sensitivity, or social desirability. Furthermore, the study includes only couples whose marriages have endured, excluding those whose relationships may have dissolved due to sectarian tensions.

Future research could expand the sample to include couples in different regions or religious movements, incorporate the perspectives of extended family members who play a decisive role in marital outcomes, or employ longitudinal or mixedmethod designs to trace how identity strategies evolve across generations. Comparative studies could also explore how different diaspora environments shape identity visibility, social capital, and intergroup acceptance.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Alevi–Sunni mixed marriages within the Gülen Movement constitute a dynamic sociological arena in which identity, belonging, and community expectations are continuously negotiated. These findings offer a foundation for further research and provide insights for community leaders seeking to foster openness, communication, and mutual understanding.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AIASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The author did not use any generative artificial intelligence or AIassisted tools during the preparation of this manuscript for structuring the article, improving clarity, or meeting the journal's formatting requirements. Without employing any such tools, the author personally reviewed and edited all content and assumes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The study was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the work.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with established academic ethical standards. No experiments involving human or animal subjects were carried out for this study. All sources, quotations, and referenced materials have been properly acknowledged. The author affirms that the manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration by any other journal.

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