

Identity Formation and Community Organization among Kurdish Diaspora in London¹

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of Kurdish community organisations in preserving identity among the Kurdish diaspora in London. This study contributes to the discussion on ethnic community organisations and analyse the functions of social network theory among Kurdish community organisations in London. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of ethnic community organisations addressing the specific needs of these Kurdish communities, encouraging their cultural, social and diasporic identity. This study is grounded on a qualitative research design within case study approach. In-depth semi-structured interview employed for data collection. The findings of this study indicated that Kurdish community organizations are places for socialisation, friendship settings, an exercise in ethnic identity awareness and counselling.

Keywords: Diaspora, Kurdish, social network theory, ethnic community organisations.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of Kurdish community organisations in preserving identity among the Kurdish diaspora in London. The reason for choosing this subject is that even though the Kurds are one of the largest “stateless nations” in the world (Bruinessen, 2000a; Gunter, 2007; Hassanpour, 1992; Johnston, 2006; McDowall, 2004;), there has been no research focusing on the role of migrant and ethnic community organisations as a prominent means of support for ensuring the social inclusion of the Kurdish immigrants. This is particularly the case for first generation and newly arrived immigrants (Zetter, Griffiths & Sigona, 2005).

Although the growth of Kurdish community organisations in Europe, including the UK, has occurred within the last few decades, little academic attention has been paid to this phenomenon – even though the Kurds are now one of the largest minority communities in the UK. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by studying the Kurdish community organisations within the research arena of the social sciences. The two most recent studies – Griffiths (2002) and Wahlbeck (1999) – explore Kurdish migration to the UK. These do not, however, use a community organisation perspective, which is the main tool used here, in the study of Kurdish immigrants’ experience in the Kurdish community organisation. Zetter, Griffiths, and Sigona (2005) argue that community organisations can facilitate immigrants’ adaptation to a new country during migration processes and settlement.

Researchers pointed out that the Kurdish diaspora has an important role to play in contributing to the raising of awareness about Kurdish issues in Turkey, and the development of cultural identity in the receiving countries (Alinia, 2004; D’Angelo, 2008; Eliassi, 2010; Wahlbeck, 1999). The main purpose of this research therefore is to investigate the participants’ experiences and their understanding of collaboration of the Kurdish community organisations. Moreover, the target of this study is to examine the role of Kurdish community organisations on preservation identity and culture especially regarding the Kurdish diaspora in London. Throughout, diaspora studies have become a very popular area of research with an extensive variety of theories and methodologies over the last several decades (Cohen, 2008). Particular attention has been paid to different areas of diaspora, including: social networks, political activism and ethnic identity (Butler, 2001). The numbers of people in diaspora have grown, and these individuals have major influences on such issues as the political and economic issues in both their homeland and the receiving country (Baser, 2012).

Several Kurdish diasporic associations have been arranged to address the specific needs of Kurdish immigrants during recent years. Furthermore, these organisations have contributed to the Kurds’ identity and culture in the host countries (Griffiths, 2002; Wahlbeck, 1999). At the same time, the aim of these organisations has created awareness about the Kurdish issue in the Middle East, including Turkey (Baser, 2012). The majority of Kurds live in Turkey, numbering an estimated 14 million people (Erdem, 2013). These overseas organisations carry out political pressure on the Turkish

¹ This study is produced from author’s MA Thesis.

government to improve the current situation of the Kurds in Turkey (Baser, 2012). For example, according to Wahlbeck (1999), they lobby within the European Parliament for official rights for the Kurdish population in Turkey. In addition, these organisations implement a key role in shaping Kurdish people's daily life, activities and identity (Griffiths, 2002; Wahlbeck, 1999).

In this context, as Malesevic (2006) expressed, identity has become a highly controversial topic in Western countries even though, or perhaps because, these countries have allowed immigrants since 19th century. For example, an article in 2005 from Guardian by Benedictus and Godwin (2005) underlined that London is one of the most nationally diverse capitals on the world, with over 300 languages being spoken in the city. Moreover, Benedictus and Godwin (2005) claim that 44.9% of London's population is White British and 55.1% are immigrants. London is the only place in the UK in which White British people encompass less than half of the total population. Moreover, 37% of the population were born outside of the UK in the 2005 census (Benedictus and Godwin, 2005). Through this diversification, there is a large number of studies published on multiculturalism and multilingualism including, language, religion, cultural and ethnic identity in the United Kingdom (Aydin, 2011). However, there is a lack of study on the Kurdish population, which is now one of the largest ethnic minorities in London.

Thus, this study focused on the role of the Kurdish community organisations on the identities of diaspora in using 'social network' and 'ethnic community organisation' theories to investigate the cultural and social aspects of this process. Since the focus of the study will be on the role of the Kurdish community organisations on preserving identity among the Kurdish diaspora in London and will include people's own stories about their positions in these organisations, the following particular questions will be addressed and answered as follows:

- How do the Kurdish diasporic people interact with Kurdish community organisations in London?
- What is the role of the Kurdish community organisations in preserving Kurdish identity in London?

The structure of this study is as follows. First, Chapter two presents a review of previous research into diaspora, identity. Chapter two also includes a brief historical background of the Kurdish people, a background on the formation of the Kurdish diaspora and Kurdish immigration to the United Kingdom, and specifically Kurdish community organisations. In Chapter three, I outline the methodologies used within this study; the participants and their location; how data was collected and its analysis; and finally ethical considerations are taken into account. Chapter four outlines my findings which are discussed in relation to ethnic identity awareness and the function of various organisations. Chapter five I draw conclusions and recommendations.

The concept of diaspora and Identity

Thanks to their transnational networking capacities, diasporas play a noteworthy role in both homeland and receiving country politics, as well as a role in the global arena as non-state actors (Baser, 2012). Most diaspora communities have extended in the receiving community in a similar manner to other interest or lobby groups and civil community organisations (Baser, 2012; Brubaker 2005). Furthermore, diaspora communities impact upon their homeland's policies through their financial funding and other support, for example, to political parties for opposition to the government (Baser, 2012). Because of these developments, diaspora has become a popular area of study in social science.

Diaspora has gained a different meaning in today's world since it has become a concept in the social sciences. While a variety of definitions of diaspora have been suggested, Ember and Skoggard (2005, p. viii) saw it as a dispersed people with a 'common origin in a smaller geographic area'. Furthermore, Ember and Skoggard (2005) argue that the notion can also give mention to the movement of the population from its original homeland, and can be involuntary, such as the exclusion of Jews from the Middle East (Ember et al., 2005).

According to Brubaker (2005), many new definitions have been added in recent diaspora literature, and diaspora has become different from the immigrant and transnational groups. The new concept of diasporas involves 'the evolution of national sentiments over time, an idea of returning back to the homeland, and concerns about the homeland's future' (Baser and Swain, 2008, p. 47). Cohen (2008) and Brubaker (2005) express that diaspora consists of three basic defining characteristics: dispersion, homeland and boundary maintenance.

According to Baser (2012, p. 25), almost every migrant group with a collective identity or that has recognised organisations in the receiving countries, is mentioned to as a 'diaspora' by themselves or by authors in the literature. In this context, diaspora and identity are very related concept in social science; this view is supported by Hall (1990) who writes diaspora implies the concept of identity. A recent study by Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest a definition of identity. These researchers try to

put in order a concept of identity with five core elements, which are currently used in social science and the humanities:

- identities as non-instrumental forms of social action;
- identities as a collective phenomenon of group sameness;
- identities as deep and foundational forms of selfhood;
- identities as interactive, procession, contingent products of social action;
- identities as fluctuating, unstable and fragmented modes of the self (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 6).

In addition, according to Malesevic (2006), identity is not something physical or obvious; people cannot touch and smell it. Conversely, for today's world, nearly everything has come to be a substance of identity. Media has bombarded us on a daily basis with information on how 'the very identities of numerous cultures or ethnic groups are threatened' (Malesevic, 2006: 13). Particularly for Western countries, a question has occurred as to 'how our national identity has to be preserved either from the "the floods of immigrants" or polluting influences of culturally or morally inferior others' (Malesevic, 2006: 13). In this context, many researchers distinguish identity in relation to topics such as; social, cultural, political, ethnic and diasporic identity.

A bridging role: Ethnic community organisation

Over the last a few decades, ethnic community organisations have grown in immigrant receiving countries (Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter, 2005). For instance, as D'Angelo (2008: 3) states that 'there were about 5,500 of these organisations in England and Wales with a very wide range of characteristics in terms of groups they work with, organisational dimension and legal status'. These organisations are commonly considered a significant means of integration for ethnic communities in the host counties (Griffiths et al., 2005).

Moya (1997: 834) published a paper in which she described ethnic community organisation as: 'private groups, public-interest groups, grass-root movements, intermediary organisations, goal-oriented associations, community-based organisations, and non-profits'. Ethnic community organisations may give quality service to minority communities. Moreover, most organisations come from networks of social, cultural and economic relationship ties, which bind compulsory immigrants and minority groups together (McLeod, Owen, & Khamis, 2001).

These kinds of organisations directly support immigrants, with the provision of personalised services such as legal and counselling, as well as cultural activities (Wahlbeck, 1999). Furthermore, ethnic community organisations provide some advocates for their immigrants who are 'disadvantaged and underrepresented' and have a main role in increasing community meetings by supporting their contribution in the local community (D'Angelo, 2008: 3). These organisations correspondingly endeavour to decrease the social isolation of their participants by providing opportunities to make friends and share 'similar experiences', as well as giving information to access 'mainstream service providers' – in other words, strengthening their users' social networks (D'Angelo, 2008: 3). These institutional networks are important for ethnic communities based far from their homelands, owing to the participation of the differing ethnic elites who would not normally become involved in the same informal social networks, as they do not generally maintain friendship networks across ethnic boundaries (Fennema, 2004).

In addition, according to Moya (1997), memberships of homeland organisations arrange their activities to have an impact upon their local home governments, regional and municipality, those have traditionally gained favour to hometown associations in the diaspora for money and support. 'This activism reached a high level in the last decade' (Moya, 1997: 856), and in this context therefore, many Kurdish community organisations have been formed during the last few decades in European countries owing to mass migration during 1960s, 1980s and 1990s (D'Angelo, 2008).

World's largest stateless nation: The Kurds

The geographic province of the Kurdish people today is widespread, covering contemporary Turkey, Armenia, Iraq, Iran and Syria (Gunter, 1990; McDowall, 2004). Moreover, living within these five countries, the people are economically and politically separated. With an estimated population of 25–30 million, the Kurds constitute the fourth largest Middle Eastern population (Bruinessen, 2000a; Gunter, 2007; Hassanpour, 1992; Johnston, 2006; McDowall, 2004). Such a high population makes them one of the largest 'stateless nations' in the world (Johnston, 2006: 1), the distribution of which through these five countries may be summarised as 45% in Turkey, 20% in Iraq, 20% in Iran, 5% in Syria, 5% in Armenia and a further 5% in other countries; although exact figures are not available and are contested (Sirkeci, 2000: 153). Furthermore, upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by Atatürk,

Turkey, Iran and Iraq decided not to agree to create an independent Kurdish state (Khayati, 2008; McDowall, 2004).

For many years, the Kurds were not recognised by the Turkish authorities (Gunter, 1990). However, after a change to a more socially liberal and democratic government in 2002, it followed that in 2004, this situation changed when the government allowed wider use of the Kurdish language, including television broadcasts in Kurdish on Turkish national television and Kurdish language courses were approved (Johnston, 2006: 2). Books, records and concerts in Kurdish were no longer forbidden. Two private local TV stations and a radio station started brief Kurdish language shows for the first time on 23 March 2006 (Johnston, 2006: 2).

Kurdish community organisations in London

According to D'Angelo (2008), the historical background of Kurdish community organisations in London dates back to the 1980s, when political immigrants started to establish a few organisations with the purpose of preserving Kurdish identity and culture. The first Kurdish organisation in London was the Kurdish Cultural Centre and Kurdish Community Centre whose original motto was '*Kurdish Embassy for a nation without a state*' (D'Angelo, 2008: 19). The Kurdish Cultural Centre offers financial support to Kurdish workers in London and highlights the problems experienced by the Kurdish community to the British government such as health, education and housing (D'Angelo, 2008). Following on from that, a few important organisations were established by the Kurdish social networks in London on behalf of the Kurdish Workers Organisation (D'Angelo, 2008; Wahlbeck, 1999).

Griffiths, (2002), D'Angelo, (2008) and Wahlbeck, (1999) have already drawn attention to the Kurdish community organisations in UK. The immigrant populations in London are estimated to be around 7 million people with about 40,000 of Turkish origin; however, with no specific legal Kurdish identity under this Turkish 'umbrella', the true number of Kurdish immigrants in London is unknown (D'Angelo, 2008: 13). However, as stated above, according to Holgate et al. (2012), the entire Kurdish community in UK is about 200,000. The 40,000 Turkish and Kurdish populations living in London are mainly centred round Haringey, Hackney, Enfield, Islington, Waltham Forest and Barnet (D'Angelo, 2008: 13) with community organisations dispersed throughout.

The Kurdish diaspora is a kind of transnational movement (Baser, 2012; Wahlbeck, 1999). This kind of social movement can be explained by social network theory and ethnic community organisation theory. These theories provide an understanding of Kurdish diasporic organisations and their functional impact on diaspora people's lives and activities (D'Angelo, 2008). The issue of the Kurdish diaspora has become more widely talked about, thanks to the internet, where everything and anything belonging to Kurdish culture can be found and accessed easily; for instance, Kurdish news, music, academic articles and so on, which may act as political propaganda through the homeland website (Curtis, 2005). Many activities and lobbying are in progress by Kurdish community organisations in London to preserve Kurdish culture and protect their people from assimilation into the host society.

Dispersion, services, staff and participants

Consequently, during the research it was not possible to visit all of them due to time restrictions; therefore, only three were visited. As stated above, for many diasporic communities, including Kurdish, organisations have been founded with the aim of providing the support for people in their own community (D'Angelo, 2008). These organisations attempt to provide help, support and information, which are needed within UK by their participants (Carey-Wood, Nee, and Marshall, 1997). Furthermore, Kurdish organisations offer a varied range of services that can commonly be divided into three main groups: one-to-one advice and consultancy; training; and social or cultural activities (D'Angelo, 2008: 21). All the community centres included legal, immigration and welfare advice service, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses and IT classes (D'Angelo, 2008).

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of Kurdish community organisations in preserving identity among the Kurdish diaspora in London. In order to realise this purpose, in-depth semi-structured interview data collection methodology was employed for the following reasons. First, this method would enable the interviewees to provide confidential information giving the interviewer a unique insight into the role of the Kurdish community organisations in their lives. The semi-structured

nature of the interviews allowed them to talk in-depth about issues that they believed to be of the greatest influence on their everyday lives (Bryman, 2012). Second, interviews were conducted because it was felt that the stories related by the participants were of primary importance to the research (Bryman, 2012). Quantitative research would have given an indication of the attitudes and experiences of the participants, but would not have provided the ‘thick’ descriptions that qualitative analysis allows (Bryman, 2012).

The research was conducted in London for two reasons. First, London has the largest Kurdish population in the United Kingdom (D’Angelo, 2008). Second, as a small-scale study, a total number of 13 participants were chosen in London because of the time constraints of the study, by taking into consideration its duration of three months. In a larger study, however, a greater number, possibly around 30 participants, would be required.

These aspects made this the most advantageous method, otherwise the information provided would have been difficult, if not impossible, to obtain from other sources. The method chosen has also some disadvantages, such as the unavoidable ‘interviewer effect’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The fact that conclusions were drawn from a small number of participants may not allow generalisations of the findings to the other populations than Kurdish population living in London.

Participants of the study

The interviews were conducted with 13 participants, 11 of whom were Kurdish immigrants living in the London area and two, who lived outside.² Total participants of this study was thirteen which five females and eight males.

Setting and procedure

Both individual and group interviews took place in various locations, such as the Kurdish Community Centre offices, participants’ homes, restaurants and cafes, and some other convenient places for the participants. Unfortunately the interviews were largely conducted in a public place because of convenience and the location of the gatekeeper’s arrangements. This may have impacted on the fullness of answers. Where the interview took place in a participant’s home, the gatekeeper was present before and after the interview and sat in the next room during it, to ensure the researcher’s safety.

Ethical considerations

In preparation for this study, the researcher completed training for protection of human subjects through the University of Kent’s Human Subjects Committee website. To ensure the safety and well-being of the participants, all data was gathered from participants with explicit permission from them and in full compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and University of Kent research study requirements and approvals. The researcher respected the rights, needs, values and desires of the participants. Throughout, the ethical concerns of participant anonymity were observed and careful attention was given to protecting the participants’ identities. The participating respondents’ names were kept confidential, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The researcher used informed consent forms with each of the respondents, emphasising that their participation was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed that there was no penalty from their employer or the University of Kent if they withdrew from the study. Approval for this study was sought from the University of Kent Human Subjects Committee and the participating Kurdish community organisation. All documentation from interviews was destroyed on completion of the study.

Data collection

The data collection took four weeks from 10 June to 5 July 2013. Data was collected through individual and group interviews with first generation Kurdish immigrants who left Turkey due to political unrest, and for economic reasons. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked introductory questions to develop the researcher-participant relationship, set the participants at ease, and gain demographic information such as age and occupation. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were chosen as a data collection method because the questions prepared in advance gave a more consistent investigation of particular topics for easier analysis (Bryman, 2012). But by being semi-structured, there was also enough flexibility to engage in natural conversation, which invariably provides deeper insight (Berg, 2004; Bryman, 2012). When a point was made by the participants that were of interest to the research, they were asked to talk further on this. The interviews were face-to-

² Some of Kurdish immigrants who live outside London come to visit Kurdish community organisations in London owing to non-existence of them over the UK.

face because the gatekeeper facilitated this form of communication, instead of by telephone or other method. This was beneficial to the research, however, as it allowed for a greater participant-researcher relationship to develop, which then developed trust and, it was hoped, facilitated honesty and more lengthy answers to open-ended questions.

The researcher provided the director of the Kurdish Community Centre and Halkevi (KCCH) with a brief description of the study in an information sheet. Using personal contacts, the director communicated with potential members of the community to ask them if they might be interested in participating in an interview. Individuals who were interested were asked to fill out the interest form and send it to the researcher's university email as an attachment to minimise any risk of a group email being sent, thus protecting the respondents anonymity.

The selection of interviewees took place at the KCCH in London in the month prior to the investigators' visit. The KCCH meet once a month, with most participants visiting the community organisation most months. In this initial meeting, interested participants were able to access the researcher's information sheet to participate in the study. Participants were clearly informed in the information sheet that participation in the study was entirely voluntary; furthermore, the researcher was careful to inform the director of the KCCH that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that no pressure should be placed on anyone who did not wish to take part.

All interviews were audio-taped so that the researcher could transcribe and analyse them accurately at a later point, but also so that he could also pay full attention to the interviewees without distraction from detailed note-taking. However, a few brief notes were taken as a reminder to return to a point later in the interview. The interviews took 30–45 minutes to complete. This length was beneficial to the research as it was quicker and easier to transcribe, particularly as the interviews were conducted in Turkish. In order to decrease the threat to validity and reliability, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim.

Data analysis

After reviewing all interview transcripts, and follow-up field-notes, these were manually coded and preliminary codes were generated. According to Miles and Huberman (1984), the data analysis proceeded from noting patterns and themes to arriving at contrasts and comparisons to determining conceptual explanations of the qualitative study. In the early part of the analysis, the researcher listened to the interviews five times to familiarise and immerse himself in the data. This was to ensure that a detailed analysis could take place. At this early stage, some words appeared to be repeated many times by some respondents and these were noted as a particularly important theme to the respondents. These words included: *vatan* (homeland), or particular discussion about counselling services.

The transcripts were then read through eight times. Each time these recurring words, emotions and feelings were highlighted. However, with each reading, these themes were broken down into further subcategories. For example, some repeated words were counselling, lobbying, the place for socialisation, and places for friendship settings, all of which were expressed by many participants to explain the role of the Kurdish community organisations in their life. Subsequent data analysis of these themes allowed the researcher to reduce the large number of themes to a more manageable number of major themes (Creswell, 2002). Low inference descriptions were used to strengthen the validity of the study. The major themes were analysed and categorised, and data was continually reviewed and coded. The analytic codes were referred to as categories throughout the presentation of the study's findings and conclusions.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of Kurdish organisations in London in forming the Kurdish identity in the Kurdish diaspora. Previous studies indicate that diasporic organisations which take on the role of preserving and developing the ethnic identities of Kurds living away from their homelands also support the Kurdish cause transnationally. In June 2013, a field study was carried out in KCCH which is the most frequently visited organisation in London.

An exercise in ethnic identity awareness

One of the main purposes of this study is to find out the activities of the Kurdish diaspora to preserve the Kurdish identity. In this regard, one of the points often emphasised by the participants is that Kurdish diaspora in London uses the Kurdish organisations very actively to preserve the Kurdish identity. Besides, Kurdish associations organise many activities to prevent the Kurds from assimilating. Essentially, organisations serve as a homeland for the migrant Kurds and help them to preserve their Kurdish identity. Many participants stated that it was in these organisations that they gained awareness

on many issues such as Kurdish identity, Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish culture, and it was in these organisations that they developed an awareness of their Kurdish identity. For example, Cihan and Ali recount their experiences such:

Cihan (M: 22): I learned more about the lives of the people in my home country here. The sentimental gap between those who come from the home country and who are born here closes in these organisations. This is a place where we can share differences. Everyone shares their culture here. Everyone breaks their prejudices here.

Ali (M: 20): Those who attend to the Kurdish organisations give up religion later on. I can say that those who attend to these organisations do not pay much heed to religion. Religion is relegated to a secondary status. What is important is the cultural identity. Kurdish identity is of foremost importance here. Religion is not so much so. When I arrived here, I was religious too. But later on I learned everything. Right now religion does not mean much to me. I have respect for humans. When I was in my homeland, I was of course a little bit different... The people who come to these organisations think like me.

Ali explains that he formed a strong cultural bond with people who come to the organisations and that he developed his identity there. He also goes on to explain that although most Kurds are Sunni-Kurds, organisations, however, are more secular. Cihan says that by visiting the organisations he gets to know the lives of people who share his ethnic identity. Furthermore, since Cihan was born in England, he can only relate to Kurdistan through the organisations and his family.

Fidan (F: 33): I am a Kurd. I have been more aware of this especially since I left Turkey. Since people live together there, the distinction between Kurds and Turks is not very important. Therefore we have not had conflict. However I connected to my identity more here or to be more precise I realised my identity here. I have foreign friends. When they ask me where I am from, I tell them that I am from Turkey but I am a Kurd.

Fidan says that her Kurdish identity has developed more and her bond to Kurdish identity has increased since she came to England.

Gülay (F: 45): I came here for educational purposes; I have a politically active family. Since I was little, I have been aware of the Kurdish issue. I have been in search of an identity since then. When I say identity, do not get me wrong, I am not referring to an ID. I am referring more to cultural identity. I am referring to that spirit. I am talking about spiritual connectedness; I am certainly in favour of that. I believe that borders need to be eliminated everywhere on earth. Not only in Kurdistan because I am a socialist.

Kazım (M: 28): I am using this place so as not to lose my identity and to preserve it. We chat with friends. We watch TV, listen to music, I browse Kurdish news sites online. I try to preserve my identity. We watch Nuçe TV and Sterk TV. There are also some magazines, we distribute them. We attend to meetings and programs.

Gülay searches for Kurdish identity in a deeper sense and talks about a spiritual connectedness. On the other hand, Kazim states that by visiting Kurdish organisations and attending to their activities, and by watching Kurdish television and reading Kurdish newspapers and magazines, he maintains his Kurdish identity. Each organisation has a canteen where people gather, drink tea, chat, watch TV and read newspapers and magazines. TV channels broadcasting in Kurdish were viewed in these organisations. People were practising their Kurdish, some having become 'rusty' over time. However, it is hard to say that they spoke entirely in Kurdish. Second generation Kurds spoke in English among themselves whereas first generation Kurds sometimes spoke in Turkish.

Counselling

In one interview with the manager of a Kurdish organisation, she told an anecdote which exemplifies this function.

Gülay (F: 45): It was at the beginning of 1990s, 3–4 years after I founded the organisation. There was a serious wave of migration from Turkey to Britain. I remember having brought asylum-seeking Kurds to the organisation from the airport by bus. In one go, we would bring hundreds of people. We would bring buses full of people from the airport.

As Gülay underlined, there was a serious wave of Kurdish migration into the UK in 1990 and afterwards. There is a certain procedure to go through to apply to the Home Office for a residence permit. When people arrived here, first they needed a house to take shelter, then a job to sustain themselves and above all a residence permit to avoid deportation. Many participants highlighted that the Kurdish organisations in London provided counselling services to newcomer Kurds about such issues and made their lives easier. Turhan explains the situation.

Turhan (M: 21): The Kurdish organisations in London are very important for Kurds. Because the Kurdish population here is composed of the Kurds who were forced to migrate here after 1990.

Most of these people do not even know how to open a bank account. They instantly found themselves in a foreign place. However the organisations here have been their helping hand.

The point mentioned by Turhan is reiterated by another participant who does counselling and language teaching at the organisation.

Fidan (F: 33): Our people here generally need counselling. Because the main problems people face are the lack of linguistic skills and the lack of knowledge on how to handle legal issues. We provide counselling here. Our most sought after services are finding accommodation, applying to social security benefits and following the legal procedures in applying for a residence permit. Sometimes they cannot even pay their bills or when they have accidents they do not know how to act. We try to help them with such issues they face in their everyday lives.

The role of many Kurdish organisations in London spans from finding accommodation for Kurdish migrants arriving at the airport, to getting a residence permit, to finding a job for them. Most of the participants interviewed still continue to visit the organisations in their days off even though they migrated to London a long time ago. They abide by many decisions taken on behalf of Kurds in London. Moreover, Kurdish diaspora, as Fidan stated, carries almost all of its lobbying through the organisations in London.

The places for socialisation and friendship settings

While doing field study in London, the opportunity arose to observe the physical settings of two big organisations belonging to the Kurdish diaspora (Halkevi, Kurdish Community Centre). Many of these physical settings have classrooms, conference rooms, counselling room, canteens for people to chat and halls for cultural activities. For example, the first impression of the Kurdish Community Centre is as follows. About 8–10 people were gathered around a pergola in a garden and were engaged in a heated political debate. There were many tables in the canteen and there were big and small groups around those tables drinking tea and conversing in Turkish and English. Kurdish TVs were playing and there were Kurdish newspapers around. There were PKK posters on the walls and photos of people involved in this movement. There were also photos and posters of those who could be considered the elders of the Kurdish community. A young person who brought me to the organisation introduced me to the people there. After chatting for a while, Gülay, one of the participants, made the following observations regarding migrants coming to the organisation.

Gülay (F: 45): We tell people that we are a community. We should not get lost here. You might be living in this country. Integration is something, losing your identity is something else. Of course, it is necessary to adapt in certain respects. Because you are living in this culture but to become different is something else. In our community something different happened. Our community rotted under the title of integration. For example gangs started. The gang formation issue started in later years. In the beginning there was no gang formation. In the past, at least 500-1000 people used to come to this organisation. Because they had nowhere else to go. They did not speak English. There was almost no integration. Since they did not speak English they could not blend in with other communities. Therefore people used to come here a lot.

Gülay evaluated many factors about migrant life, however, one point she highlighted was important: for Kurds, especially for the first generation migrants, there was no alternative to coming to the organisation or staying around it.

Dilan (F: 26): To be here as a person, to be here as a Kurd is important. I come here because people here share my views. You are away from the land you were born in and then there is the problem of communicating in English. People work most of the week, they have limited linguistics skills and many shortcomings. When they come here, they feel closer to home country. When they come here, they socialise. They have nowhere else to go. More or less the lifestyles of people here are the same. Here everything is limited for Kurds.

Dilan states that the organisation is a means for her to meet people from her country. At the same time, it can be seen that Dilan equates the organisation with her country. As Dilan emphasises, Kurds generally work as labourers and do not have much time to socialise. They use organisations as places to relax. For example, regarding this point Kazim states that:

Kazim (M: 28): Honestly I come here only for my friends, I am here for the friendly setting, I watch TV and learn something here. If it were not for the organisation... honestly, I need to say this, I like this place more than my home. I am coming outside of London, I came here first; I have not been to my home yet. Frankly, I become happy when I come here. I become happy when I see people. I taste friendship here. As I said, I have been here for 8 years. The first two years I did never come here. I had no friends but since I started to come here, I have had hundreds of friends.

Kazim states that although he works outside London, on his off days he directly comes to the organisation and that he found friendship in the organisation. Fidan, another participant, explains what organisations means like so:

Fidan (F: 33): The organisations are also culturally active. We organise important days, commemorations. Conferences are organised that is to say the organisations function like cafés where people chat and can relax. Also political ideology is important; people go to places where they can express their political ideas. The organisations certainly have political goals; they try to impact parliaments. I think there is a need for this. There are various Kurdish organisations here. There are political ones and apolitical ones. Some of them are set up separately to receive government grants and to act professionally. However the number of their activities and the number of people they reach is open to debate. I think it is better for us to have a political union. It is important to unite to have a single voice and to have an impact on policies. However there is one fact. No matter what organisation is concerned, the youth that attend to an organisation I think stay away from bad habit and circles such as drugs and gangs.

Fidan states that migrants in London have political stances and in parallel with those stances, they attend organisations. At the same time, she emphasises that organisations, too, have a political mission and act accordingly.

Discussion and Conclusion

Finally, the findings of this study, ‘Exploring the role of the Kurdish community organisation on the identity of the Kurdish diaspora in London’ are presented and are supported with the findings of various but similar studies. In this research I have attempted to explore the role of the Kurdish community organisation in preserving its identity in the context of social network theory. My research relied largely on in-depth semi-structured interview carried out with immigrants, community leaders and business owners within the Kurdish community in the Lon Identity awareness, a prominent thought emerging in the field study, is about the awareness of Kurdish diaspora, living away from its home country, on its ethnic and cultural identity. The experiences of Kurdish migrants on maintaining their identity are not very different from the assumptions in the literature. According to Hall (1990), identity is a combination of all attributes from attachments, desires, dreams, even to clothes and shoes chosen, through which a person connects with life and defines his stance. Giddens (1991) defines identity as the positioning of a person or a group with respect to its distinctive properties. In that regard, identity awareness that emerges in migrants is related to the general identity concept yet is different in a few aspects. These differences can be listed as the longing for the home country and trying to maintain national, ethnic, cultural and religious attachments in the host country (Alinia, 2004; Eliassi, 2010; Khayati, 2008).

In general, it can be argued that the formation of identity is composed of main factors that form societal and collective interactions such as the cultural values, norms and prejudices people share (Alinia, 2004). As Alinia (2004) states, a person’s perceptions about the world and himself/herself are in constant interaction with society. These perceptions take shape after a certain period of time, at the end of which, social and cultural identity awareness is built through people’s experiences gained from their environment and people’s comments on others (Alinia, 2004). The communities that live away from their home cultures (migrants, diasporas, refugees) go through these stages in terms of identity awareness and identity formation. Some communities are assimilated at the end of this process whereas some others maintain their ethnic, cultural and social identities. It has been stated by many participants that the organisations, through their activities in London, help people living there maintain their Kurdish identity.

Furthermore, informed by theories and debates in the literature on diaspora, identity, social network theory and ethnic community organisations, my primary concern was to follow a research strategy that would help me explore the role of the Kurdish community organisations in preserving Kurdish identity. Therefore, qualitative, in-depth semi-structured interviews gave me a chance to listen to the stories of what it is like being a Kurdish immigrant and what they make of their experiences in London. My questions were related to the relationship structure, and activities of Kurdish community organisations in London, and the two main questions that guided this study were:

- How do the Kurdish Diasporic people interact with Kurdish community organisations in London?
- What is the role of the Kurdish community organisations in preserving Kurdish identity in London?

The findings show that the ongoing relationship between Kurdish community organisations and Kurdish immigrants in London were closely interacting with the Kurds in London. At the same time, it is concluded that Kurds consider these organisations as a part of their home country, and that

they preserve their Kurdishness better in these organisations. Furthermore, these organisations play a fundamental role for the Kurdish diaspora: they help non-English speaking Kurds with no knowledge of the host country by offering all sorts of counselling. At the same time are financed by the Kurdish people. Moreover, political organisation including the political activism of passive people is ensured through these organisations, which have a primary function to lobby political institutions to improve the conditions in the home country. However, it can be argued that their most important duty is to ensure that the Kurdish identity is maintained in the foreign host country, by bridging the complicated network of relationships and institutions which form the Kurdish immigrant's daily life.

Most Kurdish community organisations know each other and many of them are connected by formal and informal ties, such as membership and partnership agreements (D'Angelo, 2008). These organisations, on the one hand, impact the daily lives of Kurdish migrants and impose that no matter what, they should live 'like Kurds'. On the other hand, they try to find a solution to the Kurdish issue in the Middle East and especially in Turkey. These organisations try to impact the political mechanism in their host countries to improve the rights of Kurds in Turkey and in other countries where Kurds live. Many researchers who worked on the Kurdish diaspora and the PKK (D'Angelo, 2008; Griffiths, 2002; Khayati, 2008; Wahlbeck, 1999) claim that the PKK carries out political activities in Western European countries through diasporic organisations. Kurdish diaspora and Kurdish organisations raise questions for many people. Therefore, based on the London example, the activities of diasporic Kurdish organisations and their interactions with Kurdish migrants are discussed in the light of the field study and literature review.

Owing to restrictions of time and resources, some limitations are presented in this research. Foremost, only members and managers of the Kurdish Community Centre and the Kurdish Cultural Centre and Halkevi have been interviewed. The main risk when analysing the interviews was that only a small portion of the Kurdish community organisations were involved. This means that the results might stress the role of the participants and minimise the role of the other members and managers of the Kurdish community organisations in London. Furthermore, some interviewees tended to assume, due to researcher's ethnic background as a Kurdish that the researcher already knew from his own personal experiences. In order to diminish the bias regarding the 'as you know' issue, further elaborating questions were asked of the participants. This is a small-scale study from the perspective of Kurdish diasporic community organisations and identity issues. I hope to inspire new comprehensive studies on Kurdish diaspora and their ethnic community organisations, which have been part of the UK since 1950.

As stated in the findings, some Kurdish people in London experienced social and cultural exclusion, particularly children, who are marginalised at school. It is very important that any social construction of young people within education policy by the Department for Education recognises differential (ethnic and cultural) constructions within north London schools, where a large number of Kurdish populations are based, especially Haringey, Hackney and north of Islington. The research also recommends that some community organisations should accept the political diversity within the Kurdish community, and to avoid imposing and propagating only one political view among the Kurdish community. This study emphasises that Kurdish immigrants have meaningful outlooks that would contribute to clearly developing their cultural and ethnic identity by embracing the appropriate services that are in use by Kurdish community organisations. Lastly and simply, more research is needed to investigate the relationship between the Kurdish community organisations and Kurdish immigrants to develop and identify their vital needs.

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