



Exploring the Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Social Structure in Multicultural Societies: A Phenomenological Analysis of Religious Experience

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ABSTRACT

Religion and culture play a fundamental role in shaping individual and group identities, particularly in multicultural societies. While much of the existing research focuses on the interaction between religion and culture, little attention has been given to the subjective experiences of individuals navigating these intersections. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how individuals experience and make sense of the interplay between religious practices, cultural norms, and social structures. Specifically, the research aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do individuals navigate the tension between traditional religious practices and modern social norms in multicultural contexts? (2) What role does religion play in shaping social solidarity and cultural identity within a multicultural society? Using a phenomenological approach, the research delves into the lived experiences of participants from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds within a multicultural urban context. Through in-depth interviews and field observations, key themes emerged, including the tension between traditional religious practices and modern social norms, as well as the role of religion in shaping social solidarity and cultural identity. The findings highlight how religious and cultural experiences shape individuals' sense of belonging and identity, providing new insights into the dynamics of multicultural societies. These results have important implications for future research on religious identity, intercultural relations, and the role of religion in shaping social cohesion in diverse communities.



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INTRODUCTION

The intersection of religion, culture, and social structure is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, particularly in multicultural societies where diverse belief systems and cultural practices coexist (Taves & Barlev, 2022). In such contexts, individuals often navigate the challenges of integrating their religious practices with the norms, values, and expectations of the broader society. This process can lead to experiences of tension, such as conflicts arising from religious attire in public spaces, or harmony when religious practices are embraced within the cultural framework. Religion, which serves as a powerful force shaping individual and group identities, may influence how people perceive their roles within society, as well as their interactions with others from different cultural or religious backgrounds.

The relevance of this issue is heightened by the increasing diversity within contemporary societies, where individuals from various cultural and religious backgrounds come into frequent contact (Nordlander, 2024). This diversity calls for an understanding of how religious beliefs and practices are negotiated in daily life, and how individuals experience the tension or synergy between their faith and the surrounding cultural norms. It is essential to explore these lived experiences to gain

insights into how religion contributes to identity formation, social integration, and even social fragmentation in multicultural environments.

Existing research on this topic has largely focused on the broader social and cultural dimensions of religion, including the role of religion in shaping group identity and the ways in which religious communities engage with the surrounding culture. While studies have provided valuable insights into how religion interacts with culture at the macro level, there is a notable gap in the understanding of the subjective, lived experiences of individuals. Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative measures or general social theories that do not capture the nuances of personal experience. Therefore, a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes the deep, subjective experiences of individuals, is particularly valuable for exploring how people navigate the complexities of religious practice within diverse social settings.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals as they engage with both religious and cultural norms in a multicultural society (Dein, 2011). By using a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to uncover the meanings and personal perceptions that participants attach to their religious practices, cultural interactions, and social dynamics. The goal is to understand the interplay between religion, culture, and social norms from the perspective of those directly affected, thus providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of how these forces shape personal and collective identity in a multicultural context.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a critical area of study, particularly in fields like sociology, anthropology, and religious studies (DeLay, 2014). Understanding how individuals experience and interpret the intersection of religion, culture, and social norms is essential for gaining deeper insights into identity formation, social cohesion, and the negotiation of belonging in multicultural societies. Phenomenological approaches, which focus on exploring the lived experiences and meanings that individuals assign to their experiences, have proven to be highly effective in shedding light on these complex dynamics. This approach enables researchers to grasp the nuanced and deeply personal ways in which religion and culture shape individuals' perceptions of self and others.

However, exploring the profound meanings and experiences of individuals presents significant methodological challenges. One of the primary difficulties lies in the limitations of traditional data collection methods, particularly those based on quantitative analysis. While statistical data can provide valuable insights into broader trends, they often fail to capture the intricate, subjective aspects of how people experience and interpret their religious practices within a multicultural context. The use of structured surveys or interviews with closed-ended questions cannot fully account for the depth and complexity of personal lived experiences. As a result, many existing studies tend to oversimplify or generalize the phenomena under investigation, missing critical insights into the personal significance of religious and cultural interactions.

These limitations highlight the inadequacy of many previous research methods in addressing the essence of the phenomenon at hand. Quantitative approaches and generalized frameworks may provide surface-level understanding, but they are not equipped to uncover the rich, multi-layered meanings that individuals attribute to their religious and cultural practices. As such, the use of phenomenology in this study is not only appropriate but necessary to explore the deep, subjective experiences of participants. By focusing on individuals' lived experiences, this research aims to uncover the true essence of how religion, culture, and social norms intersect in their daily lives, offering a more nuanced and holistic understanding of these dynamics.

While general solutions to understanding the intersection of religion, culture, and social norms often rely on practical frameworks such as quantitative surveys or large-scale sociological studies, these approaches tend to overlook the deep, subjective experiences of individuals (Hill, 2003). These traditional methods, while valuable in providing broad trends and patterns, fail to capture the rich, nuanced meanings that individuals attach to their experiences of navigating religious and cultural complexities. Quantitative measures can identify correlations or general behaviors, but they are not designed to explore the personal and emotional dimensions of how religion and culture shape individual identities and social interactions. Consequently, existing research in this area remains limited, offering a surface-level understanding that neglects the lived reality of participants.

The need for a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon becomes apparent when considering that individual experiences of religious practice within multicultural contexts are

often not homogenous or easily categorized. The meanings individuals ascribe to their religious and cultural interactions vary greatly, influenced by personal history, social context, and individual values. Given these complexities, traditional approaches are inadequate for providing the depth of insight needed to understand the essence of these experiences. Therefore, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the subjective, lived experiences of individuals in multicultural societies, particularly in how they navigate the tensions and harmonies between religious practices and cultural expectations.

A more holistic and nuanced understanding of these phenomena can be achieved through the adoption of a phenomenological approach (DeRoo, 2022). Phenomenology, by focusing on individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to their interactions with religion, culture, and society, offers a powerful method for addressing this gap. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the ways in which religion and culture shape individuals' identities and behaviors in multicultural contexts, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics at play. By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology offers a promising alternative to the more superficial analyses often found in traditional research, enabling researchers to uncover the full richness of participants' lived experiences.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of understanding how individuals navigate the intersection of religion, culture, and social norms (Benchín, 2022). Studies on religious identity and cultural adaptation have provided valuable insights into how individuals form their identities in multicultural contexts, emphasizing the role of religion in social cohesion and differentiation. However, specific examples such as the impact of religious rituals on community integration or the challenges faced by migrants in preserving cultural practices have often been underexplored. Theoretical frameworks, such as Clifford Geertz's notion of religion as a cultural system and Peter Berger's social construction of reality, have been widely used to explore how religious beliefs shape social behavior and cultural practices. However, much of the existing literature focuses on broad cultural patterns or group dynamics, leaving a gap in understanding the deeply personal, subjective experiences of individuals. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and how they interpret the interactions between religion, culture, and social norms in their daily lives.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is adopted, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings and personal experiences associated with religious practices in multicultural settings. Phenomenology emphasizes the subjective experience, focusing on how individuals perceive and interpret the world around them (Moran, 2013). By using this approach, this research seeks to uncover the essence of how individuals experience religious practice within a multicultural context, exploring both the tensions and harmonies they face as they navigate their cultural and religious identities. This approach offers a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, addressing the limitations of quantitative methods that overlook the depth of personal experience. Ultimately, phenomenology provides the most effective method for understanding the lived experiences of individuals in multicultural environments.

The structure of this article follows a logical progression, beginning with an introduction to the phenomenon under investigation and the context of multiculturalism. The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach used, including data collection through semi-structured interviews and observations. Following this, the article presents the analysis of the data, with thematic exploration of key findings related to religious practice, cultural interaction, and social identity. The discussion interprets the results within the broader theoretical framework and examines the implications for understanding the relationship between religion and culture in multicultural societies. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights and suggests avenues for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological research design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Yi, 2017). Phenomenology focuses on uncovering the essence of human experiences, aiming to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their world, particularly in relation to specific phenomena. This approach was chosen

for its ability to provide deep insights into the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their experiences of religious practices, cultural interactions, and social structures in a multicultural society. By focusing on participants' personal perceptions, phenomenology facilitates an in-depth exploration of the nuances of religious and cultural identity, making it an ideal method for investigating the research questions concerning the intersection of religion, culture, and social norms. The study followed a descriptive phenomenological approach, which emphasizes capturing the essential qualities of participants' experiences without interpreting or inferring beyond what is directly expressed. In addition to the interviews, field observations were incorporated into the data collection process to complement and triangulate the findings. Observations provided a direct, contextual understanding of how religious practices unfolded in multicultural settings and allowed for the identification of behaviors, rituals, and interactions that might not have been fully captured through interviews alone. By combining these two data sources, the study ensured a more comprehensive exploration of participants' lived experiences.

Participants

The participants in this study were 10 individuals from a multicultural urban setting, representing various religious and cultural backgrounds (Yandell, 2010). Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomena being investigated. The inclusion criteria were: (1) active engagement in religious practices, (2) living within a multicultural community, and (3) willingness to share personal experiences regarding the interaction between their religious practices and local cultural norms. Exclusion criteria included individuals who were not actively practicing their religion or those who did not have significant experience navigating the intersection of religion and culture in a multicultural context. The participants' demographic details varied in terms of age, gender, and cultural background, contributing to a diverse representation of experiences. The sample included a mix of male and female participants, aged between 20 and 60 years, with varying levels of religious involvement and cultural engagement.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, allowing for a flexible yet focused exploration of participants' experiences (Sarbacker, 2005). The interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, providing sufficient time to engage participants in detailed conversations about their religious practices, cultural interactions, and experiences within their social environments. The interview guide was designed to address the research questions, with open-ended questions focused on understanding how participants experience the intersection of religion, culture, and social norms. A comfortable and private setting was chosen for each interview to ensure participants felt at ease when sharing personal and sensitive information. Additionally, field observations were conducted in religious spaces (such as mosques, churches, and temples) to complement the interview data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics at play. The field observations focused on understanding how religious practices were influenced by local cultural values, and how participants navigated social interactions in these spaces. These observations helped corroborate and enrich the insights gained from the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method widely employed in phenomenological studies to identify and interpret patterns or themes within the data. The analysis process involved several systematic steps: (1) reading and re-reading the transcriptions to become familiar with the data, (2) identifying significant statements that related to participants' lived experiences of religion and culture, (3) organizing these statements into meaningful themes, and (4) interpreting the themes to uncover the essence of participants' experiences. The analysis aimed to identify the core elements of how participants navigated religious and cultural tensions, the role of religion in cultural identity formation, and the social dynamics within multicultural environments. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the thematic analysis process by aiding in the organization, coding, and retrieval of data. The software allowed for efficient coding of both interview transcripts and field notes, which helped to manage the large volume of qualitative data. It enabled the identification of key themes by grouping related text segments, which then facilitated deeper analysis.

Although NVivo supported data management, the core analysis remained grounded in manual coding, ensuring that the researcher maintained direct engagement with the data. This combination of manual and software-assisted coding allowed for a rigorous and comprehensive examination of the data, leading to the identification of four key themes, which are presented in the Results section.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's aims, procedures, and the voluntary nature of their participation (Dein, 2007). Participants were assured that their involvement would remain confidential, and their identities would be anonymized in all reports and publications resulting from the study. Written consent was obtained from each participant, confirming their agreement to take part in the study and to allow the use of their interview data. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research, including those relating to respect for participants' privacy, the protection of sensitive information, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tensions between Religious Practice and Social Norms

The first major theme emerging from the data centers on the tension experienced by participants between their religious practices and the prevailing social norms within their multicultural environment. This tension reflects the struggle to maintain one's religious identity in the face of social expectations and the modern, secular context in which they live. Several participants expressed feelings of discomfort or the need to conceal aspects of their religious practices to fit into broader societal frameworks.

One participant stated, "I feel like my religion provides guidance for my life, but sometimes the social norms here make me feel like I need to hide certain aspects of my beliefs." This sentiment was echoed by others who described navigating between their religious commitments and the pressure to conform to the more secular cultural environment around them. For example, another participant shared, "I often find myself caught between what my faith teaches me and what is accepted by the society I live in. It's like I have to choose between staying true to my religion or fitting in." These reflections underscore the emotional and cognitive dissonance many participants face when their religious practices clash with societal expectations.

Religion as a Source of Cultural Identity

Another prominent theme was the role of religion in reinforcing cultural identity, particularly within the context of a multicultural society. Participants frequently noted how their religious practices were intricately linked to their cultural heritage, serving as a means of maintaining a sense of community and belonging. Religion, for many, was not only a personal spiritual practice but also a cultural marker that helped preserve traditional values and customs in the face of external cultural pressures.

One participant explained, "Religion is a part of our culture, and for us, maintaining religious practices is how we preserve our identity. It's what connects us to our roots and reminds us who we are as a community." This connection between religious practice and cultural identity was highlighted by others as well, with one participant remarking, "Our faith is not just about belief; it's about who we are as a people. Practicing our religion is how we keep our culture alive, especially in such a diverse society." The findings suggest that religion plays a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining cultural identities, particularly for individuals belonging to minority groups within a multicultural society.

Social Solidarity through Religious Practices

A third theme that emerged from the interviews and observations was the role of religion in fostering social solidarity, particularly in multicultural settings. Participants emphasized that religious institutions and practices often serve as spaces for building solidarity and creating supportive

networks among people from diverse backgrounds. Despite differences in belief, these spaces often become sites for collective engagement, where shared religious values or experiences transcend cultural boundaries and contribute to social cohesion.

For instance, one participant noted, “In our mosque, we are not just a group of people following the same faith; we are also a community that helps each other. It doesn’t matter where you come from or which culture you belong to, we are united through our faith.” Another participant highlighted how their church provided a sense of belonging and mutual support: “Our church is a place where I feel I can find people who understand me, who share the same values, regardless of our different cultural backgrounds.” These insights illustrate how religious communities can create inclusive environments that promote unity and mutual understanding, fostering social bonds across cultural and religious divides.

Navigating the Interactions between Religion and Local Culture

The final theme explores the complex interactions between religion and local culture, and how these relationships shape individuals' daily lives and social behavior. Observations in religious spaces revealed that the way people interact within these spaces is often influenced by the local cultural norms. In mosques, churches, and temples, participants exhibited behaviors that reflected both their religious teachings and the cultural values of their environment. This was particularly evident in the way individuals engaged with one another, with cultural norms of hospitality, family, and community frequently interwoven with religious practices.

One participant described the influence of local culture on religious interactions, saying, “In our mosque, there is a strong sense of family and community. People are not just focused on prayer; they are also concerned about each other’s well-being, which I think is also a cultural value, not just a religious one.” This blending of religious and cultural practices was observed in other religious settings as well, where communal support and cultural values like respect for elders were highlighted in religious rituals and social gatherings. These findings suggest that the integration of religious and cultural elements is a significant factor in shaping both individual and collective behavior in multicultural societies.

The results of this study underscore the complex and multifaceted relationship between religion, culture, and social structure in a multicultural context. Participants' experiences reveal the tensions they face in balancing religious practices with societal norms, the importance of religion in maintaining cultural identity, the role of religion in fostering social solidarity, and the intricate ways in which religion and local culture intersect to shape social behaviors. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate the challenges of practicing religion in a diverse society and how religion serves as both a personal and collective force in shaping identity and social relationships.

The key findings of this study reveal that individuals in multicultural societies experience a complex interplay between their religious practices and the cultural norms of the surrounding social environment. Specifically, participants highlighted how religious identity serves as both a source of personal strength and solidarity, yet also as a point of tension when conflicting cultural values emerge. These findings offer a deeper understanding of how religion and culture influence personal and social identity, addressing the central question posed in the introduction: how individuals navigate their religious practices in the face of diverse social and cultural pressures.

The study’s findings contribute to the broader discourse on religious and cultural identity by providing insight into the lived experiences of individuals in multicultural contexts. It was found that, for many participants, religion acts as a grounding force that shapes their sense of self, while also creating spaces for interaction with others who share similar religious or cultural values. At the same time, the tension between religious practices and the norms of a secular or multicultural society emerged as a significant theme, with individuals often finding themselves negotiating between adherence to religious tradition and conforming to societal expectations. This nuanced understanding expands on previous research by illustrating the personal and emotional complexities of living in a

multicultural society, offering a more intimate perspective on how individuals engage with their religious and cultural identities in everyday life.

These findings align with and expand upon existing theories of religion and culture, notably Clifford Geertz's concept of religion as a cultural system and Peter Berger's notion of the social construction of reality. Geertz's idea that religion is not only a system of belief but also a deeply ingrained part of cultural practice is reflected in participants' descriptions of how their religious practices form a central component of their identity and worldview. Similarly, the notion of religion as a socially constructed reality, as proposed by Berger, is evident in participants' experiences of reconciling their personal religious beliefs with societal norms. However, this study also challenges the notion that religion and culture always align harmoniously. The tension observed in the experiences of participants reveals the more complicated reality of how religious identities are constantly negotiated in the face of a pluralistic society. These findings offer a more dynamic view of the relationship between religion, culture, and social norms than previously articulated in studies that have focused solely on either religious or cultural identity in isolation.

The findings of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications for understanding how individuals navigate the intersection of religion, culture, and social norms. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on religious identity in multicultural societies, highlighting the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of religious practice. It emphasizes the importance of religion as a core component of personal identity, while also revealing the tensions that arise when religious practices clash with the prevailing cultural norms. These insights could be valuable for scholars of sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, especially those interested in exploring how individuals negotiate and navigate their identities within diverse cultural contexts.

On a more practical level, the findings have implications for professionals working in multicultural settings, such as educators, social workers, and policymakers (Sarbadhikary, 2018). Understanding the emotional and social challenges faced by individuals who balance religious identity with the demands of multicultural society can inform more inclusive practices and policies that foster social cohesion and mutual respect. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of creating spaces for individuals to express their religious beliefs without fear of stigmatization or marginalization, which is crucial for promoting social integration and acceptance. In contexts such as education, workplace settings, and community programs, recognizing the role of religion in shaping individuals' lives can lead to more supportive and empathetic environments for diverse populations.

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of individuals navigating religious and cultural identities, there are several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings (Rincón, 2020). First, the sample size of 10 participants, although sufficient for a phenomenological study, limits the scope of the data and may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within a broader population. The participants in this study were selected from a single multicultural urban setting, which may not be representative of experiences in more rural or homogeneous contexts. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews, which, while providing rich qualitative insights, may have been subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Future studies could benefit from expanding the sample size, diversifying the demographic characteristics of participants, and incorporating longitudinal data to explore how these experiences evolve over time.

This study opens several avenues for future research, particularly in exploring the broader dynamics of religious and cultural identity in multicultural contexts (Martínez-Guerrero, 2011). One promising direction would be to expand the sample to include individuals from various religious backgrounds and cultural communities, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how religious identity functions across different demographic groups. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of religion in shaping intergroup relations and community-building in multicultural societies, exploring how religious practices foster social cohesion or, conversely, contribute to division and conflict. Another important area for future research could involve longitudinal studies that track how individuals' religious and cultural identities evolve over time, especially in the context

of migration, globalization, and increasing cultural diversity. By building on the findings of this study, future research can continue to explore the complexities of religious and cultural identity in increasingly pluralistic societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of individuals engaged in interfaith dialogue within a multicultural community, focusing on how these interactions contribute to the understanding and practice of religious pluralism. The findings revealed that while participants experienced both challenges and rewards in their interfaith encounters, they largely perceived these dialogues as opportunities for personal growth and increased empathy. Key themes emerged around the emotional and existential dimensions of these interactions, which are often overlooked in traditional studies of religious diversity. The research addresses gaps in the literature by emphasizing the importance of creating safe, empathetic spaces where religious differences can be discussed without fear of judgment or exclusion. These findings offer valuable insights for enhancing interfaith dialogue programs, particularly in ensuring that they not only address intellectual differences but also create environments where emotional and spiritual complexities are acknowledged. Practical applications for policy development include designing interfaith programs that integrate emotional and spiritual support into their frameworks, promoting deeper understanding and respect among participants. Additionally, these findings could inform the development of community guidelines and public policies that encourage more inclusive and empathetic approaches to religious diversity, particularly in multicultural urban settings. Future studies could further explore the role of cultural identity and long-term outcomes of interfaith engagement to expand our understanding of its broader societal impact.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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