

The Effects of Social and Intellectual Factors on Being a Nonbeliever*

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Introduction

The term *nonbelief* generally includes approaches such as atheism, agnosticism, and apatheism, which mean not having a religious or spiritual belief. Currently, the number of nonbelievers is increasing rapidly (Brown, 2013, p. 232; Vermeer, 2013, p. 80; Baker and Smith, 2009, p. 719; Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2006). Nonbelief is defined as the absence of belief in God/gods or supernatural agents, and thus does not express the absence of belief in its absolute meaning. Epistemologically, belief and nonbelief are in the same position, for both are attitudes about the existence of God or supernatural agents (Ganzevoort, 1994, p. 24). Being a nonbeliever is basically an attitude change. *An attitude*, commonly understood to refer to a person's considerations, evaluations, and reactions to any event or phenomenon, is formed by a combination of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive components (Atkinson et al., 2010, p. 625).

Approximately 70% of all nonbelievers believed in God at some point in their lives (Streib and Klein, 2013, p. 716), but then abandoned their religious/spiritual beliefs due to the influence of various factors. When we look at the literature to determine these factors, we can see that there are a wide range of them, all of which can be categorized under three main headings according to attitude components: (1) social factors (behavioral), (2) psychic/emotional factors (emotional), and (3) intellectual/cognitive factors (cognitive).

At this point, the discussion should turn to which factor group is the most influential in this regard. Many studies show that there is a positive relationship between one's level of education and nonbelief (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997; Silver, 2013; Smith, 2011; Baker and Smith, 2009; Beit-Hallahmi, 2007; Keysar and Navarro-Rivera, 2013; Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2006; Caldwell-Harris, 2011). A second view posits that social factors (e.g., one's social environment, family relationships, social structure, and religious background) are more influential than intellectual factors (Brown, 1966; Mauss, 1969; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997; Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977; Oser, 1994; Voas and McAndrew, 2012; Spray and Marx, 1969; Wilson and Sherkat, 1994; Shand, 2000).

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The first approach argues that the change of attitude toward nonbelief is cognitive, whereas the second approach argues that it is affective. At this point, the question is as follows: If becoming nonbeliever is a change of attitude, is this change mostly cognitive or affective?

Procedure

After reviewing the literature on nonbelief, our basic hypothesis was established: Social and emotional factors have priority over intellectual factors in terms of becoming a nonbeliever. We therefore decided to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research in order to better determine why a believer becomes a nonbeliever.

Our research sample comprised individuals aged 18 and above. Purposive sampling methods, (typical case sampling, and snowball sampling) were used. A total of 502 participants in Turkey were given the questionnaire during June 2015. Interviews were held between October 2014 and July 2015 with 32 participants: 10 foreign nationals and 22 Turks who self-identified as nonbelievers. We employed the following data collection tools: a personal information form, a belief assessment form, *DİSOL* (The Turkish Scale of Nonreligiosity and Nonspirituality) (Sevinç et al., 2015), *EDEİ* (The Scale of Relationship with Parents in Adolescence Period), *İNÖ* (The Scale of Reasons of Nonbelief), and a semi-structured interview form.

Results

Of the participants, 70% were male and 30% were female. The mean age was 30 (SD=10.9). Almost half (53%) of them were undergraduate or graduate students, 49% had a monthly income between 1,000 and 3,000 Turkish liras, 66% were single, 71.7% were of Sunni Muslim background, and 63.5% were nonbelievers.

The data revealed that the rate of nonbelief among men (72%) is higher than that among women (46.5%), as is the *DİSOL* rate (nonreligiosity/nonspirituality) score: (=4.05 SD=1.15) and (=3.59 SD=1.25) ($p=.000$), respectively. The rate of nonbelief among the residents of the metropolitan area and their average *DİSOL* score (=4.11 SD=1.06) are higher than those of the other groups. The average *DİSOL* score of the less-educated participants (=4.08 SD=1.07) is higher than the average score of those who have a bachelor's degree or above (=3.78 SD=1.29) ($p<.05$). A very high proportion of nonbelievers (78.68%) hold leftist political views.

When the results of the *İNÖ* are examined (Chart 2 [Grafik 2]), one sees that a low *DİSOL* score indicates social factors, whereas a high *DİSOL* score indicates intellectual factors. The intellectual subscale score decreases with the *DİSOL* score (Chart 2), and there is a positive correlation between the two variables ($r =.557$; $p <.01$). These results reveal that both groups are aware of the reasons for nonbelief. In other words, believers and nonbelievers are aware that what is pointed out as the cause of nonbelief is important in terms of justifying their own choices.

The most important component of intellectual development is the level of education that one has attained. For this reason, those who emphasize intellectual reasons should be expected to have a higher level of education. When the relationship between this factor

and belief/nonbelief is examined (Table 1 [Tablo 1], believers are shown to be more educated than nonbelievers ($\chi^2=12.271$; $p<.05$). In other words, there is a positive correlation between one's level of education and belief in God ($r=.129$; $p<.05$), as well as a negative correlation between one's level of education and his/her DiSOL score ($r=-.125$ $p<.05$).

When the cause-effect relationship between the level of education and one's belief in God and his/her DiSOL score are examined, the simple linear regression analysis result reveals a significant relationship, according to ($R^2=.016$; $p<.001$). But the level of education explains only 1% of being a nonbeliever (Table 2 [Tablo 2]). Interview data show that nonbelievers state that they are very pleased with intellectual activities, but more than half are not intellectually active in terms of nonbelief.

The EDEI measures the participants' relationships with their parents during their adolescence. When we examined the scale results, the highest average score was found among believers (3.53) and then decreased among those who were raised as nonbelievers (3.36), and those who deconverted (3.18) (Chart 3 [Grafik 3]). We made a one-way ANOVA to see whether these differences were significant (Table 6 [Tablo 6]). According to the results obtained, it was significant ($p <.001$).

According to the results of linear regression analysis, the parental relationship during the adolescence stage explains 3% of becoming a nonbeliever ($p<.001$). Our examination of the parents' cohabitation (Table 7 [Tablo 7]) determined that there was a statistically significant difference between the nonbelievers and the believers ($\chi^2=12.026$; $p<.05$). Among those whose parents were divorced, the first group comprised deconverted nonbelievers (19.4%). According to the results of linear regression analysis, the status of the parents' association explains 1% of becoming a nonbeliever ($R^2=0.15$; $p<.001$). As expected, the parents' religiosity (Chart 4 [Grafik 4]) was as follows: believers (mother-3.98; father-3.54), deconverted nonbelievers (3.36; 2.93), and raised as nonbelievers (2.93; 2.37). The ANOVA testing of these differences (Table 8 [Tablo 8]) found that they were statistically significant ($p<.01$). In other words, the parents' religiosity is influential in terms of being a nonbeliever.

According to the results of linear regression analysis, the mother's religiosity affected 7% ($p<.001$), and the father's religiosity affected 9% ($p<.001$), of the participants. This raises the following question: Do nonbelievers have a more negative relationship with their parents? As can be seen in Table 11 (Tablo 11), the deconverted have low EDEI scores (average 3.04) if their parents were more religious. Namely, they had a negative relationship with their parents during their adolescence stage if their parents were religious. The same case was also examined in interviews. As can be seen at Table 12 (Tablo 12), if the parents were non-religious, then the nonbelievers had a stronger relationship with them (3.54); if the parents were religious, then the nonbelievers had a weaker relationship with them (2.91). Multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate the effect of one's relationship with his/her parents, mother's religiosity, father's religiosity, and cohabitation of parents on becoming a nonbeliever (Table 13 [Tablo 13]). When taken together, the effect of all of these predictors on the participants to become nonbelievers was 15% ($R^2=.154$; $p<.001$). That is, a causal relationship between family structure and nonbelief was indicated.

At the interview, most of the nonbelievers, whether raised as such or deconverted, stated that they had rational reasons for their lack of belief and that there is no evidence of God's

existence. When the interviewers examined the life stories of the 32 participants, they found that 71.87% of them had become nonbelievers due to social or emotional factors, and that only 9 people were intellectually active about nonbelief. That means that they read books, like to join some philosophical or theological discussions, and watch TV programs or videos on belief/nonbelief. Just 3 (9.7%) of the intellectually active nonbelievers became nonbelievers due to intellectual factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

Comparing the data with previous studies reveals that the relationship between demographic variables and nonbelief can vary from country to country.

In this survey, nonbelievers mostly see the intellectual factors as primary. But while the research shows that they consider themselves to be intellectually active, in reality the majority of them are not so in terms of nonbelief or belief. In other words, intellectual factors do not have the primary influence on being a nonbeliever.

The data show that broken families can lead individuals to nonbelief. When the participants' relations with their parents during adolescence are examined, it is seen that those who deconverted have a worse relationship with their parents. Non-believing families raised nonbelieving children, believing families raised religious children, and deconverted families raised less religious children. All of these family types indicate that social factors are more effective than intellectual factors when it comes to one's decision to deconvert.

So why do these people stand out for intellectual reasons? There are several reasons for this: (1) Artificial social codes that proclaim a link between being a nonbeliever or disinterested in religion and being modern or developed. As Aronson (2004) says, people want intelligent and successful people to be on their side and stupid and unsuccessful people to be on the other side (p. 153). Therefore, it is normal to think that my side is intellectually more developed. (2) The theory of attitude change, which posits that behavior precedes from thought (Zajonc, 2001, p. 226). However, when one is asked the reason for his/her preference, he/she tries to justify it rationally (Zajonc and Markus, 1982, pp. 123-128). When people do not behave according to their attitudes, they usually change their attitudes because they cannot undo their behavior (Taylor, 2012, pp. 148-149). In other words, those who adhere to no religion or who "live as if there is no God" gradually reject God's existence in order to make their attitude fit their behavior.

When these data are evaluated together, affective factors are seen to be more effective than cognitive factors on being a nonbeliever. Events during one's adolescence and the social environment are very influential when it comes to acquiring or modifying one's attitudes. As a biological-psychological-spiritual being, the person and his/her environment are a whole (Hutchison, 2008, pp. 11-34). The person comes into existence in this multidimensional environment; maintains its existence; and lives in a specific time, culture, society, and belief system. Therefore, the decisions that one takes today are based upon the common influence of all of the components in each person's life course and cannot be regarded as mere instantaneous logical cognitive products. People's decisions are both cognitive and contextual, and being a nonbeliever is a contextual preference.

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