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CHANGE THROUGH SOHBET: AGENCY AND SELFHOOD IN THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

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Change Through *Sohbet*: Agency and Selfhood in the Gülen Movement

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DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and effort and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any award. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged. I also declare that the word length is accurate.

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Abstract

This research focuses on the Gülen Movement, a popular faith-based movement in Turkey and is based on fieldwork carried out in Istanbul in 2012. After presenting an introduction to the movement, I focus on two aspects of the movement: its participants
and the practice of Sohbet. I aim to explore the involvement of the participants and what this involvement means in terms of their agency and the role of the practice of Sohbet in the formation of a particular selves.

Although not focused exclusively on religious discourse and conceptions of ‘tradition’, I consider worth discussing this and will argue that religious discourse cannot always be conceived of as an exercise of power that subjects docile bodies and controls and dominates selves. Rather, it can also be used as a conscious tool to aid the process of forming particular selves. I will analyse data collected in interviews and participant observations with the movements, and based on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, I aim to explore the practice of sohbet, showing how this is the most effective practice used by participants in forming a Gülen defined “Islamic habitus”.

Key words: Agency - Selfhood - Habitus - Religion - Discourse - Morality – Identity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Turkey and the Gülen Movement

Turkey lies along differing fault lines: between Europe and the Middle East, between the secularity of the state and popular faith. The country's borders march from
Armenia and Iraq to Bulgaria and Greece, from the coast of the Black Sea to the waters of the Aegean, enclosing 21st century Istanbul as well as the remote, almost Biblical landscapes of the interior. This is where the Gülen Movement\(^1\) started and where it keeps its largest base. Even today, it continues to attract a multitude of followers.

Over the three and a half decades since the movement began in the 1970s, it has grown into a transnational educational and interfaith movement with participants numbering in the millions. It also has well-established institutions and schools not only in Turkey, but across the world.

Fethullah Gülen (born 1941), the founder of the movement, is considered one of the most significant Islamic thinkers and activists to have emerged in the 20th century (Barton 2005). He is known affectionately as ‘Hodjaeffendi’ by supporters in Turkey and abroad. Both ‘hodja’ and ‘effendi’ are terms of respect: ‘hodja’ is generally used to denote respect for a teacher, while ‘effendi’ is used widely in Turkey to address males of relatively higher social standing and high education.

Gülen began as a preacher in his hometown of Izmir, a city on Turkey’s Aegean coast. Now, nearly half a century after his first sermons in Izmir, the religious movement he helped to inspire includes as many as six million followers\(^2\) (Zalewski 2013). As the largest religious movement in Turkey, the Movement’s supporters and members run hundreds of schools and several media outlets (including Zaman, the newspaper with the highest circulation in Turkey), as well as a bank, a number of foundations and a major charity. This makes the movement a key social force, not only

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1 Those within the movement like to identify it as the ‘Hizmet’ movement. I have used Gülen Movement in this paper, as the term is commonly used in academic literature.

2 According to the movement’s members, there is no formal membership structure, which makes exact numbers impossible to determine.
because of the large number of supporters from every social strata or its financial strength, but because of the role it is able to play in terms of social mobility - it provides opportunities in education and employment, as well as social opportunities, even finding spouses\(^3\) - for young Turks who otherwise may not have access to them.

On the political front, the movement officially forswears any role and is said to discourage political discussions amongst its followers (Zalewski 2013). However, many Turks view the movement with suspicion (ibid.), suspecting the movement of, at the very least, influencing the political-scape of Turkey by placing supporters and members in key positions, if not harbouring broader aims of a political takeover.

As such, the socio-economic contexts and the political landscape cannot be ignored in the study of any movement in Turkey, not least because, to a large extent, Islamic intellectual history in contemporary Turkey has been a response to the challenge of Kemalism\(^4\) to religious identity (Abu-Rabi’ 2008:12); the movement does not shy away from acknowledging this (see Gülen 2005 as well as the introduction in Yavuz and Esposito 2003). I briefly focus on this discussion in Appendix I when considering what the socio-economic and political contexts might actually say about participants’ loyalty and devotion to the movement and how to anthropologically understand the contrasting views of the movement in Turkey.

**Studies of the Gülen Movement**

Given the role of the Gülen Movement in Turkish society and its transnational nature, the movement has attracted ample scholarly attention. Some of the studies previously conducted on the movement have taken a sociological approach to

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\(^3\) One of my participants pointed out that he met his wife through the movement's network.

\(^4\) The political ideology attributed to Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the modern republic. It is characterised by secularism, nationalism and statism, amongst other things.
understanding the movement: what it can tell us about civic activism and grassroots mobilisation, for example (Ergene 2008), or investigate the movement more broadly from the purviews of collective action and social movements (Cetin 2010).

Aside from sociological interests, other studies have approached the movement from the direction of politics or economics, or they focus on the movement’s ideas and the way they are practised. For example, the edited collection by Yilmaz and Weller (2012) considers the movement in light of questions about European identity – particularly with 9/11 and terrorism as a backdrop – as well as the movement’s interfaith activities, discussing the ways in which these might provide interesting case studies for efforts in anti-extremism and de-radicalisation.

Furthermore, other scholars tend to concentrate on the transnational element of the movement, one that champions altruism and interfaith dialogue (Pandya & Gallagher 2012) and provides messages of peace and cooperation between faith-based societies in the modern world (Bilici 2006; Esposito & Yilmaz 2010). Much has also been written on the theoretical and philosophical ideas of Fethullah Gülen, with a particular focus on aspects such as the reconciliation of science and religion, educational philosophy (Agai, 2003) and modernity (Kuru 2003), as well as the movements ties to Sufism and influential thinkers such as Said Nursi (Yavuz 2003).

All of the above works also provide extensive historical background of the movement within the context of Turkish political history and the post-Ottoman reforms that led to Kemalism and state-sponsored secularism – in short, the socio-political dimensions that have made the movement possible. Furthermore, they shed light on the movement’s complex engagement with politics, both intellectually and within the

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5 See the proceedings from a series of international conferences titled *The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice* that covers all of these topics in addition to many more. Available online: [http://fethullahgulenconference.org](http://fethullahgulenconference.org) (accessed 05/04/2013).
workings of Turkish secular democracy (see Baskan 2005, Kösebalaban 2003, Yavuz 1999), as well as such scholarship challenging the predominant juxtaposition of Islam against the secular state (Turam 2004).

However, with the exception of Turam (2004), who specifically uses in-depth ethnographic data, and Navaro-Yashin’s work on the political culture in the public life of 1990s Turkey (2002), there has generally been a dearth of anthropological studies of the movement itself; this is an area that I aim to contribute to with my paper.

The Scope of This Study

My study is based on three months’ fieldwork in Istanbul between September 2012 and January 2013. This involved following one participant in particular, who introduced me to the movement’s activities and regular meetings, as well as also introducing me to other members of the movement, who were not only employed by the movement’s various organisations, but had been with the movement for well over 15 years. Additionally, I was able to take part in Sohbets: the regular meetings of the movement.

Focus and Thesis

Given that I was exposed to two aspects of the Gülen Movement – its followers and Sohbet – during my fieldwork, this study largely focuses on both. In looking at the members of the movement, I have tried to understand and portray what they want to achieve in relation to selfhood and what it means in terms of agency, to be part of the movement. As such, my central argument is that participants seek to build an ‘Islamic habitus’ as taught by Gülen and understood and defined by the movement’s members.

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6 For reasons of anonymity, I have not named individuals or provided any identifying information.
Using Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective on habitus, I illustrate how *Sohbet* aids in this process of forming such a ‘self’ (Chapter Three). I also explore how, by engaging with Gülen’s discourses and the movement, members conceive of their own agency.

In Chapter Two I consider whether or not members view Gülen’s discourse – resulting from his own engagement with Islam – as an exercise of power and control on themselves. This, I argue, is relevant in conceptualising anthropological understandings of religious discourse and its consumption, insofar as questioning whether religious discourse always imposes constraints and limitations on the body of a social being – or, rather, if religious discourse itself can be a tool used to form particular selves.

*Sohbet* and ‘Islamic Habitus’

The word *sohbet* means ‘conversation’ as well as conveying meanings of ‘companionship’ (Silverstein 2008). In the context of my fieldwork, it usually indicated a meeting of the movement’s members in a given location, usually one of the halls of a school owned by the movement, to listen to speeches delivered by a senior member and also to socialise, drink tea and use the meeting as a platform to discuss charitable projects and activities they were involved with. However, *Sohbets* took different forms depending on the audience and the expected participants. I was fortunate enough to participate in both of the following:

1) A weekly *Sohbet*, which proceeded as described above. It took place in a relaxed setting: the focus was on listening to a senior member deliver a talk, based on Gülen’s teachings, introducing the movement and its message of renewal, self-change and being ‘good’ Muslims. This *Sohbet* was largely aimed at new or interested participants; current members were tasked with bringing along
friends or acquaintances not affiliated with the movement. Sometimes a prayer was factored into this Sohbet.

2) There was also a Sohbet where current members of the movement exclusively met, before the dawn prayer at weekends, to collectively perform optional prayers (Salat) and take part in devotional practices such as liturgy and reading the works of Gülen and Nursi. Time was also devoted to self-reflection and conversation with a senior member who assumed the role of a mentor. After the dawn prayer, this meeting moved to a dormitory, where the older members of the movement had breakfast with younger students living in the dormitories. There, they delivered talks based on Gülen’s ideas, read from his books and watched or listened to one of his weekly sermons uploaded to the Internet.

In using the term ‘Islamic habitus,’ I signify members’ desire to live a certain way and possess certain qualities, which members would generally place within the category of being a ‘good’ Muslim. My participants would always highlight the following as key features of this self: a love of God and an aspiration to fulfill the commands of Islam (by which they meant the five daily prayers, the giving of alms and avoidance of undesired actions such as drinking, gambling and sexual activities outside the confines of marriage) as well as the willingness to perform optional devotional activities such as extra prayers, recitations of the Qur’an and extra fasting.

Participants added that this self has sincere intentions – that it only acts because it wants to please God, with no further motives – and that it is a self that respects others and wants to serve the whole of humanity. Some participants would highlight particular aspects of this ‘desired self,’ such as good character, trustworthiness, honesty, selflessness, love and concern for the poor, and being a person who eschews harming or
hurting anyone else. This is the ‘self’ that participants wanted to create, and this was always given as the reason why they had chosen to take part in both the movement and the particular activity of *Sohbet*.

Chapter 2: The Discourse of the Gülen Movement

The teachings of Fethullah Gülen draw heavily on two sources: the wider Sunni tradition\(^7\) and on the teachings of Said Nursi (1873-1960), an influential Turkish Islamic

\(^7\) The word ‘tradition’ is not used in the sense that Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012[1988], cited in Hirschkind 2001:645) refer to as an ‘invented tradition’ where ‘ancient roots are claimed for a practice that is actually of recent origin’ (Hirschkind 2001:645). Instead, I employ ‘tradition’ in this paper to mean Islam as a ‘discursive tradition,’ one with which people engage and which they reformulate and draw from. In this respect, Gülen’s teachings are the product of his discursive engagement with Islamic sources – determining authenticity is not the task here – and this is what the participants of the movement consider to be a genuine representation of Islamic tradition. My study rarely found that participants actually doubted or critiqued Gülen’s teachings as suspicious or questionable; to them, his teachings were an authentic reflection of Islamic tradition. Here, tradition should always be understood in these terms: that of Islam as defined and taught by Gülen and accepted by members and participants. My focus is not
thinker who first initiated reading circles in order to inspire a revival and whose legacy has been continued and reformulated by Gülen (see Yavuz 1999 for a full elaboration of this). In this chapter, I provide a cursory overview of Fethullah Gülen’s teachings, highlighting his emphasis on the need to change the self in order to be a ‘good’ Muslim – what I refer to as an ‘Islamic habitus’ throughout the paper – and to reach the wider objectives of the movement. Such objectives are, namely, to realise a universal change and bring about an Islamic revival (Gülen 2005). It is important to understand this aspect of his teachings, for in the next chapter I will show that Sohbet – with all its constituent parts – is used as the tool to consciously build such a Gülen-defined Islamic habitus.

Additionally, this discussion provides a context by which to establish correlations between the movement’s members and its teachings – in other words, between selves and texts. In doing so, ‘Gülen is metaphorically considered as the “writer”; his teachings... [the] text; and the “readers” [are] the participants of the... movement’ (Çelik & Alan 2012:22).

A secondary objective is to devote a segment of this chapter to a discussion on anthropology, power and discourse, since Fethullah Gülen’s teachings take the form of religious discourse. Before proceeding, however, it is interesting to note, from an anthropological standpoint, that the Gülen movement’s participants do not readily draw a line between religion as a somewhat ‘pure’ category, and Gülen’s teachings and their lives as standing separate from religion, therefore conceiving of his teachings as just

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8 My use of the term ‘text’ does not in any way imply the application of textual linguistic analysis (see Çelik and Alan 2012:22); rather, my references to ‘reading’ and ‘text’ are more in line with that of interpretive anthropology (see Geertz 1993). A full textual analysis of Gülen’s sermons and discourses would no doubt be a fruitful endeavour to provide a greater understanding of the movement in relation to anthropological work in the areas of narrative, discourse and rhetoric.
another expression of a particular religious code of conduct. They thus blur the lines between a ‘pure’ notion of ‘religion’ and conceptions of the economic, political and private, in a similar manner to Schneider's (1987) blurring of the lines between the categories of kinship, nationality and religion.

Consequently, when considering the perspective of participants, it can often be difficult to determine where religion leaves off and where everything else begins; to participants, their whole lives – in every sphere – are part of the religious. Therefore, the movement and all its activities and aims are seen as part of one’s religious self. When I use the term ‘religious,’ it should be understood within this complexity and fluidity, without strictly having to define it.

In my study, religion does not stand as a distinct domain, but permeates all aspects of members’ lives. In this instance, it is not only bound with nationality – Turkish identity and commitment to the nation-state are defining features of the movement – and kinship in one single domain (Schneider 1987:510); the spiritual and the material are just as bound together in one domain as the public and private spheres. Religion stands for a complex concept, rather than simply reflecting a belief in the ‘supernatural’ or making a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Such a complication of the term ‘religion’ and the struggle to give it a strict definition is nothing new in anthropology (Eriksen 2001:210); not having a strict definition itself is a virtue of the field and is partly due to wariness in ‘imposing’ onto a community definitions that are alien to it.

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9 Members frequently use kin terms such as brother, sister, aunt and uncle to refer to each other, but furthermore, it is common to refer to the community and wider Turkish society as a family; in the same way, these terms are used in wider society for strangers and acquaintances.

10 Tylor defined religion as a simple belief in the ‘supernatural,’ whilst Durkheim confined religion to the domain of the sacred (Eriksen 2001:210-211).
Gülen is not merely building a community that advocates a particular religious
conduct within the confines of a circumscribed religious movement (for example, it is
not just another Turkish Sufi movement\(^{11}\)), nor does it only seek to provide an
alternative reading of scripture; it is creating something much larger than this. It seeks
to effect universal change and bring about an Islamic revival, and in doing so, it requires
its members to embody a certain way of being – this, as may be expected, comes at the
price of controversy and suspicion (see Appendix 1).

To the movement’s participants, their lives and involvement with the movement is
religion; thus, studying the Gülen movement from an anthropological point of view
provides interesting suggestions for defining religion: religion is just as much tied to
nationalism, patriotism and Turkish identity as to Islamic scripture and Gülen’s
formulations of Sunni tradition.

One of my aims in this chapter is to draw attention to the point that participants,
in their engagement with the teachings of Gülen, do not feel such engagement limits or
reduces their agency; nor do they feel that they are subjecting themselves to the
coercive power of religious discourse.\(^{12}\) These teachings, which are partially given form
in Sohbet and participants’ daily lives, are instead used in the creation of a Gülen-
defined Islamic habitus; they are used as a tool in a strikingly similar way to the use of
cassette sermons by Egyptian men in Cairo as discussed in an ethnographic study by

\(^{11}\) See Silverstein 2008 for discussion of a Sufi order in Turkey.

\(^{12}\) This is the same reason why I do not take into consideration Weber’s notion of Charismatic authority
(see *A Sociology of Charismatic Authority* in Weber 2009), for again it may serve to relocate agency from
members to the leader and, in doing so, decrease or reduce the agency that members perceive themselves
to possess. Gülen is seen as inspirational to members, but they do not consider him to be instilled with
divine or supernatural powers. However, a more in-depth discussion of the form of Gülen’s ‘charisma’
may provide interesting ways to reformulate understandings of leadership and authority in communities
and their discursive practices.
Charles Hirschkind (2001a and 2001b). This argument will hopefully contribute to a growing body of anthropological literature providing alternative conceptualisations of power and authority, and the implications of such studies on understandings of human agency (see, for example, Hirschkind 2001a and Mahmood 2001).

Another point of anthropological interest this chapter touches upon – and which could form a study on its own – is the use of religious media in the contemporary world and anthropological conceptions of the public and social spheres. Fethullah Gülen’s teachings are widely disseminated in print and digital forms and used not only in Sohbet, but also on a personal basis. Thus, when I refer to his teachings, I am also by necessity implying the forms of these teachings: the media of print, the Internet and video or audio recordings.

The Gülen movement’s membership is not restricted to Turkey alone, and the media is a key method of disseminating his teachings and maintaining connections between a wide network of members, transcending geographical boundaries. Furthermore, supporters and members of the movement also run a newspaper, a TV station (Samanyolu TV) and a radio station (Burç FM) in Turkey. It would be worthwhile to undertake a lengthy study of the Gülen movement’s production and use of religious media and dovetail this with wider anthropological work on the impact of global media, particularly religious media.

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13 Much can be gained in terms of anthropological insight when making a comparative study between my own ethnography and other ethnographies in the area of Islamic religious ethical formations (such as Hirschkind’s, cited in the text, and Silverstein’s 2008 ethnography on the ethical disciplines amongst a Sufi order). Unfortunately, however, I am unable to do this here in full. One can also consider the role of media in the Iranian revolution as a comparative study (see Mohammadi 1994).
14 Today’s Zaman is an English-language newspaper printed on a daily basis. It also has a Web presence at http://www.todayszaman.com.
15 http://www.samanyolu.tv
16 http://www.burcfm.com.tr
Kirsch (2007:510) writes of a ‘chasm’ between scholars who see global media as producing cultural homogenisation and those who argue for the relative autonomy of media audiences and their consumptive practices. The ‘imperialism’ discourse of global media – highlighting the power of media and the agency contained therein – is often accused of ‘hermeneutic naivety’ (Tomlinson 1999:5, cited in Kirsch 2007:510), while the middle ground tends to stress the alternative approach of studying the effects of media as moderated through sociocultural concepts. As previously explained, my core argument – that the teachings of Gülen are a tool consciously used to form a Gülen-defined Islamic habitus without diminishing the agency of the members – also includes media as a key theme. Thus, the Gülen movement suggests a new ground upon which the effects and the use of media can be studied: the conscious use and consumption of ‘tradition-based’ media and its relation to the formations of habitus, much like Hirschkind (2001a) has shown in his analysis of the audition of religious cassette sermons in Egypt.

When considering the movement’s teachings, it is important to bear in mind that such discussions should not reify the movement.\(^{17}\) Referring to the study of culture in general, Geertz writes that although this is an obvious truth, there are a number of ways it may be obscured: one is to imagine that culture is a self-contained ‘super-organic reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is, to reify it’ (Geertz 1993:11). His observation also draws attention to the pitfall of attributing ‘force’ to a culture or movement and, in doing so, obscuring the location of agency; as previously mentioned, one key aim of this paper is to highlight the fact that agency in the Gülen movement is located – foremost, though not exclusively – within the members of the movement.

\(^{17}\) The movement also absorbs global discourses of democracy, human rights and the market economy (Yavuz 1999:585-6).
Geertz also takes to task intimations that culture is wholly composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups guide their behaviours;\(^{18}\) my own fieldwork did not indicate such a two-step process. Moreover, using this theoretical framework not only implies a dualism between a structuring mind and a structured body, akin to Cartesian dualism, but also dislocates agency from conscious human beings to an unconscious structure.

Knowing the teachings of the movement familiarises us with the movement’s world and renders that world accessible to us; it provides a ‘context’ in which the Sohbet can be intelligible – that is, thickly described’ (Geertz 1993:14). However – paraphrasing Geertz – to assume and conclude that knowing the teachings of the Gülen movement is the same as ‘being’ a member of the movement is to betray a confusion,\(^ {19}\) such as ‘taking thin descriptions for thick’ (1993:12).\(^ {20}\)

The Self in the Gülen Movement: Reflecting the Spirit of the Prophet and Qur’anic Morals

The centrality of Gülen’s teachings to the movement should not go amiss; his writings and sermons form a central element in Sohbet, and his books are also widely read on an individual basis. Gülen’s teachings form participants’ own perception of tradition. One of my participants described Gülen’s teachings and books thus:

Reading is very important... members voluntarily read [Gülen’s] books and look forward to listening to his sermons. It’s like how you might listen to music in the morning before you leave home to get your ‘swagger.’ It gives them a motivation and a boost... It just

\(^{18}\) Another danger of cultural analyses that seek to uncover the ‘all-too-deep-lying turtles’ is that they lose touch with the surface of life and surface realities as well as the biological and physical necessities that envelop all humans (see Geertz 1993).

\(^{19}\) Each participant is always a distinct individual, and one can find a large range of diversity within the movement (Pandya 2012:7).

\(^{20}\) Geertz’s difference between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ descriptions emphasises that cultural analysis is an interpretive exercise and that all anthropological writings are themselves interpretations: ‘We are not actors and we do not have direct access, but only a small part of which our informants can lead us into understanding’ (Geertz 1993:20).
depends how much you really want to learn – but, obviously, not reading his books doesn't mean you can't do the work of cemaat\(^1\), and also just by reading it doesn't mean you can just change yourself into a good Muslim...doing so helps in changing and guiding you. (*Fieldwork notes, 11/11/2012*)

Through his teachings, one of the key changes that Gülen wishes to bring about is the changing (or reformulating) of the self in line with his exposition of the ethical teachings and values of Islam in order to change oneself into an insan-i-kamil: ‘a perfected human being’ (Toguslu 2009). Moreover, this endeavour is a religious one, where in no dichotomy exists between religion and ethical/moral concepts. This was reflected in my discussions with another member:

**How can you expect to change things around you if you cannot change yourself to be a better Muslim, a better insan [human]; someone that brings benefit to the people and is always ready to do Hizmet [serve others]?** (*Fieldwork notes, 09/10/12*)

To participants, Gülen’s teachings are the teachings of Sunni Islam.

Anthropologically, his work is that of a man engaging discursively with Islam, which itself is a 'discursive tradition' (see Anjum 2007 for a full elaboration on Islam as a discursive tradition, following the work of Asad (1986)). Thus, his teachings do not draw a distinction between the ethical and the religious – the concepts are intertwined – nor do they make a separation between the religious and the profane.

I should point out that this is not a unique conceptualisation of Gülen, but rather has also been argued with respect to Islam in general (e.g. Izutsu (2002) who argues in favour of the intertwining of both the ethical and religious in the Qur’an - what he calls the ‘ethico-religious’). What is important here is that this does not remain simply a conceptualisation or just a teaching; it is given force through active adoption through the process of Sohbet.

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\(^{21}\) *Cemaat* means ‘community’ or ‘group’ and is used regularly by members to refer to the Gülen movement.
Furthermore, Gülen’s teachings also place stress on ‘perfecting’ and ‘changing’ the self to reflect the teachings of Islam as he himself presents them; these teachings are seen as the pinnacle of morality and ethical practice, Gülen writes in his influential work *The Statue of Our Souls* (2005):

[What is] required is that we rediscover ourselves, find and know who we are, and reacquaint ourselves with Islamic consciousness and the styles of thought and reasoning. (11)

Religion embraces the whole of the individual and collective life; it intervenes in everything we have of mind, heart, and soul; it gives its tincture to all our acts according to our intentions… (20)

Without ridding ourselves of the urges and sentiments which are the true reasons for the fall and dissolution of our people, such as greed, laziness, ambition for fame, yearning for status, selfishness, and worldly-mindedness, without establishing in their place the spirit of abstinence, courage, modesty and humility, altruism, spirituality, piety and godliness – which are all of the essence and the truth of Islam – without directing people to truth, and without purifying and reforming them with the sense of truth… it will be nigh impossible to reach the straight path and calm days. (27)

In short, those who undertake the responsibility of revival and who universal change for the better – as opposed to prevailing ‘ignorance, poverty and disunity’ (Weller & Yilmaz 2012:xxiv) – need to be a new type of people: those who ‘reflect the spirit of the Prophet and the Qur’anic morals’ (Woodhall & Çetin 2005:viii). To achieve this, I contend that *Sohbet* plays a key role.

All of the participants I spoke to had a particular statement in common: their primary goal was to bring change to be ‘better’ Muslims. This ‘self’ as a ‘better Muslim’ is what I refer to here as seeking a self with an Islamic habitus: one that is religious, and at the same time moral, virtuous and pious (Ebaugh 2010; Ergene 2008; Gülen 2005; Pandya & Gallagher 2012; Toguslu 2009), as defined and elaborated by Gülen.

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22 This text is considered influential because it is frequently used in *Sohbets* and given to new students that join the dormitories owned and managed by the movement. It is also readily offered to outsiders as an English introduction to Gülen’s thoughts and ideas.

23 Gülen and the movement’s members stress that this should not be read to imply the revival of an Islamic regime or even an Islamic state (although some members of Turkish society do fear this; see Pandya 2012:7).
Though Gülen’s teachings are a key factor in bringing together members and supporters, one should not assume that his message and speeches themselves make the participants or that they are a kind of social imposition that constrains the self and, crucially, diminishes the participants’ own perceptions of autonomy and agency. This point is highlighted by the conversation that occurred one late-October evening, when a participant and his friends gathered in a café after work. His friends, who were not members of the Gülen movement nor had any affiliations with it, did not appear to show much consideration for the movement, although their feelings were masked by sarcasm and humour:

[Interrupting his friends, the participant remarks sarcastically] You guys always think that I am under some mind control and am a zombie! [He chuckles and sips his tea.]...you’re thinking that freedom means you should always hate listening to someone else and you should feel you have no chains on you... but is the self really free when what you wear, buy and eat is all because of advertising? [He chuckles again, raising laughter and murmurs of affirmation from his friends.] My involvement in cemaat is what I want to do and, thanks to God, it has been such a good thing for me as a Muslim... ask my mum and wife and they’ll tell you how good I have become! [He again laughs and his friends laugh with him.] (Field notes, 25/10/2012)

As revealed by the above conservation, this participant recognised that his membership of the group linked him to what he saw as a tradition. Importantly, he did not feel that this membership diminished or limited his own agency. This is not to deny or reject anthropological analyses that elaborate on the power of various traditions, particularly the ‘constraints and limitations imposed by a tradition’ (Anjum 2007:661). Here, I want to stress the particular viewpoint of the participants: they not only spoke of, appealed to and revered a tradition (Sunni Islam) as understood by them through the teachings of Gülen, but in wanting to reflect this taught tradition and embody it in their lives, they did not feel it required a loss of their own agency.
Anthropology, Discourse and Power

The term ‘power’ seems ‘to be on the verge of attaining celebrity status,’ write Barrett et al. (2001:468), and a new ‘god term’ (D’Andrade 1999:96 in Barrett et al. 2001:468) in anthropology: one that is pervasive and becomes an overwhelming analytical structure subjected upon ethnographic analysis. Power has been a pervasive concept in the anthropological conception of discourse, wherein discourse is often seen as inscribing itself onto bodies either to control or to produce and maintain a monopoly over the production of normative behaviours.

Such anthropological analyses seem to rehash the enduring dilemma of structure vs. agency (Barrett et al. 2001:473). Although the prevalence of religious media is on the rise, it is often downplayed as a technique for the cultivation of conceptions of Islamic virtues (see Hirschkind 2001a and 2001c); instead, the ideological aspect of religious speeches and media and the disciplinary functions they serve are emphasised (see Kepel 1986 and Mohammedi & Mohammedi 1994). In such theoretical analyses, religious discourse fulfils a disciplinary function and becomes ‘an extension of authoritative religious discourse’ (Hirschkind 2001b:3).

These characterisations of religious discourse do not necessarily apply to all types of religious media; in my case study, participants willingly consumed religious media. Furthermore, one can also question the concept of power itself: it is ‘every bit as ambiguous and controversial’ as the concept of ‘culture’ (D’Andrade, cited in Barrett et al. 2001:473). Power is not always seen in a negative light or as standing antithetical to one’s own agency.
Analytical approaches to power have also run the risk of framing and polarising religious media as two contradictory processes: the deliberative – where, through the use of religious media, people engage with and revise religious traditions – and the disciplinary, where religious media is a subjection of authority and aimed at producing uniform models of behaviour (Hirschkind 2001b:3). Such a framing of religious media (and, by extension, discourse) reflects a tendency within liberal human thought to view the individual as ‘necessarily in conflict with... forms of collective discipline that undergird [the community]’ (ibid.).

This tension also manifests itself in wider anthropological discussions that conceptualise traditions (and culture) as either determining forces – thus potentially limiting agency – or simply as a ‘ruse, utterly subordinate to sociological, political, or economic considerations’ (Anjum 2007:661). This is relevant insofar as my case study, considered from the perspective of the participants, does not run to either extreme of this polarisation.

I should note from the outset that I do not intend to contest that religious traditions and discourses cannot be intricately involved with power and domination (Asad 1986, cited in Anjum 2007:660). However, I do wish to underline the need to recognise disparate understandings of the way religious media is consumed and of people’s relationships to particular religious discourses and conceptions of tradition: religious discourses do not necessarily have to stand antithetically to agency, be wholly deterministic or, at the very least, subtract from a person’s conception of his or her own agency. Ethnographies of this kind often help to provincialise liberal understandings of agency and autonomy, in which true agency is fully realised only in liberal conceptions of reason, freedom and autonomy and stand antithetical to tradition (in its various
definitions) and religion (in its various forms); one does not always have to sustain the argument that there exist fundamental contradictions between freedom and authority (Arendt 1998).

In tracing the influence of power in conceptions of religious discourse as well as limiting religious discourse to play only a disciplinary function, I believe the work of Foucault\textsuperscript{24} has had a substantial influence – after all, his writings in general have been noted as influential in anthropology (Boyer 2003). Foucault's work has shed light on ways in which discourse structures social space and affects multiple areas of life (see Foucault's instrumental and fascinating works \textit{Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison} [2012a] and \textit{The Birth of the Clinic} [2012b]) and how the human body is subjected to various apparatuses and systems of knowledge (Power 2011). His 'archaeological' analysis (Foucault 2002 [1972]) posits that discourse possesses a performative and conditioning role (Power 2011), suggesting that discourse 'has its own life' and is 'independent of human agency, radically divorced from the subjectivity of agents' (Power 2011:46).

This 'Foucaultian' notion of 'power'\textsuperscript{25} (Barrett et al. 2001:468), in influencing anthropological discussions of tradition and religious discourse,\textsuperscript{26} can lead to

\textsuperscript{24} Although Foucault is sometimes charged with conceptualising power as everything, he did not articulate such a position. Power as an autonomous question did not interest him, nor did he attempt to develop a theory of power. Rather, he sought to highlight recapitulations of power and authority in the modern world that sometimes remain beyond the purview of analysis (see Barrett, Stokholm & Burke 2001). Furthermore, Foucault's later works (post-1980s) and pieces on ethics provide greater insight into his nuanced understanding of ethical formations and his attacks on the construction of human beings as subjects (see the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on 'Michel Foucault: Ethics': http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucault/#H6).

\textsuperscript{25} One can also consider the work of Wolf (1998) as another example of the pervasiveness of the notion of 'power' in anthropology (Barrett et al. 2001:469). Wolf focuses on structural power, which he defines as something that operates within relations and settings and 'organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves' as well as determining the direction of energy flows (Wolf 1998:5). Such conceptions of power are in danger of being considered reductionist (Barrett et al. 2001:469) and, when specifically applied to discourse, produce a binary oppositional scheme between the speaker/agent of a discourse and the object/receptive audience.
conclusions that discourse and traditions are transformative agents and sources of power. I do not discredit such conceptualisations or argue against their pertinence to particular cases; my point is simply to draw attention to alternate ways of conceptualising religious discourse and to emphasise that a single conceptualisation does not necessarily apply to all situations. This is especially true in the instance of my case study, where participants not only eschewed notions of ‘docility’, but continually stressed their own ‘agency’ and intentionality in listening to Gülen’s sermons, reading his books and using them as tools in the creation of an Islamic habitus as taught by Gülen, and to consciously connect themselves to Gülen’s conceptualisation of tradition.

Additionally, by conceptualising religious discourse as disciplinary actions that produce normative behaviour, one falls into the trap of thinking in terms of dualism and structuralism – that the mind absorbs or contains an unconscious structure which then produces actions through the body. My research shows that, rather than believing that actions were consequential to thinking, participants actually regarded the opposite to be true: actions generated the forms of selves that they desired to be. Consuming Gülen’s conceptualisation of what an ‘Islamic’ tradition is, in the form of his teachings, was itself a tool used to create particular selves. Consider the following elucidation from a member of the movement:

*Cemaat made me who I am; every guy will tell you that. I want to work on myself and make myself a better person than I am. It really helps to be part of cemaat because I feel I am doing something and I am in control. Of course, having the reminders and company*

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26 This claim is tentative, as one would need to devote time to a complete study in order to understand the exact influence of Foucault’s works on power and authority within their anthropological conceptualisations and see whether they have given rise to an essentialisation of religious discourse as authoritative, powerful and subjecting of bodies within a relationship of power and ideology. D’Andrade’s (1999) remarks on the ‘god-like’ pervasiveness of power and its emergence as a central theoretical concept in anthropology intimates that ‘power’ has had a rather strong influence in anthropology: one can survey anthropological writings in the area of religious discourse to see the pervasiveness of ‘power’ and the resulting conceptualisations of religion and tradition.

27 See, for example, Brenneis (1994) on the discourse of statistics and the power and control such a discourse yields upon groups.
around you also helps, but ultimately you have to want to do this – otherwise no one is going to do it for you, and no one is forcing you... This movement isn’t Fethullah Gülen or what he writes and says; the goal is to be a good Muslim and to live Islam. His words are important reminders...they teach us what we need to know, which is to become good Muslims and to serve other people and put them before ourselves. Reminders are beneficial, and you can be a good Muslim without reading, listening or attending Sohbet, but sometimes you do things out of love, respect and because you want to listen to what someone has to say from his knowledge and experience, and you find that he has something good to say. *(Field notes, 15/11/2012)*

From this quote, it becomes clear that *Sohbet* is a process in which members actively choose to engage; members do not see their own agency diminishing here. Consuming Gülen’s religious media is not seen as playing a disciplinary role; nor do members attend *Sohbet* to buy a stake in a deliberative space to revise and reformulate religious traditions (the polarity to which Hirschkind [2001b] refers). It is consciously used as a tool in *Sohbet* to help form a Gülen-taught Islamic habitus. This chapter has made numerous references to *Sohbet* because I believe *Sohbet* is a potent and powerful matrix – it is an effective tool for members to use in forming selves in line with Gülen’s teachings.28

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28 Although I deliberately refer to Gülen’s teachings as a representation of Islam, I do not have space to touch on the debate as to whether there is one Islam or multiple ‘local’ Islams without any sense of ‘orthodoxy’. Asad’s argument that Islam is a discursive tradition finds a suitable middle ground in navigating the two extremes (see Asad 1986 and Anjum 2007 for a full discussion of the implication of this in relation to the anthropological study of Islam).
Chapter 3: Agency, *Sohbet* and Habitus

**Anthropology and Agency**

‘Agency is a term ubiquitous in anthropology,’ writes Ahearn (2001:109); according to her, it is ‘especially important for anthropologists to ask themselves how conceptions of agency may differ from society to society, and how these conceptions might be related to notions of personhood’ (ibid.:113).

One of the aims of my study is to embark on finding answers to such a question, in the process adding to the growing body of literature in anthropology that focuses on indigenous notions of selfhood as part of an attempt to gain insight into cultural difference and challenge Western notions of individualism (Kondo 1987:241) and selfhood and their relation to power, authority and tradition. Insights gained from this can also contribute to the task of rethinking the ‘decidedly stubborn opposition between tradition and modernity’ (Hirschkind 2001a:624), thus helping to conceptualise autonomy in ways that may run counter to modern secular-liberal sensibilities, which often presume an opposition between freedom and authority (see Mahmood 2011 for an example of how agency can be exercised in situations that seem more like acquiescence to power and authority).

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, a key teaching of Gülen is that members are self-formed, with dispositions that reflect Qur’anic teachings and the
teachings of the Prophet. I encountered this in my conversations with a participant, who noted that:

We want to be and do like the Sahabah\textsuperscript{29}.... (Field notes, 9/10/12)

This statement highlights members’ desire to return to a former way – to their notion of a tradition; in doing so, they find a sense of agency. This is in contrast to agency emanating from notions of progress and modernity: ‘that the agent must create the future and remake herself and help others do so, and in doing so old universes must be subverted and new universes must be created’ (Asad 2009:19). However, I wish to add that, as my study shows, members do not in any way view engagement with tradition and the past as reducing, limiting or subtracting their own agency and that such recognition and aspiration (coupled with a particular production of the self) does not simply result in the ‘unthinking reproduction’ of that tradition (Anjum 2007:658).

Moreover, members’ participation is fused with ‘conscious intentionality’ – what Ortner calls ‘agency of intentions’ (Ortner 2001:77, 81). This point is further explored by Asad (2009:131) in his discussion of rituals amongst Cistercian monks. His study focused on how the liturgical practices of the monks were not merely communicative or symbolic, but rather that such performances came to endow the subjects’ own wills, desires and intellect with particular forms of being (Mahmood 2001:834). Although \textit{Sohbet} itself is not a ritual per se, it does contain ritual practice: \textit{Salat}, the five daily ritual prayers. In the same vein as Asad (2009) and Mahmood (2001), I argue that \textit{Sohbet} is a process through which participants – with agency of intention – seek to form an Islamic habitus so as to reflect the spirit of the Prophet and the Qur’anic morals.

\textsuperscript{29} The companions of the Prophet are referred to as the Sahabah.
**Sohbet and habitus**

As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the aims of the Gülen Movement and Gülen’s teachings is not only to create a link between its members and their own conceptualisation of tradition, but furthermore to change and reformulate the self around the Prophetic and Qur’anic teachings disseminated through Gülen’s instruction. To this end, I have stated that *Sohbet* is particularly geared to such a task; in this section, I will discuss in more detail *Sohbet* and its function in creating a Gülen-taught Islamic habitus.

Participants of the movement take part in *Sohbet* in multiple settings as was highlighted in the introduction, and *Sohbet* is central for those who seek to accomplish the formation of a self (with a particular habitus) as taught by Gülen. As one participant highlighted:

*Sohbet happens in different ways... we discuss...the teachings of Nursi and Hodjaeffendi and the work of the cemaat, and the importance of working on your self and perfecting yourself as a Muslim. Sohbet... [is] important to keep motivated and to use as a means of changing yourself and making yourself better. Not only do you pray Salat and Qur’an, but you also listen to other brothers and have the space to read and think about the message and meanings of what Hodjaeffendi says. (Field notes)*

The speaker in the quote specifically mentions *Salat* (the Muslim act of prayer); analysed thoroughly by Mahmood, *Salat* is identified as a ‘key site for purposefully moulding intentions, emotions, and desires in accord with orthodox standards of Islamic piety’ (2001:828); Henkel provides another ethnographic analysis of the performance of *Salat*, characterising it as a ‘mobile discipline that can easily be inserted...
into very different forms of life’ (2005:487). To the participants of my study, Salat was not only an important aspect of their lives but was also purposefully ‘inserted’ into Sohbet. Moreover, Sohbet combines reading and audition, which was specifically analysed by Hirschkind (2001a) as a process that is geared to and employed by participants in order to create particular dispositions and selves.

Thus, my understanding of the role of Sohbet within the Gülen movement proceeds along similar lines of thought to both Mahmood and Hirschkind in emphasising how religious practices, in all their forms, are a tool ‘for becoming a certain kind of person and achieving certain states’ (Mahmood 2001:837). Whereas Mahmood and Hirschkind focus on one particular activity (audition of religious sermons), Sohbet differs from their analyses insofar as it is not a single act of self-discipline but instead encompasses a combination of a number of acts: ritual processes such as salat, audition (and consumption) of religious media, companionship. It is also a practice which, analogous to MacIntyre’s sense of ‘practice,’ involves the acceptance of ‘standards of excellence and obedience to rules’ (2013:190). I would add to this the importance of accepting the authority of the Ağabey, the ‘older brother’ serious members of the cemaat have, as someone to look up to and treat as a confidante, as well as someone to seek advice from in the path to reforming and making one’s self.

Above all, I should clarify that Sohbet does not lead to a world in which participants are ‘naïvely shaped into religious Muslims’ (Henkel 2007:60). It serves,

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30 In other Islamic texts, Sohbet has a notably ‘more technical meaning of companionship, including shades of fellowship and discipleship’ (Silverstein 2008:126).

31 Participants often spoke of attending Sohbet with the ‘correct attitude’: to want to learn and to be sincere in taking part in Sohbet to experience its full benefits.

32 One of my informants described his relationship with the Ağabey as such: ‘He’s not only an “older brother” in the work of the cemaat, but also an older brother to guide me and someone I can seek help from, someone I can talk to about my problems. He is senior and someone I respect, and it is not that he is my “master” or “boss” ...’
rather, as a tool that participants use with conscious intention to achieve a particular form of selfhood; this was always a key insistence of the members with whom I spent time conversing. Nor am I suggesting that each Sohbet and experience is always uniform or carries the same sort of performance; ‘even the most standardised of Muslim practice generates a slightly different performance’ (Henkel 2007:64), but that occurrence, too, is important, as ‘each different iteration... integrates a person’s action into the [particular] discursive framework’ (Mahmood, cited in Henkel 2007:64). Sohbet becomes an effective tool in the process of ‘inculcation through... practice’ (Mahmood 2001:837) not only through its combination of performative elements and embodied religious practices, but also its reiteration – a detail that did not escape the attention of some of my participants:

You can turn up to Sohbets now and again, but if you really want to make yourself better, you should want to come again and again. Just like the five daily Salat – you keep repeating the practice and keep on perfecting it in the hope that in the process, you too slowly become better and better, inşallah (Field notes, 02/12/12)

Bourdieu’s (1977; 1990) notion of habitus is a key theoretical framework that I believe can be used in the analysis of Sohbet, drawing on examples of such usage by Hirschkind (2001a), Mahmood (2001), Silverstein (2008) and Winchester (2008). However, my own use of habitus in relation to the Gülen Movement departs from Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the term in a number of ways, which I will highlight.35

33 Bourdieu’s own definition of habitus is ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (1977:72).
34 Mauss’ conception of ‘body techniques’ (1979) is another important theoretical framework illustrating the inextricable implication of the body in relation to society which one could engage here.
35 When thinking of these departures, my own thoughts have overlapped greatly with those of Hirschkind (2001) and Mahmood (2001), upon whose writings I base this section.
A key point of my departure from Bourdieu lies in his primary concern that habitus is a locus of unconscious power; the process ‘tends to take place below the level of consciousness, expression… what is “learned by the body” is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is’ (Bourdieu 1990:73). Bourdieu’s notion is primarily concerned with the subconscious, a ‘generative principle’ through which the objective conditions of a society are inscribed and sedimented into the bodies and actions of the actors concerned (Mahmood 2001:837). Standing at odds with my analysis is not only the determinist and structuralist character of his notion, and the disregard of actual pedagogical processes (ibid.:838), but the ambiguity that Bourdieu’s notion of habitus lends to the role of the social actor and his or her agency. As has already been discussed, my participants enter Sohbet as willing and intentional actors, knowing exactly what they want to achieve and aware that this participation will help them reach the selves and embodiments that they desire. This problematises Bourdieu’s ‘narrow model’ of the unconscious reception of ‘supraindividual structure[s] of society’ (Mahmood 2001:838).

Another point of divergence with Bourdieu is that his elaboration is primarily concerned with how ideology is inscribed on the body, particularly the objective conditions related to social class and ‘capital’ (Bourdieu 1990:53) and the subjective experience; thus, his analysis is mostly restricted to understanding the permutations

36 Mahmood argues that Aristotle’s conceptualisation of habitus is more true to her study of the ritual prayer; though Bourdieu retains the permanency of habitus, he leaves aside the pedagogical aspect as well as the context of ethics that was developed by Aristotle. Her own participants, she argues, suggest a more complicated notion of habitus in which ‘issues of moral formation stand in a specific relationship to a particular kind of pedagogical model’ (2001:838). However, I would be reluctant to use the notion of a particular model for my study. Although Sohbet has a form and structure, it does not seem to me to promote one specific model of learning. In addition to encouraging the use of media, it also promotes companionship, audition, private reflection and spiritual devotion. To infer a model from such a complex and multifaceted process would, to me, build a ‘structure’ that inscribes onto bodies the tradition or culture in which one participates. Such ‘models’ can leave many other factors (such as nationalism or socio-economic considerations) unexplored, thus ignoring external forces that could also be inscribing themselves on a micro level.
and accumulations of political and economic power in society (Hirschkind 2001a:624). My analysis is not of ideology, asymmetrical power or individual subjection to authority; as was explained in the previous chapter, not all social actors engage with or perceive religious tradition in such a manner. My participants did not see their own agency diminishing or being subjected to authority in a negative or deprecatory way. Rather, it was seen as a conscious process, engaged in order to form and produce the self in a certain manner. However, aside from these particular departures, Bourdieu’s focus on the body does go some distance in returning participants – the social actors – to the centre of the story and, in doing so, leaving their own agency (and perceptions of it) unambiguous.

It is now necessary to discuss the practical aspects of the Sohbet that produce what participants identified as an Islamic habitus. I have already noted that Sohbet is dynamic, takes many forms and combines numerous different elements that can all be analysed in their own right (as Hirschkind [2001a] has done in terms of ‘listening’ to religious sermons and Mahmood [2001] and Henkal [2005] have done in the practice of Salat). I have not focused on just one of these aspects because Sohbet cannot be defined by a single act. Instead, it is treated as a whole. This is why, I argue, Sohbet is the most effective practice and tool for forming the habitus and why it occupies a central place within the Gülen movement: it is more than one act or one performance.

37 I would like to highlight the dynamic nature (as opposed to a static permanency) which characterises my use of habitus in this study. My informants did not identify one specific ‘way’ in which they wanted to form themselves. Instead, they made comments such as ‘the Companions of the Prophet are all examples too, and each of them is unique in their own way. So, too, each person is unique and has his or her own unique self... [it] is not to make everyone the same, but to make everyone united on certain things, such as service to humanity, selflessness, humility and the desire...’ This point is also discussed by Hirschkind in his survey of Bourdieu; ‘[practices], rather than being determined by the “objective conditions” that Bourdieu privileges as the site of historical agency, impact and alter those conditions’ (2001a:625). In essence, practising Sohbet is not a unidirectional process or a permanent or durable embodiment of dispositions, but one that requires constant attention and conscious human industry.
Sohbet works to reorganise participants’ relationships not only to other people (through companionship), but also to time and space. Prayer is essential, and extra prayers often take place at night. Participants frequently have to exert a great deal of effort, and it takes substantial personal determination to attend these prayers:

Tehajjud [an extra optional night prayer] happens on a Friday night when you would more happily be in bed, but that is the sacrifice; those are the things that really help you in understanding hardship and what it takes to really work on yourself... Also, it is cold [this conversation took place in December]... it really does have a big effect on yourself and how you think when you do such things... The night also has a special calmness and makes you think and wonder on who you are and what you have done and are doing in life. (Field notes 10/12/12)

Notable from this experience, and from the perceived effects of Sohbet detailed by the participant, is how Sohbet reorganises the body’s relation to everyday social structure and to participants’ perceptions of time, space and the ways in which they engage with time and space; rather then staying asleep, they choose to get up, pray and contemplate. The types of space used are important to note here; normally, participants would meet in a mosque or one of the movement-owned reading halls that often form part of the schools run by the Gülen Movement. This is done because the process is not within the comforts of one’s own home or that of another member; instead, everyone moves away from their own personal spaces and collectively participates elsewhere.

Sohbet would not be what it is without its emphasis on the canonical practices of the five daily prayers, Qur’an recitations and fasting, which are part of wider Muslim practice not exclusive to the movement. Within Sohbet, however, these are emphasised, as well as within the broader teachings of Fethullah Gülen himself. I cannot provide a

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38 During my own fieldwork and participation, members often gathered at 3:30 or 4 a.m.
39 One could perhaps even devote a study to the phenomenological aspects of Sohbet within the context of religious experience and practices (Merleau-Ponty 2002), but it is an avenue I cannot pursue in this paper.
40 Students that lived in one of the movement-owned dormitories would regularly wake each other up for the dawn prayer and pray together in congregation.
full analysis to show empirically how such practices ‘fundamentally change’ a person’s moral constitution (Winchester [2008] does so in his examination of some of the above practices with relation to converts to Islam), but the efficacy of such actions is revealed in the ways they ‘reorganise the embodied relationships [of social actors] to space, time, and the local social order’ (Winchester 2008:1759). This was pointed out by one of my participants, who shared the following thoughts about the five daily prayers:

...before I joined cemaat, I used to pray, but it was a meaningless practice. But the more I spent time with the cemaat, the more I learnt the real purpose of prayer: that five times a day it is meant to refocus yourself to a bigger picture... I never used to pray at work, but now I do; it really changes my perspective on life and serves as a reminder five times a day that I have an obligation to God to not only think of me, but to think of who I am and what I am meant to do in this life... You see, praying in a congregation puts you next to everyone and reminds you that you are not alone. Also, the imam is always the one who is seen as more pious and knowledgeable; it is humbling that you might be a CEO, yet you are praying behind someone who is your junior, such privileges matters in the eyes of God... prayer is something that makes you. (Field notes)

The above participant related a string of benefits he perceived in his practice of the five daily prayers. I also heard similar statements from participants who came to Sohbets that specifically had a formal prayer or an optional prayer scheduled into the meeting. This participant noted a change between the way he used to perform prayer and how it was now performed, carrying multiple layers of meanings and performative functions. One senses a change in his thoughts, feelings and even the orientation of his life and his relationship to others – illustrating the ‘constitutive powers of prayer’ (Winchester 2008:1763) and emphasising that this practice of prayer removes one from the structure of everyday life, placing the self in a different pattern and structure even within mundane spaces like those of employment. This is akin to what Winchester describes as responding to ‘God’s time’ and that the ‘praying subject is engaged in the practical reorganization of bodily memory’ (2008:1765).

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41 In mentioning ‘meanings’, I should point out that participants generally believed that prayer is what a good Muslim does, not only because of prayer’s ‘meanings’ but because praying is integral to the self. It does not just convey a message; it is, in its own right, submission to God (see Winchester 2008:1763 for a similar elaboration on this point).
Sohbets also build on the teachings of mutual love and respect between participants and, importantly, emphasise deference to one’s Ağabey – the ‘older brother’. Each member I spoke to always pointed out someone else as his Ağabey, and in my own observations of interaction between an Ağabey and his ‘younger brother’, I noted that the Ağabey would show love and care toward the other while the ‘younger brother’ would show deference, respect and admiration toward his Ağabey. For example, every time one participant would see his Ağabey, he would immediately go over to him, hug the Ağabey and readily introduce him to me; he would then explain who this person was and how much respect and admiration he (the participant) had for him.

Ağabeys are important to Sohbet; for example, when Sohbets took the form of an informal tea gathering on a weekday evening, the most senior Ağabey would deliver the talk. The Ağabey would also take the lead in arranging the other Sohbets, reminding his ‘younger brothers’ (usually an Ağabey ‘looks out for’ two or three ‘younger brothers’) to turn up using SMS and asking after them if they were not seen for two or three weeks. This relationship was given particular focus within the confines of Sohbet, since it is primarily during Sohbets that an Ağabey and his ‘younger brother’ have the most interaction. One participant explained these relationships thus:

...having an Ağabey teaches you about humility and is like the early community of Muslims; the Prophet had companions who not only had love for him, but who listened to him, and he in turn cared for them, loved them and nurtured them. It teaches you obedience, which is ultimately something we have to do for God... Just like I have an Ağabey, I too can be an Ağabey to someone else and look out for him and help that person... It helps having a friend and an ‘older brother’... It makes you think about how

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42 This talk was typically based on a sermon or a one of Gülen’s writings.
arrogant you can be, and that we should be humble and not let our pride get in the way of things – especially... being a Muslim. (Field notes, 5/10/2012)

Embedded in this description is the complex connection between oneself and one's Ağabey; this relationship itself can serve as a means to create a subjective disposition of serving God, the character identified as integral to the Muslim self. The organisation of an actor’s relationship to another person – that of deference and respect – is seen to structure one’s own capacity to submit to God and, in doing so, to be a good Muslim. A participant is not just subjecting himself to a relationship of power between himself and his Ağabey; he is using that relationship to reconstitute his own self and his relationship to God, to make the propensity to submit to God, ‘to let a higher authority take precedence in one’s life’ (Winchester 2008:1766) and, finally, to remove and be mindful of undesirable characteristics such as arrogance.

I should point out that deference to an ‘older brother,’ or to elders in general, is not unique to the movement. In the context of Turkish culture, one would have a level of respect and deference not only for one’s older brother, but for elders in general; thus, it is quite normal to kiss the hands of elders and even scholars. This is an example of Doriene Kondo’s (1987:242) observations that ‘specific discourses of selfhood are variations of culturally given themes - they stand in particular relationship to often loosely articulated ideologies of selfhood present in culture at large.’ The movement uses deference and respect in a specific way: these are forms of subjection that lead to the creation of a certain aptitude and selfhood.

A Note on Perceptions of the Movement
Until this point, my analysis has focused on the words of the movement’s members themselves. I should point out that of the four members whom I closely followed, all had very similar life trajectories and involvement with the movement. All had been members for at least 15 years; they initially became involved during their late teens, and their involvement was often sparked by listening to one of Gülen’s sermons or meeting a member of the movement who would later take the role of an Ağabey.

The members also had another important thing in common: they all went through the pre-university preparation schools, then went on to study at a university set up by the movement or with the movement’s financial support and help.

This is crucial in terms of achieving the ‘thick description’ to which I earlier referred. One not only senses the ‘gratitude’ some members feel they owe to the movement, but it can even be possible to question whether the movement’s role in socio-economic mobility and in opening up avenues of ‘self-actualisation’\(^43\) is what really garners loyalty and devotion from the members. This consideration can form a study on its own; in Appendix 1, I not only acknowledge this issue in my study, but also attempt to briefly sketch how such a problem may be approached and understood anthropologically.

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\(^{43}\) ‘A Theory of Human Motivation,’ A. H. Maslow (1943)
Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this work I have attempted to study two aspects of the Gülen Movement, its participants (and the relationship of the participants to religious discourse) and the particular practice of Sohbet.

This research found that the participants own involvement in the movement is more than just a form of subjection and disciplinary practice. Through fieldwork, I have demonstrated that participants engage in the movement willingly and intentionally, without feeling subject to a power relationship or feeling that their agency is diminished.

Participants also willingly engage and consume Fethullah Gülen’s understandings and teachings of ‘tradition’ and Islam and in doing so, they do not, again, feel that this is a form of disciplinary practice or an exercise of power. Rather, such religious media and discourse is used in the conscious process of making their selves; of ensuring that the self has an “Islamic habitus” – as taught by Gülen and understood by the participants.

In wanting to achieve this particular habitus, I have argued that sohbet provides
an important matrix. However, the essential role – in all aspects of my study – is centered in the actor, who remains intentioned, conscious and does not feel his agency diminishing in anyway. *Sohbet* – in its various permutations - opens up the possibility to powerfully transforms one’s self. This process is aided by and mediated through the techniques of prayer, companionship, consumption of media, self-reflection and with the help of ones ‘older brother’. *Sohbet* in my study, looks less like a form of subjectivity and exercise of power or the ritual outcome of a pre-formed self, but rather a tool to form a certain conception of what a ‘good Muslim’ aught to be and the qualities they aught to have.
Appendix 1

Perceptions of the Gülen Movement: between external suspicion and internal loyalty

In broaching this issue in Chapter Three, I mentioned how the financial strength of the movement, together with its wide network of organisations providing employment, endows it with a degree of power and the potential to play a major role in the social and economic mobilisation of participants. This fact has not gone unrecognised; it is readily pointed out when one talks with outsiders to the movement. A whole new perception of the movement opens up, one particularly defined by strict controls and a rigid hierarchy in opposition to its perception by the movement’s members. One person external to the movement whom I spoke to explained:

The movement... uses its financial strength to get the support from the towns and villages and channel young students through its schools and universities. Of course, if someone has paid for your education, got you a job and is helping you live a comfortable life, you won’t really be disloyal or be willing to lose all that, will you? The movement will tell you there is no membership or hierarchy, but even at the newspaper, there is an official editor and an unofficial editor; even recently a lecturer was removed from the top of the university because the decision was made at the top. This is how things work and is the other face of the movement. (11/10/12)
As mentioned earlier, the movement denies any political ambitions or intentions to affect political centres of power or military and security establishments, but outsiders readily dismiss this denial. This dismissal is not limited to people with particular political persuasions or a certain degree of religious antipathy; I often spoke to Turks who generally had no issues with a religious lifestyle which they felt offered them more than an identity. They, too, shared similar fears and suspicions about the actual workings of the movement and how it garnered and retained support in practice.

In addition to the fear of a hidden political agenda, in speaking to outsiders one will certainly be told that ‘everyone knows’ that Gülen members have infiltrated the police and, furthermore, the higher echelons of military and political circles. Such perceptions of the movement are very common and are often reported in the media. For example, an article in *Time* magazine reads:

> Many Turks view the Gülen Movement with suspicion. The group has drawn comparisons among the conspiracy-minded to the Freemasons; it has been accused of being a shadow government and more than once of trying to engineer an Islamist takeover of Turkey; and in recent years, some of its opponents have found themselves snared in legal proceedings. There’s little reason to expect such issues to come up during an informal gathering of local Gülenists in a place like Diyarbakir. The movement not only forswears any role in politics, but

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44 I highlight this in particular because participants in the movement often state that suspicion and antagonism toward the movement arises from people who have a problem with ‘religion’ and Islam itself, or from secular Kemalists.
is also said to discourage discussion of political issues among its followers. (Zalewski 2013)

How does one deal, anthropologically, with such contradictory perceptions of the movement? Firstly, as I mentioned in the introduction, the Gülen movement cannot be understood in isolation from the wider political and socio-economic landscape of Turkey. Contemporary Turkish history is closely tied to the founding of Kemalism, and the rise of Islamic movements in Turkey has largely been in response to Kemalism (Abu-Rabi’ 2008:12). Considered from this perspective, the Gülen movement is necessarily tied to the political space of Turkey and is implicated in discussions about secularism, Kemalism and the country’s political future; the political context will most certainly have had a role in shaping Gülen’s elaboration of Islamic tradition just as much as it will have shaped the thoughts and reactions of the members themselves (the ‘internal’ view).

The political landscape is also important when considering non-members’ perceptions of the movement (the ‘external’ view). The same political history and context may account for some of the suspicions Turks bear in relation to the movement. As the Ottoman Empire folded, it gave birth to discourses that led to the eventual foundation of Kemalism in the 1920s (Abu-Rabi’ 2008:11). Instead of a benign political envisioning, this project posed a direct challenge to religious identity and, moreover, to the role of religion itself in the public sphere.

Given the entrenched role of Kemalism not only in the political sphere, but also in the social sphere in relation to personhood and identity, I would suggest that this complex entanglement of the political and the social has deeply shaped people’s perceptions of religion and religious movements, considering this can go some way in
helping to contextualise the negative perceptions that people harbour in relation to the movement. Such a political landscape would undoubtedly have shaped the perceptions of members in the movement, some of whom clearly stated their disdain for the role of the military in the country. Additionally, they described how Kemalism, as an ideology, had often marginalised and disregarded their conception of ‘religion’ and its deep implication in their personal lives, noting what they conceived to be disregard for the ‘Ottoman legacy.’ I must also add that the political landscape has been further complicated by the victory of openly Islamic candidates in the city’s municipal elections, creating wider discussions and often tolerated discomfort in establishments such as the military (see Kuru and Stepan’s *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* [2012] for a full discussion of Turkey’s social, historical and religious contexts and their implications in the present).

I would suggest that such conflicting perceptions of the movement highlight, more broadly, the deep implication of occurrences in the political and social landscapes to people’s perceptions of religious identity and selfhood. This is a possible avenue one can approach, anthropologically, in order to understand such a phenomenon, and it is the one I favour in this paper.

Here, the wider socio-political context itself is strongly implicated not only in an understanding of ‘religion’ in the Turkish context – religion is blurred with nationality, political power and social identity (à la Schneider 1987) – but also in the way that it ‘inscribes’ (à la Bourdieu 1977) itself on people and their perceptions, resulting in the contrasting and contradictory views that can be seen in my study. Furthermore, it would be relevant to study how embodiment and personal experiences of the wider political context – thus conceptualising the body, culture and self as interrelated, both as bodily phenomena and as the outcome of wider ideas, symbols and material conditions
(à la Csordas 1999) – may account for the contradictory perceptions that exist with regards to the Gülen movement.

To elaborate further, I argue that the conflicting view of the movement highlights, on the one hand, the complexity and blurred distinctions between ‘secularity,’ the ‘state,’ ‘society’ and ‘religion’ and how wider social and political elements are deeply intertwined in my study. It also sheds light on the competition to claim ‘Turkish culture’ by various competing parties. In my case, I could broadly distinguish between supporters (the ‘insiders’) and suspicious outsiders. Closer analysis of both negative and positive perceptions of the movement shows that they can appear to be different guises of the very same effort – of attempting to reclaim and recreate ‘Turkish culture’ within the confines of statism (see Navaro-Yashin [2002] for a wider and thoroughly in-depth exposition of such competing desires borne from a culture of statism).

In effect, insiders try to reclaim and recreate ‘Turkish culture’ through their loyalty to and membership of the movement just as much as external, suspicious non-supporters attempt to recreate and reclaim it on their own terms. The fact that issues of politics constantly seem to loom over the movement is due in part to the wider culture of statism and the deep permeation of politics into every aspect of Turkish society. Furthermore, the two contradictory perceptions of the movement are rooted in politics: major suspicions directed at the movement are political in nature, and politics are implied in the movement’s explicit denials of such accusations – despite the fact that participants readily admit that the movement has supporters and members from all corners of Turkish society.
Bibliography


[Accessed May 7 2013]