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Who is Responsible for the Conflict? The Role of Identification and Perception of Discrimination

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Abstract

This study examines whether identification (ethnic and national) and perception of discrimination between minority and majority members are related to attributions of responsibility in the context of the prolonged Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Understanding attributions of responsibility for the conflict are important because they can exacerbate or hinder conflict. The two ethnic groups, Turks and Kurds, hold different views of the conflict in which they are involved. We identify four primary parties in the current context of conflict: the Turkish state, the PKK, Kurdish citizens, and foreign states. The official state discourse holds that the PKK and the Kurds are responsible for the conflict. A shared national identification might reduce in-group conflict but also might result in minority group members adopting the official state discourse. Ethnic identity might operate differently for the different groups. Furthermore, perception of discrimination might be related to endorsing alternative explanations for the conflict, different from the state discourse. Kurds are the largest ethnic minority group in Turkey but have been denied ethnic, political, and cultural rights until recently. They have also been the targets of a long-standing assimilation policy aimed to create a nation state based on Turkish ethno-cultural identity. The Turkish Republic's founding ideology has historically denied the existence of the Kurdish ethnic minority group (currently around 18% of the population). For this study, we used a nationally representative data set of 10,386 participants; of the participants, 76% self-identified as Turkish and 13.4% as Kurdish. We conducted multiple regression analyses to predict how the two groups differed in their ethnic and national identification and perception of discrimination in predicting four different sources of conflict. Results were discussed in terms of social identity theory and conflict resolution approaches.

Introduction

In this study, we examined whether ethnic and national identification and perception of discrimination between minority and majority members are related to attributions of responsibility for Turkey's Kurdish conflict. The ongoing conflict in Turkey between the Turkish population and the Kurdish minority (the largest ethnic minority group in Turkey, now with approximately 18% of the population) is an important issue that the government has long tried to resolve.

The source of the conflict between Turks and Kurds can be traced back to the 19th century: the end of the Ottoman era (by nationalist thoughts) and the beginning of the foundation of the Turkish Republic. As the underlying ideology of this foundation, founders of the Turkish Republic believed in the idea of one nation and one language and tended to ignore the existence of other ethnic minority groups; they named the peoples from different nations and ethnic background as "Turkish," or the new Turkish

Republic (Çelebi *et al.*, 2014). Over time, the problem ignited into a state that has become nearly unsolvable; unable to use their mother tongue, with no rights to name their children with Kurdish names or change Kurdish town names with Turkish versions, Kurds became increasingly more discriminated. With these restrictions of the Turkish state's policies against the Kurdish minority group, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) was born, which together with the Turkish army's military forces caused the deaths of more than 40,000 people just in 1984 during the armed conflagrations (Çelik & Kantowitz, 2009). In 2013, the Turkish state signed an agreement with the PKK to create a peaceful environment, with good intentions (Kelman, 2005). However, usefulness of the agreement has largely failed given the armed conflicts afterward. When examining the overall process of the conflict, one thing is clear: As the policies of the Turkish state to restrict Kurdish ethnic minority increase, national-destroying actions of the PKK have become stronger (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997).

To examine the ongoing conflict in Turkey today, understanding of the attributions of responsibility is important because they can either exacerbate or hinder the conflict. The two ethnic groups, Turks and Kurds, hold different views of the conflict; each group blames the out-group for the conflict and perceives itself as the victim (Bar-Tal, 2007). According to social identity theory, the in- and out-groups can be categorized, identified, and compared (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In general, people tend to label themselves as belonging to a particular group or a ¹specific category; that is, they identify themselves with certain groups to enhance their self-esteem and to differentiate in-group characteristics from out-group specialties (Myers, 2012). The word "Kurdish" itself is used by Turkish youth as an insult.

Method

Participants

We used a nationally representative data set carried out by the KONDA in our study. The KONDA survey has significance because it is a nationality representative survey featured in Turkey. The survey lists questions about political support, monthly earning, accession, social welfare, ethnicity, and displacement. In total, 10,386 people took part in the study; in this stratified survey, we used the government's address-based system to randomly select the informants from the entire national population of 77,400,000 people¹. We grouped 55,000 villages and neighborhoods into categories of countryside, town, and city to ensure that every country subregion had been represented; of these, 874 were chosen randomly by computer, after which 12 houses were randomly chosen (KONDA, 2011). Of the participants, 76% self-identified as Turkish and 13.4% as Kurdish. In addition, 29.3% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 28 years, 34.3% were between the ages of 28 and 43 year, and 35.4% were older than 44

¹<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist>.

years ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .826$). Finally, 46.6% were women, and 52.7% were men.

Table 1

Mean scores and standard deviations for different measures, for Kurds and Turks

	Mean		Standard deviation	
	Turks	Kurds	Turks	Kurds
Age	2.08	1.97	.82	.83
Education level	4.03	3.39	1.32	1.55
Ethnic identification	3.75	3.84	.98	.97
National identification	4.3	3.64	.64	.93
Perception of discr.	2.13	2.95	1.12	1.37
State responsibility	2.6	3.6	1.05	1.1
PKK responsibility	4.00	2.82	.088	1.23
Kurds responsibility	3.68	2.65	1.0	1.15
Foreign forces resp.	4.07	3.25	.8	1.2

Table 2

Correlations among all measures

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Age	-								
Education Level	-.376**	-							
State Responsibility	-.032**	-.099**	-						
PKK Responsibility	.011	.032**	-.271**	-					
Kurds Responsibility	-.044**	.045**	-.111**	.363**	-				
Foreign Forces Resp.	.044**	.101**	-.256**	.421**	.308**	-			
Ethnic Identification	.021*	-.171**	.035**	.050**	.090**	-.006	-		
National Identification	.044**	.005	-.224**	.341**	.214**	.287**	.307**	-	
Discrimination	-.083**	.032**	.253**	-.226**	-.160**	-.204**	-.037**	-.198**	-

Correlations between the different measures, for Kurds and Turks

** $p < .01$ (2-tailed), * $p < .05$ (2-tailed)

Measures

We measured *attributions of responsibility* with a 5-point scale that evaluates the source of the ongoing conflict with four items. The question was: “What do you think about the following statements regarding the origin/causes of the Kurdish conflict? (Kurdish conflict is caused by...).” For evaluating the source of the conflict, four items were: “It is an issue of Kurdish identity being acknowledged and validated,” “It is caused by the State treating Kurdish people differently,” “It is because of the foreign countries/states’ provocation,” and “It is caused by the PKK” (KONDA, 2011). We measured *ethnic identification* with one item (5-point scale): “To be described by your ethnic origin, under ‘People describe/define themselves based on what is important to them,’ which of the following are important to you when you’re describing yourself?” (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006, 2007). We evaluated *national identification* with one item (5-point scale): “To be defined as a citizen of Turkish republic, under ‘People describe/define themselves based on what is important to them,’ which of the following are important to you when you’re describing yourself?” (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006, 2007). We

measured *perception of discrimination* with one item (5-point scale). We used a single question of the KONDA survey to measure perception of discrimination: “Some people report experiencing problems in freely expressing and living their identities in Turkey, and some report no problems. In your opinion, do you think other people may experience problems expressing their identities?” For measuring the answer, the options were as follows: “Absolutely no, there are no legal obstacles;” “They feel peer pressure, pressure from other people;” “Sometimes, they experience some problems;” “They can live with their identities, with not much problem;” and “Absolutely yes, no problems” (KONDA, 2011). We conducted stepwise regression analyses to predict how the two groups differed in their ethnic and national identification and perception of discrimination in predicting four different sources of conflict.

Results

Stepwise multiple regression analyses for Turks

We conducted analyses to evaluate how well the Turkish participants’ scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to the state. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered perception of discrimination into the regression equation; it was significantly related to state responsibility ($\beta_1 = .136$, $t(7601) = 12.720$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .15, indicating that approximately 2% of the variance of attributing responsibility to the Turkish state could be accounted for by perception of discrimination scores. At step 2 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to state responsibility ($\beta_2 = -.165$, $t(7601) = 8.208$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .17, indicating that approximately 1% of the variance of attributing responsibility to the Turkish state could be accounted for by national identification.

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Turkish participants’ scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to the PKK. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to PKK responsibility ($\beta_1 = .237$, $t(7626) = 14.353$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .20, indicating that approximately 4% of the variance of attributing responsibility to PKK could be accounted for by national identification scores.

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Turkish participants’ scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to foreign forces. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to responsibility of foreign forces ($\beta_1 = .196$, $t(7619) =$

14.326, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .17, indicating that approximately 3% of the variance of attributing responsibility to foreign forces could be accounted for by national identification scores.

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Turkish participants' scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to the Kurdish people. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered ethnic identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to Kurdish people's responsibility ($\beta_1 = .101$, $t(7629) = 8.069$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .13, indicating that approximately 1% of the variance of the Kurdish people's responsibility could be accounted for by ethnic identification.

Table 3
Stepwise multiple regression results for Turks

Model	Predictor variables	β	t	p	R	R^2
1 (State respons.)	(constant)					
	Ethnic identification	.044*	3.586	$\leq .001$	.177	.031
	National identification	-.101*	-8.208	$\leq .001$	.172	.030
	Perception of discr.	.144*	12.720	$\leq .001$	.15	.023
2 (PKK respons.)	(constant)					
	Ethnic identification	.048*	3.696	$\leq .001$	.209	.044
	National identification	.175*	14.353	$\leq .001$	.198	.039
	Perception of discr.	-.049*	-4.379	$\leq .001$	.205	.042
3 (Kurds respons.)	(constant)					
	Ethnic identification	.099*	8.069	$\leq .001$	.131	.017
	National identification	.070*	5.735	$\leq .001$	.148	.022
	Perception of discr.	-.056*	-4.945	$\leq .001$	.158	.025
4 (Foreign forces respons.)	(constant)					
	Ethnic identification	-.018**	-1.504***	.133	-	-
	National identification	.162*	14.326	$\leq .001$	.167	.028
	Perception of discr.	-.056*	-4.972	$\leq .001$	.177	.031

* $p < .001$

excluded variable; beta in value, *excluded variable; t-value.

B, standardized regression coefficient; t, obtained t-value; p, probability; R, multiple correlation; R^2 , proportion variance explained.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses for Kurds

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Kurdish participants' scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to the state. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered perception of discrimination into the regression equation; it was significantly related to state responsibility ($\beta_1 = .223$, $t(1295) = 10.724$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .36, indicating that approximately 13% of the variance of the state responsibility could be accounted for by perception of dis-

crimination.

At step 2 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to state responsibility ($\beta_2 = -.300$, $t_2(1295) = 9.842$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .42, indicating that approximately 4% of the variance of the state responsibility could be accounted for by national identification.

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Kurdish participants' scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to the PKK. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to PKK responsibility ($\beta_1 = .443$, $t_1(1295) = 13.409$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .39, indicating that approximately 15% of the variance of the PKK responsibility could be accounted for by national identification.

At step 2 of the analysis, we entered perception of discrimination into the regression equation; it was significantly related to PKK responsibility ($\beta_2 = -.252$, $t_2(1295) = 11.146$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .49, indicating that approximately 8% of the variance of the state responsibility could be accounted for by national identification.

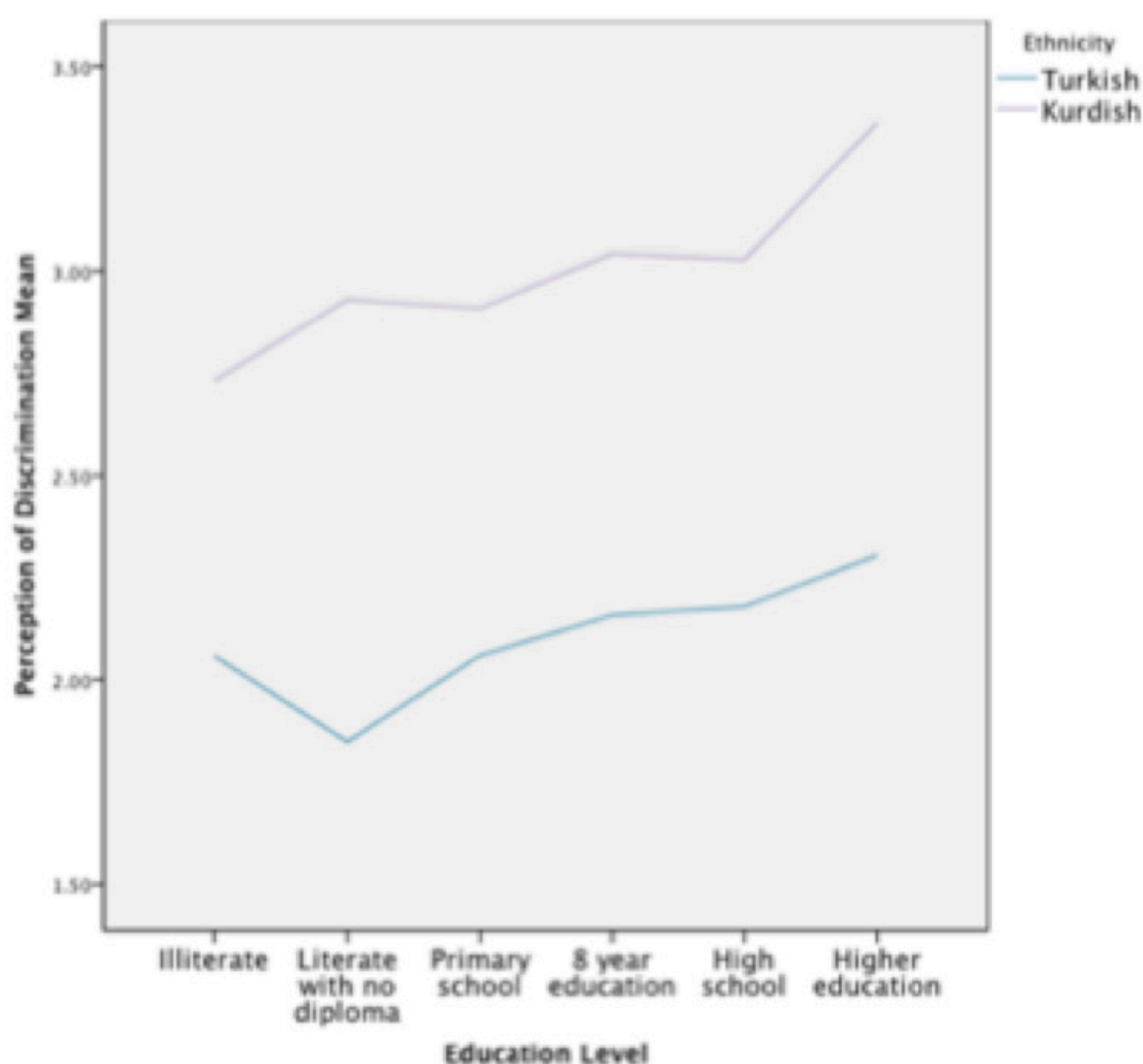


Figure 1
Education level and perception of discrimination

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Kurdish participants' scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of

discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to the Kurdish people. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered perception of discrimination into the regression equation; it was significantly related to the Kurdish people's responsibility ($\beta_1 = -.112$, $t_1(1298) = 4.710$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .16, indicating that approximately 2% of the variance of the Kurdish people's responsibility could be accounted for by perception of discrimination.

At step 2 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to Kurdish people's responsibility ($\beta_2 = -.143$, $t_2(1298) = 4.219$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .19, indicating that approximately 1% of the variance of the Kurdish people's responsibility could be accounted for by national identification.

We conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to evaluate how well the Kurdish participants' scores of ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination attributed responsibility of the ongoing conflict in Turkey to foreign forces. At step 1 of the analysis, we entered perception of discrimination into the regression equation; it was significantly related to foreign forces responsibility ($\beta_1 = -.220$, $t_1(1295) = 9.369$, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .33, indicating that approximately 11% of the variance of the foreign forces responsibility could be accounted for by perception of discrimination.

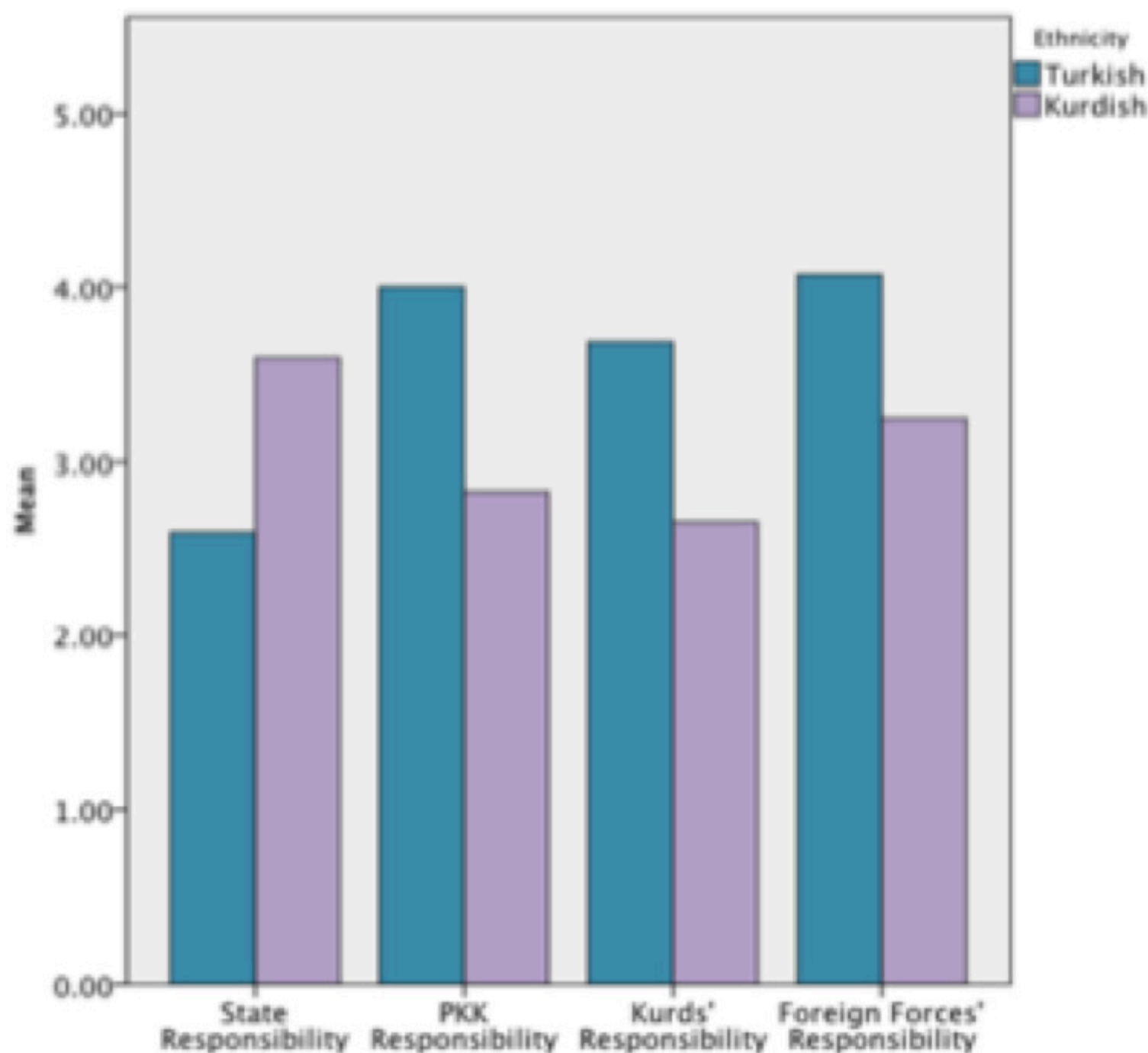


Figure 2

Attributions of responsibility and possible sources of the conflict

At step 2 of the analysis, we entered national identification into the regression equation; it was significantly related to foreign forces responsibility ($\beta_2 = .349$, $t_2(1295) =$

10.097, $p < .001$). The multiple correlation coefficient was .4, indicating that approximately 5% of the variance of the foreign forces responsibility could be accounted for by national identification.

Education level and perception of discrimination

We examined the impact of education level on perception of discrimination separately for scores of Turkish and Kurdish people (see Figure 1). With a qualified education level, there is higher awareness of the ongoing discrimination and conflict in both groups. As the figure shows, Kurdish people's awareness of discrimination is significantly higher than Turkish people's.

Attributions of responsibility and possible resources of the conflict

Figure 2 shows attributions of responsibility to four possible sources of the ongoing conflict in Turkey: the state, PKK, Kurdish people, and foreign forces. In attributing responsibility to the Turkish state, scores of Kurdish people are significantly higher than those of Turkish people, indicating that they find the state more responsible for the current conflict. In contrast with Kurdish people, Turks find the PKK, the Kurdish people themselves, and foreign forces more responsible for the ongoing conflict in Turkey.

Conclusion

This work takes a novel approach from the literature by examining the effect of three different independent variables (*i.e.*, ethnic identification, national identification, and perception of discrimination) on four different dependent variables (state's responsibility, Turks' responsibility, Kurds' responsibility, and responsibility of the PKK). These variables are mainly used as dependent variables in the existing study, in this study they serve as independent variables, which enables us to assess the conflict at a different angle. Analyses of the collected data showed results parallel to the idea of social identification theory, as predicted. From the results, it is understandable why both the Kurdish and Turkish peoples have little trust in the out-group (Çelebi *et al.*, 2014). The results show that the Kurdish people, especially those who define themselves with their ethnic identity, attribute the responsibility of the ongoing conflict mostly to the Turkish state, while the Turkish people attribute the responsibility mostly to the PKK or foreign forces; these findings coincide with those of Çelebi and colleagues (2014). According to the results, the Kurds look through an ethnic frame at this conflict, making the results even more meaningful (Çelebi *et al.*, 2014). However, the Turks also understand this conflict from a terrorism frame (Çelebi *et al.*, 2014), which causes them to view the PKK as among the most responsible parties for the conflict. Turkish people who define themselves with their national identity are more prone to consider PKK responsible for the conflict. Similar to the Kurdish people, the Turkish people do not blame the in-group members or the Turkish state for what is happening. According to the Turks, the state is the least responsible party, and those defining themselves with national identification are

less likely to blame the state.

Kurdish people with a higher degree of national identification have more trust in out-group members (Bilali, 2012). In parallel with the Turks, Kurdish people who have higher levels of national identification tend to blame the Turkish state less and the PKK more for the conflict. Of note, they also blame the Kurdish people for their circumstances. Turkish people who have higher levels of national identification attribute the responsibility for the conflict to the Kurdish people. Conversely, Turks who score higher on perception of discrimination blame the Kurdish people less. This result can be linked to the higher level of education as well; for both sides, a higher education is correlated with a higher perception of discrimination against the minority groups.

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