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Predictors of Support for Democratic Reform: Role of Intergroup Friendship, Perception of Discrimination and Identification

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Abstract

In Turkey, recent debate is whether to include the word “Kurd” in the constitution or to replace the word “Turk” with “Türkiyeli” (who holds Turkish citizenship). These changes symbolically challenge the close correspondence between Turkish ethnicity and nationality. Granting some rights to the Kurdish minority, including recognition of their ethno-political identity in the constitution, is critical for democratic reforms and sustainable reconciliation following the peace agreement in March 2013. The question is “How much of the Turkish population supports these constitutional changes?” Research has proposed that having relationship with out-group individuals positively influences an individual’s perceptions of others. Therefore, the current study investigates the role of intergroup friendship, perception of discrimination, and identification (ethnic, national) in predicting support for democratic reforms through constitutional change. 380 college students (68.2 %women, 31.3% men) who identified themselves as Turkish, participated in the study. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict support for democratic reform. The main effects of intergroup friendship, perception of discrimination and identification (ethnic, national) were entered. All predictors had significant independent effects except ethnic identity. Results were discussed in terms of intergroup relations.

Introduction

The reveal of talks regarding the protection of minorities and their rights has a long history. Prior to World War II, it was only by treaties that minority rights were protected, and it was largely accepted by the international community that any situation regarding a state’s treatment towards its own nation was an internal matter. After World War II, however, the rights of the minority became a more prominent issue, and protection of such rights was considered as an international concern.

A variety of international organizations created communities to protect minority rights – in the name of protecting human rights – around the world (Stavros, 1995). In addition to international organizations, such as the UN, researchers in many different areas including psychologists, political scientists, and social policy makers have been studying different perspectives on this topic. Verkuyten and his colleagues, for example, identified various fields such as international law, human rights, history, political science and sociology, and he added his particular studies, which aim to explain the people’s attitudes towards minority rights (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006). Verkuyten and his col-

leagues (2006) mention three basic points about supporting minority rights, which are (i) the value of cultural diversity, (ii) social equality and (iii) social cohesion. With regard to the first point, philosophers say that while all multicultural ideologies point out the essential need of cultural diversity, they also reject the idea of cultural assimilation. Based on this premise, their study showed that if there were a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, there would be more support for minority rights. The second point states that while minority groups carry their culture in daily life, they should also have equal rights before the constitution with all other people in the society they live in. However, pervasive social discrimination is a barrier for such equality, whereby perception of discrimination would affect the support of minority rights in the community. Lastly, some believe that there should not be special recognition of minority groups, as it could possibly become a threat to the country's unity. The study conducted by Verkuyten *et al.* showed that the more people considered a state's unity, the less they provided support for minority rights (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006). Furthermore, studies have shown that minority groups are more likely to favor the endorsement of rights of the other minority groups than the majority of the population does. Interestingly, it is also demonstrated that low-status groups are more engaged in supporting minority rights than those of high-status groups (Evans & Need, 2002).

Treatment of ethnic minorities influences all aspects of their lives and put them in danger to become disconnected from their culture and eventually to the loss of their rights. Additionally, in the case of political change and conflict, just because a group is not fully integrated within the society, such minority groups are the first to be threatened by the community; even blood revenge (tribal revenge killing) might take place between minority and majority groups. For these reasons, effective mechanisms for protecting minority rights are essential in multicultural societies. Usually these mechanisms are provided by the constitution, which has provisions to protect rights of all citizens. Since the constitutions have the highest power and legal authority in most countries, reforming some articles and having minorities specifically recognized in the constitution can be the best safeguard of minority rights.

As a state having different minority groups, Turkey is one of those countries that pays increased attention to minority rights, particularly to those of the Kurds since they are the largest minority group of the country (currently around 18% of the population; Konda 2011). On the one hand, the Turkish constitution does not include any article that can be interpreted in a way that Kurdish people may have been discriminated as a minority group, yet it also does not have any explicit statements that are in favor of the Kurds' rights. On the other hand, Kurdish people have a history full of discrimination imposed by the Turkish Republic. As a result of its founding ideology of a single nation, single language, and centralized power, the Turkish Republic followed an assimilation policy, banned the use of the Kurdish language, and replaced Kurdish names of people

and towns with Turkish names (Çelebi et. al., 2014). As a reaction to these acts of oppression, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) launched a violent campaign in 1984 that led to today's Kurdish-Turkish conflict, which has resulted in the death of almost 40,000 people, some having been killed by the PKK while others were killed by the Turkish army (Çelik & Kantowitz, 2009; Çelebi et. al., 2011). The result was a vicious cycle of violence that continued for approximately 30 years, during which Kurdish nationalism had found its way to grow (Kirisçi & Winrow, 1997), resulting in the conflict becoming one of the largest concerns of the society.

With the hope of ending the conflict, the so-called “Kurdish Opening” policy of the then Turkish government has been implemented since 2009 with the aim of granting more rights to Kurdish people. The policy includes constitutional changes such as allowing the use of the Kurdish language as a mother tongue in education. The changes related to the use of the Kurdish language include that the official language of the Turkish State would be Turkish, but the Kurdish language will be used in any other cases in governmental areas. Additionally, it is now being discussed whether the word Turk, used to define Turkish citizens should be excluded from the constitution or not. While many authorities oppose this idea of excluding the word ‘Turk’ an argument has arisen suggesting that the word “Kurd” should be included in the constitution instead of excluding the word Turk.

The current study, therefore, aims to focus on the Kurdish issue with regard to constitutional amendments regarding Kurdish people's rights. The purpose of this study is to understand the factors that contribute to the attitude of the majority group, in our case the Turkish people, and what helps them to develop a point of view in support of these amendments to the constitution. The previous research suggested that intergroup friendship has been a powerful predictor of support for minority rights (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006; Teney, 2011; Pettigrew, 1997). Besides having a good communication with the minority group, we predict that whether or not the Turkish people define themselves and the Kurdish people within their national and ethnic identity is also an important contributor as to the extent that an individual may be aware of the discriminations against Kurdish people. What we measured in this study, therefore, is the impact of these three factors for and against the constitutional changes. We operationalized support for democratic reform with the item, “The word Kurdish should be included in the constitution.”

Role of National and Ethnic Identity

Identity includes one's both national and ethnic identification within the majority or minority groups. In the current study, we measured both ethnic and national identification and the relationship with endorsement of minority rights for the Turkish group only. (An important reminder here is that national identification refers to being from Turkey as opposed to ethnic identification referencing being either Turk or Kurd.) The research suggests that people with higher in-group identification are more likely to have

concerns about the continuity of their own group; as a result they tend to be more negative toward out-groups (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Brewer, 1999). Accordingly, if identification with ethnic background was the case, we would expect that the Turkish group would not support the rights of Kurdish people. On the other hand, if the Turkish people identify themselves more with nationality, they, then, would support the rights of Kurdish people. This is simply because they define both themselves and the Kurdish group as from Turkey (“Türkiyeli”), meaning that they believe in a higher identity shaped by shared values rather than one shaped by ethnic backgrounds.

Role of Intergroup Friendship

As the recent studies of Verkuyten and colleagues demonstrated, having close relationships with the members of out-groups positively affects one’s attitude about that out-group since in such situations, one’s attitude towards multiculturalism and diversity become more positive (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006). In one study, they found that majority groups that have friends from the minority group have been supporting the weak assimilation, a concept referring to a process in which minority groups get adapted to the general public rules of the society they live in while maintaining their own rituals and such in their private life (Teney, 2011). Pettigrew (1997) found that the members of the majority who had intergroup friendships had more pro-immigrant policy preferences. According to Pettigrew, members of the majority who have intergroup friendships are more concerned and sympathetic for the situation of ethnic minorities (Teney, 2011). Considering these results, we expect to find that Turkish people who have Kurdish friends would support Kurdish rights more than those without such relationships.

Role of Perception of Discrimination

Prior research studied how the minority groups themselves perceive discrimination and how this perception influences their attitudes and behaviors. This study aimed to understand perceived discrimination in another perspective: We assumed that the more the members of a majority group realize that the minority group is being discriminated against, the more the majority group members would stand-up for that group’s rights. In this regard, we expected to find that as the Turkish people become more aware of the discrimination against Kurdish people in public places and schools, they would more readily support Kurdish people’s rights. That is, they would support the inclusion of the word “Kurd” into constitution.

Method

Participants

625 Turkish and Kurdish college students from 8 colleges and universities in seven cities who participated in research on societal issues in contemporary Turkey participated in the study. The participants were between 18 and 27 years old ($M = 21.17$, SD

= 1.88). 54% were female and 46% were male. The participants described the economic status of their families as middle class (assessed by one item measured on a 7-point scale, $M = 4.0$, $SD = .89$). On political orientation participants placed themselves slightly to the left on the political spectrum ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.19$). Since our research considers only the view of the Turkish people, we analyzed their answers only. Therefore, our primary focus group consisted of 380 college students (68.2 %women, 31.3% men) who self-identified as Turkish.

		1	2	3	4	5
1	My ethnic group is very important for how I see myself					
2	I feel committed to my ethnic background					
3	I strongly identify with people of my own ethnic group					
4	My ethnicity is the most important part of who I am					
5	I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group					
6	I participate in cultural activities of my own ethnic group such as special foods, music or customs					
7	I like to show my ethnic group membership to other people, for example by wearing or doing things that symbolize my ethnicity					

Figure 1

Questions of ethnic identification. 1=certainly not agree; 5 =certainly agree

Procedure

We operationalized support for democratic reform with the item, “The word Kurdish should be included in the constitution.” The predictors were intergroup friendship, perception of discrimination and ethnic and national identification. All questions regarding predictors were asked within the same questionnaire that is given to the participants anonymously. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict support for democratic reform. The main effects of intergroup friendship, perception of discrimination and identification (ethnic, national) were entered.

Identification

Identification is based on both nationality and ethnic background. The survey included 5 national identification questions and 7 ethnic identification questions, all of which were measured in a 5-point-scale (1= Certainly not agree, and 5= Certainly agree).

		1	2	3	4	5
1	I am proud to be a citizen of Turkey					
2	Being a citizen of Turkey is an important part of how I see myself					
3	I have strong feeling of being a citizen of Turkey					
4	I really feel that I belong to this country					
5	I feel addressed when foreigners say something negative about Turkey					

Figure 2

Questions of national identification. 1=certainly not agree; 5 =certainly agree

Intergroup Relationship

We used one question for measuring intergroup friendship, which was, “How many of your close friends are Kurdish?” There were five possible answers to this question: None, Around ¼ of them, Around half of them, Around ¾ of them and Almost All.

Perception of Discrimination

We measured perception of discrimination using two questions, which are (1) “In general, how often are Kurds being discriminated in daily life?” and (2) “In general, how often are Kurds discriminated in schools or at work?” We used a 5-point-scale for the answers (1=Never, and 5= Always).

Results

Correlations among all measures

The results of multiple regression showed that all predictors had significant independent effects except ethnic identity, $p > .05$. We found that national identification (NI) ($\beta = -.20, p < .01$), intergroup friendship ($\beta = .14, p < .01$) and perception of discrimination ($\beta = .13, p < .05$) were significant predictors.

Table 1*Mean scores and Standard Deviations for different measures, and for Turks*

	Mean	SD
Age	21.17	1.87
Socioeconomic Status	4.00	.89
Political Orientation (Left Right)	4.82	2.21
FriendKurd_IMP2	2.79	1.23
Perceived Discrimination	3.51	1.12
Ethnic Identification	3.10	1.06
National Identification	3.21	1.42
Democratic Reform	3.42	1.49

Table 2*Results of the multiple regression***Coefficients^a**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.52	.48		5.24	.00
Ethnic ID Total	-.12	.10	-.09	-1.30	.20
National ID Total	-.27	.09	-.20	-3.02	.00
How many close friends Kurd	.33	.12	.14	2.75	.01
How often are Kurds being discriminated in daily life	.19	.07	.13	2.55	.01

Table 3*Correlations between the different measures*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intergroup Friendship	-				
2. Perceived Discrimination	.43**	-			
3. Ethnic Identification	.19**	.10*	-		
4. National Identification	-.52**	-.50**	.09*	-	
5. Democratic Reform	.53**	.40**	-.03	-.51**	-

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

Hierarchical multiple regression results

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of three control measures (intergroup friendship, perceived discrimination, and national identification (NI)) to predict support for democratic reform, after controlling for the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) and political orientation. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. SES and political orientation were entered at Step 1, explaining 11% of the variance in supporting democratic reform (Table 4). After the entry of the intergroup friendship, perceived discrimination and NI at Step 2 the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 36.6%, $F(5, 625) = 72.02, p < .01$. The two control measures explained an additional 26% of the variance in support for democratic reform, after controlling for intergroup friendship, perceived discrimination and NI, $\Delta R^2 = .26, \Delta F(3, 625) = 84.88, p < .01$. In the final model, three control measures were statistically significant, with the intergroup friendship recording the highest beta value ($\beta = .31, p < .01$); national identification recording higher beta value ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$) than the perceived discrimination ($\beta = .14, p < .01$).

Table 4
Regression analyses with democratic reform as dependent variable and intergroup friendship, perceived discrimination, and national identification as predictors: standardized regression coefficients (beta)

	Step 1	Step 2
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	-.042	.019
Political Orientation	-.0316**	.007
Intergroup Friendship		.310**
Perceived Discrimination		.138**
National Identification		-.292**
R2 Change	.107**	.258**
F Change	37.657	84.880

** $p < .01$

Discussion

The present study found that support for the constitutional change is predicted by national identification ($p < .01$), intergroup relationship ($p < .01$), and perception of discrimination ($p < .05$). Among these factors, intergroup relationship seems to be the most remarkable one to us, especially when considering applying the findings to the actual relationships within the society in order to decrease the stereotypical attitudes and to increase support for constitutional changes. Yet, to establish an optimal condition, the underlying reasons must be understood. Research suggests that intergroup interaction, first and foremost, allows the different groups to learn about each other, which explains

how it leads to a lessening of the prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Besides this, some research focused on anxiety as a mediator for the intergroup contact and reduced prejudice, and suggests that intergroup contact might help people to reduce their anxiety and their perception of threat coming from the out-group (Blascovich et. al., 2001), thus reducing their prejudices against the other group. In other words, intergroup contact might help one to understand that the other (or the group) is not threatening him, thereby his anxiety of a possible threat to his group decreases and this leads to a reduction of prejudices against the other. The idea of reduced perception of threat seems to be more explanatory for our case considering the fact that the “Kurdish issue” had been discussed as a terrorism problem for decades, and this had led to the lessened out-group trust for the Turkish community (Çelebi et. al., 2014). Batson et. al. also found that intergroup friendship leads to empathy and taking the perspective of the out-group members and thus enables people to have a reduced prejudice against the out-group (Batson et. al., 1997). This seems to provide another explanation for our results as we also established that the more Turkish people become aware of the daily discrimination against Kurdish people, the more they support the constitutional changes for Kurdish rights.

Among all the factors, we did not get significant results for ethnic identification, which is compelling because the Kurdish issue has always been discussed as an ethnic problem. The reason for this finding could be that most of the Turkish people deny the fact that Kurds have a different ethnic background, which may be a result of shared values including religion and a shared historical background. Another possible reason, as we already showed in this study, is that many Turks have Kurdish friends, and also may have family relationships formed through cross-group marriages between Kurds and Turks (currently about 3.7% of the population; Konda, 2008). Thus, it may be the case that the probability for Turks to perceive Kurdish people as a different ethnic group is decreased by these relationships, which in turn prevented us to find a significant result for ethnic identification.

Limitations

Though the current study presents some significant predictors for supporting democratic rights of the Kurdish people, it lacks in several points. The very first limitation is that our sample consists only of 380 Turkish university students. To explore the scope of the present findings, a larger sample size including other demographic groups is needed, such as workers and educators. Another limitation may be that our questions do not require detailed answers. For instance, in order to investigate the perceived discrimination, we only ask whether participants are aware of any discriminations at school or in public places. To support the present findings, participants involved in future studies should answer more questions and provide specific examples of experienced discrimination.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study suggests that Turkish students with more Kurdish friends are more willing to support the changes in the constitution that promise to give the rights of Kurdish people. Other factors that contribute to the endorsement of Kurdish people's rights are perception of discrimination and national identification. Interestingly ethnic identification does not seem to be a predictor for the constitutional changes. This raises the question "How much of an ethnic problem is actually ethnic?". The present research suggests that ethnic conflicts could be studied and understood in other respects in the future studies. One needs to ask what other factors besides ethnic identification contribute to conflicts. It may be that the adaptation of different groups to each other's social and cultural norms is hard enough to lead to conflicts. This seems plausible with respect to our findings about intergroup friendship: the more the parties come together and know about each other, the more they support each other. In this regard, future studies may look for the effects of cross-group marriages between both parties since such marriages provide good amount of intergroup contact. If the results are found in line with ours, our hypothesis about the effect of knowing each other will be supported.

One other point that further studies can look for is the effect of intergroup friendship for the Kurdish people. The current study only analyzed how Turkish students are affected by their close friendships with Kurdish people. Yet, the results might have been different when the way out-group friendship affects Kurdish people's perspective is studied. As Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) revealed with a meta-analysis, contact-prejudice relationship is generally weaker for the minority groups, while stronger for the majority group. The reason for this finding could be that minority members, being aware of devaluation of their group, may have an inhibited potential for positive contact outcomes (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Nevertheless, the results may also be different in another respect. Teney (2011) found that members of the minority groups who have had friends from the majority of the population favored the idea that one does not need to consider cultural heritage as an important issue. Hence, further research is needed to see whether this would be the case for the Kurds who have intergroup friendships in a way that they do not ask for any constitutional changes since they are already comfortable with their given identities in the current constitution. In both cases, new studies will show if our hypothesis is supported or not for the Kurdish population as the minority group in the current issue. If results will reveal that Kurdish people also change their understanding of the Turkish community in a positive manner after intergroup contact, then the idea that increased knowledge about the out-group predicts endorsement of minority rights is strengthened. If not, the discussion of the role of friendship on ethnic conflict will need further explanations.

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