

Summary

The Representations of East-West among the University Students: Distinctions, Criticisms, Demands

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Social representations and behavior of people are affected by both the social and physical environment; meanwhile they affect and transform this environment. Mental representations that are shaped by this dynamic relationship bear the trace of not only personal characteristics but also characteristics of identified groups, interactions with the environment, shared meanings, historical and cultural backgrounds (Göregenli, 2013). People obtain information through the physical and social effects of the surrounding environment and this information is also a resource for the representations of this environment (Moscovici, 1984). Thus, through mental representations, the surrounding environment becomes meaningful and familiar. Besides, group identification and social identities determine the way people perceive the world, in other words, they determine people's mental representation of the surrounding social and geographical environment. (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Cognitive mapping is a way to make social representations and meanings of a place visible and workable. A cognitive map can be defined as an organization of both physical reality, and social and symbolic attributions to this reality in one's mental representations (Milgram et al., 1972). According to Bell, Fisher and Loomis (1978), this concept enables the interpretation of daily environment, as well as storing, coding and retrieving spatial information. Cognitive maps assist to find our way in the physical world, besides it has a role in the construction of and acting of social behavior (Göregenli, 2013). Cognitive maps are shaped by not only one's characteristics but also interaction with surrounding physical and social environment.

In this study, young people's representations of Turkey as a social, geographic and political factor were studied via the cognitive mapping method. The aim of

this study is to examine how political tension and conflict in the context of Turkey which occasionally result in the loss of lives were represented in young people's mind and how these representations diversified with regard to ethnic and geographic origins, and also ideological orientations. Furthermore, the role of social representations and its construction dynamics on the social identities was examined. Thus, representations that were associated with social identity and geography, and common and different aspects of representations were revealed.

Method

Participants

The sample consists of 461 people 249 of which are students from Ege University, 212 of which are students from Mersin, Dicle, and Mardin Artuklu Universities. Among all the participants 223 (48.4%) were women, 227 (49.2%) were men.

Materials and Procedure

In the current study, cognitive mapping method was used in order to learn participants' representations of Turkey. Each participant was given an A3 sized blank paper and requested to reflect the image of Turkey in their minds onto paper by drawing sketch maps. The ethnicity of participants was not directly asked in order not to influence representation reflections of participants by their ethnic identities, however the fact that participants with different ethnic origins such as Arabs, Kurds, Turks, were included in the sample was ensured with the question inquiring the place where the participants lived in for the longest time. Besides, we obtained participants' information such as gender, university, department, and the place that they lived for the longest time by using so-

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cial demographic form. Approximately 25 minutes were given to complete the maps. The findings derived from the maps were analyzed by content analysis (see Bilgin, 1999) and discourse analysis of these cognitive maps (Göregenli, 2013; Potter, 2004).

Results

Data were analyzed firstly according to styles of the cognitive maps and the types of containing items, i.e., geographic or symbolic items. Then, differentiations in the social representations of Turkey in terms of socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were examined.

Among 461 cognitive maps, 156 were “symbolic” style (33.8%) which included metaphors, symbols or figures regarding to Turkey, 39 were “geographic/graphic” style (8.5%) which included objective geographic components such as mountains, cities, monuments, seas and 76 were “symbolic-geographic” style (16.5%) which carried characteristics of both styles. 108 cognitive maps (23.4%) mostly had texts about representations of Turkey and they were categorized as textual style. The remaining 82 cognitive maps were categorized as “other styles” that included block style cognitive maps in which items were grouped as blocks and didn’t have any sequential connections or sequential style cognitive maps in which items were in sequential and linear order or mixed style cognitive maps.

Prior to analysis, all the cognitive maps divided into two group as “West” and “East”; the former involved the maps of participants from Ege University and the latter involved those from Mersin, Dicle and Martin Artuklu Universities. Then, content analysis of geographic items were conducted as Bilgin (1999) suggested. All the maps had 1171 geographic items that mainly contained cities, geographical regions, and seas, landforms such as Lake Van, Mount Ararat, and monuments such as Anıtkabir. As a remarkable finding, it showed up that while 118 participants (25.6%) drew the borders of Turkey saliently and 19 (4.1%) participants drew it unclearly, most of the participants (69.8) didn’t draw any borders of Turkey.

After content analysis of geographic items, secondly, discourse analysis of symbolic items was performed to understand social representations of Turkey. Thematic analysis revealed three main categories; (i) *demands* and expectations from political power were stated in 21 percent of the maps, (ii) *criticisms* towards government and society were in 46 percent, and (iii) *social distinctions* in the aspects of geography, gender and social class were in 33 percent. At first glance, it drew attention that all these three categories were more frequently stated by participants from the East.

Frequent themes emerged in the first category were demands for establishing peace, living together with diversity of cultures without any problem, freedom of religion and belief. It also involved demands about ending violence against women, harrasment, rape, social degeneration, child abuse, unemployment and differentiating between East and West. While demands related to economic welfare, improvement in education and freedom of the press were expressed by participants from both West and East; demands related to justice, democracy, equality on the basis of religion, ethnicity and language, tolerance and peace were expressed mostly by participants from the East.

The second category included criticism towards the government’s policies and society. The government’s policies were critiqued about its authoritarian regime (60%), exploitation of religion (9%), environmental issues such as destruction of green-fields (9%), causing chaos, and restriction of freedom of press. Besides, criticisms about economic conditions such as financial difficulties, unfair distribution of income, and corruption were stated on the cognitive maps. Nationalism, disruption of national unity, cultural degeneration, violence towards women and capitalism were the emerged themes in the criticism toward society category.

Lastly, in the social distinction category, there were dichotomies as such East-West (29%), Turkey-Kurdistan (5%), peace-war (24%), women-men (13%) and class inequality (29%) themes. Lack of governmental investments, class inequalities, difficult living conditions, and political tension about the Kurdish Question were the themes that were generally stated on the cognitive maps from the “East” group. On the other hand, themes related to vacation and economic welfare were noticeably stated on the maps from the “West” group. The East-West dissociation was mostly observed on maps of participants from West (58%).

The Kurdish Question was called by different names, such as terrorism, civil war, or honorable struggle. In addition, while no one from the West touched on Kurdistan as a geographic theme, emphasis on Kurdistan by those from the East was remarkable.

Peace and war environment was respectively associated with east and west part of Turkey and this peace-war distinction was expressed by 45 percent of participants from the East, 55 percent of those from the West.

Women-men distinction, which was more frequently expressed by participants from East (84%) than those from West (16%), included criticisms towards subordination of women, patriarchal system, violence against women and gender ideologies. Also, the class inequality theme drew attention in the social distinctions category; it was stated more frequently by the participants from East (66%) rather than those from West (34%).

Discussion

In the present study, the social and cognitive representations of Turkey in students' mind who were studying in two different regions of Turkey were examined by the using cognitive mapping method. The results of study firstly showed that representations of students had similar, integrated and separated aspects. It is worth noting that there were very few shared geographical elements by the two groups, and out of the three major cities (İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir) there were almost no geographical and monumental elements shared by participants. Students geographically focused on more local representations rather than including common items in their drawings. It was also seen that Turkey was mostly represented by being surrounded by "borders". Further, rather than a common Turkish identity, belonging to different identities was obviously observed. In this sense, being from East or West is not only a geographical distinction but also a social distinction, and geographical location directly affects the formation of social identities. Cognitive representations associate space and social contexts, for example symbols such as weapon or war scenes were portrayed as east, and objects such as sun-bed, sea and sun were portrayed as more of a western lifestyle.

The neighboring countries surrounding the borders were rarely placed in students' maps and were mostly found in the maps drawn in the West. In the representations of university students Turkey was a geographical region that was disconnected from its surroundings.

When the findings of the study were evaluated as a whole, it was seen that the participants' evaluations about the general political environment of Turkey, their perceptions of conflict and their social and cognitive representations were directly affected by their ethnic origins, region of birth, place that they lived in (East-West) and their ideological tendency. Symbolic items in the cognitive maps were found in three basic categories. These categories included demands (for living in peace, ending violence towards women, etc.), criticisms (towards authoritarianism of the government, violence of

the government, religious exploitation, etc.) and social distinctions (East-West, Peace-War, gender, etc.). Items in these basic categories could be handled through two basic axes: "Nationalist-Conservative and International-Democrat" and "East-West"; it can be assumed that social representations define social identities by way of these two axes.

It is clear that the similarities and differences in cognitive representations of Turkey between two groups of participants indicate that the place that lived in and geographical representations are influential in the construction of social identity. The east of Turkey, as a geographical location, is similar for both groups being represented with "negative" qualifications like war, poverty, and women's secondary status. On the other hand, themes such as conservatism and system criticism were frequently mentioned by both groups regardless of the region that they lived in. Also, regional inequalities are observed as a shared representation for almost the entire sample of study.

Another noteworthy finding was that cognitive maps and representations embodied "social media language" as a critical language. Participants used social media language and irony to remark irregularities or misapplications of the government in a context that emphasized with 'cheerful' style and civil disobedience.

According to the social identity paradigm, how we view ourselves and others, represent ourselves, and when we perceive others as enemies is also related to the processes of identity description (Reicher, 2004). For this reason, it is possible to say that the findings of our study point to the deep segregation in the perception of social identity by students in the light of social identity theory. This deep segregation warns us that if common universal goals, values and ideal conditions are not reached, geographic distances may lead to deep social distances.