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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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A Comparative Evaluation of German, Italian and Turkish University Students' Perceptions on Democracy

*Remzi Y. Kıncal, Çavuş Şahin and Osman Yılmaz Kartal
Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Turkey)*

Abstract

The aim of this study is to compare university students' perceptions of democracy. This study is a descriptive study and survey model has been used. In this framework, a comparative evaluation of the German, Italian and Turkish university students' perceptions on democracy has been conducted. Total 3141 students' views, being 2330 Turkish students from 9 Turkish universities, 529 German students from 2 German universities and 282 Italian students from 2 Italian universities, have been evaluated. According to findings it can be said that the university students from three countries have similar expectations-understanding on democracy.

Key words: *Democracy, democratic life, democracy education, university student.*

There is no universally accepted definition of 'democracy', but there are two principles that any definition of democracy includes: The first principle is that all members of the society (citizens) have equal access to power and the second that all members (citizens) enjoy universally recognized freedoms and liberties (Manent, 1996; Banks, et al 2005).

Democratic culture includes the insight of "the freedom that I want for myself should also be obtained by the others" (Kıncal, 2009). There is no discrimination among the people in free and democratic societies in which social differences are regarded as richness. There is a constant relation among the social classes because individual is in the forefront and not a means but an aim (Post, 2006).

Democratic life is a process in parallel with what individuals understand and expect from it. Should the democracy function be in the form of voting, electing the representatives and their making decisions up to the next election? Or should we form out new approaches? These questions should be discussed by individuals to see alternative point of views.

Democracy Education

Modern life means democracy; democracy means freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness-the emancipation of mind as an individual organ to do its own work. We naturally associate democracy, to be sure, with freedom of action, but freedom of action without freed capacity of thought behind it is only chaos (Dewey, 1903).

The individuals' behaviours have to be democratic as well as their verbal expressions about democracy (Prothro and Grigg, 1960). Education, it is argued, should promote

democracy because it enables a “culture of democracy” to develop (Acemoglu, et al 2005). Democracy education comes forth in the social acceptance of democracy, defined as a world view or a lifestyle, and in its transfer into daily life. Taking democracy as a governmental form, indicating the rights and freedoms that democracy provides for the individuals, emphasizing human affairs, teaching skills and attitudes in parallel with peace culture are among the priorities of democracy education. Accordingly, the issues such as presence of democracy education in the formal and informal education, getting it functional in primary, secondary and higher and adult education necessarily appear. But democracy education should be provided by supporting it with activities, practices and experiences rather than through information transfer. For the sake of democracy education, democratic education shouldn't be ignored and programs and methods should be decided according to the fundamental principles of democracy. Democratic life practices should be models for the individuals both in schools and families/societies (Yeşil, 2002; Kahne and Westheimer, 2003).

Importance of Research

Community and education have an effect on opinions about democratic principles (Prothro and Grigg, 1960). To reiterate, democratic life is a process in parallel with what individuals understand and expect from it and this is especially important in Europe where different cultures, identities and opinions coexist, and where the concept of democracy should be universal. Universities within democratic communities cannot be less committed to expand the democratic discourse (Torres, 1998). Knowing about what is the stance of the university students towards democracy and whether prejudices or experiences are effective in the formation of these stances is significant. So, it is important to determine university students' perceptions on democracy.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to compare German, Italian and Turkish university students' perceptions on democracy. Depending on the general purpose, this sub-purpose has been examined;

- What is the university students' perception on democracy according to country variable?

Methodology

In this descriptive study, a quantitative data collection method is used. In the quantitative process, a survey model has been used. A survey is a system for collecting information from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (Fink, 2003). This research uses survey that has the following characteristics:

- The purpose of the survey is to produce statistics, that is, quantitative or numerical descriptions about some aspects of the study population.
- The main way for collecting information is by asking people questions; their answers constitute the data to be analyzed.
- Generally, information is collected about only a fraction of the population, that is, a sample, rather than from every member of the population (Fowler, 2002).

This research is a part of EU project results. The project of “EU and Turkey: Connecting Identities, Bridging Cultures” was performed with German (two university), Italian (a university) and Turkish (a university-project coordinator) partners.

Sampling

In this research Cluster Sampling method is used. Cluster sampling is an example of 'two-stage sampling' or 'multistage sampling': in the first stage a sample of areas is chosen; in the second stage a sample of respondents within those areas is selected (Foreman, 1991; Vaus, 2002; Babbie, 2008).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of survey sampling

Country	University	N
Germany		
	<i>University of Education Heidelberg (Partner Uni.)</i>	361
	<i>Ludwigsburg University (Partner Uni.)</i>	168
Sub-total		529
Italy		
	<i>Università di L'Aquila (Partner Uni.)</i>	240
	<i>University Gabriel D'Annunzio</i>	42
Sub-total		282
Turkey		
	<i>Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Coordinator Uni.)</i>	225
	<i>Dokuz Eylül University</i>	83
	<i>Karadeniz Teknik University</i>	377
	<i>Gazi University</i>	479
	<i>Gaziantep University</i>	147
	<i>Yeditepe University</i>	86
	<i>Selçuk University</i>	517
	<i>Atatürk University</i>	338
	<i>Akdeniz University</i>	78
Sub-total		2330
TOTAL		3141

Totally 3141 students' views, being 2330 Turkish students from 9 Turkish universities, 529 German students from 2 German universities and 282 Italian students from 2 Italian universities, have been evaluated. The amount of participants for each university has been determined as it represents the twenty percent of the population of the related faculties in each university.

Data Collection Techniques

Data, reflecting the university students' views, have been gathered with questionnaire. Questionnaire has been developed by project researchers (German, Italy and Turkish academicians). Questionnaire has four dimensions: Perception on Democracy, Perception on Multiculturalism, EU and Turkey, Multiculturalism & curriculum. In this research, Perception on Democracy dimension has been analysed. This dimension has 16 items. Descriptive statistics are used for analysing views of university students.

Reliability and Validity

All German, Italian and Turkish experts (academics) have evaluated the questionnaire. The pre-application was done. The Croanbach Alpha's score of questionnaire was found as .71. According to this result, the questionnaire's level of reliability is high. According to experts' views, this questionnaire is valid in dimensions of content validity and constructs validity. The questionnaire was applied to Turkish students in Turkish language; German and Italian students in English.

Findings

Table 2. University Students' Views on "In democracy, minorities must have all the equal rights that majority group(s) has/have."

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 1. In democracy, minorities must have all the equal rights that majority group(s) has/have.						
Strongly Agree	311	13,3	264	49,9	134	47,5
Agree	364	15,6	229	43,3	96	34,0
Partially Agree	801	34,4	25	4,7	31	11,0
Disagree	445	19,1	11	2,1	14	5,0
Strongly Disagree	409	17,6	-	-	7	2,5
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

While most of the students in Turkey are "partially agree" about the item "*In democracy, minorities must have all the equal rights that majority group(s) has/have*", great majority of the rest mark "disagree" and the like. It can be seen that German and Italian students "strongly agree" on this item.

Table 3. University Students' Views on "Individuals must have the right to express any kind of thought freely."

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 2. Individuals must have the right to express any kind of thought freely.						
Strongly Agree	777	33,3	297	56,1	185	65,6
Agree	361	15,5	202	38,2	79	28,0
Partially Agree	355	15,2	22	4,2	11	3,9
Disagree	290	12,4	8	1,5	5	1,8
Strongly Disagree	547	23,5	-	-	2	,7
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

It can be realized that majority of the Turkish students "agree" on the item "*Individuals must have the right to express any kind of thought freely*". On the other hand, German

and Italian students “strongly agree” on it. The ones in those particular countries who “disagree” on that item are almost nonexistent. The number of the Turkish students who “disagree” is quite higher than the students of other two countries.

Table 4. University Students’ Views on “In society, any kind of thought should have the chance of turning into an organization”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 3. In society, any kind of thought should have the chance of turning into an organization						
Strongly Agree	255	10,9	113	21,4	46	16,3
Agree	434	18,6	191	36,1	105	37,2
Partially Agree	684	29,4	150	28,4	77	27,3
Disagree	567	24,3	68	12,9	45	16,0
Strongly Disagree	390	16,7	7	1,3	9	3,2
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

It is clear that a great majority of the Turkish students “agree” on the item “*In society, any kind of thought should have the chance of turning into an organization*”. The percentage of the students in this item is lower than that of the ones in other items. Most of the German and Italian students have stated that they “agree” on this item. German ones “strongly agree” on it. The number of the ones from these two countries who are “partially agree” is extremely high. The percentage of the “disagreeing” students from Germany and Italy is lower. In particular, the percentage of the German students is far lower.

Table 5. University Students’ Views on “Different ideas, religious and lifestyles must be welcomed whole-hearted in the society”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 4. Different ideas, religious and lifestyles must be welcomed whole-hearted in the society						
Strongly Agree	637	27,3	107	20,2	95	33,7
Agree	443	19,0	230	43,5	120	42,6
Partially Agree	454	19,5	129	24,4	47	16,7
Disagree	321	13,8	62	11,7	14	5,0
Strongly Disagree	475	20,4	1	,2	6	2,1
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

It is evident that most of the students from these three countries “agree” on the item “*Different ideas, religious and lifestyles must be welcomed whole-hearted in the society*”. But the percentage yielded by the Turkish students is much lower than that of the other two. It is clear that the number of the Italian students who “agree” on this item is higher than the others. The highest percentage of the students who “disagree” is of Turkish students, while the lowest is of the Italian students.

Table 6. University Students’ Views on “Anyone who disrespects national and religious values must be punished.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 5. Anyone who disrespects national and religious values must be punished.	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	909	39,0	44	8,3	75	26,6
Agree	340	14,6	148	28,0	97	34,4
Partially Agree	277	11,9	174	32,9	66	23,4
Disagree	249	10,7	132	25,0	33	11,7
Strongly Disagree	555	23,8	31	5,9	11	3,9
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

Whereas Turkish and Italian students “strongly agree” on the item “*Anyone who disrespects national and religious values must be punished*”, most of the German students are “partially agree” about it. The percentages of the students who “disagree” on the item in question are higher for Turkish and German students than for the Italian ones.

Table 7. University Students’ Views on “Everyone must obey the orders of parents and older people in their families.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 6. Everyone must obey the orders of parents and older people in their families.	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	447	19,2	14	2,6	27	9,6
Agree	502	21,5	84	15,9	64	22,7
Partially Agree	760	32,6	165	31,2	88	31,2
Disagree	365	15,7	215	40,6	84	29,8
Strongly Disagree	256	11,0	51	9,6	19	6,7
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

A great majority of these three countries’ students are “partially agree” about the item “*Everyone must obey the orders of parents and older people in their families*”. Half of the German students “disagree” on this item. The percentage of the students who “agree” is quite low. The highest percentage in this item is of the Turkish students.

Table 8. University Students' Views on "Non-Governmental organizations are crucial institutions of democracy concept."

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 7. Non-Governmental organizations are crucial institutions of democracy concept.						
Strongly Agree	425	18,2	33	6,2	56	19,9
Agree	623	26,7	88	16,6	134	47,5
Partially Agree	520	22,3	272	51,4	71	25,2
Disagree	415	17,8	102	19,3	18	6,4
Strongly Disagree	347	14,9	34	6,4	3	1,1
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

Over half of the Italian students were "partially agree" about the item "*Non-Governmental organizations are crucial institutions of democracy concept*", whereas most of the German students "agree" on it. The percentage of the German students who "disagree" on the item is lower than the other countries. Majority of the Turkish students "agree" on the item, while a remarkable amount do not.

Table 9. University Students' Views on "Cultural and political conflicts can be solved by means of democracy."

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 8. Cultural and political conflicts can be solved by means of democracy.						
Strongly Agree	368	15,8	61	11,5	84	29,8
Agree	552	23,7	196	37,1	120	42,6
Partially Agree	663	28,5	194	36,7	60	21,3
Disagree	434	18,6	70	13,2	16	5,7
Strongly Disagree	313	13,4	8	1,5	2	,7
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

It can be noticed that the Italian students in particular "strongly agree" on the item *Cultural and political conflicts can be solved by means of democracy*". A noteworthy amount of the German students "agree" on the item in question, while a significant number of the students were "partially agree". It is clear that most of the Turkish students "agree" on it, but the percentage of the ones who do not is higher than the students of the other countries.

Table 10. University Students' Views on "The majority's decision is always democratic."

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 9. The majority's decision is always democratic.	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	295	12,7	36	6,8	19	6,7
Agree	481	20,6	160	30,2	61	21,6
Partially Agree	813	34,9	171	32,3	79	28,0
Disagree	484	20,8	127	24,0	85	30,1
Strongly Disagree	257	11,0	35	6,6	38	13,5
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

In the item “*The majority’s decision is always democratic*”, the percentage of the “partially agree” ones from the three countries is fairly high. The percentages of the Turkish students who “agree” and “disagree” on the item are close to each other. Most of the Italian students “disagree” on this item. The German students are the ones who have the highest percentage for “agree” choice.

Table 11. University Students’ Views on “In a democratic country the media must be free in every aspect.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 10. In a democratic country the media must be free in every aspect.	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	293	12,6	144	27,2	67	23,8
Agree	457	19,6	194	36,7	81	28,7
Partially Agree	793	34,0	106	20,0	58	20,6
Disagree	494	21,2	67	12,7	59	20,9
Strongly Disagree	293	12,6	18	3,4	17	6,0
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

The percentage of the German students who “agree” on the item “*In a democratic country the media must be free in every aspect*” is higher than the other two. It can also be seen that the percentage of “agree” by Italian students is quite high and a considerable amount of Italian students “disagree” on the item. It can be realized that majority of the Turkish students are “partially agree” about the item or “disagree” on it.

Table 12. University Students’ Views on “In daily life, I pay attention to the protection of my basic rights and freedoms.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 11. In daily life, I pay attention to the protection of	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%

my basic rights and freedoms.						
Strongly Agree	742	31,8	124	23,4	109	38,7
Agree	595	25,5	295	55,8	133	47,2
Partially Agree	176	7,6	86	16,3	34	12,1
Disagree	339	14,5	22	4,2	5	1,8
Strongly Disagree	478	20,5	2	,4	1	,4
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

The percentage of the students from the three countries who “strongly agree” on the item *“In daily life, I pay attention to the protection of my basic rights and freedoms”* is high. Especially the percentage of the students in Turkey who “agree” on it is higher than the other two. A considerable amount of the Turkish students “disagree” on it. The number of the students who “disagree” is almost nonexistent for the other two countries.

Table 13. University Students’ Views on “The rights and freedom of other people are important to me.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 12. The rights and freedom of other people are important to me.	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	788	33,8	184	34,8	123	43,6
Agree	527	22,6	293	55,4	125	44,3
Partially Agree	145	6,2	43	8,1	28	9,9
Disagree	328	14,1	8	1,5	5	1,8
Strongly Disagree	542	23,3	1	,2	1	,4
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

The percentage of the students from the three countries who “strongly agree” on the item *“The rights and freedom of other people are important to me”* as is on the previous item. Similar to the former item, the amount of the Turkish students who “disagree” on it is fairly high. The percentage of the German and Italian students who “disagree” is quite low.

Table 14. University Students’ Views on “In a discussion, I do not hesitate to share my opinion even if it disturbs other people.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
Item 13. In a discussion, I do not hesitate to share my opinion even if it disturbs other people.	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	366	15,7	10	1,9	10	3,5
Agree	464	19,9	69	13,0	38	13,5
Partially Agree	683	29,3	162	30,6	68	24,1
Disagree	481	20,6	205	38,8	83	29,4

Strongly Disagree	336	14,4	83	15,7	83	29,4
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

Majority of the Italian and German students “disagree” on the item “*In a discussion, I do not hesitate to share my opinion even if it disturbs other people*”. The percentage of the ones who “disagree” is fairly high, whereas that of the ones who “agree” is low. It can be seen that the percentages of the Turkish students who “agree” and “disagree” are close to each other. The number of the students in Turkey who are “partially agree” is also high.

Table 15. University Students’ Views on “I do not like disputing with a person who has believes and thoughts different than I have.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 14. I do not like disputing with a person who has beliefs and thoughts different than I have.						
Strongly Agree	140	6,0	77	14,6	83	29,4
Agree	218	9,4	242	45,7	126	44,7
Partially Agree	268	11,5	110	20,8	35	12,4
Disagree	920	39,5	84	15,9	30	10,6
Strongly Disagree	784	33,6	16	3,0	8	2,8
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

There is a contradiction between the responses of the Turkish students and those of the German and Italian ones for this item “*I do not like disputing with a person who has believes and thoughts different than I have*”. While the German and Italian students “strongly agree” on this item, a considerable amount of the Turkish students do not.

Table 16. University Students’ Views on “I feel uncomfortable when I listen to individuals who have believes and ideas different than I have.”

	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Item 15. I feel uncomfortable when I listen to individuals who have beliefs and ideas different than I have.						
Strongly Agree	337	14,5	2	,4	1	,4
Agree	452	19,4	47	8,9	29	10,3
Partially Agree	336	14,4	80	15,1	42	14,9
Disagree	678	29,1	294	55,6	129	45,7
Strongly Disagree	527	22,6	106	20,0	81	28,7
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

The responses to the item “*I feel uncomfortable when I listen to individuals who have believes and ideas different than I have*” are similar. The students “strongly disagree” on this particular item from the three countries. Besides, a considerable amount of Turkish students “agree” on it.

Table 17. University Students' Views on “I do not care what other people do or say.”

Item 16. I do not care what other people do or say.	Turkey		Germany		Italy	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	177	7,6	126	23,8	94	33,3
Agree	199	8,5	250	47,3	110	39,0
Partially Agree	290	12,4	92	17,4	33	11,7
Disagree	822	35,3	50	9,5	26	9,2
Strongly Disagree	842	36,1	11	2,1	19	6,7
Total	2330	100,0	529	100,0	282	100,0

There are differences between the views of Turkish students and those of German and Italian students in terms of the item “*I do not care what other people do or say*”. Majority of the German and Italian students “agree” on the item, while most of the Turkish students do not, which reveals that Turkish students are more sociable, whereas German and Italian students are individualistic.

Conclusion

According to the findings it can be said that the university students from the three countries have similar expectations and understanding on democracy. It has been concluded that the students, who are going to actively take roles in the future, have positive attitudes towards democracy. However, students from the three countries show some differences among themselves. So that, the study shows us that there are not only students who have positive reactions on democracy, but also there are some students who have negative reactions. On the other hand, although students generally have positive attitudes towards democratic elements such as freedom for expressing believes and thoughts, protections of basic rights theoretically, they have difficulty to practice in their daily life and to adopt them as a lifestyle.

Since there are some differences about important items such as “minorities’ rights”, “media’s independency in democracies”, it is recommended that the reasons for the differences among the perceptions of the students on democracy should be researched in further studies.

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