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Maneuvers between Compliance and Transformation: University Students Navigating Minority Perceptions in Turkey[1]

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Abstract: This study explores university students' perceptions of minorities in Turkey through a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted by students as part of an undergraduate cultural studies course in İstanbul. While students were encouraged to treat interviews as constructed narratives requiring critical interpretation, our analysis reveals that the students' own questions, assumptions, and conclusions also constituted narratives on minorities in Turkey and needed analysis. The findings trace two overarching, and at times overlapping, trajectories. The first reflects a reproduction of the dominant state-centric, nationalist discourse—portraying minorities as separatist, dangerous, or culturally deficient. The second trajectory reveals moments of critical reflection and potential transformation, where students begin to question and deconstruct official narratives on minorities, engage in acts of 'unlearning,' and reconceptualize minority and majority identities. These encounters, though fraught with ideological tension, offer a space for dialogical engagement and reflexive learning. The paper concludes by reflecting on our own experiences as instructors and proposes more ethnography for any project with an agenda of diversity in education, including this course, to deepen students' engagement with diversity.
Keywords: Education, minority, nationalism, perception, Turkey.

Researching minorities in Turkey necessitates an interdisciplinary academic approach, often confronting the researcher with complex and multifaceted challenges. In Turkey, the concept of minority has commonly been framed within a narrow political-legal context, diverging significantly from academic discussions in Europe and North America. Given the complexity through which the concept is historically understood and re-interpreted in Turkey, minorities have been studied through the lens of official historiography and nationalist ideology, as well as in relation to Turkish nationalism, citizenship, and politics, alongside ethnographic and semi-ethnographic approaches emphasizing subjectivity and identity.

Since the mid-1990s, with the rise of identity politics and Turkish aspirations for EU membership, democratizing and reforming education have emerged as an item on the Turkish political agenda and led to the development of a body of literature that has critically analyzed education in Turkey. This body of literature has interrogated the ideological foundations of the

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Turkish education system and highlighted its authoritarian, nationalist-statist orientations, characterized by high levels of centralization and monoculturalism (Çelik, Gümüş, & Gür, 2017, p. 104). This period has also witnessed the proliferation of research on school textbooks—as tools employed by the state in constructing national identity and the ideal citizen. These studies have drawn attention to their militaristic, nationalist, exclusionary, and anti-democratic underpinnings and explored their implications for minority groups in education.

A more limited, yet growing, body of contemporary research has begun to focus on the educational experiences of both Muslim and non-Muslim minority groups in Turkey. They have pointed to exclusion and harassment faced by Alevi students amid rising religiosity within the educational system (Baysu & Agirdag, 2019; Strayhorn, 2022); the sense of stigma, self-doubt, and distrust experienced by Kurdish students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Çelik, 2022; Turgut & Çelik, 2022); instances of tacit racism toward Romani students (Uştuk, 2024); and Syriac students' limited access to inclusive education that embraces diversity (Sakız et al., 2020). Though fewer in number, studies on LGBTQ+ students in Turkish schools underscore both overt and covert forms of discrimination, including bullying, harassment, institutional indifference, and lack of safety, particularly in secondary education—although the situation appears somewhat better in higher education (Göçmen & Yılmaz, 2016; Çavdar & Çok, 2016).

This study seeks to contribute to the literature on minorities in education in Turkey by shifting the analytical focus toward the 'majority'—those who are presumed to be recipients of the nationalist, state-centered ideology embedded in the Turkish educational system and its textbooks, and who are assumed to witness, reproduce, or remain indifferent to discriminatory practices against minorities. Moreover, by extending the research on minorities in education to the context of higher education, the study aims to explore how these ideologies and discourses narrating on minorities are perceived and internalized—or potentially resisted—by young adults.

Accordingly, this paper examines university students' perceptions of minorities in Turkey through an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted by the students themselves, as part of an elective social science course titled *Cultural Studies and Identity*. As a course requirement, students were asked to conduct an in-depth interview with an individual identified as a minority in the broadest sense. While students were consistently encouraged to treat interviews not as transparent representations of experience but rather as constructed narratives requiring critical analysis (Silverman, 2000, p. 36), we came to realize that the students' own questions, expectations, and conclusions also constituted narratives in need of analysis.

This paper thus offers a thematic analysis of these student-generated narratives, not only to understand how minorities are imagined and perceived by university students in Turkey, but also to explore the potential for such perceptions to be questioned, deconstructed, and transformed within educational settings. Our analysis of student narratives on minorities reveals two overarching, albeit not mutually exclusive trajectories: first, an inclination to reproduce state-centric, nationalist ideologies that continue to exert hegemonic influence over education in Turkey; and second, a counter-tendency to resist, critique, and reconfigure these dominant narratives. To explore these dual trajectories, the paper begins by reviewing the literature on minorities in education in Turkey, outlines the research methodology, and discusses recurring patterns in the interviews.

Researching Minorities in Education in Turkey

Studying minority groups in Turkey requires engagement with a substantial and diverse body of literature that includes both academic and semi-academic sources. Researchers must also

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contend with a conceptual complexity: on one hand, a unique understanding of minority status rooted in a certain local history and legal framework, and on the other, a more "universalist" approach derived from broader international academic frameworks. According to the "universalist" approach, a minority can be defined as a non-dominant group whose members differ from the majority in terms of ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics, and who maintain a sense of solidarity and collective identity as citizens (Capotorti, 1979, as cited in Oran, 2018, p. 26). In the Turkish context, however, the term 'minority' has historically referred almost exclusively to the non-Muslim communities recognized under the Lausanne Treaty of 1923—namely, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews. This narrow legal interpretation excludes other non-Muslim communities, such as Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Yazidis, despite their alignment with international criteria for minority status. Furthermore, non-Turkish Muslims, non-Sunni Muslims, disabled, and LGBTQ+ individuals remain outside this legal scope, even though they too face systematic marginalization. The recent influx of Syrian refugees has further complicated the minority discourse in Turkey. While most Syrians are not officially recognized as minorities due to their lack of citizenship, academic and policy-oriented literature refers to them using terms such as "minorities," "minority refugees," or "new minorities."

Apart from this terminological complexity, academic research on minorities in Turkey tends to coalesce around three different scholarly approaches. The first strand reflects an official historical perspective closely aligned with Turkish nationalism. This body of literature predominantly focuses on the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, portraying minorities as problematic remnants of the imperial past. Within this framework, minorities are depicted as having benefited from Ottoman tolerance, only to betray the Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries by aligning with Western imperialist interests and seeking its partition. In the Republican era, they are often cast as "internal enemies" threatening the imagined ethnic and cultural purity and homogeneity of the nation. This perspective is also reflected in popular political books, including best-selling, conspiracy-themed works that depict minorities as "puppets" in broader international plots aimed at destabilizing the Turkish state. Claims of an orchestrated assault of "external elements" —such as "ASALA supporters," "moderate Islam," the "Greek Orthodox Patriarchate," "Sabetayists" ("secret Jews"), and "Jewish Kurds"— are symptomatic of this nationalist imagination.[4] These accounts frequently lack any analysis of subjectivity or agency, treating minorities—and at times even the state—as passive constructs rather than active social agents.

The second category of research on minorities in Turkey critically engages with minorities from a historical perspective, criticizing the official historical narratives and often referring to a literature on the theories of nationalism and nation-building processes through a critical examination of various discriminatory policies, publications, and ideas of the late Ottoman period and early Republican era (Aslan, 2007; Çağaptay, 2009; Güven, 2022; Emen-Gökatalay, 2023). A subset of studies in this category focuses on the policies of the Republican period (Turan & Öztan, 2018; Serçe, 2019; Grigoriadis, 2021). Scholars within this strand often argue that these policies reflect a systematic policy of "Turkification" (Bali, 1999; Eligür, 2019; Aktar, 2021). Additionally, there is also research that delves into the minority issue from within a politico-legal context which enables the introduction of notions such as 'multiculturalism', 'inter-culturalism', 'respect for the other' and a discourse of rights, paving the way for discussions on the processes of democratization in Turkey (Oran, 2018; Kuzu, 2018; Martin, 2023).

The third category adopts an anthropological lens, focusing on minority subjectivities and identities. It incorporates methodologies such as oral history, ethnography, in-depth interviews,

[4] For an extended discussion of these accounts and their implications, see Gürpınar (2019).

focus groups, and participant observation to examine the formations of minority selves (Özdoğan et al., 2009; Neyzi & Kharatyan-Araqelyan, 2010; Brink-Danan, 2014; Erol, 2016; Suciyan, 2016; Örs, 2017; Kaymak, 2017; Serdar, 2019; Sunata, 2020; Akgönül, 2021; Simonetti, 2022; Gültekin & Suvari, 2023). In this group of studies, the self is understood not as a passive subject of external structures, but as an active agent with self-reflexivity and a transformative potential (Giddens, 1991). By facilitating first-person encounters and humanizing the "minority question," this approach challenges essentialist narratives and opens space for empathetic engagement and reflexive critique.

Beyond these categories of minority literature in Turkey, one can also observe a growing body of research focusing specifically on texts, policies, ideologies and institutions of education as sites where minority issues are both reflected and reproduced. Since the mid-1990s—particularly in the 2000s, amid rising identity politics, and Turkey's aspirations for EU membership and democratization—these critical studies have interrogated the ideological foundations of the education system. They have criticized the Turkish education system as characterized by the enduring influence of an authoritarian, nationalist-statist ideology glorifying the Turkish nation and state while viewing external influences as threats (Kaplan, 2013).

A key focus within this critical literature on education is the analysis of school textbooks—especially those used in primary and secondary education—through the lens of human rights, gender equality, democracy, and nationalism. Researchers have argued that the textbooks in Turkey suffer from essentialism (Çayır, 2016), militarism, xenophobia, gender bias, intolerance, and an entrenched Kemalist nationalism (Tarba Ceylan & Irzık, 2004). Other studies have highlighted the prevalence of militarist narratives emphasizing internal and external enemies (Kancı & Altınay, 2007, p. 65) and portrayals of Turkish identity as inherently superior (Boztemur, 2004, p. 129), fostering a sense of nationalist pride.

Regarding the representation of minorities, scholars have noted that textbooks in Turkey often oscillate between assimilationist, subtly prejudiced, and neglectful discourses, occasionally lapsing into complete silence (Gemalmaz, 2004, p. 34). Even when minorities are mentioned, the focus tends to remain on historical events, ignoring the presence and diversity of contemporary multicultural societies (Çayır, 2016). History textbooks, in particular, with their isolationist, ethnocentric, state-centric, and anachronistic perspectives that display mistrust and hostility towards minority groups and frame them as threats aligned with foreign powers, obstruct the possibility of any intercultural dialogue (Öztürk, 2009; Önal & Pala, 2022; Durna, 2024). These critiques prompted modest reforms in 2005 and again in 2017, yet several of the core ideological tendencies in textbooks are claimed to persist (Çimen & Bayhan, 2018).

Beyond textbook analysis, a parallel strand of literature has examined educational policies through the prism of multiculturalism and inclusive education. These studies have investigated the impact of state policies on minority communities (Sakız et al., 2020), minority schools (Kaya, 2013), and minority language instruction (Kaya & Aydın, 2014; Bilmez, Çağatay, & Arslan, 2022).

Despite the growing scope of literature, several key gaps exist in research on minorities in education in Turkey. First, despite the proliferation of studies on minorities through legal-political and anthropological frameworks, analysis of field data that is based on the perceptions of the 'majority' is limited to, mostly, public opinion surveys on political attitudes and values. This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on how young people in Turkey—particularly university students—perceive minority groups. Second, studies on minorities in Turkey, with the exception of some reports and public opinion surveys, tend to compartmentalize individual minority groups or categories of minorities, limiting our ability to fully see the structural mechanisms of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion. While acknowledging the differences among these

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groups, this study is a juggler-wise attempt to produce knowledge on the majority's perceptions of these seemingly incommensurable groups coexisting in Turkey. Third, nearly all of the studies on minorities and education have concentrated on primary and secondary education, while very minimal or no attention has been given to higher education level which presents more intricate and heterogenous patterns. Fourth, while there has been commendable work on curricula and textbooks, the ways in which these educational tools shape the perceptions and subjectivities of students remain underexplored.[5] This study regards students not merely as passive recipients of the prevailing ideologies and discourses embedded in the curricula and educational policies, but as agents capable of resisting, transforming, and 'unlearning' their teachings. Finally, this paper aims not only to analyze students' perceptions of minorities but also to explore the potential for transformative capacity of subjectivities—investigating how students themselves may change through encounters with 'the other.'

Methodology

This study presents a thematic analysis of student interviews conducted for an undergraduate course titled *Cultural Studies and Identity* between 2007 and 2017 at a university in İstanbul. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the course addressed themes such as gender, national and minority identities, multiculturalism, Orientalism, Occidentalism, globalization, and transnationalism. Students enrolled in the course came from a wide range of disciplines—including engineering and the natural sciences—and were typically fulfilling a mandatory quota of social science electives. For most, this course represented their first exposure to cultural studies, undertaken more as an academic obligation than out of an academic curiosity in the subject matter.

An elective requirement of the course was the completion of a semi-structured in-depth interview with an individual who could be considered a minority within the broadest definition of the term.[6] Accordingly, the course included a brief introduction to in-depth interview methodology, emphasizing rapport as a key methodological concern and informed consent as a foundational principle of academic ethics. Eschewing a positivist orientation, students were encouraged to adopt a reflexive stance and to view the interviews not as transparent windows into lived experience but as constructed *narratives* that themselves warranted critical analysis (Silverman, 2000, p. 36). Following the interviews, they were required to submit a written reflection that included their expectations prior to the interview, their interactions with the interviewee, their own observations, and—where appropriate—selected excerpts or full transcripts of the interviews. Although these assignments were submitted as part of the course requirement, students were verbally informed that they might be used for future research.

The present study is based on a thematic analysis of 386 student-conducted interviews carried out over the ten-year period.[7] Rather than focusing on the interviewees, the study centers on the *narratives of the interviewers*—that is, the students—as a means to examine how the concept of minority and minority identities are perceived by young adults in Turkey. Our thematic analysis

[5] One notable exception is Metin's (2007) study on the impact of the history curriculum on high school students' perceptions of the Armenian question in Turkey.

[6] In practice, this led to the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community as a minority group, while refugees and individuals with disabilities were excluded.

[7] We taught the course *Cultural Studies and Identity* over a ten-year period, and the data analyzed in this study were collected during that time. While we are mindful of the potential risk of the data being perceived as outdated, we maintain that the interviews remain relevant and analytically valuable—particularly in light of the scarcity of qualitative research on university students' perceptions of minorities in Turkey.

of the interviews was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which treat researcher subjectivity not as a limitation but as a resource, and underscore the importance of reflexivity in qualitative inquiry. Such a non-positivist model for thematic analysis aligns with our own positionality as both instructors of the course and the interviews and researchers engaged in the study of minorities in Turkey.

Thematic coding of the students' reflections—particularly their questions, expectations, and conclusions—resulted in the identification of two overarching and interrelated themes: **(1) mimicking the state-centered discourse** and **(2) transforming identities**. These themes reflect the dual orientations observed in the data—one that reproduces dominant nationalist discourses, and another that gestures toward critical engagement and transformation.

This study, however, is subject to certain limitations. It analyzes the perceptions of a specific segment of Turkish youth—namely, undergraduate students enrolled in a public university in İstanbul between 2007 and 2017—and therefore does not claim to include a representative sample of Turkish youth more broadly. Nevertheless, in the absence of more comprehensive qualitative research on youth's perceptions of minorities in Turkey, this analysis offers valuable insight into how a particular cohort of young people conceptualizes minority identities. It may allow us to rethink the implications of the state-centered nationalist ideology within the Turkish education system and its potentials to be internalized, resisted, or transformed. Another limitation of the study is related to the demographic and ethnic composition of Turkey during the stated period. If a similar course requirement were to be implemented today, one might expect a significant number of student interviews to involve Syrian participants residing in Turkey, offering valuable insights into majority perceptions of this increasingly visible and contested population.[8]

A critical reading of the student narratives reveals two coexisting, though not mutually exclusive, trajectories. On the one hand, there are clear echoes of nationalist discourses portraying minorities as separatist, insignificant, incomplete, insufficient, dangerous, or threatening. On the other, there is discernible potential for deconstructing, transforming, and even 'unlearning' these hegemonic narratives within educational contexts. The subsequent sections of this paper will explore and discuss these two trajectories in greater depth.

Mimicking the State-Centric Discourse: "What Do You Think about the Claims of the So-Called Armenian Genocide?"

In their reflections on the interviews, some students revealed expectations shaped by the dominant nationalist, state-centric, and Turk-centric ideology prevalent in the Turkish education system. Such expectations frequently involved anticipating certain essentialist traits in their interviewees: Armenians and Kurds were presumed to exhibit separatist tendencies, non-Muslims were expected to be resentful or bitter, and LGBTQ+ individuals were assumed to possess vaguely defined negative personality traits. Similarly, some of their questions mirrored widespread prejudices and adopted the rhetoric of official history regarding the minorities. For instance, one student described the PKK as a pawn of foreign powers and sought affirmation of this view from a Kurdish interviewee. Similarly, D., when interviewing an Armenian participant, concluded his

[8] As of September 2023, the majority of Syrians in Turkey remain under refugee status. According to official figures, approximately 3.5 million Syrian refugees reside in the country (İçişleri Bakanı, 2023), with an additional 240,000 having acquired Turkish citizenship (Bakan Yerlikaya, 2023). Although most Syrians do not fulfill the legal criteria to be classified as a minority group, their large-scale presence has provoked widespread public discourse, fueling hate speech, discrimination, and rising anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment—particularly on social media platforms (Koç, 2021; Özdüzen et al., 2021), and stigmatization and othering in the classrooms (Eren & Çavuşoğlu, 2021).

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interview with a question that referred to the Armenian genocide as "so-called," invoking a key phrase frequently employed in Turkish nationalist discourse to dismiss and delegitimize such claims:

> *— What do you think about the claims of the so-called Armenian genocide?*
> *— I do not hold any particular viewpoint, much like the majority of individuals. (D.)*[9]

The ideological implications embedded in such questions often became apparent to interviewees, leading to a defensiveness and closure on their side or even abrupt closures of the interviews. In subtler instances, students asked Armenian or Jewish interviewees when they had immigrated to İstanbul—despite their families having lived there for generations—or questioned an Abkhazian interviewee about why they were not living in "their own country," though the interviewee had no connection to Abkhazia beyond ancestry. A Kurdish interviewee was asked whether they "could" consider themselves part of Turkey, while an Alevi was questioned about the practice of "*mumsöndü*"[10], and an LGBTQ+ individual was asked what had "pushed" him toward that identity. These examples illustrate how state-centric ideology of education and Sunni-heteronormative teachings of Turkish society frequently overrode the instructors' guidance to use open-ended and nonjudgmental questions.

Another recurring narrative was the denial of minority identity for the particular interviewees by the students. In instances where students formed bonds of empathy or friendship with their interviewees, they appeared troubled by the fact that someone they perceived as "decent" and "normal" could belong to a minority group. As a result, a substantial group of students attempted to include interviewees in the majority with which they comfortably identified themselves. Interviewees' expressions such as "*inşallah*" ("if God permits"), "*Allah'a şükür*" ("thank God"), support for Turkish football teams, or preferences for Turkish songs were enthusiastically noted as indicative of interviewees being "like a Turk" or "indistinguishable from a Turk" ["*Türk gibi*" or "*Türkten farkı yok*"]. Exposed to a national education system that equates national unity with ethnic and cultural homogeneity and perceives any divergence from the core as a threat (Altınay, 2004, p. 84), students latched onto these similarities as a source of relief that could neutralize the perceived threat of difference.

In this context, underlining someone's similarities with the generic category of "the Turks" became a way to express approval and even affection. Rather than viewing minority as a category that signals recognition of difference and legal rights, some students seemed to associate it with inferiority. As such, the very act of labeling someone as a minority was uncomfortable, and emphasizing their similarity to the majority served to mitigate that discomfort. Due to such a perception, some students expressed discomfort with the concept of minority in general, either denying its existence altogether or deeming discussions on minorities as "unjust": according to them, minorities did not exist.

Furthermore, this discomfort was not limited to terminology. A small number of students expressed more visceral unease stemming from the actual interaction with minority individuals. For some, the interview prompted anxieties—for example, fears of jeopardizing their heterosexual orientations through interaction with LGBTQ+ individuals in queer venues or being proselytized

[9] The letters are anonymized identifiers assigned to different students who conducted the interviews.

[10] *Mumsöndü* (literally, "putting out the candle") is a derogatory phrase referring to a fictitious religious libel that falsely accuses Alevis of engaging in orgiastic rituals following the extinguishing of candles (Wilson, 2024, p. 1). The term provoked widespread outrage among the Alevi community in Turkey during the 1990s, particularly due to its circulation in media and public discourse. Hence, beneath this apparently simple interview question lies a long and troubling history of sectarian defamation, moral stigmatization, and hate speech targeting Alevis in Anatolia.

by Christians. One female student even contacted the course instructor, expressing concern about repeated invitations to a church by the interviewee, suspecting a missionary agenda. This placed the instructor in the awkward position of encouraging the student to politely decline such invitations as a mature individual capable of setting boundaries and refusing anything undesired. As a result, field experiences that would have been invaluable opportunities for cultural studies students occasionally became sources of anxiety—not only for the interviewers themselves but also for their families. For example, F.'s father insisted on accompanying him to an interview with a Romani interviewee and ultimately succeeded in doing so. This experience prompted F. to reflect on the stigmatization faced by Romani in Turkey and to consider his own family's role in reproducing such biases—a moment of self-reflexivity that will be discussed in the next section.

A common misconception in many interviews was the conflation of minority identity with the absence of belonging to the Turkish nation. In a similar vein, many students implicitly or explicitly treated minority status as incompatible with Turkish citizenship. Minorities were often perceived as either foreign or subordinate to the core of Turkishness. In some cases, students even redefined their interviewees' identities to fit such a perception. For instance, after verifying the patriotism of an Armenian interviewee, G. concluded:

> *Does she regret that she did not leave? She says: "No, this is my country. I have never left and I will not. Regardless of the extent of my sorrows, no one can tear me off from my country." ...I conclude that she is not an Armenian, but rather a Christian Turk. I figure out that she is more patriotic than the so-called patriots who leave the country over minor issues. (G.)*

Here, renaming and "Turkifying" served to reconcile the student's nationalist assumptions with the national belonging and patriotism expressed by the interviewee. A survey cited by Metin (2007, p. 49) found that 30.4% of Turkish high school students associated Armenians with treason, 16.25% with ingratitude, and 11.25% with terrorism—demonstrating the pervasiveness of such stereotypes and his motivations for renaming the Armenian identity. Through Turkification and reclassification of the interviewee as part of the majority, G. preserved the dominant historical narrative of Armenians as traitorous.

In a small subset of interviews, overt conflicts emerged, particularly in interviews with Kurdish participants when both interviewer and interviewee were of similar age. Some Kurdish respondents faced accusatory and patronizing questions, as seen in H.'s interview: "Is it just? You just mentioned that your family migrated from Mardin to Marmaris because of terror. Those born in Marmaris are dying there. [*Orada Marmarisliler ölüyor.*]*"* (H.)

These confrontational questions were rarely spontaneous; rather, they appeared to be premeditated attempts to provoke or shame the interviewees, often casting them as scapegoats for the broader Kurdish question. Even when not overtly hostile, some interviews featured a subtle but persistent 'us versus them' discourse, where minorities were portrayed as separatist, non-Muslims as bitter, LGBTQ+ individuals as morally deviant, and (Sunni) Islam as the superior religion. These views were not necessarily the result of ignorance but often reflected the ideological formations instilled by the Turkish national education system. These deep-rooted frameworks can only be challenged through a deliberate process of 'unlearning,' which we explore in the next section.

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Transforming Subjectivities: "I Questioned Everything I Had Known about the Alevi Community"

Although many interviews reflected dominant prejudices and ideological teachings regarding minorities, some prompted students to engage in critical self-reflection and undergo processes of transformation. Several students described the interview experience as "remarkable," highlighting how it challenged their assumptions and broadened their worldviews. Interviews' impacts varied by various factors, including gender, socioeconomic background, cultural and religious upbringing, age, and personal history. Based on students' narratives, three levels of transformation can be identified: informative, empathetic, and transformative.

The **first level**, the *informative stage*, was the most common. Students in this group emphasized the value of learning about minority identities and experiences previously excluded from their education. Coming from a mainstream ideological framework shaped by Kemalist and nationalist discourses, many students seemed to have limited engagement with narratives and subjectivities outside the dominant historiography. Their encounters with 'the others' enabled an exposure to alternative perspectives that often produced a sense of surprise—and even disorientation—as students confronted the extent to which minority voices had been silenced or distorted. As one student, J. reflected after interviewing a member of the Alevi community:

> *Following this interview, I questioned everything I had known about the Alevi community. …I really encountered very different opinions. I learned to see things other than what we were taught. I also learned about different lives and lifestyles. It was an experience I will never forget throughout my life. (J.)*

This initial, informative level has the potential to soften defensive reactions from the interviewer, as it marks the moment when the student begins to move closer to the 'other camp' in an effort to learn about a group that had previously been overlooked or ignored. K., for instance, described the emotional impact of learning about the Armenian community: "I realized that I was wrong in general about what I thought about the Armenians. I saw that they were a part of this country, sometimes even more than the Turks." (K.)

The **second level**, or the *empathetic stage*, involved not only cognitive shifts but also emotional engagement with the person/group under scrutiny. Students at this level demonstrated a capacity to relate the whole interview experience to their own lives, personal choices and political stances. For example, M. described how the interview, as a positive but also odd experience, helped dismantle stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people:

> *I became familiar with a lifestyle that is alien to me. If I can say now "there exists such a lifestyle other than my own," that's because of this interview. I received interesting reactions from people who just learned that I've conducted this interview. Everybody agreed it was a "different" kind of research, but I also realized that gay people are exposed to extreme prejudices and bigotry all the time. (M.)*

Hence, the interview process presented an opportunity for these interviewers to embrace a self-reflexive attitude and question their own identities and their social networks, often shaped in opposition to the identity of 'the other' -that is often the interviewee. However, their engagement with differences at this level remained interpersonal rather than structural. Some, like N., reflected on their heightened awareness and the cautious, deliberate engagement the interview required:

> *I am thoroughly content with conducting this interview, as I have gained a lot. Primarily, I overcame some of my prejudices and adopted different*

> *perspectives about the Kurdish issue. I was quite nervous about the possibility of misunderstanding and being misunderstood. I was very careful during the interview, which ultimately proved rewarding. (N.)*

Still, the ideological weight of nationalist narratives persisted for many students, creating resistance to empathy. Relinquishing the understanding of a 'sacred' state which was firmly established through early education, the schools at all levels and the media has proven to be quite challenging. An official, state-centered interpretation of Turkishness operated as a factor curbing the students' potential to communicate with and recognize the 'other.' As O. noted:

> *"Learning about how others perceive us is not always pleasant," my interviewee conveyed. It was really hard for me to empathize with them. All of those prejudices against the Kurds are making a negative impact on their psychologies. I can clearly say that he was experiencing that impact at times. (O.)*

The **third level**, the *transformative stage*, involved a more profound shift in students' subjectivities. At this stage, a relatively smaller group of students not only challenged dominant ideologies but also began to reevaluate and transform their own social positions and perceptions. P.'s account exemplifies this reflexivity:

> *Although I claim that I am not homophobic, I had concerns about inadvertently projecting a homophobic image. Upon confiding in my interviewee, s/he understood me right away and reassured me by admitting s/he also could sometimes make homophobic, heterosexist or sexist remarks, because they had become the norm. (P.)*

In this transformative stage, a level of self-reflexivity transformed the interview experience to a site of knowledge construction, and the interviewees and interviewers into co-participants in the process (Mason, 2002, p. 227). Observing that self-reflexivity, interviewees allowed and guided the students to navigate their lives and identities.

V.'s transformation unfolded in both public and private spheres. Initially ridiculed by peers for agreeing to conduct an interview with an LGBTQ+ individual, he was reluctant even to enter the gay café where the meeting took place. However, the encounter proved to be "a remarkable and shocking experience," in V.s words. He later recounted how his peers' derision turned into admiration, and how the interview challenged his own sense of social conformity, heteronormativity and fears of judgment. Finally, after witnessing transphobic discrimination in a public venue, R.'s narrative point to the emergence of a new level of social and critical awareness, almost at the brink of social activism:

> *Upon S.'s departure, the owner of the café disclosed his usual refusal to admit a transvestite unaccompanied by other people. I asked why! He said they were not allowed because they fought among themselves and made other clients unhappy. When we think about Beyoğlu or Taksim, we tend to imagine progressive places crowded with open-minded people. However, I realized that one can face bigotry even in Taksim as in elsewhere. (R.)*

These accounts illustrate how encounters with minorities—when facilitated within an educational setting—can initiate meaningful shifts in perceptions. While the ideological weight of state-centric narratives remains significant, such moments of rupture offer the possibility for students to move beyond passive reception and toward a critical, transformative engagement with difference.

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Discussion

This study, focusing on 'majority' perceptions of minorities in Turkey, has drawn on a thematic analysis of interviews conducted by undergraduate students enrolled in a cultural studies course. Regarding the composition of interviewees, the gender distribution was skewed toward males at a ratio of approximately two to one. Notably, about half of the students chose to interview either an Armenian or a Kurdish individual. Alevis and LGBTQ+ individuals each constituted roughly one-sixth of the interview sample. Other groups—including Assyrian, Protestant, and Catholic Christians; Jews and Greeks; non-Turkish Muslim communities such as Circassians, Arabs, and Iranians; as well as refugees and people with disabilities—each accounted for less than 5% of the interviews.

From this composition, it is evident that for this cohort of students, the prototype of a 'minority' in Turkey was predominantly an Armenian or Kurdish male. This contrasts with public opinion studies which have positioned atheists and LGBTQ+ individuals as "ultra-others" in Turkish society in general (Yılmaz, 2010), and among the youth—along with a very strong anti-refugee stance (*İstanbul Ekonomi*, 2024). The domination of interviews conducted with Kurdish and Armenian interviewees in our research may be due to the fact that throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, Kurdish and Armenian identities survived an over-politicization as a result of the Kurdish armed movement and nationalism, and controversies over the Armenian question of 1915. As a result, Armenian and Kurdish identities were often perceived through a xenophobic lens in the nationalist discourses of the 1990s (Belge, 2003, p. 192). The relative underrepresentation of Circassians and Alevis—despite the estimates that they comprise approximately one-tenth and one-fifth of Turkey's population respectively—suggests that the perception of a group's contentious relationships with the state significantly influenced students' selection of the interviewees.

Interestingly, student curiosity for 'the other' peaked not with Armenians or Kurds, but with Alevis. Raised under successive governments of Justice and Development Party (AKP), a conservative party with the aim of creating a pious generation (Lüküslü, 2016), and in an education system built on a Turkish-Islamic synthesis from the 1980s (Copeaux, 2016) and redesigned with increasing religiosity and emphasis on Sunni values after 2002 (Baysu and Ağırdağ, 2019; Ertem, 2024), the students were particularly inquisitive about the Alevis and their religious practices. Several interviews with Alevi individuals became spontaneous, open-ended conversations in which the students, abandoning their prepared questions, positioned the interviewees as 'experts.' This suggests that an intense exposure to Sunni Islamic values and teachings in education has not yielded to a slight familiarity with the Alevis and their belief system.

A group of students in their reflections clearly echoed state-centric discourses on minorities, replicating the essentialist, indifferent, or even patronizing attitudes embedded in the national education system. Some approached their interviews with an antagonistic tone—particularly toward Kurdish interviewees—while many equated minority identities with foreignness, failing to differentiate between national belonging, religious or ethnic identity, and citizenship. This inability recalls Eldem's critique of the Turco-centric interpretation of Ottoman history where elements not linked to an idealized central state apparatus and/or dominant nation are promptly labeled as 'foreign' or marginalized as passive and dependent entities in relation to the core (2022, p. 16).

While some students rejected the concept of 'minority' altogether, some denied their interviewees' minority status. Various levels of Turkification operated in their narratives, including statements like "s/he is like a Turk" or "s/he is not different from the Turks" ["*Türk gibi,*" *"Türkten/Türklerden fark(lar)ı yok"*], echoing formulaic expressions in school textbooks that link Turkish identity with strength or virtue ["*Türk gibi güçlü"*] (Çimen & Bayhan, 2018, p. 39). As

Copeaux (2016, p. 17) contends, such textbook teachings often may be the source of instinctive thoughts at the moments of tension and crisis. Indeed, in spontaneous moments of their encounters with 'the others,' these ideological reflexes often surfaced more readily than the critical frameworks offered by the course.

In their dedicated search for similarities, a couple of students even went so far as to reclassify their interviewees as "Turks," in hyphenated forms. While interviewees from various minority groups patiently recounted their daily routines as minorities living in Turkey; e.g. refraining from using their names on the doorbells, hiding their identities, adopting Turkish aliases in daily interactions, and feeling overwhelmed by a need to voice their experiences and minimize minority stress with reference to a "lump in the throat" ("*boğazdaki yumruğu çıkarma isteği*"), some students still strived to find, underline and cherish their perceived similarities with the generic category of "the Turks." As students of a national education system that, since the 1920s, has prioritized "conformity and uniformity as values that should become a 'way of life' for all students" (Kancı & Altınay, 2007, p. 64), they often looked for uniformity as a way of coping with difference. Even in the simple phrases used by the interviewers such as "*inşallah*" ("if god permits"), "*Allah'a şükür"* ("thank God"), "*maşallah*" ("as God has willed"), this group of students found a relief that they were similar with "the Turks", hence not dangerous. Unable to realize that minorities in Turkey must engage in certain performances of Turkishness as a prerequisite for inclusion in the symbolic contract of Turkishness (Ünlü, 2023, p. 234), they rarely realized and questioned the broader political or historical conditions that necessitated such minority signals of similarity, and their own comfort in observing them.

Hence, some students' inability to acknowledge diversity and cope with it, their inclination to overlook, minimize, trivialize, and assimilate differences whenever possible, their lack of empathy, their failure to listen to others' sufferings when they did not align with their expectations and objectives, their swift readiness to exclude minorities from the realms of citizenship and national belonging, their staunch belief in the supremacy of the Turkish identity and Islam, and their effortless identification with the majority were not due to a lack of exposure to education, but rather a reflection of the skills and baggage acquired through national education. These acts of the student-as-interviewers mirrored Turkish state's strategies for managing minorities since the foundation of the nation-state.

Nevertheless, many interviews also opened critical spaces for encounter and reflection. In certain cases, the political climate in Turkey—such as the Kurdish peace process initiated after 2009 or the "queer turn" of the 2010s marked by rising visibility and empowerment of queer politics and culture (Özbay & Öktem, 2021, p. 117)—may have created discursive openings that facilitated a more open engagement with difference. Drawing on our analysis, we identify three levels of impact stemming from the interviews: informative, empathetic, and transformative.

At the informative level, students gained new knowledge about minority groups, often encountering basic facts and perspectives that had been excluded from their formal education. While such exposure is crucial, it rarely resulted in immediate shifts in worldview. Information alone, without critical reflection or emotional engagement, did not significantly challenge the official narratives on minorities.

The empathetic level involved a deeper emotional connection. Students at this stage not only listened but imagined themselves in the shoes of the interviewee. Empathy enabled them to recognize the tolls of everyday discrimination and marginalization. However, while students began to "feel with" the interviewee, they often stopped short of asking broader systemic or political questions. Their engagements remained interpersonal rather than structural.

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Finally, at the transformative level, students displayed critical awareness and self-reflexivity. They not only questioned dominant societal norms but also examined their own complicity in reproducing those norms. Some acknowledged previously held prejudices; others articulated intentions to engage more actively in social or political agendas concerning minorities. At this level, students moved beyond emotional resonance and empathy to critique, resistance, and potential future activism.

We argue that these interviews can also be read as spaces of tactical engagement, revealing student agency in their encounters with 'the others.' Drawing on Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), we see the students' narratives as sites of what he calls "tactics": small, everyday acts of resistance, maneuvers, or reinterpretations within dominant systems of meaning. Unlike "strategies," which belong to the domain of power-holders, tactics are the ephemeral and inventive actions of those without institutional control. In the students' encounters with 'the others,' we observed two broad trajectories—compliance with dominant ideologies and attempts at self-transformation. These can be interpreted as tactical responses to a complexity shaping minority literature and the concept of minority in Turkey: a unique perception of minorities deriving its legitimacy from a certain local history on the one hand and a more "universalist" approach drawing from a wider global literature. While the ideological weight of state-centric nationalism remains formidable, these interviews—however constrained or conflicted—reveal the possibility of dialogical spaces in which subjectivities may be unsettled, reframed, or even transformed.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed university students' perceptions of minorities in Turkey through student interviews conducted with minority individuals as part of an elective course requirement. While academic literature has explored minorities in Turkey through various lenses such as ethnicity, history, education, citizenship, and law, it has rarely examined how the 'majority' perceives minority groups today. By focusing on the narratives produced by a segment of Turkish youth—specifically university students in İstanbul— on minorities, this study has sought to address this gap and has identified two major trajectories.

The first trajectory involves students' mimicry of the state-centric discourse on minorities. Instances of othering, scapegoating, discrimination, and prejudice were observed as instinctive reactions in the students' questions, expectations, and conclusions. Some students struggled to acknowledge difference, instead displaying a tendency to ignore, minimize, or assimilate it whenever possible. This was often accompanied by a lack of empathy, a readiness to exclude minorities from citizenship and national belonging, and a firm belief in the superiority of Turkishness and Islam. They appeared to find comfort in a compliant alignment with the majority. We argue that such attitudes were not simply personal or temporary shortcomings, but rather skills that have been systematically, consistently, and gradually cultivated through the Turkish education system.

The second trajectory concerns the transformative potential of field encounters with minority individuals. We argue that a viable antidote to the doctrinal effects of earlier education lies in field experience itself—specifically, in direct encounters with 'the other.' Such exposure has the potential to foster critical thinking and self-reflexivity, provided it is accompanied by a critical re-reading of Turkish history and a more politically liberal, less state-centric reassessment of minority identities. Ultimately, one can only hope that these encounters—often uncomfortable and

far from painless—lead to self-confrontation and transformation, enabling students to critically reflect on their own identities in relation to minority others.

In our case, Turkish nationalist ideology was a central force shaping both the selection of interviewees and the direction of the interviews themselves. Students showed greater interest in identities they perceived to be in conflict with the Turkish nation-state. Things can take a different trajectory elsewhere. For example, maybe in North America the main focus will potentially revolve around the issue of 'race', while in Europe 'migration' will turn out to be the dominant theme.

It is important to stress that even if one is equipped with progressive ideals and cultural capital, the process of 'unlearning' is often complex, messy and full of challenges. In the Turkish context, the state has legitimized its sacredness by relying on a traumatic past which (re)produces a "psychosis of annihilation"—a deeply rooted fear that the survival of the nation remains perpetually at risk (Akçam, 2004, p. 54). This results in a paranoid political psychology, one that prioritizes unity and security over dialogue or recognition. It regards multiculturalism not as a strength but as a weakness that had led to imperial collapse and constrains any serious engagement with the question of minorities. As such, the early Republic viewed pluralism—linguistic, ethnic, and religious—not as a condition to embrace but as a problem to be solved (Bilmez, Çağatay, & Arslan, 2022, p. 16). A committed blindness to difference, along with an aversion to the conflicts arising from these differences, has characterized the official political culture (Parla, 1995) and by extension, the education system in Turkey. This ideological and historical background still serves as a foundational element of the Turkish education system which diverges from global trends as a notably centralized model among OECD and middle-income countries (Gershberg, 2005; OECD, 2020).

Consequently, in the Turkish context, the potentials for inclusive and pluralist educational paradigms—as well as critical thinking tools—are often constrained by the emotional and ideological dominance of nationalism and a deeply entrenched state-centered political culture. Furthermore, a marriage of convenience between neo-liberal welfare and employment policies and (neo-)conservative familialism (Kandiyoti, 2016) has been a dominant motif of Turkish politics and policy making throughout the last decades. Recent quantitative studies on Turkish youth point at the implications of this ideological constellation: despite their support for democracy and acknowledgment of disadvantaged groups, young people in Turkey by majority define themselves as Kemalist and/or nationalist and display high levels of intolerance towards different groups (Uzun & Lüküslü, 2024)—particularly refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals, and atheists (*İstanbul Ekonomi*, 2024).

Therefore, the interviews should not be seen as a panacea to resolve or finalize the complex issues surrounding minorities. It would be overly optimistic to assume that these encounters with the 'others' would immediately "educate," "enlighten," or "broaden" the perspectives of all students. For some, the interviews risked reinforcing existing ethnic stereotypes, provided an opportunity to rehearse discriminatory views, or even triggered regression. In such cases, identities may be further fortified and protected rather than questioned or transformed.

Since identities are never fixed but are constantly negotiated within contested spaces, students' interviews with 'the other' unfolded within a field of ongoing, and often uneasy, negotiations—marked by hesitation, discursive bargaining, and subtle maneuvers. Despite the inherent tensions of this process, we observed that for a meaningful subset of students, these encounters did prompt substantial shifts in perceptions. Physical proximity, dialogical engagement, and ordinary conversation opened up avenues for students to reimagine both minority identities and their positioning within the broader social fabric of Turkey.

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Importantly, the transformative potential of this process was not limited to students alone. As instructors, we too experienced a pedagogical transformation as we witnessed students keenly observing seemingly minor symbolic, social or spatial cues. One student reflected on the presence of a large portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in an Assyrian household; another was struck by the emptiness of a Kurdish security guard's desk—devoid of any personal items.[11] A student observed how a Jewish shopkeeper's neighbor tried to "protect" him by falsely claiming he attended Friday prayers, while others recounted how waitresses reacted to them when they interviewed a transvestite in a public venue. These moments stood out as powerful instances of critical insight into space and social interactions.

For their interviews, many students visited sites that they considered unconventional: LGBTQ+ bars, ethnic associations, *cemevis* (Alevi houses of worship), nursing homes, churches, and community coffeehouses. Observing these sites, they demonstrated more curiosity and less defensiveness. In their analysis of these spaces and the social interactions within them, the students were less anxious and more 'out of the box.' The fluidity with which the students navigated those urbanscapes, along with the freedom they enjoyed in observing and interpreting these settings and interactions, has led us to contemplate on the potential benefits of integrating ethnographic techniques.

Such ethnographic engagement may offer students expanded space for exploration, experimentation, and art—in a Socratic sense— for dialogical inquiry into how minority identities are (re)produced, represented, negotiated, and lived in relation to others in the everyday life of a metropolis in constant flux. Any project with an agenda of diversity in education, including this course, may thus deliberate on complementing the interview component by encouraging students to engage more deeply with the identityscapes of the city—through more time, labor, and ethnography.

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[11] In one instance, an interviewer noticed a large portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic, displayed prominently in the home of an Assyrian interviewee in Mardin. When asked about its significance, the interviewee responded that they were living in Turkey and the portrait served as a protective symbol—an *antidote to misfortune* ("*belasavar, iyidir."*) In another case, during an interview with a Kurdish security guard, the student observed that the interviewee's desk was conspicuously bare except for a mug, despite his long tenure at the workplace. When questioned, the interviewee explained that he had previously decorated the desk with personal items but was told they appeared "too Eastern" ["*fazla doğulu"*], prompting him to remove them entirely.

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