



STEREOTYPING OF THE MIDDLE EAST BY TURKISH ACADEMICS: HOW DOES MIDDLE EAST STUDIES EDUCATION WORK?

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how education might affect the stereotypes patterns related to the Middle East (ME), proposed by Turkish academics. To explore common stereotypes and stereotyping-knowledge links concerning education in the region, a total of 40 (22 Middle East Studies (MES) and 18 non-MES) scholars were asked to define the ME, list characteristics they attributed to it, and position Turkey in relation to it. The results reveal significant differences in these two groups' understanding and elaboration of the region in terms of using negative

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This research article is based on the results of the MA thesis entitled “The Perception of ‘the Middle East’ in Turkey: How do Turkish scholars of Middle East Studies and other disciplines perceive the area?”, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Özlem Tür (Küçükaya), Middle East Technical University, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Middle East Studies Department (Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Orta Doğu Araştırmaları Bölümü), Master tezi/MS thesis, 2016.

YDÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, C. XVI, No. 2, (Ekim 2023)

Geliş Tarihi: 11 Eylül 2023

Kabul Tarihi: 25 Ekim 2023

Bu makaleden alıntı yapmak için: Gökyar, Meryem & Tür, Özlem (2023, Ekim). Stereotyping of the Middle East by Turkish academics: How does Middle East Studies Education work?, *YDÜ SOSBİLDER*, 16(2), 252-279.

stereotypes. The paper then attempts to show how the literature on the 'stereotyping-knowledge link' connects in area studies education's main discussions.

Keywords: *Middle East Studies Education, Area Studies, Regional Identity, Türkiye-Middle East identity, Stereotypes*

ÖZ

TÜRK AKADEMİSYENLERİN ORTA DOĞU KALIPYARGILARI: ORTADOĞU ARAŞTIRMALARI EĞİTİMİ NASIL İŞLİYOR?

Bu çalışmanın amacı eğitimin Türk Akademisyenlerce belirtilen Orta Doğu'ya ilişkin birtakım kalıp yargı (stereotip) örüntülerini nasıl etkelediğini görmektir. Yaygın kalıp yargıların ve kalıp yargısal varsayımlarla-bilgi arasındaki ilişkiyi bölge çalışmaları eğitimi açısından incelemek amacıyla toplam 40 (22 Orta Doğu Uzmanı, 18 Orta Doğu Alanı dışından) akademisyenle görüşülmüştür. Yanlılık oluşturmaması adına, tüm katılımcılardan "Orta Doğu"yu özellikleri ve Türkiye ile olan ilişkisi üzerinden tanımlamaları istenmiştir. Sonuçlar uzmanlık alanı dışında diğer tüm alanlarda eşitlenerek oluşturulan bu iki örneklem grubu arasında Orta Doğu'yu anlama ve açıklama açısından olumsuz kalıpyargıları kullanmada anlamlı farkların bulunduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bu çalışma alanyazınının da belirttiği kalıpyargı-bilgi bağlantısının alan çalışmaları eğitiminde de etkili olduğunu ve varolan alan çalışmaları alanyazınındaki ana tartışmalarla da ilişkisini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Orta Doğu Çalışmaları Eğitimi, Alan Çalışmaları, Bölge Kimliği, Türkiye ve Ortadoğu kimliği, Stereotipler (Kalıpyargılar)*

1. Introduction

The link between stereotyping and information depth is important to understand how education might affect the negative stereotypes and prejudices common in any society, related to a certain subject matter. Even though stereotypes have long been studied in the social psychology literature, there is a gap for such research in Area Studies. By depicting the role of knowledge via cognitive theories of stereotyping in the the perception of the Middle East (henceforth ME), this paper exemplifies interdisciplinary Area Studies wherein the results could benefit other studies on intergroup conflicts, prejudice, migration, and so forth.

2. The Psychology Behind: Stereotyping Framework

A stereotype is a concept indicating beliefs about a certain group or thing that are widely held. Early definitions of the concept describe it either as a type of cognitive map to understand complex environments that human beings are not well-equipped to grasp (Lippmann, 1965) or overgeneralizations used to make sense of a certain category without much effort (Allport, 1954). Similar to other assumptions about characteristics and groupings like schemas and heuristic labels, they can be perceived as innocent and cognitively functional. However, real harm is observable if they are applied unfairly and used negatively in evaluations as prejudices (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Composing a huge research area since the 1950s, various models and theories have been put forward to explain their representations, formations, applications, and changes (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Moreover, the subject remains timely; the number of publications on stereotypes doubled between 1990 and 2008, then doubled again in the subsequent decade (Landy, 2008). The literature on stereotyping regarding its implications regarding main age, gender, and racial stereotypes continued to grow (e.g. Andreoletti et al, 2015; Fiske, 2017; Eaton et al, 2020; Eagly et al, 2020).

One of the early important achievements of this literature is Devine's 1989 theory about how stereotypes work. Devine claimed that stereotypes are *automatically activated*, and conscious effort is required to shut them down before they are manifested as prejudices (Devine, 1989). In other words, certain stereotypes are absorbed through socialization and experience, especially during childhood, and even though they do not always affect our judgment as prejudices; stereotypes are resistant to change and easy to pop up (Devine, 1989). Later, many studies not only confirmed the automaticity theory but also drew a better link between stereotypes and information processing (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996.) Later, that stereotyping process was linked to cognitive connectionist theories in attempts to explain the process more (Cox and Devine, 2015). Moreover, the antidote to prejudices also lies in the theory. For instance, Devine's group; also depicted that "knowledge" proposes an important concept to work on if one wants to break the biases due to automaticity or identity (Forscher et al, 2017).

In addition, people tend to use stereotype-consistent information if available, especially when they have categories to evaluate a particular case, due to the comfort stereotypes create for our cognition (Rahn, 1993; Johnston &

Macrac, 1994). This is explained through the unlikelihood of always having comprehensive information on a certain issue and the ability of stereotypes to fill those knowledge gaps (Landy, 2008). However, providing all the information—including both stereotype-consistent and -inconsistent information—does not change the tendency to use stereotype-consistent information unless people are forced or motivated to process all the available information (Johnston & Macrac, 1994). Therefore, stereotype change theories that suggest personal involvement with a particular group seem to be successful only when people are motivated to comprehensively process information when making evaluations (Johnston & Macrac, 1994; Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Some of this information is acquired through systemic education, which may inhibit or activate stereotypes based on its degree of success at drawing conscious attention to stereotyping, stereotype knowledge, and stereotype-inconsistent information. When unsuccessful, it can lead to increased use of stereotypes (Osland & Bird, 2000).

The motivation to actively engage in or ignore the stereotype inconsistent information might come from the concept of “social identity”, where people use their social group membership (class, ethnicity, sports team affiliation, etc.) as a source of identity, self-esteem, and pride (Tajfel, 1979). In other words, social identity was what constructs “us” versus “them” categories as shortcuts in our understanding of everyday social phenomena. Recent literature had revealed that these stereotypes can both be observed in the real world and the media contents and affect the stigmatization process (Brylla, 2023). Even though the holding of negative stereotypes is inversely proportional to the possession of objective detailed knowledge and consciousness over psychological biases, perceiving one’s country as in-group or out-group might change the results. For instance, Tétrault (1996) mentioned the difficulty of teaching American students about the Middle East, which they perceive as “the other” due to various media images prompting negative stereotypes. She claims this otherness is well beyond Orientalist thinking, and is a problem of objectifying a region based on its problems and conflicts, thereby denying its people agency and human identity (Tétrault, 1996). Therefore, whether positioning one’s home country in the region or not, might give clues about the acceptance of a “Middle Eastern” social identity in the case of Turkish academics.

The media images or shallow (text)books feeding the negative stereotypes and the “education” to fight the negative imagery is mentioned in the US context. In a 1975 research, secondary school textbooks’ ME images and cultural explanations had triggered negative stereotypes and were concluded as the possible reason for youngster’s prejudices (Griswold, 1975). Similarly, cartoons such as Disney’s *Aladdin* are argued to lead to many negative stereotypes unless actively critiqued in a media literacy course (Sperry, 2006). After 9/11, Western media was also criticized for advocating such negative imagery, like creating knowledge for itself via its Orientalist depiction of women of the region (Abu-Lughod, 2001) as well as feeding hostilities by presenting stereotypes and failing to give adequate background information, context, and proper reasoning (Jarjour & Chahine, 2007).

Since stereotypes are cognitive tools to make sense of the outside world, even undetailed stereotype-consistent information by the media seems to create a sense of familiarity. Therefore, Haddad and Schwedler (2013) claimed that if students are not provided with a fulfilling course on the ME; exotic, Orientalist images of the region wherein culture tends to be used as the single explanatory factor for many political issues continue to fill their minds. Fortunately, studies to intervene in this formation of stereotypes and prejudices have been on rise in the recent years. In one example, elementary school students (3rd and 4th graders) in the US were subjected to a media-literacy program in collaboration with Kuwait and were able to rely less on cultural stereotypes about the Middle East (Hobbs, 2010). Similar media literacy education was also shown to diminish media influence on racial and ethnic stereotypes in general (Scharer and Ramasubramanian, 2015).

3. The Issue of “Construct” in Defining the Region and Positioning Turkey

The role of perceptions and interpretations in the social sciences is nothing new for the scholars of Middle East Studies (MES): Early scholars of the area like

Said, Davison, Hourani, and Khalidiⁱ had problematized the region by studying its construction, timing, naming, scaling and self-perception: i.e. despite to the consensus of a core, the ME is a region whose frontiers geographically, historically and culturally changeⁱⁱ, positioned and named in relation to “the West” and problematically internalizes that by translating “Middle East” to their languages as it isⁱⁱⁱ. Nevertheless, such academic debates do not resonate with the everyday notion of the region, as the sources, type, and depth of knowledge between an area expert and non-expert differ, leaving more room for the social identity and cognitive biases to interpret these constructs, especially for the latter group.

Turkey’s geographically and culturally straddling nature between Asia and Europe, with ethnocultural differences of Ottoman heritage and long-standing East-West dichotomy provides an important case in the region. Therefore, being Middle Eastern has symbolic meanings regarding Turkish political history, since early Republican policies towards Westernization in terms of scripts, attire, educational and legal systems are referred to create two broad conceptual clusters of “Western-Modern-Secular” versus “Eastern-Traditional-Islamic”^{iv}. This dichotomy was observable in the puzzle of identifying Turkey in relation to the ME even in the late 1960s:

All Muslims are, at least in theory, brothers; nationalists of neighboring countries are not. This is one reason for the ambivalence of Turkish feelings about the Middle East. There are others. Geographically Turkey is at least in part a European country; the Ottoman Empire in its heyday was much more so. Although, to Europe, the Turks were Asiatics, whether in Europe or Asia, although to the Arabs the Ottoman

ⁱⁱ See Davison (1960), Said (1978), Hourani (1991) and Khalidi (1998). Internalization and translation of the terms “Near/Middle East” in the region, despite the fact that it had taken Europe/West as the reference points was the starting point.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also, see Bilgin (2004) and Yesiltas (2014.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Khalidi argues “‘al-sharq al awsat’ being no more than a translation of the English term.” and “analogous terms in other regional languages, indicate that an external perception of the region is prevalent in countries of the ‘Middle East’ itself.” (1998:74)

^{iv} see Altunışık & Tür (2004), Altunışık (2009), Aras & Karakaya-Polat (2007), Aydın (1999), Balcı & Mış (2008), Bilgin, & Bilgiç (2011), Bozdağlılı (2008), Dağı (2005).

Empire was the Muslim State and therefore their state too, Ottoman Turks were invested with a degree of European otherness in Arab eyes (Mango, 1968, p. 225).

Despite there is research on ME countries' perception of Turkey (Akgün, Perçinoğlu & Gündoğar, 2010), the Turkish public's stereotypes regarding the ME are not well studied. Anti-migrant reaction to the Syrian refugees has increased in recent years, with a pejorative "Arab" stereotype rising through social media such as Twitter and hyperlink dictionaries. Moreover, some racist idioms attached to ME ethnic groups like Arabs, Kurds, Jews, and others, have still used in the Turkish language since the Ottoman era.^v These broadly held negative stereotypes would be harmful if believed and applied as prejudices, by affecting societal harmony, since Turkey hosts many economic and forced migrants from Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan. Therefore, Turkey presents a useful domain for studying stereotype theories in the MES from within the region. Additionally, as mentioned previously, there is not enough work on the Middle East stereotypes literature, especially regarding prejudice in academia. The closest ones are the Turkish papers by Yılmaz & Yiğit (2010) and Aksoy & Karaçalı (2014) where both descriptively studied the perceptions of Pre-Service Social Studies Teachers (senior year students of anonymous University year students of Sinop University respectively). However, none of these articles link these perceptions to stereotypes or stereotyping literature and both works unlike this present article remain purely descriptive and as single case studies.

Finally, Turkey's "bridge" analogy is an important part of its geographical discourse and "exceptionalism" arguments. Both Middle Eastern exceptionalism and Turkish exceptionalism are fed from geopolitical theories, arguing the country/region has strategic/military significance; and hence is unique/different from the other regions. However, popularized by former Justice and Development Party (JDP) minister and scholar Davutoğlu in his Strategic Depth doctrine (Davutoğlu, 2011); Turkish exceptionalism argues that its geopolitical position between Asia and Europe makes the country a unique, exceptional central power

^v Such stigmatizing idioms "Ne Şam'ın şekeri ne Arabin yüzü", "Arap yağı bol buldu mu kışına başına sürermiş", "Ağaçtan maşa, Kürtten paşa olmaz" can be found in hyperlink urban dictionaries.

in the region. Such discourse is also utilized by military/bureaucracy circles (Bilgin, 2007), and sometimes has the perception of “cultural, religious, historical, strategic or societal” superiority (Yanık, 2011). It was also noted by many that Turkish foreign policy had experienced an axis shift when JDP was reelected in the 2007 general elections and came to power with more emphasis on its conservative-democrat self-identity until the Arab Spring. Thus, it popularized discussions of Turkey’s role and shift to engage more with the Middle East both publicly and academically (Larrabee, 2007; Aras & Karakaya-Polat, 2007; Altunışık, 2008). However, that is not only sui generis to JDP, as 1990s Sayarı commented “Turkey’s more activist Middle East policy had an unforeseen consequence: increasing Arab concerns about a reemergence of Turkish regional dominance” (1997, p. 46). Therefore, the ME image and positioning of Turkey in it may be shaped by the ideological stance and social identity of the participants, which was controlled by both groups.

4. Methodology

This phenomenological study is designed to answer how the academic knowledge of the Middle East as a region affects the understanding of its definition and boundaries--as well as whether or not the region includes the participants’ home-country-Turkey. Therefore, 40 Turkish academics from two different groups divided across their academic exposure to the “Middle East” as an IR system/area were interviewed. The reason for choosing “academic knowledge” instead of other types of expertise —such as the ones gained through personal interest, journalism, and NGO work— can be justified through;

- a. the necessity to keep factors other than area knowledge —such as intellectual/educational level and background, work environment, pre-university education, political experiences, and inclination— across these two groups as constant as possible; where the universities provided the best feasible solution,
- b. diminishing the possibility of sympathy towards the region’s coming before knowledge,
- c. the nature of graduate-level academic knowledge which requires students to discuss stereotype-consistent and inconsistent information together.

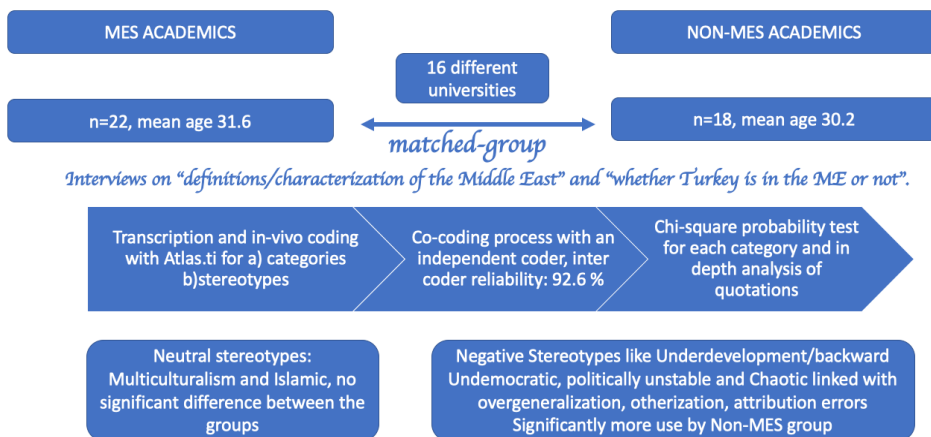
To test these presumptions, participants were additionally interviewed in depth about their personal and academic backgrounds and interests of the ME. Initially, for every participant from the MES group, an equivalent participant from the other group in terms of background (educational background, socioeconomic status, upbringing, political inclination, education before university, the university-affiliated to) was selected. Therefore, 22 MES scholars who had their graduate studies in the Middle East as an International Relations (IR) system/Area Studies region and 18 non-MES scholars^{vi} without any exposure to “Middle East Area/Studies” academically were recruited from 16 different universities from seven cities/regions.

The participants were first interviewed on their definition of the ME and its boundaries. After disclosing their perceptions of the Middle East, the interviewees were presented with a basic question to elaborate on: “Is Turkey in the Middle East?” along with why and how they position the country concerning the region. Moreover, MES scholars were also interviewed about their MES education and research in the field. The answers were coded with the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti, by the researchers for the patterns in their answers which are mentioned in the finding section as “categories”. Simultaneously, the data were coded for stereotypes regarding the literature, i.e. using stereotypic generalization language, cognitive fallacies/biases such as attribution errors, negative verbal/non-verbal criticism, etc. To enhance coding objectivity, an independent coder with a psychology background co-coded the data and the inter-coder agreement was calculated as 92.6%. The overlaps between categories and stereotypes are studied in detail and shape the final argument about negative stereotyping categories. Finally, to see the difference between the groups, a chi-square probability test was utilized under each category, where the results are presented in the footnotes of the paper. The concepts and main arguments derived from the data will be presented concerning the psychological stereotyping theory as the main framework along with the debates concerning area studies. Therefore, the study tries to test the following hypotheses:

^{vi} Participants were from seven cities from different regions of Turkey and 16 different universities, age range is 23 to 42; the mean age among MES scholars is 31.6 and among non-MES scholars is 30.2.

1. Non-MES scholars are expected to use more stereotypes (either negative/positive) in general compared to their correspondent MES scholars (when the two groups are controlled by other demographic and sociopolitical factors, except the education they receive in terms of area studies). The MES scholars would engage in less stereotyping either positive or negative, due to the experienced complexity and heterogeneity of the region they study, i.e. due to having more detailed and contradictory information on the region.
2. Despite their exposure to similar stereotypical images in the public domain, media, and previous educational background; both groups are expected to refer to common stereotypes about the region, due to automaticity; whereas non-MES scholars will depict the region more in line with these stereotypes; whereas MES-scholars will not (See Table 1).

Table 1: Chart for Methodology



Moreover, the study tries to answer the following questions through its descriptive methodology: a) What are the different categories that emerge in these two groups' perception of the Middle East and characterization of the region and positioning Turkey concerning the Middle East? b) What are the possible roots of prejudices/stereotypes and how are they justified? c) What are the intellectual debates addressed by the scholars about Middle East perception and characterization?

Findings: Defining the subject: The Middle East is ...

Both MES and non-MES scholars were asked to locate the ME geographically and describe it briefly, to figure out how area knowledge interferes with the perception of the region. The question triggered various categories which were analyzed in line with stereotyping literature.

Proving the assumptions, MES scholars depicted a more heterogeneous and complex definition based on their academic knowledge. With the emergence of the early works on the problematization of the region, constructing, naming, and locating the ME have constituted an important debate. Therefore, MES scholars immediately identified the term as “problematic”, “debatable”, “constructed” and “Eurocentric”, rather than accepting a given territory:

This is a very debatable issue. Even what we call the 'Middle East' is something constructed. What we call the ME has been defined as only the Arab world for a time ... Recently, Af-Pak was included ... But I perceive a 'core' and a 'periphery' (MES, ID: 20).

The internalization and translation of the terms “Near East” or “Middle East”—despite these terms taking Europe/the West as their reference point—was the starting point. Turkish scholars had also debated which and whose ME we are talking about and generally concluding the region is a “construct” whose geographical, cultural, and ideological frontiers can occasionally change:

The ME does not have a geographical definition, thus here emerges the difficulty in sketching that out. It is a region defined to be dominated by the Western powers, to be exploited, plus it is a very recent term and we

perceive it as such. Despite this, we use the term because it became well-established over time (MES, ID: 19).

Therefore, Area Studies debates over the construction of the region had primed the MES scholars to challenge the question itself, instead of taking the region as a simple given phenomenon and depicting a more complex and heterogeneous ME. Dividing the region into “historically and culturally meaningful” sub-regions was one of these patterns:

The ME is rather a historical naming given to the region as it was on England’s way to India ... There is a great map and a small map ... Thus, while I am studying, I prefer to use sub-regions like the Levant, the Gulf, etc., but since each region interacts, if you ask me to draw a picture of the ME, I will choose the greater one, as even Af-Pak is related (MES, ID: 10).

However, non-MES scholars with comparable intellectual backgrounds except the above discussions and information depth did not problematize the concept and rather gave simplistic definitions:

What comes to my mind first are Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, and the south of our country generally (Non-MES, ID: 26).

Generally, non-MES scholars consistently sketched out the region according to their sources of information, which appeared to be mainly Western and Turkish media, and described it as a given geographical territory.

As far as I know, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Morocco, I think Afghanistan, and Pakistan were also included; the group is composed of these countries. They are on this particular list since they are in the ME (Non-MES, ID: 36).

Additionally, MES scholars located Turkey in the ME based on the current MES literature, whereas the non-MES scholars had different tendencies based on the long-standing and somehow ideological dichotomy between Turkey’s Middle Eastern and European identities:

When you say ME, even if it should not pop up, Turkey comes as the first thing in my mind. Because, I believe that Turkey geographically belongs to Europe, rather than Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and these countries (Non-MES, ID: 29).

Therefore, while the majority of non-MES scholars made the point that Turkey is rather European or an “exceptional bridge”; MES scholars’ indicated that claiming Turkey is in the ME does not exclude it from Europe, as one country can be a part of different regions and systems. Participants were also encouraged to think aloud and justify their positioning: Their answers were coded into two main categories as references to (1) historical, political, and geographical connections and (2) similarities/differences of Turkey to/from what was supposed “Middle Eastern”. For instance, IR scholars indicated historical connection was a factual criterion used in drawing the borders of the Middle East and including Turkey in it:

As we have defined the ME at the beginning of the interview, and based on the criteria I mentioned in terms of the Ottoman past; Turkey is the main heir... Therefore, from the historical point of view, it is a part of the ME (MES, ID: 13).

On the other hand, for non-MES scholars, history intertwines the country and the region, without really making the former a part of the latter:

We are not directly in it, but we have lots of connections. We have our histories shared, Iraq and Syria... In the end, they were the Ottoman soil for centuries...Therefore, in a way, we have had cultural and economic ties for a long time, say for centuries and it is hard to break. Since we have the geographical proximity, our relations continue. Thus, I think we are intertwined but still, I claim we are not a part of it. But I would have said we were if we had the same political climate as the ME... (Non-MES, ID: 34).

Cross-checks with their answers of the perception of the ME reveal that for the participants who draw Turkey reactively outside of the region, the ME itself is rather a politically unstable, war-like and chaotic environment. Therefore, the

above patterns in historical connection exemplify how the same factual information can be interpreted due to motivation especially when the information is lacking. For the ones who claimed Turkey is in the ME historical connection is one criterion for involvement, whereas for the non-MES group who overwhelmingly interpreted the region as negative; Turkey was not its part and the historical connection was neither unmentioned nor utilized for the counter-argument.

Political connection, on the other hand, seems to be a criterion that had more consensus on, however more than half of the non-MES scholars claimed Turkey's involvement is a minor issue that occurs due to geographical proximity and governmental tendencies and does not satisfy to make country a part of the system; since the perception of the ME is negative:

Turkey is a buffer zone and I think there are interventions of the Europeans and the Americans for the region, as well as for us. Due to the location, especially in recent years, due to refugee crises and conflicts, they still want us as a buffer, I mean. Because, we are not similar to the ME, in terms of our political and judicial systems, it is close to Europe, not to the ME. Thus, no one prefers us to be involved in the ME and I think even though we are getting close to that region, it is not at that level... (Non-MES, ID: 35).

Finally, all of the non-MES scholars acknowledged the geographical connection either as a justification or a misleading criterion for Turkey's being in the ME. Referring back to Turkish ambiguity in the East vs. West dichotomy, at the surface, finding supportive arguments for both answers is easy due to the heterogeneity and ethnic/cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire. From the stereotyping literature; a lack of in-depth knowledge of the region might have triggered the stereotypical homogeneity claims of the region and people differentiate themselves from the stereotypes of the region.

5. Stereotypes of the Region: For you, what characterizes the ME?

The second question, "Which cultural and political characteristics do you attribute to the region?" was intended to bring out common stereotypes. The

qualitative analysis revealed several negative perceptions of the ME as “underdeveloped”, an “undemocratic and politically unstable place”, “a chaotic place” and more neutral perceptions as “a multicultural place” and a place connoting “Islam”, where significant differences between MES and non-MES scholars were observed in terms of their tendencies to utilizing these stereotypes.^{vii} The two groups were also differentiated by knowledge asymmetry and the way they positioned Turkey vis-à-vis the region by utilizing certain stereotypes, as most MES scholars located Turkey in the ME, the non-MES scholars perceived the region as an outside entity, using the “Turkey is a Middle Eastern country” schema either as a criticism of recent policies or as an argument for Turkey’s superiority, depending on their ideological stances.

5.1 Negative stereotypes and stereotype-knowledge

First of all, as an important negative stereotype, it is significant that “underdevelopment/backwardness” was often mentioned by non-MES scholars. In line with the ultimate attribution error phenomenon, wherein negative stereotypes might be attributed internally to the stereotyped group, these negative stereotypes are not only attributed underdevelopment to the region, but also argued that it was endemic to the society and people of the region:

Technologically underdeveloped/backward but has fertile lands, and is attractive in terms of its oil reserves. In terms of people, it has not developed much, not a kind of place where people can present their culture and have better lives, but rather a place that is already ready to be exploited (Non-MES, ID: 38).

Similar arguments were common among non-MES scholars, who tended to differentiate Turkey from the ME or the “rest of the ME”; where social identity division between “us” and “them (the people of the ME)” might have played a

^{vii} The chi-squares were also computed as a supportive analysis and the results indicate that these differences between MES and non-MES scholars is also statistically significant at $p < .05$ for the negative stereotypes; as the code “underdeveloped” had $X^2(1, n=40) = 12.03$; $p = .00$; and the code “undemocratic and politically unstable place revealed $X^2(1, n=40) = 4.41$; $p = .04$.

role in attributing negative characteristics to the internal factors. In fact, similar cases of negative stereotypes and prejudices against the region have been covered by other authors. For instance, describing difficulties teaching MES in the US due to the stereotypes^{viii} were studied; however, such a discussion is missing in the Turkish context. In line with these studies, in our interviews, the sources of information were important for understanding why the non-MES scholars elaborated on their “*observation*” of the ME as an “underdeveloped” place, which many acknowledge stems from “*media coverage*” of the region:

I don't know whether it is because of how the media depicts it, but as far as I see the area is underdeveloped mainly. The place where Muslims predominantly live, plus not being developed, being poor, etc. is what comes to my mind but I do not know how true they are (Non-MES, ID: 27).

Even though some non-MES scholars felt doubt about the accuracy of their stereotype knowledge, generally their evaluations of the region were in line with how the media portrayed it. The role of mass media in producing, activating, and maintaining stereotypes becomes clear because it provides “vicarious contact” for people who have no or minimal direct contact with the region (Ramasubramanian, 2007). In other words, media depictions of negative images and stereotypes might create a biased and shady knowledge of the region, as well as a sense of familiarity fed by similar media coverage. Therefore, the non-MES scholars are not enabled and motivated to think about any stereotype-inconsistent information; whereas MES scholars had to actively engage with stereotype-consistent and inconsistent information throughout their studies, such means as classroom discussions, fieldwork in the region, or in-depth analyses of cases. Otherwise, without such motivation of active engagement, due to the automaticity of stereotypes, there is a tendency to select stereotype-consistent information, even if stereotype-inconsistent information is also present. The following is a clear example of the case, as this non-MES scholar claims the people of the region are naïve and emotional, and that they fail to ask for their rights; despite the recent

^{viii} Please recall previous discussion about media and textbook references in the US in the literature section.

examples like the 2009 Iranian electoral protests and 2011 Arab Spring received widespread coverage in the Turkish media:

It is a region where people are gathered together with more warmth and passion; they are more helpful but less educated, and so naïve that they don't even challenge how they are being ruled and ask for human rights, yet interestingly they are the ones who need to ask for human rights more ... and in terms of political culture they have more emotional connections with their leaders and ask less about their rights (Non-MES, ID: 29).

On the other hand, MES scholars were also quite aware of the stereotypes used by their non-MES colleagues to characterize the region. In other words, neither group differs in terms of their “stereotype knowledge”, which may be due to their backgrounds as growing up in the same country, reading the same history textbooks, and observing the same media images. MES scholars, however, after retrieving the stereotype, use counter-arguments to prevent themselves and their audience from overgeneralizing the facts or propagating their misconceptions. This seems in line with Devine’s (1989) theory that stereotypes are activated automatically and are shot down with an active effort. Therefore, we suggest MES education provides the tools for such “active effort” with its deconstruction and critique of the region, its images, and its stereotypes, as well as through academic and in-class debates on issues such as scaling, Orientalism, otherization, and exceptionalism.

Finally, in terms of chaos, non-MES scholars were more likely to use incendiary wording like “a very bloody region”, “bombs, wars and bloodshed”, and “children who lose their body parts” whereas most MES scholars either did not mention or largely criticized this perception. This tendency also runs parallel with their observed hesitation to generalize and stereotype and can be considered as a conscious effort to curtail the activated stereotype knowledge, as Devine (1989) proposed, as they have the same stereotype knowledge, but do not apply it in their understanding of the region. Thus, MES scholars criticize this “chaos” perception, referring to “pop politics” books depicting the region as a place characterized only by tension:

People see political instability, late nation-statehood, unconsolidated democracies, and a region where there are sad events and problems. But, I don't perceive it as pure chaos, and I get angry when I see these things like 'the Middle East is a Boiling Cauldron', 'the Middle East is a Witch's Brew', etc. It is always depicted like that and I think the more it's depicted like that, the more likely it is for us to perceive it as such (MES, ID: 16).

In terms of positioning Turkey mentioning differences was more common in non-MES scholars who also positioned Turkey outside the region and claimed differences were their main reason. Even though this sense of “difference” is not backed up with specific examples; the most cited explanation was Western identity and cultural modernity:

Even though Turkey seems to have the ME religious culture, it is more of a Western country in terms of much of its institutional values. We see it in economic development, cultural values, and even political stability. There are more conflicts in the ME (Non-MES, ID: 39).

Moreover, this Western/European identity and modernity seems to bring a sense of “superiority” for some participants, which was in line with the soft-power/role model discourse of the late 2000s. Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as an Orientalist view:

I think we can help them [the Middle Easterners] to interact with Europe or we can be the coordinator in their relations with Europe. I think we are one level superior to them in every aspect. Beyond being modern, we can be their negotiator, and we can help them in many aspects, in terms of goods, technology, they can get know-how from our universities, such cases... (Non-MES, ID: 36).

The general pattern of not attributing an ME identity to the country by the general public is criticized as “otherization” by some MES scholars:

[ME] is our “the other”. The one that Turkey otherizes, the place she describes by asking the question “What should I not be?” and has the anti-ME position by claiming “No, I am not Middle Eastern”; but due to all these historical connections, she is ... (MES, ID: 21).

5.2 Neutral (and Neutral-like) stereotypes

Neutral stereotypes such as “multiculturalism” and “connoting to Islam”^{ix} were utilized by both MES and non-MES scholars, despite their framing significantly diverged: Both groups described the region as multicultural but non-MES scholars did not elaborate much on that:

Even though I am not sure whether it is right or wrong, in my mind, as much as I learned from the media, even though I know it is a multicultural, predominantly Arab culture, an Arabo-Persian mix comes to my mind. They have a similar culture (Non-MES, ID: 32).

On the other hand, MES scholars elaborated more on “multiculturality” in line with area studies literature to back up their arguments against essentialism and ME exceptionalism:

They only “have the language in common”, but no, in fact, to claim “the widespread language is the common one” is also wrong. When you consider Israel and Iran you realize the language is also not common... There are theories of exceptionalism, as you know, Arab exceptionalism, exceptionalism based on Islam. Mostly these are cultural explanations. ... when you look at ME exceptionalism, neither is their particularities recent phenomenon nor was the ME always like that. The region neither became underdeveloped since becoming Muslim nor became underdeveloped since becoming Arab. There have been times in history when the ME was much better than the West, something like the Golden Age of Islam (MES, ID: 19).

^{ix} The chi-squares were also computed as a supportive analysis and the results indicate that these differences between MES and non-MES scholars revealing in terms of neutral stereotypes there is no statistically significant difference between both groups; as category “is multiculturalism” turned out $X^2(1, n=40) = 2.12; p = .14$; not significant; and the code “Islam” had revealed $X^2(1, n=40) = 0.33; p = .56$ results.

The second category “connoting Islam” is also framed differently between groups, for the non-MES scholars Islam is rather a homogenous cultural entity, and the main characteristics of the region deeply affect other characteristics:

I believe also the reason [for backwardness] is that it is a closed society. It is not open to new things, and I believe this is because of Islam's dark side; within their framework of Islam, their society is closed to novelty. And by now, they have lost their ability to do something new, something different (Non-MES, ID: 40).

The notion of the ME as a homogenous Arab and/or Muslim territory had been challenged as a common misconception by MES scholars since the 1970s, who depict the politicized connections between these two phenomena: For instance, Keddie observed that there were more Christians in the Arab world than in Iran and Turkey and that, while Christian Arab intellectuals extol the virtues of Islam, the latter two nations are more likely to emphasize the harm Islamic institutions wrought on their identities (Keddie, 1973). Therefore, the common “Arabs are Muslim” stereotype had emerged. On the other hand, MES scholars generally warned about Orientalism, exceptionalism, and essentialism, noting that appreciating a fact and advocating a stereotype are two different things:

I will say that Islam is one of the main predictors in the ME, but in saying this, we should not be Orientalist ... thus, culturally it is a region dominated by Muslims, though neither does that mean that Islam is a homogenous unity, as not all Muslims are the same Muslims (MES, ID: 11).

Therefore, considering the region as more heterogeneous and paying attention to its nuances seems to prevent MES scholars from falling into the trap of stereotypical thinking about the region. In other words, those who received a formal education in MES might be better equipped to combat stereotypical thinking through active discussion about stereotype-consistent and -inconsistent information and greater contact with the region.

Lastly, these two stereotypes were also cited as similarities of Turkey to the ME due to its Ottoman past and Muslim majority. However, for the non-MES scholars, these were just “relations” inadequate for a Middle Eastern identity:

I would not be able to say all of the countries in the ME, but most are Muslim states and we have a connection there (Non-MES, ID: 36).

In sum, the quotations from interviews emphasize the link between identity, motivation, and active effort in terms of automaticity theory and information. As proposed in assumptions, the less information-depth they have (non-MES group), the more negative stereotypes they started to attribute, and the more eager they become to otherize ME and perceive Turkey as exceptional. On the other hand, due to their active efforts and area knowledge, MES scholars had a less stereotypical image of the region and grasped the Turkish Middle Eastern identity as a fact, shutting down and criticizing the negative stereotypes common in the general public.

6. Conclusion

This phenomenological study summarized the 40 interviews with MES and non-MES scholars, whose differences other than academic knowledge of the region were controlled. The role of education and related information depth in defining the region and its boundaries were investigated. The assumptions drawing a link between stereotypes and knowledge were tested. To prompt the stereotypes, the participants were asked to define the ME geographically to test whether the groups would differ in terms of how cognitively complex or simple their definitions would be; and what type of stereotypes they would attribute to the region. The results indicated that non-MES scholars had more tendencies toward negative stereotypes, as well as having a homogenous and simple image of the ME, usually falling into the traps of Orientalist and exceptionalist thinking in their understanding of the region and Turkey’s involvement in it. On the other hand, MES scholars with more information depth depicted a more complex, heterogeneous ME, utilized fewer stereotypes, and criticized common negative stereotypes despite being aware of these. These patterns support Devine’s automaticity theory as stereotype knowledge is acquired through socialization and

is automatically activated, and conscious effort and motivation are required to stop stereotypes from being manifested as prejudices. Therefore, while both groups recalled similar stereotypes about the ME—those commonly depicted by the media—the MES scholars hesitated to employ these stereotypes uncritically, so elaborated counterarguments that depicted their line of reasoning. They also backed up their assertions with discursive themes from MES like scaling, Orientalism, exceptionalism, and so forth, along with stereotype-inconsistent information. Even though some of this stereotype-inconsistent information is explainable through the different sources of information available to MES and non-MES scholars like books and recent events, etc., non-MES scholars rather tended to use stereotype-consistent information. This was also in line with Johnston and Macrae’s findings that unless participants are forced to focus on both stereotype-consistent and -inconsistent information, they tend to employ the former. The MES scholars’ education was evident in the way they conducted themselves in their interviews through their reference to the literature and relevant themes of Middle Eastern scholarship and courses.

To sum up, the value of this research lies in its capacity to propose a way to challenge especially negative stereotypes about the ME by education. Considering the various sources of mainly negative stereotypes, like the mass media, social media, non-explanatory history textbooks, and popular politics/Middle Eastern books^x, understanding how stereotypes work is important, especially in a region having a lot of human and political contact and interaction with other Middle Eastern countries. However, a specific education on the region which provides room for discussion and presents stereotype-inconsistent information as well may lead people to actively shut down these stereotypes and reduce their prejudices for the sake of cultural harmony.

^x Turkish history teaching until recently had the stigma “Arabs betrayed the Ottomans” which was part of the nation-building strategy of the early Republican era, see Çiçek (2012). However, the discourse in textbooks has dramatically changed since the 2010s, and one early study of the effect of the 2012 secondary school books suggests that not much prejudice is exhibited on the part of Turkish children towards Arabs, see Işık, Hasan, and Abdülcelil Gök (2017).

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