



CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ESSENTIALISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR ANTI-REFUGEE POLICY SUPPORT

ULUSAL KİMLİK İNŞALARI VE ÖZCÜLÜĞÜN SIĞINMACI KARŞITI TUTUMLARA DAİR SONUÇLARI

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Abstract

The current study investigates the relationships between essentialism, constructions of national identity, and responses toward Syrian refugees in Turkey. We draw upon the concept of essentialism, which refers to tendencies to view socially constructed categories such as race and gender as fixed, natural, strictly bounded, and informative about people's characteristics. We extend this concept to national essentialism, the belief that the nation is a fixed entity with clear and strict boundaries that defines the qualities of its members. We argue that such an essentialist way of thinking will predict tendencies to define a particular national identity such as Turkishness in a more exclusionary way, by emphasizing common ancestral and cultural roots, rather than by emphasizing civic bonds such as citizenship. Such an ethno-cultural construction of the national identity, in turn, is likely to feed into tendencies to exclude ethnically and culturally diverse immigrant populations within the society. We have collected data from a sample of 499 participants to test our proposed mediation model using structural equation modelling. Our analyses have shown that national essentialism predicts endorsement of an ethno-cultural construction of the Turkish national identity, which, in turn, predicts greater perceived threat posed by refugees, and greater support for anti-refugee policies. Endorsement of a civic construction of national identity, on the other hand, was not a significant mediator in the model. Our study connects the literatures on essentialism and constructions of national identity to shed light on the psychological roots of public responses toward newcomers to societies such as refugees.

Öz

Bu çalışma özcülük, ulusal kimlik inşaları ve Türkiye'de Suriyeli sığınmacılara olan yaklaşımlar arasındaki ilişkilere odaklanmaktadır. Özcülük kavramı, ırk ve cinsiyet gibi toplumsal olarak inşa edilen kategorileri sabit, doğal, keskin sınırları olan ve insanların özelliklerini belirleyen unsurlar olarak görme eğilimini içermektedir. Bu çalışma, özcülük kavramını genişleterek ulusal kimliğe uyarlamaktadır. Ulusal kimlik özcülüğü, ulusların net ve kesin sınırları olan, sabit yapılar olduğu ve ulus üyelerinin özelliklerini belirlediği düşüncelerine dayanmaktadır. Uluslarla ilgili özcü görüşler, belirli bir ulusun niteliklerinin nasıl görüldüğünü şekillendirebilir. Bu görüşler doğrultusunda ulusal kimlik daha kısıtlayıcı bir biçimde tanımlanabilir. Örneğin, ulusal kimliğin vurgusu, ortak vatandaşlık yerine, ortak etnik ve kültürel köken üzerine kurulabilir. Bu tür bir etno-kültürel kimlik inşası da toplum içindeki etnik ve kültürel farklılıklar taşıyan gruplara karşı dışlayıcı yaklaşımları yordayabilir. Bu çalışmada, aracı değişkenli bu modeli yapısal eşitlik modellemesi yöntemiyle test etmek için 500 katılımcıdan veri topladık. Analiz sonuçlarına göre, ulusal özcülük, etno-kültürel ulusal kimlik tanımlamasını yordamakta, bu aracı değişken de sığınmacıları tehdit olarak görme ve sığınmacı karşıtı politikaları destekleme değişkenlerini yordamaktadır. Ulusal kimliği vatandaşlık üzerinden tanımlama eğiliminin modelde aracı değişken rolü bulunmamaktadır. Çalışmamız, özcülük ve ulusal kimlik inşası alan yazınlarını bir araya getirmektedir. Bu sayede, topluma katılan sığınmacılar gibi ögelere karşı yaklaşımların psikolojik kökenlerinin anlaşılmasına katkı sunmaktadır.

Introduction

Turkey currently hosts close to 4 million Syrian refugees under temporary protection (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Public opinions about Syrian refugees are generally negative (Erdoğan, 2020), which presents a similar case as other countries that host refugees (Esses et al., 2017). Natives' attitudes towards refugees might be more negative in countries such as Turkey compared to European countries, because of the larger quantity of refugees and socio-economic challenges faced in the country (De Coninck et al., 2021). Perceptions of threat posed by an influx of refugees are closely related with public responses toward refugees, with attitudes, emotions, and behaviors becoming more negative as perceived threat increases, in Turkey and elsewhere (Esses et al., 2017; Stephan et al., 2005; Verkuyten, 2018; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). The present study examines the precursors of perceived threat, policy support, and behavioral intentions toward refugees in Turkey. Specifically, we consider essentialist perceptions of the nation, or beliefs that nations are natural entities that definitively shape the psychological characteristics of people that belong in them, which may foster an exclusionary way of defining the boundaries of the nation. Such exclusionary definitions of the nation, in turn, are likely to foster more negative responses toward refugees in the form of greater perceived threat, support for anti-refugee policies, and negative behavioral intentions.

Essentialism

We draw upon and extend the literature on essentialist thinking, by conceptualizing an essentialist perception of the nation as an entity. Essentialism refers to beliefs about deep-rooted natures (i.e., "essence") that make up and distinguish between social categories (Haslam et al., 2000, 2002; Bastian & Haslam, 2006). It fosters an understanding of social categories as discrete, stable, natural, and uniform entities that define the psychological characteristics of their members (Bastian & Haslam, 2006). Such beliefs imply that social category membership definitively determines the kind of person someone is and differentiates them from members of other groups in a deep and fundamental way (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002; Prentice & Miller, 2007). Applied to race or ethnicity, essentialism refers to beliefs that racial or ethnic groups provide a natural, meaningful and important source of division among humans (e.g., Chao et al., 2007; Hong et al., 2009). For instance, people may believe that racial or ethnic groups differ in terms of their genetic make-up, such that people can be distinguished in terms of

their racial identity by examining their DNA (e.g., Byrd & Hughey, 2015; No et al., 2008; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008).

What exactly the essence that defines a category like race or ethnicity consists of may be unclear (Prentice & Miller, 2007). For instance, people may assume the essence to have a biological basis rooted in genes or hormones (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Keller, 2005). However, beliefs in fundamental differences rooted in culture and upbringing also reflect essentialist thinking (Rangel & Keller, 2011; Verkuyten, 2003). Ultimately, what indicates essentialism is a belief in fundamental and deep-rooted differences between social categories that permanently define their members, whether these may be believed to stem from biology or culture (Morning, 2011; Byrd & Ray, 2015).

Essentialist views of social groups can make social inequalities seem natural, and therefore acceptable (e.g., Jost et al., 2004). Research has shown that the endorsement of essentialist views is related with intergroup outcomes such as legitimizing social inequality (Jost et al., 2004; Williams & Eberhardt, 2009), racial prejudice (Andreychik & Gill, 2015; Keller, 2005; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Keller, 2005), and inter-ethnic hostility (Kimel et al., 2016).

One of the goals of the current study is to extend the concept of essentialism by applying it to the national identity. Previous research has considered ethnic and racial essentialism (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009; Williams & Eberhardt, 2009), but has not examined national essentialism. In line with the conceptualizations of ethnic, racial or gender essentialism, we argue that an essentialist perception of national identity would entail beliefs that the nation is a fixed entity that provides an important and meaningful source of division among humans. Such an essentialist view of the nation would emphasize strict boundaries between nations and assume a deterministic nature of the national identity. From this perspective, people who belong to different nations would have fundamental differences between them, which they acquire through birth or by virtue of being raised within the cultural world of a particular nation.

We argue that an essentialist way of thinking about nations in general may foster a relatively exclusionary definition of a specific national identity, such as Turkishness. Such a construction of the Turkish identity is likely to deny refugees the potential of ever taking on the national identity. Hence, the current study investigates the relationships between national essentialism, constructions of

Turkish national identity, and perceptions of and behavioral intentions toward Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Constructions Of National Identity

We have conceptualized national essentialism as beliefs about the nature of nations in general, in line with the conception of ethnic essentialism in the literature (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009). Constructions of national identity, on the other hand, refer to people's understanding of what a particular national identity consists of. Societies may come to foster particular constructions of national identity as a function of historical and socio-political circumstances, and individuals may also show differences in the extent to which they endorse different markers of the national identity (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Shulman, 2002). For instance, Turkishness can be constructed in more or less inclusive ways, based on the markers or criteria that people believe are required for one to be truly Turkish (e.g., Cingöz-Ulu, 2008; Taşdemir & Öner Özkan, 2016). Such markers or criteria that one is expected to fulfill in order to belong to the national identity can be distinguished as civic and ethnic constructions of national identity (Brubaker, 1992; Ignatieff, 1993; Pakulski & Tranter, 2000; Smith, 2001). A civic construction considers citizenship and fulfillment of civic responsibilities to the nation as the basis of a national identity, rather than ethnicity or religion (Brubaker, 1992; Ignatieff, 1993; Pakulski & Tranter, 2000; Reijerse et al., 2013; Smith, 2001). An ethnic (or ethno-cultural) construction, on the other hand, focuses on qualities relating to one's ancestral or cultural roots (Smith, 2001). In that sense, one's national identity would be ascribed by birth (Brubaker, 1990). Based on an ethno-cultural construction of the national identity, inheriting the dominant ethnic identity would determine one's membership in the nation (Wakefield et al., 2011). Verkuyten and Martinovic (2015) identify family origin and ancestry as the basis of an ethnic construction of national identity. Whereas some researchers consider ethnic and cultural markers as part of the same construction of national identity (i.e., ethno-cultural), some have argued that they make up separate dimensions as ethnic and cultural (Pehrson et al., 2009; Shulman, 2002).

The literature on national identity constructions reflects the complexity of distinguishing between various constructions of national identity. Researchers have empirically distinguished between ethnic and civic constructions of national identity across various settings; however, the markers or criteria that define these constructions may show contextual variation based on the particular socio-political

and historical characteristics of a society (Leong et al., 2020). Some researchers have identified different constructions altogether, such as 'ascriptive/objectivist' and 'voluntarist/subjectivist' constructions that Jones and Smith (2001) have identified using European data. Although there is overlap between these dimensions and the typical ethnic-civic distinction, the ascriptive dimension includes citizenship, which Jones and Smith (2001) considered as ascribed (by a state) rather than achieved, unlike most other work that considers citizenship as a civic marker of national identity.

A civic construction of national identity may be relatively more inclusive than an ethnic construction; it is associated with relatively more positive responses toward immigration and immigrants (e.g., Rothi et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2012). An ethno-cultural construction of national identity is generally less inclusive, since it emphasizes the ascribed, as opposed to voluntarily chosen aspects of belonging to a nation (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015). Research has shown that a civic construction is related with anti-immigrant attitudes (Lindstam et al., 2021), lower support for immigrant rights (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015), greater prejudice toward immigrants (Pehrson et al., 2009), lower helping behaviors toward immigrants in an interpersonal situation (e.g., Wakefield et al., 2011), and greater perceived threat posed by immigrants (Wright, 2011). However, unlike the patterns in these studies, Janmaat (2006) has found that the specific construction of identity one endorsed did not matter in predicting attitudes toward immigrants among Europeans; however, the more strongly people endorsed national identity markers in general (i.e., showed stronger identification with the nation), the more negative were their attitudes. This pattern suggests that national identity constructions may interact with each other, and their relationship with responses toward immigrants may be influenced by several factors (Byrne, 2011). It is important to also note that people can endorse different constructions of national identity such as ethno-cultural and civic simultaneously (Janmaat, 2006; Jones & Smith, 2001), which may predict their responses toward immigrants under different conditions.

To summarize, national identity constructions and the markers that define each may vary across settings; however, the general pattern suggests that relatively inclusive conceptions of a national identity relate to greater openness toward immigrants (e.g., Cingöz-Ulu, 2008; Rothi et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2012). This is because such constructions imply that immigrants can adopt the national identity by satisfying certain criteria, such as fulfilling civic duties (Rothi et al., 2005; Wright

et al., 2012). Less inclusive constructions, however, emphasize criteria that are more essentialist, which immigrants would be unable to ever fulfill (e.g., Pehrson et al., 2009).

National Identity Markers in Turkey

Foundation of the Republic of Turkey as a secular nation-state in 1923 required the reconfiguration of the Turkish national identity in a way to serve national unity. Atatürk's infamous saying "How happy is the one who says 'I'm Turkish!'" is a direct reflection of a more inclusive, civic imagination of the Turkish national identity that is based on a sense of belonging rather than ethnicity or religion. The 1924 constitution reflected this imagination by upholding a definition of Turkishness primarily based on citizenship and civic participation (Yeğen, 2004). However, recent research in Turkey has shown that mainstream portrayals of national identity reflect the dominant ethnic and religious identities, in line with an ethno-cultural conception of national identity (i.e., Turkish and Muslim; Cingöz-Ulu, 2008; Kurtiş et al., 2017; Özkırmı, 2006). For instance, the high school history curriculum downplays ethnic and religious diversity within society; minority populations are only mentioned in relation to the negative behaviors they have committed in the past (Kurtis et al., 2017). However, although the official curriculum fosters an ethno-cultural construction of national identity, individuals may differ in their personal endorsement of various understandings of the national identity. In addition to the ethno-cultural and civic constructions, Cingöz-Ulu (2008), for example, has identified an affective dimension of Turkish national identity based on people's endorsement of various markers of identity (e.g., emotional ties to and love for the homeland, and sense of belonging and attachment). Endorsement of both civic and affective constructions was related with relatively more positive attitudes toward minorities, compared to endorsement of an ethno-cultural construction. A few years later, Taşdemir and Öner-Özkan (2016) and Taşdemir (2018) identified ethnic and 'participatory' dimensions of Turkish national identity. In line with most studies in the literature, the ethnic dimension consisted of endorsement of markers related with one's ancestry and parents' ethnicity as criteria for having Turkish national identity. The participatory dimension consisted of a variety of markers related to responsibilities toward the nation, protecting the culture against change, adhering to the principles of Atatürk, being Muslim, speaking Turkish, and being a citizen (Taşdemir & Öner-Özkan, 2016; Taşdemir, 2018). Although these markers emerged as part of a single dimension empirically, some of them have been commonly

considered as ethno-cultural features, such as language and religion, and some as civic, such as citizenship (e.g., Smith, 2001). Among Turkish participants, endorsement of the participatory construction predicted more negative attitudes toward and greater perceived threat posed by minorities, whereas, unlike most studies in the literature, endorsement of the ethnic construction did not (Taşdemir, 2018). This suggests that identifying culture-specific distinctions in national identity constructions and the markers that define them are critical in understanding the correlates of national identity constructions.

The Present Research

The current study aims to investigate the links between essentialism and national identity constructions, and the implications of exclusionary constructions of the national identity in terms of perceived threat, policy support, and behavioral intentions toward refugees in Turkey. Previous research has suggested that exclusionary definitions of a national identity are likely to be related with essentialist thinking (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015). Some have argued that an ethnic construction of national identity may be considered as a form of essentialism (Pehrson et al., 2009; Taşdemir, 2018; Taşdemir & Öner-Özkan, 2016). Yet, no previous studies, to our knowledge, have empirically tested the relationship between essentialism and national identity constructions. We propose that more exclusionary constructions of Turkishness may emerge as a function of an essentialist perception of the concept of “nation”. We therefore investigate whether an essentialist way of thinking about the nation can predict endorsement of different constructions of Turkish national identity. Specifically, we set out to examine the relationships between essentialism of national identity, relatively exclusionary (i.e., ethno-cultural) or inclusive (i.e., civic) constructions of Turkish national identity, and responses toward Syrian refugees among majority Turkish participants.

We hypothesized that endorsement of essentialist perceptions of national identity will indirectly predict greater perceived threat, anti-refugee policy support, and negative behavioral intentions toward refugees, through endorsement of an ethno-cultural construction of Turkishness, but not a civic construction. We controlled contact with refugees, political orientation religiosity, and strength of national identification. Previous research has shown that contact with Syrians is related with behavioral tendencies and perceived threat among majority group members (Bağcı et al., 2022a; Yitmen et al., 2022). Political orientation and religiosity tend to be related with attitudes toward refugees (Rustenbach, 2010; Bağcı et al.,

2022b; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018b). Previous research has also shown national identification predicts attitudes and behavioral intentions toward refugees, as well as perceived threat (Taşdemir, 2018; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018a, 2018b). We tested the proposed mediation model using structural equation modeling.

METHOD

We collected data from $N = 499$ participants (319 females, 158 males, 16 other identity, 6 missing, $M_{age} = 20.94$, $SD_{age} = 2.23$). We recruited our participants from the participant pool of Boğaziçi University for course credit within a pre-specified timeframe.

Considering existing measures of national identity constructions (Cingöz-Ulu, 2008; Jones & Smith, 2001; Taşdemir, 2018), we picked six markers that define ethno-cultural and civic constructions of Turkish national identity. We asked participants whether each marker is important or not in defining whether a person can be considered as belonging to the Turkish national identity, on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 7 (*Extremely important*). Ethno-cultural items included ‘having Turkish ancestors’, ‘coming from a Turkish lineage’, ‘having Turkish as one’s mother tongue’, ‘having been raised with Turkish values’ (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$). These ethnic and cultural markers of identity reflect characteristics that one acquires through birth or upbringing that cannot be achieved in later adulthood. Civic items included ‘being a Turkish citizen’ and ‘being a legal resident in Turkey’ ($r = .54$) and focused on characteristics that a person can acquire later in life through legal means.

We adapted the ethnic essentialism scale used by Rhodes and Gelman (2009) to measure essentialism of national identity. The scale consists of eight items, with response options ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). The adapted version of the measure assesses the meaning and importance attributed to national identities in defining the kind of person one is. Sample items read, “Nations emerge naturally” and “National identity is a very important part of what makes a person who they are” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$).

We used eight items to measure symbolic and realistic forms of threat on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). We wrote the items based on items used previously by Gonzales and colleagues (2008) and Verkuyten and Martinovic (2017). Sample items read, “It is becoming harder for Turks

to find jobs because of Syrian refugees” and “A large number of Syrian refugees living in Turkey may harm Turkish culture” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$).

We measured anti-refugee policy support with five items with response options ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Three items were adopted from Yitmen and Verkuyten (2020) and two items were generated for this study. A sample item reads, “Turkey should not accept any more refugees” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$). Positive items were reversed so higher scores reflect greater anti-refugee policy support.

We used four items developed by Yitmen and Verkuyten (2018) to assess behavioral intentions on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all likely*) to 7 (*Very likely*). The items were, “sign a petition in favor of Syrian refugees”, “participate in a protest supporting Syrian refugees”, “sign a petition against Syrian refugees”, and “participate in a protest against Syrian refugees”. We reversed the former two items so that average scores reflect negative behavioral intentions (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .70$).

We used several control variables in our model. We measured daily contact with Syrian refugees with one item on a scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (Very frequently). We used one item to measure strength of Turkish national identification on a scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very strongly). Only participants who responded as “Turkish” to an earlier question on their national identity encountered this item. Finally, we measured political orientation and religiosity using one item each.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the demographic variables and variables in the model appear in Table 1. We used R 3.3.3 to conduct the analyses (R Core Team, 2017). We first conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using all constructs in our model to assess the factor structure and covariances between the variables. The latent constructs were essentialism, endorsement of ethno-cultural markers of Turkishness, endorsement of civic markers of Turkishness, perceived threat posed by Syrian refugees, anti-refugee policy support, and negative behavioral intentions toward Syrian refugees. The model showed mediocre to acceptable fit based on several model fit indices, $\chi^2(420, N = 489) = 1527.94, p < .001, CFI = .85, TLI = .83, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06$. All items loaded on their respective constructs with loadings above .38, showing that the factor structure was appropriate. Modification indices suggested that several error covariances could be added to the model to improve fit. The addition of 8 error covariances to the model resulted in significantly improved

model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(8) = 649.5$, $p < .001$. The modified CFA model showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(412, N = 489) = 878.43$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, TLI = .93, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = .06.

Based on the parameter estimates, endorsement of ethno-cultural and civic national identity markers showed a small, positive correlation, $r = .13$, $p = .04$. Whereas endorsement of ethno-cultural national identity was moderately correlated with essentialism, $r = .62$, $p < .001$, endorsement of civic national identity was not, $r = .10$, $p = .09$. All outcome variables were strongly and positively correlated, with r values ranging between .82 and .89.

Next, we conducted a structural equation model where we tested the hypothesized mediation model using the latent constructs (Figure 1). We included contact with refugees, strength of national identification, political orientation, and religiosity as control variables in the model. We used essentialism of national identity as an exogenous variable predicting ethno-cultural and civic constructions of Turkish national identity. We used essentialism and both constructions of national identity as predictors of perceived threat, anti-refugee policy support, and negative behavioral intentions toward refugees. The model showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(512, N = 438) = 983.61$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06. Essentialism was positively correlated with all of the control variables: contact ($r = .17$, $p = .001$), political orientation ($r = .34$, $p < .001$), religiosity ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), and strength of national identification ($r = .62$, $p < .001$).

As hypothesized, essentialism significantly predicted greater endorsement of ethno-cultural markers of Turkishness, $b = 0.81$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$, but not endorsement of civic markers, $p = .41$. The control variables did not predict either of the national identity constructions. Essentialism also predicted greater perceived threat, $b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .003$. Furthermore, endorsement of ethno-cultural markers predicted greater perceived threat, $b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .003$, and anti-refugee policy support, $b = 0.81$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$, but did not predict negative behavioral intentions, $p > .05$. On the other hand, civic national identity did not predict any of the outcomes, $ps > .05$.

Finally, we tested the indirect effects of essentialism on each of the outcome variables through endorsement of ethno-cultural markers of Turkish identity using confidence intervals based on 5000 bootstrapped samples. Essentialism had a significant indirect effect on perceived threat through greater endorsement of ethno-cultural markers, $b = .15$, $SE = .07$, CI [.04 - .33], $p = .02$, as well as an indirect effect

on anti-refugee policy support, $b = .12$, $SE = .06$, $CI [.03 - .27]$, $p = .03$. However, the indirect effect of essentialism on negative behavioral intentions through greater endorsement of ethno-cultural markers was not significant, $p > .05$. The indirect effects of essentialism on the outcomes through endorsement of a civic construction of national identity were not significant, $ps > .05$.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the implications of endorsing an essentialist view of the nation as a fixed entity with solid boundaries. We examined the relationship between essentialism of the nation, endorsement of relatively inclusive (i.e., civic) or exclusionary (i.e., ethno-cultural) conceptions of the Turkish national identity, perceived threat posed by refugees, anti-refugee policy support, and behavioral intentions toward refugees. We proposed a mediation model, whereby an essentialist perception of the nation fosters an ethno-cultural construction of Turkishness (i.e., more exclusionary criteria for national belonging, based on ethnic and cultural roots), which, in turn, predicts more negative responses toward refugees. Our study showed that essentialism has an indirect association with perceived threat and support for anti-refugee policies through endorsement of ethno-cultural, but not civic, markers of Turkish identity. We have thus provided initial evidence that an essentialist mindset regarding the nation as a fixed entity with strict boundaries can shape people's opinions on who can or cannot belong to a particular national identity, and relatedly, their responses toward immigrants.

Our analyses on markers of Turkish national identity showed evidence for a distinction between ethno-cultural and civic markers of the national identity, in line with previous work in Turkey (Cingöz-Ulu, 2008; Tasdemir, 2018). In keeping with most research on constructions of national identity (e.g., Lindstam et al., 2021; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015; Pehrson et al., 2009), we found that an ethno-cultural construction is relatively more exclusionary, as it predicts greater perceived threat and more negative behavioral intentions toward refugees, whereas a civic construction does not. Endorsement of a civic construction of Turkish national identity did not mediate the relationship between essentialism and negative responses toward refugees. Unlike an exclusive ethno-cultural understanding, a relatively more inclusive civic understanding of the Turkish identity maintains the possibility that refugees, and majority members may become part of a common identity at some point (Dovidio et al., 2008), which can reduce intergroup bias over

time (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1996). This may explain why a civic construction of Turkish national identity did not negatively predict attitudes toward refugees.

It would be informative to also examine other constructions of national identity such as a participatory construction that researchers have previously identified in Turkey (Taşdemir & Öner-Özkan, 2016) in terms of their mediating role between essentialism and responses toward refugees. Such alternative constructions provide an interesting avenue for future research, since they show some overlap with ethno-cultural factors, but may also be defined in relatively more or less essentialist terms depending on the sociopolitical context and the motivations of individuals.

The fact that essentialism, and, in turn, different constructions of the national identity have implications in terms of attitudes and behavioral intentions toward refugees has great importance in an increasingly globalizing world, especially in countries such as Turkey where the recent influx of refugees has been a central public discourse in the last decade. Essentialist definitions of the nation as an entity, and constructions of national identities are bound to evolve as societies become more diverse (e.g., Ariely, 2012), and as more and more people start to identify with multiple or hybrid identities (Lindstam et al., 2021; Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2020). Such patterns of increasing diversity can lead to changes in the way in which a national identity is defined; more specifically, whether it will become more inclusive of immigrants or not (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Majority group members in increasingly diverse societies may experience greater threat to their national identity, as Integrated Threat Theory suggests (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). The perceived threat may lead people to show stronger tendencies to protect the national identity from changing, by excluding newcomers (Ariely, 2012). Indeed, people may strategically endorse essentialist beliefs about the nation to justify the exclusion of immigrants (e.g., Kadianaki & Andreouli, 2017). Although ethno-cultural criteria for nationhood are generally more inclusive and achievable, cultural criteria may also come to be used as tools for the assimilation of diverse populations to mitigate perceived symbolic threat (e.g., Reijerse et al., 2013).

It is important to note that we only measured frequency of contact in the current study. Assessing valence of contact would be informative, since positive contact with refugees may enhance attitudes toward them over time (e.g., Bağcı et al. 2022a; Yitmen et al., 2022). Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) proposes that contact, particularly under optimal conditions, can reduce prejudice. A large-scale meta-analysis has shown that intergroup contact can be helpful in

reducing prejudice, even if it may not satisfy all of the optimal contact conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Over time, frequent positive contact between refugees and majority group members may shape people's understandings of the Turkish national identity toward greater inclusivity.

At the applied level, it is crucial to examine the precursors of responses toward Syrian refugees in Turkey, given the large number of refugees the society currently hosts. Recent research has shown that attitudes towards Syrian refugees are becoming increasingly hostile over time (Bagci et al., 2022), which underlines the need to focus on various social psychological mechanisms that might explain outgroup behaviors. Our findings support the proposition that endorsement of essentialist beliefs about the nation can foster a more exclusionary construction of Turkishness. Furthermore, defining Turkishness on the basis of ethno-cultural characteristics that people can only achieve by birth or upbringing is likely to have implications in terms of anti-refugee sentiment.

Amongst the few methodological limitations, the correlational nature of the study restricts our assumptions about the directionality of the suggested effects. While we proposed an essentialist belief system would predict construction of national identities and outgroup attitudes, it is possible that identity constructions reinforce one's essentialist thinking system and thereby predict attitudes towards outgroups. Experimental procedures can shed light on the direction of causality in this relationship and might involve activating essentialist thinking or particular national identity constructions and investigating their effects on one another and on responses towards refugees. A further methodological issue was the use of a student sample; although our sample was not representative of the general public, it provided an initial insight into the relationships of interest. Nevertheless, it is essential for the proposed model to be tested with samples that are more diverse in terms of age and socioeconomic status.

In summary, the current research contributes to the existing essentialism and national identity literatures, by extending the psychological construct of essentialism. Previous research has typically focused on essentialism of race and gender but has not considered essentialist perceptions of the national identity. Moreover, we examined whether the link between those two constructs was further associated with perceptions of and behaviors toward refugees, which would provide important insights for understanding increasing hostility towards refugees in a mass immigration context. Our research contributes to the understanding of negative

public responses to Syrian refugees in Turkey, where there are ongoing debates about the integration of refugees into the society, and research on the psychological roots of public attitudes is increasingly necessary.

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Summary

Turkey currently hosts close to 4 million Syrian refugees under temporary protection (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). The present study examines the precursors of perceived threat, policy support, and behavioral intentions toward refugees in Turkey. Specifically, we argue that essentialist perceptions of the nation, or beliefs that nations are natural entities that definitively shape the psychological characteristics of their members, may foster relatively exclusionary ways of defining the boundaries of the nation. Such exclusionary definitions of the nation, in turn, are likely to foster more negative responses toward refugees in the form of greater perceived threat, support for anti-refugee policies, and negative behavioral intentions.

Essentialism refers to beliefs about the existence of underlying natures (i.e., ‘essence’) that constitute and differentiate between social categories (Haslam et al., 2000, 2002; Bastian and Haslam, 2006). It entails the tendency to understand social categories as expressions of discrete, fixed, natural, uniform, and defining characteristics that are shared by all members, and are informative about them (Bastian and Haslam, 2006). Endorsement of essentialist beliefs has commonly been associated with negative intergroup outcomes such as legitimization of existing social hierarchies (Jost et al., 2004), acceptance of racial inequality (Williams & Eberhardt, 2009), racial prejudice (Andreychik & Gill, 2015; Keller, 2005; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Keller, 2005), and inter-ethnic hostility (Kimmel et al., 2016).

One of the goals of the present research is to extend the concept of essentialism to the national identity. An essentialist perception of national identity would consider the nation as a fixed entity that provides an important and meaningful source of division between humans. From this perspective, people who belong in different nations would have fundamental differences between them, which they acquire through birth or by virtue of being raised within the cultural world of a particular nation. Such essentialist ideas suggesting that national identities determine people’s characteristics may foster the endorsement of exclusionary definitions of the Turkish national identity. Whereas national essentialism relates to beliefs about the nature of nations in general, constructions of national identity refer to how people define a particular national identity. More specifically, constructions of Turkish national identity, for instance, involve markers or criteria that people believe are required for one to be truly Turkish. An ethno-cultural construction of national identity is generally less inclusive, since it emphasizes the ascribed, as opposed to voluntarily chosen aspects of belonging to a nation. Research has shown that it is related with anti-immigrant attitudes (Lindstam et al., 2021), lower support for immigrant rights (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015), greater prejudice toward immigrants (Pehrson et al., 2009), lower helping behaviors toward immigrants in an interpersonal situation (e.g., Wakefield et al., 2011), and greater perceived threat posed by immigrants (Wright, 2011).

We hypothesized that endorsement of essentialist perceptions of national identity will indirectly predict greater perceived threat, anti-refugee policy support, and negative behavioral intentions toward refugees, through endorsement of an ethno-cultural construction of Turkish national identity, which focuses on characteristics ascribed to an individual by birth or through upbringing, but not a civic construction. We tested the proposed mediation model using structural equation modeling. We collected data from $N = 500$ participants (319 females, 158 males, 16 other identity, 7 missing, $M_{age} = 20.94$, $SD_{age} = 2.23$) at a public university in Istanbul. We measured national identity constructions (i.e., endorsement of ethno-cultural and civic markers of Turkish national identity), national essentialism, symbolic and realistic forms of threat, anti-refugee policy support, negative behavioral intentions toward refugees. We also measured contact with refugees, strength of Turkish national identification, political orientation, and religiosity as control variables. The

structural equation model where we specified the directional relationships between our variables showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(512, N = 438) = 983.61, p < .001, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06$. As hypothesized, essentialism significantly predicted greater endorsement of ethno-cultural markers of Turkish identity, $b = 0.81, SE = 0.13, p < .001$, but not endorsement of civic markers, $p = .41$. Essentialism also predicted greater perceived threat, $b = 0.22, SE = 0.08, p = .003$. Endorsement of ethno-cultural markers predicted greater perceived threat, $b = 0.22, SE = 0.08, p = .003$, and anti-refugee policy support, $b = 0.81, SE = 0.13, p < .001$, but did not predict negative behavioral intentions, $p > .05$. On the other hand, civic national identity did not predict any of the outcomes, $ps > .05$. The control variables did not predict either of the national identity constructions.

Finally, we tested the indirect effects of essentialism on each of the outcome variables through endorsement of ethno-cultural markers of Turkish identity using confidence intervals based on 5000 bootstrapped samples. In keeping with our hypothesis, essentialism had a significant indirect effect on perceived threat through greater endorsement of an ethno-cultural construction of national identity, $b = .15, SE = .07, CI [.04 - .33], p = .02$, as well as an indirect effect on anti-refugee policy support, $b = .12, SE = .06, CI [.03 - .27], p = .03$. However, the indirect effect of essentialism on negative behavioral intentions through ethno-cultural construction of national identity was not significant, $p > .05$. The indirect effects of essentialism on the outcomes through endorsement of a civic construction of national identity were not significant, $ps > .05$.

Our study showed that essentialism has an indirect effect on perceived threat and support for anti-refugee policies through endorsement of ethno-cultural, but not civic, markers of Turkish identity. In other words, we have provided initial evidence that an essentialist mindset regarding the nation as a fixed entity with strict boundaries can shape people's opinions on who can or cannot belong to a particular national identity, and relatedly, their responses toward immigrants.

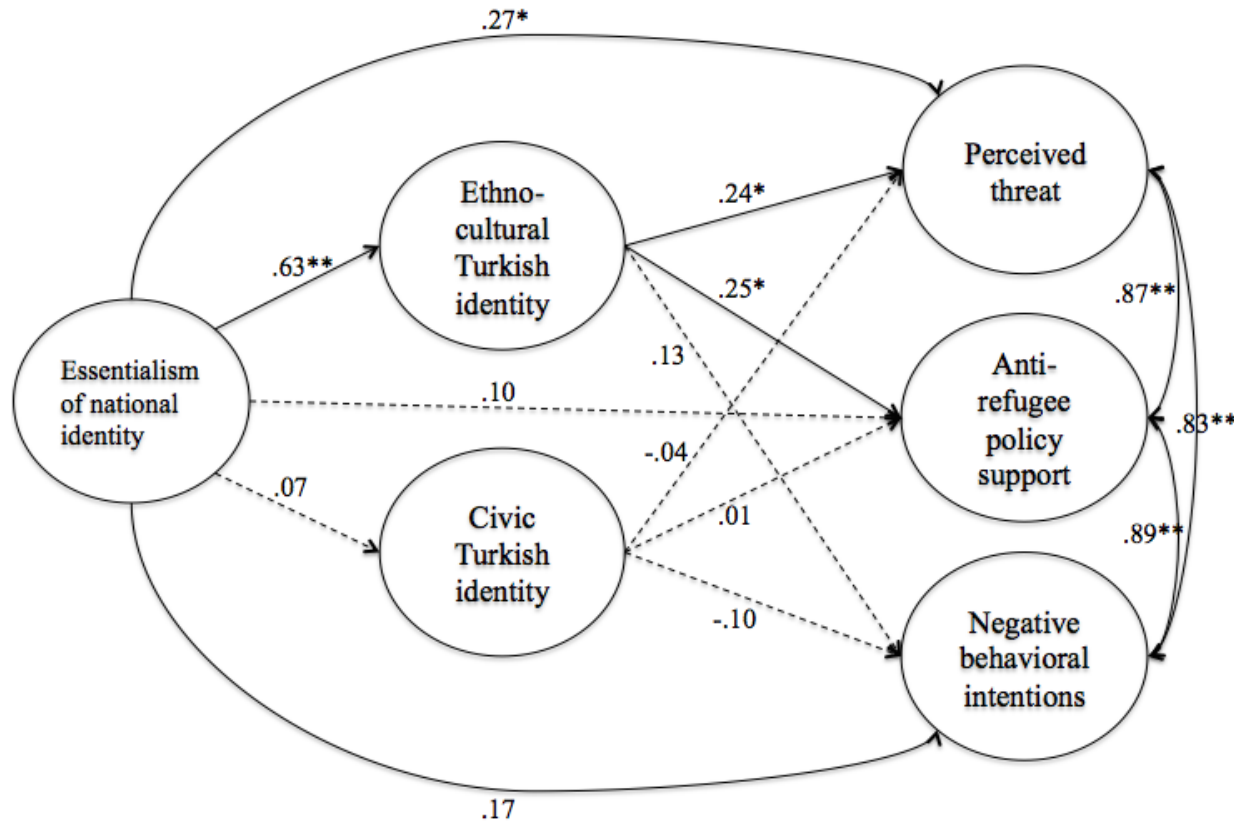
Ek 1**Table 1**
Descriptive statistics for and correlations between key variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Mean (SD)
Essentialism	1									3.65 (1.02)
Ethnocultural	.449**	1								3.74 (1.48)
Civic	0.075	0.067	1							3.68 (1.80)
Threat	.432**	.311**	0.071	1						4.51 (1.43)
Policy	.297**	.273**	.096*	.765**	1					4.86 (1.38)
Intentions	-	-.190**	-0.049	-.687**	-.699**	1				4.63 (1.27)
Political	.225**	.287**	.195**	-0.030	0.072	0.024	0.033	1		4.12 (1.62)
Religiosity	.315**	.215**	-0.036	-0.002	-0.022	.116*	.553**	1		3.57 (2.82)
National Identification	.534**	.314**	0.071	.306**	.221**	-.155**	.294**	.368**	1	4.38 (1.53)

Ek 2

Figure 1

Structural Equation Model



Note. Control variables in the model are strength of national identification, political orientation, and religiosity.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .001$