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Research Article

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**Social Representations of Democracy Among Citizens in Türkiye****Türkiye'deki Vatandaşların Demokrasiye İlişkin Sosyal Temsilleri**Canan Çelikadam <sup>1</sup>  <sup>1</sup> Istanbul Commerce University, Istanbul-Türkiye**Abstract**


Scientific, political, and ideological concepts are perceived and evaluated differently by laypersons compared to the knowledge of experts. When such concepts find a place in daily life, they transform into social representations and integrate into individuals' discourse and the world of thought. This study focuses on the social representations of the concept of "democracy", which is frequently used in politics. Democracy is addressed from a social psychological perspective within the framework of the social representations theory. The research was carried out with the participation of individuals from different demographic characteristics in Istanbul. Semi-structured interview questions on democracy were created due to the literature review and pilot interviews, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 participants with these questions. Fifteen interviews were conducted individually, while the other 15 were conducted as focus group interviews in groups of three. The obtained data were analyzed using the MAXQDA software and the thematic analysis method. As a result of the analysis, 11 main themes and 33 sub-themes were revealed. Three basic social representations of democracy were identified through these themes: "democracy as a system based on liberal values," "democracy as a disadvantaged system," and "democracy as an impossible system." Representation based on liberal values views democracy as a system dominated by freedom, equality, justice, and individual rights. Disadvantaged system representation sees democracy as a structure open to abuse and, therefore, problematic. Impossible system representation defines democracy as a utopia contrary to human nature and cannot be applied in real life. The results have shown that individuals' views on democracy, while sharing some similarities with scientific knowledge, are shaped based on practical experiences. These findings are consistent with the predictions of the social representations theory and reveal that the social reality of democracy is constructed in a multifaceted structure. At the same time, they have similarities and differences with the results of other studies in the literature examining the social representations of democracy and how laypersons conceptualize democracy.

**Öz**

Bilimsel, politik ve ideolojik kavramlar, uzmanların bilgisine kıyasla sıradan insanlar tarafından farklı şekillerde algılanır ve değerlendirilir. Bu tür kavramlar günlük hayatta yer bulduğunda sosyal temsillere dönüşerek bireylerin söylem ve düşünce dünyasına entegre olur. Bu çalışmanın odağında, politika alanında sıkça kullanılan "demokrasi" kavramının sosyal temsilleri yer almıştır. Demokrasi, sosyal temsiller kuramı çerçevesinde sosyal psikolojik bir bakış açısıyla ele alınmıştır. Araştırma, İstanbul'dan farklı demografik özelliklere sahip bireylerin katılımıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Demokrasiye dair yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme soruları, alanyazın taraması ve pilot görüşmeler sonucunda oluşturulmuş, bu sorularla toplamda 30 katılımcıyla derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bu görüşmelerin 15'i bireysel, diğer 15'i ise üç kişilik gruplar halinde odak grup görüşmeleri şeklinde yürütülmüştür. Elde edilen veriler, tematik analiz yöntemiyle MAXQDA yazılımında analiz edilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda 11 ana tema ve 33 alt tema



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ortaya çıkarılmış; bu temalar üzerinden demokrasinin üç temel sosyal temsili belirlenmiştir: “Liberal değerlere dayalı bir sistem olarak demokrasi,” “dezavantajlı bir sistem olarak demokrasi” ve “mümkün olmayan bir sistem olarak demokrasi.” Liberal değerlere dayalı demokrasi temsili, demokrasi özgürlük, eşitlik, adalet ve bireysel haklar gibi değerlerin üzerine kurulu bir sistemi ifade etmektedir. Dezavantajlı sistem temsili, demokrasiyi kötüye kullanıma açık, dolayısıyla sorunlu bir yapı olarak görmektedir. Mümkün olmayan sistem temsili ise demokrasiyi, insan doğasına aykırı ve gerçek hayatta uygulanamaz bir ütopya olarak tanımlamaktadır. Sonuçlar, bireylerin demokrasiye ilişkin görüşlerinin, bilimsel bilgilerle bazı benzerlikler taşımakla birlikte, pratik deneyimlere dayalı olarak şekillendiğini göstermiştir. Bu bulgular, sosyal temsiller kuramının öngörülerıyla uyumlu olup demokrasiye ilişkin sosyal gerçekliğin çok yönlü bir yapıda inşa edildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Aynı zamanda, alanyazında demokrasinin sosyal temsillerini ve demokrasinin sıradan insanlar tarafından nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığını inceleyen diğer çalışmaların sonuçlarıyla da benzerlikler ve farklılıklar taşımaktadır.

**Keywords** Democracy · social representations · laypeople · everyday knowledge · qualitative analysis

**Anahtar Kelimeler** Demokrasi · sosyal temsiller · sıradan insan · gündelik bilgi · nitel analiz

**Author Note** This study is derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation.

## Social Representations of Democracy Among Citizens in Türkiye

The theory of social representations is based on the work of social psychologist Serge Moscovici in 1961. In this work, Moscovici used the concept of social representations for the first time and examined the social representations of psychoanalysis. Moscovici (1981, p.181) defined social representations as “a set of concepts, expressions, and explanations that emerge in the flow of daily life through interpersonal communication.” Moreover, Moscovici says social representations are “the contemporary version of common sense”. In other words, social representations are thoughts that emerge in daily discussions and communication and are shared by the majority to meet the individual’s need to understand the world. They develop due to the efforts of individuals in society to understand, explain, and make familiar new phenomena that they are not familiar with common sense. When political, scientific, professional, and ideological concepts spread into daily discourses, they transform into social representations or integrate into them (Moscovici, 1984). According to Moscovici (1981, 1984, 1988), social representations have two functions: First, they impose themselves, allowing individuals to dominate their social worlds and thus creating harmony. Second, the objects, people, and events encountered are perceived in line with pre-existing categories and knowledge and are transformed into common codes and discourses. Thus, they facilitate communication and consensus among people.

Isolated individuals do not create representations. Symbolic phenomena and social practices carry a sense of reality as everyone shares them, thus strongly affecting individuals. Their effect on individuals is even more significant when individuals are unaware of them (Moscovici, 1984). For example, European citizens born after the French Revolution in 1789 adopted shared images that implicitly associated democracy with freedom, equality, and fraternity (Moodie et al., 1995). While some symbolic phenomena exist implicitly in culture, others are acquired through explicit guidance and persuasion throughout a person’s life. Ideological doctrines are often forcibly spread by political regimes by brainwashing their citizens. Doctrines are spread through advice, mass communication, education, and institutions. For example, most Europeans have lived under various political regimes that defined themselves as democratic (Moodie et al., 1995). Therefore, social representations are also fed by such ideological doctrines.

### How Are Social Representations Formed?

The underlying function of social representations is to provide familiar content to the unfamiliar, which is accomplished through anchoring and objectifying. Social representations are created and expanded through these two processes. Anchoring is the reduction of unfamiliar ideas to various classes and images and the

giving of a familiar context to them. Objectification is making abstract concrete; thus, things become part of the physical world (Moscovici, 1984). Without the anchoring process, this new event will remain in the unknown and unfamiliar realm, not be part of common sense or known reality, and will not be represented. Anchoring fundamentally fixes social representations; it draws on common knowledge from the past and/or culturally familiar knowledge. Objectification is a process that makes a new event or phenomenon more real, transforming it into a social representation (Moodie, 2005).

The anchoring process also involves classifying and naming new encounters, ideas, things, and people. While classification is fitting the new thing into a particular set of rules and determining what it is and is not, naming includes the named phenomenon into specific words, the identity matrix determined by culture. Naming is not a logically consistent process but rather a process that occurs through observations dictated by common sense (Paker, 2000). According to Moscovici (1984), naming has three consequences: a) The named object acquires specific characteristics and tendencies. b) Thus, it is distinguished from other named things along these characteristics. c) It becomes an object of conformity among those who share the same tradition.

In recent years, the findings of an increasing number of studies show that the concept of democracy, which is an abstract and complex phenomenon, is perceived differently by different ideological, cultural and social segments (see Akboğa & Şahin, 2018; Bratton & Mattes, 2001a; Tessler et al., 2012), and these perceptions can affect commitment to democratic values and political participation (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). In this context, conducting a study examining the social representations of democracy not only contributes to a theoretical knowledge base but also provides a strong basis for understanding individuals' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors toward democracy and can shed light on studies conducted on other related topics.

Despite this, when the literature is examined, it is striking that there are few studies examining the social representations of democracy (Magioglou, 2008; Moodie, 2005; Moodie et al., 1995). No study has been found that was conducted with a Turkish sample. Considering the findings of these few studies, it appears that everyday representations of democracy are created, maintained, and changed by implicit and explicit processes. Some features of representations are deeply embedded and carried across generations and cultures, meaning they may be relatively resistant to change. Others are shaped by existing thought patterns and reflect more recent social practices (Moodie, 2005). The various elements of representation are co-constructed by individuals, revealing the interdependence between meaning and current political and social practices. The structural features of the social representations theory allow the different contents of representations of democracy to be more obvious and more responsive to various economic and political realities. It indicates that it can be expressed differently and show cliques (Moodie, 2005). Therefore, the cultural and political context in which representations of democracy are formed is a critical issue to be evaluated when trying to understand these representations. For this and other reasons mentioned above, it is thought that a study conducted with participants from Türkiye will contribute greatly to both the national and international literature.

## Democracy

Although democracy has a deep-rooted history, no clear definition is agreed upon in the literature. Democracy has gained different meanings according to different periods of history and cultural contexts, and therefore, it has become challenging to provide a single universal definition (Canache et al., 2001). While some researchers equate democracy with the institutions and processes of representative government (Dahl, 1971), others argue that democratic relations are established through broad, equal, and protected negotiations between the state and citizens (Tilly, 2011). Intertwined with culture, this concept is also

related to social and psychological variables. For example, Dewey (2000) viewed democracy as a form of government and a moral way of life. According to him, individuals should be aware of their decisions affect other people's lives, and this moral consciousness should support democracy. Many recent studies have also provided evidence of the complex and multifaceted nature of democracy, especially in new and developing democracies (Bratton & Mattes, 2001b; Bratton et al., 2005; Dalton et al., 2007a; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007).

Just as with social representation, except for some notable studies in the literature that examine precisely what laypersons understand by democracy (e.g., Akboğa & Şahin, 2018; Alacapınar, 2020; Arensmeier, 2010; Baviskar & Malone, 2004; Bratton & Mattes, 2001b; Dalton et al., 2007b; Canache, 2012; Kemahlioğlu & Keyman, 2011), the paucity of studies examining how democracy is understood by ordinary people is also striking. Looking at the general results of these studies, this uncertainty about the meaning of democracy is also valid for laypeople. In other words, laypeople also perceive democracy differently and seem confused about it (Diamond & Plattner, 2008; Kaufman & Stadelmaier, 2020). Here, a question arises: Citizens living in most parts of the world demand democracy, but which democracy? This study aims to answer this question for citizens living in Türkiye by examining what democracy means to laypeople in daily life using the social representation theory approach.

## Türkiye's Democracy Adventure

Türkiye's journey to democracy is the product of a long and difficult process. In the last years of the Ottoman Empire, especially during the Second Constitutional Monarchy in 1908, an important step was taken towards democratization; the westernization movements and constitutional processes that began during this period played a role in the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, which was an important democratic transformation (Çimen & Bakan, 2019). Although the foundations of a political regime based on popular sovereignty, a constitutional government and a parliamentary system were laid with the proclamation of the Republic, these foundations were initially limited to a legal framework and democracy could not deepen at the social level (Keyman & Gümüşçü, 2014).

Türkiye's democratic process has become more difficult since the mid-20th century. The military interventions of 1960, 1971 and 1980 and the subsequent processes have seriously shaken the understanding of democracy based on public participation and increased the political role of the army (Özbudun, 2000). This situation has also prevented the establishment of democratic norms and opened deep wounds in the social structure. The democratic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s failed to fully resolve the deep disagreements and tensions in society. The 1990s were a period when social cracks in the democratic process became clear. Unsolved murders, violent conflicts, and tensions in civil-military relations undermined the trust in democracy (Keyman, 2013). Although the legal reforms and economic liberalization steps taken between 2002 and 2006 strengthened Türkiye's relations with the West, practices contrary to democratic norms and human rights violations have created serious instabilities in the country's internal structure (Keyman, 2013).

One of the biggest obstacles to democracy in Türkiye is the deep divisions between different ideological groups in society. Although the forms, naming, and definitions of these divisions have varied over time, they have appeared in various forms such as secular-Islamist, Democrat-Populist, left-right, secular-conservative, secular-religious, Turkish-Kurdish, and Alevis-Sunni (Ertugay, 2022). Democracy has not been able to go beyond constitutional norms and become a social phenomenon, and has been in a constant state of crisis both in terms of its institutional functioning, elements of political culture such as ideological conflicts and political polarization, and mechanisms of participation and representation (Keyman, 2013). In the last decade, Türkiye's democracy has been shaped by various factors. For example, according to Freedom House (2023), increasing criticism of authoritarianism and obstacles to the rule of law have overshadowed democratization. The 2016 coup attempt left deep scars on Türkiye's political and social structure and forced

the government to declare a state of emergency and make extensive regulations. At the same time, criticisms that democracy was weakening increased with the purges of public institutions and increasing pressure on civil society and the press (Amnesty International, 2018).

As a result, although Türkiye's democratic journey has taken steps back from time to time, it has shown a continuous effort to progress and witnessed a process of social transformation. Democratization will be possible not only with constitutional arrangements but also with a change in social mentality. The deepening of democracy in Türkiye can be achieved by strengthening fundamental values such as social participation, rule of law and freedom of expression. These goals can only be achieved by internalizing democratic values and social awareness. How democracy is understood by different segments of society and what it represents plays a decisive role in the adoption of democratic values and the concretization of these values in daily life (Kemahlioğlu & Keyman, 2011). Therefore, it is hoped that conducting an exploratory study on the daily knowledge of democracy will guide the research to be conducted on such issues related to democracy.

## Method

### Participants

This study determined the social representations of individuals toward democracy through semi-structured, comprehensive interviews. Care was taken to select as many participants as possible with the most diverse characteristics possible for these interviews. As a result, the maximum variation sampling method was used within the scope of purposeful sampling and the participants were reached from Istanbul, the most populous and heterogeneous city that receives intense migration from various places. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013), the findings and results obtained from such a study can be richer than the results obtained with a different sampling method.

A total of 30 people were interviewed, including five focus group discussions of three people each and one-on-one interviews with 15 people. The reason why individual and focus group interviews are preferred together in a study is that the data obtained from the focus group interviews provide a solid foundation for one-on-one interviews and pave the way for the emergence of new and different ideas (Kitzinger, 1995, as cited in Çokluk et al., 2011). Thus, the use of multi-source data will provide a better understanding of the subject under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Focus groups are also particularly useful for addressing the communicative practices involved in developing and maintaining social representations (Flick et al., 2015). Therefore, in this study, it was thought that the use of both individual and focus group interviews together will help to reveal new and different ideas and provide a richer and more solid understanding of the representations of a complex and controversial subject such as democracy. Twenty males and 10 females participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 48 years; the mean was 30.27, and SD was 6.59. Although the sample was intended to have maximum diversity, sufficient diversity was not achieved in terms of the education levels of the participants, and the majority of the participants were individuals with a higher education level. Participants' education levels were based on the last school they graduated from: 80% of the participants had a bachelor's and master's degrees and 20% of the participants were high school and associate degree graduates. The details of the participants' demographic data are presented in [Table 1](#).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of the Participants*

Participant no	Age	Gender	Education Level	Occupation	Political View	Religious View	Ethnic Background
1	27	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Industrial Engineer	Kemalist	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Turkish
2	20	Female	High School	Student	Liberal	Agnostic	Turkish
3	31	Female	Master's Degree	Research Assistant	Socialist	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Arab-Turk
4	30	Male	Master's Degree	IT Professional	Social Democrat	Agnostic	Turkish
5	31	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	Apolitical	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Turkish
6	32	Male	High School	Freelancer	Social Democrat	Muslim	Romani
7	34	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Musician	Socialist	Atheist	Mixed-Circassian
8	31	Male	Master's Degree	Academic	Apolitical	Muslim	Turkish
9	26	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Chemical Engineer	Socialist	Atheist	Turkish
10	29	Female	Master's Degree	Research Assistant	Socialist	Muslim	Turkish
11	29	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Salesperson	Social Democrat	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Turkish
12	27	Male	Master's Degree	Lecturer	Liberal	Atheist	Turkish
13	40	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Sports Trainer	Social Democrat	Muslim	Mixed (Roma-Azeri)
14	32	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Coach	Nationalist	Muslim	Turkish
15	39	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	Socialist	Atheist	Turkish
16	25	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Student	Socialist	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Circassian
17	35	Male	Master's Degree	Real Estate Investor	Kemalist	Atheist	Tatar
18	24	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Psychologist	Apolitical	Muslim	Turkish
19	18	Female	High School	Student	Liberal	Muslim	Turkish
20	48	Male	Associate Degree	Coach	Kemalist	Muslim	Turkish
21	31	Male	Master's Degree	Ship's Third Officer	Apolitical	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Romani
22	29	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Public Officer	Social Democrat	Atheist	Turkish



Participant no	Age	Gender	Education Level	Occupation	Political View	Religious View	Ethnic Background
23	28	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Metallurgical Materials Engineer	Kemalist	Average Muslim	Turkish
24	40	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Director	Communist	Atheist	Turkish
25	19	Male	High School	Student	Conservative Democrat	Muslim	Kurdish
26	36	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Civil Engineer	Liberal	Muslim	Turkish
27	30	Male	Master's Degree	Civil Engineer	Liberal	Muslim	Turkish
28	34	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Logistics Manager	Social Democrat	Other	Turkish
29	21	Male	High School	Software Engineer	Embraces all ideologies	Muslim	Turkish
30	32	Female	Master's Degree	Medical Promotion Representative	Social Democrat	Believes in God but does not follow a religion	Turkish

## Materials

### *Semi-Structured Interview Questions Form on Democracy Representations*

The researcher and thesis advisor reviewed 15 semi-structured questions from the literature review. Initial interviews with four participants were conducted to assess the functionality of the questions and, if necessary, to revise them according to the results. In the final stage, the questions were made more understandable and were arranged to include the dimensions necessary for democracy. This form contains 13 questions about democracy, such as "What does democracy mean to you?", "What are democratic rights?" and "What do you think about the role of protests and actions in democracy?". It was attempted to ensure that these questions addressed as different aspects and dimensions of democracy as possible.

To ensure consistency in the study, the same questions were used in the focus group and individual interviews. However, semi-structured questions were preferred, which allowed for minor adaptations while maintaining the basic theme to be appropriate to the context of both interviews. For example, the question of democratic rights was asked as "What are the democratic rights of citizens living in a democratic country?" in the focus group interviews, while it was asked as "What are your democratic rights?" in the individual interviews.

### *Demographic Information Form*

In this form, participants were asked to indicate their demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, occupation, political view, religious view, and ethnic origin. Participants' gender, last education level, political view, and religious view were determined from the given options, while age, ethnic origin, and occupation information was based on participants' own statements.

## Procedure

This study was initiated by obtaining permission from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee of a university in Türkiye (Number: 215257; Date: 15.12.2020). Participants of the study were reached through various non-governmental organizations, associations, universities, social media,

and online platforms. The interviews could not be held face to face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were conducted online voluntarily through various applications. All interviews were conducted by the researcher in a quiet and private home environment that belonged to her. When planning the interviews with the participants, they were asked to participate in the study in such an environment. Before starting the interviews, the participants were given short and understandable introductory information about the study. Each participant was asked to fill out a demographic information form and an informed consent form. Considering the possibility of participants feeling uncomfortable, especially due to the personal questions in the demographic form, participants were verbally reminded that they had the right not to answer any questions they did not want or to leave the study if they felt uncomfortable with the questions or at any stage of the study, as stated in the consent form. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder with the participants' permission. None of the participants experienced any discomfort regarding this or the other issues mentioned. This application took an average of 35 minutes for individual interviews and 1 hour and 50 minutes for focus group interviews. While individual interviews were conducted in a single session, focus group interviews were conducted in two sessions, as they would naturally cause various conditions such as fatigue. Short 10-minute breaks were given between sessions to not distract the participants from the study. For the transcription of the data, the data was anonymized and encrypted in a way that only authorized persons could access it, and it was done by a professional who was trained in this field and knew the methodological and ethical standards, and then checked by the researcher.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis of different types of interviews can clearly be useful in studies of social representations (Flick et al., 2015). Thematic analysis has been shown to be useful in social representation research (Flick & Foster, 2008) and the use of thematic coding has been recommended (Flick, 2014). For this reason, the data obtained in this study were analyzed in MAXQDA 2020 software according to the thematic analysis approach first developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to these researchers, thematic analysis is an independent qualitative approach that involves "identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). However, while a close examination of themes (and their relationships) in any data is an important step in evaluating representations of any topic, a true assessment of social representations requires moving beyond the basic themes that may be noted in the data. That is, to get from themes to social representations, one must go beyond the 'facts' of what is being said, and researchers must use their skills to make this possible (Condor, 1997). It is necessary to be able to establish various connections and suggest why such patterns might be in evidence and to develop hypotheses about social understanding in action and interaction (Flick et al., 2015). For this reason, in order to reach social representations from the obtained themes, a multi-stage method was followed in line with various procedures in the literature (Flick & Foster, 2008; Flick, 2014; Flick et al., 2015; Moscovici, 2000; Marková, 2003; Wagner et al., 1999). The themes revealed through the codes were not only addressed at a descriptive level; at the same time, it was analyzed which social representations these themes reproduced in the processes of social meaning-making and they were evaluated not only as individual expressions but also as networks of meaning carrying the traces of collectively shared representations. In addition, the analyses were carried out using a comparative perspective focusing on different groups in the study through this developed thematic structure.

## Results

A general review of the interview data revealed that participants had no difficulty answering questions about democracy and that a clear pattern emerged that organized their conversations. This pattern can be explained as follows: Participants encountered some contradictions in their statements, and these contra-



dictions were often expressed with conjunctions such as ‘but’, ‘despite’, ‘actually’. In other words, the speech was frequently organized with phrases like "but in real democracy...", "despite the ideal democracy...", and "but in reality what should happen...". Spontaneous explanations have emerged for how ideal democracy differs from the current democracy. In other words, democracy is defined by the contrasts between its ideal and the current state. Even in cases where ideal democracy is a utopia, it is observed that it exists symbolically, and the reality, i.e., experienced democratic systems, is still judged.

The titles of the themes and subthemes obtained from the thematic analysis of the interview data are given in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2**

*Themes and Sub-themes Related to Democracy*

Themes	Sub-themes
<b>The Impossible Democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy as a Utopian System</li> <li>• The Non-Ideal Conditions of Today</li> <li>• Reasons Originating from Human Nature</li> </ul>
<b>Democracy with Preconditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education is a Must</li> <li>• Economic Prosperity</li> <li>• Social Characteristics</li> </ul>
<b>Democracy as a Better System than the Alternatives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to Its Advantages</li> <li>• Due to Its Sustainability</li> <li>• Provided It is Well Implemented</li> <li>• Despite Its Disadvantages</li> </ul>
<b>Disadvantaged Democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disadvantage of Majority Representation</li> <li>• Low Education Level</li> <li>• Abused Democracy</li> <li>• Democracy as a System Different in Practice and Theory</li> </ul>
<b>Democracy Defined by Liberal Values</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality</li> <li>• Civil Rights</li> <li>• Personal Freedoms</li> <li>• Justice</li> <li>• Individualism</li> </ul>
<b>Democracy Defined by Economic and Social Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Egalitarian Welfare Distribution</li> <li>• Sociality/Communality</li> </ul>
<b>Democracy Defined by Institutions and Procedure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Government of the People</li> <li>• Pluralism</li> <li>• Well-Functioning Democratic Institutions</li> </ul>
<b>Responsibility of Democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual</li> <li>• Social</li> <li>• Interpersonal</li> <li>• State</li> </ul>
<b>Limiting Democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disadvantage of Unlimited Democracy</li> <li>• Limitation Subject to Certain Conditions</li> <li>• Special Situations</li> </ul>

Themes	Sub-themes
Democracy on a Universal/Cultural Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture-Specific Democracy</li> <li>• Universal Democracy</li> </ul>
Democracy Without Compromise	

As can be seen from the table, many and quite diverse themes and sub-themes related to each other were obtained. These themes and subthemes obtained as a result of thematic analysis do not reveal the social representations of democracy, but the participants' definitions of democracy. Since the main purpose of this study is to reveal the social representations of democracy, these themes and subthemes are not included here.<sup>1</sup>

According to the results obtained from the thematic analysis, participants made different definitions of democracy (Çelikadam, in press). Based on these definitions, three different arguments have been determined. When the statements of the participants supporting these arguments are examined, it is seen that the meanings attributed to democracy are different. These arguments are undoubtedly based on different representations of democracy.

In the first of these arguments, democracy refers to a system based on liberal values such as freedom, equality, justice, and individual rights. Therefore, it is the ideal system that benefits individuals and societies on a universal scale. Another argument is that democracy is open to abuse and has more disadvantages than advantages. Because it is accepted as an inevitable situation that it will be misused. The third argument includes the belief that democracy cannot be realized due to various characteristics of human nature and current conditions. These arguments, respectively, point to three representations of democracy: 'Democracy as a system based on liberalism,' 'democracy as a disadvantaged system' and 'democracy as an impossible system'. These representations are explained in more detail below.

### Democracy as A System Based on Liberalism

According to the representation of democracy based on liberalism, democracy refers to a system established on the liberal political philosophy of thought that emerged in the modern world and includes freedom, equality, justice, and individual rights. In addition, a political functioning and social structure based on liberal values constitute essential components of democracy. Democracy refers to a system with institutions and regulations that provide and guarantee these values for people. Democracy is considered the ideal system for individuals who know they need these liberal values much more in today's multicultural society structures consisting of individuals of different races, religions, and languages. For example, the statement of a Romani participant who explains this situation is as follows:

*Individuals should be shown that they have equal citizenship rights. Up until now, they have called disadvantaged groups positive discrimination; today, in a mega city like Istanbul, when it comes to showing positive discrimination in terms of voting and being elected, I am sorry, I am constantly talking about my ethnicity, but I think it is precisely on our subject. In Istanbul, we do not have a single council member who will represent us in this population; we do not have a single citizen, we do not have a mukhtar, we do not have a mayor, we do not have a deputy, we do not have a manager in any unit. They say we do not have educated people, but only seven university graduates in my family (32 years old, male, social democrat).*

<sup>1</sup>These themes and subthemes can be seen in another study produced from the doctoral thesis of the author of this study, which examines the themes through which democracy is understood by individuals living in Türkiye (Çelikadam, in press).

Individuals need the components of liberal democracy not only to be represented equally and fairly in the political sense but also to have the necessary tools for democratic struggle and individual encounters in daily life. It is believed that the political components of democracy alone are not sufficient for an ideally functioning democracy; the ideals of democracy must also be realized at the individual and social level. In other words, the ideals of democracy, such as equality, freedom, and rights, must also be internalized by society. An example participant statement emphasizing how essential this is for an ideal democracy expresses this in the following words:

*When we adapt these ideas to our own lives and talk about absolute equality, where women and men will be equal in society, women will not look at men differently. Men will not look at women differently, we will learn to respect orientations, we will learn to respect ethnic identities, and we will remove Armenian, Jew, and Alevi from our language. If we cleanse all these, we can achieve an ideal democracy (40 years old, male, social democrat).*

### Democracy as A Disadvantaged System

The representation of democracy as a disadvantageous system is based on the argument that democracy is a system that is open to abuse and, therefore, has more disadvantages than advantages. It is a system that is open to abuse, especially by the actors within the political system. Being open to abuse is primarily due to the characteristics specific to human nature, making democracy a disadvantageous system. The participant statement below expresses this situation through historical experiences as follows:

*I mean because they can easily manipulate psychology in society; the simplest example is Adolf Hitler. When you look at it, it has a very racist side, but at least when it gets that mass behind it, it can change the destiny of a whole country, a whole world. When you look at it, it came with democracy, it came with elections, so when democracy involves too many people, in fact, when a living being has its ego and arrogance, even the most ideal system can turn into a monster. I can say that there are problems in the current system due to this (30 years old, male, liberal).*

Although this type of abuse is considered to be a situation that is difficult to avoid, it is thought that it can be prevented by providing certain preconditions. A society with a high level of education can prevent individuals from being prone to manipulation by nature, thus preventing abuse. This situation is expressed as follows by one participant:

*Here, the most fundamental of these is education; that is, if there is a group that has received a correct education, has received a correct education, or has been able to educate and develop itself, it already values the rule of law above all else, the separation of powers, and does not engage in fanaticism when it comes to politics. In my opinion, this is the ideal group for an ideal democracy (27 years old, male, liberal).*

Specific cultural and social dynamics are other reasons that will put democracy at a disadvantage. In other words, democracy is not a system that is suitable for every society and culture, and there are various prerequisites that countries must have for democracy. This also contains an argument against the idea that democracy is universal. For example, as can be seen in the participant statement below, some Türkiye's characteristics make it an unsuitable country for democracy.

*Societies like Türkiye, no matter how much they say they are governed by democracy or want democracy, actually need a good leader. What do I mean by saying that Türkiye, having a complex social structure, cultural structure, and geographical location, Germany also comes to the fore with its leaders? For example, no matter how much democracy it wants, the left-wing thinks that it can continue this democracy with a good leader, for example (25 years old, female, socialist).*

## Democracy as An Impossible System

Another representation of democracy includes the idea that an ideal democracy is impossible. Due to various characteristics and tendencies in human nature, an ideal democracy is almost a utopia. A participant's statement that examples this representation explains this situation as follows:

*I do not think there can be an ideal democracy where there are people (21 years old, male, no political views stated).*

This representation also includes the claim that democracy existed but was no longer possible. Therefore, this claim does not represent a utopian democracy but a democracy that is no longer possible. One participant expressed this with the following words:

*So when I say ideal, the Ancient Greek civilization comes to mind, and even an environment where all issues were discussed in the square and put to a vote by the public. However, since today's existence does not allow such logistics, today's systems are still valid (30 years old, male, social democrat).*

## Discussion

This study analyzes how laypersons conceptualize democracy based on the social representation theory. According to the social representations theory, when political, scientific, professional, and ideological concepts find a place in daily discourses, they either integrate with or transform into social representations (Moscovici, 1984). In this context, democracy, generally considered within the scope of politics and political science, gains meaning through various representations when included in daily conversations. Looking at the results obtained from this study, it was seen that democracy was given meaning with the representations of "Democracy as a system based on liberal values," "democracy as a disadvantaged system," and "democracy as an impossible system." These findings indicate that individuals in Türkiye share certain social representations of the concept of democracy, which experts and researchers often examine in detail. For example, democracy described in terms of liberal values is quite similar to the understanding of democracy adopted by liberal democracy theorists (see Dahl, 1989; Rawls, 2017; Sen, 1999). It has been determined that these representations are not entirely independent of the knowledge of experts but have a different structure from scientific knowledge. In other words, these representations are derived from information sources that are flexible and used in daily life, based on practical experiences, rather than scientific knowledge limited to precise and clear definitions.

People desire to know and understand the reality of the society they have built. Laypersons use common sense knowledge to understand and explain social reality, and scientists use scientific knowledge and techniques to arrive at the truth (Paker, 2000). As Moscovici (1981, p. 181) puts it, social representations are the modern equivalent of common sense. Various arguments emerge based on different social representations, and these representations and arguments are part of the universe of everyday thought, which Moscovici (1984) refers to as the universe of consensus. This study revealed several representations and arguments about democracy; these representations and arguments can exist in the universe of consensus while also

being similar, different, and even contradictory to one another. This difference in representations and arguments, or evaluations that support or oppose each other, reflects the consensus universe's pluralistic nature and supports Moscovici's (1984, 1988) viewpoint.

In this study, the evidence that emerges that compatible and incompatible representations and arguments can coexist in the universe of consensus and co-construct social reality is the relationship between the representation of democracy based on liberalism and the representation of disadvantaged democracy. According to the representation of a disadvantaged democracy, democracy can only be functional under certain social conditions; otherwise, it can become a disadvantaged system. For example, in societies that live in a colonial state, are not free, or have difficulty meeting their basic needs, democracy is seen as a system that cannot offer a practical solution. Furthermore, it is thought that such societies do not need democracy; instead, they should focus on different priorities, such as meeting basic needs and freedom. This representation is clearly different from the representation of liberal democracy, which defines democracy as a system that provides individuals with freedom, equality, and justice. According to the representation of liberal democracy, democracy is a system that provides freedom by meeting the needs of individuals in a fair and equal manner. This view is consistent with many studies such as those by Baviskar and Malone (2004), Bratton and Mattes (2001a, 2001b), Canache (2012), Canache et al. (2001), and Dalton et al. (2007a). However, according to the disadvantaged democracy representation, democracy does not seem to have such a mission; on the contrary, it is considered a system whose effectiveness depends on the convenience of social conditions and is considered within a conditional framework. Although the representation of "democracy based on liberal values" and the representation of "disadvantaged democracy," which are part of everyday knowledge, contain the paradox of "anti-democracy for democracy," they can be used together when necessary without experiencing any apparent tension between these two representations.

While the representation of democracy based on liberal values expresses a system in which all individuals have equal rights and can live freely, the representation of disadvantaged democracy suggests that some of the contents of democracy may have negative consequences and, therefore, defends the idea that democracy can be limited or suspended with antidemocratic methods in some cases for its sound and continuity. For example, the idea that certain rights and freedoms should be limited in extraordinary circumstances is specific to this representation. In this context, the participants stated that the state can make regulations that will restrict the rights and freedoms of individuals for the sustainability of democracy. As a result, democracy can be considered an illegitimate and undesirable system from the perspective that prioritizes individual freedoms (Dahl, 1989). Similarly, in Paker's (2000) study examining the representations of modernity and secularism, it was observed that the representation of "secularism as a requirement of democracy" and arguments that find antidemocratic practices legitimate for the protection of democracy were used together. Historically, the relationship between democracy and freedom has also been viewed with skepticism by democratic theorists and thinkers. For example, the connection between freedom and democracy was discussed in Athens. However, thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle argued that this connection could not be approved for all citizens because of the concern that it could lead to anarchy and tyranny (Davies, 1997, as cited in Moodie, 2005). This perspective reflects the critical view of the rights and freedoms offered by democracy that has continued from ancient times to this day. These findings provide further evidence for Moscovici's (1984, 1988) approach that different and even contradictory arguments can coexist in the consensus universe where everyday knowledge occurs and that this universe presents a pluralistic and inclusive structure.

The finding that representational areas contain more than one similar or opposing thought may also provide support for Moscovici's (1961, 2008) hypothesis, which he calls cognitive polyphasia. This concept expresses the coexistence of different forms of reasoning in the same group or the same individual, that is,

the flexibility and resourcefulness of cognitive functioning (Moscovici, 2008). According to Markova (2023), it is an expression of an internal dialog in which an individual evaluates his or her own and others' perspectives. For example, a person may simultaneously have and express contradictory feelings such as generosity and selfishness, loving and disliking others, the rights of others and his own desires. Therefore, according to Markova (2023), cognitive polyphasia is a dynamic concept characterized by tension, conflict and limitations rather than balance and harmony, and it expresses the multidimensional nature of thinking and the internal dialog of the self.

As a system based on liberalism, democracy representation presents democracy as a system that shapes universal values such as freedom, equality, justice, and individual rights and bases the political and social structure on these values. When considered through the concepts of the theory of social representations, it can be said that democracy gains a familiar context by being anchored in these values, and that it is made concrete by being objectified with concrete terms referring to political and institutional structures (law, constitution, voting, elections, etc.) based on these values; thus, it is understood by being transformed into this representation in everyday knowledge. A similar finding emerged in one of the few studies in the literature examining the social representations of democracy. In the study conducted by Moodie et al. (1995) with Scottish and Slovak samples, the most important concepts associated with democracy were individual rights, individual freedoms and justice. Considering that these concepts are among the most important values of individualism (Farr, 1991; Markova, 1982; Taylor, 1989 as cited in Moodie et al., 1995), it can be argued that the influence of the individualism movement that emerged with the Renaissance and humanism movements was felt not only in Europe but also in many societies and shaped everyday knowledge.

At the same time, in today's world where multiculturalism and social diversity have become more important, this representation is quite understandable. Democracy is the administration that will fulfill the desire for a system in which individuals have equal rights in all areas and where the social order is based on these principles. It is also significant that such a finding emerges, especially in the context of Türkiye, where different ethnic and cultural groups live together. A similar finding was revealed in the study of Akboğa and Şahin (2018) who examined the perception of democracy in Türkiye. As a result of the analysis of interviews with individuals from various ethnic and religious identities and socio-economic groups, it was seen that women emphasized gender equality, Kurds and Alevis emphasized rights and freedoms, and Sunni Turkish men emphasized economic prosperity when defining democracy.

It is seen that some descriptions and arguments referring to the representation of democracy based on liberalism have some similarities with the findings of another study (Çelikadam & Cesur, 2023) produced by the author of this study and the thesis advisor. Although the aims, research questions and analysis methods of these two articles are different, meaningful results can be obtained when their findings are evaluated together. Accordingly, the aim of the study conducted by Çelikadam and Cesur (2023) is to examine how democracy is described by ordinary people, and a thematic analysis was conducted on the answers given to the question 'What comes to your mind when you think of democracy?' When the themes obtained as a result of the analysis are examined, it can be said that some contents of the themes 'Democracy defined by liberal values', 'Democracy defined by institutional structures' and 'Democracy defined in terms of socio-economic benefits' are similar not to the representation of democracy based on liberalism in this study but to the descriptions and arguments produced within this representation. Based on this, it is understood that the liberal perspective of democracy is at the forefront for these participants and that it has the power to transform into a social representation.

The representation of democracy as a disadvantaged system emphasizes the disadvantages of the system, based on the fact that democracy is open to abuse. If democracy is not governed by individuals with



high levels of education and in appropriate social conditions, it can become a system open to manipulation and abuse. The structural weaknesses of society cause political actors to abuse the system and undermine trust in democracy. There may be many reasons to associate democracy with such a representation. As the participants clearly stated in their statements, democracy has always been a system that has been abused throughout history and has made people pay a heavy price. Historical actors such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini came to power through democracy and built totalitarian systems by using its advantages. As explained earlier, some features of representations may be deep-rooted, transmitted across generations and cultures, and relatively resistant to change; others are shaped by already existing thought patterns and reflect more recent social practices (Moodie, 2005). In addition to these historical examples, the production of these arguments based on negative experiences in the current system was also frequently encountered in the study. It can be clearly seen that this representation is shaped in line with arguments fed by past and present experiences; the ideal-real distinction that pervades the data and structures the participant statements also plays a decisive role in this representation. In this representation, arguments involving various preconditions are constructed to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real. Similar to the Platonic perspective, which suggests that if the democratic discourse of freedom and equality is taken to its extreme, it may lead to tyranny—a corrupted form of governance (Topakkaya & Şahin, 2015) —some participants argue that unlimited rights and freedoms should be restricted on the grounds that they could turn democracy into a dysfunctional or disadvantageous system. This representation also questions the difficulties of democracy becoming universally functional in every society and tries to draw the limits of an idealistic perspective.

The representation of democracy as an impossible system is based on the idea that democracy cannot function ideally due to human nature and current conditions. Sometimes, although democracy has existed historically (for some participants, this refers to the direct democracy system of ancient Greece), its ideal functioning in today's social, cultural, political and economic conditions is now seen as a utopian goal. This representation expresses pessimistic views of democracy and the inability of societies to achieve idealized democratic systems. This finding is quite consistent with the findings of another study conducted with Greek participants and examining representations of democracy (Magioglou, 2008). In this study, too, most sample thought that democracy had never really existed and would never exist, except in the Ancient Greek period. This representation can also be interpreted through the lens of participants' experiences within their current political systems. Reflecting a widely acknowledged perspective in the literature — articulated by numerous scholars (e.g., Keyman, 2013) — participants similarly express the view that Türkiye's democracy has remained confined to constitutional norms since its inception. It has persistently been in a state of crisis, marked by dysfunctional institutional operations, deep-rooted ideological conflicts, political polarization, and fragile mechanisms of participation and representation. Within such a context, it appears reasonable that this type of lived experience and perception undermines faith in the feasibility of a functioning democracy.

### A Fundamental Feature of Thought: Ideal versus Real

When participants discuss democracy, they generally evaluate the ideal democracy and the current democratic systems together, and democracy is explained through the contrasts between the ideal and the current state. In other words, there is always a gap between the ideal and the reality for almost all participants. This dialectical perspective, which goes to extremes, points to a way of thinking frequently evaluated in the literature on democracy and by theorists (e.g., Dahl, 2001; Sartori, 1993). Sartori (1993) explains this situation by proposing that democracies in our century are generally the product of ideals and

always emerge due to a struggle against reality. Dahl (2001) also stated that democracy is both ideal and reality. Therefore, we can see this distinction in people's conceptualization of democracy.

Similarly, Magioglou's (2008) study observed that most Greek participants continued to judge reality or the current system through the ideal despite thinking there was a gap between the ideal democracy and today's democracies and that the ideal democracy would never exist. This dual way of thinking is seen both in the explanations of some theorists and in the results of studies conducted with citizens. However, it is sometimes considered a problematic situation. Sartori (1993) claims that what is reasonable in democracy should be protected and that idealist and realistic readings will harm democracy. According to him, approaching democracy from an overly realistic perspective causes it to be seen as an activity of demagogy. In contrast, an idealist perspective distances politics from its concrete content, making it useless and unusable. In this study, the representation of democracy, which evaluates democracy as a utopia that is not specific to today's world or even to the earth and humanity, can be evaluated as a reflection of this idealist perspective. When this representation is evaluated in this context, it can be claimed that this idealist perspective makes democracy unusable. Moreover, an over-idealist political perspective will lead to a constant pessimistic worldview, disrupting social relations. This situation is also seen in the statements of participants who evaluate democracy as a utopia due to the evil side of human nature. This negative perspective on human nature also includes the idea that the democracy created by humans themselves is rendered impossible by their own nature. Democracy is such an idealized system for these participants that it is assumed that even if it can be realized, it will be unhealthy for human. It is considered more beneficial for it to remain a utopia. The representation of democracy evaluated through the current systems is a system that is evaluated only through the disadvantages of democracy and will prevent seeing its positive aspects and fighting. Therefore, even if democracy is evaluated as good enough to be perfect, it ceases to be a desired system due to excessive idealization and negative experiences in current systems.

On the other hand, although this dual way of thinking is considered a problematic situation in the literature, it can be considered reasonable when it is considered that social representations are thought schemes that carry the influence of the social, political, and cultural context in which they are formed. The research results reveal that past and current experiences related to democracy determine representation. For example, the disadvantageous system representation of democracy includes the descriptions made by the participants based on their experiences. The inference that democracy is the most advantageous system when it can be implemented well and a disadvantageous system when it cannot is often made based on the negative experiences of democracy in history. The Nazi period in Germany, the Mussolini administration in Italy, or the military coup periods in Türkiye are bad experiences that have shaken the image of democracy and caused it to be evaluated as a disadvantageous system. Similarly, since democracy has gaps that will cause abuse within itself, that is, bad actors who have the potential to use the freedoms or positive image provided by democracy for their interests can easily overthrow democracy by deceiving, manipulating, and directing the public. The participants often explain this situation by referring to various historical examples that are considered antidemocratic, such as Julius Caesar, Adolf Hitler, America's overseas interventions and coups, and martial law practices, or to examples from the current democratic functioning in which they are involved, such as practices that restrict rights and freedoms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

Democracy, which is mostly considered as a subject of politics, has been seen in a comprehensive literature review that it has not found much place in the psychology literature. In other words, except for a few theorists and studies (e.g. Caprara, 2022; Forgas & Lantos, 2020; Magioglou, 2008; Moghaddam, 2018; Montiel & Wessells, 2001; Moodie, 2005; Moodie et al., 1995), democracy does not seem to be a subject in

which psychology is very interested. In particular, as emphasized before, there have been very few studies conducted in the field of social representation (bkz. Magioglou, 2008; Moodie, 2005; Moodie et al., 1995), which can be counted on the fingers of one hand. As far as is known, no such study has ever been conducted in Türkiye. While this situation makes it difficult to make comparisons with studies in the literature, it leads to the discussion being conducted within the framework of the theory of social representations in general terms and the meanings of representations in the context of Türkiye; on the other hand, it has made a significant contribution to the theory of social representations, which is one of the most important theories of social psychology, and therefore to the literature of social psychology.

When all the findings are evaluated together, a very different and comprehensive perspective on democracy emerges. The first representation emphasizes trust in democracy and the liberal values needed, while the second discusses the disadvantages and abuse-prone aspects of democracy. The third representation argues that it is not always possible for democracy to function ideally and is more of a utopian dream. When all three representations are considered together, they reveal that democracy is a multidimensional and complex system facing social, cultural, and political differences. Each of these representations is important in understanding Türkiye's perception of democracy and offers social criticisms and solution suggestions from different perspectives. These representations seem entirely meaningful and valid, especially considering the problems of political stability and social integration in Türkiye.

In addition to the findings and contributions, this study has several limitations. In this study, a complex issue, such as democracy, was investigated through in-depth interviews, allowing for the dynamic and productive nature of social representations. However, because of the dynamic nature of social representations, it is essential to remember that social and political developments and changes in Türkiye and worldwide since the study's data collection phase may have resulted in changes in public discourses about democracy. At the time the data for this study were collected, the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected and threatened all life, was in its most intense periods. The impact of the pandemic on individuals and societies was directly observed in the statements of the participants during the interviews. For example, it was stated by the participants that even if democracy is evaluated on the basis of rights and freedoms and these values should never be compromised, it could be limited during the pandemic on the grounds that it threatens human life. While it is possible to observe these effects in the statements of the participants, directly understanding and explaining their possible impact on representations goes beyond this study. In subsequent studies, it is very important to examine the changes in representations caused by this event, which has such great effects on a global scale and has the potential to change the lives, perspectives and understandings of people and societies.

This research was conducted using an inductive approach and a qualitative method based on the thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews and the social representations theory analysis stages. To achieve more inclusive representations, an attempt was made to select a sample of individuals with different demographic characteristics. The research sample consists of individuals living in İstanbul, a province that receives intense migration from all regions of Türkiye and has a very heterogeneous population. Although the sample shows a balanced distribution in terms of demographic variables such as ethnicity and political orientation, it is seen that the participants form a group that is close to each other, especially in terms of education level. Since the aim of this study is not to examine how representations differ among different individuals and groups, but to explore various representations of democracy; and since there were no significant differences between groups in terms of education level, the differential effect of this variable on representations could not be evaluated. Therefore, it should be kept in mind that the findings obtained from the study cannot be generalized to all individuals in Türkiye and that the representations are specific

to the participants of this study. In future studies, working with more diverse and balanced samples will allow for more generalizable results.



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