Historical Significance from Turkish Students' Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine how students in a south-western province of Turkey employ historical significance which is one of the second order concepts of historical thinking. 44 11th and 12th grade students participated in the study. They were asked to identify the most significant 10 persons in the history and provide their reasons for selecting each person. A total of 127 people are determined by students as significant. Each person identified by the students given a score according to a formula developed by the researchers. Thus 10 people with the highest score determined by the most significant person history. Analysis of these 10 people along with remaining of the list revealed that students are unable to employ professional standards to differ significant people from those who are not. Rather they are quite personal and subjective with regard to selections they made. Additionally it has been revealed that they choose people only from Turkish history, their selections characterized by people from relatively recent past, and paucity of female figures in list raised concerns regarding content, curriculum and instruction of history and social studies courses in Turkey.

Keywords: historical significance, historical thinking skills, history education, social studies education

1. Introduction

Historical significance is one of the major concepts discussed among historians and, history and social studies educators. For educators the concept is important since it address two issues: making a selection among all that history offers and equipping students with a powerful thinking tool. Since it is impossible to bring everything that happened in the past to the classrooms, studying about the concept of historical significance helps us to set the criteria to select (Seixas & Ercikan, 2011) what to choose to discuss with pupils.

Turkish education system is a strongly centralized one, thus history curriculum has been created by the Ministry of National Education (MNE) implemented in every schools across the country. History is integrated in social studies courses starting from 4th grade. The first independent history course called History of the Revolutions is offered in the 8th grade. In high schools history courses are compulsory at the grades of 9, 10 and 11. In addition to these compulsory courses some elective courses exist at different grades of high school as well. Despite the fact that the concept of historical significance is not mentioned literally as much as it is expected, the program focuses on historical thinking greatly (MNE, 2007). In the 'explanations regarding implementations of the curriculum' part, for example, it has been stated that "teachings and activities should serve to have students acquire and develop historical skills" (MNE, 2007. p. 5). According to Kiriş-Avaroğulları (2014) the concept of historical significance is mentioned 10 times both explicitly and implicitly in history curriculum for the 9th grade which is considered as the key curriculum for all history courses.

Differing significant events from those are not can be difficult especially for nonprofessionals like students. What must be our standards to judge whether an event, a trend or a person is significant historically? According to Partington (as cited in Phillips, 2002) importance, profundity, quantity, durability and relevance are the criteria to assess an historical phenomenon. Influenced by Partington's work Phillips (2002) developed the criteria regarding World War I called GREAT in which G stands for Groundbreaking, R for Remembered by all, E for events That Were Far Reaching, A for affected the future, and T for Terrifying. Labeling Partington's criteria as set by professional historians Levesque (2005) adds some other criteria that arguably set by educational community including students, school authority and ministry authority. These are intimate interests, symbolic significance, and contemporary lessons. After reviewing criteria suggested Partington and Levesque, Peck and Seixas (2008) reduced them either of the two criteria: resulting in change and revealing. Counsell (2004)

suggested another set of criteria consisting of five R's which are remarkable, remembered, resonant, resulting in change, and revealing. Hunt (2003) provided four sets of questions to assess significance of a person, an event, a change, and issues respectively. Cercadillo (2006) argues that significance may come from following features: contemporary significance, casual significance, pattern significance, symbolic significance, revelatory significance, and present significance.

Student's having a solid idea of historical significance contributes to their motivation to learn, help them develop interest in some subjects otherwise seen as dull. It clarifies the connections between local and national or global perspectives, and develops citizenship skills (Phillips, 2002). According to Hunt (2003) it will demonstrate importance of learning history by making it more relevant. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore to what extend Turkish students are able to evaluate and apply the concept of historical significance. The study is considered significant in terms of there is no such research conducted regarding students in Turkey according to the best knowledge of the researchers. Thus we hope to provide international researchers an opportunity to compare situations in their country with another country. Cross-country comparative works are very important to assess effectiveness of the works and transfer of the knowledge. It is also expected that the results will shed a light on effectiveness of history and social studies courses in terms of supplying students with historical thinking skills.

2. Method

2.1 Design of the Study

This is a descriptive study. The data has been collected and analyzed with content analysis method. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012, p. 478) content analysis is a method that enables study of human behaviors indirectly, by examining their communications.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Population of the study consists of high school students in a county of a south-western Turkish province. The sampling has been selected by two-stage random sampling method. For this purpose, 4 of the 8 high schools in the county has been selected randomly followed by random selection of 50 11th and 12th grade students to participate in the study. Since 6 of the students refused to take part in the study the sampling emerged as 44 students.

2.3 Data Collection

The data has been collected from written answers to the question of "Who, do you think, are the most significant ten people in the history? Please rank them starting by the most significant person and provide an explanation of why you think so". People determined by the students have been placed to predetermined categories by the researchers. In the process of categorization the reasons provided by the students has been taken into account. Only open content has been considered for the analysis.

2.4 Analysis of the Data

The persons included each student's list has been given a score which is calculated as described below. Each person has been given a 10 point of preference point for each time being included in a list. Then according to their position in the list a priority point has been added to the list point. For priority point the person at the top of the list has been given 10 points while the person at the bottom has been given only 1 point. Points calculated independently by the researchers and compared with each other. No disagreement between the scores has been observed. Then, names suggested by the students are classified in terms of their profession, the era they had lived, nationality, and gender.

3. Results

A total of 127 people have been designated as significant by the participants of the study. A detailed list of significant people and some brief information about them has been presented in Appendix 1.

According to the scores calculated for each person suggested by the students, the most significant 10 people in the history in Turkish student's view have been presented in Table 1. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk is founder and first president of the republic of Turkey. Mehmet II of Ottoman Empire is the sultan who conquered Constantinople now called Istanbul. Mete Khan of the Huns is founder of first Turkic empire which is Hun Empire in the Central Asia. He is also accepted as the founder of present day Turkish Army. Kemal Sunal was an actor who was famous with comedy movies. Mehmet Akis Ersoy is a famous poet who wrote Turkish national anthem. Osman I is founder and first ruler of Ottoman Empire. Cahit Arf was a scientist who found Arf Variant. Sinan was an architect who lived 16th century and regarded as the best of Turkish architects. Mahmut II is an Ottoman sultan

who ruled in 19th century. He started first reforms to stop the empire from collapsing. Although his efforts were unsuccessful, they paved the way to the republic. Finally Barış Manço was a popular singer who died in recent past.

Table 1. According to students the most significant 10 people of history

	Preference Points	Priority Points	Total Points
Mustafa Kemal Ataturk	390	304	694
Mehmet II of Ottoman Empire	290	218	508
Mete Khan of the Huns	140	93	233
Kemal Sunal	130	81	211
Mehmet Akif Ersoy	130	76	206
Osman I of Ottoman Empire	110	78	188
Cahit Arf	110	62	172
Sinan the Architect	90	62	152
Mahmut II of Ottoman Empire	100	50	150
Barış Manço	70	44	114

3.1 Significant Persons in Terms of Their Profession

Distribution of 127 significant persons in terms of profession has been presented in Figure 1. Since professionalism is a relatively current phenomenon many people in history had more than one profession but we preferred each person's the most dominant feature. For example Erdal Inonu who was a famous physicist, taken as a scientist although he was a successful politician as well. After examining the data we classified person into categories as follows: Military- Statesmen (to include military persons and statesmen with a military career), 32 persons; Statesmen (Statesmen Without a Military Career), 16 persons; Artists, 20 persons; Persons of Letters , 27 persons; scientists, 9 persons; Sportsmen, 6 persons; Persons of Religion, 3 persons; Journalists, 3 persons; and others, 11 persons.
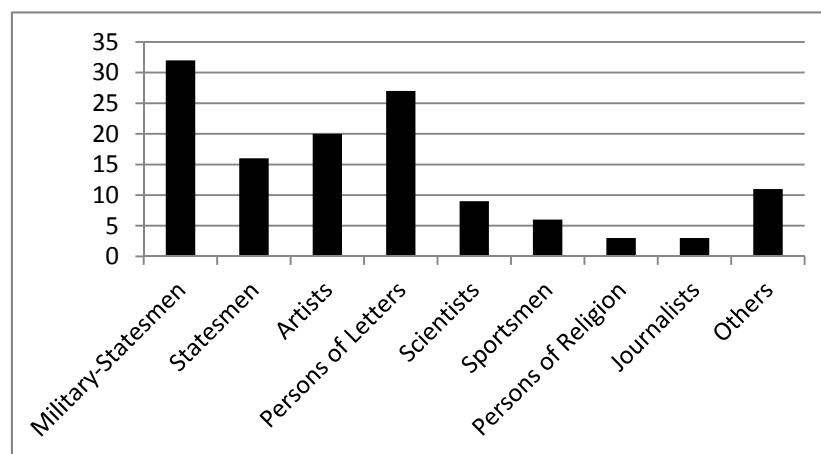

Figure 1. Distribution of significance persons in terms of profession

3.2 Significant Persons in Terms of the Time They Lived

Distribution of significance persons in terms of time they lived has been presented in Figure 2. Some persons may have lived in two succeeding eras. We preferred to place them into the era they are known better. For example Atatürk was born and educated in 19th century, but we placed him into 20th century since he is known with his achievements in 20th century. Eras we employed are as follows: 10th century and earlier, 10 persons;

11th–14th centuries, 22 persons; 15th–19th centuries, 32 persons; 20th–21st centuries, 63 persons; Persons not from Turkey History (PNTH), 13 persons.
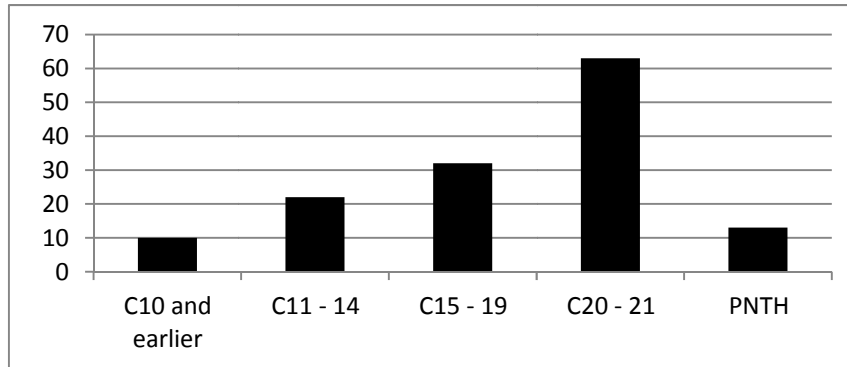
Figure 2. Distribution of significance persons in terms of time they lived

3.3 Significant Persons in terms of Nationality

As demonstrated in Figure 3, all persons included in the list are either Turks or from a relative nation with one exception: President Wilson of USA. There are 111 persons form history Turkey while there are 3 persons from Uzbek history and Azerbaijan and Tartars are represented by 1 person each. 10 people are classified as Mutual Turkish history. This category includes persons early times of Turkic nations who may be shared by all Turkish speaking people.
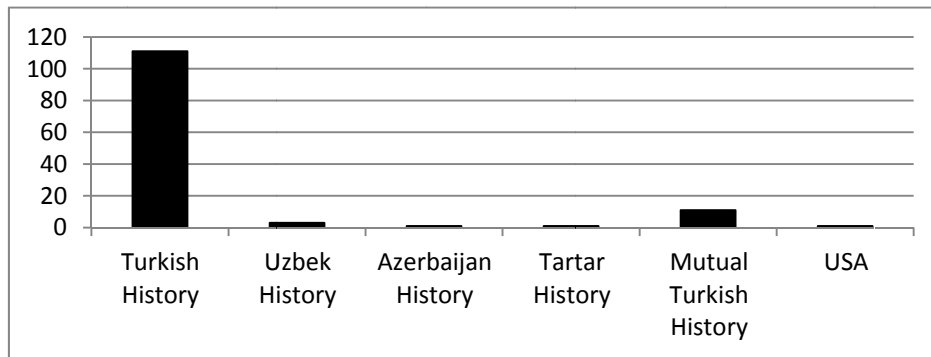
Figure 3. Significant persons in terms of nationality

3.4 Significant Persons in terms of Gender

Significant persons in terms of gender have been presented in Figure 4. The list includes 13 females and 114 males.
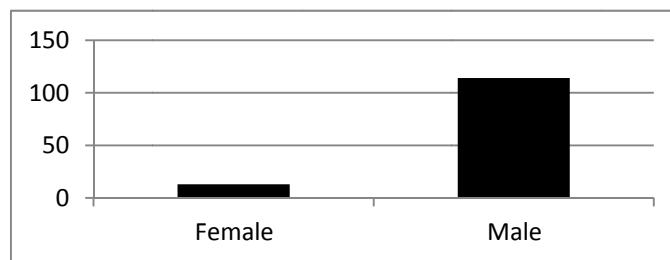
Figure 4. Distribution of significant persons in terms of gender

4. Discussion

The list of then significant persons demonstrates that Turkish students are quite ethnocentric in terms of attribution of historical significance. However, we might speculate that the reason for this attitude is most probably structure of the history courses offered. A similar finding reported by Epstein (1998) as well who reported that African-American students choose black person as significant while European-American students choose white ones.

According to a different framework developed by Seixas (1994), two sources of students' idea of significance are narrative explanation and analogy. "In narrative explanations, historically significant events and developments were those that could be identified as having made the greatest impact on the contemporary World" (p. 290). Analogy means drawing lessons from history for the present day situations. Findings of Sheehan (2011) follow the same path with Seixas (1994) Sheehan (2011) reports that students connect the significance to relevance and importance and history is about drawing lessons from the past according to the students. Turkish students' view does not seem to reflect narrative explanation because it seems that only one historical figure, Ataturk, has a considerable impact on students' contemporary world. A review of ten people selected by the students reveal that Turkish students are not interested particularly at drawing lessons from the past either.

The results of this study reveal that Turkish students are inclined to memory significance as defined by of Lévesque (2005). Memory criteria are quite close to subjectivism concept of Seixas (1997). According to Lévesque (2005) memory significance stems from at least three concerns: Intimate interests i.e. personal, family or group connections to an event or person, Symbolic interests i.e. a person's or an event's importance for nationalistic feelings, and contemporary lessons i.e. use of events to guide present actions. It is possible to observe intimate and symbolic concerns of memory significance at choices of Turkish students. For example Cahit Arf's inclusion in the list can exemplify intimate interest because he is not in the list for his contribution to mathematics as a science but for "his well representation of our country in mathematics". Existence of Mehmet the Conqueror and Sinan the architect symbolizes Turkish power and genius. Yet Lévesque (2005) asserts that memory significance is far from enhancing historical understanding. This may cause us to conclude that Turkish students are not able to evaluate historical significance by the standards of the discipline.

Cercadillo (2006) identifies six types of significance attributions by students: contemporary significance, casual significance, pattern significance, symbolic significance, revelatory significance and present significance. This study has found that Turkish students tend to adopt symbolic persons and persons who have pattern significance (i.e. people who caused a shift in Turkish history). Three of the 10 significant persons in Table 1 (Atatürk, Mete Khan, and Osman Ghazi) are founders of different Turkish states while 2 of them (Mehmet the Conqueror and Mahmud II) are seen as starters of imperial era and reform era in Ottoman history respectively. Likewise Sinan the architect is known as the person who shaped Turkish architecture forever. Findings of Cercadillo (2006) reinforced largely by the study of Apostolidou (2012) who researched into Greek students' idea of historical significance by having them list significant events since 1989. Greek students have chosen 34 cases with symbolic significance and pattern significance out of 70 cases. In pralllel with Cercadillo (2006) and Apostolidou (2012) Turkish students have chosen historical figures who have symbolic and pattern significance as well.

When they asked reasons for the choices they made their answers are generally what Seixas (1997) calls subjective or advanced subjective in nature. According to Seixas (1997) subjectivism consist of largely personal feelings while advanced subjectivism occurs when a person judges the events not with their universal impact but impact on himself/herself or the group he or she belongs. For example with regard to Atatürk, some student views are as follows: "he is the reason we are here today", we owe our independence to him" "he saved the country with his hard work and intellect" etc. The statements for Mehmet the Conqueror "He conquered Istanbul", and Mete Khan "he is the founder of Turkish army" further proves this point. Even for Sinan the architect, who is a world-wide known artist, there is no international perspective. The most frequent reason for his being in the list is "his contribution to Turkish architecture. Existence of movie star Kemal Sunal and singer Barış Manço, on the other hand, can be interpreted as proof of common subjectivism among the students. Their reasoning has not reflected the objectivist or advanced objective approaches. Most importantly they failed to express a narrativist approach that balances subjectivist and objectivist approaches as discussed by Seixas (1997). This can be noted as a deficiency in their account.

Dominance of military persons and statesmen in the master list of significant persons as seen at Figure 1 tells a lot about characteristics of history courses offered in Turkey. This shows that history is presented as actions of great men like sultans, viziers, and generals excluding ordinary people. Yet existence of artists and scientists

among the most important ten people is a promising result. Steady rise of number of significant persons as history comes close to the present date as shown at Figure 2 is another interesting point. These figures can be interpreted as dominance of present relevance over determination of historical significance which may lead to presentism as cautioned by Counsell (2004). Another point that, we believe, requires quick action is lack of persons from global history. One may expect to see names like Napoleon, Karl Marx or Isaac Newton in the list, but they not here. The overstress on national history seems as a problem in Turkey. Lastly but not least underrepresentation of women in the list as demonstrated in Figure 4 must be another concern. We believe that appreciation of women's contribution to both national and global history is a must for a better understanding of past.

As a result it is possible to suggest that Turkish students see history from an ethnocentric window. Thus they see historical figures from a subjective and advanced subjective perspective rather than objectivist, advanced objectivist and narrativist perspective. Their main criterion for evaluating historical figures is memory criterion. Symbolic significance and pattern significance are the most important screens for evaluating historical figures. These results indicate that students are far from professional standards to assess historical significance

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion this study reveals that Turkish students attribute significance not according to standards set by professional historians but according to some personal and subjective ones. Thus they are quite ethnocentric in terms of choices they make resulting in only one person from out of Turkish history. They have difficulty at making distinction between what is personally or historically significant as shown by inclusion by their favorite singers or actors into the list. In order to let students focus on disciplinary nature of history some reconsideration may require regarding curriculum and instruction of history courses in Turkey.

This study has demonstrated that history is perceived as deeds of great men by students. This perception must be changed by adopting a view that inclusive to greater parts of the society. Connecting past to present is a good way to make history more meaningful to students but overstressing on present may lead to presentism as stated by Counsell (2004). Results of this study partly point out existence of this danger.

It seems that Turkish students don't pay attention enough to the world history and history of Turkish societies that live outside Turkey. This is an important deficiency in the present day which is characterized by globalism and interconnectedness. Historical figures that are from other Turkish societies and seen significant by the students are all well known in Turkey too proves that giving more names in the textbook will familiarize Turkish students to their relatives who live in other states. Thus they will be able to assess their contribution to history in a more reliable way. Finally, women's contribution to history seems underestimated by the students. We believe that content of the courses must be reviewed to deal with this problem.

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Notes

Note 1. This paper has been presented in part orally at III. International Symposium on History Education, Sakarya, Turkey 25-27 June 2014

Appendix A

Master List of Significant People

Abdullah Catli	Abdulmecid	Adile Nasit
Adnan Ali Menderes	Ahi Evran	Ahmet Cevdet Pasa
Ahmet Kaya	Ahmet Yesevi	Ali Fethi Okyar
Alpaslan	Aprin Cul Tigin	Asik Veysel
Ataturk	Attila İlhan	Aziz Nesin
Aziz Yildirim	Barbaros	Baris Manco
Bilge Kagan	Osman Kocaoglu	Bulent Ecevit
Bulent Korkmaz	Cahit Arf	Canan Tan
Cem Karaca	Cemal Sureya	Cengiz Han
Caka Bey	Dede Korkut	Deniz Gezmis
Emir Timur	Enver Pasa	Erdal İnonu
Fatih Sultan Mehmet	Fatma âliye	Fuat Koprulu
Fuzuli	Gazi Yasargil	Gazneli Mahmut
Genc Osman	Gevher Nesibe	Halide Edip
Halit Ziya Usakligil	Hasan Tahsin	Hurrem Sultan
Hz. Muhammed	İ. Ahmet	İ. Murat
İİ. Mahmut	İİ.Abdulhamit	İİİ. Ahmet
İİİ. Selim	Ibn-i Sina	Ismail Gaspirali
Ismet İnonu	Kadir İnanir	Kanuni Sultan
Karamanoglu Mehmet	Kasgarli Mahmut	Kazim Karabekir
Kemal Sunal	Kuscubasi Haci Sami	Kutalmisoglu Suleyman
Kutluk Han	Kul Tigin	Kursat
Lagari Hasan Celebi	M. Akif Ersoy	M.F.O
Mehmet Celebi	Mehmet Rauf	Mete Han
Metin Oktay	Mevlana	Mimar Sinan
Mustafa Balbay	Mustafa Resit Pasa	Mujdat Gezen

Munir Ozkul	Muzeyyen Senar	Namik Kemal
Nasrettin Hoca	Nazim Hikmet	Nef'i
Nejat İsler	Nene Hatun	Neset Ertas
Nizamulmulk	Oguz Atay	Orhan Bey
Orhan Kemal	Orhan Pamuk	Osman Gazi
Omer Hayyam	Omer Onan	Omer Seyfettin
Ozdemir Asaf	Ozhan Canaydin	Piri Reis
Saadettin Kopek	Sabiha Gokcen	Sadri Alisik
Sait Faik Abasiyanik	Salih Bozok	Seyit Onbasi
Sezen Aksu	Sokullu Mehmet Pasa	Suleyman Seba
Sutcu İmam	Sebnem Ferah	Sehzade Mustafa
Sener Sen	Sir Mehmet Bek	Teoman
Tugrul Bey	Tuncay Ozkan	Turkan Saylan
Turkan Soray	Ulubatli Hasan	Woodrow Wilson (ABD)
Yasar Kemal	Yavuz Sultan Selim	Yildirim Bayezit
Yollug Tigin	Yunus Emre	Yusuf Has Hacib
Zeki Muren		