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**Perception of Incivility in the Turkish Urban  
Context: Youth Perspective**

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Perception of Incivility in the Turkish Urban Context:  
Youth Perspective

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Abstract

There is a growing interest in studying (in)civility within the contemporary urban context due to disordered image of the city. The aim of this study is to inquire different perceptions of incivility and the ways it is perceived and experienced thoroughly by the Turkish urban youth. In order to compare two different collectivities - youth and adults - and grasp the generational gap between them qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-two young people and seventeen adults. The results indicated that while describing and explaining incivility, Turkish urban youth focuses on the importance of respecting the norms and rules of the adult order of the society and the role of education and the family. Furthermore, Turkish youth is observed to be responsive to politics and social issues as well as individual differences in face-to-face interactions.

Keywords: incivility; social incivilities; physical incivilities; Turkish urban youth.

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## Introduction

There is a growing interest in studying (in)civility within the contemporary urban context due to disordered image of the city (Boyd, 2006; Fyfe et al., 2006; Philips and Smith, 2006). A predominant concern in contemporary urban studies is to question the means that provide civility to make living among strangers possible. Therefore, studying the perception of incivilities and their degree of salience is imperative to be able to understand relations of citizens with a city (Félonneau, 2004).

Incivilities and their reasons are perceived and experienced differently by different groups of citizens depending on their socio-demographic characteristics, place of residence in the city and how they identify themselves with the city life. Young people, their gathering and behaviors in public spaces such as street corners, front walls, town centers are debated as the main incivil events in the social realm that prompt anxiety and unease among adult users of those spaces (see Franzini et al., 2008; Robin et al., 2007).

As White and Sutton (2001, p. 8) pointed out, 'perceptions of "youth" as a problem need to be tempered by the realization that many of the behaviors that are the target of condemnation and chastisement are not unique to young people'. In other words, young people themselves might be the targets of incivil acts at different situations. This leads to the understanding of a contradictory position for young people as being both victims and victimizers; as both being "angels" and "devils" (Breitbart, 1998; Valentine 1996).

In this framework, this paper underlines the significance of investigating how young individuals perceive and experience incivilities as a labeled and stigmatized group and how they see adults/elderly and their peers within the discussion of incivility. Accordingly, the main purpose of this paper is to inquire different perceptions of incivility and the ways it is perceived and experienced by Turkish urban youth. Turkey is a good example to demonstrate differences among youth due to different conditions and transformations in the country that are influential on young people.

Although young people seem to be labeled with attitudes of their generation, their experiences, perceptions and expectations vary across gender, age, income and location in the city. In that respect, another aim is to consider and observe the differences among youth. Besides, in order to compare the perspectives of two different collectivities - youth and adults - and grasp the generational gap, the views of adults are also analyzed.

To this end, first the theoretical framework and assumptions regarding the incivility argument are reviewed. I interrogate the incivility perceptions and experiences in the Turkish urban realm through the statements of young people and adults living in different neighborhoods of Ankara through a qualitative research. In the following section, types of incivilities are discussed to form a basis for the field survey.

## Theoretical Framework: Types of Incivilities

In contemporary studies, incivility is mostly analyzed with its criminal aspects (see Brown et al., 2004; Covington and Taylor, 1991). The number of researches that study crime and violence in the urban context seems to be increasing

in Turkey as well, due to the rising concerns on crime which is triggered by events like terrorist attacks, kidnappings and murders (see for example, Aksoy, 2007 on this issue). However, there is a lack of comprehensive research that investigates the variety of meanings, perceptions and experiences of incivility within the Turkish urban context. The reasons of this might be complexity of the term incivility in different contexts, as well as the prejudices against certain groups such as young people. Nevertheless, it is possible to claim that incivility in Turkey is also described in a stereotyped way by referring to rudeness, rusticity and unmannerliness as well as different forms of criminal acts. Besides, it also covers the threatening and unwanted behaviors of undesirable and stereotyped individual groups.

In the light of the literature review, perceived incivilities are grouped under two main headings which are related: to physical environment and to social environment. Incivilities and nuisances that are related to the physical environment can be reflected by perceived problems and inconveniences about environmental stressors, design and planning failures and functional aspects of living in an urban environment. Noise, population density, pollution, traffic, the bad smells, lack of green spaces, graffiti, litter on the sidewalks, broken windows, poorly lit streets, lack of parking space and lack of or dangerousness of pedestrian areas are some examples of physical incivilities in the urban context. Incivilities related to social environment and interpersonal relations include all forms of disorderly manners, behaviors and deteriorated social exchanges resulting from involving with strangers. Those behaviors are deviances from the norms of living together; involve reduced helping behaviors, behaviors leading to insecurity, fear and acts of criminality. In this respect, some examples of social incivilities can be listed as drug dealing, public drinking, vandalism, begging, arguing on the streets, smoking in public spaces, gang activities, prostitution and verbal harassment on the street (see Brown et al., 2004; Félonneau, 2004; Franzini et al., 2008; Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004 for various examples of such incivilities). Furthermore, in many researches, groups of teenagers and young people hanging out in public spaces of the city and some of their behaviors such as going around in gangs and “misusing” public spaces are usually entitled as a type of social incivility (see Robin et al., 2007).

Besides, impolite and rude behaviors and manners or bodily management and display in face-to-face interactions within public realm such as a long hold gaze, an insulting or arrogant gesture, an overly familiar smile, an uninvited touch, bumping into each other in a public space, pushing into queues, loud talking, loud laughing, swearing, blowing one’s nose, spitting, yawning, belching, not offering one’s seat in the bus, neglecting to greet one another and prejudicial comments about race ethnicity or sex can be entitled as a type of social incivility (see Elias, 1994; Kassin, 1990; Philips and Smith, 2006). These kinds of incivilities can be grouped under the heading of “proximate incivilities”<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the use of mobile phones, iPods and mp3 players are perceived as incivilities due to a common use and share of public spaces by different citizens (Robin et al., 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Fyfe et al. (2006), “proximate” civility - which may be assumed as the literally opposite of proximate incivility - is commonly used as politeness or absence of “rudeness” in personal interactions. This understanding of civility is related to both our verbal and non-verbal communication; physical interaction, presentation and appearance; body or language (see also Philips and Smith, 2006 on this issue).

*The Turkish Context: Youth Studies*

The composition of Turkish society is quite young compared to many European countries. According to the 2007 population census results indicated by Address Based Population Registration System (ABPRS), the median age of the population is 28.3 and approximately 61.3 % of the total population is below 35 years of age. The proportion for the age group 15-24 is 18 %. As for the metropolitan cities are concerned, 2,106,359 of that age group live in Istanbul and 778,958 in Ankara (TURKSTAT [Turkish Statistics Institute], 2008). Whilst these statistics, which underline the fact that the major part of Turkey's population is composed of youth below 30 years of age, the precise information about this "silent majority" is very few (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1999). If the significant role of the youth population in determination of the future of a country is taken into consideration, a country like Turkey, of which more than half of the population is below 25 years of age, should pay more attention to this majority (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1999).

Although limited in number, there are researches on Turkish youth indicating that there are generational shifts in the attitudes and worldviews of this group parallel to the structural changes in the society (see Armagan, 2004; Kagitcibasi, 2005; Yumul, 2002). Within this framework, while focusing on youth as the subjects of different research topics, it is crucial to elaborate differences and heterogeneity among them as well as the social, political and economic conditions and transformations of the country.

**Field Study: Method***Sample Selection Procedure*

The main aim was to collect qualitative data, so that quota and convenience and/or snowball sampling methods were used. In the framework of this study, the sample consisted of youth who were considered as the persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusive. The reason of choosing this age range is, in this study, it is referred to UN (2008) definition of youth and to the age range used by TURKSTAT.

As Yumul (2002) stated, even if their ages are comparable, individuals live their youth in very different environments. For this reason, the way youth perceive their conditions show variations as well. Moreover, as Robin et al. (2007) stated, quality of residential conditions is closely associated with the perception and experience of incivilities and feeling of insecurity. In this respect, the sample group of this study was chosen among youth who inhabit different neighborhoods of Ankara including high, middle and low-income districts. Adult group was also selected from the inhabitants of the same neighborhoods; parents, family members and neighbors of the young people.

*The Research Instruments and the Procedure*

In this study, semi-structured interviews were done to investigate how different groups of urban youth conceptualize the term incivility. This instrument was capable of seizing the depth and variety of incivil events and different meanings of incivility that young people perceive and experience in the urban realm. Following

the questions that aimed to collect socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, interview questions were structured around meaning and description of incivility, the events/behaviors/individual groups that were considered as incivil and the incivil behaviors/events that were encountered in everyday life. To compare and contrast young people's perceptions and experiences of incivility with the views of adults and to have a more comprehensive understanding of youth's experiences, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with adults. The sample size was 39 in total – 22 young people and 17 adults.

The study was limited in terms of the size of the sample group, but as comprehensive as possible in terms of the scope and the content of the interviews. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes. Out of 39, 22 of them fell between the ages of 15-24. Out of these 22 young people, 10 of them were females and 12 of them were males. The sample consisted 17 adult respondents who were aged from 41 to 60, 12 females and 5 males. Since the sample size was small, qualitative analyses and comparisons were used to underline the differences among individuals.

## **The Findings and Discussion**

In the following sections, the findings and the discussion is revealed along two headings which are categorized as: 1- the conceptualization of the term incivility - including different meanings of incivility, 2- different types of incivilities. The perception and experience of incivility by youth and adults are compared and contrasted under these headings.

### *1 - Conceptualization of Incivility*

It is difficult to study the term incivility in Turkish context due to the fact that there is no exact translation of the word that overlaps with its meaning in English. By referring to the description of civility which is about rules, norms, codes, rituals, moral obligations, behaviors of living together and concern for the benefit of a whole society (see Boyd, 2006; Shils, 1991 for the definition of civility), respondents were asked to bring out a description for the individuals and behaviors that stayed out of this argument of civility. In other words, by giving the definition of civility, respondents were asked to define and describe the opposite of it, i.e., incivility. According to the results, incivility and incivil individuals were described as being disrespectful, impolite, ill-mannered, rude, uneducated, thoughtless, arrogant, self-centered and rustic. Young people mostly explained these adjectives together with self-interest, disregard for others and erosion of empathy as Philips (2006) used while describing incivility.

The incivil behaviors that were mentioned by young respondents were mostly entitled under the heading of social incivilities including the behaviors of spitting, swearing, sexual harassment and inappropriate ways of dressing. The responses of adults were not very distinct from youth. Adult respondents described incivility together with being disrespectful, impolite, ill-mannered, rude, thoughtless, uneducated and offender. These terms were explained mostly by emphasizing behaviors that threaten the wholeness of a society and destroy the regulations of living together. Incivil individuals were mentioned as self-centered and disrespectful for the shared environment and for the rights of other individuals in the society. The behaviors that were used by adults to explain social incivilities were spitting, using

mobile phones in public spaces such as public transportation vehicles, loud talking, smacking while eating and inappropriate ways of sitting in public spaces.

Moreover, some young people defined incivility as being disobedient, rebellious, radical and independent from family. In other words, they considered incivility as being different and having a different and contradictory life style compared to the rest of the society. Almost all of the respondents of this survey were living with their families. Hence, they were financially and emotionally dependent to their families as most of the Turkish youth (see Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1999). Therefore, they identified being independent from family as a disobedient, rebellious and radical act and use it to exemplify incivility since living independent from family is contradictory with the embraced norms of Turkish society. Nevertheless, this explanation of young people does not mean that they are happy with this situation. As previous research indicated, dependency to older generations is not necessarily seen as an indication of good communication between parents and young people (see Armagan, 2004). Contrarily, as one of the respondents claimed, living with family is a threat to the freedom of young people.

In addition to the definitions that were brought out for incivility, respondents were also asked to define all the terms that match with incivility including rudeness (*kabalık*), unmannerliness (*görgüsüzlük*), thoughtlessness (*düşüncesizlik*), not being civil (*medeni olmamak*), disrespect (*saygısızlık*), uneasiness (*huzur kaçırmak*) and disobedience (*kurallara uymamak*). According to the responses, these terms were not differentiated substantially. Nevertheless, there were some distinctions among the terms that can be highlighted. For instance, “not being civil”, which is the exact literal meaning of incivility in Turkish, was defined as being conservative, traditional, hidebound and not being a part of city life.

Moreover, the description for disrespect was also mainly differentiated from the other given concepts. For Turkish youth, respect for customs and tradition is indicated as one of the most important virtues. ‘The concept of “tradition” occupies a privileged status among the youth’s system of values’ (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1999, p. 70). The young respondents denoted disrespect together with being disrespectful to elderly and adults and generated a definition of disrespect along this understanding. This can be explained by the high percentage of confidence and trust of Turkish youth in older generations and need for their advices.

The definitions of adult respondents for the concepts that were related to incivility were not even as distinct as the definitions of young respondents. Adults entitled all the terms under the heading of “threats to social order and wholeness of the society”. According to them, all these concepts had almost the same definitions and commonly related to the disobedience of social rules, norms and value systems. They indicated that all these concepts were not approved by the society in general; these concepts were related to being self-centered or having lack of education.

## *2- Different Types of Perceived and Experienced Incivilities*

After investigating the definitions and descriptions of incivility, respondents were asked to exemplify incivil acts, behaviors, conditions and circumstances by which they were disturbed or with which they did not want to encounter in the daily urban life of Ankara. Within the framework of the variety of perceived and experienced incivilities by the youth, types of incivilities were grouped under four

headings: physical incivilities, social incivilities, proximate incivilities and crime-related incivilities. According to the responses of youth, they were mostly disturbed by social incivilities and proximate incivilities. Under the heading of social incivilities, most commonly, sexual and verbal harassment, especially, against females, fighting and arguing on streets, beggars, drunks and homeless individuals on streets and public drinking were indicated by the young respondents. Moreover, inconveniences related to public transportation such as crowding, bad smells and dirt, breaking and disrespecting the rules (e.g. traffic rules), violence, aggressive and nervous people in public spaces, impulsive and provocative behaviors, gang activities, insecurity of wandering at night, smoking in public spaces and migrants living in cities were other kinds of social incivilities that were noted by the youth.

Public drinking and sexual contacts with the opposite sex were declared as incivil acts by the young respondents living in low-income districts. Konrad Adenauer Foundation (1999) underlines the negative relationship between conservative, traditional, tamed and dependent way of living of youth and their socio-economic status. This relationship was also observed during the interviews of this study; young people who are inhabiting in low-income, squatter housing areas were much more tamed, traditional and conservative about alcohol consumption, gadding and intimate relationships with the opposite sex.

When the social incivilities which were noted by the adults were examined, it was observed that they were not as much and as various as the responses of the youth. Unlike the youth, the adults mainly highlighted breaking and violating the traffic rules as incivil, insecure and dangerous. This difference between two generations in perception of the problems encountered in traffic as the major incivility can be explained through having freedom of owning a car and the chance of driving of the adults and also lack of emotional and financial freedom of the youth almost all of whom are living with their parents. Another interesting finding was, "breaking and violating traffic rules" was mostly indicated as the major incivility by the high-income group of respondents living in gated communities of the high-income suburban district. Accordingly, there seemed a correlation between socio-economic status and owning a car and these are correlated with the perception of problems encountered in traffic as the major form of incivility in the city. Fighting and arguing on streets was the second most frequently declared incivility by the adults, which was followed by the insecurity of wandering at night and beggars, drunks and homeless individuals on streets. Sexual and verbal harassment which were perceived as the major incivilities by the youth, were noted only one adult respondent.

Another difference between two age groups in perception and experience of social incivilities was about perceiving mobile phone use in public spaces as incivil. Two of the adults pointed out that they were disturbed very much by the public mobile phone use and they found it very rude. Whereas, none of the youth related public mobile phone use with incivility by confirming the findings of a previous research on the perception of public mobile phone use by Turkish youth (Mugan and Erkip, 2008). Some adult respondents emphasized another significant point which is about disorderly and misbehaving groups of youth as potential threats to the adult order of the society and the main sources of incivility in public spaces (see Philips and Smith, 2006).

Among proximate incivilities which were commonly pointed out by the young respondents following the social incivilities, spitting, swearing, loud talking, loud music, uninvited touch and invasion of personal space and unnecessary

horning were highlighted. In addition, following verbal harassment, swearing and spitting were the second and third most perceived incivilities that young people encountered in their everyday life respectively. Besides, belching, to be fanned, to pick one's nose, smacking while eating, long hold gazes, insulting or arrogant gestures, talking in movie theatres, inappropriate way of sitting and dressing in public spaces and not offering one's seat in public transportation for elderly were also mentioned by the youth. There was not much difference between adult and young respondents in terms of proximate incivilities. According to the adults, spitting, loud talking, swearing, unnecessary horning, picking or blowing one's nose, inappropriate way of sitting in public space, pushing into queues and bumping into each other were impolite, rude, ill-mannered and disorderly acts as well.

As categorized under proximate incivility, one of the young respondents stated the prejudicial or political comments. Still, the young respondents brought harsh criticisms for the working of municipality of Ankara, inconveniences in the state and military mechanisms and deficiencies and failures of the police forces which can indicate that the level of political activism of Turkish youth was not as low as it was considered in previous researches (see Armagan, 2004). Adult respondents also revealed their political attitude and position during the interviews by complaining about the increase in the number of minarets in the city and women wearing scarf, inconveniences in the state, failures of the municipality and police forces.

On the contrary to the previous researches, which indicate that younger people are more environmentally concerned than older people (see Honnold, 1984; Klineberg et al., 1998), the young respondents of this survey seemed not to be very much concerned with the physical environment and physical incivilities. The number of physical incivilities which were expressed by the youth was very limited. The most commonly perceived physical incivilities for young respondents were litter or trash on sidewalks or on the street, traffic jam, noise, pollution due to traffic, bad smells and water shortage in the city. One interesting environmental concern specific to the city of Ankara was brought out by a squatter housing inhabitant who perceives squatter settlements in Ankara positively and criticized the formation of gated communities as leading to spatial and social segregation in the city through their visible physical boundaries; gates and walls (see Erkip, 2010 for the argument regarding spatial and social segregation through gated communities in Ankara).

The responses of the adults were not very different than those of the youth, but obviously they were more diverse and varied. In addition to the physical incivilities that were perceived and experienced by young respondents, adult respondents expressed gradual road constructions, lack of parking spaces, visual pollution due to some design failures such as use of various colors in building facades and antenna towers, water pollution and threat of transmitter towers as well.

Adult respondents seemed to be more fearful against crime rather than younger people. Crime-related incivilities that were perceived by two age groups were almost the same: hit-and-run attacks, overspeed, rape, sexual harassment and offensive behaviors. Unlike young respondents, the adults, as being "minding parents" who have control and autonomy on their children, highlighted the increase in drug use at schools as a threat and danger for their children (see Kagitcibasi, 2005 for the discussion on the emotional interdependence between parents and their child). Use of guns in wedding ceremonies, which is a crime-related incivility as well, was also pointed out by adults as dangerous and disorderly.

In the literature, it is emphasized that young people as a labeled group of incivil conducts, can be the main targets of incivility at different situations (see Pain,

2001; Yumul, 2002). However, according to the findings, young respondents who ascribed youth as the main actors of incivility did not consider them as the main target group of incivil acts. Put it another way, while indicating the perceived target group for incivility they did not consider age as a determinant. According to them, females were the group who were mostly affected by incivil conducts and the main targets of incivilities. Besides, adults' responses regarding the target group of incivil acts were also consistent with their responses about the actors of the incivility. According to the adults, the educated groups and the individuals who behaved orderly and respected the rules and the norms of the society were mostly affected by the incivil conducts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this qualitative survey, the conceptualization of incivility by urban youth living in Ankara was investigated in the light of the way they perceive and experience incivility in the urban realm. Accordingly, different meanings of incivility and the perceptions and the experiences of different types of incivil conducts were determined through interviews with the urban youth. In addition, interviews with adults were also conducted to have a comparative understanding of generational differences.

The main emphasis of this study was to make some Turkish urban youth's voices heard by focusing on their standpoints regarding the issue of incivility. While describing incivility, Turkish youth focused on the importance of "respecting the norms and rules of the adult order of the society" by privileging the tradition and the customs (see Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1999). Most commonly perceived and experienced incivilities by the urban youth were indicated as social incivilities and proximate incivilities.

One of the social implications of this study was the emphasis given to the role of education and the family in the discussion of incivility by the youth. Both age groups stressed lack of education and inappropriate family environment as the major reasons of incivilities. In accordance with this statement, increasing the education level of individuals was suggested as the major intervention practice in order to tackle with incivil conducts in the society. Moreover, it was observed that young individuals were very responsive to politics and social issues as well as individual differences in face-to-face interactions. As in the case of adult group, they brought harsh criticisms for the failures of state policies and police forces. Hence, they suggested more severe policy implication such as increase in legal sanctions, penalties and police control as a way to withhold incivilities in the urban context. Likewise, group of youth was found to be aware of the importance of individual interventions to hinder incivility in the form of immediate warning. However, they also stressed that warning someone in Turkey was dangerous and insecure as it may cause further incivil encounters in the urban realm.

Another important finding of this study was observed in the investigation of the actors and the targets of incivil conducts. Due to the unjust position of young people in the adult world, they are assumed to have the potential of indicating their peers as the group which is mostly affected by incivil conducts in the urban realm (see Pain, 2001). However, Turkish youth ascribed their peers as the actors of incivil conducts in the urban realm. This can be explained by the overemphasis given to the respect for customs and traditions and the family by Turkish youth (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1999). The young people, who are brought up with the

doctrine of the rigid social structure of Turkey that does not accept disrespectful behaviors of youth towards adults and elderly seemed to associate disorderly and disrespectful behaviors with youth. However, adults or elderly were not indicated as the target groups for the incivil conducts. Instead, females were ascribed as the group who were mostly affected by incivil conducts. In other words, gender seemed to be more influential on the perception of being the target of incivil behaviors than age. This attribution of females as the main targets of incivil acts was related to the indication of sexual harassment as the most commonly perceived and experienced incivility by the youth. Nevertheless, further attention should be given to the relationship between perceived actors and targets of incivil conducts in the urban realm. Besides, the reasons of ascription of different groups of individuals to these categories should be analyzed thoroughly.

A further social implication of this study was the comparison of the youth and the adults in terms of the perceived and the experienced incivilities. Some differences were observed between the two age groups due to the generation gap. Regarding physical incivilities, both groups appeared as not being interested in and concerned with the physical environment on the contrary to what was expected, especially from the youth. Further analysis is needed to determine the reasons of this lack of concern regarding physical incivilities and the overemphasis on social and proximate incivilities.

The differences between two age groups can be explained by generational discrepancies. Furthermore, some specific characteristics of Turkish youth such as financial and emotional dependence to family and older generations can manifest the similarities between two age groups as well. Besides, the similarities in the perception and the experience of incivilities between two age groups indicated that complaints about and solutions for incivility was not unique to young people, rather many issues raised by young people should concern all citizens. Further and more detailed explanations can be brought to these differences and similarities between adults and youth through additional studies.

In this study, through the perceptions and the experiences of different types of incivilities in an urban context, the interconnection between social dimensions of living in metropolitan cities and the incivility arguments of urban youth was explored. However, further analysis about the impact of different urban settings and the influence of socio-demographic characteristics of the urban youth on their perception and experience of incivility are needed. Within the scope of this study, some differences in the experience of certain incivil conducts along socio-economic status of the urban youth and the characteristics of the inhabited neighborhood were observed. Yet, the size of the sample group which was very limited and not representative for a quantitative analysis was the main limitation of this study.

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