

Emirati pre-service teachers' perceptions of Europe and Europeans and their teaching implications

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In our increasingly globalised world, it is very important to see how Europe is perceived by non-Europeans and especially from people who have for a long time been considered the 'Other'. In the study reported here, the image of Europe and Europeans is explored based on the perceptions of 478 Emirati (United Arab Emirates citizens) prospective teachers. In general, the results reveal that the respondents' perceptions of Europe and Europeans are mainly negative, although there are also some positive and neutral perceptions. Emirati perceptions of Europe and Europeans confer to one major point that Europe represents economic, scientific and technological development but Europeans lack moral values. The findings have to be understood as reflecting the socio-cultural, political and historical milieu to which the subjects of the present study have been exposed. Suggestions to teaching methods, school curricula and study programs are made.

Arabs, Europe, stereotypes, intercultural education, United Arab Emirates

INTRODUCTION

A Profile of the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was formed from the group of tribally organised Arabian Peninsula sheikhdoms along the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf and the northwestern coast of the Gulf of Oman. The United Arab Emirates is a federation formed in 1971 by seven emirates known as the Trucial States – Abu Dhabi (the largest), Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, and Umm al-Qaiwain. The country covers about 83,000 square miles. Current official estimates show that the population is approximately around 4.041 million, of which only 27 per cent are UAE citizens. The rest include significant numbers of other Arabs (Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Yemenis, Omanis) as well as Pakistanis, Indians, Iranians, Filipinos and West Europeans. The majority of UAE citizens are Sunni Muslims with a small Shi'a minority. Also, most foreigners are Muslims, although Hindus and Christians make up a portion of the UAE's foreign population. The official language is Arabic, but English and Farsi are widely used, and Hindi and Urdu are spoken by many of the Asians. The UAE experiences a rapidly expanding economy and is becoming a tourist and economic hub in the region (Gulf Research Center, 2005).

Learning to Live Together

The debate concerning the relationships between the Arab world and Europe or the West at large, has drawn the attention of many scholars due to social, cultural, political and economic facts that either unite or divide these two worlds. Dangerous misunderstanding and stereotypical perceptions have been ascribed to the Arab world and Arabs, especially after 9/11. Therefore, one of the most fundamental challenges today is how to exchange views in order to build a positive

relationship between the West and the Arab world based on mutual respect, recognition and understanding.

It is argued that among the most important competencies needed in our times is learning to live together. It constitutes one of the four pillars of education as defined in the Delors Report (1996) and aims at developing an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and peace (cited in Hallak and Poisson, 2000). Learning to live together is a process that requires particular skills for a culturally diverse world in which we can learn to share values, appreciate cultural differences and work together for common social purposes (Reardon, 2002). One of the major goals of the principle of learning to live together is the elimination of stereotypes. Slone et al. (2000) found that stereotypical attitudes of Israeli children toward Arab children could be altered through an educational experience aiming at reducing cross-ethnic stereotypical attributions of Jewish children toward Arab children.

The role of education in developing international understanding and the promotion of intercultural education has been advocated and adopted within the framework of international organisations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe among others. UNESCO has listed a number of guiding principles for educational policy with respect to promoting international understanding. One of these principles is understanding and respect for all peoples, their cultures, civilisations, values and ways of life, including domestic ethnic cultures and cultures of other nations. It has been also recommended that member states of UNESCO should promote, at various stages and in various types of education, the study of different cultures, their reciprocal influences and their respective ways of life, in order to encourage mutual appreciation of the differences between them (Coomans, 1999). The school curriculum can thus play an important role in promoting creative cultural dialogue and interaction, especially by injecting the intercultural approach in all school subjects (Rassekh, 2001). Concerns about the curriculum and teacher awareness of cultural differences, ethnocentric attitudes and global consciousness can be also found in the recommendations of other organisations such as the Council of Europe.

The rationale behind all these initiatives is based on the belief that students arriving in the classroom bring with them certain preconceived or distorted notions relating to other groups. Research shows that schools, family and the media are the major agents influencing children's perceptions of other countries (Harris, 1998). It becomes easily understood that the school and university have to be involved actively in preparing students and teachers for the implementation of the new curricula that will promote the principles and norms of the shared values and appreciation of diversity.

The *Council of Europe Committee of Ministers: Recommendation No. R(84) 18* of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the training of teachers in education for intercultural understanding, recommends that teachers should be trained in such a way that they (among other things):

- recognise that ethnocentric attitudes and stereotyping can damage individuals and therefore, attempt to counteract their influence;
- realise that they too should become agents of a process of cultural exchange and develop and use strategies for approaching, understanding and giving due consideration to them;
- make teachers and pupils more receptive to different cultures by, inter alia, incorporating into teacher training the use of authentic materials and artifacts in the classroom, thus enabling them to see their own culture in a new light;

- encourage the development and use of appropriate materials to support the intercultural approach in the training of teachers and in school in order to give a “truer” image of the different cultures of their pupils (cited in Batelaan and Coomans, 1999).

There is, thus, an urgent need not only for reforming the school curricula but also for introducing courses at Universities to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century with specific focus on education for learning to live together. The question then is: Are pre-service teachers in the United Arab Emirates prepared to integrate the concept of ‘learning to live together’?

The study reported here aimed to answer this question by investigating how Emirati pre-service teachers create an image of the ‘Other’ (in our case the Europeans), while at the same time confirming their own identity as a contrast to this. It is assumed that this could be predictive of the kind of education they get and their readiness to integrate themes related to the principle of ‘learning to live together’ across the curriculum.

Given the pluralistic nature of Emirati society, which includes people from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, we should expect that Emirati pre-service teachers should hold fewer stereotypic attitudes towards the ‘Other’ and in our case, towards Europeans. Relevant research in the past has focused on the perceptions of American people towards the Arabs and the Arab world. Particular attention has not been given to the image of Europe and Europeans among the Arabs of the Gulf States, and especially of those who are going to educate the youth.

Discerning the Socio-cultural Boundaries of Europeans and Arabs: An Historical Perspective

In understanding the stereotypical perceptions held by Emirati pre-service teachers towards Europeans, there is a need to discern the socio-cultural boundaries of these two worlds as they have been constructed through history.

Europe has always been more of a mental construct than a geographical or social entity, with Christianity being a key component of its identity and with its inhabitants sharing common beliefs and ways of life (Lowenthal, 2000; Stone, 2002). The concept of Europe as a geographical area was challenged by the emergence of the Persian Empire and its threat to the Hellenistic Civilisation. As Strâth (2002) points out, the Persian Empire promoted the idea of a Western civilisation against an Eastern one, where both were increasingly loaded with values and counter-values. Although, the Persian threat had not been realised, Europe and more specifically its southern part experienced its first socio-cultural influence through the eruption of the Islam, the second monotheistic challenge and its spread along the North African coast, in the 7th century A.D. This introduced a marked division between the European Christianity and the Islamic newly established world.

It is widely known that the relations and encounters between these two religions have been mostly characterised by negative mutual perceptions, which started from the Crusader wars in 1095, through the Anglo-French colonialism to the American support for Israel (cf. Jawad, 1993; Weede, 1998). From the late eighteenth century through the Second World War, the West was dominant militarily, politically, economically and culturally in the Arab world (Watson, 2002). Although, nowadays, the Arab world has gained its independence from the European powers, and despite the economic and technological relations, which have been beneficial, the political context of these relations has been critically bound up with the central political issue of the Middle East, that is the Arab-Israeli conflict (Jawad, 1993). The 9/11 attack intensified the Western perceptions of an Islamic threat, which has been always used as a means for military and political interventions. Despite some differences between American and European approaches to Middle

East issues, it is expected that the historical legacy, and more specifically, the colonial heritage, is still shaping the Emirati's images and perceptions of Europe.

Stereotypes about the 'Other'

In introducing the term 'stereotype', Lippmann (1922) defined it "as pictures in our head" and stressed the point that people are naturally predisposed to classify their perceptions and thoughts into patterns without which an orientation would not be possible. In general, psychologists view stereotyping as a natural phenomenon, in that all humans develop mental categories in order to make sense of their environment. In other words, a stereotype is any categorical generalisation for people or social groups that ignores individual or social variability and difference which ultimately affects our behaviour (McNabb, 1986). In this study, particular attention is drawn to social stereotypes, that is "the attributes that most subjects ascribe to a large percentage of the target group" (Hewstone and Giles, 1997, p.272) because they are more resistant to change and they affect inter-group relations. However, it has been argued that stereotypical ideas about the 'Other' can change only if accompanied by changes in political, economic and social conditions.

Although stereotypes are not always negative, research usually concentrates on negative stereotypes towards the out-group. Research shows that stereotypes include negative evaluations about the out-group, which we tend to see it as homogeneous and monolithic and positive ones for the in-group (Hewstone and Giles, 1997). There is a tendency to define culture in terms of our own beliefs and practices, or in other words, our worldview, and then interpret all differences as deficiencies (Saville-Troike, 1995). The 'Other' is judged according to our own cultural frame, which represents the normal or even superior. Different worldviews often lead to mutual misperceptions, hostility, or conflict (Bennett, 1995). As Allport argues people prefer the familiar because of "the principles of ease, least effort, congeniality and pride in one's own culture" and not because of prejudice (cited in Bennett, 1995, pp.21-22). Related to stereotypes are prejudices, which are most often negative attitudes towards members of a group, and could result in frequent hostile and discriminatory behaviour toward the 'Other' (Brislin, 1993). Children acquire stereotypes and prejudices from the world around them. The appearance of prejudice among children raises the issue of how it is acquired and transmitted. Prejudices are usually explained by direct parental or social agency socialisation or by broader cognitive and affective developmental processes (Slone et al., 2000). The way individuals perceive each other is usually determined by their personal backgrounds, a mix of cultural, socio-political, ideological and religious factors. Ongoing exposure to other cultures can help to increase tolerance and intercultural understanding as students learn to acknowledge and appreciate both differences and similarities. It is thus expected that Emirati's experiences to other cultures might have influenced positively their perceptions of the 'Other', which in our case is the Europeans. However, as indicated above, the historical legacy, and more specifically, the colonial heritage and the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict, created and maintained by the Western powers, is expected to affect negatively Emirati's images and perceptions of Europe and Europeans.

METHOD

The study was conducted in the three colleges of education in the United Arab Emirates: Ajman University (private institution), the United Arab Emirates University, and Zayed University (Dubai campus), both public institutions. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire that was administered by the colleges themselves during the 2002-2003 academic year. In the College of Education at Zayed University, the questionnaire was delivered to all students of the Dubai campus due to the small number, while in the other two Colleges it was delivered to classes. In total, 478 pre-service teachers (189 from Ajman University, 181 from United Arab University, and 108 from Zayed University) responded to the questionnaire. All

subjects were females, with an average age of 21 years old. The medium of instruction at Zayed University is English, while in the other two institutions it is both English and Arabic. All subjects are UAE nationals. Besides background questions (institution, gender, age, nationality), the questionnaire consisted of an open-ended question asking the subjects to write down what comes to their minds when they hear the word Europe and Europeans¹.

The research method applied here used a set of categorisation procedures for making valid and replicable inferences from the written answers of the subjects to their context. The method combined qualitative (defining the categories) and quantitative (determining numbers within categories) aspects. The main research procedures were based on the following steps or levels that have been guided by methodological assumptions found in the works of Brown and Dowling (1998); Scheurich (1997) and Brannen (1992): Coding, Categorising, Classifying, Checking, Comparing, Inferring.

Coding

Deciding what to set as a unit of analysis is fundamentally an interpretive judgment and choice (Kirk and Miller, 1986). This step involved simply determining the basic unit of analysis, that is, any word or phrase denoting the subjects' perceptions of Europe and Europeans, and counting the frequency each described trait appears. Scoring the facts, although not essential in qualitative research, was considered necessary in the process of weight attributed to the categories formulated in the next step or level. The frequency was coded into three groups: (a) less frequently (<50%), b) frequently (50-70%) and (c) very frequently (>70%).

Categorising

"The process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain is called categorising" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.65). This step involved creating meaningful categories to which the unit of analysis can be assigned. Three categories were formed, namely: (a) positive statements, (b) negative statements, and (c) neutral statements, which are exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

Classifying

This step involved verifying that the units of analysis (words and phrases) can be easily and unambiguously assigned to the three categories, according to the frequency of appearance.

Checking

In order to check the consistency of classification (Inter-rater reliability), a second rater was asked to classify the units into the same categories. The check assumes consistency in the classification between independent 'raters' and the main researcher. Very high consistency (closely to 90%) has been found and when differences emerged consensus was reached through discussion (inter-subjectivity).

Comparing

This step involved comparing the three categories in terms of frequency of ascribed concepts defining 'Europe' and 'Europeans' in each category. The creation of a transcription or matrix of

¹ The way the question has been phrased poses some dangers for stereotyping because it seems that the variety and diversity that characterize the notion of Europe and Europeans is ignored. However, talking about Europe and Europeans in general, it does not mean that differences between Northern and Southern Europe as well as between Western and Eastern European countries are ignored. As mentioned above, Europe is considered as a mental concept, where its inhabitants share some common beliefs and a way of life characterized by diversity and nuances.

the main categories and the placement of phrases and words that define them according to the frequency they appear facilitated greatly this procedure.

Inferring

This step involved drawing contextual assumptions about the content of the ascribed concepts, largely discussed in the introductory section.

FINDINGS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

The analysis of the findings reveals a high degree of animosity towards Europeans and Europe. Negative statements as compared to positive and neutral statements heavily load the respondents' perceptions of Europe and Europeans. More specifically, Emirati pre-service teachers' negative perceptions of Europe are intertwined and very frequently rate with the mostly cited statements referring to crimes and dirty habits as well as a tendency to control and dominate other countries. To their minds, Europe stands as the imperialist militaristic enemy, which poses a threat to the Arab or Islamic culture and existence. They also refer to the hatred of Christians towards Muslims and Europeans' lack of moral principles. Words and phrases such as 'Lack of ethics' and 'Lack of family ties' were frequently mentioned in their responses. It is also worth pointing out that the word 'Prejudiced' was also stated in their negative perceptions of Europeans.

Some examples of phrases denoting animosity include the following:

"[Europeans] wish all bad things to Arab and Muslims",

"Should be boycotted",

"We can live without them",

"Good countries but gangsters",

"They only care for money and scientific development and how to destroy Muslims",

"Europeans commit so many sins and ethics are not in their minds. Living life of animals",

"I hate Europeans like any other Muslim does because they enjoy torturing Muslims and we will win regardless of how much they destroy us",

"Strange prejudiced ideas about Arabs",

"Europe is developed but unethical",

"Well developed but no ethics. May God help all Muslims living in Europe",

"Good economy but no ethics",

"Europe claims to be developed but they only try to control others either by conquering countries and destroying their cultures or by demolishing ethics"

"Conquering and lack of ethics although developed thinking".

A number of powerful positive notions, although fewer compared with negative ones, are associated with Europe. These typically include Europe as a place, which is industrially and technologically developed, although polluted, where there is freedom of speech and democracy, two notions that are mentioned very frequently. Europe had already by the late eighteenth century began to symbolise the ideals of freedom and progress against the autocratic rules and social backwardness (Lowenthal, 2000). Less frequently, they mentioned 'heritage', 'history', 'cultural development' and 'human rights'. From a positive perspective, Europeans were also associated with phrases and words such as 'sense of time', 'punctuality', 'time management' and 'work ethics'.

On the neutral side, that were least frequently stated, the subjects associated 'Europe' with holidays because of the climate and the weather as expressed in phrases such as: 'good weather', 'green lands', 'beautiful scenery', which is in contrast to the hot gulf climate and desert land. It is worth pointing out that some subjects perceived Europe as a country or a place where the English language is spoken.

In an attempt to explain why Emirati pre-service teachers felt like that and expressed a high antipathy towards Europe and Europeans, we should look back to history and politics. The history of the Crusader wars between Christendom and the Dar Al-Islam was one reason, followed by the fact that a glorious past (the Islamic civilisation was a direct source of learning for the West) had been transformed to a miserable present (recent Western domination of the Arab world) creating feelings of grievance and injustice (Jawad, 1993). It is obvious from subjects' answers that a negative impact of the colonial and post-colonial period has been left in the Arab societies, and there would seem to be a very vivid image of the Western powers interfering in the internal affairs of the region in order to control their resources. This could also be seen in frequently mentioned words such as 'to control others', 'to conquer', 'using others'. The Israeli-Arab conflict is another hot issue that although not mentioned frequently, contains strong emotional attributes.

Examples of comments dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict included such statements as:

"Prejudiced people always taking side of Jews and trying to control other countries".

"Israel, wishes all bad things to Arabs and Muslims".

"Europeans don't know Arabs except what Jews want them to know".

"Europeans are disliked in the Arab world because of the stand with the Jews and Sharon".

According to results of the study it seems that Emirati pre-service teachers are not convinced that European policy on the Palestinian issue is fair, and among the Arab world in general, the Arab-Israeli conflict creates bitter feelings, a finding substantiated by other studies (Jawad, 1993; Watson, 2002).

The economic and technological superiority attributed to Europe and its inhabitants was associated with religion (Christianity) and as a threat to Arab or Muslim traditions and morality. As one subject put it: "Developed scientifically but not religiously". Clearly, the ideological (Islam-religion) issue has been functioning as an important determinant of subjects' perceptions of "Europe" and "Europeans". As has been pointed out in other studies, Arabs believe that Western values are penetrating the Muslim world leading to cultural alienation and widespread corruption in their societies (Jawad, 1993).

For the great part of the respondents, being European somehow implies being immoral. The results of this study re-affirm the observation that Arab countries tend to perceive European or Western countries as materialistic, secularist, with a laxity in sexual behaviours and the dissolution of family (Watson, 2002). In this vein, it is perceived that Western domination has brought alien values and immorality in the Arab societies. As Jawad (1993, p.220) points out, "the prevailing images of the West as a consumer, permissive and decadent society make the West both an alluring and a despicable place from the Middle Eastern point of view".

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate Emirati pre-service teachers' perceptions of Europe and Europeans, which constitute the 'Other'. The results indicate that prospective Emirati teachers who participated in the study hold more negative stereotypical perceptions of Europe and Europeans than positive and neutral ones. In general, it seems that there is a reaction against anything that represents Europe and Europeans and this seemed to be explained by the colonial

and post-colonial Western intervention in the Arab world, either military or cultural. It is also clear that the ideological aspect (Islam) highly affects respondents' perceptions of Europe and Europeans along with the secularist Western attributes that were perceived by the respondents as a threat to the Arab-Islamic value system. These results reconfirm the popular Western assumption that Islam and Arabs' relations to the West, is that of conflict (Taji-Farouki, 2000). The imposition of Western secularist approaches has been severely criticised by contemporary Islamic scholars as doing pervasive damage to the moral and ethical values of Arab or Islamic culture and heritage (Ali, 2001; Cook, 1999). This is a contradiction, however, since the Arab world has introduced Western modes of administration, law, and social institutions and, as well, its education is heavily influenced and is being influenced by the West. In the United Arab Emirates, which is considered a country sympathetic to Europe and the West at large, for example, two of the most prominent universities are called American, and most of the other tertiary institutions are based on Western staff and adopt Western patterns of development. While respondents' education is planned and delivered by a Western dominated faculty, their images and perceptions of Europeans seem to reflect the Islamic reformers in the nineteenth century who "struggled against the encroaching Westernisation of their societies, and they rooted their responses more deeply in Islam" (Watson, 2002, p.7).

As has been pointed by Cook (1999), modernity and development, stand for Western modes of doing things and modern Islamic nations still struggle to meet the scientific and technological changes demanded by the modern period. This is evident in many of the subjects' statements such as the following: "Well developed in computers and related fields. I wish our country could be the same". One of the main dilemmas United Arab Emirates faces is how to reconcile the requirements of modernisation with their traditional values (Bahgat, 1999). On the one hand, they see Europe as a model that they would like for their societies, and on the other hand, they perceive it as a way of hegemonic domination over the Arab and Muslim world. The subjects admire Europeans because of their technological and scientific development, but at the same time, they criticise them with respect to values and moral development. It is worth pointing out, that Islam as a religion does not reject science and technology per se, but rather the pervading Western philosophy of secular science.

It is, thus, crucial to introduce curricula that are fostering respect for, and preservation of, cultural traditions and indigenous values and ways of life, while they are concerned for finding a balance between traditional or national and modern or global elements in the curriculum (Hallak and Poisson, 2000; Skaflestad, 2000). Countries in the Gulf region are quite conscious of the value of their cultural heritage and Islamic studies have a particular place in the school curriculum. According to Bennett (1995), an important goal of the principle of learning to live together, is the development of multiple historical perspectives. Such perspectives are based upon knowledge and understanding of the worldviews, heritage, and contributions of diverse nations and ethnic groups, including one's own. Subject matter from the fields of history, literature, social studies and the arts can be used to provide understanding about people's contemporary culture, worldview and differing interpretations of human events. This knowledge builds an awareness of historical and contemporary developments among the world's diverse nations and ethnic groups. People can achieve a psychological balance between cultural pride and identity on the one hand and appreciation of cultures different from their own on the other.

Learning to live together with other cultures and learning to appreciate the cultural diversity that exists both in their country and outside seems to be essential (Byron, 2001). To this end, there is a need to re-examine textbooks for possible bias and stereotypical statements and introduce appropriate teaching methods that promote intercultural understanding, tolerance and empathy. Fostering the sense of shared values and a common destiny is the basis for international co-operation and solidarity (Rassekh, 2001). Education for international understanding is

interdisciplinary and must be diffused through all subjects, especially at the primary school level. It seems also, that the respondents lack an in-depth knowledge of Europe and tend to have superficial and stereotypical notions about this continent and its people. One of the misconceptions found among the respondents is that they think that all Europeans are Christians, whereas it has been estimated that 23.6 million Muslims are living in the European Continent (cited in Karic, 2002). In other words, they compare a geographic or political area (Europe) to a religion.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have certain implications for teaching methods, school curricula and teacher professional development, in order to combat stereotyping. The very frequently listed negative images of Europe and Europeans go in parallel with the absence of intercultural understanding concepts in the school curricula and the colleges of education². It is worth pointing out, that the United Arab Emirates have set up a project (UNESCO, 1994, p. 12) that aims at revising, updating and developing school curricula across all school levels and in the curriculum areas of social studies, Arabic and English language, religious education, philosophy and civics. In that project, both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches are to be adopted for introducing the topic of international education across the curriculum. The new curriculum to be implemented defines two major ways: first, by developing students' capacity to perceive and understand their involvement in a global society and their responsibility towards it; and, second, by developing students' capacity to understand and make judgments and decisions about world issues. However, despite continuous reviewing and updating, the present-day school curricula in the United Arab Emirates have not been developed with regard to intercultural understanding. As stated, in the recent reform initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Education (MoEY, 2000, p.45), "Cross cultures both locally and worldwide require the education system to produce generations receptive to other cultures, able to interact positively and dialogue equally with others". Therefore, it is important for individuals to recognise that there are different worldviews and combating racism, prejudice and discrimination means lessening negative attitudes and behaviour, which are based on bias and misconceptions about the 'Other'.

In the context of globalisation and increased interdependence among countries and cultures nowadays, this paper argues that education has a key role to play in combating stereotypes, overcoming prejudices, and dispelling myths about the 'Other'. More specifically, there is an urgent need for the United Arab Emirates education to change these negative images and perceptions, both by revising the school curricula and textbooks in order to reflect values of tolerance and understanding of various peoples and cultures that make up their country and the world at large, and by integrating intercultural education into the study programs of colleges of education. A review of the study programs at the three Universities that respondents come from revealed a lack of intercultural education courses that could tackle the issue of international understanding. It is, thus, necessary to introduce courses for intercultural understanding in teachers' education, which will increase the awareness of existing stereotypes and prejudices about the 'Other'. Such curricular interventions are particularly timely in the light of the current socio-political situation between the Arab world and Europe or the West at large.

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² However, in a future study it would be interesting to examine students' sources (e.g. school, family, peers, television, newspapers) of their knowledge and attitudes towards the 'Other'.

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