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Studying Abroad from the Perspectives of Turkish Graduate Students in the USA*

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ABSTRACT

Studying abroad is a unique experience including social and cultural practices and affects students' education, life styles, habits and identities. For a better insight about this unique experience, the experiences of students studying abroad need to be analyzed deeply. In this context, this study aims to understand the experiences of eight Turkish graduate students studying in the U.S. The study was designed as a qualitative study and phenomenology was used as a research method. The data of the study was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face by the researcher. All participants finished their undergraduate education in Turkey, and pursue their education in the U.S. with different scholarship and funds. The interviews were recorded with participant consent and the data was analyzed with content analysis technique. The findings reveal educational, social and cultural dimensions of studying abroad experience.

Keywords:
Studying abroad, graduate students, university, student experiences

1. Introduction

Studying abroad has a long history dating back to Aristoteles, and it has been popular for enrichment of culture, pedagogy, and intellectuals. Every nation and culture had their own progress and richness, and intellectuals have always urged to benefit from them. Thus, it is possible to see incidents of studying abroad almost in every country and era; however, studying abroad has had its milestone in the 19th century with high numbers of foreign students and investments in foreign education. Today, there are more than 3 million students studying abroad.

Turkey has a similar history for studying abroad. Since the 19th century, Turkey has been sending many students abroad and it is true that most of these students have had an important place in the government, universities or intellectual field. According to OECD data, Turkey sent 52048 students to study abroad in 2005. Also in 2019, the program of Selecting Graduate Students to Study Abroad (Yurt Dışına Lisansüstü Öğrenim Görmek Üzere Gönderilecek Öğrencileri Seçme ve Yerleştirme – YLSY) was announced to send 1195 students to study abroad. It is a program that provides scholarship and job positions in Turkish universities after finishing PhD degrees abroad. In total, the number of students studying abroad for language courses, internship, undergraduate and graduate degrees is summed up as more than 100,000. Moreover, Turkey invests more than 2 billion dollars on studying abroad every year. These numbers of students abroad and investment margins outline the significance of studying abroad.

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Studying abroad has effects on international economy. In the international market, graduates of abroad universities seem to have better chances of getting a job (Waibel, Petzold & Rüger, 2018; Di Pietro, 2012; Parey & Waldinger, 2010). Studying abroad improves students' global literacy skills (Farrell, 2007) and intercultural awareness (Gao & Kennedy, 2019; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004), and administrations encourage students to take various classes, improve their foreign language skills (Farrell, 2007). Moreover, studying abroad is reported to have positive effects on human capital, which is effective in taking a position in labor market (Schmidt & Pardo, 2017). Especially for under-developed or developing countries, studying abroad seems to constitute a good chance for young to get high prestige jobs (Coffman, 2000).

Alongside with labor market advantages, studying abroad has positive effects on students' personal development. Various studies have shown that students' self-efficacy (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012), language skills (Ife & Meara, 2000), vocational identity (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016), creative abilities (Fu, 2017) and sense of own capacities (Wilson, 2018). Also, universities are willing to establish partnerships for internationalization and cultivation of global citizenship (Take & Shoraku, 2018).

Students who study abroad also report academic advantages of studying abroad (Costello, 2019; Hadis, 2005). It is hypothesized that students are able to take a small break while they are still in the system, increasing their academic motivations (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Also, students experience experiential education when they study and benefit its positive effects (Dewald, Jimenez & Self, 2016). They experience different educational activities and routines, and they increase their educational awareness.

Although studying abroad has many advantages, students from underprivileged families are reported to attend less into studying abroad program (Lörz, Netz & Quast, 2016). It seems that students from low socio-ecomomic groups benefit less from these international programs (Di Pietro, 2019) as these programs require personal investments as well. Even though governments or universities have their funds for international programs, individuals need to save an amount for this experience.

With its advantages and disadvantages, studying abroad is a significant experience for students whose impact could last for more than 50 years (Dwyer, 2004). Researchers indicate studying abroad is a significant experience for students (Costello, 2015) and it is a unique experience for individuals not resulting in the same outcomes for every one (Mendelson, 2004). Thus, studies differ from each other according to the contexts. The features of host country, host school, inhabitant country and schools affect the experiences of studying abroad. Students generally start studying abroad with high academic or personal growth hopes (Mendelson, 2004); however, the situations they confront in the host institution and their previous experiences of schooling affect how they would organize this unique experience.

Students experience academic, personal, cultural, emotional and sociological differences and difficulties while studying abroad. Many universities embody desks or offices for international students as well as certain programs to guide students in terms of academic gains to be used in their career (Pilonieta, Madina & Hathaway, 2017). Also, there are suggestions for students to handle emotional difficulties (Cheng, Friesen & Adekola, 2019). However, the individuality of student experiences and difficulties make it difficult to come up with certain supplementary programs. For instance, American students state cultural training programs are not always sufficient in guiding them (Erffmeyer & Al-Khatip, 2015), and studies show attempts to organize studying abroad experiences and influences are often ineffective (Öhrstedt & Scheja, 2017). Thus, the experiences of students studying abroad should be studied in depth and more often to organize these programs in support of students and institutions.

In Turkish language, "gurbet [abroad]" is connotated with loneliness and sorrow. While reading the book of Ayşe Göktürk Tunceroğlu (2008), the experiences of students abroad seem much more important to me. Among many host countries, the most common country in studies of studying abroad seems to be the U.S. Many students visit the U.S. universities, language courses and other educational institutions every year. For instance, Japanese female students prefer American universities to improve their human capital for the competition of global economy (Ono & Piper, 2004). Also, many students in Turkey prefer American universities. Their experiences, struggles and academic dispositions are not visible to Turkish partners and institutions, and they need to be studied thoroughly. In this sense, this study aims to understand the experiences of Turkish graduate students who study in the U.S. This way, it is hypothesized that supportive models and programs could be developed and more benefit could be generated from these experiences.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study aims to focus on the experiences of Turkish graduate students who study abroad, thus the individuality and uniqueness of the data is of capital importance. For this reason, the study was designed in the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative studies allow researchers to analyze the experiences, phenomenon, and events deeper. The main concern of this study is the experiences of students studying abroad, thus phenomenological method was adopted. The foundational question of phenomenology asks the meaning of the lived experience of a person or group of people. This way, the meaning, or phenomenology, of life experiences could be understood deeply (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon of this study is determined as studying abroad, and graduate students' experiences are aimed to be understood deeply.

2.2. Participants

Qualitative studies require purposive sampling to provide cases with rich information (Patton, 2002). Thus, the participants of this study were selected with purposive sampling principles.When the researcher was in Lubbock, Texas for his graduate studies, he met many students who are experiencing studying abroad. Their life styles, concerns for career and education, cultures and values took his attention and became the motive of this study. The participants consist of five (5) male and three (3) female Turkish graduate students who went to Lubbock for educational purposes. The majors of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Participant Code	Gender	Major	Level
S1M	Male	Chemistry	Graduate
S2M	Male	Geography	Graduate
S3M	Male	Education	Graduate
S4M	Male	Sociology	Graduate
S5M	Male	Business	Graduate
S6F	Female	Education	PhD
S7F	Female	Architecture	Graduate
S8F	Female	Mathematics	Graduate

2.3. Data Collection Tools

The data of this study was collected through face-to-face interviews. Interviews enable researchers to infuse into the worlds of participants (Patton, 2002). To understand the experiences of student studying abroad from their perspectives. The semi-structured interview form was designed by the researchers, and expert opinions were received by two external researchers. Also, two pilot interviews were conducted to increase the validity of the interview form. All participants were interviewed by the researcher face-to-face and the interviews took 26-54 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data of the study was analyzed with content analysis technique, which enables researchers go deep into the data and understand hidden concepts. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and the transcriptions were sent to the participants for correction and validation. After participants approved transcriptions, the data was coded and themes were drawn. For analysis reliability, the codes and transcriptions were sent to two experts with PhD and they analyzed the data. For inconsistencies, meeting with all analysts and consistency was achieved.

3. Findings

Studying abroad is a significant process for time, energy, money, professionalism and education. To understand this process better, this study aimed to understand students' experiences without any interference. The data of the study consists of eight interviews taking 26 to 54 minutes. The participants described their experiences in terms of educational concerns, life conditions, difficulties they faced and friendships. The data was analyzed with content analysis technique, and themes drawn from the data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Findings in themes

Fre. order	Theme	Explanation	Quote
1	Language problem	Experiencing difficulties due to language problem on first arrive	*"The biggest problem I had was language. I didn't know English well, so it was very difficult for me"* (S2M).
2	Academic expectations	Academic expectations are high in the U.S. although school and undergraduate levels are much lower than Turkey	*"Master's and PhD are very demanding here. Professors expect a lot from you. But in lower levels like secondary school, the education level is lower than Turkey"*(S3M).
3	Academic atmosphere	Academicians are much into their business in the U.S.	*"Here, academicians care only your work. Your title, religion, identity… Nothing is important. They just want to do their job"* (S4M).
4	Friendships	Turkish friends are much sincere; however, one needs foreign friends for language development and cultural integration	*"You can ask anything from your Turkish friends, they are closer to you. Of course you need American friends for development, but they cannot be like Turkish people"* (S1M).
5	Turkey	Americans do not know about Turkey	*"They don't know where Turkey is on the map, they even asked me if we spoke Arabic"* (S4M).
6	Turkish people in the U.S.	Turkish people are not united in the U.S.	*"Turkish people are not in a union here. They all have their small communities, and you are not welcome if you're not one of them"* (S5M).
7	Staying long	Participants want to stay in the U.S., but not very long	*"I want to return Turkey of course, I don't want to live here for long. But now, I am studying my PhD and comfortable here"* (S6F).
8	Missing	Participants stated they missed Turkish food the most	*"I miss Turkish food very very much. I think we have better food in Turkey, this is the only thing they cannot beat us"* (S3M).

The participants described their experiences in three different dimensions: education, life case, and Turkey. In term of education, they referred their academic responsibilities and the academic atmosphere in their universities. As all of the participants were graduate students doing their Master's degree of PhD, they had educational responsibilities and they could easily observe the experience of being a student in different levels (undergraduate, primary school, high school, etc.). Also, most of the participants had the position of assistant in Texas Tech University, so they could observe the academic atmosphere aspersonnel.

The second dimension of their experiences was life case. Participants mentioned their experiences in a different homeland with a different language. They referred the difference of life conditions in the U.S., the difficulties they faced and their coping mechanisms for these difficulties. Lastly, participants talked about the impression of Turkey in the U.S., Turkish friendships in their city and their feelings about Turkey. Apparently, their home country has an effect on their experiences, and this fact was taken as the third dimension.

3.1. Findings about Education

All the eight participants were graduate students, and this role of theirs affected their experiences the most. The social sphere they attend the most is university, and education is one of their biggest responsibilities and reasons they exist in the U.S. Thus, participants referred educational issues often, stated clearly that they gained an insight into American education system. The second and third themes in Table 2 will be discussed under this dimension: *academic expectations* and *academic atmosphere.*

A shared understanding was apparent among the participants about academic expectations in the U.S. All of the participants studied primary, secondary, high schools and undergraduate levels in Turkey. Thus, they compared the American education system with Turkish education system. Apparently, they shared the idea that American education is less demanding before graduate level; however, graduate level was more demanding than it is in Turkey. For instance, one of the participants stated: *"They expect you to do more here. They give an assignment every week, you have to study all the time. In Turkey, we study only one week before the exams and it is enough. Here, you have to study every week"* (S3M). All participants agreed on high academic expectations in the U.S.

The educational process in the U.S. is perceived differently than Turkish education. Participants referred process evaluation being used, multiple assessments, high track system and personal effort in the American education system. One of the participants stated *"Here, you have to put on much more effort, and your professor needs to see it. If you don't try hard enough, you will fail. But if you put enough effort, they always support and encourage you"* (S7F).

However, participants agreed on the easiness of lower levels in the U.S. They referred lower levels of education being much less demanding and consisting of easier subjects and objectives. For instance, one participantreferred this issue as:*"Here, school is easier. They teach simpler subjects at all levels. In Turkey, we teach one subject in high school. Here, they study the same thing in undergraduate level, or may be in a higher level"*(S6F). Also, participants agreed the seriousness of Turkish education in lower levels. They perceived American education being less serious and one participant stated*"I had a chance to observe a couple of primary school classrooms. They are much less organized and focused. Someone enters into the classroom, someone leaves... There is an interruption all the time"*(S2M).

For the academic atmosphere, participants had the similar perception of a more professional atmosphere in universities. *"People here do not care who you are, or what you believe. They only look at your publications, your effort and work. They are much more professional"* (S2M). Instructors and personnel in American universities did not discriminate or favor people for their personal choices, identities or relationships. *"They tell you that they like you very much and they mean it, then they tell you they cannot hire you as you are not qualified enough"* (S6F). Also, *"I was never discriminated for being a Muslim. And I know people with tattoos etc working at university. They don't care as long as you do your job well"* (S1M).

3.2. Findings about Life Case

Living in a different country, for what reason it would be, brings different life conditions. People experience different language, culture, life styles, routines, rules and values. Similarly, participants of this study shared a common understanding about life abroad, especially in terms of language. They stated the biggest difficulty they faced as language problem, no matter how their English level was. One participant stated *"The biggest problem was language when I first came here. Although I knew English, I couldn't understand a word. I remember not understanding supermarket cashiers, even not being able to say 'water' properly. I couldn't explain myself and I was dependent on my Turkish friends for shopping and etc for a long time"* (S3M). Besides, participants who stated their English level as low before going to the U.S. described their first couple of months as very difficult for not being able to communicate in English. All participants referred their Turkish friends for help; however, they all stated they were not comfortable for not being able to take care of themselves. Here, the individuality of American life style becomes apparent. Language problem is a difficult issue for many; however, participants defined the difficulty clearly as not being able to take care of themselves. One of them stated *"I was dependent on my Turkish friends all the time. As you don't know English, you can't do anything on your own. That was the biggest difficulty"* (S5M).

Also, participants reported they had culture shock upon their arrival. They defined the culture of America being more individualistic and they referred this feature as causing uneasiness. *"Here, you are on your own. Everyone is alone. If I had a chance, I would have married before I came here. If you are married, you have somebody to*

share. But I was single and all alone" (S4M). It took time for them to get used to the life conditions and make friends, so they all stated experiencing loneliness first. Interestingly, participants did not signal this loneliness to perish, yet they got used to this culture of individuality.

For socialization, participants mentioned Turkish and foreign friends of theirs. They shared the same insight of Turkish friends being vital for their life in the U.S., because they were helpful and closer to them. They all described how their Turkish friends helped them upon their arrival for finding house, a car, shopping, etc. Yet, they did not prefer all-Turkish friends to get used to American life style. *"When you have only Turkish friends, you never learn anything. You don't learn language, You stay Turkish in America"* (S1M). Nevertheless, they never gave up on their Turkish friends and counted on them for any emergencies and closer relationships. Participants referred their American friends being understanding, nice, but distant. They all agreed that American friends were crucial in language development and cultural integration; however, American friendship culture was found distant and unsatisfactory by participants.

Another notion for life conditions, it is necessary to mention what participants missed the most about Turkey. American life conditions are different for obvious reasons, and what participants miss tells us the breaking point. All participants shared the same longing about Turkey: food. They described American food culture being much different and they miss Turkish food like kebab, lahmacun, etc: *"I miss Turkish food the most. I already love eating, and I loved it when I was in Turkey, too. Kebab, lahmacun… I miss them a lot"* (S2M).

Interestingly, participants stated they would not prefer to stay in America for lifetime. Although they shared the same ideas about the easiness and comfort of American life style, they stated they would not like to stay in the U.S. for good: *"It is really comfortable here. Everything is more systemized and I feel comfortable. But, I want to return some time. It is good that my child was born here, but I don't want him to grow up here"* (S4M). Nevertheless, none of the participants stated they would return at a specific time. Instead, they referred their return as vague such as *"some time, later, in the future"*. They preferred studying in the U.S. for better academic qualities (5 of the participants) and scholarship (3 participants), meaning they did not choose to live in the U.S. before arrival. However, they shared common ideas on better life conditions in the U.S. and equivocated about their return to Turkey.

3.3. Findings about Turkey

For participants' experiences, the perceptions of Turkey as a country were determinative. Participants mentioned Americans did not know about Turkey and they thought Turkey was an Arabic country. *"They think we speak Arabic. I tell them that I wear the same clothes in Turkey, too. They find it difficult to believe. I even show them my photos sometimes. They think all women in Turkey has to wear hijab"* (S7F). With these wrong impressions on Americans, participants take on responsibility to defend and advertise their country, and *"… Turkish government should do better to show who we are"* (S2M). Especially for historical controversies such as Armenian issue, participants believe Turkish government and intellectuals should work harder and make clear explanations. In that, they state Americans believe them when they make decent explanations; however, they find national efforts unsatisfactory. *"Most people here are educated, so they can easily explain these issues. When you explain topics like Armenian issue well, they believe in you. But Armenians have documentaries, movies, and advertisements. We have nothing. So, they don't know"* (S3M).

For Turkish people in the U.S., participants share negative ideas. They state their expectations of a united Turkish community, but Turkish people are much disconnected. They are content with the culture of help they received upon their arrival, yet they clearly specified Turkish people being gossipers, discriminative and self-seeking. They complained about Turkish people not being able to unite although other nations united very easily in their city. Turkish people discriminated each other for their religions communities, politic ideas, etc. One participant stated *"Even Indians are united here, but Turkish people discriminate each other. When they see you first, they want to know whom or where you belong to, your politic ideas or your religious concerns. However, we need to be union here. We have only each other"* (S6F). Apparently, Turkish people in the city sustain their hometown cultures there, and participants clearly specified their discontent of this apartness.

4. Discussion

The experiences of Turkish graduate students studying abroad are affected by three different factors: the features of primary social institutions they become a part of, the social features of people (both local and

foreign) in the new homeland, and local people's perceptions about their home country. These factors define the way students work, socialize and select their connections whether it would be their home country or the lived one.

The participants of the study shared the same idea about the education system in America: it is easy for lower levels, but it is more demanding for Master's and PhD degrees. For Master's and PhD levels, participants did not state the subjects taught being more difficult; however, they clearly defined they had to work every week and it was different from Turkish education system. Turkish educational system relies on product assessment with mass student selection examinations such as High School Entrance Exam (Lise Giriş Sınavı – LGS), and Higher Education Exam (Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı – YKS). Students go through levels according to their marks on these standard tests. As those tests are product assessment techniques, they affect school systems. Primary school teachers do not find themselves proficient in alternative and performance assessment methods (Birgin & Baki, 2009). So, the participants are not used to process assessment and they clearly find it difficult to adapt.

The next difference participants observed between Turkish and American academic feature was the atmosphere. They agreed American academic atmosphere be more professional. The dissatisfaction of Turkish academicians about Turkish academic atmosphere is apparent in various studies (Ölçer & Koçer, 2015; Buluş, 2004). The reason of this different between job contexts between Turkey and America may result from the difference of social values two different nations possess (Titrek & Cobern, 2011; Aygün, Arslan & Güney, 2008; Wasti, 1998). Also, the differences between two management systems result in differences in academic atmosphere in the two countries (Çiçek, Ulker & Tarman, 2012).

The next dimension affecting students' experiences abroad was surely the life conditions of the new homeland. The values, norms, rituals, routines and rules of the social life in the new homelandaffect the newcomers' experiences by themselves. Also, the relationship of these social features with the hometown cultural elements determines the way of these experiences. If the hometown and new homeland cultures are alike, the newcomers do not experience much difficulty and find it easier to adapt. However, when there are big differences and new regulations for daily life, newcomers may suffer through adaptation process.

The biggest difference participants of this study experienced was understandable, as one of the primary necessities of humans, the way of communication was different. The local people used a different language, and the participants agreed on stressful adaptation process on first arrival. As English language education is found problematic by many studies, it is understandable that students had a low English level before they went to the U.S (Kizildag, 2009). However interestingly, the participants who told to have a good level of English suffered the most because of English, too. They mentioned dialect difference and difficulty in understanding and expressing themselves. This may have resulted from less weighted skills in language education: listening and speaking (Alptekin & Tatar, 2011; Demir, 2017). Yet, language is culturally determined and structured and the way natives and second language learners use English in different ways (Aydin, 2013). Thus, newcomers need intercultural communication skills whichneed to be practiced exclusively before studying abroad experiences (Goldoni, 2015) and best learned by authentic practice.

The second experience participants shared about life case was culture shock, meaning that the life in America was sociologically differently constructed than the life in Turkey. Studies reveal Turkish and American people differ in their consuming habits (Rawwas, Swaidan & Oyman, 2005), identity formations (Tompkins, Galbraith & Tompkins, 2010; Kaya, 2004), and social norms (Lecompte & Lecompte, 1973). Thus, the adaptation process is understandable for students studying abroad (Bektaş, Demir & Bowden, 2009). However theoretically speaking, the experience Turkish students had in the U.S. been not a culture shock but an adaptation process (Ortaçtepe, 2013).

Thirdly, the life case of students studying abroad was deeply affected by their friend choices. They differentiated friendship reasons as beneficial and affective. For adaptation, language development, cultural integration and personal development benefits, they preferred American friends. This idea of participants is in parallel with other studies (Duru & Poyrazlı, 2011; Bektaş, Demir & Bowden, 2009). However, for intimate relationships, asking for help easily and sharing they preferred culturally closer agents: Turkish friends. Similarly, research shows friendship and happiness is culturally specific and may vary for Turkish and American citizens (Demir, Özen & Doğan, 2012). All participants agreed having only-Turkish friends

would keep them isolated from American culture and prevent them reach their academic goals. However, they could not feel socially satisfied with friendships with American and searched for closer relationships, which may be caused from different perceptions of privacy and personal space for American and Turkish students (Kaya & Weber, 2003).

As Turkish students in the U.S. did not prefer culturally American social spheres for socialization, it is understandable that they did not want to stay in America for lifetime. They had the same conception of their time in America: temporary. Social structures and relationships were not satisfactory to them (Kaya, 2009), and they all dreamed about returning to Turkey. However, they could not define a specific time such as "when I finish my PhD, etc.". In addition, they all shared the same missing about Turkey: food. It is understandable that students studying abroad feel homesickness about certain elements (Carden & Feicht, 2001). However, food is not only a necessity to live in Turkey. It is socially structured as spending quality time, socializing with friends and family, and related to happiness and joy (Sağır, 2012). However in America, food is not a socially gathering item, and people do not spend much time in kitchen as Turkish people do. Besides the taste of Turkish food, it is possible that participants missed Turkish food for social reasons, too.

The last dimension determining the experiences of students studying abroad was the impression of Turkey on local people, Americans. The participants shared understanding of Turkey being mis/under-advertised in the U.S. They stated Americans do not know about Turkey, and they associate Turkey with Arabic countries. Participants hold Turkish government and students responsible for decent advertisement, and they believe it is possible to publicize a good image of Turkey.*"If we had a better education of history, I believe Turkish people could easily answer questions about Armenian issue, etc. But students here do not know well, and they cannot make good explanations. So, Americans believe in other stories"* (S4M). Local people's ideas about one's home country are effective in social relations (Kaya, 2009), and students should be supported with quality history education for possible questions.

Lastly, participants shared the same understanding about Turkish people in the U.S. They declared Turkish people pursuing Turkish fractions in America, and remarked their dissatisfaction. They all believed they needed to be united in the foreign land, but people discriminate their countrymen for religious and political reasons. As they counted on Turkish friends for social comfort, this negativity affected their feelings.

All in all, the experiences of Turkish graduate students studying abroad were shaped with educational features of American universities, social dynamics of America, and the image of Turkey and Turkish people's relationship among each other. As most of the participants were in the U.S. with Turkish scholarship, the government or educational institutions could conduct orientation programs for adaptation process and possible problems students might encounter. Also, students should be supported with national historical knowledge before they go to a foreign land. Lastly, better opportunities and academic atmosphere should be provided for students abroad to return Turkey and prevent brain drain.

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