



Acculturative Stress and Scholarship Liability: Exploring the Challenges Faced by Turkish Graduate Students at U.S. Universities*

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Article Information	ABSTRACT
<i>Received:</i> 23.01.2023	This qualitative research aimed to explore the challenges that create acculturative stress on Turkish graduate scholarship students at U.S. universities. This study used the theoretical framework of Berr's (2006) Acculturative Stress Model. As the experience of being a student in the U.S. is socially and contextually constructed through the students' shared experiences, the phenomenological research method is used in this study to obtain in-depth knowledge about the phenomenon. For the data collection, 13 participants were interviewed as a representative sample. The interviews were transcribed, and the common challenges that create acculturative stress for the students were determined. Five salient themes emerged in this study: language incompetency, loss of self-confidence, scholarship liability, loneliness, and academic advisors. Also, time restriction and students' perception of America are determined as essential subthemes. Implications for the scholarship program authorities, students, advisors, and counselors are discussed. Keywords: Turkish international graduate students, scholarship liability, loneliness, academic advisors, loss of self-confidence
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1. INTRODUCTION

Global student mobility has increased since the 1950s and reached 6.4 million in 2020 (Project Atlas, 2022). The U.S. has been the top destination for international students, hosting nearly 1.1 million students worldwide in 2019 (Open Doors, 2020). The U.S. higher education institutions accept students from more than 200 countries. Turkey is one of the first three countries to participate in the Fulbright Program (Bevis & Lucas, 2007) and has been sending students to the U.S. for more than 70 years. In fact, Turkey was the leading European country sending students to the U.S. between 1999-2016, with more than 12,000 students (The Institute of International Education (IIE), 2022), and held the tenth place of origin in U.S. higher education in 2011 (Burkholder, 2014).

The students are from different countries, cultures, and socio-economic statuses. Although they go through the same acculturation processes in the host country, their experiences of this acculturation vary due to their different backgrounds (Mukminin, 2012). Research (Wang, 2009; Mwangi et al., 2019) show that countries and cultures are essential variables that affect students' adjustment processes. Therefore, each category of students experiences unique challenges besides general difficulties. To understand the unique challenges of each category, an increased number of studies have started to consider the nationalities or cultural backgrounds of the students, such as Arab, Turkish, Chinese, and African students (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Poyrazli, 2001; Wang, 2003; Mwangi et al., 2019).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Turkish international students are a unique subcategory of international students in U.S. higher education who experiences the American academic culture with its unique qualities. At the intersection of East and West, Turkey is a secular and democratic country with the legacy of the Ottoman empire. The factors that differentiate Turkish students from the Far East, Arab, African, and European students stem from the unique characteristics of the country. Therefore, general determinations about international students may not include all problem areas of Turkish students. On the other hand, no research was found in the literature on Turkish students studying at U.S. universities between 1950 and 2000. The first known research on Turkish

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students was conducted by Poyrazli et al. (2001). After this date, few studies (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Bektaş, Demir, and Brown, 2009; Avci, 2017) have been carried out. Considering the 82% of prospective students intend to study at U.S. universities (IIE, 2015), more research in this area is needed to explore the challenges faced by Turkish international students.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The studies on Turkish international students consistently indicated that Turkish governmental scholarship students experience more challenges than non-scholarship students (Poyrazli et al., 2001; Karayigit, 2021). However, as these studies were quantitative, they did not specify the difficulties that the students experienced. To understand this phenomenon, Karayigit (2021, p. 1129) recommended a qualitative research design "to examine in more depth" the government scholarship students' overall experience. Therefore, this phenomenological study aims to discover the challenges faced by sponsored students studying at U.S. universities.

Research (Can, Poyrazli, and Pillay, 2021) shows that English language, financial aid, and admission-selection problems are the top three domain areas causing adjustment problems for international students. However, the research on Turkish graduate students in the U.S. (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Burkholder, 2014; Ilhan & Oruc, 2020; Karayigit, 2021) did not report any financial or admission problems since the government warrants all their educational expenses. Also, the students have a high cognitive capacity as they are selected as a result of rigorous and competitive examinations conducted at the national level (due to Law, 1416). In this case, the challenges that Turkish students experienced were other than cognitive, economic, or admissions. Therefore, at this stage in this research, the concept of challenges will be generally defined as difficulties that create acculturative stress that the students experience during their acculturation process. These difficulties are considered essential stressors that need to be explained within the theoretical framework of acculturative stress.

The stressors that Turkish scholarship students experience will be investigated using the phenomenological research method to get detailed and rich information based on the students' lived experiences. This study will contribute to the literature by examining Turkish graduate students' difficulties at U.S. higher education institutions. Besides the Scholarship Study Abroad Program, students, universities, advisors, counselors, and host institutions may benefit from the results of this study.

The main research question leading the study is:

What are the significant sources of challenges and acculturative stress experienced by Turkish Graduate students in terms of social/cultural and academic life? And how did these challenges and stressors affect students' psychology?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Institute of International Education (2022) defined international students in the U.S. based on "a non-immigrant, temporary visa that allows for academic study at the post-secondary level." Their purpose and visa status differentiate them from other migrant categories. They are all "international students" in the U.S., and despite being from different countries and cultures, they all shared "the experience of acculturation" (Sumer, 2009, p. 3, 28). Acculturation is challenging as it requires two different cultural groups to come into continuous "first-hand" contact with each other (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936; Berry, 1997; Haviland, 2011, p. 371).

Berry's model (2006) of acculturative stress and adaptation provides a theoretical framework for this qualitative study. It provides an instrument to understand the acculturative stress of Turkish international graduate students at American higher education institutions. In this model, Berry (1997) differentiates between group acculturation and psychological acculturation. Group acculturation refers to the change that occurs due to contact with cultural groups. However, psychological acculturation refers to the change that is experienced at individual level. Therefore, the interaction between cultures is the source of the stressful experience, which Berry conceptualizes as acculturative stress (2006). In other words, the source of the problem is intercultural, residing in the acculturation process (therefore acculturative), and linked to psychological stress (therefore stress).

2.1. Group-Level Acculturation

At a group-level analysis, the society of origin (Turkey) and the society of settlement (U.S.) have unique cultural characteristics that affect students' acculturation process.

When Turkish international students go to the U.S., they need to adjust to American individualistic culture, which emphasizes individual autonomy and "stresses the importance of individual independence, achievement, self-efficacy, self-reliance, self-actualization, privacy, and freedom of choice" (Kagitcibasi, 2005, p. 405). In an individualistic culture, political, judicial, and educational systems prioritize individual rights. However, collectivist culture prioritizes group identity over individual identity. Hofstede (2001, p. 225) defines collectivism as "stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty."

However, there is not one type of collectivism (interdependence). Güngör et al. (2014) found that Japanese collectivism emphasizes conformity, but Turkish collectivism stresses relatedness. Japanese described their agencies more in conformity, whereas Turkish people described their agencies more in relatedness.

2.2. Individual-Level Acculturation

The second part of Berry's acculturative stress model considers individual-level variables. The model focuses on the moderating factors existing before and during acculturation: age, gender, length of stay, educational level, cultural distance, language, and social support are some essential acculturating variables. Many studies (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Alshafi & Shin, 2017; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Berry, 2006; Wang, 2009, p. 35; Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahama, 2008) found that demographic variables such as age, gender, and marital status have a partial effect on the acculturation of the students. However, language, family, social support, and cultural distance consistently affect the students' acculturation.

2.3. Process of Acculturative Stress

According to Berry's model (2006), acculturation is the source of difficulties (as stressors). In this sense, "acculturative stress is a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation" (Berry, 2006, p. 47). When international students are equipped (in terms of language, education, economy, etc.) for this acculturation, they will adjust with minimum difficulty and experience slight stress. However, if the students experience challenges beyond their competency yet controllable, they face acculturative stress. Students who cannot deal with the stress encountered successfully may experience anxiety and depression. The model ultimately predicts a successful adaptation which "refers to the relatively stable changes that take place in an individual or group in response to environmental demands" (Berry, 2006, p. 48).

In the Present Study, Turkish international graduate students, as a unique subcategory of international students in the U.S., experience unique challenges. To understand these challenges, Berry's acculturative stress model (2006, p. 46) provides an instrument to understand the challenges they experience. This qualitative study addresses the difficulties experienced by Turkish graduate scholarship students using the phenomenological method to get in-depth information.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges that create acculturative stress that the students experience during their acculturation process. Social construction theory provides a foundational and methodological base for this study as the experience of being a student in the U.S. is socially and contextually constructed through the students' shared experiences (Dugan, 2017). To obtain in-depth information from participants, the qualitative-phenomenological method will be used in this study. In this method, a researcher follows systematic procedures for collecting data, identifying themes, connecting these themes, and explaining the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1. Participants

In qualitative research, a sample's determination depends on the researcher's knowledge, experience, and judgment. The judgment (purposive) sampling approach gives confidence and freedom to a researcher, but it carries the potential for inaccuracy in sample selections (Mills & Gay, 2019). Setting clear criteria in selecting participants is essential to avoid such biases in sampling. Mills and Gay (2019) emphasize three critical characteristics in determining informants: the ability "to be reflective and thoughtful, to communicate effectively with the researcher, to be comfortable with the researcher's presence" (p. 159) during the interview. The sample of this study comprised 13 Turkish graduate scholarship students to develop an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. They were selected from different universities in the U.S. according to gender, academic level, departments, and willingness to contribute to the research topic. The experience of the students is central to this study. Table 1 shows some characteristics of the participants. The name of the participants were labeled as P (participant) to protect the identities of the informants.

Table 1.

Participants' Code, Gender, Department, and Education Level

Participants Codes	Gender	Department (Field)	Status (Level)
P01	Female	Engineering	Master
P02	Male	Engineering	Master
P03	Male	Engineering	Ph.D.
P04	Male	Agriculture	Master
P05	Female	Social Sciences	Ph.D.
P06	Male	Engineering	Ph.D.
P07	Male	Agriculture	Master
P08	Female	Agriculture	Master
P09	Female	Social Sciences	Ph.D.
P10	Male	Social Sciences	Ph.D.
P11	Male	Engineering	Master
P12	Male	Social Sciences	Ph.D.
P13	Female	Engineering	Master

Studies (Poyrazli et al., 2001; Berry, 2006, p. 50-51; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahama, 2008) show a positive correlation between length of stay, GPA, and socialization of the students. In this study, the students were determined carefully depending on their semesters, i.e., length of stay. The participants, at least in their third semester, are invited. A student who is already experiencing difficulties in their academic life might bring only things necessary to the research and might not evaluate the challenges objectively. Contrary, the students who are at least in their third semester have already adapted to the system and experienced almost all the challenges that the students might encounter. So, these students might have an objective approach to the phenomenon and a holistic perspective about "why" the challenges experienced.

After determining the sample, the research questions were sent to the students. The students who agreed to be interviewed were invited depending on their availability. And then, they were interviewed via zoom meeting. After taking the permission and consent of the participants, the session was recorded and then transcribed. The participants were interviewed in Turkish, allowing them to express their feelings and thoughts without difficulty.

Before starting the research, the IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval was taken from Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University on July 6, 2022. Following the rules of IRB, the variable related to the identity of the participants is coded to protect the participants.

3.2. Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability are essential in scientific studies and have been primarily associated with quantitative research. However, some procedures must also be followed to ensure the validity of qualitative research. "Qualitative researchers can establish the trustworthiness of their research by addressing the credibility, transferability, and dependability of their studies and findings" (Mills & Gay, 2019, p. 558). Observation, document review, peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking were utilized to address the credibility or accuracy of the information. One student and one peer reviewer with international experience reviewed the findings and interpretation. The critiques are taken into consideration in the study.

3.3. Data Analysis

In the phenomenological method, the participants' experience is essential (Cresswell, 2014). In fact, lived experience is the essence of the phenomenological approach. In this study, every participant was interviewed, and this experience was recorded and transcribed. Every participant's experience is unique. The researcher read the transcribed texts many times to underline and code the common experiences of the participants. Every experience that created challenges for the students was determined. The common difficulties were classified, and from these classifications, the themes emerged. The frame of the research phenomenon appeared and was described by combining the themes. Finally, quotes or context-relevant statements were included in the study description to make the research setting understandable and identify the findings with the context setting (Mills & Gay, 2019).

3.4. Researcher Bias

In qualitative research, the researcher's culture, background, and experiences hold the potential to shape the interpretation of the research findings (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Therefore, the researcher believes it is the readers' right to be informed about the researcher's biases. For Patton, experience and interpretation are intertwined. "Interpretation is essential to an understanding of experience, and the experience includes the interpretation" (2015, p. 192). However, the only way for the researcher to know what people experienced is to experience the phenomenon "as directly as possible," which leads to "the participant observation and in-depth interviewing" (p. 192). This research topic stemmed from the researcher's experience as the researcher used to work as a representative of the Study Abroad Scholarship Program. He was primarily responsible for the

students studying in U.S. universities. In this sense, the challenges experienced by Turkish graduate students were observed from an outside (etic) perspective by the researcher. As the researcher had the experience of being a student at a university in the U.S., the phenomenon was also experienced from an inside (emic) perspective. The experience of the researcher might affect the research process and evaluation. The researcher used peer reviewers to avoid biases affecting the interpretation of the data. Also, the reliability and validity procedures were strictly followed to minimize this effect. On the other hand, this experience gives the researcher the competence to gain insight into the topic.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This phenomenological study explores the difficulties faced by Turkish graduate scholarship students studying at U.S. universities. The acculturation process of the students experienced is described based on Berry's Model of Acculturation Stress (2006). The findings show that language incompetency, loss of self-confidence, scholarship liability, loneliness, and academic advisors are the main themes that emerged in this study. Table 2 shows the themes and subthemes of the research findings.

Table 2.

The Challenges of Turkish Graduate Students: Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Language incompetency	1) Exam-oriented study
	2) Time restriction in language study abroad
	3) Difficulty in understanding accents
Loss of Self-Confidence	1) Different Pedagogies
	2) Competing with American Students
	3) Language Barrier
Scholarship Liability	Time Restriction
Loneliness	Students' Perception of America
Academic Advisory	

4.1. Language Incompetency

The literature consistently shows (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Wilton, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahama, 2007; Burkholder, 2013; Ilhan & Oruç, 2020; Can, Poyrazli, and Yegan, 2021) that language is one of the essential barriers that international students face, especially in the first months of their arrival in the U.S. Chen (1999) defined the second language as anxiety and a critical variable that interrelates with many stressors in education and socio-cultural domains.

Research on Turkish international students in the U.S. (Burkholder, 2014; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Ilhan & Oruc, 2020) found that the students experience the most difficulty in English. The findings of this study support the previous studies that the most critical challenge for Turkish students is incompetency in the English language. However, there are some reasons for this to be explained.

First, the scholarship program allows students to take 12 months of English courses in Turkish universities. During this period, the students are expected to get a 70 TOEFL score to go to the U.S. Therefore, the students primarily focus on the strategies to get a high score from TOEFL/IELTS. Getting this language score is a barrier, and going abroad becomes the primary motivation for students. With this motivation, the basic expectation of the students from the language education centers in Turkish universities is shaped on the basis of the learning exam techniques. Language centers develop curricula and teaching techniques in line with these expectations.

Students want to get a certain score (70 TOEFL) immediately and go to the United States. Regarding the students' motivation, Turkish teachers teach students strategies to get high exam scores. This strategy of learning English helps take high exam scores; however, it leads the students to go to America without developing their language competencies (P12). (The idea in this quote was also emphasized by participants P8, P6, and P2).

Even though learning English through exam-oriented methods is not a maximum learning strategy, it is required for the students to get a high score for their acceptance to their departments. However, this strategy limits students learning in terms of listening/speaking, daily conversation, familiarity with different accents, American culture, and lifestyle. A second issue is that exams have a limited number of topics. The exam strategy is based on the instruction of these subjects, which limits students' ability to learn English. The following quotes are evidence for these findings.

Language education in Turkey only focuses on the topics to be asked in TOEFL/IELTS. In other words, you get points with a technique, but when you go to the U.S., you try to understand what the teacher is saying and try to understand the lesson, which is very challenging (P8).

You get 100 from TOEFL/IELTS in Turkey, but you can't speak confidently at the restaurant and place your order. Speaking with self-confidence is different. You have to experience this before. Every exam has a strategy, and you somehow get your score when you apply it. I've seen friends who get the score and say "OK, I've learned the language now". But when they are exposed to real life, the situation is entirely different because this daily conversation works very differently (P11).

Also, the students pointed out they could not gain proficiency in English in Turkey as they were constantly exposed to Turkish outside the language course. As a result, the concentration of the students' energy on exam-oriented techniques and lack of social environment for exposure to English cause the students to have limited language when they go to language centers in the U.S. In this second stage of language learning, the scholarship program limits the duration to 6 months. Even though the time is limited, the students reported that it significantly contributed to their language improvement.

During the six months, we become friends with international students and establish a dialogue. We also begin to adapt to social life, for example, how to open an account in a bank, how to rent a house, how to shop at the market, and how to get acceptance by universities, we learn all these. In summary, we gain familiarity with social and educational life (P8).

The 6-month period is beneficial. I know friends who started their departments directly, as their English scores were very high. They believed that going to U.S. language centers for six months was a waste of time for their education. However, in their departments, they experienced the culture shock we experienced during our 6 months period. When this culture shock, combined with the lessons and the problem of understanding the language, they experienced great difficulties. I strongly recommend every student come to the U.S. language centers if they have no experience abroad (P8). (The idea in this quote was also emphasized by participants P11, P2).

In this process, the students also get familiar with different accents as their classmates come from other countries. Getting familiar with accents is essential in American academia. Open Doors (2022) indicates there are 136,563 international faculty members in the U.S. in 2018, predominantly (46%) Chinese and Indian. This number excludes those who have been citizens before. In addition to the accents of international academic staff, there are also regional and ethnic group accents, Texan, African-American, or Latino. The following quote refers to the student' difficulty in their departments.

I could not understand my academic advisor's accent. I was getting nervous every time I entered the room. I lost my self-confidence. I had the feeling that I didn't know English. I was afraid to enter the lecturer's room. Because he was asking me something, I was scared to answer the question; I was afraid of not understanding. The problem of communication with my advisor was the most stressful factor for me. This was due to my lack of language understanding (P4).

In these 6 months, the students try to improve their language, increase their scores, adapt to the environment, get familiar with different accents, and carry out the admissions process. The students attempt to fulfill these requirements under time pressure. Indeed, they start to adapt to the system in the last period of the term, but the process is interrupted due to the legal time limit (Foreign Language Learning, Law 1416). It was stated that it would be beneficial to extend this period in terms of adaptation. Nevertheless, this period plays a buffer zone or facilitator for the students before transferring to their departments.

Consequently, even though the students get the required scores from TOEFL/IELTS for their acceptance, they experience language deficiencies in their departments due to their language learning pedagogy. This study identified speaking, listening, and accents as Turkish international students' essential language problem domains.

At first, my understanding of what we read and my inability to understand all of what the lecturer said affected me. Talking to my supervisor, for example, he gave me an 8-item to-do list. While the advisor was speaking, I did not understand some of them. I could only understand 5 out of 8. In this case, the advisor said; we've discussed this before. Then I was doing it again. I was studying, and there was no doubt about it, but when I didn't understand what was spoken, I got stressed out (P7).

When language deficiencies and lecturers' accents are combined with unfamiliarity with U.S. education pedagogy, the students experience substantial difficulties that affect their psychology.

4.2. Loss of Self-Confidence

Loss of self-confidence is one of the seven components of acculturative stress. Self-confidence is "self-assuredness in one's judgment, ability, and power" (Liu et al., 2015, p. 525). Low levels of self-confidence predict depression and are associated with high anxiety. In their study, Liu et al. (2015) described self-confidence as the step before the depression. Poyrazli et al. (2002) found that students with higher self-confidence and academic self-efficacy experienced fewer adjustment problems.

Turkish graduate students are selected after rigorous and competitive examinations conducted at the national level due to the law (Law No, 1416). They have high self-efficacy and self-esteem as academically successful students in their home country (Bektaş, Demir, & Randall, 2009). However, the students in this study report losing their self-confidence, especially during their first two semesters. The following might be the reasons:

First, the students are not familiar with U.S. educational pedagogy. Research (Chen, 1999; Wang, 2003; Tatar, 2005; Poyrazlı & Grahama, 2007) shows that different pedagogical approaches and curricula are essential for the student's adjustment and may lead them to experience academic stress. In a teacher-centered pedagogical approach, lecturers are at the center of the learning process (Wang, 2003). The students are expected to take their notes and master them after class. Mainly there is no class participation, presentations, group discussions, etc. However, when encountering a student-centered pedagogical approach that requires class participation, presentation, and group discussions, Turkish students first try to understand the system as they are unfamiliar with this pedagogy (Poyrazlı et al., 2004; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000).

In my first week, I went to class, and the lecturer did an exam called pop quiz! He asks what I learned last week. Then you understand that I should know the previous week's lessons and be ready at all times. Additionally, during this time, I had a practical study that I had to complete. Adapting to the system and the language problem during communicating with the lecturers created incredible stress for me (P4).

Quizzes, assignments, presentations, etc., were all strange at first; I constantly asked myself: "What kind of system is this? How will we get used to this much?" I know I did 20 hours of homework for a statistic. First of all, it is necessary to accept the system difference. It is very difficult for people to adapt to the system for the first time, not only the first 6 months but the first year. While an American reads a text given on the first visit, I read it 3 or 4 times. That was a significant factor, of course (P7).

As indicated in the quote, it takes time for the students to adapt to the system. However, almost all the students appreciated the multi-grading of this system. The students indicated that all the assignments, presentations, and class participation turned into grades, making them more comfortable in passing their classes. Activities held during the semester cause students to experience less exam stress.

In the lessons, a lot of demand stresses me at first, but after a point, this gives us an advantage. Because homework takes the weight of exams, so, this time, we have a chance to collect more points with homework. This reduces our exam stress (P11).

In the first two semesters of the department, the students are used to adjust not only to the pedagogy and curricula but also to the lecturers' speaking speed, accents, and teaching styles. Some students from the STEM field reported that they experienced difficulty in using specialized machines, laboratory equipment, and measurements system. In addition, one of the students' critical deficiencies in this process is their lack of field literature and knowledge.

The second reason is that American students always confidently express their thoughts in class as they are socialized in their educational culture and recognize the importance of class participation. American culture and education system enhance the self-confidence and comfort of their students, which is sometimes strange to students from collectivist cultures. However, all the students noted that the American students did not judge them because of their accent or language incompetency; contrary, they were helpful and tolerant even though they did not want to do group assignments with them at the beginning.

International students live and study abroad primarily to develop their academic learning and skills. For this reason, the expectation from international students is to be successful in their academic education. This expectation may come from students themselves, their families, or their social environments, which become one of the stressors for the students as they attribute high value to their academic performance (Chen, 1999). However, taking the same courses with American students who came from within the system and are familiar with the concepts, theories, and literature of the field during this period causes the students to question their self-efficacy, experience a loss of self-confidence, get stressed, and to get the feeling of "I can't do it."

The first semester is difficult due to a different education system and cultural adaptation. We already feel two steps behind because we are foreign students. We had no self-confidence at all; I think that lack of self-confidence makes everything extremely difficult. Only when I started writing a thesis, I started to feel confident in myself (P8). (The idea in this quote was also emphasized by participant P9).

Being in a group where you compete with the Americans creates extreme psychological stress. Being in this group causes you to lose your self-confidence and feel incompetent. Maybe something is not that difficult, perhaps you understand what you read, but you perceive yourself like this because you constantly compare yourself with American students (P9).

I finished school with a degree; I had a master's degree, but in my first semester, I was mentally absent for the first 6 months and had zero self-confidence. In Turkey, I was used to people asking me questions, but after I came to the United States, I was the one who asked the questions but didn't get answers (P13).

The first two semesters in the department can be described as trying to cope with the problems encountered in language and getting used to the academic environment. As students' language competencies increase and they adapt to the system, their success and self-confidence increase. This finding is consistent with other research such as Yildirim (2014). However, in this acculturating process, the students may fall behind, and this may cause stress for them.

4.3. Scholarship Liability (Surety agreement/Kefalet Senedi)

Turkish graduate students are sent to the U.S. by the Turkish government based on a legal agreement. This agreement must be signed by the students and their families or anyone who trusts the students' families. By signing this document, students and their families undertake a critical liability. However, in case of academic failure, this situation poses a significant risk for the students and their families as they have to pay all the expenditures with interest*. Fear of academic failure puts students under pressure and worry throughout their education. Most students come from middle or low-income families, so it is almost impossible for them to pay the expenditures back. Students must also finish their studies within the time frame stipulated by the law. Time restriction is another factor that puts students under pressure. As a result, the strong ties of students with their families (Ataca, 2009), their scholarship obligations (Law, 1416), and the limited duration of the scholarship are essential sources of stress for the students.

The stress of the surety agreement was on my shoulders before I went to the U.S. My sister and brother-in-law did not initially want to sign the surety agreement. When the guarantors were hardly convinced, this put a huge responsibility on me and created massive stress. When I came to my department, I started to experience the stress of lessons, the feeling that I would fail, and the fear that I would fall into compensation began to dominate. Paying the money back (Tazminat) is one of our biggest stressors. Even if you pass the course, you start to worry about whether you will be able to write your thesis. Even the possibility of compensation is a nightmare (P1). (The idea in this quote was also emphasized by participant P2).

Students experience the stress of surety agreement when they first arrive. Only one thing comes to mind in this process: What will I do if I fall into the compensation process? The surety agreement is a great burden that can't be imagined. It's a terrible source of stress. It creates a huge stress load for those in the first semester and those who think they will not be able to do it in the future (P3).

When I first came, the university wanted my average not to be below 3.00. If it were below 3.00, I would be dismissed. It was tough for me to make 3 in the first semester as one of my classes was outside my field. If dismissed from the school, I would fall into the compensation process. My friend's advisor went to another university, and the student was left without an advisor. This is something beyond the student's will. For this reason, the student began to fear falling into compensation (P6).

The surety agreement was the most stressful factor for me. Scholarship students are not wealthy. Compensation is the first thing student thinks about when they feel like they can't do it. In other words, the fear of being dismissed from the program, the fear of compensation, and the embarrassment to the family are important factors that the students think about. The fear of being unsuccessful even though I studied hard is difficult. Frankly, this thought compelled me at first. The fear of failure affected me at first (P7).

The stress of the surety agreement never goes away; it starts from the moment your guarantors sign it. Your owe is always at the back of your head. That's why going with family support and going as a scholarship student are very different. Being a scholarship student means being under more challenging conditions and pressure. In fact, I received psychological support (P8).

* According to the scholarship agreement, if the student successfully completes his/her education and returns to Turkey, the state offers the student a guaranteed job opportunity. The students' compulsory service within the country is twice the period of their study and no deductions are made from their salaries during this period. However, if the student fails or does not complete his/her studies on time or does not return to the country, then all the expenses are taken from the student, his/her family, or guarantors, together with the interest. Most of the students who are interested in this program are children of low or middle-income families. When a student studies in the U.S. within the scope of this program, the state usually spends an average of \$150,000 for a master's program (including tuition, fees, insurance, and living expenses). Considering the GDP per capita was 9,592 USD in 2021 (<https://data.tuik.gov.tr>), it is difficult for families to afford to pay this amount. Therefore, this is an important stressor for students in their academic studies.

The first challenge for the students is to be selected after rigorous and competitive examinations conducted at the national level due to the law (Law No, 1416). The second challenge for them is to find guarantors. Some families take this risk quickly, while others hesitate, and the students experience difficulty in finding guarantors to sign the surety agreement.

The students' responsibility to their families and guarantors stresses them the most when studying abroad. The Turkish family has a collective character, and the emotional roles are higher than the material roles for family members (Ataca, 2009). When the students experience challenges in their departments, the surety agreement is the first thing that alerts them. In case of compensation, the family members and their guarantors will undertake a considerable risk. For this reason, the students do not want to put their families and guarantors in a dangerous situation economically. Besides the economic risk, in collectivist cultures, students feel social pressure and shame for themselves and their families in case of failure.

From the students' point of view, the scholarship program is not a blessing but a burdensome responsibility. Of the 13 participants in this study, only 3 said they did not consider the surety agreement.

The scholarship opportunity seems like a great blessing from the State, but it is a challenging responsibility. Because you get out of your undergraduate, and your family takes you there, you have no obligation; life is beautiful, but suddenly they put you under a heavy load that you can't handle. The scholarship is a huge burden. You have such a serious debt; you will go, you have to do it in another country, you have to finish it, you have to be successful; otherwise, the State will get the money back financially with interest, you will not be given a job, and you will be left unemployed. This is what it looks like from the student's side (P8).

Lastly, the surety agreement also impedes the students' creativity. Since the students' biggest fear is failing and falling into the compensation process, they choose more accessible subjects they think will be successful. Some students stated that they could not engage in studies requiring effort and time regarding creativity and innovation due to the fear of compensation. This is a loss for the scholarship program. Therefore, the terms of the scholarship program should encourage students' creativity.

4.3.1. Time restriction

Time restriction is part of the surety agreement. There is a time limit at every stage of education for students who are accepted to the scholarship status. Domestic language training is 12 months, and language training in the U.S. is 6 months. The Master's degree is three years in total. The students have to act according to the determined time frame. Students who do not complete their program within the defined period may lose their scholarship status and be subject to compensation. The time limitation at each stage stresses the students. The students constantly feel under the pressure of time.

What happens is that if I cannot do well this semester, I cannot take the other course. If I don't take the other class, the semester gets longer. If the semester gets longer, my internship will be delayed. If I cannot do that, my research will be hampered. This time, the graduate period granted to me by the scholarship ends. And if you miss the end of the rope in that process, it feels like you won't be able to catch it again (P9).

Academic staffs are very demanding, and when a complex topic starts to be investigated, a process expansion can be experienced. For this reason, time constraint stresses student and put them under time pressure. There should be time flexibility depending on the university or program (P3).

Toward the end, things may go wrong with the thesis. For example, you are experimenting, and things may go wrong in the experiment. We can go back to the beginning. This time, we are having difficulties regarding the time the Scholarship Program gave. There is an inconsistency between the work that needs to be completed and the amount of time left. Then there is a feeling that if the speed is not reached, I will fall into compensation (P6).

As informant P3 expressed, when a complex topic is started to be investigated, the student may need more time to complete the process. However, due to time restriction stemming from scholarship liability, the students may not prefer to study innovative subjects as they are usually time-consuming. In this case, the time restriction may prevent the creativity of the students. The finding of this study shows that the time constraint arising from the Scholarship Agreement should be reconsidered for students studying creative subjects.

4.4. Loneliness

Loneliness is a significant challenge for Turkish students. Most students use the phrase that they felt like a 'fish out of the water' to express thoughts and feelings about being alone in the U.S. Considering the structure of Turkish families (Ataca, 2009), this result can be expected.

Although it is the first time going to the U.S. during the language process, the loneliness isn't felt strongly since you are within a group. However, the main education process is entirely different because you are not with a group, so it isn't easy. If you go to a place where there are few Turkish students, you will feel like a fish out of water (P8).

I have suffered a feeling of loneliness. Because expressing yourself in a mother tongue is very different from expressing yourself in a foreign language. When I say I miss my mother so much to a foreigner, the reactions he gives and the reactions I can give are very different. I feel lonely due to cultural differences because I can't convey emotions (P6).

Most students have experience abroad during their language education for 6 months. They did not feel lonely as they went to language centers in groups. They stayed with their friends and were together in the language centers. This togetherness relieves their loneliness. However, they experienced deep loneliness when they transformed into their departments. They left their families, friends, and all networks that provide social support for them behind. Alsahafi & Shin (2017), in their research on Saudi international students, also found that the students experienced loneliness and homesickness, especially during their transformation, as they left behind all their social connectedness.

Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) indicate that social support from significant others is vital for a person's self-concept and self-esteem validity, which international students are deprived of when they are involved in a new culture. Also, social support directly affects psychological adjustment and has a "buffering effect on the life stresses" (p. 71). Besides social support, family and connectedness also predict acculturative stress (Yeh and Inose, 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Sumer et al., 2008; Duru & Poyrazli, 2009). Social disconnectedness may lead to loneliness, academic failure, and psychological issues. Also, due to loneliness, students may lose self-confidence, feel inferior, confused, and less willing to communicate with others (Chen, 1999). Poyrazli et al. (2002) in their study found that gender and assertiveness predict students' loneliness. Males reported higher levels of loneliness than females. However, proficiency in English did not predict loneliness but predicted adjustment.

The findings of this study show that Turkish students, especially in their first two semesters, face the challenges of loneliness. The results also show that loneliness is not related to academic adaptation but to cultural and emotional spheres. The following quotes from the students are evidence for this interpretation:

I don't think anyone can say they didn't feel lonely during this process. I suffered from an extreme sense of loneliness. First, I was unfamiliar with the environment. Second, I was far from my homeland and couldn't go when I miss my family. I cannot reflect my feelings to my family even when I was in difficulty. If I had difficulty, I would cry, wipe my tears, wash my face, and call my mother. Our families suffer a lot, they also get stressed when we are going through difficulties because they don't know the process. Looking from Turkey, the students in the U.S. are in a rosy place, in a great position, but that loneliness was the thing that I had the most difficulty with. I had a hard time overcoming the feeling of loneliness. Maybe everything is overcome, things work out, and perhaps it takes time, but that feeling of loneliness never ends (P9).

I've been here for 6 years, but my loneliness is the only thing I can't get over. Yes, we spend time trying to do something together, but at the end of the day, we are alone. Some students marry to overcome their loneliness, and indeed, they have been successful (P3).

The participants in this research define loneliness with these concepts; "losing self-confidence, being a fish out of the water, suffering, being unfamiliar with the environment, far from the homeland, stress, the most difficult thing, the feeling that never ends, the feelings that cannot get over, challenge, cultural difference, not be able to convey emotions." All these concepts and phrases imply challenges, difficulties, and suffering. A student from a collectivist culture with a strong family and social relations may experience such problems.

Regarding U.S. university students, being alone and living alone are part of American individualistic culture. When students from collectivistic culture transform into this individualistic one, they get depressed and do not even operate according to the norms of American academia.

The cultural barrier affects Turkish students more than the language barrier in academic life. In our culture, our friendships are strong. We love hanging out, having friends, and doing something together. Otherwise, we stay alone, get depressed, and this negatively affects our achievements. The people here work professionally. Since the education system is student-centered, the student is expected to go directly to the lecturer. They have office hours. If you have a problem, the lecturers insist, come to us. But because of our emotions and togetherness, we were trying to find a solution with Turkish friends instead of going and solving our problem with the professor. This sometimes is perceived as plagiarism. We expect we can solve the problem together with friends, and the teacher expects the student to work independently. They should visit during office hours if they have any issues (P3).

There is a conflict between the university and the students' cultural norms. Universities require students to act independently; however, they function according to their group norms. It took time for the students to transform from collectivist to individualistic understanding and adapt to the system of academia. Kilinc and Granello (2003), in their study on help-seeking attitudes of Turkish college students, found that 50% of Turkish students prefer to get help from their friends instead of getting professional services. Even though the participants in this study indicated that they experienced many difficulties, except for one, they did not get professional help. Instead, they preferred their families' and friends' help.

The students need time and effort to get used to an individualistic culture. As time pass, the students get accustomed to their universities. Adapting to a university takes almost two semesters. Although the problems and challenges differ, students learn how to deal with these challenges. The social environment they have acquired guides them in this process. Students' adaptations are getting easier.

During this time, you develop social relations. Even though the challenges keep coming in different sizes, the people around you make it a little easier. They guide you. You do not know the way beforehand, and you do not know how to ask. Thanks to the environment, you can see the university's possibilities, learn about your rights as a student, etc. (P8).

This finding is consistent with the previous research (Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011) that the students provide social support from friends of their home country and native students, academic staff, and institutions of the host culture, which is essential for their adjustment.

As the students get used to the system (especially in the first two semesters), their academic stress decreases, but their feelings of loneliness continue. Since their primary motivation for coming to America is academic success, they can tolerate feelings of loneliness as long as they are successful in their academic studies. This interpretation is supported by Poyrazli et al. (2002, p. 640) study as they found that "proficiency in English predicted adjustment, but not loneliness."

In this study, only 3 participants indicated they did not experience loneliness. One of them is married, and the others stated that they had lived separately from their families since their undergraduate years and therefore do not suffer from loneliness. To overcome the feeling of loneliness, the students applied different strategies. Most students indicated they were involved in university social activities to relieve their loneliness. For some of them, marriage was another choice to reduce their loneliness.

4.4.1. Students' perception of America

The IIE report (2015) shows that 82.3 % of prospective Turkish students reported that the U.S. is their top choice of country to pursue their education. The students found American educational institutions attractive, and it is a privilege to study in the U.S. However, the U.S. is encoded in the minds of Turkish students as a very distant country.

In Turkish culture, living in faraway places is usually associated with "loneliness, stranger, living abroad, sadness" (Dictionary of Turkish Language Institution), challenge, and difficulty. When the social environment says there is a language problem in a foreign country, how to rent a house, how to buy furniture, what will happen if there is a health problem, etc., it is actually driving away a country for people perceptually and psychologically.

The students' social environment added all social/cultural connotations of gurbet (abroad) to America. Then the perception of America is constructed according to these cultural settings. When social perception is added to physical distance, students' perception of America starts to be identified with loneliness, challenges, and stress. Distance and time are socially constructed concepts. For example, in the older times, people's perception of gurbet (abroad) was to go from a province in Anatolia to Istanbul. The distance was one day or two days. Now they say the same thing about America. Although transportation and communication facilities have reduced physical distance to a minimum, culturally, the U.S. is still coded as a very distant country. But in reality, it is social perceptions that make it remote. This perception also affects the students' sense of loneliness.

At first, I felt uneasy about going to the other side of the world. This sense of distance is created by the people around. As much as the difficulties I had in America, there were also the beauties that I experienced and were given to me. This must also be considered (P8).

One of the feelings of loneliness is that you know you cannot return to Turkey whenever you want. It is not one of the close countries in Europe. Because you know this, it sometimes feels like a prison to you. There is no escape route, and you have to stay there. Maybe that stress is related to loneliness and distance (P1).

The U.S. is a distant land. The idea of not being able to reach Turkey immediately affected me. If something urgent happened and I had to go, that part made me think a bit. Some fellows studied in England at the Institute. It is so easy to go to England; They say: "What if we go to England next week?" For America, it is necessary to plan six months in advance. America is far, far away from this aspect (P7).

Turkish students find Europe more accessible. However, Europe, especially Germany, was very distant and abroad (gurbet) in the 1960s for Turkish people. The students' perception of America worried the students about their families. Especially in the early stages of COVID-19, this concern has risen a lot. This perception increases students' loneliness and anxiety even more.

4.5. Acculturative Stress Regarding Academic Advisors

Students face significant difficulties when they transfer to their departments as they have language barriers, do not know the bureaucratic procedures, and have limited experience with the U.S. higher education system. In this situation, students' most essential source of guidance is their advisors. They help students to create their academic plans, select their courses, and guide them for general academic purposes. Studies (Curtin, Steward, & Ostrava, 2013) show that influential faculty advisors reduce students' stress and increase their academic self-concept and sense of belonging. Advisors "connect students to their departments, orient them to their fields, and are sources of both explicit and tacit knowledge about their fields (p. 111-112)."

The participants in this study indicated that after the scholarship liability and the English language, the most things that stressed them were their advisors. Most students in this study (8 out of 13) had a negative experience with the advisors, mainly with non-U.S. advisors, due to the following reasons:

First, some students are stuck between their institutions' needs and academic advisors' demands.

The academic advisor wanted me to study in the field he wanted. Since the government pays for our scholarship, the advisor does not pay from his funds. So, he tried to direct our studies toward his academic interests. However, the institution in my country sent me to study in the field they required. I have a responsibility to my institution in Turkey. If I do what the academic advisor wants, this time, I deviate from my original purpose. Sometimes you work on a subject, but the institution in Turkey says that I do not want you to study such a subject; I do not need it. This time you get stuck between the institution and the advisor (P1) (The idea in this quote was also emphasized by participants P2 and P11).

According to the Scholarship Agreement, each student is sent on behalf of an institution. Student cannot change their fields of study without the institution's permission. However, advisors sometimes do not understand the students' obligations and insist on the subject they offer. The students are squeezed between the institutions' obligations and the advisors' requests. As the scholarship program covers the students' tuition and living allowance, the advisors want to study with the students as this gives them a chance to use their special funds for their other needs. However, in this case, they put the students under pressure.

Another group of students was not satisfied with their academic advisors' accents. They said they could not understand them. Still, another group was not happy with the concern or guidance of the advisors as they were indifferent. Two of the participants reported that due to the indifference of their advisors, they could not finish their program on time.

He expected too much from me without giving me anything. He never guided me. He didn't even help when choosing a course. I had to decide everything for myself. This indifference and uncertainty were stressing me out (P8).

Due to the abundance of his work, my advisor could not spare time for me, and I did not see that support for a few years (P9).

This study determined that academic advisors who encouraged students shared their problems and helped them cause the students to experience less academic acculturation stress. This finding was consistent with previous research. These students did not report any pressure due to their advisors. They said they were lucky due to their advisors as one experienced being an international student, and the other stayed abroad and knew what it meant to be an international student.

There is another type of stress that the students experienced. Even though the situation is positive, the outcome is negative. The students report that they had difficulty writing, and as they respect their advisors' academic authority much, they want to submit an academically quality paper. However, they mention they stressed as their advisors may not like their writing and strongly criticize it.

5. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This study explored the challenges that create acculturative stress on Turkish international scholarship students in U.S. higher education. The phenomenological research method is used in this study to obtain in-depth knowledge about the phenomenon. The findings of this study, in relation to the theoretical framework, revealed that the stressors the students experienced during their acculturation process are that scholarship liability and time restriction, language incompetence, loneliness, loss of self-confidence, and academic advisors.

Scholarship liability is determined as the primary source of stress and profoundly affects the students. In addition, as part of the scholarship liability (surety agreement), time restriction significantly affects the students. The second important factor affecting the students during their academic adaptation is the language barrier. It has been determined that due to an exam-oriented language education curriculum and time constraints, students start their programs without fully mastering their language. American education pedagogy is student-centered that requires class participation, group discussions, and presentations. Due

to their language barrier, Turkish students were silent but active listeners in their first two semesters. Being inactive in their classes and experiencing challenges in adaptation lead the students to experience a loss of self-confidence and stress. Most of the participants in this study report that they experienced difficulty with their advisors, mostly non-US advisors, due to being indifferent, having accents, or forcing students to study a subject they do not need.

Lastly, regarding non-academic challenges, loneliness is a significant factor affecting students. Coming from a collectivist culture, Turkish students have a strong relationship with their families and friends. Leaving all their social networks behind and adapting to an individualistic life challenges students and causes stress. In addition, the perception of America as being distant affects students in terms of challenges and loneliness as they cannot easily access their families.

This study also has some implications for the scholarship authority, students, and counselors:

1) The scholarship liability has significant adverse effects on the psychology of the students. When students encounter challenges in their academic study, the first thing that comes to mind is the compensation (kefalet senedi) process. The possibility of failing and putting their families and guarantors at risk puts students under stress throughout their education. Scholarship liability also impedes the students' creativity. Since the students' biggest fear is failing and falling into the compensation process, they choose more accessible subjects they think will be successful. This is a loss for the scholarship program. Therefore, the terms of the scholarship program should encourage students' creativity.

2) Language incompetency is the biggest challenge for students. If students receive a competent language education, it will prevent many problems they will encounter in academic life. Students' most significant issue is that they start their education without a qualified English language. It is determined that the students, especially, have difficulty with speaking and listening. This study suggests that the education and curricula of English language education centers should be reviewed, and students' language education time limits should be extended.

3) The students should be informed about the educational pedagogy of the U.S. while they are in Turkey. It is extremely useful and essential to hold pre-information meetings for students on this subject. Orientation programs should be practical and informative about academic and social life. If the students know what awaits them, then they psychologically prepare themselves. Mentorship might be one of the critical mechanisms. The students who pass the adaptation stage can be a mentor for newcomers. Therefore, effective guidance is essential.

4) The students should also be informed or advised about the cultural barrier they may face. They should not hesitate to seek professional help services instead of co-national helps. Collective cultural norms may not work in an individualistic culture, and they should be aware of this.

Limitations

Turkish international students, the subject of this study, have common characteristics in terms of scholarship status, educational background, and language proficiency. As a qualitative study, the findings of this study are not generalizable but can be transferred to other situations with careful consideration. Also, as the researcher used to work as an education attaché representing the Turkish Scholarship Program in the U.S. universities and had the experience of being an international student, the findings were analyzed and described from an outside (etic) and inside (emic) perspective. Lastly, It should also be considered whether the students' answers were affected by the researcher who worked in the scholarship program.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The present study devotes particular concern to the research publication and ethics declaration. Ethical permissions and participant consent were sought, and participant privacy was protected during the course of the study. This study was found ethically appropriate by the decision of Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Institutional Review Board dated 07.06.202, Number, 13.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

The research was prepared by a single author.

Statement of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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