

The Influence of Culture on the Acquisition of Turkish People's Conceptions about Education:

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, I have examined the Turkish people's conceptions about education and the influence of culture on the acquisition of these conceptions. Twelve Turkish people participated in the study. With face-to-face interviews, instant-messaging (IM), and e-mail messages, I have collected data and the analyses revealed that language, family, religion (Islam), and agrarian values seem to be the major cultural factors shaping the educational conceptions of the participants.

Keywords: *Culture, agrarian values, language socialization*

INTRODUCTION

Culture plays a very significant role in human life that no society can exist without it. All norms, value systems, and any the ways of conducts are the products of culture. Culture determines how an individual should act, dress, talk, eat, educate, interact, believe, etc. Any study aiming to explain social issues regardless of cultural influences would not be accurate enough to deserve any merit. According to Avci (2013), due to globalization, which has connected people economically as well as culturally, we need to understand each other and what made us unique and similar at the same time. This understanding could be a stepping stone toward solving many social problems we face today (Avci, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to examine the Turkish people's conceptions about education and the influence of culture on the acquisition of these values. Moreover, possible factors that are contributing to those values will also be scrutinized.

In the following sections, the research literature will be reviewed and the cultural theories that underlie this study will be discussed. The literature review will also cover the historical background of Turkey, which is the basis for the focus group of this study, and which will also provide a better understanding in the interpretation of the data gained from the study.

1. The Concepts of Culture

Scholars of human development believe that there is a strong relation between cultural practices and the development of how members of a particular society think, remember, reason, solve problem, act, and behave. In this sense, every individual in all communities are "cultural participants" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 10). The question here is to figure out what is meant by culture and how people acquire culture. LeVine (1973) provides a definition of culture from an anthropological perspective and states that culture determines human behavior and human adjustment to the surrounding environment, and thus, organize a collective life. He further elaborates on the definition of culture and posits that it is "an organized body of rules concerning the ways in which individuals in a population should communicate with one another, think about themselves and their environments, and behave toward one another and toward objects in their environments." (p.4). Each culture has its own set of rules that the members of that particular population has to follow. These rules are both implicit and explicit. When a rule is recognized and justified by the members of a particular society it becomes institutionalized. In other words, sociocultural environments are institutions that regulate norms. Individuals are forced to follow the institutionalized rules (cultural norms) in order to fit in the community. (LeVine, 1973).

Hallowell (1955) states that culture helps individuals in human populations psychologically adjust to their environments. In this sense, culture provides five basic orientations to the individuals: self-orientation, object orientation, spatiotemporal-orientation, motivational orientation, and normative

orientation. What Hallowell (1955) means by self-orientation is that culture has the function to help individual function appropriately in his/her society through providing him/her a sense of self. Language has a very important role in self orientation. The second function of culture is to provide the individual the orientation of the many different objects that are around him/her. Here again language is very important in object-orientation. The third orientation is the spatiotemporal orientation, which is primarily that all cultures help individual identify him/herself and with reference to his/her society. The individual acquires the sense of existence in space other than the immediate environment, which enables him/her move freely and purposefully. "Motivational orientation is orientation of the self towards the objects of its behavioral environment with reference to the satisfaction of its needs." (p.100). It is the fifth major function of culture to provide values, norms, ideals, and standards to its members.

2. Historical Background of Turkey

The origins of Turks are traced to Central Asia, Siberia and Ural Mountains (Mango, 1968). The Turks were mainly organized into tribes and they were nomads. Turks' first conversion to Islam took place after 751, when they fought against the Chinese with Muslim Arabs. The Oguz tribe is the ancestor of the Turks in Turkey today. The Oguz Turks conquered most of the Islamic world in the tenth and eleventh centuries as Muslims. The battle of Malazgirt in eastern Turkey in 1071 opened the door of Asia Minor (Anatolia) forever for the Muslim Turks. The Ottomans were a state in Anatolia that gained power and moved toward the west. After they conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul), Ottoman state is regarded as an empire, which ruled in three continents. The modern Turkish Republic was established and built on the remnants of her immediate precursor, the Ottoman Empire. According to Mango (1968), the Ottoman Empire reached her glorious state integrating the Holy Law of Islam. However, "it was not an autocracy; even less was it a totalitarian state." (p.23).

Modern Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. The historian Bernard Lewis (2002) states that there are three major influencing factors that lead to the emergence of the new state: local, linguistic and religious factors. The local factors are those cultures and civilizations that had been in the land (Anatolia) that is now occupied by the Turks. The influences of Hittites, Greeks, Byzantium, Rumelian, Anatolian Seljuks, and Arabs can be seen in many aspects of life in the Ottoman Empire. The second major factor is the language of the Turks, namely Turkish. Despite its subjection to so many alien cultures, the Turkish language has managed to survive and resisted against the influences of other languages. Turkish language is considered to be a sign of Turkish tradition. Later on, Turkish was influenced by Arabic and Persian (especially Persian literary tradition). Racism or exclusiveness was not experienced in the Ottoman Empire. The two main requirements for the non-Turks to reach real power and status were religion (Islam) and language (Turkish). The third factor is religion: as many other converted peoples, Turks were not forced into accepting Islam. From its foundation to its fall, the Ottoman Empire dedicated itself to the advancement of Islam. "Ottoman Turks had identified themselves with Islam – submerged their identity in Islam- to a greater extent than perhaps any other Islamic people." (Lewis, 2002, p. 13). In the west, the word "Turk" was used synonymously with the word "Muslim".

In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was established on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Right after that, the office of the caliphate (the leadership of the Muslim world) was abolished in order to fulfill the secularization of the new state. Between the 1920s and the early 1930s, some fundamental changes were made, which can be interpreted as rejecting the inheritance of the former Ottoman Empire. Some of the steps taken by the ruling elite are the abolition of religious courts, abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations, prohibition of male religious head covering, and adoption of Swiss Civil Code (Kadioglu, 1996). Kadioglu (1996) further states "These reforms constituted an onslaught on the existing cultural practices. They opted for a general state of amnesia which would lead to a process of estrangement of the people from some of their own cultural practices." (p.186). One of the most striking so-called reforms was the replacement of the Arabic script used by people for hundreds of years with the Latin alphabet, which abruptly cut even the literate people off from their past and culture. All of these reforms were done in order to reach the level of contemporary civilizations. The new ideology of the Republic of Turkey was Kemalism, which proposed six fundamental and unchanging principles of the secular regime: republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolutionism/reformism. One would note that liberalism and democracy were not included. Mardin (1990) states that the reforms were an indication of the disdain of the Republican elites toward Islam.

However, Kadioglu (1996) concludes that Islam was so embedded in the culture that it was impossible for the Kemalist ideology, which was not widely accepted (only by the intelligentsia) by the people, to eradicate Islam's influence from the lives of the Turkish people.

The 2015 estimated population of Turkey is 79,414,269 (CIA, 2015). 99.8% of the population is Sunni Muslims. 95% of the total population is literate, which is by gender breakdown is 98.4% males and 91.8% females. According to the Assessment, Selection, and Placement Center (Ö.S.Y.M.) Over 1.5 million people applied to get into higher education (2015).

3. Research Topic

In this study, I have tried to examine and understand the Turkish people's conceptions about education and the influence of culture on the acquisition of these values and the possible factors that are contributing to those values. The primary research questions are "How do Turkish people value education? What cultural factors contribute to the enculturation of these values?"

4. Methodology

Since the primary focus of this study is to understand what educational conceptions the Turkish people have and what cultural factors might be contributing to the emergence of these conceptions, phenomenology would be a better fit to answer the above research questions as "a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon." (Cresswell, 2007, p. 57). It is also important to keep the underlying philosophical assumptions of phenomenology in mind, which is, world is what we perceive and our perception is widely affected by our existing knowledge through which we construct meaning. Thus, the underlying assumption in this study is that the participants make sense of their worlds through their experiences, which are not devoid of the social and cultural environments, which influence our perceptions and making sense of our experiences (Patton, 2002).

One of the main approaches in phenomenological research is transcendental phenomenology, which focuses on meaning that participants create through their experience and interactions with the world. Transcendental phenomenology is suitable for my research as I am interested in how Turkish people see education and why they perceive it so. According to Moustakas (1994), there are four main data collection phases in transcendental phenomenology: epoché, or bracketing, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. In the epoché phase, researchers only focus on the participants' responses trying to put aside their own thoughts and feelings.

In the second phase (transcendental-phenomenological reduction), researchers use the transcribed interviews of participants' as the main source of meaning making of the experiences of the participants. In the imaginative variation phase, researchers identify significant themes or phenomenon. In this study, I have examined the interviews that I transcribed verbatim to see common themes for the sources of educational conceptions of the participants and the sources of these conceptions. In the last phase, researchers try to synthesize the common themes and phenomenon to further understand the cultural factors contributing to the acquisition of the educational conceptions of the participants.

4.1. Researcher's Role

Since I am a native of Turkey, I have mostly an insider's perspective on the issue the participants have shared. Thus, as a researcher my emic perspective could have been influenced my analyses. However, this should not mean that I have skipped the epoché phase, which requires researchers to refrain themselves from making judgments.

4.1.2. Research Participants

There were twelve participants in the study. All the participants are natives of Turkey. Except one high school graduate (who is preparing to get into a college), all the other participants have a four-year college degree. Two participants are doctoral students in the U.S. and one participant has a master's degree from an American university and working as an engineer in U.S. Four of the participants are female and eight of them are male. The interviews took place in U.S. and Turkey.

Burak has a master's degree in industrial engineering and works for a company in U.S. he had his bachelor's degree from Turkey and came to the U.S. to further his education and received his master's

degree from a university in the Midwest. Seda is a doctoral student in physics in an American university and received her undergraduate degree from a very prestigious university in Turkey. She is from a middle class family. Her father was a superintendent. Faruk is the third participant from the U.S. He is a doctoral student in education. He received his master's degree in the U.S. and his bachelor's degree is from Turkey. He is from a working class background. He had been a school teacher for five years before he came to the U.S. Fatma is from a working class family, who just graduated from college in Turkey and started to teach in a high school. She studied English language and literature. Ahmet is a high school English teacher in Turkey for nine years. He is married and comes from a working class background. Murat is a private school administrator. He has been in education for fifteen years. He is from a middle class family. He has been the editor of several literature magazines, authored five books and published articles. Ozgu has just graduated from a four-year college and she is expecting to become a teacher in Turkey. Nuran is a college graduate who is going to be a teacher in Turkey. Serhat is a college graduate and has a middle class background. Sukru has been a vocational school teacher for eleven years in Turkey. He is from a working class family background. Mustafa is a businessman. He established his own company after getting his business degree from Turkey. He also is from a working-class background. Rifat is a high school graduate and he could not enter college in his first attempt and he is now preparing to get into a college. He is from a middle class family.

4.3. Data Collection

I have conducted two live interviews and one interview was conducted via synchronous IM (instant messaging). The rest of the data were collected through asynchronous e-mail messages. All the interviews (live and IM-based) and e-mail messages were done in Turkish as Turkish is the participants' mother tongue and they are more comfortable in communicating with their first language. Even though a couple of the participants were rather fluent in English, they said that they would prefer to write or speak in Turkish.

The interviews were semi-structured. The following were the primary questions asked to the interviewees: How important education is for you? Why? As for the e-mail messages, I informed the participants about the research topic and gave the following directions: "Please write down your ideas about the topic. The following questions are guidelines and you do not have to adhere to these questions. What is your view about education? What comes to your mind when education is mentioned? What are your values about education? When you are responding to these questions, you can talk about your own education process." Some of the participants asked for additional explanations and clarifications, which I have provided as asked.

5. Findings

Through my analysis of the interviews and the e-mail messages (texts sent through e-mail), several themes emerged. A definition of education was drawn from the participants of the study. The following definition is based on the participants' writings and interviews: "Education is a lifelong process that gives direction to one's life. It is the means that transfers the values of the time and society to the individual. Education is not only about teaching and learning, but changing behavior and self-improvement."

Here is what Sukru wrote

"Education, in simplistic terms, is the process of voluntarily changing human behavior in the positive direction. In addition, education is the process that develops among the triangle of reasoning, emotion, and behavior. In fact, education is life itself. It starts in the womb of the mother (even earlier) and continues till death."

Nuran wrote "Education is a very broad notion. It is the process of acquiring the beliefs, standards, attitudes, and behaviors imposed by the society (and the day) in which the individual live. Serkan provided a similar definition for education "Education is a general notion that includes a very long term that starts at birth and continues till death."

Fatma's definition is as follows "I think, education is the process of adjusting to the innovations of the time and change and giving specific directions to one's own life. It is a process of a formation and giving

direction that involves the individual as a whole with his/her mind, emotions, and behaviors." Burak wrote "Education is not only teaching or learning specific subject matters. It is beyond that. Education provides us the skills to apply what we learn, interpret the world, and make decisions".

Another theme that emerged was that knowledge is regarded highly, thus education and educators are respected very much. Fatma wrote "Other people's thoughts about educated people are different. They think that educated people are superior to uneducated ones. They respect them. In this regard, it is a very good feeling to be respected and admired." According to Ahmet, the reason that people respect education and educators is religious beliefs "The tales of religious and historical figures such as the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire Fatih Sultan Mehmet's respect toward his teacher and mentor. What's more, Ali (the fourth caliph and the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad) says 'I will be the servant of the person for forty years if he teaches me a letter.' That is one of the key sayings that determine our approaches to education, educators, and knowledge." Murat said "I am respected in the society, because I am educated." Ozgu wrote "When I look around, I feel lucky, because today, it is the educated people who are respected." Sukru wrote "In Islam, education is very important. Allah says in the Holy Quran 'Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?'" Similarly, Faruk said "Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim, and getting education or learning is considered to be a prayer, which God wants us to do."

It is clear that the reason why education, educators, and knowledge are so respected by Turks. Religion (Islam) is one of the primary contributing factors for Turkish people's valuing education. The other factor is that education is the primary means of advancement in the society in Turkey (Mango, 1968). People can advance in terms of class and gain status and prestige through education. Even though historically the Republic of Turkey was not founded upon the principle of democracy, in the time of the Ottoman Empire people had the opportunity of social elevation (Mango, 1968). The tradition of democracy in modern Turkey is gradually getting its place in both political institutions and society at large. The family and social backgrounds of the presidents and prime ministers have given hope to the ordinary people that they can change their social status and gain prestige through education (Mango, 1994).

The increase in the urbanization level in Turkey is a contributing element in the above mentioned conception of education among Turkish people. Mango (1994) states that in 1927, when the Turkish Republic was just founded, 76% of the population lived in villages, whereas in the 1990s, the rate of the urban dwellers rose to 53%. Gedik (2003) reports a more updated statistics about the urbanization in Turkey. She states that the level of urbanization increased from 20% in 1950 to approximately 65% in 2000. These numbers are indicators of the urbanization level of the country as well as the shift from the agrarian type of living. LeVine and White (1986) provide an explanation of agrarian way of life, which included living in small communities, producing food domestically, agriculture, and animal husbandry. They also state that the agrarian cultural traditions, which are still the guiding principles of life, prevails in the lives of the majority of the world population today. As seen in the Turkey example, there has been a dramatic transition from agrarian way of life to urbanization and industrialization for the past 200 years, which has also brought forth a radical digression from the agrarian cultural norms and values. Eren (1963) states that industrial development in Turkey caused a great demand for skilled workforce. In agrarian cultures, children relied on their apprenticeship with their families and kins to secure a job. However, after industrialization, the wage-earning labor force need required skills that the families themselves could not provide their children. Educating children for the workforce became the main function of schooling (Hareven, 1989). The shift from agrarian way of living to urbanization contributed to the fact that education has fundamental values for the participants of the study.

Family support and the influence of fathers were also salient in the e-mails and interviews of the participants. Seda said "My father valued our education so much. Our school had always priority in the family. He was a superintendent. Both my sister and my brother went to colleges that my father wished. He wanted me to become a medical doctor, too, just like my sister; however, I did not want. My brother became a judge even though he initially wanted to practice law privately. However, my father wanted him to work for the government. I guess it was only me who did not fulfill my father's wish. Now I am working for my doctoral degree and become a doctor, only not a medical one. This way I will have fulfilled his wish, I guess." Faruk said,

"Having been from a working-class family, I was always reminded that education and learning is the only way out for us. My father only had an elementary school degree, he was literate. The village

environment was not very encouraging for my father in order to pursue his dreams of a “better life”. That's why he moved out of his village. School always had the first priority. School and success were almost equal for my father. I can remember that he was one of the very few men that bought books for his family. His dream was to have his children get the best education and through education have a higher status."

Mustafa wrote similar to what Faruk said " My parents were both illiterate. However, my father has the most impact on my education. He always wanted his children to have education." Fatma wrote "My family supported me very much. I am the only college graduate in my family. My parents said ‘we did not have education, but you should.'" According to Burak, "Families are responsible for their children's education."

The above mentioned points can also be tied to the family structures of the participants. Cakir and Aydin (2005) state that the typical Turkish family is traditional, patriarchal, and authoritarian. The above quotes of the participants match with the literature. Even though there are regional differences, obedience is highly valued attribute (Cakir and Aydin, 2005). The authoritarianism and obedience are imposed through political and educational institutions. Houston (2006) posits that the modernization of Turkey was a paternalistic and authoritarian one. The other participant Rifat said that he had to enter a university and a department that would make his family happy, which resonates Mustafa, another participant, who mentioned that his success would honor his family and especially his father.

Fertility and filial loyalty are the two main values that agrarian cultures prescribe to their members. Since children work under the supervision of their elders (especially parents) throughout their lives, they have a sense of loyalty toward their parents. Reciprocity is another virtue of agrarian cultures, which is basically children are expected to take care of their parents when they age. They are expected to give back (support) to their parents. Kinship support is a very important part of agrarian cultures (LeVine and White, 1986). It seems that filial loyalty, which is a characteristic of an agrarian society, still persists among the participants of this study. Murat wrote "I am educated now and at a certain level. Now, I can give back to the society." Ahmet stressed that the authoritarian characteristic of the society was also imposed through educational practices "The notion that teachers are trustworthy is imbedded in cultural sayings such as when a parent brings in his kid to school; he says 'His flesh is yours, his bones are mine'. However, it also implies that students should obey the teacher and later in life whoever is the authority." According to Mango (2004) education used to be seen as a piety. However, the secularization of the modern Turkey replaced piety with patriotism. Before it was annulled in 2013, each day, during the daily flag ceremony or student oath, elementary school children's chanting the pledge in unison was an indication of an authoritarian system that preferred obedient subjects.

Language is a vital tool for human beings (especially in early childhood) in acquiring a world view (Ochs, 1986). Children gain the norms, beliefs, and values of their societies “through exposure to and participation in language-mediated interactions.” (Ochs, 1986, p.2). Language socialization is not simply being exposed to a social event; rather it is the social event itself. These events (or social activities) play a very important role in developing the cognitive skills of children. By actively participating in social events, children learn different dimensions of the human interactions, such as the seriousness or playfulness of a situation through both linguistic and nonverbal cues. Language socialization has a significant role on the conceptions of educational values among Turkish people. Most of the sayings that the participants quoted were related to religion (Islam), which I examined above. Murat quoted several sayings in his response to the study almost all of which are religious "Gain knowledge starting from cradle to graveyard”. “Seek knowledge even it is in China." These two sayings are the sayings of the prophet Muhammad. In the second saying the word "China" indicates remoteness. Murat continued "Having education and therefore becoming man (mature person). I like these sayings and so do Anatolian people. I try to apply these in my own life." Faruk stated that one of his favorite sayings was "The sleep of scholars are more sacred than the prayers of ignorants", which again is a saying of the prophet Muhammad. He further said

In our faith, which is Islam, education is very highly valued. The first verses in the holy book that were revealed emphasize the importance of knowledge. In that particular chapter, it is openly commanded to seek knowledge and learn. Also, in many parts of the holy book, the people who hold knowledge are differentiated from those who do not, and those who have are praised.

According to Cakir and Aydin (2005), familial and communal values are favored in Turkish culture. In my study there seems to be contradicting elements in regards to communal values and

individualistic values. Working for the betterment of the society and giving back to the society is a characteristic of an agrarian way of life. Individualism, on the other hand, is the result of urbanization and industrialization. In my study both agrarian values and urban values exist. While some participants mentioned that it was to honor their families with their academic success and serving society, others mentioned that even though their families supported them, they valued education mainly due to their individual will and to become better and sophisticated persons.

CONCLUSION

This study is only a descriptive one which aims to understand the impact of culture on the conceptions of education in Turkish society. The findings have revealed that even though Turkey has been a modern, secular country for over eight decades, it still carries both agrarian and urban values. It is highly likely that most of the agrarian values are preserved because of Islam, which is so deeply engraved in the culture of the people of Turkey. As for the implications for the education of individuals (and especially adults), this study suggest that formal and informal institutions of education should keep in mind the cultural characteristics of their students. Before delivering an educational activity, one of the major steps for an effective learning is to analyze the audience (i.e., learners) and their needs. Thus, the educational conceptions of the participants and the cultural factors such as religion, family, language, and agrarian values contributing to the acquisition of these conceptions need to be remembered when the curricula and instruction is designed and provided.

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