

## IDENTIFYING THE MOTIVES OF SOCIAL SCIENCES STUDENTS FOR LEARNING RESEARCH METHODS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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### Abstract

Learning research methods is important for university students to improve their scientific papers' quality. Therefore, universities include relevant courses in their curriculum. However, different elements may be in play regarding the students' attention for these courses, and the lecturers should be aware of those factors. Hence, this research aims to identify students' motives for learning research methods. Accordingly, a qualitative design was preferred in the study and university students' perceptions were revealed through the metaphors they created. A total of 72 students at a foundation university participated in the study. Metaphors created by the students were later classified into six categories.

**Keywords:** Research methods, metaphor, perception, motives, university students.

**Acknowledgement:** This article is the revised and expanded version of a paper presented in Turkish at the 2016 International Conference on Quality in Higher Education (ICQH). The author thanks the reviewers for their constructive comments.

## SOSYAL BİLİMLER ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN ARAŞTIRMA YÖNTEMLERİNİ ÖĞRENMEYE YÖNELİK İSTEKLERİNİN BELİRLENMESİ: FENOMENOLOJİK BİR ÇALIŞMA

### Özet

Yapacakları bilimsel çalışmalar açısından üniversite öğrencilerinin araştırma yöntemlerini bilmeleri önem taşımaktadır. Dolayısıyla üniversiteler müfredatlarına araştırma yöntemleriyle ilgili dersleri eklemektedir. Bununla birlikte, öğrencilerin bu derslere ilgisiyle alakalı farklı etkenler söz konusudur ve ilgili öğretim elemanları bu faktörlerden haberdar olmalıdır. Bu çalışma tekniğine göre nitel bir çalışma olup, üniversite öğrencilerinin araştırma yöntemleri olgusuna dair algılarını üretilen metaforlar yardımıyla ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma katılımcıları, Trabzon ilinde bulunan bir vakıf üniversitesinden toplam 72 üniversite öğrencisidir. Araştırma sonucu öğrencilerin metaforları altı kategori altında toplanmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Araştırma yöntemleri, metafor, algı, güdü, üniversite öğrencileri.

**Bilgilendirme:** Bu makale, 2016 yılında yapılan ICQH konferansında Türkçe olarak sunulmuş çalışmanın gözden geçirilerek genişletilmiş İngilizce versiyonudur. Yazar, hakemlerin yapıcı yorumlarına teşekkürü borç bilir.

## Introduction

There is a myriad of studies criticizing the quality and originality of university students' academic papers. Among these, for example, Şen (2013) argued that master's theses and doctoral dissertations in Turkey had limited international impact, and in order to increase the impact factor of their works, students should better know the ways to guide them to succeed in their research. In other words, they should learn about research methods.

Besides, Meyer et al. (2005) maintained that university students—mostly in social sciences—tried to avoid taking courses about research methods as they include statistical approaches. Moreover, by and large, the ones taking the relevant courses have difficulty to pass them.

On the other hand, in a qualitative study on the 3<sup>rd</sup> year university students' academic papers, Uzun et al. (2007) found that principal reasons of plagiarism were the perceived difficulty of the assignment, being insufficiently informed about the assignment, sympathy (or lack thereof) for the instructor and impunity of plagiarists. The most notable result of the study was that impunity ranks last among the mentioned reasons.

Romiszowski (2004) asserted that, in higher education, the course instructors were no longer considered as the main source of students' knowledge. Rather, they are regarded as the manager of the knowledge resources of the students. Thus, for Ali et al. (2011); Banerjee and Brinckerhoff (2002), they should be aware of the diversity of learners and apply suitable evaluation strategies and measurement practices in their course.

The course content is significant for the fulfillment of the student expectations about the course (Moore, 1989; Young and Norgard, 2006). The students have expectations of a given course before they take it. Later, the course experience, together with expectations establish their relevant perceptions and motives. The course is perceived by the students more likely based on how well the lecturer performance fulfills their innate needs, wants, or desires. Thus, instructors should know the students' motives to meet their expectations.

On the grounds mentioned above, this research aims at revealing university students' perceptions on research methods through metaphors and the following is the main research question this study seeks to answer: *What are the university students' perceptions on research methods?*

The study is significant as learning research methods is crucial for university students to succeed in their graduation project or thesis, which are mandatory for their graduation. Besides, the research contributes to the limited literature on this topic, and its findings are expected to be helpful to the relevant courses' lecturers.

The research was conducted at a foundation university in Trabzon / Turkey and is limited to the research methods. So, the results cannot be generalized for other courses.

## 1. Research Design

In the study, phenomenology was used to explore participant students' course experience. Phenomenology seeks to reveal human perceptions and it is both a research and philosophical method that attempt to examine the perceptions of those experiencing a particular phenomenon to identify and describe its essence. It necessitates a new way of looking at things for a more in-depth understanding (Güler et al., 2015; Kavanagh and Knowlton, 2004; Martins, 2008; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008; Woodgate, 2006). Accordingly, in this study seeking to provide for structures of experience of broader range, the students having taken the research methods course were chosen to deal with the full panorama of actual and concrete experience, rather than conducting the research with a higher number of students including the ones not yet having taken the course but having a basic idea about it.

Recently, there has been a tendency to use metaphors more often in education, and this stimulates new research efforts on metaphors' strength to reveal perceptions (Güveli et al., 2011; Hacifazlıoğlu et al., 2011; Saban, 2006). For Gibbs et al. (2004, p. 1191), an increasing number of research papers on cognitive science show that metaphors are an important part of people's imagination, ordinary thought and reason along with being a rhetorical and linguistic figure. Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson (2005); Schmitt (2005) argue that metaphors make it possible to reveal both individual and collective patterns of thought and action as they provide a basis for describing everyday cognitive structures.

Accordingly, in this study, the student perceptions were revealed through metaphors. A similar method was used in several studies—e.g. Geçit and Gençer (2011) about geography, Güveli et al. (2011); Karagöz et al.

(2016) on mathematics, Akhan et al. (2014) about higher teacher education school students' perceptions on social sciences.

Purposive sampling was used in the study. This sampling method is mostly preferred for phenomenological studies as the purpose is to find people who had experienced a certain phenomenon (Erkuş, 2013; Güler et al., 2015). In phenomenological studies, the sampling size is generally between 5 and 25. However, a five-fold increase in the sampling size is possible in consideration with the significance and problem of the study (Güler et al., 2015). Therefore, in this study, the sampling size was estimated at a maximum of 75.

The data were gathered at the end of the 2015-16 educational year from 32 Economic and Administrative Sciences students taking Research Methods course with course code ISL 302, and 47 Master's with thesis along with non-thesis master's degree students taking Research Methods in Social Sciences course with course code SBE 509 during course hours. The study was conducted with both graduate and undergraduate students to have a more comprehensive analysis because graduate students are supposed to have higher levels of critical thinking and lower levels of procrastination. Besides, they are more innately motivated to learn than the under-graduate students due to having chosen to pursue an advanced degree leading to more university experience and greater intrinsic motivation (Artino and Stephens, 2009; Schunk et al., 2008).

The data were collected in classrooms. Participants were asked to complete the sheet beginning with "Research Methods are like.....because....." (Araştırma Yöntemleri.....gibidir. Çünkü.....). The students were given 10 minutes to complete their answer. A total of 7 responses-5 graduate and 2 undergraduate students' response-were eliminated as they lacked a metaphor or explanation for created metaphor. Hence, a total of 72 participants were included in the analysis. Later, metaphors were categorized under different themes, and direct quotations from participants supported established themes.

The reason why the said participants were chosen is that their perception of research methods was shaped through relevant course experience with the same lecturer. Furthermore, in several research papers such as the one of Carlson (2001) and Güveli et al. (2011), the participants were asked to choose among fixed metaphors. Nonetheless, in this study, the participants were asked to create their own metaphor in order to increase creativity.

The most common ways of increasing validity and reliability of phenomenological studies are: (a) Double check of data; (b) Feedback from participants and; (c) Support of a different researcher (Güler et al., 2015). Moreover, as validating themes in the initial and last steps of data analysis is essential, an outside reviewer is requested to give his feedback (Alhojailan, 2012; Miles and Huberman, 1994). In the same vein, in this study, answers were read three times and the researcher verified categories. Then, answer sheets were anonymously read in the classroom, and participants were asked to give their opinions about the metaphors and categories. Finally, answer sheets were read by an outside reviewer to make his own categorization of metaphors, and a comparison was made between two sets of results. There was an agreement on 67 metaphors out of 72. This means a reliability of 93.05 percent based on Miles and Huberman formula - i.e. reliability percentage = [agreement/(agreement+disagreement)]X100).

## 2. Findings and Discussion

A total of 72 participants' mental images about research methods were examined through metaphors. A total of 67 different metaphors were classified into six categories. 30 undergraduate (41.67%) and 42 graduate students (58.33%) participated in the research. 44 out of 72 participants (61.11%) were male, and 28 participants (38.89%) were female. 25 participants out of 42 (59.5%) were enrolled in a graduate program with thesis and 17 (40.5%) without thesis.

Table 1 indicates the undergraduate students' metaphors. Based on these metaphors, six categories were created as follows: *Enjoyment*, *triviality*, *significance*, *difficulty*, *complexity*, and *orderliness*. Among these categories, the significance is the most common with 36.67%. It is followed by enjoyment (26.67%), complexity and orderliness (13.3% for both) categories.

Another noticeable point in the table is that some of the same metaphors are in different categories. This is because the participants' causation for the same metaphor widely differs. For example, one of two participants who created sports metaphor wrote that he/she got so much tired as he/she puzzled his/her brain over research methods while the other explained that he/she would benefit from learning research methods as

he/she would be well prepared for related issues in the future. Therefore, they were classified in different categories–significance and difficulty–as explained above.

**Table 1:** Metaphors of Undergraduate Students

Category	Metaphor	f	%
Enjoyment	Riddle (Bulmaca), Raki (Rakı) (2), Galatasaray SK (Galatasaray), Candy (Şeker), Amusement park (Lunapark), Cellphone (Cep telefonu), a football match on astroturf (Halı saha maçı)	8	26.67
Triviality	Outer space (Uzay boşluğu)	1	3.33
Significance	Skeleton key (Maymuncuk), Sports (Spor), Soup (Çorba), Water (Su), Life (Hayat), Dynamo (Dinamo), Meat and vegetable stew (Türlü yemeği), Ladder (Merdiven), Soldier (Asker), Plum (Erik), Food (Yemek)	11	36.67
Difficulty	Sports (Spor), Water (Su)	2	6.67
Complexity	Rose (Gül), Gordian Knot (Çözülemeyen Düğüm), Soup (Çorba), Me (Ben gibi)	4	13.33
Orderliness	Mechanism (Makina), Skyline (Ufuk çizgisi) (2), Light (Işık)	4	13.33

Graduate students' metaphors are given in Table 2. In the table, it can be seen that the highest number of metaphors are in significance category (66.67%). The second highest rate of metaphors is in orderliness category (16.67%). They are followed by complexity (9.52%), difficulty (4.76%), and enjoyment (2.38%). Graduate students created no metaphor to be labeled for triviality category.

**Table 2:** Metaphors of Graduate Students

Category	Metaphor	f	%
Enjoyment	Giresun city (Giresun)	1	2.38
Significance	Spring (Kaynak), Equation (Denklem), Stair (Basamak), Touchscreen Cellphone (Dokunmatik telefon), Technology (Teknoloji), Bread (Ekmek), Machine (Makina) (2), Key (Anahtar), Compass (Pusula), Water (Su), Engine (Motor), Cow (İnek), Pen (Kalem), Flower (Çiçek), Flag (Bayrak), Navigation (Navigasyon), Glass (Cam), Parachute (Paraşüt), Vehicle (Araç), Ladder (Merdiven), Assistant coach (Yardımcı teknik director), Well (Kuyu), Oxygen (Oksijen), Newborn baby (Küçük bebek), Bridge (Köprü), Mirror (Ayna), Pomegranate (Nar)	28	66.67
Difficulty	Neighbourhood (Mahalle), Root (Kök)	2	4.76

Complexity	Intertwined ball of wool (Dolaşmış yün yumağı), Woman (Kadın), Intertwined string (Dolaşmış ip), Child (Çocuk)	4	9.52
Orderliness	Formula (Formül), Lego (Lego), Poem (Şiir), Vehicle (Araç), Life (Hayat), Pomegranate (Nar), Snow (Kar)	7	16.67

Table 3 illustrates the conceptual categories, the number of different metaphors, frequency and percentage. As seen in the table, the category of research methods as a source of significance has the highest number of metaphors with 39 metaphors (54.17 %), 36 of which are different. On the other hand, the category of research methods as a triviality has the least with just one metaphor (1.39 %).

**Table 3:** Total Metaphors for Research Methods

Conceptual Categories	Number of different metaphors	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Research methods as a source of enjoyment	8	9	12.5
Research methods as a triviality	1	1	1.39
Research methods as a source of significance	36	39	54.17
Research methods as a source of difficulty	4	4	5.56
Research methods as a source of complexity	8	8	11.11
Research methods as a source of orderliness	10	11	15.28
Total	67	72	100

### 2.1. The Significance (or Triviality) of Course Content

In a study about pre-service nursing students, Birks et al., (2011) maintain that the increase in the appreciation of the significance of course content will eventually improve the students' experience in their education, and the value of course content is essential for competency development. They also argue that it is important to identify students' understandings of how studies are related to their future professional nursing role. On the other hand, the lack of significance (triviality) of course content implies either that the content did not make a difference or it was not adequately described so that differences could be noticed (Schram, 1996).

In the current research, an undergraduate student, who created "Skeleton key" metaphor classified in significance category, explained:

*Research methods are like a skeleton key because it opens many different locks / Araştırma yöntemleri maymuncuk gibidir. Çünkü maymuncuk gibi çoğu kapıyı açar.*

A graduate student enrolled in a graduate program without thesis explained his/her stair metaphor in significance category as follows:

*Research methods are like a stair, because it is a springboard for succeeding in master's degree and doctoral programs, thus improving the academic career. / Araştırma yöntemleri basamak gibidir. Çünkü, yüksek lisans, doktora ve akademik kariyerde ilerlemeye olanak sağlar.*

Another participant enrolled in a graduate program without thesis creating ladder metaphor in the same category clarified:

*Research methods are like a ladder because it helps us reach our goals. / Araştırma yöntemleri merdiven gibidir. Çünkü amacımıza merdiven basamakları gibi ulaşmamızı sağlar.*

From this point of view, it can be said that students enrolled in a graduate program without thesis attribute significance to research methods as well.

## 2.2. Enjoyment

According to Lumby (2011), the directive to 'enjoy' has become pervasive in Western culture for the provision of goods and services, and higher education has not escaped this reality.

Enjoyment is a crucial determinant influencing the time an individual allocates to an activity (Dishman et al., 2005; Graves et al., 2010; Kolt, Driver, Giles, 2004). It is, for example, an essential characteristic of the youth sports experience and a construct worthy of independent research and discussion (Scanlan and Lewthwaite, 1986).

Enjoyment is a term usually used by policymakers, practitioners, communication scholars and students as identical with a range of other concepts such as satisfaction and fun (Green, Brock and Kaufman, 2004; Lumby, 2011). However, this is not helpful for scholars researching the presence of enjoyment in the schools. Therefore, it should be clearly defined to avoid ambiguity. Hartley (2006, p. 7) defines enjoyment as an emotion. For him, it is about how we feel, not about what we think.

One might benefit from various disciplines including philosophy to conceptualize the emotion of enjoyment with more clarity. However, according to Warner (1980), enjoyment has received less attention than it deserves in contemporary philosophy. For him, this is unfortunate as there are significant and systematic connections between enjoyment and other concepts such as motivation, reasons for action and beauty (Warner, 1980).

In the literature, there is a myriad of studies about enjoyment and education. For example, in a study exploring the impact of learning styles and online participation on students' self-reported enjoyment levels in distributed learning environments, Simpson and Du (2004) found that learning style affects students' enjoyment level but class participation does not.

In this study, as previously mentioned, enjoyment is the second most common category after significance. The student, who created the "Riddle" metaphor classified in this category, explained:

*Research methods are like a riddle and I take it positively because the riddle is difficult to solve but enjoyable. As you solve it, you become more interested in it and as you become more interested, you'd like to solve it / Araştırma yöntemleri bulmaca gibidir ve benim için olumlu yöndedir. Bunun sebebi ise bulmaca çözmesi zor ama zevkli bir oyundur. Çözdükçe sonunu merak eder, merak ettikçe çözmek istersin*

Another participant who created a metaphor classified in the same category clarified her response this way:

*Research methods are like a football match on astroturf. Even though it makes me tired, I can't help playing it / Araştırma yöntemleri halı saha maçı gibidir. Her ne kadar yorgunluk verse de yine de kendimi gitmekten alıkoynamam.*

## 2.3. Complexity and Difficulty

Alhadeff-Jones (2008) suggests that the notion of complexity denotes the condition or quality of being complex. He further explains that the roots of the word can be traced back to the 14th-century Latin expression 'complexus'. However, it is largely admitted that it is adapted from the modern French, the term derives from 'cum' and 'plectere', meaning, encompassing, encircling, embracing, comprehending, comprising, surrounding. In addition, the use of the word in English has a tendency to be akin to the sense of plaited together, interwoven. More specifically, it usually portrays personality, society, thoughts or feelings that the mind has difficulty in grasping and are not simply disentangled.

In their study on the impact of complexity and complexity theory for project management and project management education, Thomas and Mengel (2008, p. 307) assert that the term complexity is generally used in its dictionary definition rather than in the theoretical context of complexity theory. They further argue that the notion of complexity has been largely studied in different fields such as astronomy, evolutionary, chemistry, biology, meteorology and geology. Nonetheless, its translation into management theory and education has taken a long time.

About the appropriateness of complexity theory to the educators and educational researchers' concerns, Davis (2008) argues that thinking in the perspectives of complexity theory challenges traditional modes of interpretation and, therefore, offers valuable insights into the educational information and content that teachers have at their disposal along with educational research.

In the category of complexity (13.33%), the participant who created the Gordian knot metaphor wrote:

*Research methods are like Gordian knot because first I understand everything clearly but in the following topic, I get confused. This is why it is knotty. / Araştırma yöntemleri çözülemeyen bir düğüm gibidir. Çünkü ilk önce anlıyorum ancak, üstüne başka bir konu gelince karıştırıyorum. O yüzden sanki düğüm üstüne düğüm atılmış gibi oluyor.*

Ting (2000) underlines the difficulty of course content—i.e. difficulty in this study— as one of the important determinants of satisfaction with course design. Accordingly, in the current research, four different metaphors were created by participants in the difficulty category.

#### **2.4. The Orderliness of Course Content**

Hearn (1985) stresses three significant domains of student academic satisfaction: (a) social support factors such as levels of faculty supportiveness and availability of student interaction; (b) teaching style factors such as the orderliness of course presentations and (c) faculty competence factors such as the students' sense of faculty commitment and knowledgeable.

As can be seen in his approach to the satisfaction level of students, he places a certain value on the orderliness of course presentation. Likewise, Hau-Siu Chow (1995) maintains that Asian cultures place a high value on orderliness and conformity in education.

In the current research, the mechanism metaphor classified in the orderliness category (13.33%) was explained by the participant as follows:

*Research methods are like a mechanism because if you do not master it, it is difficult to bring the parts together and make a meaningful whole. / Araştırma yöntemleri makina gibidir. Çünkü bilmediğin zaman anlamak, parçaları birleştirmek ve anlamlı bir bütün oluşturmak zor olur.*

#### **Conclusion**

The objective of the current study is to reveal the main motives of Social Sciences students to learn research methods. Thus, the phenomenology was preferred in the study to reveal the experiences and meanings related to the phenomena. Accordingly, social sciences students' motives were explored through metaphors. As previously said, in the study, the participants were not asked to pick among the choices in order to increase creativity. Hence, 67 different metaphors were created by 72 students on the motives for learning research methods (MLRM). The results drew the introduction of five factors for MLRM. These were significance, difficulty, self-confidence, enjoyment, and orderliness.

In the research, it was revealed that research methods were widely regarded as a source of enjoyment among undergraduate students (26.67%) unlike graduate students (2.38%). Furthermore, both undergraduate and graduate students regard research methods as significant but in different percentage (66.67% for graduate, 36.67% for undergraduate). So, it may be argued that graduate students are significantly more future-oriented than undergraduate students. This result is in line with the studies of Artino and Stephens, 2009 and Schunk et al., 2008.

Finally, this research suggested that the MLRM was mainly shaped by significance, difficulty, self-confidence, enjoyment, and orderliness. Nonetheless, education practices and approaches have changed through ages and generations, as evidenced by the changes from educational practices of Ahi unions in history (Hergüner, 2012a) to the recent application of capability approach in education (Hergüner, 2012b) in the Turkish context.

Therefore, any difficulties identified in this study conducted in the Turkish context should be regarded as opportunities for improvement.

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