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# Asylum-Seekers Experience and Acculturation: A Study of Syrian-University Students in Turkey

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## Abstract

This study explores specific factors that impact the acculturation process among Syrian immigrants at a Turkish University. While providing deeper analysis of Berry (1997)'s acculturation theory, the paper addresses the impact of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences and similarities on acculturation among refugee university students based on fifteen individual interviews. Given the gap in the literature, the aim of this qualitative research is to understand how Syrian-university refugee students adapt and integrate by examining how they obtain linguistic skills, cope with ethnic and cultural differences and develop their educational objectives in relation to future goals. Language barrier is noted as the biggest obstacle against acculturation but for all participants, the linguistic acculturation and short cultural distance contribute to the acculturation process by increasing the ability to interact and communicate with the members of majority culture. Next, ethnic difference poses threat against acculturation but nearly all participants, including Syrian Turkmen, appeal to broader statuses, rather than Turkish per se, for example the ummah consciousness, to create mutual understanding and solidarity between themselves and the majority group. Finally, Syrian university students consider their experiences in Turkey as sojourning and hold firm intentions to return to home country after a period of time.

**Keywords:** Migration, Acculturation, Asylum-seekers, Assimilation, Integration

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# Mülteci Deneyimi ve Kültürel Etkileşim: Türkiye’de Suriyeli Üniversite Öğrencileri Üzerine Bir Çalışma

Yusuf Ziya Karipek\*

## Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de bir devlet üniversitesinde eğitim gören Suriyeli göçmen öğrencilerin kültürel etkileşim süreçlerini etkileyen belirli faktörleri ele almaktadır. Berry (1997)’in kültürleşme teorisini derinlemesine analiz ederken, mülteci üniversite öğrencileri arasındaki kültürel farklılıkların ve benzerliklerin kültürleşme üzerindeki etkisini, on beş bireysel mülakat temelinde ele alıyor. Literatürdeki boşluğu göz önüne alarak, bu araştırmanın amacı, Suriyeli üniversiteli mülteci öğrencilerin dil becerilerini nasıl elde ettiklerini, etnik ve kültürel farklılıkların üstesinden gelip gelmediklerini ve eğitim hedeflerini geleceğe yönelik olarak nasıl geliştirdiklerini inceleyerek Türk toplumuna uyum ve entegrasyonlarını anlamaya yönelik bir nitel çalışmadır. Dil engeli, kültürel etkileşime en büyük engel olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır fakat tüm çalışmada yer alan öğrenciler için, dil açısından çabuk uyum sağlama ve Suriye ile Türkiye arasındaki yakın kültürel mesafe, çoğunluk kültürünü oluşturan Türk halkı ile etkileşim ve iletişim kurma olanaklarını artırmaktadır. Yine, etnik farklılıklar kültürel etkileşime karşı tehdit oluşturmaktadır. Yaklaşık olarak tüm katılımcılar, Suriyeli Türkmenler de dahil olmak üzere, kendilerini tanımlarken, Suriye ile ilişkilendirmektedirler. Ancak, yerel halk ile ilişkilendiğinde ise, Türk ve Suriyeli kimliği yerine, daha kapsayıcı kimliklere, örneğin ümmet bilincine sığınarak çoğunluğu oluşturan ev sahibi toplumun bireyleriyle karşılıklı anlayış ve dayanışmayı geliştirmeyi hedeflemektedirler. Son olarak, Suriyeli üniversite öğrencileri Türkiye’deki öğrenim hayatlarını geçici süreli öğrenci olarak değerlendirmekte ve belli bir süre sonra Suriye’ye geri dönme konusunda sabit fikirlere sahiptirler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göç, Kültürleşme, Mülteci, Asimilasyon, Çokkültürlülük

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## **1. Introduction**

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, there has been a large influx of Syrian asylum-seekers into Konya, a city in the Central Anatolia Region of Turkey. Nearly three million Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey and Konya has accepted nearly 65,000 asylum-seekers in recent years. The two neighbor countries—Turkey and Syria—shared long history under Ottoman rule until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the recent influx of Syrian asylum-seekers has brought two communities into continuous first-hand contact. New waves of Syrian asylum-seekers have continued to enter Turkey but unfortunately Syrian-university students have been largely ignored in the academic research. Given the gap in the literature, the aim of this research is to understand how Syrian-university refugee students adapt and integrate in Turkish society by examining how they obtain linguistic skills, cope with ethnic and cultural differences and develop their educational objectives in relation to future goals.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Early Definitions of Acculturation**

The decision to leave one's country of origin, voluntarily or involuntarily, brings two groups of people in close contact and the term "acculturation" refers to the changes that take place between the members of these groups presumably so that they become more compatible with each other. The early classical definition of acculturation was proposed by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits<sup>1</sup> "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups."<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is the process of change and adaptation as a result of continuous contact between individuals of different cultural origins, for instance asylum-seekers and host country members. In addition, the emphasis on *continuous* in the definition distinguishes acculturation as "the result of long-term contact among individuals from different cultures

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville Herskovits, Memorandum for the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 1936, v. 38, p.149–152.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.149.

(excluding other short-term interactions)” and highlights the change in both immigrant and host cultures, not just on the acculturating group that is accommodating into the host culture.<sup>3</sup> The bidirectional nature of acculturation allows room for accommodation between the dominant and non-dominant groups. According to Redfield et al (1936), acculturation did not indicate that assimilation would ensue automatically<sup>4</sup>. In other words, the early definitions of acculturation by Redfield et al (1936) acknowledge the change in both groups but do not necessarily offer more sophisticated acculturation measures.

In 1954, Social Science Research Council incorporated a psychological dimension into the understanding of acculturation and stated:

Acculturation is a...culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems. Its dynamics can be seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors.<sup>5</sup>

Basically, in addition to assimilation, social scientists added three more kinds of acculturation: *reactive* (triggering resistance to change in both groups), *creative* (stimulating new cultural forms, not found in either of the cultures in contact), and *delayed* (initiating changes that appear more fully years late).<sup>6</sup> What makes the definition by SSRC different is the fact that it embraces change in the host culture and intergroup relations as important units of the acculturation process.<sup>7</sup> These two early definitions—developed by Redfield et al. and researchers at SSRC—broaden our understanding on how new comers react to the surrounding culture and change as a result of exposure to members of the host nation.

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela Balls Organista, Gerardo Marin and Kevin M.Chun, *The psychology of ethnic groups in the United States*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2010, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Amado M. Padilla and William Perez, Acculturation, social identity, and social cognition: a new perspective, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 2003, p.35-55, p.37.

<sup>5</sup> Social Science Research Council, “Acculturation: An exploratory formulation”, *American Anthropologist*, 1954, v.56, p.973-1000, p.974.

<sup>6</sup> John Berry, “Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2005, vol.29, issue 6, p.697-712.

<sup>7</sup> Rupert Brown and Samuel L. Gaertner, *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology Intergroup Processes*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

## 2.2. Contemporary Definitions of Acculturation

Furthermore, two major theories in the field of cross-cultural psychology explain and guide studies on acculturation: “bipolar” or undimensional model<sup>8</sup> and plural bidimensional model.<sup>9</sup> Firstly, Milton Gordon (1964) who studied the assimilation of minorities in America suggested that immigrants would be eventually integrated into the host society in an undimensional process. In other words, Gordon (1964) constrains the definition of acculturation and identifies with only one phase of assimilation—cultural or behavioral assimilation. He assumed that minority groups ultimately become an integral part of dominant society; thus explained acculturation as “change of cultural patterns to those of the host society.”<sup>10</sup> The immigrated group changes until they lose different aspects of their traditional culture and become like the receiving nation. For instance, it is expected that migrants achieve proficiency in the language of the receiving country and decrease proficiency in their heritage language. Secondly, on the other hand, developed a bidimensional model in which an immigrant may follow more than one path in acculturation: they could embrace only dominant culture or embrace only culture of origin or embrace two cultures at the same time or possibly reject them both at the same time.

So using a bidimensional model, found that not all incoming groups become like the dominant group. Instead they develop four distinct models of acculturation,; assimilation, marginalization, separation and integration. Simply, the model was based on two important decisions as part of acculturation strategies, how well the immigrant maintains relationships with members of the receiving country; and how much the immigrant retains of his or her cultural identity and characteristics.<sup>11</sup> In this assimilation strategy,

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<sup>8</sup> Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

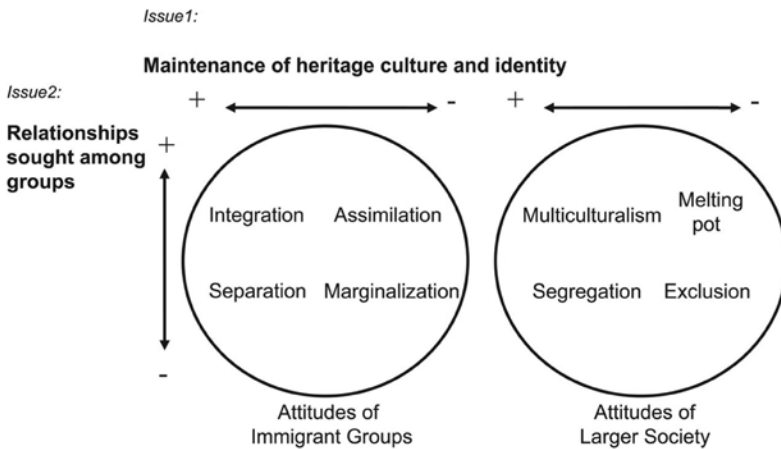
<sup>9</sup> John Berry, *Human Ecology and Cognitive Style: Comparative Studies In Cultural And Psychological Adaptation*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> John Berry, “Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2005, vol.29, issue 6, p.697-712 and David Sam and John Berry (edts), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.12.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew John Soerens, A participatory assessment of immigrant integration in a low-income suburban neighborhood. *College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations.*, 2010, Paper 13. <http://via.library.depaul.edu/etd/13> and Bellah

individuals may abandon their culture of origin and prioritize the culture of the receiving country. On the contrary, in separation strategy, individuals may have little interest with the new culture and may resort to retaining the culture of origin. In marginalization strategy, individuals neither maintain their cultural identity nor build relationships with those of the receiving country. Finally, in integration strategy, immigrants maintain their culture of origin and adopt their culture of destination at the same time. It is this group of people who will value both cultural maintenance and intergroup relations. Taken together, the newcomers develop four strategies based on their desire to maintain their culture of origin and their desire to embrace the values of the receiving country.

**Figure 1. The Berry Model From the Point of View of Migrants**



Furthermore, Berry distinguished acculturation in terms of ‘group level’ and ‘individual level’ impacts. At the individual level, factors existing prior to acculturation and during acculturation contribute to, or limit, the outcome of acculturation process. Factors prior to moving into a new country include variables such as an individual’s age, gender, education, status, motivation, cultural distance (language, religion, etc.) and factors during

Nanjekho Kiteki, *Acculturation and Psychosocial Adjustment of African Adolescent Refugees in the United States: The Role of Social Support*, Greensboro. 2011.

acculturation process include variables such as length of acculturation, acculturation strategies (attitudes and behaviors), social support, and social attitudes (prejudice and discrimination).<sup>12</sup> The outcome of an individual's acculturation depends on all the features that he or she brings to a new culture and all the factors that he or she encounters in the receiving culture. These factors are examined extensively to understand how they impact the acculturation process.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, migrant groups may go through profound changes at group-level on multiple areas including physical, biological, economic, social and cultural changes. Physical changes include urbanization, population density while biological changes include new dietary intake and exposure to new diseases. In addition, loss of status and new employment opportunities for the group are related to economic changes. Social changes include changes such as disrupted communities and the need to form new relationships. Finally, cultural changes—the core of acculturation process—range from superficial changes such as food and clothing to deeper changes such as language shifts, marital assimilation and religious conversions. All the group level context variables including physical, biological, economic, social and cultural changes which occur on a larger scale also play an integral role in migrants' acculturation process.

### **2.3. Acculturation in Youth**

Acculturation and adaptation of adults in the host nation have been studied extensively however; there is considerable lack of research on these phenomena among youth.<sup>14</sup> The levels of acculturation for young adults may differ from those of adults because people who immigrate at younger ages are more likely to make faster transition to the receiving culture than immigrants who come at much older ages and similarly older immigrants tend to

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<sup>12</sup> Ben Kuo, "Coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation among migrants: a theoretical and empirical review and synthesis of the literature", *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 2014, vol.2, issue 1, p.16-33.

<sup>13</sup> David Sam, "Psychological adaptation of adolescents with immigrant backgrounds", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 2000, vol.140, issue 1, p.5-25

<sup>14</sup> Micheal Aronowitz, M., "The social and emotional adjustment of immigrant children: a review of the literature. *International Migration Review*", Summer 1984, vol. 18, no.2, p. 237-251.

retain their native cultures compared to younger immigrants. For instance, Berry examined over 5,000 immigrant youth in 13 countries (ages 13 to 18; mean age = 15 years and 4 months for both groups) based on three core questions.<sup>15</sup> These questions included: How do immigrant youth deal with the process of acculturation? How well do they adapt? Are there important relationships between how they acculturate and how well they adapt? He concluded that the four distinct acculturation profiles described above were common in immigrant youth: the largest number of immigrant youth fell into the integrated cluster; the second largest cluster for separation; the third cluster fell into assimilation; the remaining opted for marginalization.

Consistent with these findings, integration is the most preferred and practiced by immigrant youth in other research studies.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to earlier models<sup>17</sup>, it is found that it is possible for a migrant to maintain the culture of origin and adapt to the culture of the receiving country.

#### **2.4. The Case of Syrian Asylum-seekers in Turkey**

In this study, these models of acculturation will be applied to the case of Syrian refugee university students in Turkey. Since its beginning, the Syrian civil war has killed hundred thousands of people and led to the displacement of more than nearly five million people as asylum-seekers mostly in neighboring countries. Nearly three million Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey. As a result, Syrian asylum-seekers now came in close contact with Turkish citizens and began to adapt use of the Turkish language and culture. Similarly, Turkish citizens came in close contact with Syrian asylum-seekers and began to learn more about people of different

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<sup>15</sup> John Berry, "Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2005, vol.29, issue 6, p.697-712.

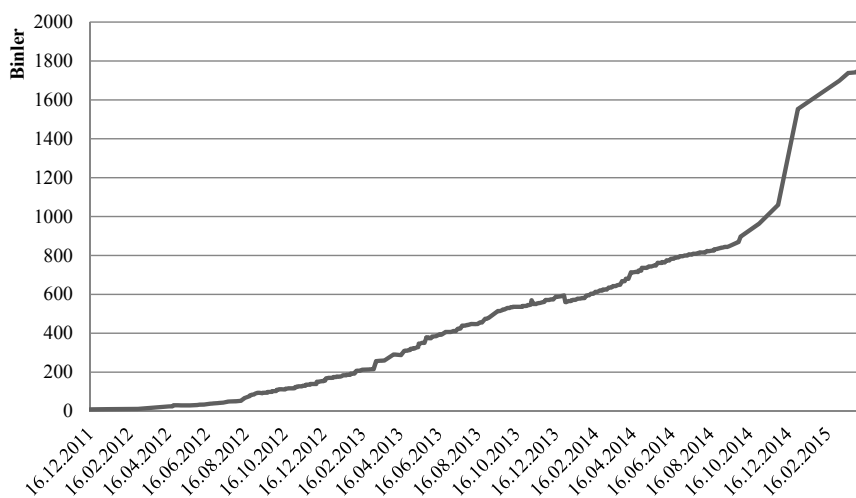
<sup>16</sup> Seth Schwartz and Jennifer Unger, Byron Zamboanga, Jose Szapocznik, "Rethinking the concept of acculturation: implications for theory and research", *American Psychologist*, 2010, vol.65, no.4, p. 237-251 and David Sam, "Psychological adaptation of adolescents with immigrant backgrounds", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 2000, vol.140, issue 1, p.5-25 and Derya Güngör and Marc H. Bornstein, "Culture-general and -specific associations of attachment avoidance and anxiety with perceived parental warmth and control among Turkish and Belgian adolescents", *Journal of Adolescence*, 2010, vol. 33, issue 5, p.593-602.

<sup>17</sup> Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.



language and culture. And in Turkey, there are 2,764,500 registered Syrian asylum-seekers as November 3, 2016. In addition, it is estimated that roughly 10% of the total Syrian population in Turkey is 18 to 22 years old based on demographic statistics from Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics.<sup>18</sup> This particular study focuses on university-age Syrian young adults and their acculturation process.

**Figure 2. Syrian Asylum-seekers in Turkey**



Source: United Nations Human Rights Council

## 2.5. The Case of Syrian-University Students in Turkey

To date, nearly all of the literature on acculturation and migration focuses on the experiences of migrants in Europe and North America (i.e. USA and Canada) and ultimately, the literature reflects the experiences of voluntary migrants (i.e. immigrants, international students/sojourners). The experiences of specific involuntary migrants, such as asylum-seekers, are

<sup>18</sup> Keith D. Watenpaug and Adrienne L. Fricke, “Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syria’s Refugee Students and Academics in Jordan” (May 2013), [https://www.academia.edu/3474289/Uncounted\\_and\\_Unacknowledged\\_Syria\\_s\\_Refugee\\_University\\_Students\\_and\\_Academ](https://www.academia.edu/3474289/Uncounted_and_Unacknowledged_Syria_s_Refugee_University_Students_and_Academ). (n.d.) Retrieved May 31, 2015.

very much neglected in acculturation studies.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, most refugee studies do not focus on teenagers and young adults. And, the case of the integration and adaptation of Syrian refugee university students is rarely addressed in the literature.

The current reports indicate that Syrian university-age young adults face two major barriers: difficulty of learning Turkish (and English if instruction takes place in English) and the complexity of Turkish educational system.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the need to work constitutes another barrier to education across all age groups for Syrian university age students since financial problems have some or a large impact on supporting themselves and their families<sup>21</sup>. Marriage and early marriage (marriage that occurs under the age of 18 years) have been utilized as alternative strategy for financial difficulties.

Taken together, much of the existing literature on acculturation and migration focuses on the experiences of migrants in Europe and North America (i.e. USA and Canada) and ultimately, the literature reflect the experiences of voluntary migrants (i.e. immigrants, international students/sojourners). The experiences of specific involuntary migrants, such as asylum-seekers, are very much neglected in acculturation studies<sup>22</sup>. This is a weakness in the literature. In addition, there exists a lack of literature on Syrian university in Turkish universities and much less attention has been paid in the literature to the experiences of their experiences in a new country. It is hoped, in addition to providing a brief overview of literature on acculturation, that this study will attempt to address the experiences of Syrian university students and examine their acculturation process.

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<sup>19</sup> Kuo, B., "Coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation among migrants: a theoretical and empirical review and synthesis of the literature", *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 2013, vol.2, no.1, p.16-33.

<sup>20</sup> Keith D. Watenpaug and Adrienne L. Fricke, "Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syria's Refugee Students and Academics in Jordan" (May 2013), from [https://www.academia.edu/3474289/Uncounted\\_and\\_Unacknowledged\\_Syria\\_s\\_Refugee\\_University\\_Students\\_and\\_Academ](https://www.academia.edu/3474289/Uncounted_and_Unacknowledged_Syria_s_Refugee_University_Students_and_Academ). (n.d.), Retrieved May 31, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Stephanie Dorman, "Educational Needs Assessment for Urban Syrian Refugees in Turkey", 1 September 2014, Retrieved May 31, 2015, from <http://www.alnap.org/resource/19464>

<sup>22</sup> Ben Kuo, "Coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation among migrants: a theoretical and empirical review and synthesis of the literature", *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 2013, vol.2, no.1, p.16-33.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. The Present Research**

The purpose of this research is to assess Syrian university students' perceptions of migrating to a new country and to explore students' coping strategies during their acculturation process. This study will apply the acculturation theories described above to assess how factors, including ethnicity, religion and language influence Syrian university-age students' academic aspiration and shape the acculturation process. Pursuing these questions and drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews with fifteen Syrian asylum-seekers at a Turkish university, I explore how language learning affects acculturation process; what role ethnic and religious identities play in acceptance; what role cultural distance between two countries plays in adaptation process; and how future goals shape how they evaluate university education.

#### **3.2. Methodology**

The study was conducted at a public university—Necmettin Erbakan University (NEU)—located in Konya, Turkey that enrolled approximately 26,000 degree-seeking students in the beginning of Fall 2014. University students of Syrian origin who have attended NEU were the targeted population for this research project. For the academic year 2014-2015, NEU have enrolled twenty-six (26) Syrian students of varying associate degree and undergraduate programs. The list of the students which included only the name of the students and their departmental affiliation was obtained from Department of Student Services at NEU. No contact information such as e-mail address, or cell phone number was divulged to the researcher for confidentiality and safety reasons. Additionally, application and permission to conduct research with human subjects was submitted and approved by the CUNY Human Research Protection Program (HRPP).

These 26 Syrian students were comprised of 10 males and 16 females. The participants were recruited by using social media and word of mouth. All the participants were expected to take part in the study but only 15 students agreed to participate in interview sessions. The duration of years Syrian university students had lived in Turkey ranged between 1 and 4 years ( $M = 2.8$  years). Additionally, participants' ages ranged from 18 to 23

years (Median = 20.4). Next, for this study, data was collected in the forms of semi-structured interviews. In two cases, two participants were interviewed at once and all the other participants were interviewed individually. The interviews lasted eight minutes to two hours and were conducted in Turkish language. The primary methods of recording data in this research are voice-recording and note-taking during the interviews. Seven interviews were recorded, to which all interviewees consented and two of these interviews were conducted on Facebook messenger: one male participant was in a distant location and the other female participant rejected face-to-face interview but agreed to participate for an interview on the Internet.

**Table 1. Syrian Students at Necmettin Erbakan University by Department**

<b>Department</b>	<b>Number</b>
Economy Department	1
Business Administration	3
International Relations	1
Science Department	1
Department of Theology	7
Department of Medicine	3
Department of Education	5
Department of Health Sciences	3
Engineering Department	2

The written report of the interview was an amalgam of summaries and notes of what the participant said generally. Themes were identified in all interviews and the data were coded with relation to these themes. Therefore, in any qualitative research, analysis is not a separate entity from the research process and “the collection, coding and analysis of data are inextricably bound up with each other”.<sup>23</sup> Before the interview, participants

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Emerson, *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and formulations* (2nd ed.). Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 2001.

were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and were given assurance that participant will remain anonymous in any written reports. In addition, if they find some of the questions farfetched or difficult to answer, then they may refuse to answer the questions and even withdraw from the study at any point.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, each participant was given written and oral consent forms. An interview guide was employed for semi-structured interviews. Even though the questions were content-focused, the interviewer was not restricted to deploying those questions. The role of the interviewer was to redirect the conversation in a way that would be relevant the research questions. As data was coded and systematized; emerging themes were analyzed in the light of the existing literature. Next, general similarities and differences with the literature review were addressed in discussion and suggestions for future studies were identified.

The grounded theory approach, first proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 was implemented in this qualitative research. This data-driven approach relies on “discovery and theory development rather logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, while data is collected, it is also subsequently analyzed at the same time. The data was divided into initial codes along the process of coding interview transcripts and further focused coding has preceded. Coding allowed the researcher to identify similarities and differences within bits of data to categorize and label the data. Next, written elaborations of ideas about the data and the coded categories were written.<sup>26</sup> Based on the data, the researcher developed a theory derived directly from the data.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing social settings*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc, 1984.

<sup>25</sup> Kathy Charmaz, The grounded theory method: An explication and interpretation. In: Emerson, R. M. (ed.). *Contemporary field research*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1983, p.110.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Dey, *Grounding grounded theory: Guidelines for qualitative inquiry*, San Diego: Academic Press, 1999.

## 4. Findings

This section will present the main findings of the research, including 1) the importance of language acquisition, 2) cultural distance, 3) ethnic identity, and 4) desire to return to homeland.

### 4.1. Language Acquisition

Language competency is one of the primary predictors of socio-cultural integration<sup>28</sup>; all of the participants expressed that learning Turkish is the primary step to communicate with others which in turn influences the level of integration. Three participants who transferred to one of the high schools in Turkey continued their education without participating in special language courses because there were no available language courses for high students. Except one individual who passed the placement exam, others who essentially obtained their high school diploma in Syria report that they had participated in Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center (TOMER) courses for at least 6 months. It is also important to note that few people in Turkey speak Arabic and therefore newcomers feel the pressure to learn the language of the host nation in order to converse with them.

In this research, some clearly found learning the language easier than others did, but for all learning the language of the host country was a key piece of acclimating to Turkey. With the exception of Turkmen who speak fluent Turkish before they arrive, all Arab Syrians who participated in the interviews felt it necessary to put in the considerable effort to learn the language.

The living and social arrangements affected how long it will take to master the language: Those who spend more time among the host nation members and interact with native speakers in the target language were more likely to

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<sup>28</sup> Walter McManus and William Gould, Finis Welch, "Earnings of Hispanic men: the role of English language proficiency", *Journal of Labor Economics*, 1983, vol.1, issue 2, p.101-130; Emily Keyes and Catherine Kane, "Belonging and adapting: mental health of Bosnian refugees living in the United States", *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 2004, vol.25, issue.8, p.809-831; Elisabeth Elmeroth, "From refugee camp to solitary confinement: illiterate adults learn Swedish as a second language", *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 2011, vol.47, issue.4, p.431-449.

learn the new language more quickly and easily than others. One such case is Ali who is a 20-year-old male student residing in a district with very low Syrian population who said:

It was very easy. I learned the language in eight months. I stayed in a dorm and I learned by speaking a lot. There are not a lot of Syrians in Seydisehir [a district that is 90 km away from Konya].

Language acquisition process is not very easy for others and one student who is a 24-year-old described how he couldn't even master pronunciation of a very basic phrase and:

Turkish is a difficult language. Ooh! I remember how I was not able to pronounce Nasilsiniz? (How are you?). I worked on simple sentences for days...If I interact more with native speakers, I will learn and pronounce quickly but I speak Arabic at home all the time. Some of my friends who stay with native speakers have really improved their understanding and pronunciation. [Besir, Male].

Clearly, not all students find comfortable authentic learning environment to interact with native speakers and thus language learning experience can sometimes lead to isolation, depression and other psychological problems.<sup>29</sup> Similarly participants blame language inadequacy as the reason why they feel inadequate and insecure in the host nation. Feeling worthless and abandoned had strong ties with linguistic ability. Feeling unworthy described by a number of participants is a recurring theme among recently asylum-seekers in the first months. Most interviewees express great difficulty with Turkish and highlighted that Turkish proficiency was the core challenge for them and stated that inability to interact with people heavily affected their self-confidence. Participants' ability to communicate with the native speakers is particularly important for socialization and acculturation. However, willingness to acquire the host nation language and willingness to communicate are more likely to lead to multicultural social ties (i.e., contact with people from outside of Turkey), and bicultural social ties, (i.e., contact with people from the host country).

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<sup>29</sup> Sun- Mee Kang, "Measurement of acculturation, scale formats, and language competence: their implications for adjustment", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 2006, vol.37, issue.6, p.669-693, and H. Colin Gallagher, "Willingness to communicate and cross-cultural adaptation: 12 communication and acculturative stress as transaction", *Applied Linguistics*, 2013, vol.34, issue.1, p.53-73; Edwin Gómez, "The ethnicity and public recreation participation model", *Leisure Sciences*, 2002, vol.24, issue 2, p.123-142.

Some clearly found language acquisition relatively easier than others did, but learning the language of the host country was a crucial part of acclimating to Turkey for all participants. The more learners immersed themselves in the new culture, the quicker they felt comfort and improved linguistic skills. In Turkey, Arab Syrians usually speak their native language with their family members and other Syrians. Therefore, learning the language of the host country is a substantial aspect of acculturation because it allows the individual to make connections with the others and become accepted more quickly as a member of society.

## 4.2. Cultural Distance

The distance between asylum-seekers' culture and the culture of the host community plays a vital role in adapting to a new environment.<sup>30</sup> First, Turkey is a country surrounded by water on three sides and share the longest border—822 km (511 mi)—with Syria. Turkey and Syria are neighbor countries and families, especially in border cities such as Sanliurfa, Hatay and Gaziantep have or had families across the border. For instance, currently 20% of the Syrian asylum-seekers living in city center of Hatay stay with their Turkish relatives<sup>31</sup>. Similarly, in this study, eight out of fifteen interviewees expressed that they either have been to Turkey or have family members, including brothers, aunts and parents who have lived in Turkey. Another participant whose father graduated from college in Ankara shared how he felt comfort in coming to Turkey. It is evident that having acquaintances in Turkey provided a heightened sense of connection to Turkey and Turkish culture.

In fact, Syria and Turkey are geographically and culturally close countries. All the interviews refer to a short cultural distance as the reason of com-

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<sup>30</sup> Irina Galchenko and Fons Van de Vijver, "The role of perceived cultural distance in the acculturation of exchange students in Russia", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2007, vol.31, no.2, p.181-197; John Berry, *Human Ecology and Cognitive Style: Comparative Studies In Cultural And Psychological Adaptation*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976, and Colleen Ward and Antony Kennedy, "Locus of control, mood disturbance and social difficulty during cross-cultural transitions", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1992, vol.16, issue 2, p.175-194.

<sup>31</sup> ORSAM Report, "Suriyeli Mültecilerin Türkiye'ye Ekonomik Etkileri: Sentetik Bir Modelleme", Retrieved May 31, 2015, from [http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/Uploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/201519\\_rapor196tur.pdf](http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/Uploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/201519_rapor196tur.pdf), p.26.



fort believing that cultural similarities between two communities lead to a higher level of acceptance and appreciation of the host nation for asylum-seekers.

One of the key elements that make Syrian asylum-seekers comfortable in Turkey has been sharing the same religion. Sharing the same religion means having similar customs, beliefs, norms and festivals including Eid. In this study, subjects express that sharing the same religion represents an advantage and strengthens the bond between the two groups. It is clear that sharing the same religion of Islam—more specifically sharing the same sect of Sunni Islam—provides communality between recently arrived asylum-seekers and Muslim Turkish citizens.

Our cultures, religions, sects are approximately the same. It is the same, it is the same. The food is the same and clothing is the same. It does not matter. It is not different from Aleppo, even the buildings, villages are similar. Even domes of mosques are similar [Ahmad, Male].

Six participants reported that they have attended religious vocational schools known as imam-hatips or the Quran Courses Centers known as Kur'an Kursları, for at least a year. Participants expressed that engagement in these activities not only has initiated contact with the members of the host nation but also has boosted her self-confidence to attend a university in this new country.

As shown above, benefits of joining such religious institutions and community centers provide a common ground between members of two groups and ease the acculturation transition for the newcomers. Not all participants believe that that sharing the same religion yields an additional benefit in acculturating to the host nation. But for most, sharing the same religion—despite their ethnic and linguistic differences—allows them to share the same religious institutions such as mosques, religious vocational schools and make them more like an “insider”.

### **4.3. Ethnic Identity**

Syrian asylum-seekers entering Turkey today represent a particularly diverse range of ethnic groups, including Arab, Turkmen, Christians, and Kurds. In this study, all the participants were asked to self-identify ethnicity. In response, 10 have identified themselves as Syrian Arab, 5 partici-

pants as Syrian Turkmen and among these one defined as yörük [nomad] specifically. All participants, regardless of their ethnicities, called Syria as homeland and expressed a high-level of attachment to their background in Syria.

Turkmen is a minority group in Syria which consists of 16 percent of Syrian population. Nearly 1.5 million Turkmen speak Turkish and another two million Turkmen only speak Arabic. Similarly, Turkmen Syrian participants noted that they used to follow two courses of action in Syria: stay in compact Turkmen communities and assimilate into Arab community. They feel that assimilation policy in Syria required Turkmen identity and traits to melt into the existing Syrian Arab identity. After the start of civil war in Syria, Turkey was their primary choice. Syrian Turkmen participants noted that have expressed identity crisis of not being able to quite fit in either culture yet manage to work as feeling ostracized in both societies. Their high expectations of being accepted for their Turkish ethnic heritage and linguistic competence in the receiving country were not fulfilled and therefore display the resentment of feeling ostracized and lesser. One Turkmen participant who is a 21-year-old male describes how he hoped to be defined as Turkish in Turkey but he found himself still labeled as Syrian:

In other areas of life, sometimes you are treated like less-human or less-deserving just because we came from Syria. *[I say]* We are Turkmen just like you are Turk; *[they say]* no you came from Syria. We were not able to hold high positions in Syria either; because we were Turkmen. Did not we fight for the unity of the Ottoman Empire together? Did not we defend our empire against Western imperialism? We sent soldiers and fought for the well-being of the empire. Now, when you are treated and labeled as traitor, you feel sorrow, pain in your heart [Necip, Male].

In this refugee crisis, not being accepted by the receiving culture as a group member is a common experience for participants. The core issue is not necessarily about racial or ethnic discrimination but *rather is about the refugee phenomenon*. The receiving community construct quite number of negative image associated with the Syrian community. In short, the refugee group—regardless their ethnic similarities and differences—can be regarded as the unwanted, inferior group in the receiving culture because of the nature of being refugee. Nevertheless, the scope of this short study is limited to investigating the acculturation experiences of Syrian univer-

sity students. Further research could include studies on attitudes of Turkish public toward Syrian population.

In dealing with issue of identity, refugee university students develop adaptive coping strategies and usually take refuge in broader aspect of social identity. The concept of ummah—the consideration of Muslims as whole body—is such as a phenomenon that encompasses all the different ethnic groups. When discussing the importance of solidarity, a 21-year-old Syrian Arab participant explained how one should think outside their ethnicity and should consider other people as part of a whole:

We have to think about our children, our ummah... We should not think about ourselves only, we should think about the entire ummah. We should not think about Arabs only. There are Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen. All of them are the same ummah [Necip, Male].

Nearly all participants, including Syrian Turkmen, appeal to broader statuses, rather than Turkish per se, for example the ummah consciousness, to create mutual understanding and solidarity between themselves and the majority group. These broad concepts provide tolerance for ethnic diversity and open space for a common ground. Although short cultural distance helps asylum-seekers to adapt to the new environment relatively easy, it is not enough. These common identity traits, for example the concept of ummah, prevent tension and conflicts that may arise as a result of direct interaction between two members of two groups.

#### **4.4. Desire to Return to Homeland**

Our interviews also suggest that most respondents, including Turkmen, clearly affiliate themselves with Syria and display a high level of desire to return to homeland in Syria. While two participants expressed uncertainty about the future, all the others indicated that they intended to return to Syria eventually. Whether they resettle in another country, or remain in Turkey during this civil war, it is clear that they share a profound sense of responsibility to be part of the process of renewal and rebuilding in the post-war Syria.

Compulsory military service raises concerns among young adults in Syria. Instead of serving in compulsory military service, interviewees regard uni-

versity education even at the expense of living in a new country and away from parents, as a profound investment for the future.

Syrian students pursuing higher education abroad embrace the challenges and believe that their investment in education will benefit the entire society by constructing a bright future and a better life in Syria. They agree that their sense of rebuilding Syria depends how much they equip themselves with skills in university and how they prepare themselves for future careers.

## 5. Discussion

In short, four key dimensions of acculturation were identified: 1) Acquisition of the majority language, 2) cultural distance, 3) ethnic identity and 4) desire to return to homeland. Major similarities exist with previous research studies. First, acquisition of the language *over time* has strong effects in facilitating adaptation for Syrian university students. Though proficiency in the language varies, all the participants improve their familiarity with the members of the host nation and eventually develop a sense of belonging and identification in the host society while learning the language.<sup>32</sup> All the participants in the study—all native Arabic speakers—discussed their language acquisition process as a key tool for social communication. In other words, the findings corroborated claims in the literature that dual language competencies considered the optimal outcome of the acculturation/ dual culture acquisition process.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, individuals who were less motivated to learn the host country's language expressed higher levels of frustration and confusion. Participat-

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<sup>32</sup> Walter McManus and William Gould, Finis Welch, "Earnings of Hispanic men: the role of English language proficiency", *Journal of Labor Economics*, April 1983, vol.1, issue 2, p.101-130; Emily Keyes and Catherine Kane, "Belonging and adapting: mental health of Bosnian refugees living in the United States", *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 2004, vol.25, issue.8, p.809-831; Elisabeth Elmeroth, "From refugee camp to solitary confinement: illiterate adults learn Swedish as a second language", *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 2011, vol.47, issue.4, p.431-449.

<sup>33</sup> Teresa La Fromboise and Hardin L.K. Coleman, Jennifer Gerton, "Psychological impact of biculturalism: evidence and theory", *Psychological Bulletin*, 1993, vol.114, issue.3, p.395-412; Claudio Toppelberg and Brian A. Collins, "Language, Culture, and Adaptation in Immigrant Children", *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 2010, vol.19, issue. 4, p.697-717.

ing in community centers has improved linguistic skills and has alleviated the level of frustration. In addition, our findings correlate with how leisure activities strengthen their sense of community.<sup>34</sup> This alone should demonstrate that participation in community-based centers, in addition to extracurricular activities, will help asylum-seekers see their commonalities with the members of the host nation and break down the barriers of fear.

Second, this study confirms previous findings in the cultural distance literature by demonstrating how shorter cultural distance leads to more positive adaptation. This is the case for sojourners and immigrants<sup>35</sup> and for indigenous people.<sup>36</sup> Our study resonates with Berry's suggestion that the assumption that the smaller the difference between the host culture and one's own, the easier the acculturation process.<sup>37</sup> The findings advance research on cultural distance by proposing short cultural distance lead to fewer sociocultural difficulties and allow young adults—particularly female adolescents—to participate in the mainstream culture.

Third, ethnic identity stands as a significant barrier to adaptation and integration, as when both the refugee population and the host society desire to remain distinct from each other. Ethnic identity is the feeling of belonging to a specific ethnic group and the extent to which one affirms association in the group.<sup>38</sup> Participants clearly affiliate themselves with Syria and clear affiliation leads to distinguishing the refugee population from the majority.

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<sup>34</sup> Baruti Amisi, "An exploration of the livelihood strategies of Durban Congolese refugees", *The UN Refugee Agency Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit*, Working Paper No.123, 2006, Edwin Gómez, "The ethnicity and public recreation participation model", *Leisure Sciences*, 2002, vol.24, issue 2, p.123-142.

<sup>35</sup> Colleen Ward and Antony Kennedy, "Locus of control, mood disturbance and social difficulty during cross-cultural transitions", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1992, vol.16, issue 2, p.175-194; Colleen Ward and Wendy Searle, "The impact of value discrepancies and cultural identity on psychological and sociocultural adjustment of sojourners", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1991, vol.15, issue 2, p.209-224.

<sup>36</sup> John Berry, *Human Ecology and Cognitive Style: Comparative Studies in Cultural And Psychological Adaptation*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.27-40.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Phinney, "The multi-group ethnic identity measure: a new scale for use with diverse groups", *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 1992, vol.7, issue 2, p.156-176; James Hsiao, Michele Wittig, "Acculturation among three racial/ethnic groups of host and immigrant adolescents", *American Journal of Community Psychology Am J Community Psychol*, 2008, vol.42, issue 3-4, p.286-297.

On the other hand, Turkmen Syrians, who once came with the hope of being accepted for their Turkish ethnic heritage and linguistic competence, also resort to affiliation with Syria. While hoping to be identified as “Turkish”, they are more likely to be recognized as “refugees” or “Syrians” by the host society. It is because both Turkmen and Arab Syrians move to Turkey from a specific geography as a result of the war and therefore all of them encounter the stigma of being labeled as “refugee”, regardless of ethnic and linguistic similarities. These narratives about refugee include inferiority, ostracism which in return fails to provide a secure identity for Syrian university students in Turkey.

However, when ethnic identities are defined by national territories, minority groups appeal to shared identities and broader statuses, rather than Turkish per se, in order to feel belonging in the receiving culture. Therefore, the umma (the community of faith) generates sense of wider loyalty or community between settled and new asylum-seekers. In this context, the concept of umma encourages ethnically different (Syrian Arabs) and ethnically similar (Turkmen Syrians) minority groups to integrate into the receiving culture. As a basic equalizing mechanism, it allows collective identities to be formed, and maintained<sup>39</sup> because both the majority and the minority groups share the same religion. On the other hand, application of the concept ummah, in a non-Muslim majority setting, may actually produce distance between the majority group and minority group such as Muslim-minority groups in Britain and Japan.<sup>40</sup> Contrary to Syrian experience in Turkey, Muslim minority groups in non-Muslim majority societies may be encouraged to remain separated from the mainstream culture when relied onto the ummah (the community of faith). In short, while ethnic differences affirm the distinction in identities between groups, but the application of the concept of ummah created connections and cohesion between groups in the study.

Lastly, Syrian university students hold optimistic views of their country left behind and maintain high level of interest in going back to the homeland. They feel highly responsible to participate in the rebuilding process

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<sup>39</sup> Manuel Castells, *The power of identity*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Akiko Onishi and Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, “Identity narratives of Muslim foreign workers in Japan”, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 2003, Vol. 13, issue 3, p.224-239.

of the country and re-establish cohesion in Syrian society. Syrian university students compare their experiences to the experiences of sojourners in terms of learning a new language and gaining proper knowledge in a university setting with firm intentions to return to home country after a period of time. In the midst of post-war issues, these students prioritize university education. While demonstrating resilience in acculturating to the mainstream culture, they want to bring back a range of knowledge and experience to homeland.

## **6. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

The findings of the present research should be carefully interpreted because this research focused only on Syrian university students at a particular university in a city far from the cities bordering Syria. Compared to living in the refugee camps and in the cities bordering Syria, this context does not provide convenient opportunities to be in close contact with culture of origin. Therefore, findings should not be generalized to the total university-age Syrian students in Turkey and other hosting countries. In addition, the research has only focused on Syrian university students and may have produced a skewed picture of asylum-seekers in general. Furthermore, the study only assessed the attitudes of Syrian students and neglected the attitudes of the majority members. In future acculturation studies, difference age groups and the host community's attitudes also must be analyzed in a sensitive manner.

One major reason for exclusion of the attitudes of Turkish people was the short-term nature of the project. The study findings are based on cross-sectional research in spring of 2015 and are limited to assess longitudinal changes. The length of stay also needs to be taken into account in understanding how it impacts the acculturation process of these university students.

## **7. Conclusion**

The current research sought to investigate the acculturation experiences of refugee Syrian university students in Turkey. More specifically, the research aimed to explore specific factors that impact the acculturation pro-

cess. The responses of Syrian university students were evaluated and found that language barrier is the biggest threat against acculturation but all participants tended to overcome this barrier over a period of time. In addition, ample of evidence proved that short cultural distance enabled them to feel insider and showed that the smaller the difference between the receiving culture and one`s own, the easier the acculturation process. Next, ethnic identity poses an obstacle for both Turkmen and Arab Syrians because they feel that Turkish people are more likely to classify all Syrians as inferior. However, by identifying as Muslim and relying on the concept of ummah, participants create connections and cohesion between themselves and the majority group. Lastly, Syrian university students consider their experiences in Turkey as sojourning and hold firm intentions to return to home country after a period of time.

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