

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Well-Being in Academia from Social Science Researchers' Points of View

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Abstract

This study examined the well-being of researchers in academia, particularly in the context of fieldwork, with a focus on the challenges they encounter and the institutional support mechanisms available. Drawing from qualitative data generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with researchers, supervisors, and Research Ethics Committee (REC) members, the study highlighted key factors influencing researcher well-being in social sciences. The findings were categorized into three major themes: the impact of experience-sharing, work-life balance, and the challenges of fieldwork. It was seen that researchers would benefit significantly from structured mentorship, peer support, and institutional guidance, during all phases of fieldwork (pre-, during, post). Work-life balance emerged as a critical concern, with many researchers experiencing stress due to excessive workload, and a lack of sufficient supervisory support. Fieldwork itself poses additional challenges, including emotional distress, ethical dilemmas, and bureaucratic obstacles, all of which can negatively impact well-being. This study argued that researcher well-being is an ethical responsibility of both individuals and institutions, necessitating comprehensive training, psychosocial support, and institutional policies aimed at fostering a healthier academic environment. Recommendations included integrating researcher well-being into graduate curricula, enhancing supervisory training, promoting peer support networks, and developing institutional mechanisms to monitor and improve mental health support in academia.

Keywords: Academia, researchers, well-being, fieldwork studies

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Öz

Bu çalışma, akademideki araştırmacıların iyi oluşunu, özellikle saha çalışması bağlamında, karşılaştıkları zorluklara ve mevcut kurumsal destek mekanizmalarına odaklanarak incelemiştir. Araştırmacılar, süpervizörler ve etik kurulu üyeleriyle yapılan derinlemesine görüşmeler ve odak grup tartışmaları yoluyla elde edilen nitel verilerden faydalanan çalışma, sosyal bilimlerde araştırmacıların iyi oluşunu etkileyen temel faktörleri vurgulamıştır. Bulgular üç ana tema altında kategorize edilmiştir: deneyim paylaşımının etkisi, iş-yaşam dengesi ve saha çalışmasının zorlukları. Araştırmacıların, saha çalışmasının tüm aşamalarında (öncesi, sırası ve sonrası) yapılandırılmış mentörlük, akran desteği ve kurumsal rehberlikten önemli ölçüde fayda sağlayacağı görülmüştür. İş-yaşam dengesi, birçok araştırmacının aşırı iş yükü ve yeterli danışman desteğinin olmaması nedeniyle stres yaşadığı kritik bir endişe kaynağı olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Saha çalışmasının kendisi de duygusal sıkıntılar, etik ikilemler ve bürokratik engeller gibi ek zorluklar ortaya çıkarmakta ve bunların hepsi de iyi oluşu olumsuz yönde etkileyebilmektedir. Bu çalışma, araştırmacı iyi oluşunun hem bireylerin hem de kurumların etik bir sorumluluğu olduğunu ve daha sağlıklı bir akademik ortamı teşvik etmeyi amaçlayan kapsamlı eğitim, psikososyal destek ve kurumsal politikalar gerektirdiğini savunmaktadır. Öneriler arasında araştırmacı refahının lisansüstü müfredata entegre edilmesi, danışmanlık eğitiminin geliştirilmesi, akran destek ağlarının teşvik edilmesi ve akademide ruh sağlığı desteğini izlemek ve iyileştirmek için kurumsal mekanizmaların geliştirilmesi yer almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akademi, araştırmacılar, iyi oluş, saha çalışmaları

Introduction

In the last decade, well-being has been one of the more highlighted issues around the world. With the emergence of the pandemic in 2020, the interest in this issue has increased in the research community. While it was already a growing topic, the impact of the pandemic on global mental health made it more prominent in academic studies. The World Health Organization's (WHO) World Mental Health Report (2022), which includes data from member states, highlights the impact of the pandemic, which saw a 25% increase in anxiety and depressive disorders in its first year. According to the report, 1 in 8 people is living with a mental health problem (p. 37). In addition, The Mental State of the World annual report notes that mental well-being was declining since before the pandemic and has continued to do so in subsequent years (p. 2). The project, which collected data from a web-enabled sample in 71 countries, further highlights that this trend is particularly pronounced among younger generations (p. 11), which states a serious mental health concern (Sapient Labs, 2024).

In this study, we aim to raise awareness about the issue of well-being of researchers in academia. In doing so, we also want to create a space for discussion on how to improve the well-being of researchers in Türkiye by sharing the diverse experiences of researchers in academia. Therefore, it is imperative to explain how well-being is defined and accepted in the context of this study. As a comprehensive view of well-being, the WHO characterizes it as "a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic, and environmental conditions" (WHO, 2021, p. 10).

Different approaches to and definitions of well-being allow the scholars to further create sub-concepts of it. Sirgy (2021) speaks about three philosophical views of happiness. At this point, it is important to clarify that in the literature, well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction are sometimes used interchangeably. The first view mentioned by Sirgy focuses on psychological happiness which is "the experience of positive emotions over time."

From this perspective, Sirgy also talks about subjective well-being, which is having more positive affect than negative affect overall. The second view Sirgy mentions is the prudential happiness, which is more related to a person's personal growth. It also involves a state of both physical and mental well-being. Building on this, Sirgy's final view of happiness is perfectionist happiness, which is a state of well-being that is similar to the second view but with the addition of living a moral life (Sirgy, 2021). In this article, well-being is accepted as the total social, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals.

Well-Being in Academia

Interestingly, academia reflects a similar critical state of mental health and well-being. Guthrie and colleagues (2017) argued that there are no clear definitions of what mental health and well-being mean in research environments (p. 15), with academics found to be much more vulnerable to mental health problems than other professions, with one of the highest prevalence rates of mental health disorders at 37% (Guthrie et al., 2017, p. 21). Job demands, job insecurity, control over work performed, time management, work-life balance, managerial/supervisory support, role clarity, and exposure to negative attitudes and behaviors from colleagues such as bullying and harassment, are among the major stressors in academia, that lead to long-term mental health problems (Guthrie et al., 2017; as cited in Mahmoudi, 2023). Nature's survey of graduate students also found that 36% of them had "sought help for anxiety or depression related to their PhD" (*The mental health of PhD*, 2019). Beadle and colleagues (2020) shared the results of their survey of PhD researchers at the Leibniz Institutes. They found that 59% of the researchers mentioned experiencing high levels of anxiety in general, and 15% said that they were experiencing moderate to severe depression (p. 83). The problems are said to be related to the workload, supervisory relationship and quality of supervision, financial and job insecurity, and lack of social support.

Advance HE, a charitable foundation based in the UK, conducts an annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, which includes a section on well-being. In 2019, it was found that postgraduate

researchers had lower levels of well-being than the general population (Williams, 2019, p. 25). In 2020, the survey focused on the postgraduate researchers' working hours and how this affected their well-being. It was found that part-time researchers were happier overall, and their well-being was better than that of full-time researchers. It is possible that because they are not working full-time, they have time to socialize and relieve stress. In support of this, full-time researchers mentioned feelings of isolation and loneliness, and to address this issue, they suggested that their institutions organize social events to build a sense of community. Differences aside, all graduate researchers highlighted financial difficulties and barriers to timely access to counselling, as many respondents mentioned that counselling services were overbooked (Pitkin, 2020, pp. 29-30). Additionally, the most recent surveys (2023 and 2024) of Advance HE do not cover well-being as the previous surveys did, but in 2024 well-being was discussed in the context of overall graduate researcher satisfaction and indicated a possible improvement in the health and well-being support offered by the institutions (Neves, 2024, p. 43). The Max Planck Society's doctoral network conducts an annual survey of PhD researchers at their institutes. In the 2022 survey, nearly 59% of PhD researchers reported feeling moderate to high levels of anxiety. In addition, 41% of them started experiencing physical symptoms of stress during their PhD (Mourato et al., 2023).

Solms and colleagues (2024a), on the other hand, examined factors that influence the well-being of doctoral researchers and emphasized the effect of "psychological capital," which is a combination of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. These characteristics are said to protect the researchers from burnout, and to strengthen their engagement (pp. 14, 17). This study underscores the importance of the impact of both environmental and individual factors on researcher well-being.

The current mental health problems are prevalent worldwide, so, Türkiye is not exempt from them. However, the studies on researchers' well-being are limited in Türkiye. Çakıcı's (2010) master's thesis on the relationship between well-being and burnout of academics working in non-profit universities in Türkiye is one of the studies that

points out that while the relationship between age and well-being is insignificant for all groups, it is interesting that one of the groups with the lowest scores is the youngest age group, which is between 24-29 years old. The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) organized the Youth Mental Health Workshop in 2019, where the increasing mental health issues in universities were discussed. Although the report is not necessarily aimed at researchers, it is still an important study that shows the rising mental health problems in Türkiye. Another related study is a report that evaluates the studies on mobbing in academia in Türkiye. The report is published by Bilim Akademisi, a non-profit organization that aims to be an example of honest academia. In this report, Cinli and her colleagues (2020) emphasized that mobbing is seen in every sector and academia is one of them, as shown by many different studies conducted in universities. In the studies reviewed, there are certain demographic characteristics that are associated with high exposure to mobbing. Younger academics experience more mobbing than their older counterparts, and incidents of mobbing decrease with age. Single and divorced academics are more likely to experience mobbing from their colleagues. And in relation to age, research assistants, who are at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, are exposed to more mobbing. It is obvious that not all researchers are currently working in academic institutions, however, the results are still significant to have an idea about the well-being of researchers in academia.

The National Mental Health Action Plan for 2021-2023, which was prepared by the General Directorate of Public Health of the Ministry of Health, states that the ultimate goal of the plan is to implement an integrated community-based mental health service model in mental health services, in order to monitor, protect and improve the mental health of individuals (General Directorate of Public Health, n.d., p. 9). While the existence of the action plan is valuable in itself, it lacks concrete steps to improve the well-being of individuals, let alone the researchers in academia. The final report of the Workshop on Restructuring the Turkish Higher Education Area, held in 2022 by the aca-

demics of leading universities in Türkiye, mentions the impact of unmerited appointments in universities on researchers. It emphasizes that those who are appointed as such expose those who deserve their appointments to mobbing and psychological harassment, which inevitably affects the well-being of researchers (Atılğan et al. 2022). Kılıç and Şanal Karahan (2023) conducted an online survey with graduate students in their study on researchers in academia. They found that master's students and younger researchers experienced higher levels of anxiety, depression, and academic distress. This proves that researchers at different stages should be approached differently. Pehlivanlı and Eslen-Ziya (2023) emphasize the effects of neoliberal structures, as well as the lack of academic freedom and autonomy, on the mental health of academics in gender studies field. Karadağ and Orhon (2024) focus on the importance of communication for academic and societal well-being. Meanwhile, Deniz and Kocabaş (2024) highlight the positive impact of organizational support on the psychological well-being of academics. It is highly significant that they found title and tenure influence the perception of organizational support on psychological well-being. Garip and Kablan (2024), on the other hand, found that marital status notably affects academic well-being, showing that academics in relationships have better well-being than single academics. Similar to Deniz and Kocabaş, Garip and Kablan also highlighted the negative effects of overbearing administrative tasks. Finally, Pehlivanlı and Eslen-Ziya (2025) emphasize academia's lack of response to physical and emotional distress. This causes academics to internalize systematic gaps as personal shortcomings, perpetuating the cycle of poor mental health and well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to raise awareness in academia and initiate a discussion about researcher well-being, as it remains a growing field in Türkiye. The second purpose is to share the fieldwork experiences of researchers, the challenges they face, and how their well-being has been affected during this process, as fieldwork is

assumed to be a challenging context for researchers. Another purpose of this study is to reflect different views about researcher well-being in academia, specifically by including academic supervisors, and Research Ethics Committee (REC) members, and finally to make recommendations to change the current situation in order to achieve a more supportive academia towards researchers in the fieldwork.

According to the purpose of the study, which is part of an ongoing PhD project, the main research question for this study is "How does fieldwork affect the well-being of academic researchers?" Related to this, the sub-question(s) are:

1. How can the support mechanisms in academia be improved?
2. How can researchers prepare for fieldwork?

Methodology

The study is designed as a qualitative research because it allows the researcher to gain insights into the complexity of phenomena to better understand the mechanisms and underlying aspects of it (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 2). Qualitative research is also known to be used to study new topics. Since the well-being of researchers in Türkiye is a new and developing concept that lacks original literature, this study is an important contribution to this gap. The study adopts the interpretive approach, which asserts that reality is constructed through communication and interaction; and the critical approach, which asserts that knowledge involves hierarchical power relations that are brought to awareness in order to question and transform the existing structures (Tracy, 2020, pp. 51-53). In the context of this study, these approaches, along with the use of data generation techniques such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, help to focus on understanding the experiences of researchers during fieldwork studies, to advocate for a change towards a better research and training process, for a healthier academic workplace, and to offer experience-based suggestions to further support the change.

Data Generation Techniques

Semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were the primary data collection techniques for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants using a semi-structured interview guideline either face to face or online, depending on the location of the participant. The guideline consists of five sections, each focusing on a different aspect and stage of the fieldwork process. The first section asked about demographic characteristics and research experience. The second section focused on the details of research experience in the past five years at the time of the interview. The third section consisted of questions about communication between researchers and supervisors. The fourth section asked about support during fieldwork, preparation before fieldwork, and types of different support mechanisms are asked. The final section focused on factors affecting well-being during the fieldwork, such as work-life balance, different emotions, and the ethical responsibilities of researchers and institutions.

While focus groups are traditionally conducted face to face, online focus groups were preferred in this study in order to save travel time and to have the opportunity to include participants from different locations with different experiences (Dayan & Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2022, p. 65). The three focus groups conducted with researchers in academia had 3-6 participants, which is roughly in the range of the ideal number of participants for online focus groups (Willemsen et al., 2023 p. 1814); while Dayan and Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu's (2022) observations that six participants is ideal were mostly confirmed by the researchers' experience.

The focus group sessions began with participants introducing themselves. Then, a fictional story about the challenges a researcher faced during fieldwork was read to the group by the researcher. When the story ended, the discussion was led with two guiding questions: 1) what would the participants do in this situation, and 2) what would/could their institutions do in such a situation.

Participants

Participants in the study are primarily social science researchers who, at the time of the interview, were conducting, participating or have conducted/participated in a fieldwork study within the past five years. There was no restriction to a specific field, and the aim was to find participants from the social, health, and educational sciences that commonly use fieldwork studies. Within a purposive sampling approach, snowball sampling was also used to reach different participants. This study focuses on 21 of the participants who were in academia at some point, and three of the focus group discussions that involved researchers from academia at different stages. The PhD project, however, consists of 30 participants, resulting in 31 in-depth interviews. Four focus group discussions were also conducted online with different types of researchers. In order to get a holistic overview of academia, 13 researchers, four supervisors, and four Research Ethics Committee (REC) members were involved in the working group. Of the researchers, eight were either PhD students or (recent) graduates, and five were either master's students or (recent) graduates. Most of the participants were women, with only three men in the study group. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 67, reflecting different levels of experience in academia. While most are from the social sciences, there are also participants from medicine, health sciences and journalism. A detailed overview of the characteristics of the participants is given in the appendix. This study was approved by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board of Hacettepe University on November 8, 2022. From the beginning to the end of the study, special attention was given to the ethical procedures. To ensure anonymity, each participant was given a codename. To maintain confidentiality, identifying and sensitive information was redacted in both the transcriptions and quotations used in this study. Each participant was informed of their rights regarding participation in the study, with an emphasis on the voluntary nature of the research. Furthermore, consent for audio- and video-recording was obtained before beginning the interview.

The three focus groups consisted of researchers from different fields and at different levels. The first focus group was conducted only with master's level researchers, and there were five women, who incidentally come from sociology. Their ages ranged from 25 to 36. In the second focus group, which was conducted with PhD researchers, there were three women. All participants were in their 30s and came from different scientific fields, namely tourism, education and social work. The third focus group was a hybrid group consisting of six (four women, two men) master's and PhD level researchers. They ranged in age from 23 to 37 and were mostly from the social sciences. Similar to the in-depth interviews, the focus group participants were mostly women, with only two men present in the third focus group. Overall, there were more participants from different scientific fields, but most of them were from the social sciences. The age range of the participants reflects a younger group than the in-depth interviews due to the focus group criteria.

Data Analysis Technique

After data generation, and the completion of transcription, transcript documents were sent to each participant and feedback was requested. Thereafter, thematic analysis was used as the data analysis technique. Braun and Clarke (2022) define thematic analysis as a technique “for developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes” (p. 27). Themes are created from codes and can be a “shared idea, meaning or concept” (pp. 33-36). They describe six definitive steps to the thematic analysis: “familiarizing with the data, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing the report” (Braun & Clarke, pp. 75-77). In this study, these steps were followed, with the addition of open coding at the coding stage, to generate as many descriptive codes as possible and achieve more accurate themes. To ensure rigor the interview transcripts were sent to the respective participants for member checking. To establish reliability and validity—often referred to as transparency in qualitative research—the researcher translated

and edited the participants' quotations, using them directly in this study to accurately reflect the participants' experiences.

Findings

The three themes that emerged from the data analysis and are discussed in this article are: the impact of sharing experiences, the impact of work-life balance, and the challenges of fieldwork. It is observed that the needs of researchers differ at each stage of research, so these themes are discussed in terms of three stages of the fieldwork process, beginning with the pre-fieldwork stage, and moving through the fieldwork and post-fieldwork stages. It is also helpful to emphasize that sometimes the stages of fieldwork may overlap and are difficult to distinguish.

The Impact of Experience-Sharing

The analysis suggests that certain characteristics of researchers are crucial to how they feel prepared for the fieldwork and how it affects their well-being. It can be said that for researchers in academia, who are either master's or doctoral students/graduates, experience and related needs for research support are the most important aspects of the process. Naturally, PhD researchers are expected to acquire certain qualities such as having the necessary knowledge to design and conduct research, organize their fieldwork, and write their dissertation. However, master's level students typically have little to no research experience, and their thesis is their first. These clear differences between master's-level and PhD researchers require different supervisory approaches for them.

The preparation phase for fieldwork is a very promising timeframe in terms of equipping the researcher with the necessary self-support mechanisms, experience, and giving enough time to adjust to the transition. However, existing systems, certain institutions, and characteristics can become a challenge that the researcher must face, sometimes alone. In this study, almost all master's-level researchers emphasized their need for support and guidance from their supervisors, and how the lack of one or both of them made them feel more stressed or lost. Neşe, a master's-level researcher

in sociology who was 26 at the time of the interview, talked about two studies in which she was an interviewer. One was her supervisor's project focusing on Syrian refugees in Türkiye, where she had less control. The other one was a group project for a class on LGBT+ people, where her peers and she had more influence. She described her experiences in these projects as different from each other. In both studies, their supervisor was there as a "controller", however, she felt she had more autonomy in the class project, mentioning that *they did all the work themselves but asked their supervisors when needed* (Neşe, p. 7).

Similarly, Seray, a 26-year-old master's-level researcher in nursing, emphasized the support she received from her supervisor during the process of choosing a thesis topic. Even though the topic she wanted to study was not in her supervisor's area of expertise, they still accepted her as a thesis student and encouraged her to study what she wanted:

Well, but she supported me because I was inclined towards this field [women's health]. Well, because I hear from many people around me that when it is not the topic of the advisor, the advisor may not want to work on that topic. I am sure they have their own reasons, but my supervisor did not do such a thing. They said, "Well, if you want to work on this topic, I support you," which was very valuable for me. (Seray, p. 7)

In contrast, however, PhD researchers were more confident in their ability to conduct research; they also emphasized their need for guidance from their supervisors when necessary and sometimes wished that their supervisors were more hands-on with them. Lamia, a 32-year-old PhD graduate in psychology, talked about her feelings about her supervisor(s) monitoring her:

Yes, I think it's very suffocating. I mean, it's good to check from time to time. I mean, I feel like it has such a very fine line. That's why I said to keep track of, not to hold someone to account, not to never ask, but to keep track of them. Because I think it is a very big job, I mean, writing a 100, 100-page work from scratch. I mean, the article is more organized, even if you read all the literature, you don't need to write

it all down, but a PhD is a very big job and very stressful, so it would be nice if we were monitored. (Lamia, p. 20)

Lamia had two co-advisors because she was studying with a particularly sensitive group. Nevertheless, she felt that neither had given her the care she needed in the dissertation process. On a more serious note, Eray, a PhD in social work who was 37 years old at the time of the interview, had been subjected to mobbing by a member of his dissertation committee, who was an expert on the topic he was studying, which made it difficult for him during this process. He highlighted the support of his supervisor and other committee members during these challenges, how he *"would run to his other professors"* and that *"if it wasn't for them, [he] would be very depressed"* (Eray, Location 22).

The interviews show that while master's level researchers were more doubtful about their abilities and when to ask their supervisors for help, PhD researchers were clearer about their abilities. However, they also needed the support and guidance of their supervisors. At this point, we can see personal differences as Lamia was more passive in expressing her needs, while Eray was more proactive and sought support from his supervisor and other academics. On the other hand, Deren, a 33-year-old PhD researcher in educational sciences who was a participant in FG2, mentioned her doubts about the number of supervisors who do not have enough fieldwork experience to adequately guide PhD researchers and summarized the role of the supervisor as:

Because they, that person, will be a scientist [PhD student], and since these [critical thinking, questioning] are the basic things of science, the person should do them. Yes, I mean, I don't think there is much need for a supervisor here. Maybe they can pave the way, maybe they can pave the way in terms of questioning things, not in terms of research, but in terms of questioning, critical thinking, yes. (Deren, FG2, p. 10)

Deren's argument is that by the time the researcher is at the PhD level, they should have the necessary skills to design and conduct research and therefore need less support on this matter from their supervisors in this regard. However, it

should be kept in mind that each master's and PhD program at different universities will equip its students with different skills, and this may result in some researchers lacking in research skills. In order to feel prepared for fieldwork, participants mentioned a number of factors, such as knowing the conditions of the fieldwork, focusing on the specific working group, and the responsibilities of researchers, supervisors, and institutions. The most common point that was raised in the interviews was the sharing of experiences among researchers. Nevra, a 53-year-old supervisor in the field of gender studies, mentioned the importance of sharing experiences before fieldwork:

For example, let's say you are going to interview children... the things you need to pay attention to may differ. For example, ... students with a background in psychology or social work from different fields can share their experiences in the field with us ... with the students. In other words, we should not necessarily think that the lecturer has experience, and the students do not. (Nevra, p. 23)

Nevra's emphasis on experience, and that any researcher at any stage can have it, is important. This stresses that research or field experience can come from a researcher's professional life outside of academia; and that the assumption that supervisors are familiar with fieldwork conditions is not always true. Sharing experiences is one way to prepare researchers for fieldwork. In addition, Çisem, a 37-year-old PhD researcher in social work who participated in FG2, mentioned the significance of preparation for the specific working group of the research. She highlighted the ethical responsibility to protect the well-being of participants and to consider their experiences (Çisem, FG2, p. 5). Çisem emphasized that to protect the participants, it is possible to realize the ethical responsibility of the researcher by preparing for the specific working group and its conditions. The interviews point out that experience is often relative to the stage the researcher is at, and that sharing experiences is crucial in preparing researchers for the challenges of fieldwork. On the other hand, Masal, a 29-year-old master's-level researcher in gender studies, struggled because she had to change supervisors during her master's program, and her current supervisor was not an expert in her thesis subject. She said

that she did not ask for support from her supervisor because *"they did not know [her] field process."* Masal emphasized that her supervisor was unfamiliar with her topic, so she was also alone during the analysis phase (Masal, p. 34).

Similarly, Delfin, a 27-year-old PhD researcher in sociology, highlighted the need for support and not to *"be thrown into the field and left"* during fieldwork, especially for novice researchers. She expressed that *"communication should be ensured in the field"* and supervisors should check the researcher's well-being as well as monitor the methodological aspects from time to time (Delfin, p. 29). Many participants indicated that communication before and during fieldwork is key to support. FG1 participant Öznil, a 25-year-old master's-level researcher in sociology, agrees with this, as she also highlighted that discussing the challenges of fieldwork at academic conferences and sharing experiences among researchers has become even more important:

Well, when we come together in such conferences and symposiums, we fail to transfer the field experience there. ... and transferring the experience there is actually, well, it is necessary to normalize that incompetence. In these kinds of gatherings, in these kinds of sharing, the transfer of different ... experiences that we all experience are very important and very valuable to me ... (Öznil, FG1, Location 98)

In some interviews, it was pointed out that methodological discussions and curricula are insufficient to prepare researchers for the challenges of fieldwork. Sertap (p. 37), a 34-year-old PhD researcher in political science, also mentioned, echoing Öznil's idea, that it could be *"put in the [text] books how exhausting this process is going to be"*. This is where institutional responsibilities come into play. Universities and their RECs should take steps to ensure the well-being of researchers. According to Ayca, a 37-year-old REC member in the field of law, the first step should be to decide what constitutes a researcher. Then, relevant training should be provided to prepare researchers for fieldwork (Ayca, p. 19).

While RECs have a clear responsibility to train the researchers on ethical values to consider during research and fieldwork, all participants who are or have been REC members pointed out that

being a REC member is a secondary task for academics who already have enough workload. Thus, this could be a possibility if only there were more capacity and potential in universities to thoroughly support researchers. Different institutions such as TÜBİTAK and YÖK are related to academics and researchers. While YÖK is considered the main actor in the implementation of rules and regulations for universities, TÜBİTAK is mainly related to the research conducted. It could be assumed that the well-being of researchers falls under the jurisdiction of these two institutions. On the other hand, universities can support the researchers in various ways. For example, Seray, a 26-year-old master's-level researcher in nursing, struggled to reach participants in factories in a small province in Türkiye because the topic of her thesis was considered obscene by human resources departments. She explained that if the university had provided her with an official document declaring support for her research, stating that *"this issue is important"*, her fieldwork would have been easier, and she would have been able to reach more participants (Seray, pp. 9-10).

In Türkiye, universities generally have a good reputation and are valued for their contribution to the community. So, a simple document of support can help researchers in the field. Researcher well-being is a relatively new issue in Türkiye, and academia is generally slow to embrace new implementations. Therefore, a bottom-up approach to the issue could be a good way to start raising awareness. Like Sila, a 48-year-old PhD researcher in political science, other researchers should be proactive and resourceful in asking for support and *"try[ing] very hard to get that..."* (Sila, p. 13).

The Impact of Work-Life Balance

An important part of being a researcher is maintaining a balance between work and personal life. Naturally, each researcher has different responsibilities in their personal lives. Of the researchers, only two were currently married and only one had children. Almost half of the researchers were living alone at the time of the interviews and thus had more responsibilities in their personal lives. On the

whole, however, they indicated that they were relatively relaxed about housework, either because they lived alone and were able to postpone certain chores, or because they had understanding spouses who tolerated their absence from chores for the time being, with the exception of Sila. The only participant with a child is Sila, and she emphasized that it was difficult to focus on work during the early years of her child's life. Sertap, a PhD researcher in political science who was 34 at the time of the interview, single, and living with her family, provides a counterpoint. She emphasized that being a PhD researcher while single and without household responsibilities allowed her to focus on her PhD. She further explained that *"if [she] were married ... if [she] had children, it would be very difficult because [she] would have to [take] responsibility for them"* (Sertap, p. 32).

Therefore, it is clear from both lived experiences and assumptions that more responsibilities in one's personal life can interrupt the research process. Delfin, a 27-year-old PhD researcher in sociology who was engaged at the time of the interview, also provided some insight into this issue. She emphasized that having only a researcher identity is a "luxury" because even during an interview you are always thinking about your other responsibilities, and it is *"hard to be there, to be in the moment"*, and is almost impossible to shed other personal identities (Delfin, p. 39).

In addition to inescapable responsibilities, fieldwork is an interruption of the researcher's social and private life. We argue that fieldwork itself is a challenge to researchers' well-being because it forces them to step outside their comfort zones. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare to deal with the difficulties involved. Sometimes, personal differences can make the situation even worse, as the researcher may not be able to take adequate care of themselves physically, mentally, and socially. Eylül, a 28-year-old master's level researcher in psychology, said that the field *"had a negative effect in a negative way because I came back exhausted from there"* (Eylül, pp. 30-31). During the interview, Eylül reiterated the fact that after traveling to different cities for fieldwork, she would feel physically exhausted and unable to get out of bed. This would get to the point where she would not call or

respond to her friends, in addition to not being able to arrange social gatherings with them to relieve the exhaustion. She admitted to losing friends during these periods and expressed the challenges she faced in coping with the reality of fieldwork. These anecdotes underscore the crucial step prior to fieldwork of preparing researchers for the impact of being in the field and providing them with the necessary skills to cope with it.

The Challenges of Fieldwork

As mentioned above, fieldwork is a demanding context for researchers, regardless of their level of experience. Of course, researchers face various challenges during their research, and how they respond to them is crucial to their well-being. However, in reality, even if the researcher is fully prepared for the fieldwork, they may be affected by unforeseen circumstances, unhelpful people from the community, or uncooperative participants.

Sometimes related to work-life balance, another crucial factor for the well-being of researchers is their personal characteristics and private life. After graduation, there are changes in both academic and personal life that seem to have a significant impact on the well-being of researchers during fieldwork. Getting married, divorced, or becoming a parent bring unique challenges after which some researchers may feel disturbed, while others may feel more empowered, having grown with their trauma.

Lamia, a recent PhD in psychology, and Eray, now an academic researcher in social work, experienced similar life events during their PhD journeys. They were both in their 30s, married and divorced during their doctoral studies, and worked with challenging research groups. However, Lamia is a woman and Eray is a man; Lamia was actively working as a therapist, and Eray was only in academia. They both faced difficulties during their fieldwork, whether it was their working groups or the bullying they endured from their committee members. In the end, they both emphasized that they grew from these experiences, either on their own or with the help of a therapist. They share their stories as:

If it wasn't for my analyst [therapist], I probably would have quit my PhD 5 times, 10

times. Because the doctorate was a process where I felt the helplessness of this patient group, where I was pushed and shoved as a member of the ÖYP, where I thought that I would not find strength in myself, that I would not find it. Both being an assistant and doing a PhD. I think I got a lot of strength from my analyst, my own therapy, telling myself, being heard, thinking about myself. I think I can say that I wouldn't have been here without them. (Lamia, p. 14)

So, if you ask in terms of well-being, you know, this process was very challenging for me, I don't know how it happened, but it was a kind of empowerment practice for me that I benefited a lot afterwards, I became very [record is unintelligible] very strong. I mean, the process was tiring, it was challenging, but I can say that the result was positive. (Eray, Location 94)

As the examples of Lamia and Eray show, similar life and research experiences can still present different challenges for researchers. Indeed, some participants argue that fieldwork can be an escape from personal life. Conversely, fieldwork can invade the researcher's life to the point of being inescapable. Sertap, a PhD level political science researcher studying refugees of different ethnicities, had such an experience during her fieldwork and claimed that if she had more responsibilities in her personal life, she could break away from the field and the participants' stories might not have "engraved in [her] soul" and caused her physical discomfort (Sertap, p. 35).

The repetition of stories also strengthened Sertap's connection to her fieldwork. It almost became a part of her life, which is how certain illnesses later manifested themselves. When asked, Sertap said that she did nothing to prepare for fieldwork, that she just "dove into" the field, and that this is why she was exhausted afterwards (p. 26). Since we have argued that preparation for fieldwork is central to protecting the researcher from these kinds of problems, it seems that lack of experience and not knowing what fieldwork might bring are also challenges that researchers face. Nevra, a 53-year-old supervisor in gender studies, mentioned that her students are sometimes reluctant to go into the field because of their lack of field

experience, in which cases, they offer emotional support (Nevra, p. 12).

Preparing researchers for fieldwork involves logistic, methodological, and psychological support. While none of the participants acknowledged a systemic approach within their universities, their supervisors were sometimes proactive on this issue and provided them with the necessary information. However, Nejat, a 44-year-old supervisor in political science, emphasized the unpredictability of fieldwork, saying that *"Whatever we determine, whatever we think, life is not like that. Field research doesn't work like that either"* (Nejat, p. 15).

Sıla, a 48-year-old PhD candidate in political science studying a sensitive and difficult topic, is an apt example of the unpredictability of fieldwork. Although she mentioned that she anticipated the challenges that this topic might present to her, she was still deeply affected by the secondary sources she used (p. 10). The uncertainty of fieldwork requires an adaptive approach to training researchers to empower them during their research. However, the responsibility for preparation falls mostly on the researcher and sometimes on the supervisor. The university as an institution in Türkiye seems to be failing to equip researchers with crucial yet basic skills and so far, lacks the awareness to change the current situation. But it is also important to look at the problem in a broader sense, because universities can only handle so much of the demand. On the other hand, public institutions such as ministries also have a role to play in fieldwork. For some studies, researchers have to get permission from the relevant ministry or apply to their ethics committees. Three of the participants had to obtain permission from different public institutions that interfered with the researcher's fieldwork process by not allowing audio recording, using relevant and important descriptive demographic information about the participants, and insisting that the interviews take place in the respective institution. These bureaucratic challenges posed various puzzles for the researchers and indirectly helped to shape their identities as researchers and their personal ethical values about research. It is interesting to note that only PhD researchers in the working group were exposed to these decisions, as they were more confident in

their practice and had the ability to make decisions in an ethically responsible way. Where acceptable, they followed the instructions given, however, when these conflicted with the anonymity and confidentiality of their research participants or with the purpose of their study, they did what they thought was ethically sound.

There may also be challenges after the fieldwork is completed. Conducting face-to-face interviews usually requires audio recording, so the researcher has to transcribe it afterwards. The transcription process seems to affect researchers in two ways: the first is more technical and depends on the quality of the recording, making transcription more time-consuming for the researcher. Serpil, a 24-year-old master's level researcher in the field of nutrition, spoke about her experience in this regard:

Because, as I said, in the transcription process you don't understand what he is saying, you listen to the same recording 50 times, you stop it, you try to write it down. Or, the sound is not clear. Maybe, for example, when you are listening to something that you don't think of right now while I am talking, I wish I had asked you about it [voices get mixed up, not understood]. (Serpil, p. 13)

Even with a high-quality audio recording, transcription is a laborious step. It becomes even more challenging when the subject matter is sensitive or when participants share emotional and personal aspects of their lives. Mazhar, a 33-year-old PhD researcher in sociology at the time of the interview, shared his experience:

I mean there ... I was personally very impressed by it. Especially the part that [name] threw, you know, the part that [name] said let's take it out, the part that I mentioned, the impossibility of it, affected me very deeply, I mean, when I was reading those transcriptions, at many points I really teared up, I cried. (Mazhar-2, p. 35)

The fieldwork process has various aspects that affect researchers mentally, physically, or emotionally. It is also evident that preparation for fieldwork is essential, especially for novice researchers. However, it should also be kept in mind that even if the researcher goes to the field prepared, they

may face challenges that negatively affect their well-being. To overcome such problems, the participants suggested different solutions, which are discussed in the next section.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Fieldwork is a sensitive context for researchers presenting them with various challenges. Three aspects of fieldwork that affect researchers' well-being were discussed in this study: experience, work-life balance, and challenges. Participants had different ideas on how to overcome these obstacles and create a better research environment for researchers. It is often mentioned that preparing researchers for fieldwork is an essential part of supporting them. In research ethics, the protection of participants is usually accepted as a rule. However, since the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century (Bowtell et al., 2013; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Williams et al., 1992), the ethical aspect of researcher protection has been discussed intermittently. Some studies have focused on qualitative researchers (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Parker & O'Reilly, 2013; Paterson et al., 1999; Vincett, 2018) due to the closer relationship between the researcher and the participant and the ethical considerations this brings to research. Nevertheless, this study aimed to include both researchers with quantitative and qualitative fieldwork experience in the social sciences in order to understand their problems and make suggestions to address them. This study argues that protecting researchers is an ethical responsibility for researchers, their supervisors, and their universities. According to the participants, more comprehensive ethics training is needed for researchers to protect themselves. In the current situation, none of the participants' universities offer such comprehensive ethics training that covers every stage of the fieldwork process. Some participants, especially REC members, suggested that RECs could take on this responsibility to thoroughly train researchers. Realistically, however, they also emphasized that since REC members are also academics with varying workloads, it is quite impossible to implement this in the current state. One solution to this problem is to give this responsibility to each

department or institute to integrate into their research ethics curriculum. REC members could provide guidance and, if necessary, train the trainers so that the workload of academics is not overburdened at the same time. This is also emphasized by Atılğan and colleagues (2022) and YÖK (2022). These reports emphasized the need to include science ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of science as mandatory courses in the postgraduate curriculum. In addition, they stated that RECs should be independent to be effective and should cover all types of ethical violations. It is important to add that there is also a lack of methodological curricula to inform and prepare researchers for fieldwork. Some participants suggested including the challenges of fieldwork in methodology courses to compensate for this. The need to develop methodology courses is also highlighted in the YÖK report (2022). It is also crucial to share experiences through textbooks, conferences and other academic events.

Another effective way to both share experiences and provide support is to form and participate in peer support groups. Panayidou and Priest (2021) found that after eight weeks of co-facilitating doctoral support groups, participants' subjective well-being scores increased. In addition, the study by de Villiers Scheepers and colleagues (2023) showed that such peer groups are helpful for researchers to keep their motivation high and feel a sense of community during their research. There were participants who reported feeling alone during their research, so peer groups may also be beneficial to alleviate these feelings. At this point, the question of whose responsibility it is to form these groups can be raised. It is possible to form these groups among volunteer researchers, as de Villiers Scheepers and colleagues (2023) did. However, the university could take the initiative to create a systematic support mechanism by forming these groups. It is also important to create a wellness-oriented, awareness-raising atmosphere in the university so that researchers can feel safe to share their challenges in these groups. Otherwise, according to one of the participants, in the current academic environment in Türkiye, researchers do not trust each other and fear that their ideas will be stolen or that they will have to compete for opportunities. These groups could be formed as part of a broader, university-

based researcher support unit that is independent and multidisciplinary. This unit was discussed in the interviews, and participants agreed that it would be beneficial for researchers. It could include psychosocial, academic writing, project writing, financial guidance, and different types of support that researchers need. In some universities, various units offering different types of support to researchers in these areas exist, so in these universities, coordinating these separate units to offer more comprehensive support could be a solution. It is essential to keep in mind that this unit should be independent so that researchers can seek advice in a safe environment. As studies by Muro and colleagues (2022) and Solms and colleagues (2024b) have demonstrated, intervention programs aimed at enhancing researchers' well-being are effective. It is essential to provide researchers with the skills to manage themselves effectively. However, it is also important to keep in mind that the effects of these interventions may take some time to be seen.

Work-life balance is an important issue in researchers' well-being, and young researchers in particular may find it difficult to maintain it. Several studies have identified various factors that impact work-life balance and, consequently, overall well-being. The study by Milicev and colleagues (2023) highlights the value of a PhD. However, as a stressor, it is a possible disruptor of work-life balance and positive emotions. To avoid this, it is recommended to model a healthy work-life balance. On the other hand, as conveyed by Muro and colleagues (2022), workload and complexity are emphasized as factors influencing the decrease in well-being (as cited in Muro et al., 2022, p. 2). Kılıç and Şanal Karahan (2023) also identified a similar problem among PhD students, indicating that they have to schedule social events in advance due to the workload of the program, which further complicates the issue of psychological problems within the cohort (as cited in Kılıç & Şanal Karahan, 2023). In this study, experience is also mentioned as a factor affecting the well-being of researchers. Preparing researchers in social sciences for fieldwork and providing them with opportunities to gain field experience are also mentioned by participants. Browning and colleagues (2014, 2016) focus on the development of early-career researchers (ECRs),

employing different methodologies. While they define ECRs as PhD researchers with less than five years of experience, what they implement and highlight can also be generalized to PhD researchers. In their 2014 study, Browning and colleagues conducted face-to-face workshops with ECRs and focused on enhancing their research skills. They later highlighted institutional support as essential for the development of researchers (Browning et al., 2016). In addition, Boeren and colleagues (2015) reviewed publications on mentoring of ECRs and again emphasized the value of mentoring and urged the academic community to better identify what mentoring encompasses.

Mentoring relationships are crucial for young researchers such as graduate students. Another recommendation from one of the participants is a committee or system to oversee the student-supervisor relationship during graduate school. The relationship between the graduate student and the supervisor is crucial, but sometimes complicated. There are times when students have problems with their supervisors, and usually there is no place for them to report this. Therefore, it is essential that this committee be independent in order to protect the confidentiality of both parties. However, due to academic politics and hierarchy in some universities, this committee should be well thought out when it is formed to avoid further conflict.

This study examines and discusses aspects of fieldwork that influence researchers' well-being. Participants shared their ideas on how to promote researchers' well-being and raise awareness in academia. More experienced participants, such as REC members and supervisors, expressed their thoughts more realistically, emphasizing the capacity and ability of universities to enforce new regulations. To create or provide such support mechanisms and make them sustainable, universities need financial and human resources. Therefore, the first step towards researchers' well-being could be to train and empower researchers and equip them with methodological and psychosocial skills. A bottom-up approach seems to be the more fruitful way to ensure researchers' well-being.

During the interviews, participants were asked whether researchers and their institutions are responsible for the well-being of researchers. While

most participants agreed that this is indeed true, institutions such as YÖK and TÜBİTAK definitely have responsibilities in this issue. YÖK's workshop on improving PhD education is a positive step towards improving the field of research in academia. However, a research or working group on researchers' well-being in these institutions has yet to be formed. In the future, it is crucial to continue studies on researcher well-being in Türkiye and to provide practical solutions, training, and prevention and intervention programs for researchers at all levels. It is also important to consider what the ethical responsibilities each stakeholder, whether individual or institutional, should promote to improve researcher well-being.

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APPENDIX

Participant	Sex	Age	Field	Education	Researcher ID
Sevgi	F	32	Demography	PhD	Researcher
Delfin	F	27	Sociology	PhD	Researcher
Masal	F	29	Women's Studies	Master's	Researcher
Lamia	F	32	Psychology	PhD	Researcher
Eray	M	37	Social work	PhD	Researcher
Necla	F	56	Medical ethics	PhD	REC member
Mazhar	M	33	Sociology	PhD	Researcher
Bade	F	*	Demography	PhD	REC member
Nehir	F	38	Law	PhD	REC member
Seray	F	26	Nursing	Master's	Researcher
Serpil	F	24	Nutrition	Master's	Researcher
Sertap	F	34	Political Science	PhD	Researcher
Hale	F	31	Gerontology	PhD	Researcher
Neşe	F	26	Sociology	Master's	Researcher
Eylül	F	28	Psychology	Master's	Researcher
Nevra	F	53	Women's Studies	PhD	Supervisor
Nejat	M	44	Political Science	PhD	Supervisor
Azra	F	46	Journalism	PhD	Supervisor
Aycan	F	37	Law	PhD	REC member
Zara	F	43	Int. Relations	PhD	Supervisor
Sıla	F	48	Political Science	PhD	Researcher