

Examination of Experimental Postgraduate Theses in Turkey with Parents of Children with Autism

Otizmli Çocuklara Sahip Ebeveynlerle Türkiye’de Yapılan Deneysel Lisansüstü Tezlerin İncelenmesi

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the experimental postgraduate theses conducted in Turkey with parents of children with autism in terms of publication year, keywords, thesis type, method, sample, variables considered together, and the institute/department in which they were conducted. The study was designed in the case study design, which is one of the qualitative research designs. The population of the study is the postgraduate theses conducted with parents of children with autism between 2011-2021. Document analysis was used to collect the data. Document analysis is an examination method defined as collecting, reviewing, reinterpreting and questioning primary research data. Content analysis technique was used in data analysis. As a result, it is seen that there are not many studies with groups of infants with autism and their families and there are no systematic studies that gather them all together. For this reason, it may be recommended to conduct studies on infancy periods

Keywords: Autism, child, experimental studies, parent.

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye’de otizmli çocuklara sahip ebeveynlerle yürütülen deneysel lisansüstü tezleri; yayın yılı, anahtar kelimeler, tez türü, yöntem, örneklem, birlikte ele alınan değişkenler ile hazırlandığı enstitü ve anabilim dalı açısından incelemektir. Araştırma, nitel araştırma desenlerinden durum çalışması deseni kullanılarak tasarlanmıştır. Çalışmanın evreni 2011-2021 yılları arasında Otizmli çocuklara sahip ebeveynlerle yapılan lisansüstü tezlerdir. Verilerin toplanmasında doküman analizinden yararlanılmıştır. Doküman analizi birincil araştırma verilerinin toplanması, gözden geçirilmesi, yeniden yorumlanması ve sorgulanması şekline tanımlanan bir inceleme yöntemidir. Veri analizinde içerik analizi tekniği kullanılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, otizmli bebek grupları ve aileleriyle yürütülen çalışmaların sınırlı sayıda olduğu, ayrıca bu çalışmaları bütüncül bir şekilde ele alan sistematik araştırmaların bulunmadığı görülmektedir. Bu nedenle, bebeklik dönemine ilişkin araştırmaların da yapılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocuk, deneysel çalışmalar, ebeveyn, otizm.

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1. Introduction

Autism, also known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a complex condition with communication and behavioral problems in general, which can be seen both within each other and separately (Şıkşık, 2016). Individuals suffering from such a disorder; have problems in understanding cognitive and emotional-state concepts such as what others understand, how they feel or what they think (Çalık, 2018). Therefore, they have inability to use gestures, mimics and facial expressions like ordinary people. However, it can be said that autism is a developmental problem of the central nervous system associated with repetitive and stereotypical movements in many children. In addition, autism continues throughout life as a chronic disorder. Thus, changes are seen in the external appearance, amount and severity of the symptoms that occur with age and growth / maturation. However, its etiology has not been determined definitively today, although research suggests that a complex interaction of genetic, environmental, and neurological factors may play a role (Schweizer, 2014).

Kanner, who first came up with the idea of autism in 1943, described autism as a congenital disease. Then, together with Eisenberg in 1956, he included the expression "autism is a result of abnormal practices in childcare" (Ünal, 2006). Later, he changed his mind by arguing that "Children of 'cold mothers' who cannot find solutions to their emotional needs will have autism." However, in the following studies this result has not been supported. After 1960s, the idea that the biologically basis underlying autism was accepted (Mukaddes, 2014). Some evidence that emerged later on the idea that it was biologically based, and to the acceptance of the view that autism is a "behavioral syndrome caused by one or more factors affecting the CNS". In recent years, it has been accepted that there are basically psychological and biological causes, and the magnitude of the effect of specific genetic causes without ignoring (Yosunkaya, 2013).

Despite the considerable body of research focusing on parents of children with autism, the existing literature reveals a substantial gap, as current studies often lack the breadth and depth required to address the highly individualized needs and heterogeneous symptomatology observed across the autism spectrum (Töret et al., 2014). The literature consistently emphasizes that parents of children with ASD require systematic training in a range of coping strategies as well as in all necessary child-focused interventions. In this context, parental education regarding autism is recognized as a primary necessity and is conceptualized as a deliberate and informed effort to enhance the quality of child care (Gül & İftar, 2012). Parent training programs for children with autism represent specialized interventions designed to address the unique needs of families, provide guidance on adapting to life with a child on the spectrum, and teach case-specific techniques (Kızılkaya, 2021). Complementary to these educational initiatives, empirical research and scholarly publications focusing on parents' lived experiences are essential. Such studies would contribute to the creation of a comprehensive knowledge base and serve as a critical resource for subsequent investigations, thereby facilitating the development of evidence-based support materials for families. Ultimately, informed by these resources, parents of individuals with autism will be better positioned to make informed decisions about daily interactions with their children, as well as to differentiate between constructive and detrimental behavioral responses. (Selimoğlu et al., 2013).

According to the results of the researches, it was seen that the most of the previous studies were based on different age groups, social skills and then medical problems. Again, it is seen that the field with the least number of studies is about autism-art-physical activities. If it is assumed that so much work has been done on it as a result of difficulties with social skills, less success will be seen in children's artistic activity or physical skills (Özeren, 2013).

Reviewing previous literature in a discipline contributes to identifying research gaps and evaluating current trends in the field. Although there are meta-analysis (Karasu, 2009; Korkmaz, 2010; Tavil and Karasu, 2013) systematic review studies (Gökçe and Kürkçüoğlu, 2019; Vuran and Olçay, 2021) on autism spectrum disorder in the literature, there are no studies examining experimental studies conducted with parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. In this context, it was aimed to examine the experimental studies on the parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

2. Method

The study was carried out prior to content analysis method to examine experimental studies conducted with parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum. Content analysis provides an additional method for strategically evaluating research trends in a discipline and uncovering new research areas. However, content analysis allows a field to be evaluated from a macro perspective (Falkingham and Reeves 1998). Document analysis was used to collect data. Document analysis is a review method defined by the way primary research data is collected, reviewed, reinterpreted and interrogated (Sak et al., 2021).

2.1. Study Aim

The aim of this study was to examine the experimental postgraduate theses conducted in Turkey with parents of children with autism in terms of publication year, keywords, thesis type, method, sample, variables considered together, and the institute/department in which they were conducted.

2.2. Research Questions

There were no research questions.

2.3. Population and Sample of the Study

The population of the study was the postgraduate theses conducted with parents of children with autism between 2011-2021.

2.4. Data Collection and Data Tools

Document analysis was used to collect data. Document analysis was a review method defined by the way primary research data was collected, reviewed, reinterpreted and interrogated (Sak et al., 2021).

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Since our study was designed as a document analysis, it belongs to the group of studies that do not need an ethics committee.

2.6. Limitations of the Research

Exclusion criteria

1. Lack of access to the entire study through the database
2. Use of non-experimental methods
3. The fact that the study was not conducted with parents of children with autism

2.7. Data Analysis

A data collection form was created in the excel spreadsheet program by utilizing a similar study (Ayanoğlu et al., 2019). In this form, a coding book has been prepared for the year of publication, keywords, type of thesis, method, sample, variables considered together, and the institute/department you are working in. In the next stage, all the studies included by the researchers were examined and the data suitable for the purpose of the research were coded under the appropriate headings in the coding book. After the coding process was completed, the codes were reviewed, and their accuracy was confirmed. The data were analyzed by calculating frequencies and percentages and presented in tables and interpreted.

3. Results

In this systematic study, the findings are presented in a table summarizing postgraduate theses conducted in Turkey under the keywords Autism–Social Support, Autism–Medicine, Autism–Psychiatry, Autism–Neurodevelopment, and Autism–Communication. The sample of the study consisted of 106 postgraduate theses, and the data obtained are displayed in the table below.

Table 1. Type of thesis examined and their distribution by years

Variable	2011-2015		2016-2020		2021		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Master's degree	0	0	39	42.8	0	0	39	36.79
PhD Degree	9	100	17	18.6	6	100	32	30.18
Expert in Medicine	0	0	35	38.4	0	0	35	33.01
Total	9	100	91	100	6	100	106	100

Upon examination of Table 1, it was determined that 36.79% of the postgraduate theses identified with the keywords *Autism-Social Support*, *Autism-Medicine*, *Autism-Psychiatry*, *Autism-Neurodevelopment*, and *Autism-Communication* were master's theses, 30.18% were doctoral dissertations, and 33.01% were medical specialization theses. Of these, 8.49% (9 theses) were completed between 2011 and 2015, 85.84% (91 theses) between 2016 and 2020, and 5.66% (6 theses) in 2021. Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that research in this field has predominantly been conducted at the master's level, with the highest concentration of studies produced during the 2016–2020 period.

Table 2: Study group of the examined thesis

Variable	Master's degree		pHD		Expert in Med.		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Children at Different Age Group	26	66.6	14	43.75	17	48.57	57	53.77
Families (Parents and Children)	2	5.12	7	21.87	3	8.57	12	11,32
Parents	2	5.12	5	15.62	4	11.42	11	10,37
Secondary School Students	1	2.56	2	6.25	2	5.71	5	4,71
Students-Teachers	0	0	2	6.25	0	0	2	1,88
Others*	8	20.5	2	6.25	9	25.71	19	17,92
Total	39	100	32	100	35	100	106	100

* Child and Specialist, Teacher, Student- Teacher and Parent

Upon examination of Table 2, it was determined that the study groups of the analyzed theses consisted primarily of children from different age ranges, accounting for 53.77% (57 theses). In this category, age groups such as 5–9, 6–12, and 8–16 were specified without reference to strict developmental period distinctions. When ranking the remaining groups from the most frequently studied to the least, the distribution was as follows: 17.92% (19 theses) classified as “Other” (including children with specialists, teachers, student-teachers, and parents), 11.32% (12 theses) families (children and parents together), 10.37% (11 theses) parents, 4.71% (5 theses) high school students, and finally 1.88% (2 theses) student-teachers. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the majority of the studies were conducted with children from various age groups.

Table 3: Sampling technique used in the examined thesis

Variable	Master's degree		pHD		Expert in Med.		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Rastgele	6	15,38	7	21,87	13	37,14	26	24,52
Convenience sampling	31	79,48	24	75	21	60	76	71,69
Mixed method	2	5,12	1	3,12	1	2,85	4	3,77
Total	39	100	32	100	35	100	106	100

Upon examination of Table 3, it was determined that the most frequently preferred sampling technique by researchers was the *easily accessible* (convenience) sampling method, which accounted for 71.69% (76 studies). Following this, the *random* sampling technique was employed in 24.52% (26 studies), while the *mixed* method was used in 3.77% (4 theses).

Table 4: Which aspect of the disease/type of the problem in the examined thesis

Variable	Master's degree		pHD		Expert in Med.		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Autism-Social Skills	17	43,58	16	50	3	8,57	36	33,96
Autism-Medical	5	12.82	3	9.37	13	37.14	21	19.81
Psychology	5	12.82	6	18.75	9	25.71	20	18.86
Communication	9	23.07	4	12.5	0	0	13	12.26
Neurology	2	12.82	1	3.12	4	11.42	7	6.60
Genetics	1	6.41	0	0	6	17.14	7	6.60
Physical Activities / Art	0	0	2	6.25	0	0	2	1.88
Total	39	100	32	100	35	100	106	100

Upon examination of Table 4, postgraduate theses on emotional and behavioral disorders categorized by *Type of Disease/Type of Problem* were distributed as follows: Autism–Social Skills accounted for 33.96% (36 theses), Autism–Medical for 19.81% (21 theses), Psychology for 18.86% (20 theses), Communication for 12.26% (13 theses), Neurology and Genetic Problems for 6.60% (7 theses), and finally, Physical Activity/Art for 1.88% (2 theses).

Table 5: The full text or summary of the examined thesis

Variable	Master's degree		PhD		Expert in Med.		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Full-text	39	100	30	93.75	33	94.28	102	96.22
Abstract	0	0	2	6.25	2	5.71	4	3.77
Total	39	100	32	100	35	100	106	100

Upon examination of Table 5, it was determined that 96.22% (102 theses) of the studies conducted with the parents of individuals with autism were obtained in full-text form, while 3.77% (4 theses) were available only as abstracts.

4. Discussion

This research examines postgraduate theses conducted in Turkey by degree, considering specific years and utilizing the keywords Autism–Social Support, Autism–Medicine, Autism–Psychiatry, Autism–Neurodevelopment, and Autism–Communication.

The highest type of thesis examination right after was specialization in medicine with 33.01%, and the next type was doctorate with 30.18%. According to these results, it is thought that almost everyone who has completed their master's degree has done their doctorate education on the thesis titles found in the searches made with these keywords, and if there are exceptions, they may be excluded from these results. However, in a study examining the Postgraduate Thesis on Autism in the Field of Sports in Turkey, the types of thesis are as follows; PhD 73.52% and master's 26.47% (Özoğlu and Karadağ, 2021).

The higher number of studies between 2016 and 2020 may indicate that there is a high tendency for parents of children with autism and children with autism between these dates in our country. In studies on other subjects and in which systematic reviews were conducted, it was determined that there was an increase in the number of studies after 2016, however, as in our study, more studies were conducted at the master's degree (Çağlar and Özkan, 2021; Özoğlu and Karadağ, 2021).

When we look at the groups in our study, 53.77% (57) of these researched thesis constitute the Children of Different Ages group within the study group. Since this child group includes children of various age groups, regardless of age discrimination (5-9, 6-12, 8-16, etc.), it is indicated in this group. However, 11.32% consists of Families (Child and Parents), 10.37% only parents, 4.71% High School Students, 1.88% student-teacher. The 'others' part, which is in the last group, was determined to consist of Child and Specialist, Teacher, Student-Teacher and Parents. Due to the fact that autism is seen in children's groups and its frequency is higher, it is seen that there are many studies conducted with children of different ages. In fact, in a study conducted by Özoğlu and Karadağ (2021), it was stated that the most studied group was children with autism (Gültekin and Başıyigit, 2018; Özoğlu and Karadağ, 2021).

When the sampling techniques of the thesis examined in this study were examined, it was determined that the most preferred technique type was easily accessible with 71.69% (76 thesis). After this technique, the second most used technique was the random method with 24.52% (26 thesis). Mixed method was also found to be another technique used with a rate of 3.77%. As stated here, the most used sampling technique is easily accessible; It is a type of study that is highly preferred because it is a technique that is quick and easy to reach, and it provides convenience to the person who will do the study in choosing the sample size (Baltacı, 2018; Büyüköztürk et al., 2012).

In our study, when the aspect of the disease/type of the problem was examined, it was determined that 33.96% had autism-social skills, 19.81% autism-medical problems, 18.86% psychological problems, 12.26% communication problems, 6.6% problems in neurology and genetics, and 1.88% deficiencies in physical activity/art. It has been seen that the most common problem is in social skills in people with autism, and there are dozens of studies in the literature in the studies conducted on this. For example, in the master's thesis conducted by Aksoy (2019), it was stated that a decrease in social skills is expected to occur in children with autism and that this decrease is reinforced by the overprotective behaviors of families. Similarly, studies emphasize that individuals with ASD frequently experience problems such as lack of social skills and behavioral difficulties. In our study, when the type of problem was examined, 33.96% were identified as autism-social skills, 19.81% as autism-medical problems, 18.86% as psychology-related issues, 12.26% as communication problems, and 6.6% as problems related to physical activity and genetics. It has also been observed that social skills are a recurring focus in the literature, particularly in studies conducted in İzmir (Skounti et al., 2007).

Looking at the studies that have been accessed as full text or abstract text in the thesis examined; It was determined that 96.22% of them were in the form of full text and 3.77% of them were in the form of abstract. With the advancement of technology, the fact that the studies are more easily obtained by more people has led to the publication of the thesis as full text and allowing access. In a recent

systematic review study (Ayanoğlu et al., 2019; Boz, 2001), it is seen that the rate of full text, which was around 80%, increased even more and exceeded 95% as stated in our study.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of graduate theses on autism in Turkey and provides important data that can guide future research. The results also reveal the need for more research on different problem areas in the field of autism, especially social skills deficits.

Examination Of Experimental Postgraduate Theses In Turkey With Parents Of Children With Autism” can contribute to the literature as follows

A comprehensive review of postgraduate theses conducted with parents of children with autism in Turkey reveals research trends, methodological approaches and focal points in this field in our country. This shows how academic studies in Turkey overlap with the world literature and in which areas there are gaps. A review of studies on the challenges and needs of parents of children with autism can help us understand where these families need more support. This can guide both social policy makers and organizations providing support services. The examination of experimental postgraduate theses offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of various intervention and support methods for children with autism and their parents. Such findings can guide the development of more effective strategies for educators, therapists, and families, while also contributing to the identification of best practices in educational programs, social support mechanisms, and guidance services for families of individuals with autism. It can offer suggestions on how such programs can be implemented, especially in the context of Turkey. This review provides information about the gaps, limitations and deficiencies in the graduate theses conducted in Turkey. This will guide future research and graduate studies and encourage more comprehensive and in-depth research on children with autism and their families.

Authors Contributions

Topic Selection: R. İ, O.T.Ç; Design: R. İ; Planning: R. İ, O.T.Ç; Writing The Article: R. İ, O.T.Ç; Data Collection and Analysis: O.T.Ç; Critical Review: R. İ.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest

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