



Syrian Refugees Minors in Turkey. Why and how are they Discriminated Against and Ostracized?

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Accepted: 12 January 2019 / Published online: 21 January 2019
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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore the extent to which 8–15-year-old Syrian children in Turkey face discrimination and ostracism at school and in the community, as well as to reveal what they think about their life in Turkey. The study group was 22 Syrian refugee children, recruited using criteria sampling by taking into account such personal data as age, gender, school attendance and so forth. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data about their feelings. Two distinct forms of semi-structured interviews were conducted: One for the participants who attend school, and another for those who do not. The data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using NVivo v10. The results of the study indicate that the participants encountered discrimination and ostracism in public places, such as schools, hospitals, parks and public transport. The participants consistently reported that they faced discriminatory acts such as humiliation and rejection by peers, while also witnessing attitudes of indifference by others. They also reported that they usually witnessed public apathy. Another major problem was that they are often exploited in workplaces (if they are working) and are paid less. The findings globally suggest that they suffer from widespread discrimination and ostracism. Therefore, a significant number of them have reported that they are mostly unhappy with life in Turkey and want to return to their home country.

Keywords Syrian refugees · minors · discrimination · ostracism · Turkey

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1 Introduction

Turkey is seen as an important bridge between the countries in the Middle East, where civil war, conflict and instability prevail, and the European countries, where economic prosperity and human rights standards are quite high (Collyer et al. 2010; Danis 2004; Elitok and Straubhaar 2010; Hess 2010; Icduygu 2003, 2005; Icduygu et al. 2009; Sørensen 2006). With its increasing economic influence in the region, Turkey has become a magnet for periodic and continuous migration (Fargues 2009; Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü [GIGM] 2017; Kaiser 2003). The momentum of increasing immigration to Turkey gathered pace as the civil unrest broke out during the Arab Spring (GIGM 2015, 2017).

Particularly following the onset of the civil war in Syria, millions of Syrians have unceasingly left their homeland to migrate to neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and particularly Turkey (Harunogulları 2016; Heydemann 2013; Magen 2015; Ostrand 2015; Sharara and Kanj 2014; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR 2017a, b). As a result of the war in Syria, Turkey has experienced one of the largest waves of immigration in its history, making it one of the key destinations for refugees (Tunc 2015; UNHCR 2016). This has led to the arrival, since April 2016, of 3,578,246 Syrian refugees officially recorded as living in Turkey under impermanent protection status (GIGM 2018; UNICEF 2017). Of the total number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, 489,411 individuals (13.67%) are recorded as children under 4 years of age; 860,025 (23.03%) are reportedly children between the ages of 5 and 14 (GIGM 2018).

Minor refugees accompanying their parents are the most vulnerable segment of the refugee population as they are most negatively affected by living in a foreign country (Bahadir and Ucku 2016; Hamdan-Mansour et al. 2017; Newman and Steel 2008; Uzun and Butun 2016).

There are many possible challenges that young refugees must face during and following migration. Some studies have reported that Syrian refugee children faced serious psychological stress during the war in Syria, and later in the countries to where they immigrated, and that some still suffer from psychological problems (Hassan et al. 2016; Farhat et al. 2018; Soykoek et al. 2017; Quosh et al. 2013). Moreover, it is frequently stated that these children are inflicted with orthopedic problems and infectious diseases (Alpak et al. 2015; Basheti et al. 2015; Fazel et al. 2009; Heptinstall et al. 2004).

Others noted that one of the most significant problems that refugees encounter is the lack of free access to quality health services in such countries as Lebanon and Iraq, which are major destinations for immigration (Cherri et al. 2017; Edwards 2015; El-Khatib et al. 2013; Gulland 2013; Lyles et al. 2017; Child Protection in Emergencies Working Group 2013). In contrast, health services are freely available to these people in Turkey. However, refugees stated that they are unable to use such services efficiently due to linguistic and cultural barriers (Demir 2019).

Another challenge that Syrian refugee children experience is the inability to access educational services. Various researchers have reported that a great majority of Syrian immigrant children, particularly those in Lebanon and Iraq lacked schooling or were dropouts, while those who attended school were not provided quality education (El-Khatib et al. 2013; The Child Protection in Emergencies Working Group 2013; Watkins and Zyck 2014). Schooling rates among Syrian refugee children in these two countries

are rather low, due to such reasons as inadequate educational infrastructure, refugees not having enough financial resources, the cultural disposition of not allowing girls to attend school and forcing them into undue marriage, and children having to work (DeJong et al. 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR 2017a, b; UNHCR 2018; UNICEF 2017). In comparison with these countries, however, Turkey allows refugee children better access to educational services (Cinkir 2015; Erdem 2017; Human Rights Watch Report 2015; UNHCR 2018). For example, temporary educational centers were established when the first waves of immigrants arrived in the country half a decade ago and immigrants are still being educated in free schools, in which the language of instruction is Turkish (Ministry of National Education 2014; UNICEF 2017). Despite such efforts, some refugees fail to attend school, due to similar reasons apparent in the aforementioned countries (DeJong et al. 2017; Duruel 2016; Cinkir 2015; Sandal et al. 2016). However, it is the lower language proficiency of these children (or their inability to speak Turkish at all), rather than inadequate infrastructure, that prevents them from receiving education in Turkish schools. Other reasons that follow this main barrier include the inability of Turkish teachers to educate multicultural classes, cultural barriers (e.g., some immigrants being opposed to the practice of co-ed education) and lack of financial resources (Aras and Yasun 2016; Bircan and Sunata 2015; Cinkir 2015; Human Rights Watch Report 2015; Levent and Cayak 2017; Nayir 2017; Saritas et al. 2016; Taskin and Erdemli 2018; Uzun and Butun 2016).

Although Syrian refugee children are a disadvantaged group in general, the situation for girls is considerably much worse than that of boys. This is because, according to a number of studies, that parents tend to force their daughters into marriage not only to minimize expenses, but also to make money by receiving marriage payments (DeJong et al. 2017; UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, SCI, and UNHCR 2014). This is particularly so among Syrian refugees who became financially poorer after migrating to other countries (Cankaya et al. 2018; Ozkaleli 2018). Overall, such undesirable situations lead to psychological exhaustion and attrition from school (Anabtawi and Al Amad 2017; Duruel 2016).

While girls are subject to forced marriage, some refugee boys are obligated to work due to economic reasons, which in turn leads to education deprivation (Cinkir 2015; DeJong et al. 2017; Duruel 2016) Saritas et al. 2016). Moreover, in some countries, particularly in Lebanon, Syrian refugee children encounter problems meeting basic needs such as food, drink and accommodation (Alsaud 2015; Hossain et al. 2016; UNICEF 2015). Moreover, in a number of studies, it is also reported that these children are likely to meet radical groups and be an open target for child kidnapping and organized crime; they live in poverty, and worse still, they are forced into begging and the sex trade (Alsaud 2015; Aydin et al. 2017; Craig et al. 2009; El-Khani et al. 2017; Fernando and Ferrari 2013; George et al. 2012; Harunogullari 2016; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Mert and Ciplak, 2017a, b; Neugebauer 2013; Ozservet and Sirkeci 2016; Rossi 2008; Seker and Aslan 2015; UNICEF and UNHCR 2015; UNICEF 2015; Wessells 2016; Watkins and Zyck 2014). Due to these numerous challenges, their psychological wellbeing and positive expectations from life are poor (Beste 2015; Lawrence et al. 2018; Kirmayer et al. 2011; McFarlane et al. 2011).

A number of studies have been carried out to investigate the problems that Syrian refugees have encountered in domains such as education and health. However, no

research studies, to the best of our knowledge, have attempted to investigate the degree to which Syrian refugee children in Turkey experience discrimination, exclusion, or ostracism at school or in the society at large.

Studies are yet to examine the reasons for such negative experiences and how the victims felt. An extensive review of the relevant literature indicates that there are no studies using interviews to examine how Syrian children feel about the discrimination they experience.

Some studies focus on the adults around refugee children rather than on the problems as seen from the perspective of younger refugees. The existing studies also have other limitations. They focus on children in educational settings only, rather than extending their scope of research to children out of educational settings. Furthermore, according to some researchers, it is essential that prospective research focus on the factors that are influential on social harmony between the host community and refugee children and whether these children experience discrimination or ostracism as a means to develop new perspectives and policies (See: Kara and Tuysuzer 2017; Seker and Aslan 2015).

The aim of the present qualitative research is to explore the perspectives of 8–15 year-old Syrian children in Turkey, focusing on the degree to which they encounter discrimination and experience ostracism, and whether that is in or outside of the school context because of their Syrian background.

2 Literature review

Discrimination is usually defined as treating a person or a group unequally/differently due to a particular characteristic that they have; it is a phenomenon directly connected with social dynamics and it can be a part of politics, education and language (National Research Council 2004). Being a phenomenon with considerable variability depending on the society, time, place and conditions in which it emerges, discrimination can be deeply rooted in differences with respect to age, language, race, religion or religious sect, nationality, gender and socio economic status (Goffman 1990; Taylor et al. 2005).

Although it is widely believed that discrimination and ostracism are primarily caused by prejudice (see Vignoles 2011), there are theories stressing that human beings use distinctive features of others, such as race, gender and religious faith, to differentiate pieces of knowledge from each other or to group them (Cayır and Ceyhan-Ayan 2012; Yang 2000).

In contrast, some claim that discrimination is caused by lack of legal norms rather than prejudice or the nature of human beings. Still others, based on Marxist theories, claim that socio-economic norms and conditions basically lead to discrimination and that capitalism comes with some processes that trigger inequality, and this in turn leads to discrimination and ostracism in the society (Jeong 2008). The “elite theory” of Morca and Pareto suggests that the main reason for discrimination is the efforts of the organized minority in the society to dominate the rest (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). According to Sumner (2013), individuals discriminate between the group they belong to and others in the society. Thus, they focus on those that resemble themselves, thereby acting based upon the distinction between “we” and “others” (Hall 1997, 2001). The dominant group considers itself as “perfect, knowledgeable, powerful, decent” while seeing others as “second-class, unskillful, weak, evil, ill-judged. This is both a psychological and

sociological process, which stirs up discrimination (Sumner 2013). It is also claimed that the tendency of the dominant group to consider itself as superior; its desire to protect itself or the effort to maintain the *status quo* brings about discrimination (Cayır and Ceyhan-Ayan 2012). In this regard, Brewer (1999) note that the more one identifies with a group, the higher the level of prejudice and discrimination towards others.

Cognitivist and postmodern approaches posit that, along with psychological and intellectual factors, ignorance and lack of communication lead to the phenomena of ostracism, labelling and exclusion (Hall 1997, 2001). Conversely, traditional psycho-analytic theories consider the issue as intrapersonal and instinct-based, claiming that identification with one's own group turns into hatred, prejudice and discrimination against other groups (Cayır and Ceyhan-Ayan 2012; Yang 2000).

As it is seen, although there are a plethora of reasons for discrimination, in countries that are popular destinations for immigrants, the problems of labeling, discrimination and ostracism may manifest as the dominant group considers immigrants, who do have different characteristics, as a threat to their comfort zones and identity (Hernandez et al. 2010).

A number of studies have focused on the discrimination and ostracism suffered by refugee minors in various countries. For example, Brabant et al. (2016) found that refugees (42 children aged 9–13) faced name-calling and were given nicknames like '*Frenchy*', '*Belgian*' and '*Black Girl*'. They also found that the children were not invited to celebrations like birthdays and were refused permission to eat at the same table as the local children in Canada. In a study conducted in a Canadian context by Kirova (2001), it was found that a Ukrainian girl was not allowed, by local children, to join during play and that she was called by other children as '*silly*'. These could be an indication of how immigrant children suffer from discrimination due to their race or nationality. However, as Goffman (1990) notes, regardless of the type of discrimination, the expressions used by locals to humiliate immigrant children can be solid evidence of how labeling brings forth discrimination.

Hajisoteriou et al. (2017) observed that immigrant children living in Southern Cyprus were excluded from games play; this was also supported by Brabant et al. (2016). Similarly, Stark et al. (2015) reported that immigrant children in the Congo were not accepted into the playground on the grounds that their parents admonished them not to play with the immigrants.

The examples of discrimination depicted by various researchers (e.g., Hajisoteriou et al. 2017; Brabant et al. 2016; Stark et al. 2015) can be discussed vis-à-vis the social learning theory, which posits that children usually learn discrimination and ostracism from their immediate environments or their families. The cases described in these studies can be linked with labeling theory, critical race theory or group position theory.

Other studies point to the efforts of the members of host communities to dominate the minority groups by labeling them. For instance, Anderson (2001) reported an Afghan child who said that she had to endure hearing offensive remarks such as '*You're a foreigner, you don't belong in Germany. Get out of here. You're not wanted.*' By the same token, Bates et al. (2005) reported that a female student was offended by her teacher's remarks labelling her as a '*terrorist*'.

Various studies have highlighted the ways that immigrant children are *otherised*. For example, Hamm et al. (2005) stated that immigrant children are likely to experience discrimination due to their accented speech. Others stressed that differences resulting

from religious beliefs also give rise to it. For example, Eghdamian (2016) noted that Syrian refugees in Jordan face discrimination and ostracism for this reason. Likewise, Syrian Christians and Durzis reported facing difficulties in developing bonds of friendship with the rest of the society and finding rental accommodations. They also reported that their children were verbally abused, labeled, or bullied at school.

According to some studies, immigrant children have been considered “negro, diseased, filthy, enemy, atheist, foreigner” and they frequently hear comments at school and in the community like “Go home!” “Why have you come here?” “Why are you here?” “Be gone from my country!” “You’re not a part of us” (see Altinyelken 2009; George et al. 2012; Kim et al. 2011; McKenney et al. 2006; Montgomery 2008; Oxman-Martinez et al. 2012; Verkuyten and Thijs 2001, Brabant et al. 2016).

Discrimination and ostracism that Syrian refugee children come up against not only hinder the integration process, but they also lead to a number of issues, such as psychological problems, lower satisfaction levels in life, and poorer well-being (Lawrence et al. 2018; Kirmayer et al. 2011; McFarlane et al. 2011).

3 Method

3.1 Research design

This study was carried out using a case study design as it aims to investigate whether Syrian immigrant children suffer from discrimination and ostracism at school, in the workplace or environment and how they feel if they do.

3.2 Participants and Ethical issues

In this qualitative case study, participants were recruited using criterion sampling procedures, which is a form of purposive sampling method. Willingness of both the children and the parents were the main criterion used to recruit the participants for the study. Additionally, disadvantaged minors who fail to attend school as they are disabled or forced to work were also included in the study.

There are 22 minors in different age groups in the study group. We considered criteria such as age, income, access to schooling, and employment. The participants live in Sivas, Ankara, Gaziantep and Kilis. These provinces are the places where the highest number of refugees live in Turkey. Since cultural factors made it difficult for us to collect data from female participants, the number of females and males are not equivalent.

All the participants and their parents were informed about the aim and the scope of the study before data collection. A Parental Permission Form and an Assent Tips Form were used in during all processes of research and the recruitment of participants. The parents of all participants approved and signed the Parental Permission Form, prepared both in Arabic and in English. All participants were asked to read the Assent Tips form and they declared that they had understood it. Participation in the study was voluntary. Due to ethical considerations, the participants in the study were given ‘participant numbers’ as pseudonyms. Details about the participants in the study are given in Table 1.

Table 1 The description of the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Income	Employment status	Schooling
P1	M	14	Very low	Yes	No
P2	F	8	Middle	No	No
P3	M	14	Very low	No	Yes
P4	M	14	Very low	Yes	No
P5	M	14	Middle	Yes	No
P6	M	11	Low	Yes	Yes
P7	M	11	High	Yes	Yes
P8	M	9	Very High	No	Yes
P9	M	10	Very low	No	No
P10	F	11	Middle	Yes	No
P11	F	13	High	No	Yes
P12	M	12	Very low	Yes	No
P13	M	13	Very High	No	Yes
P14	F	14	Middle	No	No
P15	M	14	Low	Yes	No
P16	F	14	Middle	No	Yes
P17	F	9	Very High	No	Yes
P18	F	9	Very low	Yes	No
P19	M	11	Very low	No	No
P20	M	12	Very low	No	Yes
P21	M	12	Middle	Yes	No
P22	M	14	High	Yes	No

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Two different forms of semi-structured interview forms were created for two groups of participants (participants attending school and those who do not). In preparing the interview questions, the procedures for developing qualitative data collection instruments were followed. To this end, expert views were gathered and piloting was conducted. Interview protocols contained open-ended questions. The resulting questions were used to help reveal the participants' views. A total of 14 main questions and six probe questions were created in semi-structured interview protocols to reveal whether Syrian refugee children experience discrimination and ostracism at school or at work, and to explore what they feel about this negative experience. In the interview protocols, seven main questions and three probe questions were created for the children with schooling experience. The remaining questions were used for the participants with no schooling.

An expert who holds a PhD degree with expertise in designing data collection instruments was consulted. Two questions were revised and one was rephrased based

on recommendations from the expert. The question items were translated into Arabic by a native Arabic speaker who was also highly proficient in Turkish. To crosscheck the accuracy of the Arabic translations, a professional translator examined it and necessary changes were made. The questions were piloted to ensure that they measure the intended constructs. The piloting was done in the company of parents and an interpreter with 5 Syrian refugee children who were 8–14 years old and who were deemed by a psychologist as ‘suitable’ for such an interview. The Syrian refugee children who participated in the piloting process were not included in the study. During the piloting, it was found that one question item was not comprehensible enough, so it was deleted from the protocol. In this way, the final form of the interview protocol was established.

The interview protocol created for children in schooling contained such questions as: *“Do you feel positive about living in Turkey? Have you experienced any difficulty in schooling? If yes, specify and indicate your feelings about it. Have you met any negative attitude or act because of your Syrian background? How did you feel about it?”* The interview protocol created for the children without schooling included such questions as: *“How do you feel about living in Turkey? Do you attend a school? Are you employed? If yes, indicate your occupation. Have you met any type of discrimination or ostracism at work? Do you have Turkish friends? If no, explain why. Would you like to have Turkish friends? Have you met any difficulties because of your Syrian background? What was it? How did you feel about it?”*

To make sure that ethical standards are observed, the whole data collection procedure was accompanied by interpreters competent in Arabic and Turkish. The participants were informed about the aim of the study and were assured that the information obtained would be kept strictly confidential. Before the interviews, a psychologist had a talk with each child. Two children were found to be unsuitable for the interview and were excluded from the study. They were found to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The children who were found to be suitable for the interview were accompanied by a psychologist and one of their parents during the interview sessions. Additionally, the interview protocol created for Syrian children attending school was submitted to the inspection of Ministry of Education for approval. The official approval for interview protocol was obtained from the R/D and ethical committee of the ministry. The interview forms, Parental Permission Form, and Assent Tips Form were also examined and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University. The researcher was interested in collection data relevant to the scope of the study only. The voice recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were kept for future reference and in case ethical questions arise.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview sessions were voice recorded and the resulting data were transcribed using Microsoft Word Software without editing. During the interview sessions, interpreters simultaneously interpreted interviewees’ answers from Arabic to Turkish. When transcribing the interviews, detailed translations were used rather than interpreted versions.

Before the data were submitted to the coding process, two researchers thoroughly examined the interview notes and transcriptions in order gain a comprehensive overview of the content. Additionally, key points in the interview notes and transcripts were detected in line with the aim of the study. To perform the coding process, words and

concepts expressed by the participants were used as codes and subsequently a line-by-line interpretation technique was applied.

In the process of data analysis, Nvivo 10 was used, and subsequently an open and selective coding technique was used. For example, codes such as *'not being accepted to the group'*, *'offensive words'*, *'insulting ethnic background'* were created for answers to questions such as; *'have you encountered any negative reaction at school because of your Syrian background?'* After coding all the data, a code list was created. Based on that code list, similarities and differences between the codes were checked and later categories were created accordingly. After determining the categories, themes were drawn from the categories. In the process of drawing themes, areas where discrimination and ostracism occur are emphasized based on the difficulties encountered by Syrian refugee children. Accordingly, the themes (areas of discrimination and ostracism) in the study are determined as in the following:

- Discrimination and ostracism at school
- Discrimination and ostracism at work
- Discrimination and ostracism in the community

In the analysis of the data, descriptive analysis and content analysis were used. Also, direct quotations were frequently used with the aim of better illustrating the experiences of participants and helping the reader vividly see the details of what the participants live through.

During data analysis, the researchers used basic analytic induction and content analysis. After the coding process was completed, categories and themes were identified according to interconnections among the codes. The coding, category development, and theme development processes continued through reflexive understanding, and accountability was the main principle. The analysis file has been preserved, as it could be required in line with the accountability principle. In the final part of the analysis, qualitative query was conducted using Nvivo. Especially, a coding query was performed based on characteristics of participants.

We sometimes provided direct quotes to depict the participants' perspectives clearly. While selecting quotes for the final report, we paid attention to how frequently a particular idea was mentioned, the extent to which the participants were sure of what they said, tone of voice and so forth. As the principle of accountability is an important characteristic of qualitative research, all data were kept safe for later reference should the need arise. In addition, during the study, ethical principles were carefully taken into account.

4 Results

4.1 Findings about discrimination and ostracism at school

Analysis of the interview data showed that the participants P3, P8, P13, P17 and P20 (pseudonyms) in schooling were pleased with living in Turkey. Nevertheless, the participant with the pseudonym P20, who was also in schooling, was not happy with living in Turkey. All of the participants though indicated that they had to cope with discrimination and ostracism at school, due to being a Syrian refugee.

P16 said that she was not pleased with living in Turkey. When asked the question ‘why are you not content with living in Turkey?’ she said that owing to ostracism at school she was not happy with living in Turkey. Her words described ostracism at school as in the following;

Nobody wants to sit next to me in the classroom because of my Syrian background. I sit alone. My classroom teacher made me sit at the back of the classroom. He criticizes me. I feel that he doesn’t like me. I don’t like him, either. I don’t like the school, either.

P16 and P13 recounted that they were sent by the Turkish Ministry of Education to schools where the instruction is given in Turkish only, in order to facilitate connection with other children. However, as they were devoid of basic language knowledge in listening comprehension and reading/writing, they thought that waste their time in classes because they sit alone at the back row and do not participate in classroom activities.

The study found evidence that Syrian refugee children are ostracised by their classmates. For example, P13 reported that he sometimes was asked by his classmates questions such as ‘*you are Syrian so why are you here*’. In spite of such discriminatory attitudes P13 encountered, he indicated that he was content with living in Turkey. The following remarks are a clear indication of difficulties that he experiences while integrating with the Turkish students.

I spend more time with Syrians. I prefer playing with them. Turkish children do not play with me anyway. I, therefore, play with Syrians. It is more fun

P13 talks in that way justifiably because of a past experience. He remarked that he tried to play with Turkish students in one occasion, but another Turkish student warned him by saying ‘*you are Syrian, I won’t join the game as long as you are in the game, and you should play with other Syrian children*’. He further indicated that he had to leave the game in tears and go home as the other children following the advice wanted him to leave the playground. This clearly demonstrates the extent of discrimination.

Similar to P16 and P13, the participant with the pseudonym P17, who goes to a Turkish school with other Turkish children, told that she was content with living safely in Turkey and was fully enjoying it. Nevertheless, the participant did indicate that she was reluctant to go to school due to negative attitudes. She tried to emphasize that she was ostracized at playground and encountered verbal abuse at school by other students who use remarks such as ‘*why are you here, you are not wanted here, go away*’. That participant further indicated that the level of discrimination in the classroom decreased as she gradually bettered her knowledge of Turkish and come to understand the classroom instruction, a finding which is worth mentioning in this regard. She also said that several students who were aware of her nationality occasionally kept calling her ‘*dirty*’, an indication which shows the participant was still experiencing discrimination.

As with P7, P13 divided her stay in Turkey into two distinct phases and expressed her contentment with living in Turkey. However, she confided that owing to her low proficiency in Turkish, she had initially encountered difficulties with integration and felt a sense of frustration. P3 attributed her initial frustration mainly to school-related

experiences and mentioned an instance of discrimination by saying, *'Turkish students frustrated me as they teased me about my poor Turkish'*. He also indicated that her poor Turkish kept her from doing her homework assignments and that his teachers were not happy about it. P3, who lived in a primarily Turkish neighbourhood with skin colour and clothing style not different from Turkish locals, reported that he felt gradually happier in her life after learning Turkish. She also said that her acquired knowledge of Turkish relatively decreased discrimination by classmates and teachers, and it even enabled her to easily make friends with more Turkish than Syrian children. Yet she confessed that during play, her Turkish friends sometimes ostracized her saying, *'you are a Syrian'*.

Some participants in the study were supposed to be in schooling. Yet, some participants confessed that they had rarely attended school despite having enrolled or they had dropped out. For example, P9 and P10 reported that they have dropped out of school after failing at school due to poor language skills. P10, in particular, said, *'It was clear that I was not welcome at school'* and explained:

Initially I attended school but I don't do it anymore. That's because I was mistreated there. They said to me 'Go back to Syria'. 'You are not wanted here'. I felt sorry and decided not to go to school because I would cry all the time. P9, who had apparent signs of Syrian background such as her skin colour and broken Turkish accent, stated that she had to immigrate to Turkey at the age of five. She expressed her discontent with living in Turkey. When she was asked the reason for her discontent, she explained that she missed her friends back in Syria and found it hard to make friends in Turkey. Regarding the problems with integration at school, she said, *'I had a fight with Turkish children and had to leave school. They kept taking away my ball and yelling at me, 'chase after the Syrian'. They kept playing with my ball and had a fight with them. Later I was kicked out of school'*. When she was asked the question whether she would go back to school if they let her, she said *'I don't feel like going back to school anymore. I have lost my motivation. I am not competent either in Arabic or Turkish, so instruction at school makes no sense'*.

After the analysis of the interview data it was found that Syrian children who had financial difficulties and apparent signs of Syrian background, such as distinctive skin color and broken Turkish, encountered comparatively more discrimination and ostracism. Nonetheless, the children who have a better command of Turkish and thus are better able to follow classes are found to have encountered less discrimination and ostracism at school. It is important to note that those children with skin color similar to Turkish children and a better command of Turkish have hardly experienced any discrimination.

4.2 Findings about discrimination and ostracism at work

With his father still in Syria, P22, the oldest of the siblings, had to get a job at an early age to earn money to look after his family. As he worked at a bakery, he could better his Turkish and become fluent. Nevertheless, he openly admitted having encountered discrimination at work because of his skin color, revealing her Syrian background.

To describe an experience of discrimination, he said: *'my colleague who does the same work as me at the bakery gets a higher salary than me. Even the apprentice gets more money than me. I work more but get paid less'*. When he was asked the question *'why do you think you get paid less despite working more?'* his answer was *'that's because I am Syrian'*.

P15, who lost his father in the Syrian war, stated that he had been living in Turkey for the last 5 years and had to work to earn money to meet the needs of her family. He confessed his discontent with living Turkey and attributed it to financial problems and discrimination he encountered. He claimed that inequalities exist at workplace between Turkish and Syrian workers and he is discriminated because of his Syrian background. P15 confides that he had to work more hours (about 14 h) than legally required limits without any social insurance but got less pay than Turkish workmates. He says *'they make me work 13 h and do unpaid work overtime. I work more but get paid less without any health insurance.'*

P15 said that he had left school to support his family and took a job with a furniture firm. Besides having to work without any health insurance, he is given tasks that are too difficult to do like carrying heavy load. When he was asked the question *'why are you always given difficult tasks?'* He answered that some senior workmates wanted to humiliate, degrade him. In this way, he noted that he is faced with ostracism and discrimination at work. Like P15, the participants P4 and P5 noted that they had experienced ostracism at work saying, *"They treat me as a foreigner. They make me work more because of my Syrian background. They make me carry things that are far too heavy and make me do unpleasant jobs."*

P1 noted that he could not attend school as he had to support his family by collecting recyclable cardboard packaging in the streets and that he is content with living in Turkey. He said that some people considered him as *'dirty'* because of his job. P1 also said that although it was imperative for him to work, some other cardboard collectors sometimes forcefully took away all collected items from him. He said that such mean things had happened because other people took advantage of his Syrian background and the vulnerability of his situation.

Syrian refugee children, who cannot afford to attend school and therefore have to seek employment opportunities, feel that they are forced to do jobs, which are far beyond their physical strength, without getting fairly paid. P4, P5, P15 and P22 think that if they were of Turkish origin they would not experience such discrimination and would get paid equally. They believe that because of their Syrian origin they get exploited on the job market.

4.2.1 Findings about discrimination and ostracism in the neighbourhood

The study found that besides at school and at work, Syrian refugee children are confronted with discrimination and ostracism in the everyday life as well. For example, P19 and P11 acknowledge that they are not accepted to play with Turkish children. On the other hand, P16, who managed to join a group of Turkish children for play, recounted that an approaching mother of one of the Turkish boys said *'You are a Syrian; therefore, you should not approach my kid anymore'*. P16 expressed her surprise and indignation over the subject and said, *'I am not content with living here because of such incidents.'*

P11, who experienced a similar incident as P16, confessed that a Turkish mom pointed at her and said to her kid, '*Do not play with her*'. P11 told that other children stopped playing with her after that incident and that P11 was deeply moved by what had happened. She explained that she would stop trying to join Turkish children for play as they were not willing to do so. She said that such a thing had never occurred to him back in Syria.

P2 and P6 complained that they were not accepted for play with Turkish children. They told that Turkish children had not accepted them as playmates because of their Syrian origin. On this subject, one of the two commented '*Being Syrian is not a fault and I don't see why they are so unkind with me. Does it make any difference to be a Syrian?*'

The data provided evidence that participants in the study are confronted with discrimination and ostracism by Turkish peers and parents. In addition to this, it was also found that the participants experience discrimination and ostracism in their social lives, such as during hospital visits and shopping. A clear example for this is recounted by P16. She told that she was mistaken for a shoplifter by the shop owner when shopping alone. She put her feeling as in the following: "*Being labelled as a shoplifter right away because of my Syrian origin is not fair. I wish such a nasty thing had never occurred. It upset me greatly and made me burst into tears.*"

Like P16, P10 too recounted that when she walked into a grocery store to buy chocolate, the store owner, who took her for a beggar because of her shabby clothes and Syrian origin, forced her leave the place. Similar to P16, P10 said that though it is not a common practice in the society some Syrians are considered beggars and thieves, and discrimination and ostracisms follow as a result. Syrian children experience discrimination and ostracism from landlords and neighbours. For example, P21 said that because of her Syrian origin he is prevented from using her consumer rights and get abused by some Turkish individuals. P21 confided that their landlord always had kept appearing at their doorstep and verbally harassed them. He continued to say that without any male in the household, the landlord kept threatening to raise the rent. He told that this situation particularly hurt her feelings. According to him, the landlord would not be able to use the phrase '*if you are evicted, there will be other Syrians to rent my house*' to non-refugees since they have their own rights. Since refugees do not have such consumer rights, they are faced with such threats from landlords. P18 recounted an incident of discrimination which affected her deeply. He/she said:

A female lived upstairs. Whenever we met she would always ask 'why are you (Syrians) still here? Why don't you go back to Syria? When are you going back?' This situation frightened me and I tried not to meet her.

In the study, some participants noted that as well as experiencing discrimination at school and in the street they have to face discrimination and ostracism when getting health services. P22 told that sometimes he could not get access to health services or had to wait longer than Turkish individuals. He told that a health worker insulted his saying:

When we go to hospital, they do not allow us to make doctor's appointment. They say 'go back to your own country and get your physical examination there. We give you food, but don't expect us to give you health services.

P12, who worked as a shoeshine boy to support his family, did not attend school. He told that he was happy with living in Turkey and had not faced any discrimination. That participant with a skin color that reveals his Syrian origin said that on one particular occasion, he was deeply upset by the reaction of other bus commuters to his dirty clothes: *“Once, a female commuter instructed me to leave my seat to her. There was an empty seat next to me but she said he would not sit next to a Syrian.”*

When he was asked the question ‘how did you feel after this incident?’ he stated that he felt upset and was deeply affected and he found it hard to understand why people reacted in that way. P14 immigrated to Turkey with her family and initially could not find a rental accommodation for a long time. He thought because of her Syrian origin he faced discriminated. She could attend school for a couple of years and speak Turkish fluently; therefore, she could make Turkish friends, who had not discriminated him. Nevertheless, a couple of months ago she was made to leave school to get married. Although she was barely 14, she felt prepared for marriage. She accepted it and was not fully aware of the abuse awaiting her.

The analysis of the data in the study showed that although Syrian refugee children were not involved any disruptive and socially-unacceptable acts, they nevertheless faced various forms of ostracism and discrimination in the society.

P2, P6, P10, P11, P16, P19, P21 and P22, attributed discrimination to mainly to their nationality and noted that this situation makes them feel helpless and deeply upsets them. All the participants in the study expressed similar feelings and described their situation with the words; *‘if we were in Syria those things would never happen’*. A detailed legend involving information about all the themes and characteristics of the participants is given in appendix.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The present study demonstrated that Syrian children, who came to Turkey fleeing from the Syrian civil conflict to find a refuge, have encountered discrimination and ostracism at various places such as schools, hospitals, parks and public transport. More precisely, Syrian refugee children had to face discriminatory acts such as rejection by peers, humiliation, indifference by others, public apathy, exploitation of labour and rejection from public spaces.

The study showed that Syrian refugee children faced challenges in Turkey at school or in their neighbourhood (parks, street) particularly in their first years. They were not allowed to participate in play groups by other Turkish children due to their background. According to the Syrian refugee children, Turkish children are reluctant to bond with them and to spend time together. They also noted in this context that some Turkish parents warned their children not to play with Syrian children for the fear that they might end up contracting disease of or getting into trouble. This type of attitude, according to participants, cause Turkish children to reject Syrian children as playmates. Kara and Tuysuzer (2017) reported that Syrian refugee children were discriminated against and rejected as playmates. Similarly, Istanbul Bilgi University Child Studies Unit (2015) reported that too little interaction between Syrian refugee children and Turkish children exists at school, which does not lead to any social contact. A study by Uzun and Butun (2016) also found that Turkish parents cautioned

their children not to play with Syrian children “to prevent them from contracting any disease”. It seems that the biggest challenge for the acceptance and integration of Syrian children within the society is the prejudices from Turkish parents. It is likely that Turkish children act on the prejudicial views of their parents and reflect it in their interaction with Syrian children in their everyday lives. This situation shows that there is a need for adopting policies aimed at overcoming prejudices from Turkish parents and their children.

According to the social learning theory, younger generations usually develop behavioral patterns by observing the people around them. As one could argue, the prejudice that Syrian children carry diseases and the popularity of such a belief among children are one of the sources of discrimination and ostracism. As traditional cognitivists believe, besides prejudice, ignorance and poor communication might be related with discrimination.

The present study found that Syrian children had to face discrimination and humiliating situations, in which they were verbally abused and offended with words such as ‘dirty’ as they could not afford to wear clean and proper clothes. The study found that a Turkish woman rejected to sit next to a Syrian shoe-shine boy on a public bus as his face was soiled and wore dirty clothes. The woman’s offended the boy saying ‘You should leave your seat to me. I cannot sit next to a Syrian. You Syrians do not have personal hygiene. This is an indication of Syrian children’s facing socio-economic discrimination. As Sumner (2013) noted, it is probable that the tendency to see oneself as good, clean and superior while considering minorities or immigrants as filthy, evil and inferior makes itself clear as a form of discrimination.

However, even if they could afford to wear proper clothes, they would still face the same kind of attitude from Turkish children at school and parks as their skin color remains recognizable. Turkish children called them as ‘Suri, Suri, Suriyeli’. ‘Suri’ is the short form of ‘Suriyeliyim’ (I’m Syrian), which is used by Syrian refugee children but it was adopted by their Turkish peers as an insulting name. This type of ethnicity-based name-calling among Turkish children shows the extent of the discrimination against Syrian children. In the study, it was also found that Turkish children usually made fun of the poor language skills of Syrian children. The participants in the study expressed that when faced with humiliation and ridicule, they could not help getting upset, indignant and even withdrawn. In their study, Saritas et al. (2016) found that Turkish pupils ridiculed a Syrian refugee kid’s accent. Also, Kara and Tuysuzer (2017) reported that Syrian children who were ridiculed for their ethnic origin started to fight with other Turkish children. The present study, in this regards, reached similar conclusions with other studies in the related literature.

For immigrants to attain near-native like proficiency of the target language takes a lot of time, and linguistic errors resulting from accent or the inability to speak fluently might lead to linguistic discrimination. Humans inherently use such distinctive features as religion and language to group or discriminate people (Cayır and Ceyhan-Ayan 2012; Yang 2000). Because linguistic differences and accent are easily recognizable, members of the dominant group (in the host community) could easily label a person as an outsider and tend to exhibit some discriminatory behavior.

Based on the interview data obtained from the participants in the study, it was found that Syrian children, who attended Turkish schools and had little knowledge of Turkish, were ignored by classroom teachers and made to sit at the back of the classroom at the

expense of apparent isolation. The interview data showed that rather than coming up with ways to solve this problem the teachers attempted to offset this problem by harshly criticizing the Syrian refugee children in their classrooms. The study and found that Syrian children for the reasons above had negative thoughts about their teachers, felt alienated from school and even ultimately dropped out school. For example, in his study Erdem (2017) found that some Syrian refugee pupils with poor Turkish were ignored by their classroom teachers and were not invited to participate in classroom activities. Similarly, data from other studies indicated that classroom teachers were reluctant to accept Syrian children in their classroom because of communication problems deriving from lacking language knowledge (Levent and Cayak 2017; Saritas et al. 2016; Uzun and Butun 2016).

As Turkish teachers are not equipped with instructional skills and experience to educate Syrian immigrant children, mostly due to linguistic barriers or they think that Syrian children fail to understand them, it could be claimed that they get involved in discriminatory behavior. However, such behavior could also result from the fact that most families do not want their children to receive education in the same class where Syrian children exist.

The language problems that negatively affect communication between teachers and Syrian children at school and ultimately their academic achievement can be overcome if they attend a language preparation programme ahead of usual classes or if they are given extra language classes alongside their usual classes. It has officially been announced that in the near future, the government will close all Temporary Education Centers, where Syrian children have been taught in their native language (Arabic) by Syrian teachers and that all Syrian children will get their education alongside Turkish children (Ministry of National Education 2014). Nevertheless, closing down special schools for Syrian children and admitting them directly to regular schools, where they are taught in Turkish with Turkish children, would inevitably cause similar events to occur as evidenced by the present study.

Additionally, the government plans to hire Arabic speaking coordinators at Turkish (as medium of instruction) schools with large population of Syrian refugee children. It is hoped that the new system would partly solve possible problems that might arise between teachers and refugee children as a result of cultural and linguistic barriers. Given that the civil war in Syria is not likely to cease in years to come, it would be a viable solution to offer courses on multiculturalism to teachers who are destined to teach Syrian children.

Some refugee children who had to leave school to seek employment either because of adaptation problems at school or financial issues expressed that they had no choice but to accept any job offer with poorer working conditions and less pay than their Turkish workmates. The participants indicated that they want to return to Syria because they face exploitation at work. They said their despair was exploited in Turkey and were made to work overtime unpaid.

The arrival of large numbers of immigrants in Turkey has brought about the concept of cheaper workforce. This has paved the way for child employment, particularly for those businesses which desire to increase their profit. In addition, it has apparently caused a good number of Turkish citizens to lose their jobs. It should be borne in mind that such experiences could lead to unrest in the society and cause people to exhibit some discriminatory behavior against Syrian refugees and to see them as foes rather

than friends. Another point is that the discrimination that Syrian children experience in the workplace can be explained by Marxist theories which claim that capitalism breeds processes that lead to inequality among people and these processes cause discriminatory behavior and ostracism to emerge in the society.

There is an urgent need for the introduction of new regulations and laws aimed at protection of Syrian young refugees from the adversities of employment. In this regard, it is crucial that families be educated to keep their children in schooling at all costs and that financial difficulties underlying the problem are alleviated.

The data obtained from the participants in the present study demonstrated that Syrian refugee children are usually considered as thieves, beggars and so forth in the society. This type of discriminatory language can be regarded as the result of overgeneralizing from a few isolated negative incidents happening in the past to entire population of Syrian refugees. For instance, one participant in the study said, *“when I went to grocery store on my own, the owner thought I was a ‘shoplifter’ because of my Syrian origin”*. Another said *“The store owner called me a ‘shoplifter’ due to my Syrian background.”* Such remarks provide evidence for the existence of stereotyping affecting Syrian refugee population. Such stereotypes about Syrians cause difficulties in finding affordable housing in their desired locations and push up the rents to unaffordable rates. Yildiz and Yildiz found that the rents tend to increase in parts of the city with Syrian refugee population. Similarly, Soykoek et al. (2017) found that the Turkish locals would rather live in neighbourhoods with no Syrian population as they were not happy living with Syrians in the same neighbourhoods. In this regard, this finding is line with those of other studies in the literature. In the study, it was found that Syrians with financial means do not experience difficulties finding a rent house as do other Syrians with a tight budget. It was seen that the former can easily find houses in any neighbourhood. This finding clearly shows the need to provide financial assistance by international and national organizations to Syrians to allow them to find proper housing. It can be assumed that if such assistance is provided, they will face lesser discrimination and ostracism. Based on the observations and the participants’ remarks in the study, it was found that Syrian children from well-off families who wore neat and clean clothes faced lesser discrimination, integrated better and felt more content with living in Turkey than those who lacked financial means.

From the interview data in the study, it was found that because Syrian refugee children experience discrimination and ostracisms at school and in their surroundings, they feel isolated and alienated. They, as a result, avoid contact with others. Because of the sense of alienation from Turkish children, the children tend to make friends with other Syrian children who readily accept them as playmates. Such incidences, however, lead to a subculture in the end. Some Syrian children who fail to find any Syrian children to interact with and experience isolation gradually become less sociable. As they usually use Arabic in their lives, their knowledge of Turkish does not show any improvement, which in turn contributes further to alienation from the society they live in. In the study, some Syrian refugee children expressed that they were discontent with living in Turkey and that they had been happier living Syria in the past. They further expressed that they miss their friends and homes back in Syria.

Nearly all of the participants who reported having experienced discrimination said, *“If I were in Syria, I would not experience such bad things, nobody would say/do such things to me. All these happen to me because I am in Turkey”*. Such remarks clearly

indicate the degree of the alienation and of sense of helplessness felt by the participants. Based on the interview data, it was seen that many of the participants cannot understand the reasons for being discriminated against in the society. They usually reacted to the discriminatory remark “*You are a Syrian*” with the response “*What is wrong with being a Syrian, I see nothing wrong with it*”. This response clearly shows that the participants question the negative connotations of being a ‘Syrian’. As a result of the fact that Syrian children start self-questioning their identity and yet cannot see any justification for their discrimination, the symptom of depression start to manifest itself in the form of unhappiness, despondency, lethargy, listlessness, sense of guilt and feeling of worthlessness.

Religion was not found to be a factor that lead to discrimination and ostracism. The main reason for this could that Islam is the shared belief system of the two countries. However, it was found that Syrian children suffer from discrimination at school or work and in the environment because of nationality, race, language and socio-economic factors.

It is often claimed that, after the large migratory movements from Syria into Turkey, Syrian children have changed the vaccination map of Turkey and many people have been laid off (due to cheaper Syrian workforce readily available) and therefore Syrian people negatively affect the economy. Such claims might account for why Syrian children face discrimination. Therefore, further research could focus on such connections and explore them deeper.

Compliance with ethical standards

Competing interests Not applicable.

Informed Consent Data collection tools and informed consents were reviewed by the Cumhuriyet University Research Ethics Commission and allowed by the ethics commission.

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