# Acculturation, Perceived Discrimination and School Adjustment Among Forcibly Displaced Syrian Youths in Turkey

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## Abstract

School adjustment of forcibly displaced immigrants is one of most the important outcomes of sociocultural adaptation in the host society. This paper examines the predictive power of forcibly displaced Syrian youths' acculturation pathways and perceived discrimination on school adjustment. The sample consisted of 281 forcibly displaced Syrian youths in Turkey and age ranged from 13 to 16 years ($M_{age}$ = 14.49, SD = 1.11). The participants completed measures of the acculturation process, perceived discrimination, school adjustment, and demographic variables. The results indicated that demographic characteristics had no significant relationship with school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths. Integration acculturation came into prominence by having higher mean scores compared to other pathways where they are more prone to integrate into the host society. The results showed that there was a significant correlation between the acculturation process, perceived discrimination, and school adjustment of Syrian youths. Forcibly displaced Syrian youths who followed the marginalization acculturation pathway and experienced more perceived discrimination significantly contributed to the variance in explaining school adjustment over and above the demographic variables. The results showed that perceived discrimination impedes school adjustment while the integration acculturation pathway can buffer perceived discrimination and improve better school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, perceived discrimination, school adjustment, Syrian youths

Intercultural contact across different cultures has been greater than ever. According to United Nations, more than 272 million people are living outside of where they were born by exceeding 29 million forcibly displaced immigrants (United Nations, 2017). The same reports indicated that Syria is the fifth largest country whose citizens living abroad approximately 8.2 million. Turkey hosts the largest portion of Syrian immigrants and due to the neighboring civil war of Syria and open-gate policy, the population of Syrian that crossed Turkey's border increased day-by-day and reached 3.6 million which covers only registered ones. Roughly, half of the forcibly displaced Syrian immigrants are under the age of 18 years (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2020). Most Syrian immigrants are living outside of the campsite and involved in the host community through social, cultural, and economic life. Involvement of immigrants in social life in the host countries they reside affects both immigrants and host society and most affected groups are children (Aziz & Yıldırım, 2020; Dustmann & Glitz, 2011). Even at Turkey and Syria countries' borders, Syrian immigrants are suddenly exposed to new challenges which they have not faced before due to cross-cultural boundaries additional to civil war. Therefore, with the new cultural influence, immigrants are often compelled to adapt, or to learn knowingly or unknowingly host cultural systems (Kim, 2001). The experience of immigrant youths, acculturation process, perceived discrimination, and their school adjustment in the host society has been extensively studied in the past decades (Berry et al., 2006; Güler & Yildirim, 2021; Yıldırım, 2020). However, there is a dearth of research about how forcibly displaced Syrian youths manage and balance their lives in terms of school adjustment in Turkey. Acculturation process and perceived discrimination may play a role in explaining the school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths.

The process and outcomes of intercultural contact fall within acculturation research. Acculturation is a process that is defined as sets of cultural and psychological changes resulting in an interaction between different cultures

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(Berry, 2019). This process is also conceptualized as a second-culture acquisition that can be applied to all cultural groups in contact either first-hand or remote (Rudmin, Wang & de Castro, 2017). Acquisition of other group's traditions and applying them to social, political, and economic life refer to cultural changes, whereas alterations in individual's attitude, behavior, and identity refer to psychological changes (Phinney, 2003). Even though not all intercultural contact is welcomed, these components facilitate both psychological and sociocultural adjustment of immigrants in the host society. There are two main concerns members of heritage culture to deal with: the extent to which they wish to retain their heritage culture and the extent to which they wish to engage with the mainstream host society (Berry et al., 2006). When these two concerns collide with one another, four acculturation pathways emerge: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Integration occurs when there is a desire to retain key features of heritage culture and at the same time to engage with receiving society, requiring simultaneously high involvements with each. Assimilation occurs when there is no desire to retain the heritage culture and a strong intention to engage or merge into receiving society. Separation occurs when there is a strong desire to retain features of the heritage culture while rejecting significant contact and engagement with members of receiving society. Lastly, marginalization occurs when there is no desire to retain heritage culture and at the same time contact with the receiving society is avoided. Existing research showed that integration has been found as the most adaptive pathway, whereas marginalization is the least in the cultural involvement (Carlson & Güler, 2018; Grigoryev & Berry, 2017; Güler & Yildirim, 2021). However, depending on the context and the particular outcome of psychological or sociocultural, a stronger pathway toward the heritage or host culture can be more adaptive (Ward, 2013).

Schools are an important acculturative context for youths (Arslan, 2018; Horenczyk & Tatar, 2012). Adjustment of youths at school is a crucial outcome of a successful acculturation process which helps integration into society in the long run (Berry et al., 2006). School adjustment is among the most important acculturation outcomes of immigrant youths (Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chryssochoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012). School adjustment of immigrant youths is a form of psychosocial adaptation in immigrant-receiving societies. School adjustment as a psychological form that covers academic self-concept and school-related behavioral problems and delinquency (Arslan & Allen, 2020; Güngör & Bornstein, 2013). School adjustment as a sociocultural form includes academic achievement and contacts with mainstream peers in the school environment (Arslan, 2019a; Vedder & Horenczyk, 2006). Better school adjustment is characterized by positive relationships, fairness, and justice between teachers, mainstream peers, and immigrant youths. Adjustment is found to be related with various well-being and mental health outcomes including depression, anxiety, stress, satisfaction with life, and college belongingness (Arslan, 2019b; Arslan & Coşkun, 2021; Arslan, Yıldırım & Zangeneh, 2021; Güler, 2020; Yıldırım & Solmaz, 2021). Acculturation process plays a central role in immigrant school adjustment. As school adjustment is one of the most important outcomes of acculturation process for immigrant youths (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012), they have to navigate between heritage and host cultural boundaries and adapt to the cultural environment of the host society (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2012). By virtue of navigating between cultural challenges, immigrant youths are found to lag behind and score lower on the school adjustment than their mainstream peers (Frankenberg, Kupper, Wagner, & Bongard, 2013; OECD, 2012). Previous studies consistently documented immigrant youths are less adapted to school in host countries than host peers (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, & van de Vijver, 2016). Strong attachment with heritage culture was found to impede better school adjustment (Schachner, Juang, Moffitt, & van de Vijver, 2018). However, fostering equality and promoting cultural pluralism, supporting integration versus other acculturation pathways, were found to be associated with better school adjustment in immigrant youths (Schachner, Noack, van de Vijver & Eckstein, 2016).

Perceived discrimination refers to a behavioral appearance of negative attitudes, judgements, or unfair treatments toward an ethnic group (Williams, 1999). It can result in wear and tear on the body and spirit (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). A substantial body of research suggests that being subject to perceived discrimination has been identified as the most important factor associated with negative psycho-social adjustment among immigrant youths. According to Şimşek (2020), perceived discrimination has a detrimental impact on acculturation process. Similarly, existing studies indicated that immigrants' tendency to adopt host cultural elements is weakened by experiencing more perceived discrimination in the host country (Guerra et al., 2019). The cultural preference of immigrants toward heritage and host culture showed the association with school adjustment, as strong preference of heritage culture can buffer perceived discrimination which leads to better school adjustment (Wong, Eccles & Sameroff, 2003). In a study of Vietnamese adolescents in Finland, perceived discrimination was found to have a

detrimental impact on school adjustment (Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Solheim 2004). Related research documented that immigrant youths faced with discrimination are less likely to adjust to school and establish a good relationship with peers and teachers (Skoog & Stattin, 2014).

An increasing body of research is conducted to explain differences in the school adjustment of immigrant youths in Western countries. There is scant research on forcibly displaced Syrian youths residing in Turkey in the context of acculturation, perceived discrimination, and school adjustment. The present study investigated how acculturation process, perceived discrimination, and school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths in Turkey are related to each other. Further, we explored how acculturation process and perceived discrimination are predicting their school adjustment. To address this question, we seek to test for following hypotheses:

i)      We expected that the most followed acculturation pathway by Syrian youths would be integration.

ii)     We expected that marginalization and separation would hinder Syrian youths to better adjust to the school environment.

iii)    We expected that Syrian youths who are experiencing more perceived discrimination would adjust less to school environment.

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sampling technique was utilized in this study. The study is based on data collected as part of a larger study on acculturation and intergroup relations from the public schools in Gaziantep and Sanliurfa where the Syrian population density was high (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2020). The total sample included 281 youth (54.8% girls and 45.2% of boys). The average age of participants was 14.49 years ($SD = 1.11$; ranged from 13 to 16 years). This study focused on Syrian adolescents who came to Turkey between 2012 and 2019. The length of residency ranged from 1 year to 6 years. A total of 90% of participants resided 2 years or more in Turkey.

### Procedure

Before approaching participants, permissions were obtained from both authorities and parents. All the participants were given information about the purpose of the study, the voluntariness of participation, potential risks, anonymity, and confidentiality of responses in the classrooms when teachers were present. Informed consent was given to all participants before starting the study. The administration of the questionnaire and data collection process was done by the author. Participants who partook in the study were given the choice of completing either Arabic or Turkish version of the questionnaire. All measures were administered both in Arabic and Turkish. For the adaptation of scales, several steps recommended in the literature were followed (Sousa & Rojjanasrirat, 2011). Unvalidated scales were forward-translated into Arabic and Turkish, and independently back-translated by two bilingual academics. This procedure has been done in Arabic and Turkish separately. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee (Anonymized).

### Measure

Acculturation process was assessed with a 20-item scale adapted from the Vancouver Index of Acculturation (Ryder, Alden & Paulhus, 2000). These questions measure four acculturation pathways: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The items concern five domains: cultural traditions, language, identities, social activities, and friends. In this scale, each item was presented four times as follow: 'I feel that my ethnic group should maintain their own cultural traditions but also adapt to those of host' (integration); I feel that my ethnic group should adapt to host cultural traditions and not maintain those of their own ethnic group.' (assimilation); 'I feel that my ethnic group should maintain their own cultural traditions and not adapt to those of host' (separation); and 'I feel that it is not important for my ethnic group either to maintain their own cultural traditions or to adapt to those of host' (marginalization). The response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicated higher participation in each culture. Good psychometric properties for the scale have been reported in previous studies (Güler, 2019).

Perceived Discrimination was assessed with 9-item derived from Discrimination and Everyday Discrimination by Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson (1997). The scale assessed the perceived frequency of being treated unfairly or negatively or being teased, threatened, or feeling unaccepted because of one's ethnicity. A sample item is 'I think

that members of host culture have behaved unfairly or negatively towards my ethnic group.' Responses on a scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with a higher score representing the greater experience of perceived discrimination. The internal consistency of the scale in this study was α =.86.

School Adjustment scale was inspired by the study of Sam (1994). This 7-item scale focused on how well item applied to immigrant youths with school in general and with school achievement. Response options are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores refer to better school adjustment. A sample item is: 'I have problems concentrating during classes.' The internal consistency in the present study was α =.72.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Data Analysis

Before conduction the main analyses, the data were screened for normality of the distribution, outliers, and violations of statistical assumptions. Descriptive statistics of the variable were calculated such as mean, standard deviations, and frequency. No issues related to normality and outliers were detected as all variables appeared to fall within an acceptable range of skewness (range: −0.75 and 1.47) and kurtosis values (range: -1.98 and 3.36) indicating that all variables had approximately normal distribution based on the criteria of skewness and kurtosis values. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. A total of 7 questionnaires had missing data and those were removed for further analysis.

**Table 1.** Results of descriptive statistics

| Variable | Range | *Mean* | *SD* | Skew. | Kurt. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age | 13 − 16 | 14.49 | 1.11 | .39 | -1.33 |
| 2. Length of Residence | 1 − 6 | 3.19 | 1.27 | .21 | -.37 |
| 3. Assimilation | 5 − 25 | 10.52 | 3.62 | .62 | .59 |
| 4. Separation | 5 − 25 | 12.84 | 4.44 | .46 | -.12 |
| 5. Integration | 9 − 25 | 19.60 | 3.62 | -.37 | -.30 |
| 6. Marginalization | 5 − 25 | 8.43 | 3.30 | 1.47 | 3.36 |
| 7. Perceived Discrimination | 9 − 39 | 15.55 | 6.23 | 1.06 | .44 |
| 8. School Adjustment | 15 − 35 | 29.67 | 4.42 | -.75 | .25 |

A Pearson correlation analysis was used to reveal the relationship between acculturation process, perceived discrimination, school adjustment, and demographic characteristics. The analysis of correlation is presented in Table 2. Assumptions for regression analysis were met. Multicollinearity was within acceptable limits, with variance inflation factors (VIF) values under 2.0, for both school adjustment scores, for all predictor variables. To determine the predictive roles of acculturation process and perceived discrimination on school adjustment, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was computed by controlling demographic characteristics. The level of significance was set at $p<.05$. All analyses were performed in IBM SPSS version 25 for Windows.

**Table 2.** Results of correlation analysis

| *Variable* | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age | - | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | .05 | - | | | | | | | |
| 3. Length of Stay | -.14[*] | .00 | - | | | | | | |
| 4. Assimilation | .00 | .05 | .03 | - | | | | | |
| 5. Separation | .03 | -.09 | -.10 | .00 | - | | | | |
| 6. Integration | .08 | .04 | .05 | .01 | -.45[**] | - | | | |
| 7. Marginalization | -.02 | -.08 | -.06 | .37[**] | .26[**] | -.28[**] | - | | |
| 8. Perceived Discrimination | .12 | .08 | -.07 | .12[*] | .18[**] | -.13[**] | .17[**] | - | |
| 9. School Adjustment | -07 | .01 | .03 | -.12 | -.11 | -.03 | -.16[**] | -.24[**] | - |

[**]$p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).
[*]$p < 0.05$ level (2- tailed).

School adjustment was negatively correlated with perceived discrimination and marginalization acculturation pathway. Perceived discrimination was positively correlated with marginalization, separation, and assimilation pathways while negatively correlated with integration pathway. Marginalization pathway was negatively correlated with integration but positively correlated with separation and assimilation. Integration pathway was significantly positively correlated with separation pathway.

To test the hypotheses of the study, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed. In the analysis, school adjustment was treated as the dependent variable and perceived discrimination and acculturation pathways were treated as independent variables while demographic characteristics as control variables. Concerning variables entry into the regression model, demographic characteristics were entered in Step 1, acculturation pathways were entered in Step 2 and perceived discrimination was entered in Step 3. The results are presented in

**Table 3.** Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis

| Variable | B | $\beta$eta | $t$ | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | School Adjustment | | |
| *Model 1* | $F_{(3, 277)} = 0.54$, R = 0.08, $R^2 = 0.01$, p = .65 | | | |
| Age | -.28 | -.07 | -1.16 | .25 |
| Gender | .12 | .01 | .22 | .82 |
| Length of Stay | .07 | .02 | .34 | .73 |
| *Model 2* | $F_{(4, 273)} = 2.06$, R = 0.22, $R^2 = 0.05$, p < .05 | | | |
| Age | -.23 | -.06 | -.97 | .33 |
| Gender | -.02 | -.00 | -.04 | .96 |
| Length of Stay | .03 | .01 | .15 | .88 |
| Assimilation | -.08 | -.07 | -1.00 | .32 |
| Separation | -.13 | -.13 | -1.88 | .06 |
| Integration | -.14 | -.12 | -1.72 | .09 |
| Marginalization | -.18 | -.13 | -1.95 | .04 |
| *Model 3* | $F_{(1, 272)} = 3.47$, R = 0.31, $R^2 = 0.09$, p < .01 | | | |
| Age | -.14 | -.04 | -.60 | .55 |
| Gender | .15 | .02 | .30 | .77 |
| Length of Stay | .01 | .00 | .02 | .98 |
| Assimilation | -.06 | -.05 | -.75 | .45 |
| Separation | -.10 | -.10 | -1.49 | .14 |
| Integration | -.16 | -.13 | -1.92 | .05 |
| Marginalization | -.15 | -.11 | -1.66 | .09 |
| Perceived Discrimination | -.15 | -.22 | -3.57 | .00 |

In model 1, age, gender, and length of stay in Turkey were entered as confounding variables. These variables were not significantly associated with school adjustment $F_{(3, 277)} = 0.54$, $p = .65$ explained 1% of variance. In model 2, only Marginalization acculturation pathway was significantly associated with school adjustment $F_{(4, 273)} = 2.06$, $p < .05$, after controlling demographic variables. These variables explained an additional 4% of the variable in school adjustment. In model 3, perceived discrimination was added and made a significant contribution to the model $F_{(1, 272)} = 3.47$, $p < .01$ explaining an additional 4% of the variance in school adjustment.

## Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between the acculturation process, perceived discrimination, and school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths in Turkey. We found support for our first hypothesis. The findings

showed that forcibly displaced Syrian youths reported a higher mean average score on integration (M =19.60) and lower mean on marginalization (M = 8.43). This result is in line with previous studies (Carlson & Guler, 2018; Güler, 2019; Güler & Yildirim, 2021) which suggest that Syrian youths prefer to maintain heritage culture while involving in mainstream host culture. The results suggest that age, gender, and length of stay in Turkey had no significant impacts on their acculturation process, even preferring integration tends to increase over time. The findings showed that Syrian youths who preferred marginalization and reported more perceived discrimination have a lower level of school adjustment. This finding partially supports the second hypothesis of the study. As expected, a weaker orientation towards both heritage and mainstream host cultures was associated with lower levels of school adjustment confirming previous studies (Schachner et al., 2018) and showing less attachment toward mainstream and strong attachment toward heritage became an obstacle for better school adjustment of immigrant youths. The results also suggest that there was a significant negative association between perceived discrimination and integration but positive associations with other acculturation pathways. The findings confirm the previous study of Şimşek (2020) and Güler and Yildirim (2021) who reported that immigrants who experience less discrimination preferred integration and constructed social bridges with host societies.

The finding of the present study also revealed that only marginalization acculturation pathway significantly predicted school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths above and beyond demographic characteristics. Acculturation pathways together explained 4% of the variance. Based on these findings, more marginalized youths are less adjusted to the school environment. These findings are in line with study of Schachner and colleagues (2016) stating that to better adjust school environment, equality, cultural pluralism, and integration policies should be implemented by principles. Experiencing more perceived discrimination was the most significant predictor of school adjustment by explaining an additional significant amount of the variance (4%) after controlling for demographic characteristics and acculturation pathways. These results supported the third hypothesis of the study and confirmed previous studies showing that perceived discrimination is the most significant factor impacting school adjustment of immigrant youths (Guerra et al., 2019; Skoog & Stattin, 2014).

There are some limitations that should be mentioned. Firstly, the study is cross-sectional, and data were collected using self-report measures. It does not allow conclusions about causal links between the acculturation, perceived discrimination, and school adjustment of forcibly displaced Syrian youths. Experimental and longitudinal research is required to better understand the relationships among the variables. Secondly, the participant only consists of youths in Gaziantep and Sanliurfa, and the age range in this sample was quite small. These findings cannot be generalized to all Syrian youths residing in Turkey. The groups of broader age categories would be more appropriate for future studies to get a clearer idea. Future research should also focus on other aspects of cross-cultural adaptation including hospitality of the host country (Yıldırım & Güler, 2020), and examine them in greater depth. Future studies should include multiple informants, such as parents, teachers, and peers representing the mainstream host society, for more objective information on contextual conditions

In sum, integration acculturation was found to be the first preference of the forcibly displaced Syrian youths where they are more prone to integrate into the host society. There were significant association between acculturation process, perceived discrimination, and school adjustment of Syrian youths. Marginalization and perceived discrimination were factors that impeded school adjustment over and above other variables. To better adjust forcibly displaced Syrian youths into school environment in Turkey, principals and policy makers should implement and support integrative policies.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

### Ethical Standards

All study procedures involving human participants followed institutional and/or national research committee ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This study has also been approved by the author's university Institutional Review Board.

### Author Contributions

The author developed the concept for this manuscript, carried out the literature search, critically analyzed the data, wrote the manuscript, and proofread it.

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