Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Turkish Students in Japan: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
The present study explores the cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish students in Japan. The purpose of this study is to partially fill the gap in the literature by investigating Turkish students' perceptions and expectations while living in Japan. Another purpose of the study is to provide upcoming students with an overall understanding of what to expect when they choose to study at a university in Japan, and this study aims to provide universities with some implications of how to devise better support and facilities to aid international students with their transition stages. The study used data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Turkish students to identify the stressors, difficulties, and problems they encounter during their cross-cultural transition in Japan. A total of 21 students (12 females and nine males) from Turkey who were either in postgraduate education in Japan or had already obtained an academic degree from a graduate school in Japan at the time of the interview completion (one bachelor's degree, two master's students, one master's degree, 11 PhD students, four PhD degrees and two postdoctoral degrees) volunteered to be interviewed for this study. Students ranged in age from 25 to 37 years with a mean age of 29.09 years (SD = 3.30). Each interview transcript was individually examined via qualitative analysis, with the aim to develop or identify possible categories based on Grounded Theory Approach. The analysis resulted in different hierarchical levels of categories related to cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish students. It was suggested that differences in collectivistic tendencies have influences on cross-cultural adaptation process.

Keywords*:* Cross-cultural adaptation, Turkish students in Japan, Grounded theory approach

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Introduction

There is a substantial body of research that focuses on international students from Eastern and Western countries in Japan (Guo, Yiwei, & Ito, 2014; Maruyama, 1998; Simic-Yamashita & Tanaka, 2010); however, there are no studies that specifically examine Turkish students in Japan in psychology literature. Although there are a limited number of studies (e.g. Boiger, Güngör, Karasawa, & Mesquita, 2014; Güngör, Karasawa, & Boiger, 2014) available on the Turkish culture and the Japanese culture, these studies make cross-cultural comparisons by using samples directly from Turkey and Japan. Also, they focus on topics such as interpersonal relations, interdependence, relatedness, certain emotions and autonomy. In addition to these, there are no other available studies which investigates cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish people living in Japan. Cross-cultural research literature needs more variations in order to better understand cultural differences. Turkish culture is a collectivist culture with individualistic behavioral patterns (Sunar, & Fişek Okman, 2004). Therefore, cross-cultural studies on Turkey and Japan is important as it is a step outside of Western-dominated cross-cultural psychology literature (Berry, Poortinga, & Pandey 1997), and it will help to provide a deeper understanding of two cultures from a cross-cultural psychology perspective. Therefore, the present study focuses on cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish students who study in Japan.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Students from various countries have preferred to move to the industrialized countries where they pursue education in the search for a better life. A high number of studies regarding international students' adaptation to the host culture have been conducted because of the increasing numbers. Cross-cultural adaptation is defined as the changes to the ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling when the sojourner travels from the native country to a new country – a physical journey that is often parallel to a psychological journey (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006).

It is crucial to understand the adaptation problems of international students in order to frame their unique challenges in unique cultural settings and a new society, and in order to offer guidance for a better adaptation to a new culture and a society. This study is designed to contribute to the current literature by helping to understand cross-cultural adaptation problems and difficulties faced by Turkish students in Japan. The number of Turkish students in Japan estimated by The Embassy of The Republic of Turkey in Tokyo (2017) is 160. The present study is the first study that specifically focuses on cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish students in Japan. It is hoped that the current study will make a significant contribution to the literature because cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish students who study in Japan is quite a new topic and there is a lot to find out about this topic. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate cross-cultural adaptation problems experienced by Turkish students including social difficulties associated with the host language, communication and relationship with people from the host country. Also, this study aims to find out if Turkish students developed any coping strategies to overcome cross-cultural adaptation problems during their cross-cultural transition. The research questions of this study are as follows:

1) What are the cross-cultural adaptation problems Turkish students encounter in Japan?

2) What kind of strategies do Turkish students use to cope with the problems and difficulties that they face in social life in Japan?

Method

Participants

A total of 21 students (12 females and nine males) from Turkey volunteered to be interviewed for this study. The education levels of the students are distributed as follows: One bachelor's degree, two master's students, one master's degree, 11 doctoral students, four doctoral degrees and two postdoctoral degrees. Twenty of the students were either in postgraduate education in Japan or had already obtained an academic degree from a graduate school in Japan at the time of the interview completion except one student. That student stayed in Japan only for two semesters on an exchange program when he was an undergraduate student. Additionally, 20 of the students obtained their bachelor's degree from various universities in Turkey. Only one student obtained her bachelor's degree from a university in France. Of the total sample, 13 of the students were from natural sciences or engineering (five females and eight males), and the rest were from humanities or social sciences (seven females and one male). Students ranged in age from 25 to 37 years with a mean age of 29.09 years (SD = 3.30). The average length of stay in Japan was 52.14 months (SD = 32.89) at the time of the interview completion (range = 12-151 months). The students were asked to report their Japanese language proficiency levels. Of 21 students, six (29%) (five females and one male) were Japanese language majors and reported their Japanese language proficiency level as advanced. Additionally, 11 students noted that they took the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and had official results. The JLPT has five levels which are N1, N2, N3, N4 and N5. The most difficult level is N1 whereas the easiest level is N5 (The Official Worldwide Japanese-Language Proficiency Test Website, "What is the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test?", 2012). Of 11 students one student whose Japanese-Language Proficiency Test level was N3 reported that he took the old version of JLPT. In the old version of JLPT, there were only four levels which were N1, N2, N3 and N4. The most difficult level is N1 whereas the easiest level is N4 (The Official Worldwide Japanese-Language Proficiency Test Website, "FAQ", 2012). The JLPT results of the rest of the students are distributed as follows: One N4 level (10%), two N3 levels (20%), three N2 levels (30%), and four N1 levels (40%).The Japanese language proficiency levels of all students are distributed as follows: Eight advanced (38%), eight intermediate (38%) and five beginners (24%). The students were also asked to report their English language proficiency levels. The self-reported English language proficiency levels are distributed as follows: 18 advanced (86 %), three intermediates (14 %). (see Table 1: Demographic information of Turkish students.)

Measures and Research Design

A demographic questionnaire and interview questions were used in this study. Questions on demographics covered information about the age, gender, major, education level, residence in Japan, length of stay in Japan, Japanese language proficiency level, and English language proficiency level. The research used data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Turkish students. The interviews were designed to assess social difficulties and problems encountered, communication and relationship with people from the host country and coping strategies developed during cross-cultural transition. Pre-planned questions were employed in all interviews. However, there remained enough flexibility to change topics in a smooth, conversational way in the interviews because interviewees were encouraged to speak about topics beyond the interview questions if they preferred. The flexibility helped to deeply explore the issues, by making the interviews semi-structured (Scapens, 2004).

Procedures

The interviews were done in Turkish in 2017 and 2018. The students were interviewed individually after they filled out the demographic questionnaire. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. In order to maintain anonymity, the students' real names were not revealed. Of 21 interviews, 17 (81%) were conducted on Skype and four (19%) were face-to-face. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder with the consent of the interviewees. The interviews lasted about 40 minutes.

N	Gender	Age	Major	Education Level	Residence in Japan	Length of Stay	English Language Proficiency Level	Japanese Language Proficiency Level
1	F	28	Humanities	PhD Student	Chugoku Region	55 Months	Intermediate	Advanced
2	F	31	Humanities	PhD Student	Chugoku Region	108 Months	Advanced	Advanced (N1)
3	M	26	Engineering	PhD Student	Kanto Region	26 Months	Advanced	Intermediate (N3)
4	F	37	Engineering	Doctoral Degree	Kanto Region	42 Months	Advanced	Beginner
5	M	37	Engineering	Postdoctoral Research	Kansai Region	151 Months	Advanced	Intermediate (N2)
6	F	26	Social Sciences	Master's Student	Kanto Region	20 Months	Advanced	Beginner
7	F	27	Social Sciences	PhD Student	Kanto Region	30 Months	Advanced	Intermediate
8	F	26	Natural Sciences	PhD Student	Kansai Region	21 Months	Advanced	Beginner
9	M	30	Engineering	Doctoral Degree	Chubu Region	94 Months	Advanced	Intermediate
10	F	29	Humanities	PhD Student	Chubu Region	56 Months	Advanced	Advanced (N1)
11	F	27	Humanities	PhD Student	Chubu Region	42 Months	Intermediate	Advanced
12	M	29	Engineering	PhD Student	Chubu	67	Advanced	Intermediate

					Region	Months		(N3 - Old)
13	M	26	Humanities	Bachelor's Degree	Chubu Region	12 Months	Advanced	Advanced (N1)
14	F	25	Humanities	Master's Student	Chugoku Region	28 Months	Intermediate	Advanced (N1)
15	M	30	Engineering	Doctoral Degree	Kanto Region	66 Months	Advanced	Intermediate
16	F	30	Engineering	Master's degree	Kanto Region	36 Months	Advanced	Advanced (N2)
17	M	27	Natural Sciences	PhD Student	Kanto Region	60 Months	Advanced	Intermediate (N3)
18	M	33	Engineering	Postdoctoral Research	Kanto Region	36 Months	Advanced	Beginner
19	F	29	Engineering	PhD Student	Chubu Region	51 Months	Advanced	Intermediate
20	M	28	Natural Sciences	Doctoral Degree	Kanto Region	60 Months	Advanced	Advanced (N2)
21	F	30	Natural Sciences	PhD Student	Chubu Region	34 Months	Advanced	Beginner (N4)

Table 1: Demographic information of Turkish students.

Data Analysis

After all of 21 interviews were completed, each audio-recorded interview transcript was collected to ensure that the data was full and accurate. Additionally, all transcriptions were read several times to correct typographical errors and to remove any possible contradictions. Each interview transcript was individually investigated via Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with the aim to develop or identify possible categories. In this type of qualitative analysis, categories that emerge in the interviews are identified. In other words, each transcript is coded, distinguishing important categories and each category is reconsidered as the coding progresses. Hierarchical organization of the categories are created where appropriate. This approach is defined as iterative, because it is repeated to allow categories and organization of the categories to best fit the data.

Results

The coding resulted in two hierarchical levels of categories (i.e., categories and subcategories), using 189 comments by students in total. Three main categories emerged. Within the three main categories there were seven categories, and within seven categories there were 30 subcategories.

Seven categories are named as *Elements of Culture, Social Interaction, Language Difficulty, Relationship Formation, Affective Coping, Behavioral Coping* and *Cognitive Coping.* After the analysis, these seven categories were grouped into three main categories which are named as *"Culture Shock" (Elements of Culture* and *Social Interaction), "Social Difficulty" (Language Difficulty* and *Relationship Formation)* and *"Coping Strategies" (Affective Coping, Behavioral Coping* and *Cognitive Coping)* (see Table 2: Categories that emerged based on Grounded Theory Approach.).

Culture Shock		Social Difficulty		Coping Strategies		
Elements of Culture	Social Interaction	Language Difficulty	Relationship Formation	Affective Coping	Behavioral Coping	Cognitive Coping
Punctuality	Physical contact	Spoken language in unfamiliar settings (e.g., hospital)	Intimacy	Seeking social support	Engaging in activities (e.g., hobbies, exercises, trips)	Rational thinking
Orderliness	Personal space	Legal procedures and documents/paperwork	Reciprocity	Talking about emotions or problems	Spending time with friends	
Grouping	Personal time	Opportunity for language exchange and improvement	Depth	Emotional regulation	Acting like a Japanese person	
Unwritten rules: Codes, etiquettes and manners	Relationship closeness	Following conversations	Maintenance	Distancing from others	Spending time on social media	
Reading the air	Priorities (e.g., work, family and friends)		Social isolation	Seeing a mental health professional		
	Honne (true sound) and tatemae (built in front)					

Table 2: Categories that emerged based on Grounded Theory Approach.

Culture Shock

The first main category is labeled *Culture Shock* as the interviewees talked about their culture shock experiences in the beginning of their transition to Japan. This main category consists of two categories which are *Elements of Culture* and *Social Interaction*.

The category called *Elements of Culture* related to subcategories such as punctuality, orderliness, grouping, unwritten rules: codes, etiquettes and manners, and reading the air. This category refers to the elements of culture that are identified as surprising and different from the elements of culture in Turkey. Most of the Turkish students reported both negative and positive aspects of the elements of Japanese culture during the interviews. For example, punctuality of Japanese people and orderliness of Japanese society were reported as surprising in a positive manner. However, the students stated that Japanese people's tendency to become a group member (labeled here as "grouping") is different from the Turkish culture where the individualism is also adopted as the Turkish culture is a blend of both the Western cultural elements

and the Eastern cultural elements (Sunar, & Fişek Okman, 2004). Also, some of the Turkish students addressed unwritten rules (codes, etiquettes and manners) of Japanese culture as difficult to understand and thus to adjust, as they reported they had difficulties reading the air in a social context, not knowing how to behave appropriately in a certain social context. An example of the comments on this category is as follows:

"There are many things that you don't know. I mean, there are many cultural elements. For example, they are making jokes, and you don't get what they are talking about. Because you don't have the background and not been to that context, you stand in wonder. It doesn't make a difference if they speak English. You don't know the cultural meaning. You can't chat and they expect you to know things. KY – Kuuki Yomenai ('Not reading the air' in Japanese). You are expected to do it. You are expected to read the air. Nobody corrects you. I expected that they would correct me." (Interviewee 5)

The category *Social Interaction* addressed experiences on physical contact, personal space, personal time, relationship closeness, priorities (e.g., work, family, and friends), and honne (true sound) and tatemae (built in front). The students stated that they expected more physical contact among Japanese people. The Japanese culture is assumed to be a low-contact culture (Sussman & Rosenfeld, 1982). Correspondingly, most of the Turkish students mentioned that personal space of Japanese people is wider than of Turkish people. Also, they stated that time Japanese people spend alone is higher and intimacy they show to each other is lower than Turkish people show to each other. Also, they mentioned that perceived intimacy they received from Japanese people was less than they expected. Additionally, Japanese people's priorities (e.g., work, family, friends) are different from Turkish people (e.g., family, friends, work) (Nakano & Tanaka, in press). Lastly, they commented on the gap between the true feelings and desires (honne) of Japanese people and the behaviors they display (tatemae) Some students stated they felt surprised when they realized what is thought can be different from what is expressed in Japanese culture. An example of the comments on this category is provided below:

"In Turkey, both in romantic relationships and in interpersonal relationships, the priority is people; either family, girlfriend, boyfriend or friends…We hold the idea that it is the most important focus of life, I think, but for the Japanese, it is often observed that the priority is their work; their works, hobbies, then comes their families, friends and girlfriends and such. It seems very cold to us. People should come first (to us), I think. I've realized that." (Interviewee 7)

Social Difficulty

The second main category is named *Social Difficulty* in which the Turkish students described the challenges and problems they experienced to overcome during cross-cultural transition. The category *Social Difficulty* comprises two categories which are *Language Difficulty* and *Relationship Formation.*

Students commented on the *Language Difficulty* which included aspects of spoken language in unfamiliar settings (e.g., hospital), opportunity for language exchange and improvement, following conversations, and legal procedures and documents /

paperwork. Most of the students excluding Japanese language majors (five females and one male; see *Participants* section) were Japanese language majors and reported their Japanese language proficiency level as advanced.) reported that their Japanese language proficiency levels are from beginner (24%) to intermediate (38%) (see *Participants* section). Therefore, they reported the language difficulties such as communication problems when seeing a doctor. They also mentioned about difficulties of paperwork by indicating that legal documents they had to fill out prior to their arrival to Japan and documents for the application to graduate schools that were provided only in the Japanese language. In addition to these, some of the students addressed the lack of opportunity for language exchange to improve their language levels because of their busy schedule or lack of Japanese friends, thus having difficulties following conversations because of poor language skills. An example of the comments on this category is provided below:

"I went to a doctor, (and he said) hentousen… What does hentousen mean? It means tonsils. You don't know such things. You can't explain what your problem is. They don't speak English. Well, some of the doctors can speak English, though, but nurses, hospital staff say '"Nihonga daijoubu desu ka?" You reply with 'No." He stares at your face. Then you tell them to continue (in Japanese) and try to figure your way out." (Interviewee 3)

The *Relationship Formation* was another category that emerged as the interviewees stated the difficulties in forming a relationship with Japanese people. The student comments on relationship formation included the aspects of a relationship they expected; namely, intimacy, reciprocity, depth and maintenance. Most of the Turkish students addressed the difficulties of forming a relationship with Japanese people around them. Also, some of them stated that they ended up with social isolation. An example of the comments on this category is shown below:

"...especially emotional topics. For example, you are having a conversation with an Indonesian or an American about emotional topics such as a fight with my partner, I feel I am emotionally connected to those people, but when I have the same conversation with a Japanese, I never feel that connection. Because she says 'Aa sou desu ka? Taihen desu ne…' (Oh, is that so? That's tough, isn't it?) and that's it. It is over. It does not continue. I don't want to talk about the rest. It does exist. I can call it emotional disconnection. When I have an emotional talk with a Japanese, I feel stupid, but when I have the same talk to a foreigner, we can communicate perfectly. When I do it to a Japanese, she doesn't get it." (Interviewee 10)

Coping Strategies

The third main category, *Coping Strategies*, is about the types of coping strategies that the Turkish students adopted for the stress management. This category comprises three categories called as *Affective Coping, Behavioral Coping* and *Cognitive Coping*.

The category called *Affective Coping* focused on affective coping strategies that the Turkish students adopted to cope with cross-cultural transition stress. Affective coping strategies included seeking social support from and talking about their emotions or problems to co-nationals, family members in Turkey or other international students in Japan, trying to emotionally regulate themselves during a

stressful period, distancing themselves from others, and seeing a mental health professional. An example of the comments on this category is shown below:

"I feel loneliness. As I said before, I have developed depression. I'm seeing a psychologist. Apart from that, my flat mates… They are going through the same things. We are on the same journey. They are having the same problems. We are talking to each other. It helps me." (Interviewee 21)

Interviewees described the types of behavioral strategies to cope with cross-cultural transition stress in *Behavioral Coping*. The most frequent behavioral strategies identified are engaging in activities (e.g. hobbies, exercises, trips), spending time with co-nationals or other international students, acting like a Japanese people for a smooth communication or to fit in the context and spending time on social media. An example of the comments on this category is provided below:

"When I cannot have a very deep emotional sharing with my Japanese friends, I communicate with my friends in Turkey or I stayed alone. I love exercising/sports a lot. I focused on exercising/sports. I was trying to distract myself with the types of exercising/sports I've never done on Turkey. I was trying to experience them. I love taking trips. I was making trip plans." (Interviewee 11)

The final category, *Cognitive Coping* consisting of one strategy, is adopted only by one of the 21 interviewees. The example comment on this category is provided below:

"It is difficult to make friends. As everyone said, their walls are strong. You don't know the neighborhood. You don't know where to go, what to do. You don't have your childhood friends, because you are in a new environment for the first time. You moved to another country, I mean. I felt loneliness at that time. What did I do? I never called my parents, because if I had done, they would tell me that 'Come back. You had a job here. You can work. What will you do there?' But I wanted to come (to Japan). So, I thought that many people are already here. I thought about what they might have done. They came. They didn't know the language, either. Some of them might have the language proficiency. I first tried to make friends. It was the difficult period. How did I make friends? The university is an international university. I thought there must be a place where international students gather. I was lucky that there was a place which was very close to the building where I took Japanese language classes, and they meetup every afternoon. I first went there. I met with my best friend there. I have made many friends through him. So, how did I deal with that problem? I thought rationally. What can I do? I need to make friends. I need to learn the language. In that international center where international students gather, some students speak Japanese, some want to learn English. You could do a language exchange. We spent time together at weekend. Then I realized I wasn't alone. I had friends." (Interviewee 17)

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study revealed the cross-cultural experiences of Turkish students concerning to culture shock, social difficulties and problems encountered, communication and relationship with people from the host country and coping

strategies used to overcome the stress experienced, and difficulties and problems encountered during cross-cultural transition.

The results suggest that differences in the levels of individualism and collectivism between the Turkish culture and the Japanese culture may be associated with experiencing culture shock. International students must confront new social and educational organizations, behaviors, and expectations. Additionally, they must overcome the adjustment problems common to students in general. It is a challenging process even when international students are conscious about the cultural differences. However, this process is more challenging when they are not conscious and falsely expect that the new culture functions like their home country. Unfamiliar experiences have a collective impact on sojourners which is defined as culture shock (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). International students may have to cope with potential challenges by moving to a foreign country to study. As a result, it may lead to experiencing cross-cultural stress and adjustment problems (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Turkey is classified as a collectivistic country as Japan (Hofstede, 1980). However, the results of the studies by Göregenli (1995, 1997) suggest that the Turkish culture does not fall into either side of the individualism-collectivism dichotomy with regards to all the dimensions of social behavior described by the relevant literature and by target groups. The author points out that collectivist tendencies can still be observed in the Turkish culture and in terms of the individual's relation with the other, the Turkish culture is inclined towards the collectivism side of the dichotomy. In addition to these, it was suggested that the Turkish culture is a combination of the Western and the Eastern cultural elements, and the synthesis of both collectivistic and individualist cultures (Sunar, & Fişek Okman, 2004). Turkey largely exhibits traditional cultural characteristics as well as highly modern and western cultural elements at the same time. In other words, it may be stated that traditional and modern features coexist with each other gradually leading to a synthesis of traditional and modern practices in society (Sunar, & Fişek Okman, 2004). Therefore, on the basis of the results of this study it can be suggested that Japanese culture where the collectivistic tendencies shape the interpersonal relationships may elicit culture shock in Turkish students who reported individualist tendencies.

Additionally, social difficulties that Turkish students experienced in interpersonal relationships such as forming a relationship with host nationals may be associated with the differences in interdependence as suggested by the results of a study by Güngör, Karasawa, and Boiger (2014). The study indicated that while Japanese people described agency in terms of conformity, Turkish people emphasized on relatedness. In other words, interdependence for Turkish people implied relatedness-based approach whereas it addressed conformity-based approach in Japanese culture. In parallel with the results of the current study, the participants in this study reported difficulties associated to interpersonal relations. They stated that when they tried to form a relationship with host nationals, they felt a distance between them and host nations which might lead them to a feeling of social isolation.

To sum up, the results suggest that the individualist and collectivistic tendencies in cultural background which are associated with culture shock may result in some adjustive difficulties during cross-cultural transition. Therefore, a training program to

promote cultural learning and awareness in Turkish students to gain social skills prior to their arrival to Japan is suggested for a smoother cross-cultural transition.

A longitudinal research is needed on upcoming Turkish students who plan to study in Japan in order to have a deeper understanding of the current issue. Additionally, a qualitative research to investigate different aspects of cross-cultural adaptation of Turkish students and international students from different countries is suggested for generalizability and to devise a training program for all international students to support cross-cultural adaptation prior to their arrival at Japan if needed.

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