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Migration and self-esteem: A qualitative study among internal migrant girls in Turkey

Altinyelken, H.K.

Publication date

2009

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Adolescence

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Altinyelken, H. K. (2009). Migration and self-esteem: A qualitative study among internal migrant girls in Turkey. *Adolescence*, 44(173), 149-163.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=2010243166&loginpage=Login.asp&site=ehost-live>

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**MIGRATION AND SELF-ESTEEM:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG INTERNAL MIGRANT
GIRLS IN TURKEY**

Hulya Kosar Altinyelken

ABSTRACT

This article examining the impact of migration experience on self-esteem of girls enrolled at primary schools in Turkey. It is based on a broader study that explored educational and coping strategies of internal migrant girls living in a suburban town in the western part of Turkey. The study showed that students encountered a variety of challenges in their new school environment including adaptation, language, low socioeconomic background, peer relations, discrimination, and bullying. These challenges seemed to have a direct or indirect influence on the educational experiences of migrant girls, undermining their self-esteem in multiple and complex ways.

Self-esteem is a widely used concept both in popular language and in the social sciences. Not only have an enormous number of studies been published on the theme in the fields of psychology, sociology, and education, but numerous assessment techniques and research methodologies have been developed. Self-esteem influences overall functioning and has a "cause and effect" relationship with a range of phenomena. Various researchers have studied the relationship between self-esteem and other concepts such as self-love, self-regard or self-efficacy, as well as academic achievement, cognition, anxiety, violence, depression, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (Baumeister et al., 2003; Lent & Figueira-McDonough, 2002).

Yet, the linkages between migration experience and self-esteem is one of the less-researched areas. Further, studies tend to focus on

The author is grateful to all research participants for their openness, sincerity and warmth and for making this research project a transforming lifetime experience for me. Their stories not only helped me explore the research topic but also provided extensive insight into my own migrant experience in Turkey and in the Netherlands. Many thanks also to Margriet Poppema (University of Amsterdam) for her support during the research and for her thoughtful comments on the draft.

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international migrants (Wissink et al., 2008; Vazsonyi et al., 2006; Khanlou et al., 2002; Carlson et al., 2000; Diaz, 1991). However, internal migration is far more significant in terms of the numbers of people involved. Evidence also suggests that except for a few countries, internal migration is on the rise. In Turkey, internal migration is an ancient phenomenon, yet the rapid industrialization process of the 1950s has introduced a new wave of migration from the poorest agricultural Anatolian regions in the east to the richest manufacturing regions in the west. Additional factors, such as the mechanization of agriculture, rapid population growth, the relatively limited amount of cultivated land, wide sectoral and regional differences in productivity (Franz, 1994), and security concerns in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian regions were also influential in migration movements. As a result of this accelerated movement, the urban population, which was 28.8% in 1955, reached 65.1% in 1997 (DeSantis, 2003), and to 70.5% in 2007 (Turkish Statistical Institute).

In countries, such as Turkey, where there is ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, internal migrants mirror many characteristics of international migrants. Yet, little research has been conducted on their well-being and social and emotional development in the post-migration phase. Migration experience destabilizes children because they must not only learn to cope with the stresses of growing up but with moving to a new physical, social, and cultural environment (Aksel et al., 2007). As a result, modifications in terms of self-esteem are likely to occur during such transition periods.

This article is based on a broader study that explored educational challenges and coping strategies of internal migrant students at the primary level in Turkey. The study showed that migrant girls encountered a variety of educational challenges in their new school environment. The six issues that emerged from the accounts of the participants included adaptation, language, low-socioeconomic background, peer relations, discrimination, and bullying. Self-esteem was also identified as an important concern, closely interlinked with many of the other identified problems. The focus of this article is on the impact of migration experience on self-esteem of primary school students, mainly girls.

SELF-ESTEEM AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Self-esteem is usually defined as a general attitude toward the worth or value of oneself, and refers to the individual's evaluation of the discrepancy between self-image and ideal self. The discrepancy is inev-

itable and can be regarded as normal and healthy as long as an individual does not become distressed over it (Lawrence, 2000). A large discrepancy between self-image and ideal self results in low self-esteem, whereas a small discrepancy is usually indicative of high self-esteem (Pope et al., 1988; Harter, 1999). Since self-esteem is primarily an evaluation of the self, it is a perception rather than reality. It reveals individuals' personal beliefs about themselves—for instance, whether they are intelligent and or attractive (Rosenberg et al., 1989).

Theories which see the origins of self-esteem as primarily social in nature (Cooley, 1902; Harter, 1999) argue that significant others play a crucial role in its development. According to these theories, others function as a social mirror to determine the opinions of significant others about themselves. These opinions not only serve as self-evaluation tools, but also change the self as the reflected judgments of others are internalized and incorporated. Self-esteem development starts within the family as a result of those interpersonal relationships, and in later stages of life, schools and the larger society gradually become more important. For students, significant others continue to play a very important role in determining their self-esteem, with teachers and classmates joining "significant others" (Lawrence, 2000). Although childhood experiences are crucial to the development of one's self-esteem, the self is not static. The changes in environment also alter one's level of self-esteem (Harter, 1993; Mruk, 1995).

Modifications in self-esteem are most likely to happen during times of transition. According to Harter (1993), such periods lead to a re-evaluation, in most cases for three main reasons: First, transition brings with it changes in one's perceptions of competence as new developmental tasks are to be mastered and new reference groups are to be compared. Second, individuals are more likely to alter their aspirations in accordance with a new hierarchy of values. Third, individuals face the difficult task of forming a new social network that will come to serve as a social mirror, as sources of approval or disapproval.

Self-esteem has a pervasive and powerful impact on human cognition, motivation, emotion, behavior, and growth (Campbell & Lavelle, 1993). In general, individuals with high self-esteem would perceive themselves as competent to cope with the challenges of life and worthy of happiness. On the other hand, those with low self-esteem would lack that confidence. Their self-definitions are impoverished, characterized by high levels of uncertainty, instability, and inconsistency (Rosenberg & Simmons, 1971; Campbell, 1990).

A vast body of research suggests a positive correlation between school achievement and self-esteem. However, it is not certain whether good grades cause high self-esteem or vice versa as causality seems to

operate in both directions (Lawrence, 2000). Wells and Marvell (1976) confirm that children will not be able to reach their full potential if their self-esteem is low. Furthermore, Pope et al. (1988) suggests that the functional limits of one's ability are in part set by one's self-conception of ability to achieve in academic tasks relative to others. The phenomenon known as "self-fulfilling prophecy" might explain why individuals' belief about themselves will have a strong impact on how well they perform, sometimes in spite of their actual abilities.

A study conducted among school children in the province of Adana (southern Turkey) aimed to assess self-esteem, depression, and anxiety levels of school children whose families migrated from the eastern regions. The study found out that migrant children have more emotional problems compared to others (Diler et al., 1998). A more recent study looked at self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and social support among adolescents who migrated with their families from the eastern to the western part of Turkey, and compared their findings with those of non-migrants living in the same locations. On all three variables, non-migrant adolescents scored higher in comparison to migrants. The study suggests that the migration experience can be detrimental to the psychological health of adolescents. Adaptation to the new social environment might be particularly challenging when migration takes place over a long distance, and if the migrants are settled in a new area that is in great contrast culturally and socially to their original habitat (Aksel et al., 2007).

Furthermore, Lent and Figueira-McDonough (2002) studied self-esteem of girls living in poor urban areas and found that pre-adolescent girls from poor families had low self-esteem. Moreover, they suggested that girls had a deficit in self-esteem even before they started school. Thus, they call for supportive intervention programs for girls, and yet girls' problems continue to go unnoticed due to their conforming attitudes. Another study by Diaz (1991) looked at factors affecting education of immigrants in the U.S., and found that migrant students have low self-esteem because they were treated as if they were invisible and ridiculed for a variety of reasons, including being culturally different and not having the right clothes.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Sample

This research was conducted in a suburban town in the western part of Turkey for a period of two months in 2003. The region has been

receiving increasing numbers of migrants from rural areas in the northern and eastern parts of the country since the 1980s. The sample consisted of 72 participants: migrant students ($n = 19$), non-migrant students ($n = 8$), graduates with migrant background ($n = 11$), teachers, ($n = 7$), migrant parents ($n = 19$), and community members ($n = 8$). Students were selected from the sixth through the eighth grade, and their ages ranged between 11 and 14. The selection of this age group was purposive; this is a crucial transitional phase between childhood and adolescence, which induces the development of abstract and critical thinking (Harter, 1999). Due to the gender emphasis of the study, participants included only girls. The migrant girls were from several provinces in the northern, eastern, and south-eastern parts of Turkey. Kurdish Graduates were those who had completed their primary education at the same town school. They were a mixed group by gender, age, and education level: there were seven female and four male graduates, aged between 15 and 36. Some of them had university degrees, some were still enrolled in high school. Parent interviews were dominated by mothers; only four fathers among 19 parents took part in the study, mainly due to their inaccessibility. Parents' age was between 30 and 55. Among them, three defined themselves as Kurdish and four as Laz. In addition, five in-service and two retired teachers took part in the study—three were female and four were male, aged between 31 and 55. Finally, eight community members (seven female, one male) were contacted for interviews. Their ages were between 15 and 58. They were also migrants from different eastern provinces; two were Kurdish and one was Laz. Their educational background ranged from a school dropout to a high school graduate.

"Migrants" was defined in the study as persons who have migrated from the eastern to the western parts of Turkey in the last twenty years. At the time of the study, the town population was more than 3,000, 40% of which had a migrant background. More than 60% of students at the town school were migrants.

METHOD

Data were collected by qualitative methods, including interviews with students, graduates, parents, teachers, and community members. There were focus group discussions with mothers and workshops with migrant students. A questionnaire was designed to gather basic descriptive data about the socioeconomic status of migrant girls, their parents and siblings, including place of origin, ethnic background, languages spoken at home, education level, size of family, employment

status, and income level. Interviews were semi-structured and held on a one-to-one basis. In some cases, an unstructured approach was used to allow participants to tell their stories in their own way (DeGroot, 2002). Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to two hours.

Five workshops were organized with eight to ten migrant girl students participating in each for a minimum of two hours. For each workshop, there were some pre-defined themes, such as adaptation, language, and home environments. However, since participants were allowed to discuss other issues. The formality of the setting was reduced as much as possible so that participants would feel comfortable expressing their own points of view. Workshop activities mainly involved discussions and drawings—the aim being was to gain insight into their lives and encourage self-reflection. In addition to promoting learning, these workshops aimed to contribute to self-esteem of the students and facilitate empathy. During workshops, various difficulties of group discussions were experienced, such as “self-selected spokespersons, domination of the group by one or two articulate speakers, chorusing, inhibition on expressing views due to having to speak in an open forum, and the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance” (Bullivant, 1987, p. 53). Furthermore, two focus group discussions were organized with mothers, each lasting more than three hours. After introducing the main themes, the participants were encouraged to discuss their views openly.

Procedure

Together with the head teacher, we analyzed the list of students enrolled at the primary school to choose those who would be eligible for the study. Determining factors were age, place of origin, ethnicity, language, and length of stay in the town. Afterwards, several migrant households were visited to ask permission from the parents and their children. Questionnaires were filled out during these first visits by those willing to participate in the research. Interviews with parents and graduates, and in some cases with students, were conducted during subsequent home visits. The majority of interviews with students were carried out on school premises. Workshops with students and focus group discussions with mothers were organized after completion of interviews. Conversations during workshops and the interviews were mostly tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. If participants felt uncomfortable with a tape recorder, notes were taken during interviews which were expanded following the interview on the same day. The same procedure also was followed for focus group discussions.

FINDINGS

Migrant Students

Concern over self-esteem was expressed mainly by older migrant students. They noted that discrimination and bullying affected them. Three students from the eighth grade noted that the association of eastern-rural background with "backwardness" and "ignorance" adversely affected their self-esteem. One eighth grade student acknowledged that she and her closest friends had moments of self-doubt, thinking that maybe they (locals) were right—perhaps migrants could not achieve anything in life, that perhaps they really were backward and would remain so.

Discrimination was identified as an important concern for many migrant students, considering it to be prevalent both in the school environment and in the larger community. Ethnicity, cultural differences, and class were noted as the main reasons for discrimination. As established by many studies, when the opportunity to participate, communicate, and interact in the community is denied to individuals due to their being perceived as inferior this results in exclusion (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997, cited in Moser & McIlwaine, 1999). Exclusion from the community often results in feelings of inadequacy and difference, thereby diminishing self image (Collins, 2000).

Among migrant girls, there were two extreme cases of marginalization and isolation. These girls expressed very negative self-perceptions. The fact that their social relations were severely limited and their attempts rejected was gradually undermining their self-esteem. One of these girls shared the following:

Ayse (a local girl) has a diary. She has written the names of all the friends she likes. Only my name was missing. My name was written next to this title: "The ones I do not like in this class. Why only my name? I did not ask her. I felt very sad. I am thinking that maybe I am a worthless person because nobody loves me (her voice trembling). Then I cry."

Bullying, which emerged as the most frequent form of discrimination and an important source of personal suffering for migrant girls, had similar effects on their self-esteem. Longitudinal research in various countries indicates that children who are victimized for a long period are more likely to manifest internalizing behaviors such as depression and withdrawal, and externalizing behaviors such as aggression and argumentativeness (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). The self-esteem of bully victims is likely to decrease as evidence suggests that verbal abuse

negatively affects self-esteem and results in self-degradation and self-blame (Burnett & McCrindle, 1999). Such children are increasingly disliked by their peers over time. Further, in many studies, chronic victimization by peers has been associated with anxiety and helplessness (Espelage & Swearer, 2003), and suicidal thoughts and attempts (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003).

Graduates

Graduates defined self-esteem as almost equivalent to self-confidence. For many, having self-esteem or self-confidence meant being able to communicate with comfort and expressing ideas without restraint. Female graduates generally expressed their experiences and thoughts on this subject, whereas male graduates did not seem comfortable talking about personal feelings. Females noted that their self-esteem had deteriorated after moving to the west. Language difficulties, limited social contacts, and low socioeconomic status were reported as the main reasons for a decline in their self-esteem.

Difficulties relating to language emerged as having the most severe effects on self-esteem of graduates. This was a common problem since all migrants spoke in different regional dialects, yet participants from Artvin province seemed most disadvantaged since in addition to dialect differences they were also using words from the Georgina language. Graduates recalled having communication problems with local students sometimes being unable to understand the dialect. The group of graduates who came in the 1980s noted that they were puzzled when people did not understand them. One noted the following:

I was confused. It seemed as if suddenly I did not know how to talk. I tried not to talk much so that I would make fewer mistakes. It was a painful process to see that what you know as true turns out to be wrong. I used to think I was speaking in Turkish, but I was not. Although my friends were nice I was feeling very apprehensive.

The realization that they used non-Turkish words in their speech, and that pronunciation was also different (Istanbul dialect) made them anxious in their conversations. These problems made some of the graduates less willing to communicate with the locals, preferring classmates from their own backgrounds. Another graduate from Artvin noted:

In my first year at the town school, when I was speaking with my classmates, they interrupted me, saying "What? What did you say?" They were asking me to repeat the words they did not understand. Basically

they did not understand what I was telling them, so I started saying, "Oh, just nothing!" Afterwards, I became more and more reluctant to talk to people.

Another graduate recalled that even her closest classmates used to react very negatively, mostly mocking her when she made a mistake. She did not even know which words were Turkish and which were Georgian and she did not have a dictionary with which to check. Consequently, speaking meant navigating dangerous waters. She recalled how awful she felt before the start of the new academic year—even a month in advance. She added that these difficulties made her feel badly about herself, gradually undermining her self-esteem.

Graduates also stated that their poverty and low socioeconomic status in comparison to the locals were the second most important area they had been concerned about, affecting not only the quality of their lives, but their social relations and self-esteem. This confirms other studies that examined the impact of socioeconomic status on self-esteem. A longitudinal study of primary school children has shown that family socioeconomic status is the most stabilizing of family characteristics in terms of impact on academic self-concept (Muijis, 1997). Another study found that children from families with persistent economic problems manifested lower self-esteem than did children from more affluent families (Baharudin & Luster, 1998).

Five graduates noted strong feelings associated with their perceived poverty, that their lower economic status made them uncomfortable about themselves and resulted in feelings of deprivation. One graduate recalled the first time she invited her classmates to her house.

When they came to my house, they looked at the living room and said, "So your furniture has not arrived yet." I said "Actually no, that is all we have." It was an awkward and hurtful moment for me that is still alive in my memories after twenty years. Through their eyes I saw my life in a different way. I never thought before that my family was poor; I thought we had enough of everything. But then, as my eyes were replaced by theirs, we became poor and the rooms got emptier.

Another graduate added that poverty was the main cause of her and her family's suffering. She recalled that she was tired of living in a house continuously under construction, not having enough money for food or clothing, or counting pennies at the end of each month. She could not join in school trips or picnics because she did not have the money. Not having the "right" clothes also made her refrain from meeting the local girls after school. All these things, she remarked, forced her into a more limited life and weakened her self-esteem considerably.

In addition, several graduates noted that their self-esteem was significantly influenced by their parents' low self-esteem, as explained by this graduate:

There was no obvious reason for my self-esteem to decrease; my grades were good, I had a few friends. But still somehow my self-esteem was low. I believe my self-esteem was influenced by the self-esteem of my parents, which was apparently low. They were undergoing serious transformations after migration. My mother was very shy; she used to run inside if she saw someone coming close to our house. She was very timid, too; she used to get excited when she needed to have a simple conversation with someone from the town. I copied my parents, especially my mother and became uncomfortable with strangers; I tried to avoid meeting new people.

Internalization of others' thoughts seemed to be common not only at school but in the community. Another graduate suggested that the process had long-term implications, since she believed that both parents and children internalized what other people thought or said about them. She added, "Although initially, it was the locals who looked down on us, but in time an inner part of us took over that task. Even for a life time, we can keep on feeling inferior." Furthermore, graduates pointed to long-term effects of decreasing self-esteem. The four graduates who were most outspoken about this issue suggested that even if they succeeded at school through hard work, they faced difficulties in their lives since low self-esteem had a crippling effect on them. One graduate explained that even if she went on to university, she could never regain her self-confidence. She seemed puzzled as to how people could recover their self-esteem. She noted that she was still overly concerned with her speech; she was still shy and reserved. What was worse was the fact that she could hardly take the initiative in her life. Although she was a university graduate, she hardly applied for any jobs. She explained "When I go to entrance exams for various institutions, I tell myself that I cannot succeed. This negative self-talk comes true, and I never succeed." Another graduate who had been working for many years suggested that her negative self-esteem influenced her life in some other ways:

I believe I function well below my capacity; my success at work, my social relations, and my ability to feel happy is limited. It is a vicious circle which gets worse over time; since you do not have much self-confidence, you do not take the initiative, and the fact that you do not take the initiative in your life decreases your self-esteem even further. I still do not feel like I belong where I am now.

Migrant Mothers

Talking with the parents was crucial in the sense that it provided some understanding of how they approach their children's areas of abilities and disabilities. The importance of this information is that usually such perceptions are internalized by the children and will be mirrored by the children's own self-perceptions. Self-esteem proved to be a difficult topic with mothers since it was apparently an intimate and sensitive issue. Very few of them talked at length over how their self-concepts changed after they had settled in the town. Nevertheless, focus group discussion seemed to provide a secure and comfortable setting for mothers during which they shared some of both their painful and humorous experiences and could learn from others that they were not alone in their feelings. Since the majority of mothers in the focus group meeting arrived in the 1980s, the disparity they felt between their lives before and after migration was striking. They came from villages where they had no electricity, telephone, public transportation or television. Migration itself was their first trip out of their village or town. Therefore, even if they had been capable in their villages, taking care of children, the elderly, animals, and crops, when they arrived in the west, they felt inadequate and ignorant of many things. The story of one of the mothers was illustrative:

During my first trip to the west I could not sleep on the bus out of excitement. The roads were full of light; everything was full of light. It did not take me long to realize that they spoke differently, and unfortunately my dialect was not nice at all. I was embarrassed by the way I spoke. In the evening, I blew to the electric bulb to turn it off. I thought ice cream was made from dyed snow. Through such small incidences, I came to realize that I was such an ignorant woman.

Some others also confirmed that they did not know the ways of city or town life, so for a long time they felt inadequate. Although mothers did not associate their self-esteem with their children's, when the question was raised, they noted that inadvertently they might have influenced their children in a negative way. However, they did not think their daughters had lower self-esteem. Some of them just noted that their children were shy, not talkative or uncomfortable in social settings. Yet, some others commented that their children had developed an inferiority complex after they moved to the town. When mothers were asked about the correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement, most said that without self-confidence a person could not achieve anything, let alone succeed at school.

Teachers

Teachers' views on this subject were divided into two groups. One group argued that migrant children were psychologically vulnerable, whereas the second group believed that in terms of self-esteem, a categorization of migrant versus non-migrant was not relevant. The first group suggested that migrant students had self-esteem-related problems mainly due to their socioeconomic status, language difficulties, cultural differences, and adaptation problems. They were perceived to be disoriented and alienated though for how long would depend on each student for a variety of reasons. One teacher noted that emotionally, migrant children are much more vulnerable than the others. Although some are more intelligent than the locals, their lower socioeconomic circumstances make them feel inferior. Locals see themselves as superior to them—that this town is theirs. Migrants feel like foreigners in the town.

The second group, on the other hand, proposed that divergence in terms of self-esteem levels emerged from personality differences: extroverts would adapt easily whereas introverts took a long time to find their place in the new environment. They claimed that they did not note lower self-esteem among migrant students, excluding those who had some abnormalities. Yet another teacher remarked that there were students with low self-esteem in both groups. This teacher believed that the esteem level of a student was directly related to family life, particularly harmony between mother and father and the way they treated the child. He added that the second most important determinant was socioeconomic status; hence, migrant students were more vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that migrant girls encounter a variety of challenges in their new environment, including adaptation, language difficulties, discrimination, and bullying. These challenges, directly or indirectly, undermine the self-esteem of migrant girls, which confirms Aksel et al.'s (2007) study on internal migrants who moved from the eastern, predominantly ethnically Kurdish areas to the western part of Turkey. Their study also revealed that self-esteem of migrants was lower compared to non-migrant adolescents who lived in the same area in the west and to those who never left their villages in the east.

Educators need to make sure that schools provide a safe and caring environment for migrant students, where they feel valued and re-

spected. Additionally, understanding the lives of migrant families, obtaining knowledge about their culture and values, and having a broader perspective about them are important. Home-school collaboration would not only contribute to a good quality education but would empower migrant students by facilitating the development of confidence and self-esteem.

The narratives of graduates point to long-term effects of migration experiences. Their observations with regard to the effect of low self-esteem in the later stages of their lives suggest that completion of or continued education do not necessarily lead to more productive and happier lives. As suggested by Lawrence (2000, p. xii), "Education is not only about learning cognitive skills. It is also about helping children to learn about themselves, to be able to live peaceably with themselves and with others and to help them develop into competent, mature, and self-motivated adults."

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