EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN STUDENTS IN TURKEY

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Article Info	Abstract
	The experiences of African students in Turkey may be different from other international students due to their distinct identities. This qualitative study explores the challenges faced by international students from Sub Saharan Africa in Turkey and their coping strategies. Data were drawn from 17 postgraduate students from Africa studying in Istanbul through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Findings show that students faced a range of sociocultural, personal, psychological and academic challenges. Experiences of students were shaped by assumptions and stereotypes about their race/ethnicity, nationality, gender and background. While the findings show that students experience challenges, they also demonstrate how they have developed agency and become resilient through resisting marginalization experiences. Findings from this study have policy implications considering the current internationalization efforts of higher education in Turkey.

SAHRA ALTI AFRİKALI ÖĞRENCİLERİN TÜRKİYE'DE KARŞILAŞTIKLARI ZORLUKLARI VE BAŞ ETME STRATEJİLERİNİ KEŞFETME

Makale Bilgisi	Özet
	Türkiye'deki Afrikalı öğrencilerin deneyimleri, belirgin kimlikleri nedeniyle diğer uluslararası öğrencilerden farklı olabilir. Bu nitel çalışma, Sahra Altı Afrika'dan gelen uluslararası öğrencilerin Türkiye'de karşılaştıkları zorlukları ve bu zorluklarla baş etme stratejilerini keşfetmektedir. Veriler, yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yoluyla İstanbul'da okuyan lisansüstü 17 Afrikalı öğrenciden elde edilmiştir. Bulgular; öğrencilerin çeşitli sosyo-kültürel, kişisel, psikolojik ve akademik zorluklarla karşı karşıya olduklarını göstermektedir. Öğrencilerin deneyimleri ırk, etnik köken, milliyet, cinsiyet ve özgeçmişlerine dayalı varsayımlar ve stereotiplerle şekillenmektedir. Bulgular öğrencilerin zorluklarla karşılaştıklarını gösterirken, aynı zamanda bu marjinalleştirme faaliyetlerine karşı dirençli hale geldiklerini ve bu direnci nasıl geliştirdiklerini de ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Türkiye'deki yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşmasındaki mevcut çabalar göz önünde bulundurularak, çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular politik çıkarımlarla desteklenmiştir.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of international students in Turkey has rapidly increased in the past two decades. Turkey's geopolitical position and multicultural nature is attracting the attention of an

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ever-increasing number of international students. Furthermore, the Turkish government has utilized several soft power tools and instruments that include state-sponsored educational scholarships to increase the number of international students in Turkish universities (Aras & Mohammed, 2019: 438). The number of international students in Turkey increased by 75 per cent in the past ten years (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı) According to the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), currently, 155.000 international students are studying in Turkish universities (Yüksek Öğretim Kurum). Since international students contribute to the diversity and internationalization of universities and communities, the Turkish government aims to attract 200 000 international students by the year 2023 (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı).

International students are crucial to the development of the host country for several reasons. First, they bring new forms of academic thinking and help to stimulate competition, thereby enhancing the educational prestige of the host country institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Urban & Palmer, 2014). Secondly, international students contribute to the diversity of the host country's academic institutions and enrich the cultural diversity of higher education (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). They also provide a platform for academics and students to develop cultural competencies through interacting with people with different cultures, languages and traditions. International students constitute huge international relations and economic investments for host countries through their expenditure on education and living expenses (Wu et al., 2015). Therefore, African students contribute to the Turkish government's policy of opening and create trade links and economic opportunities with sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries (Shinn, 2015).

Turkey has traditionally welcomed international students from central Asian and Balkan countries. Relative to other international students populations in Turkey (e.g. Central Asian and Balkan students) SSA students are one of the most underrepresented groups on the university campuses in Turkey. They constitute only 12% of the number of international students in Turkey (Ünal, 2017). However, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of students from SSA countries. The increase is part of the current internationalization efforts and the expanding influence of Turkey in the region (Dziwornu, Yakar, & Temurçin, 2016). Most students coming from SSA benefit from the generous Turkish government scholarships, which provide both tuition and living support (Aras & Mohammed, 2019). Since the number of African students steadily continues to rise, it is crucial for administrators and counsellors within

universities to have a better understanding of their experiences, especially those related to adjustment and acculturation issues.

SSA has a long history of being a source for international students. Even though countries in the region have improved and expanded the quality of their educational systems, the demand for better academic opportunities especially in countries outside the region is still high (Chien & Kot, 2012). On the other hand, the lack of opportunities in SSA countries and the prestige associated with international education remains motivational factors in student migration decisions (Rizvi, 2011). In addition to quality and prestige, students from SSA are motivated to study in an international destination abroad by various socio-economic and political factors (Marcketti, Mhango, & Gregoire, 2006). Previously international students' mobility from SSA was usually within the context of traditional North-South cooperation to countries with longstanding colonial and linguistic connections (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). However, in recent years there have been spatial diversification to destinations in Europe, the Global South, Gulf and Asian countries (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). Turkey is an emerging destination due to state and religious foundations scholarships targeting African students (Aras & Mohammed, 2019).

International students from SSA have different academic and life experiences when compared to their counterparts from other regions due to facets of race and gender (Okusolubo, 2018). Furthermore, the unique experiences of African students are shaped by the stereotypical representation of Africans reinforced by media depiction of Africa as a continent of starvation, extreme poverty, natural disasters, and armed conflicts (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). Such stereotypical representations of Africa shape society's perceptions and attitudes towards international students from SSA, which may present challenges towards their adaptation in their new academic environment. Challenges faced by students from SSA are unique and more severe as a result of the pressure from adjusting to the new culture, language, and academic environment (Okusolubo, 2018). In Western countries especially the US, students from minority groups which include African Americans and Latinos often take too long or fail to complete their academic degrees when compared to white students (Booker, 2007; Cook & Pullaro, 2010). African students are disproportionately affected since they have multiple intersecting identities that include African, migrant, international student, women and black (Constantine, et al., 2005; Cooper, 2018). The increase in the number of students from different backgrounds also increases a variety of challenges and problems (Gebhard, 2012; Li, Yanlin & Feiya, 2014). Challenges encountered by international students are closely related to their social

and academic experiences and how they interact with social institutions within society (Constantine et al., 2005; Lu et al., 2018; Yoon & Portman 2004). Several studies have explored the experiences, difficulties, and challenges of international students in different Turkish Universities (Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, & Kondakci, 2011; Icbay & Kocayoruk, 2011; Özoğlu, Gür, & Coşkun, 2015; Redžepagić-Bulić, 2015; Snoubar & Celik, 2013; Titrek, Erkiliç, Süre, Güvenç, & Temür Pek, 2016; Titrek, Hashimi, Ali, & Nguluma, 2016; Yükselir, 2018). The challenges faced by international students in Turkey include failure to adapt to the new environment (Titrek et al., 2016), academic challenges (Redžepagić-Bulić, 2015; Snoubar, 2017; Nazir, 2019), cultural issues (Titrek et al., 2016b; Snoubar & Celik 2013), financial problems (Titrek et al., 2016; Snoubar 2017), health issues (Titrek et al. 2016), communication and language barriers (Titrek et al., 2016; Titrek et al., 2016b; Yükselir, 2018), social isolation and interaction (Nazir, 2019; Titrek et al., 2016), accommodation problems (Titrek et al., 2016), homesickness (Titrek et al., 2016) and lack of proper information (Özoğlu et al., 2015) and discrimination (Snoubar, 2017). Studies have shown that international students develop agency by adopting a range of coping skills and strategies to respond to the challenges (Nazir, 2019). Studies done in other countries show that international students develop relationships, pray, rely on the internet, study extensively, develop self-help and psychological strategies, tap into institutional support, and reach out to teachers and peers for help as coping mechanisms (Heng 2018; Khawaja & Stallman 2011; Somniso, Cekiso, Tshotsho, & Lydy, 2016). Fewer studies in Turkey have focused on the experiences of international students from SSA. SSA students' experiences were evaluated within the context of all international students. However, such an approach is problematic since SSA students are significantly different from other international students. Their nationality, ethical background, religion, gender, and race create unique identities that may expose them to distinct challenges. The present study explores the experiences of international students from SSA.

The current study's theoretical framework is framed using intersectionality theory. The theory was developed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) who examined why black women's specific experiences and circumstances were not adequately accounted for in legal judgments (Crenshaw 1991,1989). The theory has been adopted in higher education research with a view based on the premise that higher education is supposed to contribute to the formation of equitable societies and therefore the need to actively address the inequalities (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Intersectionality theory emphasizes that to understand the social experiences of minority members one should consider how different axes of stratification interrelate (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework can be used to analyze how higher education institutions organize, provide for, include, exclude and are experienced in ways that produce advantages and disadvantages (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Furthermore, the framework exposes how structures at multiple levels of (dis)advantage are intertwined with social and personal aspects of higher education experiences (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). The theoretical framework has been used to explain the experiences of minority students (African Americans, Africans and Latinos) on college campuses across the United States (Constantine et al., 2005; Marcketti, Changamire & Mosselson, 2006; Núñez, 2014; Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Sparks, 2019). Similarly, international students from Africa in Turkey constitute such a group since factors such as ethnicity, race, gender and immigration status may form multiple disadvantages.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design. Specifically, a phenomenological approach was adopted since the study aimed to understand in-depth the experiences of SSA students in Turkey. Phenomenological allows participants to have a voice while they make sense of their own lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations. Semi-structured interviews were considered effective in providing authentic and detailed descriptions of the daily lives of a heterogeneous group of SSA international students (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Interview questions focused on students' challenges and experiences since they arrived in Turkey. Questions explored participants' early experiences in Turkey, social networking on and off-campus, creating friendships and relationships; experiences in the public arena, experiences in classes and with other students and professors; and services and support provided by universities. Furthermore, probes were added to explore the responses to questions further. The rationale of using this approach was to understand the respondent's point of view rather than make generalizations about behaviour(Creswell & Poth, 2017). Participant observation provided first-hand realities concerning the daily activities of international students' lives (Silverman, 2006).

2.2. Participants

The participants were postgraduate international students from SSA. Seventeen participants studying in masters and doctorate programs in different universities in Istanbul

were selected. Participants were selected using convenience and snowballing sampling techniques. The participants included both scholarship and non-scholarship students from ten countries of origin: two from Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and three from Zimbabwe and Nigeria; as well as one each from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Gambia, and Somalia. Eight men and nine women participated in the study, and the participants ranged in age from 25 to 33 years. All the participants had lived in their countries of origin until they came to Turkey specifically to attend higher education. The participants reported having traveled to Turkey between 9 and 50 months ago. Twelve students were from state universities, and four were from private foundation universities. Eight participants were in their last year of study while the remainder were spread equally among language preparation, first, second, and third years. Seven participants were pursuing a degree in the social sciences; three were pursuing science degrees; five were in engineering, and two were in law. Convenience sampling presented challenges in representativeness in this study. Therefore, participants were selected to represent different regions of SAA, religious, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. The researcher for this study was an international student from SSA. Sharing a similar background with participants helped the researcher to establish relationships. Based on the good relationship with participants, the researcher viewed himself as a researcher from an insider perspective. This insider role allowed the researcher to research a population from which he is also a member (Berger, 2015). The researcher and participants shared similar social identity and experiences, thereby also facilitating a fast and total acceptance by the participants, which resulted, in participants being more open. On the other hand, the insider position carried its demerits. It had the potential of blurring boundaries; impose own values, beliefs, and perceptions, projecting biases, and distort the power relationship between researcher and participant (Berger, 2015).

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations. Fieldwork took place over five months from May 2018 to October 2019 in Istanbul. The interviews were conducted face to face in the participant's natural environment, places where students felt comfortable to share their stories. As an insider, many of the discussions during interviews became a sharing of our lived experiences in Turkey. The interviews were conducted mainly in English, and on average, each interview took between 30-45 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped, and all participants were comfortable with the recording. They were assured it would be used for research purposes only, and that their identities would not be revealed anywhere. Observations were conducted during lectures,

academic conferences, campus activities, picnics, student gatherings, and religious activities. At the same time, the researcher conducted informal discussions with participants and other African students in various real-life contexts. During data collection, the researcher was aware of how his insider position, preferences, worldview, and emotional responses can lead to biases and expectations regarding the potential findings of the study (Berger, 2015). Therefore, a reflexivity journal was kept where the researcher continuously self-reflected and took down notes. Reflexivity is a central principle in intersectionality since in this case, the researcher's background might be a source of preconceived biases that may affect the entire research process (Hunting, 2014). The researcher believed that the participants would enjoy staying in Turkey and undertaking their studies. Furthermore, the researcher also speculated that African students would experience some form of discrimination based on their race that would affect their cultural adjustment experiences. To maintain the necessary balance between the researcher's own experience and that of the participants, a logbook, repeated review, and peer consultations were extensively utilized as reflexive strategies. Additionally, interviews were then triangulated with reflexive and field notes, informal discussions and observation notes to ensure high validity and reliability of the collected data.

2.4. Data Analysis

Following a qualitative research approach, data analysis was primarily inductive. The researcher transcribed interviews and other fieldwork data sources, including notes. The interview transcripts were reviewed and quality checked by an independent researcher. Peer consultation offered valuable feedback and pointed to instances the researcher had ignored participants' views while favoring his own (Berger, 2015). Data analysis was conducted from an interpretivist perspective because the researcher viewed knowledge as socially constructed and emerging from the participants' lived experiences. Therefore, data analysis did not intend to find correct answers or use pre-defined narratives but rather to utilize participants' perspectives to determine themes and patterns in the data. Data analysis was done through an open coding process, and emerging themes were analyzed both individually and across interviews (Neuman, 2011). Reviewing the interviews and codes was repeated after a couple of weeks as part of data quality checks. The time-lapse in re-reviewing interviews allowed the researcher to view the same data through a new lens and identify cases where owns experience and biases interfered with accurate data analysis(Berger, 2015). After the second transcribing and analysis process, the researcher determined the common themes. Furthermore, as a form of member-checking, data analysis resulted in follow-up questions that were sent to participants,

and the answers were incorporated into the final analyses. The emerging themes from the coding and analysis process were (a) challenges face by participants (personal, academic and sociocultural); (b) strategies adopted to cope up with these challenges; and (c) recommendations for universities. Under each category, each theme is discussed, followed by potential coping strategies used and recommendations by the research participants.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The participants were approached directly and through intermediaries and oral informed consent was sought before the start of the interviews. Participants were told they would be given full anonymity and data would be kept confidential, and given the option to decline, stressing the voluntary nature of the research. All local fieldwork locations have been obscured for ethical purposes, and all names of respondents have been pseudonymized.

3. FINDINGS

The findings are presented into two major categories: challenges experienced by SSA international students and coping strategies students employ to manage those challenges. Challenges and coping strategies are grouped into the following themes: personal-psychological issues, academic issues, and sociocultural issues.

Sociocultural and Personal Psychological Challenges

Several themes related to sociocultural and personal psychological issues emerged during data analysis. Cultural shock, adjustment problems, discrimination, stereotyping, loneliness, relationship problems, depression, frustration, loss of status or identity, anxiety, and confusion are the problems that came out during the interviews with participants. Most participants left their homes for the first time when they were coming to study in Turkey and found themselves in an environment without other African students. They reported a feeling of homesickness, confusion, loneliness, emptiness, and fear in their newly found environment. Many participants experienced assumptions about their social identities as Africans which negatively impacted their ability to create social relationships with other international students. Mary recounted several experiences with stereotypes and negative assumptions made towards her by her class and roommates that left her feeling frustrated and confused about her identity.

> *On several occasions, people have made funny gestures that make you think you have done something wrong. Sometimes they ask uncomfortable questions like…. Do you*

bath in your country? It makes you feel horrible about yourself and start questioning yourself, am I smelling?

All the participants emphasized that it is emotionally disturbing when every person whom you meet always reminds you how lucky you were to have escaped from Africa. Africa is viewed as a continent of hunger, poverty, war, and misery and therefore, the assumptions in some people are that every African is hungry and carries certain diseases. Contrary to blanket assumptions made about the students, most of them come from high social standing from their country and have impressive academic and professional credentials. As a result, the negative and lower social status assigned to African students in Turkey creates disharmony with their peers and impact on their ability to create friendships. Itai described feeling lonely and stressed and described his experience as "social demotion".

I felt very inferior…I felt like I am nothing… felt someway like stepping back in social order...

African students faced perceived and real forms of discrimination based on perceptions. Participants reported demeaning actions such as avoiding eye contact, mocking their language, teasing, providing rude service, people refusing to share rooms with Africans, invasions of personal space, such as inappropriate physical touching, exiting an elevator, hostile stares, and stereotypical remarks. Furthermore, African students were also subjected to discrimination from other international students. Mike was often ignored and left out by his dorm mates.

When I was living in a dorm, I stayed with other five roommates from Arabic and Asian countries, they often left me out of their plans. I think they did that because of my religion (Christian) and because I am black

Female students experienced more challenges since most of them were sexually harassed and pestered for sex each time they walked in the streets. Sipho described how she was scared when a strangers touched her in a grocery store queue and then on a public train. When she confronted one of the men, he said he was curious about the texture of her hair and skin. Similarly, Anna explained that she now limits her movement alone, especially at night in the city center.

Each time I exit the metro I encounter men who ask for sex from me. During my first encounter, I cried because I thought I was dressing in a sexually suggestive way. I later realized that most men think African women around here are sex workers due to the presence of sex workers from Africa.

Other incidents reported involved workers in government institutions scrutinizing documents and money handed to them by the participants. Furthermore, other institutions even demand documents that not usually a requirement in the process. This came out during an incident that Gladys encountered while looking for an internship position.

> *I got an internship position and started working, but after a few days, my supervisor requested HIV tests which were never part of the job requirements. I later realized that the request was made because my supervisor researched about my country and found out it had a high HIV prevalence.*

Additionally, students have faced stigma and discrimination due to people's beliefs about diseases found in Africa, such as Ebola ad AIDS. This has resulted in students losing confidence to establish friendships, secure housemates, and join academic discussions.

Academic Related Challenges

The major thrust in the increase in the number of international students is part of the internationalizing efforts being embarked on by the Turkish government. However, participants highlighted the absence of adequate support mechanisms once they arrive in Turkey to enable them to complete their studies. The academic-related challenges highlighted by the students were the language of instruction, teaching techniques, unsupportive faculty members, lack of understanding of the Turkish educational system, difficulties in using educational supportive services (e.g. library, academic counseling services). Turkish language proficiency was highlighted as one of the biggest barriers to the participants' academic success. Participants reported difficulties in communicating with native speakers, understanding lectures, and writing assignments and exams. Unlike most international students in Turkey who are from central Asian and Balkan countries with strong linguistical ties with Turkey, SSA students do not possess a strong understanding of the language. Turkish preparatory classes are only given for one year, and most students stressed that their language training was inadequate. In most cases, African students are mixed with students who have prior knowledge of Turkish, and the language instructors often overlook their specific needs. James described how his experience in learning Turkish made him discover the weaknesses in the system.

> *When we were in TÖMER (Turkish language preparation) our classes were dominated by students from Azerbaijan. Our teacher always talked with them and ignored us. After TÖMER, I realized that my language was only enough for everyday conversation and not academic work.*

The inability to communicate effectively in Turkish is resented by some faculty members, which further compound the problems the students face. This is more disturbing among scholarship students, who are constantly reminded how they are taking the government's money and fail to speak Turkish. Gift describes the experience as dehumanizing because students are always ridiculed in front of their peers during lectures.

> *It's very dehumanizing and disturbing…imagine someone always reminding you that we brought you here and we are giving you money…sometimes I always think they do that to me because am African and black.*

On the other hand, the pressure to succeed among the students comes from their families and the scholarship funders.

> *I know I have to pass because If I fail YTB (scholarship funder) will deduct money from my monthly stipend and my parents will accuse me of playing around.*

Another challenge faced by the participants is related to the negative attitude of some faculty members towards African students especially those on scholarships. International students from SSA suffer from prejudices in the education system in Turkey. Stereotypes concerning Africans result in professors perceiving Africans students as not hardworking. Celine described having several experiences with stereotypical and prejudicial statements made towards her by lecturers that left her facing pressure to prove herself academically.

> *During my first lecture, my professor told me that African students are lazy and do not want to read. He later apologized after he discovered that his statement was offending. Another one told me that you are taking our government money and always sleep and do nothing.*

Similarly, to Celine, other participants experience similar stereotypical remarks made about their African identity, which also negatively impacted on their academic experiences. The students reported that they often work extra hard to prove that they are capable, and they are usually disappointment since all their academic achievements are based solely on their ability to speak Turkish. In explaining his frustration, Timothy believed that all the professors care about the way you speak their language. Participants faced challenges in interaction and communication both within and outside the lecture rooms. Challenges faced by students in and out of class are often results of the socialization process in their country as opposed to Turkey. Universities campuses are places for several challenges for the students that include classroom participation expectations, inability to understand Turkish context and examples, conflicting

worldviews such as competition versus collaboration, and collectivism versus individualism. Tom's social etiquette considers it rude behavior to interrupt a person, especially an older person when they are speaking.

> *I tried to raise my hand to contribute something in class after careful thought. In most cases the professor seems not to see me, and I get not to speak. In Zimbabwe, it is rude to interrupt a professor when he is speaking. Therefore, if I am not chosen, I don't get to give my contribution in class.*

On the other hand, like other participants, Sini felt worried and anxious to participate in classroom discussions out of fear of her Turkish language skills and failure to position examples in the correct Turkish context.

> *I think twice before I interrupt my professor otherwise, I will embarrass myself with my bad Turkish.*

Participants found the university environment as not supportive enough to the needs of international students. The participants pointed to their unique needs as international students and lack of sensitivity to African cultures as the main issues presenting challenges to them in universities. There seems to be a disconnection between the Turkish government and universities in the internationalization efforts of higher education. In line with other participants, Edo feels that universities in Turkey do not prioritize the needs of international students.

> *I don't feel like I am prioritized here as an international student. When you first arrived here the registration office does not have people to help you in translating from the Turkish language. Also, counseling services are not responsive to students from different cultures. I think they just want us to come here, have pictures with us for a certain narrative and leave you to struggle on your own.*

Participants described the lack of diversity in the classrooms as an intimidating situation from the beginning. This situation is made worse by the fact that there is no diversity in the academic staff across the universities. Participants believed that the current internationalization efforts of the Turkish higher education system should not just end with the enrolment of the student but should focus on the integration process of the students.

Coping Strategies

The findings revealed that participants faced psychological and sociocultural challenges such as cultural shock, loneliness, depression, stereotyped and discrimination. Additionally, they also face academic challenges, such as language of instruction, teaching techniques, unsupportive faculty members, lack of understanding of the Turkish educational system, difficulties in using educational supportive services. However, participants have adopted a variety of coping strategies to overcome the challenges they faced while studying in Turkey. The strategies used by international students made use of the available social and institutional support. All the participants highlighted that they adopt a positive mindset and a strong work ethic as a strategy to cope up with the stress associated with being an international student in Turkey. Participants constantly remind themselves and/or each other of their long-term goals and the benefits of getting good education. Participants mentioned that they have disciplined themselves to remain positive until they have completed their academic education. Quitting and failure were never considered an option since it would confirm the stereotypes about Africans. Dick described the desire to debunk negative stereotypes about Africans as his biggest motivation and coping strategy.

> *Sometimes, when I receive these negative comments, I just say to myself focus, focus doesn't let these people get into your way. Hard work and positive thinking do all the magic.*

Furthermore, creating networks with other African students serves as a mechanism to strengthen the resilience of the participants. Participants have highlighted that social media is a powerful medium to create networks of Africans where students interact with each other and provide academic and social support to each other. African students rely more on families and friends for social and economic support. Participants highlighted the crucial role played by families back home in giving them moral and financial support. The availability of the internet facilitates constant communication between students and their families through Skype and WhatsApp video calls. Scheduling calls with family and friends back home is a daily routine used to decongest the minds of these students.

For women and girls from Africa, they rely more on men and boys to provide them with security and company each time they want to go to places they feel insecure. Kiri explained that she always goes out with a friend who she calls a brother, this deters other men from harassing her and pestering for sex.

He is like my guarding Angel, after our Sunday service we usually stroll around together, otherwise if he was not there, I wouldn't do it.

When asked to share how they cope up with the academic challenges, participants highlighted hardworking, good time management and organization skills as strategies to cope up with school pressure. Others emphasized on preparing for the lectures and tutorials in advance through reading course materials as useful strategies. Tino employs innovative strategies such as recording lectures to listen later and using google translator to manage language and academic difficulties.

Each time I attend a lecture I have my phone in hand to record the lecture so that I can listen afterward.

However, other professors are not comfortable with being recorded by a student which has resulted in one participant getting in trouble with a professor. The participants devised a variety of coping strategies to overcome language barriers. These include participating in different non-educational campus activities join academic discussions, befriend Turkish students, initiating conversations with Turkish students, use google translator and dictionaries. Carol proudly described her strategies in coping up with language difficulties.

Sometimes I see a stranger and just try to say hello and smile. I go to shops for window shopping and just ask for prices as a practice measure…. I read newspapers, listen to the radio, follow Turkish music and watch their television so that I can improve my language.

Although the participants were not anticipating the kind of challenges they have faced while in Turkey, surprisingly most have developed impressive coping strategies. Coping strategies employed by international students from Africa in Turkey point to the resilient nature of the students and their ability to develop agency and took control of their lives.

4. DISCUSSION, RECCOMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the experiences of the participants, this section discusses how the intersection of the participants' identities creates a unique identity that expose them to multiple challenges and vulnerabilities. The current study aimed at exploring the everyday experiences of SSA international postgraduate students studying in Turkish higher education institutions. The findings revealed that participants faced social isolation, are stereotyped, face

discrimination and encounter psychological, sociocultural and academic challenges. However, all the participants have developed several coping strategies and are optimistic about their future education journey in Turkey. The findings of this study are supported by previous studies conducted elsewhere that show that minority students face a host of challenges due to the intersection of their multiple identities (Mwangi et al., 2019; Poteet & Gomez, 2015; Sparks, 2019). The findings from this study bring into the forefront the need for faculty members and students to be culturally sensitive to the needs of people from different cultural environments. This will aid in the internationalization efforts of higher education in Turkey and transform higher education institutions to centers for multicultural exchange.

Participants felt stereotyped, discriminated, stressed, frustrated, anxious and socially isolated during their stay in Turkey. Their unique disadvantage may be explained by the intersection of race, ethnicity/nationality, religion, migrant status and gender. Similarly, previous studies have also shown that international minority students usually experience social isolation, discrimination and other forms of prejudice in their host countries (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Mwangi et al., 2019; Nazir, 2019; Okusolubo, 2018; Redžepagić-Bulić, 2015; Sparks, 2019; Titrek et al., 2016b). International students from Africa felt isolated since they had moved from communities with people like them to a country where they become the minority. Participants were confused about why professors and other students treated them in such a way and questioned their identity. However, intersectionality theory explains the experiences African students encounter, are due to their multiple identities (race, nationality, religion, gender, international student) and the perpetual systems of prejudices found in society (Crenshaw, 1991; Núñez, 2014).

Discrimination is related to cultural differences and negative stereotypes about the identity of Africans. University professors and fellow students perceived African students through negative stereotypes about their culture, language, personality, and behaviors. Furthermore, these stereotypes are reinforced by the western media representation of Africa as a land of poverty, famine, diseases, and war (Awokoya, 2012; Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). Unlike students from other region, Africans have a unique identity that result from the intersection of several factors, that expose them to negative stereotypes. Only one side of Africa and the bad one is constantly portrayed to the world which constructs negative subjectivities about people from the continent. A common belief in Turkey is that racism does not exist since the country does not have a history of racial discrimination and colonization. However, findings from this study clearly show that students from Africa experience personal and institutional

discrimination while living in Turkey. It is worth noting that through intersectional analysis being a black African added an extra layer of disadvantage that might expose a person to stereotypes and prejudices that might result in discrimination. In Turkey clearly, the treatment given to black students from Africa is different from the one given to African American students. In this case intersectional theory provided a platform to uncover the hidden experiences of African students so that we can address the challenges and facilitate their integration and reduce the feelings of isolation and create a sense of belonging (Flateland, Pryce-Miller, Skisland, Tønsberg, & Söderhamn, 2019).

Participants reported a variety of academic challenges mainly as a result of language barriers, negative attitude of professors, unfamiliarity with the education system and lack of support mechanisms on and off-campus. Findings conducted among international students in Turkey also found out that students encountered academic and language challenges (Nazir, 2019; Redžepagić-Bulić, 2015; Snoubar, 2017; Titrek et al., 2016; Yükselir, 2018). However, the factors influencing African students' experiences seem to be different from other students due to the intersection of their multiple identities. International students from Africa described feeling ignored in language schools and classrooms since faculty members seem to concentrate on other international students who are proficient in Turkish. Furthermore, the negative attitude of professors towards African students were also shaped by prejudices they have concerning Africans. Subjective judgments and prejudices are known to affect how faculty members interact and evaluate the performance of their students (Mwangi et al., 2019). As a result, African students are forced to work extra hard to prove themselves, which affects their overall psychological state of mind.

The study found out that the university environment lacks support mechanisms for international students from different backgrounds despite the internationalization efforts in the Turkish educational system. Universities lack mechanisms to support African students with continuous Turkish language development, culturally sensitive services, translation services, and counseling services among other services. Conclusions reached by Robinson (2013) and Gildersleeve et al., (2011) showed that in the US, predominantly white colleges lack resources and services to integrate African American students (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Robinson, 2013).

Participants do not appear to internalize the negative stereotypes and comments they encounter in their everyday experiences. Instead, they developed their agency by adopting a range of coping strategies to enable them to navigate the stressful life of being an international student in Turkey. The resilience of the students was developed on the fear of confirming the

negative stereotypes though failing to succeed in their academic work. Coping strategies adopted by the students include working hard, adopting a positive mindset, creating social networks among African students, befriending Turkish students, engaging in language practice activities, constant communication from families, and relying on other African students especially men/boys. Similarly, previous studies have shown that international students use a range of social and institutional mechanisms to cope with the pressure of studying in a foreign country (Heng, 2018; Khawaja and Stallman, 2011; Park et al., 2017; Somniso et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2015). The coping mechanisms show the potential between local students and international students to create relationships that have the potential to make Turkish universities more diverse and international.

The findings of this study have implications for higher education in Turkey through making educational institutions more diverse and inclusive in a systematic way that attracts more international students from different regions of the world. Through focusing on the experiences of SSA postgraduate students, the present study manages to expose nuanced experiences of this unique student population. The study recommends that diversity and inclusion should be key training components among university administrators and academic staff. This will promote inclusiveness and equip faculty members with cultural competencies to interact with students from different backgrounds without having some preconceived biases. Training will also empower university counselling services to respond to the psychosocial needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Support systems should be established in universities through engaging a diversity officer who will be dedicated to responding to the needs of diverse students. Additionally, universities in Turkey especially government universities should consider recruiting faculty with international experience who are aware of other cultures and can interact with people from different backgrounds. The government should work closely with international students' offices in universities in its internationalization efforts to ensure that the priorities of the government are aligned with those of universities. Close cooperation between stakeholders in the education sector will ensure that students are provided with the necessary support they need before, during and after enrolment in universities. Continuous Turkish language support services should be provided to students after the language preparatory year to enable students to have the necessary academic language skills. Furthermore, the internationalization efforts of universities should also target Turkish students through raising awareness and education about the diversity and richness of other regions beyond the western world.

This research explored the experiences of international students from African studying in Turkey. Generally, African students face a range of sociocultural, academic and personal challenges. The students have a sense of feeling isolated and discriminated against within academic and social settings. However, the students have developed various coping strategies in response to the challenges they encounter. Working hard, a positive mindset, and social networks are some of the strategies used by African students to become more resilient. Because the lives of these students are centred around their academic institutions, universities should focus on the challenges faced by students encounter and provide more adequate support.

The results of this study should be interpreted carefully because they consist only of the experiences of a specific group of students, particularly postgraduate students from Africa studying in universities in Istanbul. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized beyond this group. Future quantitative studies may disaggregate international students according to gender, study level, self-funding or scholarship students, refugee or asylum-seeking students and explore their experiences, motivations and plans.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that they have no conflict of interests.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Türkiye'nin jeopolitik konumu ve çok kültürlü doğası, giderek artan sayıda uluslararası öğrencinin dikkatini çekmektedir. Son on yılda Türkiye, birçok Sahra Altı Afrikalı öğrenciye ev sahipliği yapmıştır. Türk üniversitelerindeki Afrikalı öğrenci sayısındaki artış, mevcut

uluslararasılaşma çabalarının ve Türkiye'nin bölgedeki artan etkisinin bir parçasıdır. Uluslararası öğrenciler sınıflara yeni ve farklı bakış açıları ekler ve dünyadaki farklılıklar için karşılıklı anlayışı artırarak diğer kültürlere yönelik farkındalığı ve verilen değeri pekiştirir. Bu nedenle, Türk üniversitelerinin bilgi, beceri ve akademik prestijine olumlu katkıda bulunmaları açısından uluslararası öğrencilere kucak açmak önemlidir.

Afrika'dan gelen uluslararası öğrenciler; ırk, milliyet ve cinsiyet kavramları bakımından dünyanın diğer bölgelerinden gelen öğrencilere kıyasla farklı akademik ve yaşam deneyimlerine sahiptirler. Dahası, Afrikalı öğrencilerin emsalsiz deneyimleri; Afrika'nın medyadaki klişeleşmiş açlık, aşırı yoksulluk, doğal afetler ve silahlı çatışmaların kıtası olarak temsili ile şekillenmektedir. Afrika'nın bu tür basmakalıp temsilleri, Afrikalı öğrencilerin yeni akademik çevrelere uyum sağlamalarını zorlaştırırken, Afrikalı uluslararası öğrencilere yönelik kamusal algıları ve tutumları şekillendirmektedir. Afrika'dan gelen uluslararası öğrencilerin karşılaştığı zorluklar; yeni kültür, dil ve akademik çevreye uyum sağlama baskısının bir sonucu olarak ciddi ve benzersiz bir örnek teşkil etmektedir. Türkiye'nin uluslararası öğrenciler için bir merkez haline gelebilmesi ve üniversitelerin farklı temellerden gelen insanlara daha kapsayıcı ve hoşgörülü olma amaçlarına ulaşabilmeleri için azınlık gruplarının deneyimleri araştırılmalıdır. Bu, genellikle yükseköğretim alanındaki politikaları belirleyenler ve yürütenler tarafından göz ardı edilen sorunların tanımlanmasına olanak tanımaktadır.

Kesişimsel bir yaklaşım kullanan bu nitel çalışmada, Türkiye'de Sahra Altı Afrika'dan gelen uluslararası öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları zorlukları ve bu zorluklarla baş etme stratejilerini araştırılmaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelerle İstanbul'da yaşayan lisansüstü Afrikalı 17 öğrenciden veri toplanmıştır. Katılımcılar kolaylıkla bulunabilen örnekleme ve kartopu tekniği ile seçilmiştir. Katılımcılar, on farklı ülkeden burslu ve burssuz öğrencilerden oluşmaktadır: Kenya, Uganda ve Gana'dan ikişer; Zimbabve ve Nijerya'dan üçer; Etiyopya, Kamerun, Somali, Fildişi Sahili ve Gambiya'dan birer öğrenci bulunmaktadır. Görüşmeler kaydedilip temize çekildikten sonra veriler tematik veri analizi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir.

Bulgular, Afrikalı uluslararası öğrencilerin Türkiye'de yaşarken ve okurken çeşitli zorluklarla karşılaştıklarını göstermektedir. Sosyal izolasyonla yüzleşen katılımcılar basmakalıp bir ayrımcılığa uğramakta; psikolojik, sosyo-kültürel ve akademik zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadırlar. Buna karşılık öğrenciler, bu zorluklarla başa çıkmak için çeşitli stratejiler geliştirmişlerdir. Afrikalı öğrencilerin zorluklarla başa çıkma stratejileri; çalışkan olmak,

olumlu bir zihniyet geliştirmek, yerel öğrencilerle arkadaş olmak, aileden destek almak ve diğer Afrikalı öğrencilerle sosyal ağlar kurmaktan oluşmaktadır.

Bu çalışma, Sahra Altı Afrika'dan gelen lisansüstü öğrencilerin tecrübelerine odaklanarak, bu eşsiz öğrenci nüfusunun incelikli deneyimlerini ortaya koymaktadır. Afrikalı öğrenciler, akademik ve sosyal ortamlarda ayrımcılığa uğrayarak yalıtılmış hissetmektedirler. Bu öğrencilerin yaşamları içinde bulundukları akademik kurum etrafında toplandığından, üniversiteler öğrencilerin karşılaştığı zorluklara odaklanmalı ve daha yeterli destek sağlamak adına çalışmalar yapmalıdırlar. Buna dayanarak, bu çalışmanın bulgularının Türkiye'deki yükseköğretime olumlu etkileri olacaktır. Çalışma; çeşitlilik ve katılım konularının üniversite yöneticileri, danışmanlar ve diğer akademik personeller için temel eğitim bileşenleri olması gerektiğini önermektedir. Hükümetin önceliklerinin üniversitelerin öncelikleriyle uyumlu olmasını sağlamak için uluslararasılaşma çabalarında üniversitelerin uluslararası öğrenci ofisleriyle yakın işbirliği içinde çalışması gerekmektedir. Ayrıca, üniversitelerin uluslararasılaşma çabaları Türk öğrencileri de kapsayarak Batı dünyası dışındaki diğer bölgelerin çeşitliliği ve zenginliği konusunda farkındalık yaratmayı da hedef almalıdır. Azınlık öğrencilerinin karşılaştığı zorlukları ele almak; yükseköğretim kurumlarını, dünyanın farklı bölgelerinden daha fazla uluslararası öğrenciyi Türkiye'ye sistematik bir şekilde çeken daha çeşitli ve kapsayıcı bir yapıya dönüştürecektir.