Acculturation of Syrian Refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands

From a Psychological Perspective

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The whole world woke up to the crisis of Syrian refugees after seeing the heart-breaking photo of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi lying face down on a beach in the Aegean Sea in Turkey. The photo was a tangible proof of the overwhelming consequences of the crisis, which many economically well-developed countries had largely overlooked. Given the heavy socio-economic repercussions for the host countries, the political weight of the problem has undermined the humanitarian aspect. Echoing the words of a Syrian refugee, the main reason for forced migration is the instinct for survival: “Leaving one’s home is never the easiest option but I didn’t want to die and I didn’t want to kill.” Another Syrian refugee compares the Syrian civil war to “a bomb Assad placed in the middle of each home that hurled all family members outside of Syria and landed in different places.” These narrations of forced migration reflect refugees’ social psychological processes in the premigration period, their lack of choice and control over their lives in the times of war and challenges that accompany forced migration such as loss of home, family and community.

Forced migration creates immediate and long-term effects for a large number of people around the world and requires close academic attention. Based on the most recent figures from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2019a), an unprecedented 70.8 million people worldwide have been forced from their homes with 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers, over half of whom are children under the age of 18. The Syrian civil war that erupted in 2011 gave rise to the highest number of refugees in the world. Syrian people make up the largest percentage of forced migrants worldwide, with over 6.7 million refugees and 6.6 internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2019a). The vast majority of refugees have been living in middle- and low-income countries since 2011. Turkey has the world’s largest refugee population with over 3.7 million Syrian refugees while Lebanon hosts over 1 million Syrian people, the with highest refugee density of 1 in every 5 people being a refugee (UNHCR, 2019b).

In their various host countries, refugees/immigrants have to cope with the difficulties of settling in a new country, such as learning a new language (Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Beiser & Hou, 2001), finding a new job (Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Beiser & Hou, 2001) and a new place of
residence (Van Liempt & Miellet, 2020). They also encounter negative perceptions by the host nations, rooted in feelings of threat (both perceived and real) (Badea et al., 2018; González et al., 2008; Mahfud et al., 2015; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), and deal with concomitant stigmatization (Jasinska-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola et al., 2006; Noh et al., 1999; Verkuyten & Nekuee, 1999), linguistic, religious and cultural discrimination (Çelebi et al., 2017; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008; Pascoe & Richman, 2009), maintaining a coherent social identity (Güngör, 2020) and bear the generalized psychological weight of the acculturative process (Çelebi et al., 2017).

The acculturation process of Syrian refugees deserves scholarly attention for practical and theoretical reasons. Syrian refugees are distinct from any other refugee groups in several ways, a critical difference is the size of their population. Their numbers seem to play a significant role in many aspects of their acculturation from reception as asylum seekers/refugees to the host nationals’ perception and attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Refugees are approached with much negativity all over the world by the receiving countries, politicians, mainstream, public opinion and the media, who may describe refugees as numbers, statistics, and “undocumented intruders” leading to their dehumanization. Dehumanization is the tendency to deprive people of their status as humans and to assign them an identity lacking on value (Rodríguez-Perez, 2007). Research indicates that dehumanization of refugees is reflected in the use of dehumanizing language that highlights frequency order, quantification, out-of-control phenomenon, objectification, threat and economic burden (Alcaraz-Marmol & Soto-Almela, 2020). Even scientific and popular articles on refugees may use analogies to disasters such as overflow, flood, tide, tsunami in reference to refugees’ high numbers, as a means of dehumanizing refugees. Utych (2017) provides empirical evidence that the language that portrays refugees as less human, void of feelings and human uniqueness is significant in that it leads to strong and negative cognitive and emotional responses (that of fear, anger and disgust) and negative attitudes towards the dehumanized groups. The feelings towards Syrian refugees may even be more negative in comparison to other refugee groups within the same host country, leading to increased unfavorable attitudes particularly towards Syrian refugees (Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). Dehumanization of refugees is wielded as an excuse for the society’s ineffectiveness, and to defend the status quo and maintain the power and privileges of the dominant groups (Esses et al., 2008).

Perceived rejection has consequences for both minority and host groups. A sense of rejection from the host communities, whether it is physical or social; real or perceived, creates
significant psychological costs for minority groups (Berry, 1997; Branscombe et al., 1999; Haase et al., 2019). Refugees’ reactions to the sense of rejection reflect negatively back to the host society in several ways (i.e. disidentification from core values and basic norms of the host country, reacting against the mainstream and assuming an oppositional identity) stimulating social conflict and increasing the need for social control imposing social and psychological costs on the receiving societies (Berry, 2005; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009; Phinney et al., 2006; Verkuylten & Yıldız, 2007). Moreover, such nature of the intergroup interaction not only has a substantial impact on the demography, social structure, economics, and politics of the host nations and the psychology of individuals in the contemporary times but it also continues to affect the future of the second- and third-generation descendants of Syrian refugees. Based on the far-reaching impacts of the ongoing Syrian civil war and refugees worldwide, it is of great significance to investigate their unique reception contexts, strategies adopted by the host nationals and immigrant groups, the nature of problems, and the potential causes of social conflict, in order to reduce the social and psychological costs, and increase the chances of social cohesion for future generations living in plural societies.

It is also significant to draw academic attention on Syrian refugees for theoretical reasons because the properties of the Syrian diaspora lend themselves to a useful research design, which may disentangle factors associated with the receiving contexts when welcoming a similar group. Syrian refugees are unlike other refugee groups who had a clear asylum route. Syrian refugees created a global migratory movement. They sought refuge mostly in their neighboring countries, which were relatively new to receiving immigrants, but also in the West, the United States and Canada, where research on acculturation has predominantly been conducted (Berry, 2005). Not only acculturation research but also other sub-disciplines of psychological research, focuses exclusively on a Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) nations (Muthukrishna et al., 2020), shared by only a small percentage of the world’s population, creating a major issue of generalizability of the research findings to all humans and across contexts (Arnett, 2008; Thalmayer et al., 2021). Thus, investigation of Syrian refugees’ settlement in different/non-traditional/less-WEIRD contexts will introduce an international/ global perspective, capture the variations across refugee populations in different contexts (Henrich et al., 2010) and expand the growing literature on refugees and the social psychological research.

The significance of this project can be attributed to (1) its focus on acculturation due to forced migration, (2) simultaneous exploration of different host contexts and (3) investigation from a social psychological perspective. Literature on acculturation of forced migrants varies
by research tradition, is complex, and often inconsistent (Allen et al., 2006). Researchers studying acculturation of refugees apply prominent theories of acculturation developed through research on immigrants. Thus, there is a growing need for studies based on refugee groups to understand how acculturation impacts forced migrants (Mengistu & Manolova, 2019), to acknowledge the important ways in which acculturation experiences of refugees may differ from those of voluntary immigrants (see Barlett et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2010), and to develop new approaches towards acculturation that can be integrated into the existing acculturation models in order to increase the applicability of research to diverse groups of individuals. Another novel aspect of this project is its simultaneous exploration of different migration contexts as most research is concerned with specific and WEIRD contexts of acculturation (Berry, 2005; Muthukrishna et al., 2020). Finally, this research finds it significant to study acculturation of Syrian refugees from a psychological and cross-cultural perspective, as refugee migration is mostly researched from a political and economic standpoint, in order to contribute to social and psychological well-being of communities, future generations and the development of well-integrated societies.

The following questions triggered my interest in the acculturation of Syrian refugees: What are the similarities and differences between the acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands? To be more precise, I wondered about Syrian refugees’ reasons for migration, main difficulties and main sources of support, their attitudes towards the mainstream, participation in the dominant culture and finally their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in Turkey and the Netherlands. The following overarching research questions have guided this qualitative investigation:

1. What are the most common themes and issues emerging in the acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands?
2. What are the most significant acculturation conditions surrounding Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands?
3. What are the acculturation orientations sought by Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands?
4. What are the psychological and socio-cultural outcomes for Syrian refugees’ acculturation in Turkey and the Netherlands?

As seen in the last couple of decades, acculturation research is booming with many numbers of articles appearing in international journals each year (Rudmin et al. 2017), with 18,300 publications from 1991-2000 to 45,900 publications between 2001-2010 (Sam & Ward, 2021). However, in spite of the quantity, some researchers criticize acculturation
research based on the use of quantitative approaches (Rudmin, 2009; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010), where they challenge the validity of itemized questions about cultural components and traits, selected and imposed by researchers, the answers to which are quantified and analyzed in aggregated samples (Rudmin et al. 2017). Qualitative methods display their main strength in exploration of complex human experiences and novel information about various cultural characteristics of ethnic groups that are not well researched (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Based on the strengths and limitations of both methods, a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative and qualitative data into a single investigation can be an ideal technique to assess complex interventions. However, based on the lack of a cross-culturally valid acculturation measure as well as context-specific measures in both migration countries and the absence of a theory that guides the choice on a quantified instrument that is designed to measure acculturation, a qualitative design based on inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) and content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) was applied in this project. The use of qualitative approach allows a deeper insight into the complexity of the acculturation process of Syrian refugees, and helps to generate specific hypotheses as well as quantified instruments, which may be used to conduct future research based on mixed-methods design, in order to augment and generalize the outcomes of this qualitative project.

This dissertation is constructed with the implementation of three separate studies designed to respond extensively to the overarching research questions. A qualitative study design based on inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) and content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) was adopted for three studies in order to allow flexibility for a broader exploration of the multifaceted nature of acculturation, and to ground the findings on the real-life experiences of refugees. Each research was based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 Syrian refugees with a total of 45 refugees in three studies. The first study was conducted in Turkey with 15 participants who were chosen from Syrian refugees pursuing higher education in the city of Izmir. The second study was carried out with 15 participants who were recruited from the general adult population in Istanbul, Kocaeli and Sakarya; three cities in the Marmara region of Turkey. The final study was conducted based on 15 Syrian refugees settled in the major cities around the Netherlands including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Arnhem, Breda, Tilburg, and Eindhoven.

Based on my research findings, the exceptionally high population of Syrians and the uncertainties regarding their duration of stay and legal status in Turkey seem to have accentuated the existing social, cultural, ideological, political and economic challenges in
Turkey, as also indicated in Saracoglu and Belanger (2019). On the other hand, cultural, religious similarity and social support especially at the beginning of the migration appear to have contributed positively to Syrians’ acculturation process. For Syrians in the Netherlands, three main obstacles to a successful acculturation process emerge: (1) inhumane conditions of the journey refugees endured to migrate to Europe, (2) the waiting period to achieve the refugee status in the Netherlands, and (3) experiences of prejudice and discrimination due to cultural and religious differences to the host society. On a positive note, receiving accommodation, financial support, language support and other forms of governmental support upon receiving the refugee status are reported to facilitate their long-term adaptation in the Netherlands. Religion emerges as a significant theme that seems to influence the attitude of the dominant groups towards Syrian refugees, perceived discrimination, psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in both countries.

1.2. Theoretical background

Theories of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1980; 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997), boundary formation (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2002) and social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel et al., 1971) were applied in the implementation of all three studies on Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands. They are all prominent theories used in cross-cultural psychology and social psychology to provide a comprehensive explanation of intergroup contact and intercultural change. These theories informed the formulation and the content of the interview questions, and provided a comprehensive layout to understand the experiences of Syrian refugees by drawing connections between refugees’ conditions, needs and challenges, their ways of relating to the new society; their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in Turkey and the Netherlands. Building on SIT, rejection-identification model (RIM) (Branscombe et al., 1999) and rejection-disidentification model (RDIM) (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009) have been applied to the third study on Syrian refugees in the Netherlands to explain the refugees’ response to a climate of prejudice and discrimination. Derived from SIT, the common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) has been used as a basis to describe the intergroup dynamics and political interventions to reduce intergroup bias with regards to Syrian refugees in Turkey, specifically in the second study. As religion emerged as an important variable in the acculturation of Syrian refugees in both Turkey and the Netherlands, an extensive theoretical background on religion is also provided in the following sections.
1.2.1. Acculturation

1.2.1.1. A brief history on acculturation

The first use of the term ‘acculturation’ dates back to John Wesley Powell’s book *Study of Indian Languages* in 1880. Thomas and Znaniecki’s *Peasants in Europe and America* (1918) marks the start of empirical research on acculturation (Rudmin et al., 2015). The original conception of acculturation had ethnocentric underpinnings as it was viewed as a unidimensional process through which groups of primitive/inferior/lower people assimilate to the culture of advanced/superior/higher societies (Rudmin et al., 2015). Gordon (1964) proposed a unidimensional model, which assumed that change in cultural orientation takes place along a single continuum whereby some aspects of the heritage culture are lost as aspects of the host culture are adopted. Acculturation was later redefined by Redfield et al. (1936, p. 149) as a two-way process challenging the primitive vs. advanced dichotomy and the unidimensional model: “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when *groups of individuals* having different cultures come into *continuous first-hand contact*, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of *either or both* groups.” Later definitions of acculturation made a distinction between acculturation as a group-level phenomenon, and psychological acculturation that occur at the individual level as the result of cultural contact (Graves, 1967). Berry proposed a bidimensional acculturation model, which postulates that acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. Most recent conceptualizations of acculturation expand the classical definition of acculturation beyond the required *continuous first-hand contact* as they consider cultural references of belonging as being fluid, multiple and remote (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2015). Contemporary research builds on tridimensional conceptualization of acculturation and multidimensional models, according to which people have more avenues of contact and can endorse more than two acculturation orientations towards multiple host communities rather than one single dominant host culture (Ferguson et al., 2012; Ferguson et al., 2014).

1.2.1.2. Bidimensional acculturation model and the acculturation framework

Berry’s psychological bidimensional model of acculturation remains to be one of the most comprehensive and widely recognized models of immigrant acculturation (Kıylıoğlu, & Wimmer, 2015). According to the bidimensional model, cultural maintenance and cultural adoption are cast as independent orthogonal dimensions as opposed to extreme points of a single bipolar continuum. The two dimensions are viewed as independent; an increase in
adaptation does not require a decrease in cultural maintenance. These dimensions intersect to create four prototypical acculturation orientations: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, as demonstrated in Figure 1.1 (from Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006a, p.32).

**Figure 1.1**

*Berry’s Bidimensional Acculturation Model*

Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) proposed an acculturation framework that distinguishes three main categories as shown in Figure 1.2 (from Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006b, p.143): (1) acculturation conditions (also known as antecedent factors), (2) acculturation orientations (also known as acculturation strategies, intervening conditions) and (3) acculturation outcomes (also known as consequences, outcome variables) (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011). The acculturation conditions explain the contextual variables and the setting, which serve as the background of the acculturation process. More specifically, they refer to the characteristics of the receiving country, the country of origin, the host population and immigrants as well as their socio-economic resources, and languages, among others. Acculturation orientations are ways of coping with intercultural contact (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006b) and involve the extent to which individuals or groups prefer to relate to the dominant culture and/or maintain their original culture (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011). Acculturation outcomes represent the final component of the acculturation process and refer to the consequences of acculturation (Te Lindert et al., 2008), which are categorized into
psychological, socio-cultural outcomes (Searle & Ward, 1990) and economic adaptation (Aycan & Berry, 1996).

Psychological outcomes refer to individuals’ internal adaptation, including a clear sense of personal and cultural identity, good mental health, psychological and physical well-being, and achievement of personal and life satisfaction. Socio-cultural outcomes denote external adaptation, which explains individuals’ progress in full participation in host society, acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviors and skills to successfully carry out everyday situations (Searle & Ward, 1990). Language proficiency, level of social contact in the host society, ability to deal with regulations and daily problems in work, school and family life are considered indicators of socio-cultural adaptation (Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008; Te Lindert et al., 2008). According to Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2006b), socio-cultural adaptation involves not only the level of competence in the mainstream culture, but also in the ethnic culture in terms of individuals’ interaction with co-nationals, maintenance of skills and behaviors related to their heritage culture, as shown in Figure 1.2. Economic adaptation has been introduced by Aycan and Berry (1996) as the third adaptive outcome, which refers to the degree to which immigrants are integrated in the economic life in a way that is satisfying and effective for the individuals.

Figure 1.2

Framework of Acculturation
Individuals and immigrant or minority groups differ in how they prefer to engage in the acculturation process (Berry, 2005). The integration orientation reflects immigrants’ preference for maintaining the heritage culture while adopting the key aspects of the host culture. Assimilation occurs when immigrants reject their culture of origin while adopting the mainstream culture, instead. In separation, immigrants maintain the culture of origin while rejecting the host culture. Marginalization signifies the rejection of both the heritage and the host culture (Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) explains that people rarely choose marginalization, but rather they usually become marginalized as a result of attempts at forced assimilation combined with forced exclusion. It is maintained in the literature that acculturation orientations may vary across individuals’ life domains and contexts; the condition is termed as “domain-specificity” (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003). For instance, a migrant may prefer assimilation at work (economic assimilation), speak the languages of the country of heritage and settlement in the public domain (linguistic integration), and seek separation in the private domain (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006b). Public domain refers to the context that requires interaction with the host community such as work and school environment. Private domain includes the family, marriage, child-rearing values, cultural habits, and the primary community; and promotes a context for cultural maintenance for the minority groups without necessarily adopting the host culture.

From the perspective of the dominant groups and receiving countries, the acculturation strategies of immigrant groups can be influenced by migration policies and national programs into four corresponding approaches, as shown in Figure 1.3 (from Berry, 2006, p. 705). Some countries are assimilationist, likely to eliminate diversity, and enforce cultural change expecting all migrant groups to identify with the mainstream culture. Melting pot is the term used for assimilation when sought by the mainstream groups. Some countries pursue segregationist policies enforcing cultural exclusion while some seek to marginalize migrant groups (Berry, 1997). Others endorse multiculturalism as a state ideology supporting the continuation of cultural diversity as a resource, which involves the acceptance by both groups to live as culturally different people. Countries vary in terms of accommodation, opportunities of equal rights and full participation in the society they have available for immigrants (Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018), which have implications for immigrants’ acculturation. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) maps this variation and provides scores for countries on integration policies based on a 100-point scale by looking at 8 policy areas: family reunion, long-term residence, labor market mobility, anti-discrimination, education, political participation, health and access to nationality. For instance, according to MIPEX (2020),
Turkey received a low score of 25 corresponding to slightly unfavorable conditions while the Netherlands received a much higher score of 60 indicating slightly favorable conditions. In 2021, Turkey’s score increased to 43 as the reflection of major legislative reforms on immigration indicating halfway favorable integration conditions (MIPEX, 2021a).

**Figure 1.3**

*Acculturation Orientations Sought by Dominant Groups*

1.2.1.3. **Criticisms of Berry’s acculturation model**

While gaining increased recognition in social science, Berry’s acculturation model has widely been critiqued. Some criticisms are concerned with its use of acculturation orientations and their proposed health outcomes (Rudmin et al., 2017), being too simplistic as presenting homogenous cultures and groups, not explaining the complexity of human dynamics (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008) and interactions with context (Bhatia & Ram, 2009).

According to Berry’s acculturation model, integration is associated with the most favorable psychosocial outcomes, highest levels of adaptation and lowest levels of acculturative stress because immigrants are able to combine the key aspects of both cultures (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). Rudmin et al. (2017) criticize studies that favor the integration strategy (also referred as biculturalism; Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005) as being the most favorable acculturation orientation with the most psychological health benefits although they have empirical evidence against biculturalism. Rudmin et al. (2017) emphasize the difficulties or sometimes the impossibility of achieving a balanced biculturalism as
practices of one culture may preclude practices of the other culture. They draw attention to ideological bias and confirmation bias shared by the vast majority of contemporary acculturation scholars as the reasons for the distortion of research findings and the deliberate exclusion of research from meta-analysis, which finds evidence that contradicts researchers’ expectation that integration strategy is the best solution for minority groups. Additionally, Bourhis et al. (1997) seem to argue against Berry’s (1997) finding that integration predicts highest levels of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation compared to other acculturation strategies. They defend that integration strategy when combined with the states’ pluralism/multiculturalism ideology provides a more positive migration context in North America where Berry did most of his research because multiculturalist countries are prepared to adapt national institutions to accommodate the needs of the migrant groups and are more likely to provide social and institutional support (Berry, 2005). In other words, immigrants’ choice of an integration strategy in a country that endorses an ethnist ideology (according to which immigrants are expected to reject their own heritage identity and adopt the values of the host culture) may not lead to the same favorable outcomes as observed in multiculturalist countries. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that different strategies other than integration can also produce favorable relational outcomes in different contexts that endorse ideologies besides pluralism/multiculturalism.

Berry’s acculturation model has also been questioned on the validity of marginalization as an acculturation strategy because developing a cultural sense of self without drawing on either culture seems unlikely (Schwartz et al., 2010). Indeed, empirical studies have indeed found small or nonexistent marginalization groups (i.e., Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). In Berry’s model, marginalization is proposed as an acculturation orientation, but in practice, it seems to be an undesirable acculturation outcome (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006b). Berry has also been criticized based on the outcomes associated with marginalization. In contrast with integration, marginalization is associated with the least favorable psychosocial outcomes, lowest levels of adaptation and the highest level of acculturative stress because there is a limited supportive network due to little involvement in either culture (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). In an attempt to refine the understanding of marginalization orientation, Bourhis et al. (1997) introduced another orientation termed individualism. They explained that although some immigrants experience cultural alienation as a result of marginalization, some immigrants willingly dissociate themselves from both their heritage culture and the host majority culture as they prefer to identify themselves as individuals and reject group ascriptions. In this case, not feeling a sense of belonging to any
culture is not a disadvantage and may not be related to the least favorable acculturation outcomes. It may even be an asset that gives the person a unique set of skills used to dealing with multicultural contexts (Adams & Van de Vijver, 2015).

Another criticism of Berry’s acculturation model is that it characterizes all migrants equally and examines migrants in isolation without taking into account their different circumstances such as migration types, country of settlement, and security of their residence in the host country and vitality of their ethnic group. The bidimensional model implies that individual differences in acculturation outcomes are the results of acculturation orientations, which are individuals’ specific choices of acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2010). The presentation of the acculturation orientations from the perspective of migrant groups is based on the assumption that acculturating individuals have the freedom to choose how they prefer to acculturate (Berry, 2005). Even Berry (2005) himself indicated that immigrants do not enjoy unlimited freedom in how they engage in intercultural relations; their agency may be compromised by several processes. It is often the case that although individuals can freely choose some aspects of their acculturation, their acculturation strategies are shaped by demographic or contextual factors, socio-political climate in the receiving societies, real and perceived prejudice and discrimination, intercultural hierarchy between the receiving and sending countries, coercive laws, exclusionary policies, and/or the acculturation strategies enforced by the dominant groups, which are beyond immigrants’ control (Bourhis et al., 1997; Mengistu & Manolova, 2019; Rudmin et al., 2017; Stephens, 2016). Hence, in the consideration of these limitations in Berry’s model of acculturation and in order to account for the contextual variables affecting acculturation, Bourhis et al.’s acculturation model is also used in this project.

1.2.1.4. Interactive acculturation model

Bourhis et al. (1997) developed an Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM), as shown in Figure 1.4 (from Bourhis et al., 1997, p. 371). IAM accounts for the impact of vast differences in receiving contexts, which were highlighted as the missing piece in Berry’s acculturation model. IAM is a social-psychological framework of acculturation orientations showing the dynamic relationships between the state policies, host members and immigrant groups regarding acculturation. It proposes a conceptual bridge between public policy, host majority and immigrant groups’ reactions to cultural diversity. Bourhis et al. (1997) defend that acculturation orientations of individuals do not emerge in a social or political vacuum but are influenced by integration state ideologies that shape state integration policies, which may
have a decisive impact on the acculturation orientations of both immigrants and members of
the host society. Bourhis et al. (1997) further propose that dominant host groups do influence
the acculturation strategies of immigrant groups through intergroup contact.

Figure 1.4

*Interactive Acculturation Model*

One of the elements on IAM is the continuum of four clusters of prototypical state
ideologies that shape the integration policies towards immigrants: pluralism-multiculturalism
ideology, civic ideology, assimilation ideology and ethnist ideology. All these ideologies
share a fundamental premise that the state expects that immigrants will adopt the *public*
values of the host society. The pluralism ideology distinguishes itself from other ideologies
based on the premises that cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of immigrants is of value and
that the state distributes funds to support both majority and immigrant groups’ ethnocultural activities. The civic ideology is similar to the pluralism ideology except for providing funds for the promotion of the private values of particular groups of individuals. Assimilation ideology expects immigrants to abandon their heritage culture and embrace the dominant culture. The state can interfere with some domains of private values of immigrant groups and can limit ethnocultural distinctiveness in public domains. Ethnist ideology is based on the premise that immigrants must reject their own heritage identity and adopt the values of the host culture. The state has the right to limit the expression of private values of immigrants. In some cases, the host majority does not intend to ever accept immigrants as rightful members of the host society so the state does not expect immigrants to assimilate.

In an attempt to show a more dynamic account of immigrant and host community acculturation, IAM integrates (1) acculturation orientations adopted by immigrant groups in the host community and (2) acculturation orientations adopted by the host community towards particular groups of immigrants, and predicts (3) interpersonal and intergroup relational outcomes that are the product of combinations of immigrant and host community acculturation orientations. According to Bourhis et al. (1997), immigrants can adopt one of five acculturation orientations: integration, assimilation, separation, anomie (cultural alienation) and individualism. The second element of the model consists of the acculturation orientations preferred by the members of the host society: integration, assimilation, segregation, exclusion and individualism. As indicated earlier, individualism is an orientation in which people define themselves as individuals rather than members of a group such as immigrants or host community members. Researchers explore these prototypes, namely, the acculturation orientations, more often to assess the underlying dimensions of cultural maintenance and adoption than to complete a profile analysis because sheer categorization into these prototypes may overlook the person variance.

Interaction of the acculturation orientations by the immigrant group and host community on the IAM demonstrate three different relational outcomes, as demonstrated on Figure 1.5 (from Bourhis et al., 1997, p. 382), which include patterns of intercultural communications, attitudes, stereotypes, acculturative stress and discrimination between immigrants and host community members. Consensual outcomes predict positive and effective cross-cultural communications. Problematic relational outcomes reflect partial agreement and partial disagreement between the immigrant and host community members’ acculturation orientations. Conflictual relational outcomes predict the most intergroup conflict such as stereotyping, discrimination, exclusion and so on.
1.2.1.5. Migration types and implications for acculturation

Along with the characteristics of the receiving contexts, the combination of political, economic and demographic conditions of immigrants’ society of origin should be considered in the studies of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003). The circumstances surrounding migration are significant in understanding immigrants’ migration motivations (Berry, 2005), which affect acculturation options available to immigrants (Schwarz et al., 2010). Some immigrants are motivated by pull factors that are the positive, facilitating and enabling aspects of the country of destination such as improved standards of living, as in the case of voluntary migrants or sojourners; whereas some migrants are motivated by push factors, which are the negative, constraining and exclusionary forces in their country of origin, as in the case of asylum seekers and refugees (Berry, 2005).
Berry (2006) described four types of migrants: voluntary migrants, sojourners, asylum seekers and refugees. Voluntary immigrants are those individuals who choose to leave their homelands as a result of employment or other economic opportunities, marriage, or for the purposes of family reunion. Sojourners migrate to a new setting only temporarily with a full intention to return to their country of origin after the completion of their specific purpose of migration (Schwartz et al., 2010). Asylum seekers and refugees are forced migrants. An asylum seeker is a person who has been forced to flee their country of origin due to the well-founded fear of persecution and crossed an international border in pursuit of a safe haven and whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed (Gürsoy & Ertaşoğlu, 2019; Lynch & Cunnighame, 2000). A refugee, according to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 1951), is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.1

Migration types can impact individuals’ acculturation process in various ways via changing receiving societies’ attitudes (Schwartz et al., 2010), limiting individuals’ choices, impacting their support systems; and psychological, social and economic resources (Aycan & Berry, 1996), to name a few. As described earlier by Bourhis et al.’s IAM (1997), the characteristics of the receiving context in terms of the combination of state integration policies and host community members’ acculturation orientation towards immigrant groups can differ depending on the characteristics of the migrant groups and significantly impact their acculturation experiences; resulting in positive, problematic or conflictual intergroup relations. Some migrants, such as voluntary migrants who work in high profile positions, are often perceived to contribute to the host countries and welcomed by the receiving countries; whereas asylum seekers, refugees and migrants from low-socioeconomic and educational backgrounds are viewed as burden on the receiving society and may be faced with hostility, rejection and discrimination (Schwartz et al., 2010). Exclusionary practices from the host society, such as prejudices, discrimination and exclusion from communities affect the immigrants’ ability to integrate into the host society (Phalet & Kosic, 2006). Individuals exposed to discrimination and in an unfavorable reception context are more likely to experience increased levels of acculturative stress such as uncertainty, anxiety and depression (Berry, 2006; Rudmin, 2009) and resist adopting the culture, values and practices of the host society (Branscombe et al., 1999; Jasinskaja-Lahté et al., 2009; Rumbaut, 2008). Furthermore,

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1 Media outlets rarely differentiate between refugees, migrants and immigrants.
compared to voluntary migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are more likely to have undergone traumatic events in their countries of origin, to come from low socio-economic backgrounds, and to have smaller support networks (of family and friends) available to them in the host countries (Akhtar, 1999; Steiner, 2009), which may negatively impact their ability to adapt in the new setting, and increases stress and difficulties associated with acculturation (Akhtar, 1999).

According to Berry (2005), acculturation and intergroup relations make up two distinct but interrelated domains of psychological research. Acculturation defines a change in the culture of groups and/or individuals belonging to cultural groups and thus is also a collective and group-level phenomenon. Therefore, in the investigation of acculturation of refugees, this dissertation considers the formation of social groups of people that come into intercultural contact in a plural society in addition to the formation of boundaries as critical determinants of intergroup relations. Research finds that dominant groups maintain conceptual boundaries as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in order to maintain their power and privileges (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Paasi, 2003). There can be no intergroup behavior in a social environment without social criteria or lines of division that categorize people into ‘us’ and ‘them’ or into ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ from the perspective of SIT (Tajfel et al., 1971). Thus, a detailed understanding of boundaries is essential to understanding of intergroup relations as they give rise to formation of social groups and social identities. Intergroup relations, formation of social groups, and boundary formation processes in receiving societies play a critical role in the acculturation experiences of migrant groups. Therefore, theories on boundary formation, group formation, and intergroup relations are discussed to convey an understanding of the acculturation conditions, acculturation orientations and acculturation outcomes.

1.2.2. Boundaries and boundary processes

With increased immigration across the globe (International Organization for Migration, 2020, pp.21), there is evidently more focus on boundaries and boundary processes (Paasi, 2003). Alba (2005) indicates that boundaries are conceptual tools imposed and maintained by dominant groups to differentiate themselves from minority groups in a way of creating social distance and preserving power and privileges. According to Barth (1969) and Alba (2005), boundaries are essential to group identification processes as they create and maintain social groups with respect to other groups by constructing social processes of exclusion and inclusion. Formation of a group necessitates a social categorization process based on criteria
of evaluation that will dichotomize ‘us’ and ‘them’, and differentiate who belongs with the group and who does not (Barth, 1969). In other words, social categorization implies being a certain kind of person and involves a claim to be judged or to judge oneself, by the standards relevant to the identity. Boundaries set the norms, impose certain set of standards and ideals that place constraints on the roles and identities individuals can or cannot assume in order to be accepted as part of the social group. Boundaries give expression to some forms of identity, privilege, distinctions while obstructing others (Paasi, 2003).

As a consequence of his investigation of second-generation minority groups in France, Germany, and the United States, Alba (2005) argues that boundary processes depend on the nature of boundary: bright or blurred. The nature of boundary denotes the social distance that separates groups and the processes through which individuals gain access to the privileges or reach parity with the mainstream. In other words, boundaries give rise to perceived cultural distance, which describes the size of psychologically relevant cultural differences between societies (Mathukrishna et al., 2020) and ethnic hierarchy, which refers to the relative position of ethnic groups in society that determine the preference for contact and social distance from ethnic out-groups (Hagendoorn, 1995). In the case of bright boundaries, social distinctions are salient and there is no ambiguity in terms of which side of the boundary individuals belong. When boundaries are blurred; the location of boundaries is ambiguous and social distinctions are less clear. Blurred boundaries allow individuals to maintain their cultural elements while assimilating into a new society. The nature of boundaries is determined by the context. Some boundaries can be bright in one country while blurred in another. Religion, language, race, ethnicity constitute examples for the domains in which boundaries are constructed. Religion, for instance, can be considered as a bright boundary for Muslims in Europe, creating a chasm between Muslim immigrants and the mainstream; while it is a blurred boundary for Mexicans in the US.

In the same vein, Verkuyten (2004) talks about the permeability of boundaries, which refers to the accessibilities provided to out-groups, and legitimacy of the ethnic hierarchy, which denotes the extent to which the status structure is accepted as legitimate. Socio-economic differences determining ethnic hierarchy between groups may be an example of a permeable boundary because individuals in the low-status groups can seek similar levels of socio-economic status with high-status groups in the ethnic hierarchy by attaining higher education and better work opportunities. However, cultural differences (collectivism vs. individualism) is a relatively impermeable boundary (Verkuyten et al., 1996) because it is harder to switch from a collectivistic to an individualistic lifestyle in an authentic manner,
without depriving oneself of collectivistic needs, in order to enjoy the rights and privileges of
the high-status groups. Perceptions regarding the nature of group boundaries impact
intergroup relations, individuals’ identification strategies with host and heritage culture
groups (social mobility, creativity and competition), and group evaluations such (positive and
negative stereotyping) (Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2006).

Alba (2005) describes three types of boundary processes: boundary crossing, boundary
blurring, and boundary shifting. Boundary crossing is the process in which a person simply
moves from one group to another without real change to the boundary itself, similar to
conversion. When the boundaries are bright, assimilation can occur in the form of boundary
crossing. Individuals are forced to leave one group for another, which incites accusations of
disloyalty in the group of origin and fear of exclusion in the subsequent group, which
discriminates. Boundary blurring implies that boundary becomes less distinct and social
distinctions are reduced. Boundary blurring can occur in a mainstream culture that allows for
cultural continuity. Therefore, individuals do not have to choose between the host and
heritage culture. Boundary shifting is the relocation of the boundary, which means that people
previously excluded from one side are now accepted onto the other side of the boundary.

Bail (2008) indicates that boundaries have both symbolic and social dimensions,
giving attention to their relative salience in the system. Despite being closely-related with one
another, symbolic boundaries are merely conceptual distinctions that separate the majority
from other groups, while social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences that
legitimately deter minority groups from having the privileges of the ethnic majority. Race, for
instance, is a highly contested symbolic boundary. Conversely, citizenship is a social
boundary that legitimately deters immigrants from enjoying the privileges of the mainstream.
In fact, deterring individuals from accessing resources based on race is against the law, while
discriminating against individuals based on citizenship is legally acceptable. In order to
differentiate between the symbolic and social aspects of boundaries, it is important to explore
the ways they are institutionalized and whether they are recognized within the legal system.

1.2.3. Group formation and intergroup relations

In the words of Sherif (1966): “Whenever individuals belonging to one group interact,
collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group
identification, we have an instance of intergroup behavior” (p.12). Based on Sherif’s
definition, an analysis of intergroup phenomena is not possible without understanding the
underlying concepts of group identity and group identification (Tajfel, 1982). Group identity
becomes significant in intergroup contexts ranging from the simplest ones like being a member in a football team to most significant such as being involved in war between ethnic groups (Spears, 2011). Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel in the mid 1970s, focuses on understanding group identity or social identity and group identification in order to explain the basis of intergroup relations. Despite a long history of research on group processes and intergroup relations, SIT has been most dominantly used and widely influential not only in the field of psychology but also in other disciplines such as political science.

SIT was the first to theorize a distinct form of identity and capture the psychological dimension of group identity, which has been neglected in other disciplines (Spears, 2011). Tajfel suggests that individuals derive their sense of self largely from the social groups to which they belong (Verkuyten, 2004). A social group is a collective of individuals who view themselves as members of the same category. A process of social identification is a way of attaching self to social groups, which both informs and limits the identities one can assume. A social identity is the product of a self-identification process, and can be defined as a person’s knowledge and self-categorization as a member of a social group in relation to other social classifications. People assume multiple social identities such as gender, ethnicity, religious affiliations, which can become activated, or salient in certain intergroup contexts, as being a more dominant way of perceiving self and others (Turner et al., 1987). The salience of identity is highly contingent on the social context and can shift as quickly as the context changes (Spears, 2011).

Formation of a social group is a culmination of psychological and social factors. SIT describes that cognitive processes form the psychological foundations of group formation because it requires a stage of identification or self-categorization (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Two components are recognized as necessary for self-identification in a group: a cognitive one such as the awareness of membership; and an evaluative one such as ascribing value connotations to the groups (Tajfel, 1982). That is, in addition to having a cognitive awareness of self as a member of a group, one ascribes value, emotional significance and meaning to that membership (Tajfel, 1978). These two components of self-identification are also referred to as internal criteria. Internal criteria are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the existence of a group. In order for a group to emerge, internal criteria have to be complemented by external criteria, which refer to an outside agreement that the group exists (Tajfel, 1982).

Not only do people define themselves as members of certain groups, they also classify others as belonging to several social categories. In-group is a social category with which one identifies strongly whereas an out-group is a social category with which one does not identify
Groups that differ on a particular categorization dimension (i.e. nationality, religion, and ethnicity) are out-groups (Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). Determining in-groups and out-groups and self-identification with one group entails social comparison between groups, which becomes a quest for assessing the meaning of and associating positive value to one’s own group identity (Spears, 2011). Individuals are motivated to categorize people into in-groups and out-groups as they naturally seek positive distinctiveness from others and self-enhancement based on favorable social comparison (Spears, 2011). A classification into in-groups and out-groups is functional for rendering a guide for social conduct by giving order, coherence, and meaning to social situations, and thus enabling the individual to behave in a way, which is sanctioned as ‘appropriate’ (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Intergroup bias leading to differential intergroup behavior occurs when individuals are categorized into in-groups or out-groups within a specific category dimension (Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). People tend to evaluate their in-group favorably, emphasize the perceived similarities with the in-group and stress the differences with the members of the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Intergroup bias is especially likely for higher in-group identifiers who view their group as an important reflection of themselves, and therefore are motivated to think and act in their group’s best interest (Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). A substantial body of research provides support to the theoretical reasoning that under conditions of perceived out-group threat, group members not only tend to engage in in-group favoritism but also have negative attitudes toward threatening out-groups (Ellemers et al., 2002; Hewstone et al., 2002; Tajfel et al., 1971).

SIT states that when minority groups are confronted with threat, out-group derogation and social distance, their in-group identity becomes salient (Branscombe et al., 1999). When a social identity becomes salient, the perception of self is ‘depersonalized’ in the sense that people tend to behave consistently with the value criteria of that identity as if the self is the embodiment of the social group as opposed to a unique person (Spears, 2011; Stets & Burke, 2000). People tend to cope with their low-status position and devalued social identity by attaching themselves strongly to their in-groups in order to draw collective support and establish a sense of belonging and self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Verkuyten (2004) supports the postulations of SIT that people derive their social identity from membership of social groups and they prefer their in-group to be socially recognized, accepted and valued. However, in a context in which one’s belonging in a social group is not valued relative to the membership in the other groups, the lack of positive distinctiveness represents identity threats. Thus, people become motivated to deploy a wide
range of identity management strategies, ranging from individualistic social mobility to collective strategies, in order to try to maintain a valued social identity. Verkuyten (2004) proposes that psychological (cognitive and motivational) processes behind the intergroup relations are dependent on the ideological and structural features of the social context and the interactive associations of the sociostructural variables. He adds that people adopt identification strategies based on the stability, legitimacy and permeability of intergroup relations (Verkuyten, 2004). Stability refers to the extent to which group positions are considered changeable, and legitimacy refers to the extent to which the status structure is accepted as legitimate. Permeability refers to the extent to which individual group members can leave one group and join another. Several studies find that perception of social mobility, stability, legitimacy and permeability among the low-status group members are associated with an individualistic strategy, which denotes increased identification with the high-status group, disidentification from the in-group and less positive in-group stereotypes (Boen & Vanbeselaere, 2000; Ellemers et al., 1988; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008).

Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008) show that people’s perceptions of these variables vary depending on their social position in the social structure (low-status vs. high-status groups), ethnic-group based ideology (assimilationist vs. multicultural ideology), and their personal characteristics. Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008) explain that the meaning and the consequences of stability, legitimacy and permeability are different for low-status groups from high-status groups. Permeability of the social boundaries may imply opportunity and social mobility for the minority groups while it may be perceived as a source of threat or social competition for the dominant groups. Legitimacy and stability can mean unequal status positions and the unchanging character of the dominant identity and culture for the dominant groups, in line with assimilationist perspective; while for minority groups, it may signify openness and equally in line with multicultural ideology. Multiculturalism challenges the perceived legitimacy of the dominant groups and can be threatening to the majority groups and their identity as it emphasizes the value of identity maintenance of ethnic minority groups. In contrast, assimilation provides intellectual and moral justification for the superior identity of the majority group (Verkuyten, 2004). Thus, it is likely that multiculturalism appeals more to ethnic minority groups than to majority group members who may in turn endorse assimilation more strongly (Verkuyten, 2004). It can also be argued that high levels of education, abilities and other socio-economic resources may result in greater permeability of group boundaries (Bobowick et al., 2017). People with high levels of socio-economic resources may perceive status positions to be more permeable and thus may choose more individualistic social
mobility strategies, while people with fewer socio-economic resources may opt for collective strategies and turn to their in-groups to preserve their well-being (Bobowick et al., 2017; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008).

Building on Verkeyten’s explanation (2004) on the impact of socio-structural factors on identification, Stephens (2016) also elaborates on the effect of another contextual factor: intercultural hierarchy. Intercultural hierarchies are formed through the real or perceived economic and/or political superiorities of the receiving nations. They can diversify the ways individuals relate to the host society (i.e., acculturation strategies) and shape their socio-cultural adaptations (acculturation outcomes) through identity management strategies. Immigrants experience a sense of threat to their original culture identity when they arrive in host context due to the inherent social-status hierarchy. They are automatically placed in the low-status/low-power position relative to the high-status/high-power position of host society because they are newcomers and a numerical minority. Other factors, such as the cultural and economic dominance that exists between heritage and host countries, socio-political and culturally hegemonic forces, perceptions of WEIRD superiority, may further reinforce the low-status position of ethnic groups beyond their numerical minority positions (Stephens, 2016). In order for immigrants to maintain positive distinctiveness, they apply various identity management strategies leading to variations in acculturation orientations.

In consideration of intercultural hierarchies, Stephens (2016) proposes a series of distinctions between the types of assimilation, integration and separation strategies, which capture the intensity of acculturative stress, the authenticity of the acculturation process, and the risk of long-term psychological maladjustment. Stephens (2016) makes a distinction between mechanical and opportunistic types of assimilation and integration. The mechanical approach refers to the relatively effortless embracement of the host culture, while preserving an authentic sense of self. This approach is likely when there are low levels of intercultural hierarchy, and cultural distance between heritage and host societies, increasing the chances of favorable reception and decreasing the probability of cognitive dissonance, levels of acculturative stress, and discriminatory attitudes. Even when there is a degree of cultural distance, immigrants’ personality factors such as low original culture salience, low needs for in-group affiliation may deem them a natural fit for the host countries’ individualistic environment and facilitate an authentic connection with the host culture.

In contrast, Stephens (2016) indicates that people’s perceptions of relatively large intercultural hierarchies, cultural distance, accompanied by significant cultural, economic and political status differentials between heritage and host countries, and expectation of
discriminatory attitudes may lead to the adoption of the opportunistic type of assimilation and integration orientations. The opportunistic approach describes individuals’ desire and motivation to be inducted into the perceived superior ranks of the native population (Stephens, 2016). Thus, the perceived high-status legitimacy of the host culture may lead to distancing from the heritage culture and in-group in an attempt to seek acceptance from the host society. The opportunistic type reflects an inauthentic connection with the host culture, higher levels of acculturative stress and unfavorable psychological outcomes.

Similarly, Stephens (2016) proposes a distinction between convenient and competitive separation. The former reflects the combination of contextual and personality factors that lead to the convenient maintenance of the heritage culture and detachment from the host society. Migrants may have high levels of group vitality that provides sufficient social and economic resources so that they do not have the incentives to participate in the host culture beyond minimal requirements for daily living. Competitive separation, however, involves disassociation from the receiving society in an attempt to contest its perceived superiority and high-status position that reinforces immigrants’ low-status position. Thereby, Stephens (2019) explains the ways in which intercultural hierarchies shape individuals’ identification and acculturation strategies, and proposes distinctions in acculturation orientations, which may lead to conflict-driven and psychologically stressful acculturation experiences.

Overall, SIT explores the formation of social groups and social identity as the basis for understanding intergroup behavior, differentiation and discrimination and, it helps to explain social change as the result of disadvantaged groups challenging the status quo (Spears, 2011). Branching out from SIT, RIM (Branscombe et al., 1999) and RDIM (Jasinskaja-Lahtī et al., 2009) concentrate on the psychology of the devalued groups to show the impact of these adverse outcomes on their well-being in addition to understanding their responses to and coping strategies with the negative consequences. Also inspired by SIT, the common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) is an integrative theoretical model that aims to deal with the alleviation of the unfavorable outcomes of intergroup relations such as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

1.2.4. The rejection-identification model and rejection-disidentification model

Perceived rejection from the host society in the form of pervasive prejudice, exclusion, social devaluation and perceived discrimination is a serious obstacle to minority groups’ mental health (Branscombe et al., 1999), a sense of national identity, and positive intergroup relations (Liebkind et al., 2012). Perceived discrimination, which represents systematic rejection and
exclusion by the dominant group, has a direct and strong impact on mental health and psychological wellbeing of minority groups (Branscombe et al., 1999), has been found to result in lowered self-esteem, lower levels of life satisfaction, delinquency, substance use, depression, and anxiety (Cozzarelli & Karafa, 1998; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Leary et al., 1995; Liebkind et al., 2006; Rivas-Drake et al., 2008; Seaton et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2003).

Confirming the predictions made by SIT, the RIM, proposed by Branscombe et al. (1999), and RDIM, developed by Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. (2009) explain two ways minority groups may cope with perceived rejection from dominant groups in the host society: (1) by increasing minority group identification and/or (2) by reducing national identification. Experimental research by Branscombe et al. (1999) has shown that perceiving oneself as a victim of prejudice increases identification with the threatened in-group so as to buffer negative consequences of discrimination, protect well-being and restore levels of self-esteem equivalent to that of dominant groups (Ramos et al., 2012). Similarly, the RDIM argues that perceived rejection from the host community increases disidentification from the national out-group (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). Experiences of unfair treatment such as any form of rejection or perceived discrimination discourage minority groups from identifying with the superordinate national group and create a tendency to disengage from it (Phinney et al., 2006). Such disidentification may also result in hostility toward the majority groups (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). All in all, the RIM and RDIM show that feelings of acceptance and inclusion by the host society largely affect the way minority groups communicate with host group members and identify with the host society (Branscombe et al., 1999; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009).

Existing evidence on RIM has provided inconsistent findings, whereas research testing RDIM is relatively scarce and also inconclusive (Bobowick et al., 2017). Bobowick et al. (2017) tested RIM and RDIM simultaneously among diverse migrant populations in different contexts. Their research provided evidence for in-group identification being conducive to higher well-being and psychological functioning among both voluntary and forced immigrants in the Netherlands and in Spain as a social cure to perceived discrimination from the wider society, as suggested by RIM. However, while the study demonstrated a positive relationship between perceived ethnic discrimination and in-group identification among refugees in the Netherlands, it also found a negative association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identification among all groups of voluntary immigrants in Spain, shedding light on the complexity in the relationship between social rejection and group identification. The complexity was attributed to the length of residence, migration types,
language, perceived cultural distance and different perceptions of nature of boundaries in the host context. The study found evidence supporting RDIM showing that the more unfair treatment immigrants perceived, the less they were motivated to identify with the host society. Another study by Van Osch et al. (2021) did not find clear evidence for RIM/RDIM although overt religious practices were associated with perceived discrimination among Muslim minorities in the Netherlands. RIM and RDIM are particularly relevant for understanding how Syrian refugees deal with devalued refugee status and perceived discrimination based on ethnic, cultural and religious differences and to gain insights into their acculturation orientations and group identification strategies.

1.2.5. The common in-group identity model

The common in-group identity model by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) aims to explore the cognitive mechanisms and psychological processes that are critical for reducing intergroup bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Social identity theory attributes the formation of prejudice and discrimination to humans’ tendency to favor in-group members and derogate out-group members. Negative treatment of the out-group can be reduced by eradicating or rearranging social boundaries. Recategorization is one of the several prejudice-reduction tools and refers to altering the perception of in-group boundaries to incorporate the out-group under a shared superordinate in-group identity. According to the common in-group identity model, recategorization of different groups into one superordinate group can be achieved by focusing on one existing common group membership, such as a common faith or religion, perceived to be shared by all members. Recategorization increases the attractiveness of the former out-group members, allows them as the members of the in-group and channels the benefits of in-group favoritism to all the representatives. It is found that majority groups’ evaluation of the minorities becomes increasingly favorable as the former out-group members become identified with the superordinate in-group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Recategorization can be a powerful tool not only for combating intergroup bias, reducing discrimination but also for increasing social support, applying more generous standards of fairness, and improving attitudes towards minority groups. Nonetheless, recategorization does not necessarily eradicate former group identities and offers the possibility of keeping both the superordinate identity and the original identities simultaneously salient (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). The common in-group identity model is particularly relevant in this project in understanding the mechanisms through which host societies’ negative reactions towards Syrian refugees can be altered.
1.2.6. Religion

Religion, as a dimension of culture, a boundary marker and a form of social identity, plays a highly significant role in the acculturation processes of Muslim minority groups, boundary formation processes and intergroup relations in the receiving countries (Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Güngör et al., 2012; Güngör, 2020; Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007). It is a major topic in psychology (Saroglou, 2014; Sedikides, 2010) and its relevance for mental health and acculturation research is elaborated below.

1.2.6.1. Religion and psychological health

Literature on psychology of religion has ample evidence for the association between religion, religiosity; and physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships and intergroup relations (e.g., Koenig et al., 2000; Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Spilka et al., 2003). Previous research, from a strictly individual perspective, finds that religiosity is connected, although modestly and not systematically, to indicators of improved psychological health such as higher self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms (George et al., 2002; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Salsman et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2003). Saroglou (2011) has identified four universal dimensions of religion: believing, bonding, behaving and belonging; which reflect the cognitive, emotional, moral/behavioral and social psychological processes. Researchers point out to the psychological functions of the individual dimensions such as need for purpose, meaning making, arousal of positive emotions such as optimism and security, regulation of negative emotions, buffering against existential anxiety, need for self-control and prosocial behavior, need for belonging, community, approval, inclusion, social support, collective self-esteem, and coping against public hostility and discrimination (Greenberg et al., 1997; Güngör, 2020; Saroglou, 2011; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007). Saroglou’s multidimensional model of religion integrates other models of religious dimensions, which typically distinguish between three distinct and interrelated dimensions: beliefs, practices and identification/affiliation. Religion is often of profound significance in people’s lives because people organize their lives around beliefs, values, and practices that fulfil people’s need for meaning, self-esteem, self-control and belonging (Saroglou, 2011; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007).

1.2.6.2. Impact of context on the relation between religion and psychological health

Although several studies have reported a positive correlation between religiosity and psychological adjustment, contemporary cross-cultural research considers the contextual impact on the relation between religiosity and psychological adjustment and shows that there
are cross-cultural differences in religions’ adjustment benefits (Gebauer et al., 2016). Friedman and Saroglou (2010) argue that the relations between religiosity and well-being among people in an immigration context are more complex than previously assumed and that the relationship depends on the cultural context of intergroup relations and the immigrant group’s stigmatized status. In their religiosity as social value hypothesis (RASV), Gebauer et al. (2016) focuses on self-esteem as the most direct and appropriate indicator of psychological adjustment, which is a culturally based construction of oneself as living up to the culturally prominent values of the society. Ruling out the alternative explanations by controlling the effects of other factors that moderate the relationship between religion and psychological adjustment, Gebauer et al. (2016) find that religion becomes a relevant value for self-esteem in cultural contexts where the religion of individuals is valued and thus religious people have increased psychological adjustment in such contexts. However, the positive effects of religion wanes in secular cultures in which religions pose a limited social value. The outcomes for psychological well-being are worse in contexts where perceived religious differences (such as those of Muslim immigrants and Western European societies) are made salient triggering feelings of threat to cultural continuity than in agnostic and atheist contexts. For instance, individuals became more hostile towards Muslim immigrants when they were reminded of the Christian history in the Netherlands (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013), which is one of the most secular countries in the world (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001).

1.2.6.3. Perceived religious differences in Europe

It is significant to consider the context in order to explore the impact of religion on the acculturation processes of immigrants. North-West Europe is a historically Christian and yet highly secularized society. Secularization refers to the declining importance and impact of religion in North-West European societies (Gorski & Altnordu, 2008) and also a distinctive normative ideology that “Europeans think that they are supposed to be irreligious” (Casanova, 2003, p. 19). Individual religious beliefs may be to some extent counter-normative in a secular society and attitudes towards religion and religious immigrants are generally ambivalent and negative (Voas & Crockett, 2005).

In stark contrast with the low levels of importance assigned to religion in Western Europe, large number of immigrants in North-West Europe originate from countries in which religion is predominant in the heritage culture (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). For instance, Turkish immigrants constitute one of the largest groups of immigrants in the Netherlands, come from a highly religious Islamic heritage culture with a large cultural distance to the
Dutch mainstream culture (in terms of religion, values, gender relationships, and language) (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006a) and are often considered the prototypical immigrant group (Pettigrew, 1998). Hence, from the perspective of immigrants, religious traditions and ties are often important sources of meaning, purpose, self-worth, social support, belonging and cultural continuity (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Foner & Alba, 2008; Hirschman, 2004). Research finds that Muslim and non-Muslim ethnic-minority adolescents living in England, Germany, and the Netherlands ascribe higher significance to their religion and attend religious gatherings more frequently than their native peers in all three countries (de Hoon & van Tubergen, 2014). Adherence to religion is not only a devotion to a belief system but can be a sign of identification with their group when experiencing adversity in a migration context. Research also finds that Muslim immigrants in particular, report higher scores to intrinsic religion and spirituality compared to other immigrants who seem to be extrinsically motivated when reporting religiousness, confirming the significance of religion among Muslim immigrants as opposed to non-Muslim immigrants and natives in Europe (Saroglou & Galand, 2004). For both first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants, Islamic religious traditions are found to be a highly valued part of the heritage culture (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2004; Saroglou & Galand, 2004). Among a representative sample from the city of Rotterdam, Phalet and Güngör (2004) found that Islam is considered very meaningful and important in one’s life by 87% of the Turkish population and 96% of the Moroccan population.

1.2.6.4. Religion and social rejection of Muslim immigrants

Considering the context in which there is a pronounced difference between immigrants’ religious beliefs and those of the host society, several studies point out to the public condemnation of Islam, social rejection, discrimination, increased levels of threat to the distinctiveness and religious identity of the first and second-generation Muslim immigrants in North and Western Europe (Güngör et al., 2011; Heath et al., 2008; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007). There is evidence of widespread and increasing public hostility against Islam and Muslims in particular, across European countries in contrast with people affiliated with other faiths (Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Boussetta & Maréchal, 2003; Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Voyé & Dobbelaeere, 2001). For instance, Muslim (e.g., Turkish and Moroccan) immigrants are exposed to frequent discrimination in Belgium, which is one of the most secularized countries in Europe (Halman, 2001), mostly due to the negative stereotyping of their religious traditions as incompatible with mainstream values and lifestyles (Boussetta & Maréchal,
Research provides evidence for the stigmatization of Muslim immigrants and their children based on lower levels of educational attainment, higher levels of residential segregation, and unemployment compared to non-Muslim immigrants in European host societies (Bousetta & Jacobs, 2006; Bousetta & Maréchal, 2003; Manço & Kanmaz, 2005; Manço & Manço, 2000; Phalet & Kosic, 2006, Phalet & Swyngedouw, 2003). Stigmatization largely stems from the significance attached to the religion in the lives of first and second-generation Muslim immigrants against the backdrop of secularized European host nations (Bousetta & Jacobs, 2006; Bousetta & Maréchal, 2003).

Similarly, in the Netherlands, Verkuyten et al. (1996) found that Muslim immigrants such as Moroccans and Turks were ranked the lowest in the ethnic hierarchy. Ethnic hierarchy signifies the shared intergroup and within group perception of the relative position or rank order of ethnic out-groups in a society, which determines the preference for intergroup contact and social distance from ethnic out-groups. The criteria for determining the ethnic hierarchy by the high-status majority groups were reported to be cultural differences. Cultural differences in Verkuyten et al.’s study (1996) refer specifically to the individualism-collectivism dichotomy, which has been traditionally regarded as the most fundamental dimension of such cultural differences (Dumont, 1982; Verkuyten et al., 1996). The individualism-collectivism dichotomy corresponds with religiosity (Güngör et al., 2012; Güngör, 2020; Saroglou, 2011) and immigrants’ Islamic background and homelands in the Near East and Africa (Verkuyten et al., 1996). Dutch respondents ranked the most collectivistic groups, namely the Muslim groups, the lowest in the ethnic hierarchy and preferred the least contact with such groups. In other words, Muslim immigrants were found to be the most socially-rejected group and targets of most discrimination in the Dutch society.

1.2.6.5. Religion as a dimension of culture

The psychology of intergroup relations and cross-cultural psychologists study religion from a distinct perspective that religion is not simply an individual belief system but also a social variable that influences the context and is influenced by it. Religion impacts the way that individuals conduct themselves in the social environment (Baumeister, 2002). From a cross-cultural perspective, religion is considered as a distinct and highly valued dimension of culture (Güngör et al., 2011; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007) firstly because religion functions as a prime source of shared meaning and community building. Secondly, religious values and traditions overlap with cultural values and traditions. Thirdly, many immigrants consider their religion as their culture. From the perspective of the Muslim minority in Europe, their religion
is their culture and is a powerful tool for cultural transmission (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2004; Güngör et al., 2011; Saroglou & Galand, 2004). Like other cultural markers such as ethnicity, religiosity is subject to acculturative influences as it is transmitted, affirmed, and challenged by acculturating families and adolescents (Güngör, 2020). Therefore, Güngör et al. (2011) make references to religious acculturation in the case of Muslim immigrants in the secular European host societies as the ways in which individuals negotiate their religiosity as they engage in sustained contact with otherwise religious or secular persons or groups.

Collectivism stands out as a salient aspect of culture that has been found to be associated with religion, especially in an immigration context (Güngör et al., 2012; Güngör, 2020; Saroglou, 2011). Across historical periods and geographical contexts; religions seem to encourage a collectivistic lifestyle because religious beliefs, rituals, and moral rules are organized and transmitted within the context of religious groups and communities (Saroglou, 2011). Güngör (2020) found that stronger religious identity predicts collectivistic values as they satisfy people’s need to belong, hold, and profit from a social identity (Saroglou, 2011). Studies show that religious people across cultural groups rank other-focused values (such as forgiveness, obedience, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security) higher and self-focused values (such as independence, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction) lower than less religious individuals (Güngör et al., 2012; Rokeach, 1969; Saroglou et al., 2004; Saroglou, 2011). More religious Turkish Belgian Muslim adolescents are more willing to maintain their heritage culture, and support its core collectivistic values such as tradition, conformity, and benevolence more strongly than their less religious peers (Güngör et al., 2012). Güngor (2020) also reported that tightly knit ethnic communities foster religious identification and practices, and that religious transmission is more effective in acculturating communities with a high degree of collective cultural continuity.

On a worldwide scale, migration in the post-1960s originated largely from regions (Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East) where collectivism is emphasized over individualism (Triandis, 1994) to regions (North America, Western Europe, and Oceania) where individualism is emphasized more than collectivism. In contrast with the collectivistic values of immigrant groups, most Western societies stress self-focused values such as individual rights, autonomy, and some degree of separateness from others (Kağıtçibaşı, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a result, there are gaps not only in terms of religiosity but also in cultural values between many migrants and the societies that are receiving them. Especially in the case of Muslim immigrants, religion contradicts with secularism and the individualistic values of the North and Western European host nations.
Therefore, to the extent that religiosity increases the social and cultural distance between Muslim minorities and mainstream society, a strong religious attachment might complicate the development of a sense of belonging in acculturating people (Güngör et al., 2012).

1.2.6.6. Religion as a form of social identity and ethnic identity

Similar to ethnicity and culture, religion is also an important marker of social identity (Güngör, 2020; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007). Güngör (2020) also highlights Erikson’s (1968) assertion that religion provides an ideological and social foundation of identity development in adolescence. Religiosity plays a key role in children’s identity development as an important source of collective self-esteem (Verkuyten, 2007). People affiliate with ethnic and religious groups for a positive identity, meaningfulness, feelings of certainty, a sense of belongingness and inclusion.

Studies of ethnic identity development do not usually distinguish religion from ethnicity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Anwar (1998) and Lopez et al. (2011) suggest that religious identity stems to a great extent from adolescents’ ethnic, cultural, and family backgrounds as changes in the religious identification of immigrant adolescents are found to be closely linked to changes in their ethnic identity and family belonging over time. For instance, there is a strong association between Muslim identity and Turkish identity (Çelebi et al., 2015). In addition, Güngör (2020) explains that in the case of migration, religious identity is transmitted along with ethnic identity and cultural values. Researchers found that ethnic and religious identity development overlapped almost completely in Turkish Muslim immigrants in Europe (Maliepaard et al., 2010; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007).

1.2.6.7. Impact of religion on immigrants’ acculturation and identification strategies

As a form of culture, social and ethnic identity as explained before, religion affects acculturation (Güngör et al., 2011; Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007). Several studies show that religion consolidates identification with the heritage country and culture, and can be a strong negative predictor of identification with the secular host context (Güngör et al., 2011; Güngör et al., 2012; Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007). In the case of Muslim minorities, religion separates culture and identity from the mainstream culture and identity (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Therefore, it is more challenging for Muslims to negotiate between their heritage culture where religion is a predominant social value and the host culture that opposes religion and religiosity. As religiosity is part of the heritage culture of Muslim minorities, religious Muslims are reported to be oriented towards maintaining their
heritage culture more than their less-religious peers (Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007). Güngör et al. (2012) and Saroglou & Mathijsen (2007) found that more religious Turkish Belgians were more involved in the maintenance of Turkish culture, and they were also more strongly committed to their Turkish identity. In a study on Turkish-Belgian adolescents with a highly religious Islamic heritage culture (Turkey) who grow up in a highly secularized and increasingly anti-Islamic European society (Belgium), Güngör et al. (2011) indicated that religious socialization as children in an immigration context reinforces the orientation toward heritage culture maintenance as adults and also that those who value culture maintenance more highly turn out to be more religious as adults. Along those lines, more religious Muslims were sometimes less willing to adopt the mainstream culture (Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Güngör et al., 2011; Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007), and they had fewer social contacts with mainstream friends and neighbours (Maliepaard et al., 2012).

Saroglou & Mathijsen (2007) examined religion, attachment to multiple identities and the acculturation processes of immigrant adolescents from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds and their native peers in Belgium. They found no significant difference between the identification with the host culture and the European culture among Muslim and non-Muslim immigrants in Belgium, suggesting that the seeming conflict between religion and acculturation is not particular to the Muslim faith. In addition, they found that cosmopolitan (citizen of the world) identity is correlated with religiousness among Muslim immigrants mainly due to the belief in the oneness and the community of believers (Ummah). Nonetheless, although Muslim immigrants identify with Belgian and European culture in the same way as non-Muslim immigrants, Muslim immigrants’ integration into the Belgian society was found to be more challenging than that of non-Muslim immigrants. Researchers postulated two potential reasons for this result. First, it is possible for Muslim immigrants to claim to be Belgian without embracing ‘classically Belgian’ elements of social life and reserving the rights to be Belgian in a unique way (Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007). Second, perceived or real cultural and religious distance leading to socio-economic marginalization can make integration more difficult (Kammaz & Manço, 2004; Manço, 2000; Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007).

1.2.6.8. Impact of religion-based social rejection on acculturation and identification

Religion impacts acculturation and identification in the case of Muslim immigrant groups in Europe because of the host nations’ negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims leading to different forms of social rejection. Socio-economic marginalization can be explained further
by understanding socio-structural variables within the host contexts. Individuals’ acculturation orientations and their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the intergroup context do not emerge in isolation of the socio-structural variables such as stability, legitimacy and permeability of intergroup boundaries. Socio-structural variables start to form within the historical, political, and ideological evolution of the host context before the arrival of the immigrant groups yet interactively determine immigrants’ identity management strategies such as group identification and responses to social hierarchies (Verkuyten, 2004; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2006). Secularized European societies perceive a sense of threat to security in the case of Muslim immigrants and thus have a tendency to preserve and protect the dominant status position of high-status groups. Thus, perceived cultural (religious) differences denote an impermeable/bright group boundary that limits upward social mobility of low status Muslim minority groups to gain a high-status position and obstructs the acculturation of Muslim minorities (Allen & Nielsen, 2002, Foner & Alba, 2008; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008). In response to the stable and impermeable group boundaries, minority groups react by attaching themselves strongly to their in-group. In a large sample of first- and second-generation minority adolescents aged 13 to 18 years residing in 13 countries on four continents, second generation Muslim immigrants were found to be overrepresented in the separationist acculturation orientation mainly because they had not been expected to integrate into the host culture in the first place as the children of guest workers (Berry et al., 2006). Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008) found that the Turkish-Dutch are motivated to stress their distinctive ethnic identity and prefer collective action as opposed to individualistic strategy, when the intergroup structure is interpreted as relatively stable, illegitimate, and impermeable. That is to say, even when immigrants are motivated to participate within the host society, the host society may place insurmountable boundaries, which can make socio-economic integration more challenging.

There is empirical evidence that perceived discrimination harms psychological adjustment. Discrimination is associated with depressive and somatoform symptoms among Turkish migrants living in Germany (Haase et al., 2017). Friedman and Saroglou (2010) showed that among Muslim immigrants who face increasingly more stigmatization compared to the Christian immigrants in a secular European society, religiosity was indirectly associated with decreased self-esteem, increased depressive symptoms, and reduced acculturation to the host culture, through the intervening variables of perceived cultural distance, perceived religious (in)tolerance and feelings of anger towards the host culture while no such effects were present for non-Muslim immigrants. Verkuyten and Yıldız (2007) found that perceived
discrimination and social rejection were positively associated with strong Turkish identification and Muslim identification and low Dutch identification among Turkish-Dutch participants. The negative association found in this study between religiosity and indicators of psychological adjustment are in contrast with the findings of previous research between religiosity and well-being among Christian individuals in historically Christian countries (George et al., 2002; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Salsman et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2003) as well as the findings among Muslim immigrants in Muslim countries (Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2007; Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). The findings show that there is nothing inherently negative about religion per se but rather it may be the perception of religion and the clash between deeply-held beliefs, opinions and attitudes in an intergroup context leading to religious discrimination, the public condemnation of Islam, the pressure to assimilate, and namely the recognition of social rejection from the out-group that increases identification with the heritage culture and possibly decreases identification with the host culture (Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Hogg, 2000; Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005).

Furthermore, perception of social rejection from the out-group together with familial emphasis on the maintenance of religious practices and continuity may accentuate religiosity over generations (Güngör, 2020). Against this background of social disadvantage and public hostility, reactive religiosity or religious reaffirmation may emerge and be reflected as both rejection of the mainstream group and culture as they are considered threat to religious identity and as heightened religiosity, especially in second generation (Güngör et al., 2012; Verkuyten, 2018). Roy (2005) suggests that Muslim immigrants’ high scores on many indicators of religion reflect the intensification of affiliation with Islam as a way of protesting against marginalization or against Western values, as also postulated by RIM (Branscombe et al., 1999). European-born Muslims who experience more discrimination report higher levels of (reactive) religious identification (Fleischmann et al., 2011). Based on a comparison of Turkish-Belgian immigrants with their peers in the heritage and host country, Güngör et al. (2012) found heightened levels of religiosity relative to both heritage and mainstream cultures, reaching the conclusion that religious traditions and ties are reinforced in response to a prevailing secular orientation in European societies. They also found that religious reaffirmation increases commitment to collectivistic values. Based on the abovementioned research findings, religion seems to be a symptom rather than the cause because the assertion of religiousness is either to affirm one’s collective identity and heritage culture or protest against the host culture as a result of marginalization and discrimination (Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007).
1.2.6.9. Significance of religion for Syrian refugees’ acculturation

Since the majority of Syrian refugees have a strong Muslim heritage (87% of Syrians are Muslim)\(^2\)\(^3\), their acculturation process is expected to be affected by religion because, as a part of refugees’ social, cultural, ethnic identity, it affects the way in which refugees conduct themselves in the social environment. Religion is a social variable that can be negotiated and changed along with cultural identity through the acculturation process especially in a new context that has a different perception of religion and religiosity. Secondly, it affects the acculturation process due to host nations’ diverging perceptions of religion and religiosity, perceptions of Islam as a source of threat and boundary marker, all of which may lead to social rejection, stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination in Europe and in some parts of Turkey. For these reasons, religion is expected to impact in Syrian refugees’ identification with the heritage and the host culture and thus the acculturation process. Religion may also have some benefits for the psychological adjustment of refugees as a source of self-esteem, belonging, coping and social support, particularly in contexts that share refugees’ perceptions of or sensitivities towards religion.

1.3. Aims of the current research

This research project is designed to investigate the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands using a qualitative research design based on inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) and content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) from a social psychological perspective. Acculturation of Syrian refugees needs further investigation for practical reasons due to the increasing population size of forced migrants around the globe challenging host nations’ acceptance of refugees and in return affecting refugees’ level of adaptation and identification in their host contexts. Further research is necessary also for theoretical reasons to develop new approaches towards acculturation that can be integrated into the existing acculturation models in order to increase the applicability of research to diverse groups and to articulate the perspectives from less-traditional migration contexts. This project specifically addresses (1) the most common themes and issues emerging in the acculturation of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands, (2) acculturation conditions and the receiving contexts that serve as the background of Syrian refugees’ acculturation processes (3) refugees’ acculturation orientations and identifications

\(^2\) https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/#people-and-society
with host and heritage cultures (4) psychological and socio-cultural outcomes for Syrian refugees’ acculturation.

In the light of these research interests, Berry’s psychological bidimensional model of acculturation (Berry, 1980; 1997) and the acculturation framework (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003) have been applied to explore different facets of acculturation, investigate the links between acculturation conditions, individuals’ degree of orientation toward heritage and host cultures, and their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. In order for a deeper investigation of the two receiving contexts and a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic interactions of refugees, host nations and states’ approaches towards acculturation, this project applied Bourhis et al.’s interactive acculturation model. Theories of boundary formation (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2002) allowed researchers to evaluate the mechanisms of intergroup interactions and to gain insights into the impact of social distance, cultural similarity/ distance, ethnic hierarchy on refugees’ group identification processes and thus, their acculturation orientations and outcomes. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel et al., 1971) was used to explore refugees’ group identification strategies, salient social identities that are triggered in the acculturation contexts, and to understand the basis and outcomes of different forms of social rejection. Other related theories such as rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999) and rejection-disidentification model (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009) were used to understand how various forms of social rejection, particularly religious discrimination and discrimination based on their refugee status, may impact their refugees’ level of attachment to heritage and host cultures as well as their psychological health and socio-cultural adaptation. Common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) has been used as a basis to describe the intergroup dynamics and interventions to reduce intergroup bias with regards to Syrian refugees. Religion is also included as a theoretical construct in this project because it is considered to be a highly relevant social variable akin to culture and ethnicity, affecting individuals’ perceptions of the acculturation conditions, their acculturation orientations and outcomes. More specifically, it seems to play a role in host contexts’ reception of Syrian refugees and their attitudes towards refugees, and thus may have implications for refugees’ group identification strategies, social and psychological adaptations in the receiving contexts. All the abovementioned theories are considered to complement one another in the investigation of the proposed research questions and achieving an overall understanding of refugee acculturation.
1.4. Overview of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of a total of seven chapters including an introductory and theoretical chapter, a review chapter on the migration contexts used as the background of the dissertation, four empirical chapters that investigate different aspects of acculturation as it pertains to Syrian refugees and a final chapter that integrates and discusses the findings obtained from the research projects. A qualitative study design based on inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) and content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) was adopted for all the research projects explained in the empirical chapters. Qualitative methods were adopted to gain insights into the experiences of Syrian refugees, a relatively underresearched cultural group, which can be used to generate hypotheses and develop theories and models (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). In addition, they allowed a broader exploration of the various complex and multidimensional components of the acculturation process in one study, which would not be possible using the available measures and assessments of acculturation, which are designed to selectively analyze a specific and limited number of variables and may be inapplicable in cross-cultural settings as most instruments are directed to specific target groups (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006a).

As the introductory chapter, Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research projects that make up this dissertation and lays out the theories used as a basis to explore the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the reception contexts in Turkey and the Netherlands. The aim of the chapter is to provide detailed information on the contextual variables and the settings, which serve as the background of the acculturation process. It is designed to set the stage for understanding receiving nations’ approach and attitudes towards Syrian refugees, boundary markers and the determinants of intergroup relations, which inevitably influence refugees’ acculturation orientation and acculturation outcomes. It reviews the historical evolution of the migration landscapes in Turkey and the Netherlands, compares countries’ immigration policies with respect to the recent arrival of Syrian refugees and discusses their responses to the Syrian civil war and concomitant refugee arrivals. Since the Netherlands affects the migration policies in the European Union (EU) and is also bound by their migration policies (despite not being held accountable by any supervising institutions), Chapter 2 also covers the corresponding legal structures in the EU and its response to Syrian refugees.
Chapter 3 is designed to enrich the understanding of Syrian refugees’ acculturation experience in the Turkish context focusing on the experiences of Syrian university students. The chapter reports on the first qualitative study based on Syrian refugees in higher education in Izmir, Turkey, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. It addresses the first and the second research question by presenting the most common themes and issues in the acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees and the acculturation context in Turkey. More specifically, it investigates the major social, academic, and linguistic challenges; factors supporting and impeding the integration process as well as refugees’ coping strategies.

Based on the analysis of the same sample of 15 Syrian university students as mentioned in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 investigates the acculturation conditions, orientations and outcomes in the case of Syrian refugees as addressed in the second, third and fourth research questions. The primary aim of Chapter 4 is to shed light on Syrian refugees’ acculturation conditions including reasons for migration to Turkey and refugees’ perception of Turkey; their acculturation orientations and acculturation outcomes in terms of psychological and social adaptation in Turkey in association with their intergroup perceptions.

Chapter 5 reports on the second qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 Syrian refugees from the general refugee population settled in three cities in Turkey: Istanbul, Kocaeli and Sakarya. Chapter 5 responds to the second and fourth research questions and offers an analysis of the acculturation conditions and acculturation outcomes of Syrian refugees in Turkey. It investigates refugees’ pre-migration expectations, economic concerns, and perceptions of natives’ attitudes towards Syrians and religion as the predictors of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in Turkey.

Chapter 6 reports on the third qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 Syrian refugees from several cities in the Netherlands including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Arnhem, Breda, Tilburg, and Eindhoven. The primary aim of the study is to explore the acculturation conditions, orientations, and outcomes of Syrian refugees settled in the Netherlands. More specifically, the research provides an extensive understanding of the role of perceived boundaries, cultural distance, coping strategies and religion in the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands.

Chapter 7 provides a synthesis of the research findings and discusses the implications and applications of the conclusions drawn by the present research. The exploration of Syrian refugees’ acculturation processes provides us with a broad perspective on the links between the contextual factors, refugees’ unique acculturation orientations and their socio-cultural and psychological adaptation in their new environments. Refugees’ expectations in the pre-
acculturation period, perceived attitudes towards refugees in their host countries, cultural distance, religion, availability of support, language attainment, group vitality, solidarity with minority groups, separation from families are some of the areas that seem to be significant for Syrian refugees’ acculturation in both countries.
CHAPTER 2
Cross-Context Comparison of the Syrian Refugee Movement in Turkey, the Netherlands and the Western Europe

2.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter aims to provide the basis for a comparison of the immigration processes in Turkey and the Netherlands with respect to the recent arrival of Syrian refugees, in terms of migration policies, social, economic and political dimensions. The chapter provides a general review of the cultures that interact as result of migration, contextual variables and the settings, which serve as the background of the acculturation process. It is designed to set the stage for understanding receiving nations’ approach and attitudes towards Syrian refugees, boundary markers and the determinants of intergroup relations, which influence refugees’ acculturation orientation and acculturation outcomes. It reviews the historical evolution of the migration landscape in Turkey and the Netherlands and discusses the migration policies reflecting on corresponding legal structures in two countries. As the Netherlands affects the migration policies in the European Union (EU) and is also bound by their migration policies, the corresponding legal structures in the EU are explained. Along with their migration policies, responses of Turkey, the Netherlands, and the EU to the Syrian war and Syrian refugees are discussed. The structural factors in the receiving countries and the contexts of reception with more or less welcoming environments for specific cohorts of immigrants, which are arguably affecting psychosocial and socioeconomic trajectories of migrant groups are highlighted; rather than focusing solely on migrants’ characteristics, their heritage culture, perceived cultural differences, and acculturation preferences.

2.2. Introduction

Syrian refugees constitute the largest group of the world’s 70.8 million forcibly displaced people with 6.7 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in other countries and 6.6 million internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2020a). As of November 2019, there are 3.7 million Syrians settled under temporary protection in Turkey (UNHCR, 2020a) compared to 1.4 million in Jordan and 18,000 in the USA (Düz, 2019). By 2015, Turkey became the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2018). The population of Syrians in Turkey is approximately the population size of some European States such as
Moldova, Georgia, and Croatia. Large number of Syrians have migrated to Western Europe in 2015-2016, and thus their stay in Europe started four to five years after their arrival in Turkey in 2011. Syrians have often arrived in Europe under dangerous circumstances. Based on the data from UNHCR (2019b), a total of 19,555 people died or went missing at sea since 2013. There are almost one million Syrian refugees in Europe, and by far the largest portion of these refugees is hosted by Germany (Connor, 2018). The Netherlands is one of the five biggest hosts of Syrians refugees in Europe and granted asylum status to 44,000 Syrians between 2014 and 2016 (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2018).

The considerable population size of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands, their effect on the collective identity of their host communities unlike other refugee groups; substantial social, economic, demographic and political consequences of their migration around the globe coinciding with other social developments such as rise of populism, and Islamaphobia deem it necessary to understand the contexts in which acculturation processes take place, host countries’ migration policies and approach towards specific cohorts of immigrants. The conditions under which migration movements occur have an impact on the range of opportunities of settlement in the new country (Berry, 2005; Schwarz et al., 2010). Thus, I aim to highlight the diversity of receiving contexts, a neglected perspective in the literature, which is significant in understanding immigrants’ level of psychosocial and socioeconomic adaptation, social mobility, and the degree of solidarity they are able to muster (Wimmer & Soehl, 2014).

This chapter will discuss the migration contexts in Turkey and the Netherlands with regards to Syrian refugees in four main sections. The first section will explore the cultural characteristics of Syria, Turkey and the Netherlands. In the second section, an overview of the migration landscape in Turkey including its response to Syrian refugee movement and its legislative perspective on international migration and asylum is presented. In the third section, the migration landscape in the Netherlands including their immigration history, response to Syrian refugees as well as the legal infrastructure in the country are examined. The final section provides a review of the legislative framework in the European Union (EU), its approach towards immigrants and particularly the inflow of refugees from Syria.

2.3. Exploration of cultural dimensions in Syria, Turkey and the Netherlands

Hofstede defines culture as the programming of the human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group (Hofstede Insights, 2021a). Culture is a significant influencer of human behavior, is learned from the environment and shared as a
collective phenomenon. The six dimensions of culture in the Hofstede model are listed as follows:

- **Power distance** expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

- **Individualism versus collectivism**: Higher scores on this dimension indicate a preference for a loosely-knit society whereas lower scores denote collectivism that represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society.

- **Masculinity versus femininity** reflects ‘tough versus tender’ cultures. Masculinity represents a society’s competitiveness and preference for achievement, assertiveness and material rewards for success. Femininity stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty and caring for the weak.

- **Uncertainty avoidance** expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Higher scores on this dimension exhibits countries’ tendency to maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior, and intolerance of unorthodox behavior and ideas. Lower scores represent a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.

- **Long-term versus short-term orientation**: Low scores on this dimension represent a normative society which has a tendency to maintain time-honored traditions and to view societal change with suspicion whereas high scores reflect a more pragmatic approach such as encouraging thrift and efforts as a way to prepare for the future.

- **Indulgence versus restraint**: Higher scores reflect a society’s gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun, whereas low scores stand for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates by means of strict social norms.

Through the lens of the 6-D model on Hofstede-Insight, Syria’s culture can be explored in relation to Turkey and the Netherlands, as indicated in the Table 2.1 below.

With a high score on the first dimension of power distance (80), Syria is a hierarchical society, which means that people accept a hierarchical order that needs no further justification (Hofstede Insights, 2021b). Syria scores 35 on the second dimension, which means that Syria is considered a collectivistic society, in which people feel a close, long-term commitment to the ‘group’, be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships. With an intermediate score of 52, Syria does not have a clearly dominant preference in the masculinity versus femininity dimension. On the fourth dimension, Syria has a high score of 60, which reflects a
high preference for avoiding uncertainty, a tendency to maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and resist innovation. With a low score (30) in the fifth dimension, Syria is a normative culture in which people have a strong concern with establishing the absolute truth, have great respect for traditions and a focus on achieving quick results. There is no score for Syria on the sixth dimension.

Turkey scores high (66) on power distance, which indicates that Turkey is also a hierarchical society although relatively less than Syria. With a score of 37, Turkey can be characterized as a collectivistic society, which indicates that ‘we’ is more important than ‘I’, and open conflicts are avoided in order to maintain the harmony of the group (Hofstede Insights, 2021c). Turkey scores 45, on the feminine side of the scale, which reflects that consensus, and sympathy for the underdog are valued, leisure time and quality of life are important. Turkey scores very high on uncertainty avoidance (85), which means that people have increased need for rules, laws, security and rituals in order to minimize anxiety and ease tension (Hofstede Insights, 2021c). Turkey has an intermediate score of 46 on long-term orientation, which indicates that it does not have a dominant cultural preference, although slightly on the normative end of the continuum. Again, Turkey’s dominant position on the last dimension cannot be determined due to the intermediate score (46).

The Netherlands scores low (38) on power distance which means that power is decentralized, managers count on the experiences of team members, attitude towards managers is informal, employees expect to be consulted, control is disliked and communication is direct (Hofstede Insights, 2021d). The Netherlands scores very high (80) on individualism, which indicates that people’s self-image is defined in terms of ‘I’ than ‘we’ and there is a high preference for a loosely-knit social framework. It has a low score on the third dimension and is therefore a feminine society where it is important to keep life/work balance and conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation (Hofstede Insights, 2021d). The Netherlands scores 53 on uncertainty avoidance and exhibits a slight preference for avoiding uncertainty but no dominant position on this dimension. On long-term orientation, it receives a high score of 67, which means that it has a pragmatic nature. People believe that truth depends on the situation, time and context. People have a tendency to modify traditions to changed conditions and they value perseverance in achieving results. Lastly, with a high score of 68 on indulgence, the Netherlands places a high degree of importance on leisure time and people generally exhibit a willingness to realize their desires to enjoy life and have fun (Hofstede Insights, 2021d).
Table 2.1

Comparisons of Cultural Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hofstede 6-D Model of National Culture</th>
<th>Power Distance</th>
<th>Individualism</th>
<th>Femininity</th>
<th>Uncertainty Avoidance</th>
<th>Long-term Orientation</th>
<th>Indulgence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Hierarchical (80)</td>
<td>Collectivistic (35)</td>
<td>NDP(^4) (52)</td>
<td>Avoiding uncertainty (60)</td>
<td>Normative (30)</td>
<td>No score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Hierarchical (66)</td>
<td>Collectivistic (37)</td>
<td>Feminine (45)</td>
<td>Avoiding uncertainty (85)</td>
<td>NDP (46)</td>
<td>NDP (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Not hierarchical (38)</td>
<td>Individualistic (80)</td>
<td>Feminine (14)</td>
<td>NDP (53)</td>
<td>Pragmatic (67)</td>
<td>Indulgent (67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the Hofstede model, Syria and Turkey score similarly on two main dimensions: power distance and individualism, as both of them are considered hierarchical societies with fundamental collectivistic characteristics. These scores are clearly in the different end of the continuum than those of the Netherlands. Syria and Turkey have similar scores also on uncertainty avoidance as well as on long-term orientation, even though Turkey is indicated not to have a dominant position on this dimension. These relative scores on the dimensions of national culture seem to indicate higher cultural similarity between Turkey and Syrian and cultural distance with the Netherlands.

2.4. The migration landscape in Turkey

The topic of migration has been on Turkey’s agenda as a dynamic issue for a long time, although the nature and the actors of the topic tend to change. Turkey has long been a country of migration and is often referred to as gateway, passageway, stepping stone, bridge, transit route for the immigrants flowing through Turkey (İçduygu, 2015a; Kirişçi, 2005). The amalgamation of its internal characteristics and the external circumstances in its neighboring countries has made Turkey a desirable country of immigration. The internal characteristics consist of its crucial geographical location between the conflict-ridden Middle East and the advanced countries in Europe with increasing economic prosperity and political stability. The external circumstances refer to the conflict policies, security concerns; political, social and economic turmoil in the Middle East; several regional, social and demographic changes; globalization and people’s desire to move to more secure and economically advanced

\(^4\) No dominant position
countries. Thus, Turkey has been an arena of various forms of human mobility over the last two decades from diverse backgrounds such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Moldova, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and most recently Syria (İçduygu, 2015b). Turkey has received flows of regular migrants, irregular labor migrants, asylum seekers and lastly Syrian refugees as the result of the Syrian civil war.

To understand the patterns of migration, migration policies, the context of reception and the attitude of the receiving-society members towards migrants, it is important to consider the history of migration in the country. The Republic of Turkey was founded as a nation-state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Westernist5 and Turkist6 members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that assumed a dominant role in the foundation of the emerging nation-state considered that adoption of western civilization was the most powerful remedy for its salvation (Güray, 2015). They aspired to see Turkey to become a member of the West, which they regarded as the ‘civilized world’ (Güray, 2015). Thus, the founding committee attempted to differentiate Turkey from the Ottoman Empire in order to achieve western modernization, based on new revolutions in terms of politics, identity, language and culture (Öztürk, 2015); and principles such as nationalism that promoted the new Turkish identity and laïcité (secularism of the French) that emphasized not only the separation of religion and state; but also the control and exclusion of religion in the public sphere (Barras, 2009; Tarhan, 2011; Zürcher, 2000). Kemalist7 elites attempted to tie symbols of western civilization and laïcité to the national identity to create a new definition of Turkishness that was intentionally left devoid of any religious content and ties to the Ottoman Empire (Tarhan, 2011, Zürcher, 2000). However, despite the Kemalist attempts, the Ottoman legacy and Islam remain influential on the formation of national identity. The connection between national identity and religion versus national identity with western ideals and laïcité has created a clash of identities and polarization in the Turkish society, which gets reflected on the use of headscarves in public (Göl, 2009), celebration of national vs. religious holidays as well as the attitude towards Syrian refugees, who are perceived as a threat to the laïc national identity by some dominant groups due to refugees’ religion and non-western background.

With a sharp contrast to the Ottoman Empire which harbored various ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, the CUP emphasized nationalism and pursued ethnist migration policies

5 Followers of Westernism, an ideology that emphasizes backwardness of the Ottoman Empire in comparison to the Western world and defends to emulate the West in all aspects in order for the survival and protection of the nation-state.
6 Followers of Turkism, an ideology that aims to culturally and politically unify all Turkic people.
7 Followers of Kemalism, an ideology, also known as Atatürkism implemented by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, that aims to cut Turkey’s social, cultural and religious ties with its Ottoman predecessor in order to embrace laïcism and all Western values.
to transform Turkey into a more homogenous state (İçduygu & Sert, 2015). As explained by Bourhis et al.'s framework (1997), states’ immigration and integration policies determine (1) the number, type and national origin of immigrants who are accepted in the country and (2) how immigrants are integrated within the society. They shape the way governments treat immigrants, the interaction between the host society and immigrants as well as immigrants’ attitudes, participation and belonging in the host context (Bourhis et al., 1997; MIPEX, 2021a). In fact, Turkey’s early migration policies were ethnist, namely, allowed the reception of people of Turkish descent, which in most cases also included non-Muslim populations who declared themselves to be Turks (Kirişçi, 1995). Turkey has not received a diverse array of migrants from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds but gave exclusive priority to accepting Turkish or non-Turkish Ottoman Muslims who could easily melt into a Turkish identity (İçduygu & Sert, 2015). The main groups of immigrants were from the lands of the Ottoman Empire lost in the Balkans as the result of the Balkan wars between 1912-1913, from the population exchange between Turkey and Greece between 1923-1924, from Yugoslavia between 1954-1990, from Bulgaria in three stages between 1950-1953, in 1968 and in 1989. Between the foundations of the Republic in 1923 until 1997, more than 1.6 million immigrants of Turkish culture migrated to Turkey from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Yugoslavia and others (İçduygu & Sert, 2015). Given the early policies and history of migration, Syrians can be considered the most noticeable group of immigrants who come from a different ethnic background, as present-day Syria does not overlap with the historic Ottoman Empire.

The ideology behind Turkey’s state immigration and integration policies has evolved from the ethnist ideology at its early foundational years towards a point on the continuum of assimilation and civic ideology that respects the distinctiveness of immigrant groups, as described by Bourhis et al. (1997). Harmonization is the officially declared state settlement policy in Turkey, which is stated to be neither assimilation nor integration (Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM, 2021). Harmonization is directed towards establishing a two-way active interaction between the host and immigrant groups and facilitating immigrants’ self-reliance in all spheres of life through immigrants’ awareness about the political structure, language, legal system, culture and history of the country as well as their rights and obligations. Additionally, acculturation orientations of the Turkish society have fluctuated from an integrationist towards exclusionist ends of the spectrum, as indicated by the shift from welcoming to hostile public attitudes towards Syrian refugees over the years (İçduygu, 2015). While some proportion of the society has been willing to accept and support
Syrian refugees for humanitarian reasons, an increasingly large proportion is not extremely tolerant of their ethnocultural differences (İçduygu, 2015; Kadir Has University, 2019; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2016). The majority of the host society seems to expect Syrian refugees to assimilate into the Turkish culture and abandon their distinctiveness as people may find the cultural recognition of Syrian refugees as a threat to their cultural continuity and dominant positions (Aydın & Kaya; 2019; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2016). In line with Bourhis et al. (1997), even though the states’ policies may reflect a civic ideology and support the integration orientation for the immigrant groups, a proportion of the host community is likely to maintain assimilationist and exclusionist orientation towards immigrant groups, which may hold true in the case of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

2.4.1. Turkey’s response to the Syrian refugee movement

Turkey was compelled to get involved in the Syrian war at its early phases because Syrians who were fleeing the dangerous war conditions sought refuge naturally in the closest neighboring countries. Turkey responded by taking an anti-Assad stance and supported the opposition in Syria (İçduygu, 2015a; Nas, 2019). Turkish political leaders initially held bilateral negotiations with Syria, attempting to focus the international public opinion on Syria to pressure the Syrian government to end the violence and the violation of human rights (Erdoğan, 2015). However, the international parties that previously encouraged the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt in order to ‘meet the democratic demands of the nations against the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes’ were uninvolved in the case of Syria (Erdoğan, 2015).

At the early phases of the crisis, the expectation was that the Assad regime would collapse after a short period of time, transferring the power to the opposition as a result of the increasing protests and international pressure; similar to Tunisia, Libya and Egypt as part of the Arab Spring. Therefore, the Turkish authorities assumed that displaced Syrians would stay only temporarily as ‘guests’ and repatriate after a short period of time (Erdoğan, 2015; İçduygu, 2015a). By disregarding the possibility of a long-term or permanent stay, and new actors emerging in the war scene in Syria; Turkey focused on providing temporary solutions such as creating refugee camps and delivering aid and assistance.

Turkey initially responded to the inflow of Syrian refugees with an open-door policy. The first group of Syrian refugees was accepted in April 2011 entering from the Cilvegözü entry point to the city of Hatay (Erdoğan, 2015). The refugees were settled in the refugee camps in the border provinces, with Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa hosting the largest
population of refugees (İçduygu, 2015a). The initial influx of Syrian refugees arriving in Turkey was relatively small. However, by late 2014, 55,000 people were seeking asylum in Turkey every month because of increasing violence in Syria and Iraq due to ISIS capturing large portions of territories. Up until the end of 2012, almost all Syrian refugees were settled in the refugee camps, but by 2016, only 10% of the total refugee population were living in camps established by the Turkish government (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). In the past couple of years, an increasing number of Syrian refugees started settling down in Istanbul and other bigger cities (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). Istanbul currently hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees (almost 480,000) followed by border cities like Şanlıurfa, Hatay, and Mardin (DGMM, 2019). The case of Syrian refugees has become a highly politicized issue within Turkey and between Turkey and the EU for social, ideological and economic reasons (İçduygu, 2015a; Nas, 2019). It has been reported that Turkey has spent over $40 billion worth of goods and services to Syrian war victims and granted citizenship to 102,000 Syrians so far (Düz, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the large population of Syrian refugees has placed Turkey’s reception capacity under strain (Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016). Turkish authorities attempted to restrict the arrival of refugees for both political and practical reasons by preventing unlawful arrivals, and controlling the entries of members of particular ethnic, national, religious, and ideological groups (İçduygu, 2015a).

2.4.2. Legislative perspective on international migration and asylum in Turkey

Turkey’s domestic policy towards Syrian refugees has evolved over time. Syria’s civil war started while Turkey was in the midst of implementing its international migration and asylum policy reform to meet the EU standards, a process that has complicated Turkish authorities’ attempts to manage the Syrian refugee situation. In time, with the conditions deteriorating in Syria and an unprecedented number of persons crossing to Turkey with no apparent prospect of return, it was obvious that a policy shift to encompass long term solutions was needed (İçduygu, 2015a). Thus, Turkey took initiative to prepare new administrative and legal documents and transform its migration and asylum policies to adjust to the demographic changes.

Prior to the enactment of the new legislation (‘Law on foreigners and International Protection’, LFIP), there were three legal documents informing the main policy framework governing the flow of immigrants and asylum seekers to Turkey (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). The Settlement Law was the first legal text implemented in 1934 with the purpose of facilitating the repatriation of ethnic Turks from the neighboring countries. The Settlement Law remained
the main legal text which determined the entry, exit, stay, and residence of aliens up until the
preparation of the new Settlement Law in 2006. According to the Settlement Law of 1934 and
the newer legislation in 2006, only the individuals of ‘Turkish descent and culture’ could avail
themselves of the opportunity to be accepted as immigrants and refugees in Turkey. Not
surprisingly, the immigration groups to Turkey since the early 1920s involved people of
‘Turkish descent and culture’ (İçduygu, 2015a). Even though the law was pivotal for the
management of the migratory flows at the time, it was elementary as it did not bring
systematic regulations on immigration, asylum and labor rights (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012).

Turkey did not have a specific asylum regime until the 1950s (Genç & Şirin, 2016). Turkey
followed the lead of the UNHCR’s international refugee regime. Thus, the second
main document is the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Additional Protocol on the status
of refugees, created by the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The
Convention in Article 1 gave acceding states the possibility to accept the application of the
Convention to refugees coming from anywhere in the world or solely to those who were
fleeing events in Europe (Kirişçi, 2005). This was also accompanied by a ‘time limitation’.
Turkey was among those countries that accepted the Convention with both the ‘geographical’
and the ‘time’ limitation (Kirişçi, 2005). Subsequently, as a result of the adoption of the 1967
Protocol, which gave states the possibility to lift these limitations, Turkey removed the ‘time’
but not the ‘geographical’ limitation. Turkey and Malta were the two countries that have
accepted the ‘geographical limitation’, which grants asylum rights only to Europeans
(İçduygu & Aksel, 2012).

Due to the geographical limitation, Turkey maintains a two-tiered asylum policy. The
first-tier concerns the European asylum seekers, who are given the refugee status. During the
Cold War, Turkey accepted refugees from the Communist Bloc countries in Europe, including
the Soviet Union. Such refugees, during their stay in Turkey, possessed all the rights provided
by the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Kirişçi, 2005). The second-tier
deals with non-European asylum seekers. Non-European asylum seekers are not eligible for a
refugee status in Turkey even after they are recognized as refugees by the UNHCR, which
assesses the asylum applications in Turkey and manages the administrative operations behind
the acceptance and status of the asylum seekers. Non-European asylum seekers are resettled
in third countries after being given the refugee status by the UNHCR. Accordingly, Iranians,
Iraqis, Bosnians, and Chechens were given only temporary status in the 1990s (Genç & Şirin,
2016). Turkey has long been criticized for not lifting the geographical limitation before
becoming a member of the European Union because it does not want to be considered Europe’s buffer zone (Genç & Şirin, 2016).

The third main document is the 1994 Regulation on Asylum which was created as a legal and administrative necessity after the mass inflow of half a million of refugees from Northern Iraq in 1991. The regulation is considered a turning point as it was an indication that Turkey started paying close attention to the inflows of immigrants and asylum seekers into the country, which resulted in the enactment of a more sophisticated text on asylum (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012). It is the first national legislation concerning asylum in Turkey (Genç & Şirin, 2016). Before the enactment of the regulation, UNHCR was the only responsible institution for the management of asylum seekers (Genç & Şirin, 2016). The regulation maintained the geographical limitation through identification of two types of asylum seekers: Europeans who are granted protection and non-Europeans who are channeled to a third country (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016).

The 1994 Regulation was replaced by LFIP in April 2013. This new legislation was in effect a year later, in April 2014. Through the new legislation, Turkey attempted to transform the legal texts on migration with the purpose of introducing an efficient system regarding the treatment of immigrants, asylum seekers, and irregular immigrants in accordance with the international and European norms. In other words, LFIP was designed to clarify the conditions for seeking asylum and respond to the needs of refugees. It regulates entry, exit, and stay of migrants in the country, along with the scope of international protection for those who seek asylum in Turkey as well as the rules regarding the rights to family reunion, long-term residence, education, health services, and labor market mobility of regular and irregular migrants (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). It also governs the working conditions and responsibilities of the newly established Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) under the Ministry of Interior. DGMM is given the task of concentrating on the harmonization of migrants of any kind. While LFIP no longer limits migration to the people of ‘Turkish descent and culture’, it maintains the geographical limitations of the 1951 Geneva Convention.

With the geographic restrictions maintained in LFIP, only asylum seekers from Europe are eligible for refugee status in Turkey, while non-Europeans are not (Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016). For that reason, Turkey has granted ‘temporary protection’ to Syrian asylum seekers on October 22, 2014, which was formalized with the enactment of LFIP. That is, when Syrians apply for asylum in Turkey, the UNHCR and the Turkish Ministry of the Interior process their claims. In case they are recognized as refugees by the UNHCR, they are given temporary protection in Turkey, which allows them to legally remain in the country
until they can safely resettle in a third country or repatriate. However, there is no clear limit set on the duration of temporary protection status which deems the geographical limitation meaningless and redundant.

In order for Syrian refugees to be given temporary protection, they need to be registered under DGMM. After 2016, Turkey has followed a two-step process for the registration of Syrian refugees (Refugee Rights Turkey, 2017). First, they need to pre-register at the General Directorate of Foreigners accessible in every city in Turkey. Pre-registration entails an interview with asylum seekers to obtain identifying information in order to decide on their eligibility for temporary protection. Once a positive decision is made by the authorities (takes an average of 30 days), individuals are provided with a pre-registration document required for final registration. The pre-registration document is a statement of eligibility for a residence permit in Turkey and also enables individuals to use health care services free of charge for urgent needs. In the second step, asylum seekers are required to apply to the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management to finalize the registration procedures. Syrian refugees registered under temporary protection are issued biometric identification cards for easy access to health, education, and other social services; are entitled to work permits in certain sectors and professions; free translation services and humanitarian assistance (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016).

According to MIPEX (2021a), as a result of the major reforms, Turkey’s scores on integration policies increased from slightly unfavorable (26/100) to halfway favorable (43/100) especially in the areas of education, health and access to nationality (MIPEX, 2021a). Although such reforms may lead to positive outcomes in public attitudes and awareness about immigration and discrimination in the long-term, Turkey’s basic comprehensive approach is not yet fully favorable for integration. Despite the rights granted in the Temporary Protection Directive, there are major barriers to accessing these services, especially for those living outside the refugee camps (İçduygusu, 2015a; Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). Turkey still ranks very low in four of the eight MIPEX areas: labour market mobility, political participation, permanent residence and anti-discrimination. In other words, Turkey seems to have more obstacles than opportunities in the way of achieving harmonization as a two-way process (MIPEX, 2021a).

2.5. The migration landscape in the Netherlands

Twenty percent of the entire current population of the Netherlands, that is, one in every four people (including all Schengen area descendants with a Dutch passport), has either first-
generation or second-generation immigrant background (CBS, 2020). Between 1972 and 2010, non-Western immigration grew from 200,000 to 1.9 million, with majority coming from Turkey, Morocco and Suriname (SCP, 2012). Even though the Netherlands has a long history of immigration reflected in its current population, the native Dutch of the Netherlands remain reluctant to admit that the Netherlands have always been a country of immigration (Rath, 2009). The refusal of being a country of immigration by the native population is rooted in the history of the Dutch government, who explicitly denied that there were immigrants in the Netherlands up until 1983 (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). Since the early pre-war period, the Dutch government strengthened the assumption through policy makers and via actively promoting emigration programs that they were not a receiving society because the country was already overpopulated. The discomfort around the subject of immigration in the Netherlands stems from the paradox between the long-lasting fears surrounding the issue of immigration and the multicultural image of the country celebrated by its native population. The public has fears around immigration as it is thought to threaten the established social order (Rath, 2009). Immigration is considered an anomaly that needs to be fixed (Rath, 2009). In the meantime, the natives celebrate the image of the Netherlands as a country of tolerance, acceptance and multiculturalism, a view in contradiction with the reception of the newcomers (Rath, 2009).

The immigration history of the Netherlands since the 1850s can be discussed roughly in three parts: pre-war, post-war, and the colonial immigration. Starting from the 1850s, the Netherlands accepted large groups of Eastern European Jews and Germans who worked in factories, constructions, docks and the agricultural sector (Rath, 2009; Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). There were also smaller groups of Belgian, British, Italian wage laborers, artisans, and merchants (Rath, 2009). In the early twentieth century, the immigration slowed down due to the industrialization in Germany, when the Netherlands started creating an overall impression that they were not a receiving society. During the economic crisis in the 1930s, Dutch government deported Chinese sailors and refused Jewish immigrants in order to maintain its good relations with the Nazis in Germany.

Subsequent to World War II, there was the impression that the country was overcrowded and thus the government encouraged emigration to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. The government’s policies of emigration were successful in that 210,000 Dutch left for overseas, solidifying the assumption that the Netherlands was overpopulated and incapable of accepting newcomers. That is, the slow immigration in the
pre-war years and emigration in the post-war years has shaped the mind of the Dutch people that they are not a country of immigration (Rath, 2009).

When mass immigration started in the 1950s, the Dutch found it hard to grasp the paradox of receiving immigrants while promoting the idea that they are a country of emigration (Rath, 2009). Some immigrants were warmly welcomed, usually for political reasons, such as refugees from Hungary, Chile, Nicaragua, and asylum seekers from the former Soviet Union; while others are discouraged or reluctantly accepted (Rath, 2009). The way the immigrants were treated in the Netherlands has changed depending on the source of the migratory flows and the political atmosphere throughout its migration history.

Immigration to the Netherlands after World War II reflected its colonial past. After the 1960s, the Netherlands received immigrants from its former colonies in Asia, and the Caribbean, guest workers from the Mediterranean, asylum seekers, students, professors and family members from all around the world (Rath, 2009). The colonial immigrants can be categorized into four heterogeneous groups: The first two cohorts were from the Dutch East India, namely, Indonesia: 1. the Dutch repatriates; indigenous Dutch people who lived in the colony in the Dutch East India and the Eurasians who were the children of interracial marriages between the Dutch natives and the Indonesians; and 2. the Moluccans; local soldiers recruited in the colonial army loyal to the Dutch Crown (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). The other two immigration flows were from the West Indies: 3. Surinam and 4. Netherlands Antilles (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). Surinam, the Netherlands and the Dutch Antilles were considered the three autonomous regions forming the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Surinamese and Antilleans were considered Dutch citizens from 1954 onwards. Therefore, there were in the habit of sending people to the motherland. The reaction of the Dutch government was not the same to all these groups, which impacted their adaptation and integration to the country. For instance, the Dutch repatriates were acknowledged as Dutch citizens and accepted into the society, while the Moluccans were viewed as ‘temporary’.

Labor migration came in the second phase of post-war migration (Karayalçın, 2015), as a common phenomenon throughout central Europe. At the beginning of the 1960s, the Netherlands started to recruit guest workers from Morocco and Turkey when the Netherlands experienced an acute shortage in the labor market, which was necessary to rebuild and industrialize the country after World War II (Karayalçın, 2015). The guest worker program was ended in 1973 as a result of the oil crisis of the 1970s, however, the number of guest workers continued to rise due to the family reunification programs which enabled family
members of the guest workers to move to the Netherlands (Scholten, 2011). Descendants of
the Turkish and Moroccan immigrants currently constitute the majority of non-Western and
Muslim immigrants in the contemporary Netherlands. Since the 1980s, the Netherlands has
received refugees from Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Currently, Syrian refugees make up
the largest refugee group in the country (Eurostat, 2019a).

The Netherlands is considered one of the five biggest hosts of Syrian refugees in the
EU (Orchard & Miller, 2014). However, absolutely speaking, the Netherlands hosts only a
small proportion of total number of Syrian refugees in the world (Hoekstra, 2016). According
to Amnesty International (2019), 95% of Syrian refugees are hosted in just 5 countries:
Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Netherlands received 2,621 Syrians in 2013, 11,595
in 2014 and 27,710 in 2015 (Hoekstra, 2016). According to the Asylum Information Database
(AIDA), despite the low number of Syrian refugees, the Netherlands prioritizes asylum
applications from Syrians and the protection rate of Syrians in the Netherlands is reported to
be 93% (AIDA, 2016). An extensive evaluation of the Netherlands’ response to the Syrian
refugees will be discussed as part of the EU’s response in the following section.

2.5.1. Legislative perspective on international migration and asylum in the Netherlands

The immigrant integration policy in the Netherlands has changed distinctively once in every
decade because new policy narratives emerged as well as new perspectives on defining,
conceptualizing immigration and integration; and categorizing the involved groups (Scholten,
2011). The Netherlands did not have any integration policy until the 1970s mostly because the
guest workers were considered temporary. When the guest workers were joined by their
families in the Netherlands and became permanent residents despite the former expectations,
the Dutch government introduced the Minorities Policy in the 1980s. The Minorities Policy
had distinct multiculturalist traits in that migrant communities were free to maintain their
cultural, linguistic and religious distinctiveness. The government did not put much pressure
on the immigrants to identify with the Dutch society or to learn the Dutch language. Muslim
immigrants in particular were able to take advantage of the new multiculturalist system for a
decade as they were given a chance to open their schools with a religious curriculum, vote in
local elections in 1985 and build mosques (Karayalçın, 2015). Therefore, the first-generation
guest workers and their children were not given any basic orientation to the Dutch culture but
were also not exposed to the harsh assimilationist implementation by the Dutch government
(Karayalçın, 2015). The Integration Policy in the 1990s aimed for a quicker and improved
inclusion of the newcomers in the Dutch society and had more universalist qualities. The
Newcomers’ Integration Law introduced at the end of the 1990s had more assimilationist traits in that all new immigrants were required to participate in the integration program, which facilitated language learning, social and vocational orientation. It reflected the populist and the political concerns about socio-cultural tensions in the Dutch society concomitant with the international events (such as 9/11) (Scholten, 2011). The Newcomers’ Integration Law was replaced by the Integration Law in 2007, which imposed the integration responsibility not only on the newcomers but also the oldcomers who had been living in the country without a sufficient knowledge of the Dutch language and the Dutch society (Scholten, 2011). The Netherlands’ current integration policy is categorized as temporary integration, which encourages the public to see immigrants as equals but foreigners at the same time (MIPEX, 2021b). The Netherlands scores 57 out of 100 on MIPEX (2021b), which corresponds to halfway-favorable integration policies, which indicates that the migration context in the Netherlands presents more opportunities than obstacles for immigrants.

The Netherlands has an obligation to admit asylum seekers based on two main international treaties on protection of refugees: the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees and the European Convention on Human Rights (Government of the Netherlands, 2019). In order to apply for asylum in the current Dutch system, asylum seekers need to report their presence to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) in TerApel at the time of entry in the Netherlands (Hoekstra, 2016). The asylum procedures start after asylum seekers are interviewed by the authorities. Authorities decide whether to grant protection or not based on the information provided on the asylum seeker’s identity, nationality, travel route, and reasons for asylum in the Netherlands. Even though asylum seekers are normally accommodated in houses; due to the high number of Syrian refugees, places such as gyms and barracks were being temporarily used for the accommodation of asylum seekers (Hoekstra, 2016; Van Heelsum, 2017).

The contemporary Dutch system offers the same rights to all asylum seekers, they are granted the refugee status or subsidiary protection (AIDA, 2016). Once Syrians are granted protection in the Netherlands, they are given a temporary residence permit, which allows them to remain in the country for 5 years if the situation in Syria does not improve (Hoekstra, 2016). Through the Netherlands’ dispersal policy, they are randomly assigned to municipalities across the Netherlands, which are obligated to accept them. The number of refugees to be housed in each municipality is proportional to the local population of the municipality. Syrian refugees have the right to apply on behalf of their family members through the family reunification program within three months after the asylum permit is
granted (AIDA, 2016). After being registered in the municipalities, they are offered housing, allowed Dutch social security benefits; they can start language courses, search for a job, or continue their studies (Hoekstra, 2016).

Prior to the finalization of their refugee status, asylum seekers in the Netherlands are prohibited from working, studying, or learning Dutch, which all foster integration in the host community (Rath, 2009; Van Heelsum, 2017). This procedure is a common source of difficulty among asylum seekers as they end up feeling completely detached from the Dutch community, even though they might have waited up to two years in the Netherlands for their asylum applications to be processed (Van Heelsum, 2017). Forced waiting and lack of clarity about the application outcome during this process are often extremely frustrating for Syrian refugees although they are reported to have a shorter waiting period on average (9 months) compared to refugees from other countries (18 months) (Van Heelsum, 2017). Indeed, the literature indicates that long-term residence in the reception facilities influence the course of the integration process negatively, leading to delayed integration process and mental health problems (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2018).

As a member state of the EU, the Netherlands is obliged to follow the general EU guidelines and legislation on immigration. Therefore, the legal framework in the context of asylum seekers in the EU will be discussed in the following section. For a broader understanding of the Syrians’ experience, the EU’s response to immigration and Syrian refugees in particular will also be examined.

2.6. The migration landscape in Europe

Increased cultural and religious diversity in the Western world created by immigration has brought up important issues of managing pluralism (Badea et al., 2018; Mahfud et al., 2017), reducing prejudice (Badea et al., 2018) and more emphasis on the concepts of perceived cultural distance and perception of threat. As proposed by Allport (1954), perceived cultural distance between the dominant, immigrant and minority groups seems to be an important factor for negative intergroup attitudes. Larger perceived cultural distance has been found to be associated with stronger feelings of threat (Guan et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2006; Van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012). It is likely that the majority groups perceive immigrants with different cultural worldviews as a threat to the culture of the host community, national identity and cultural continuity, which in turn lead to higher levels of prejudice, discrimination, and more display of negative out-group attitudes towards immigrants (Badea et al., 2018; González et al., 2008; Mahfud et al., 2015; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). An experimental study that
examined the majority group members’ attitudes towards Moroccan immigrants in France and the Netherlands found a positive correlation between cultural distance, threat and prejudice and a strong association between threat and prejudice, with the average scores for all these three variables being significantly higher in the Netherlands (Mahfud et al., 2017).

The perception of threat can lead to prejudicial attitudes regardless of whether the threat is real or symbolic (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Symbolic threats are based on perceived group differences in values, norms, and beliefs (González et al., 2008). Religion is often a pronounced constituent of perceived group differences and cultural distance (Triandis, 1994). It is also considered an essential part of national identity and used as a criterion for defining who belongs to the national group and whose identity should be rejected (namely a symbolic boundary) (Blackwood et al., 2015). Therefore, perceived symbolic threat to the existence of national identity or cultural continuity in the host community can be based on the religious differences observed in the Muslim immigrants in Europe (Badea et al., 2018; Badea, Iyer, Aebischer, 2018; González et al., 2008). For instance, expression of Muslim identity in terms of Islamic schools, mosques, veiled women, the Quran, Islamic holidays are typically seen as undermining the the western civilization and a serious threat to the (Jewish-Christian) roots of European culture (Smeekes et al., 2011). According to research, such existential threat to a national group increases the motivation to protect the in-group and reject the out-group (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011). People concerned about their in-group tend to show negative attitudes towards Muslim immigrants, who are perceived as threatening and undermining their way of life (Riek et al., 2006; Smeekes et al., 2011). Indeed, research finds high levels of discrimination against Muslim immigrant groups in the West (Adida et al., 2016; Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Anier et al., 2018).

Europe often perceives immigration as an ‘invasion’ and represents itself as besieged by flows of migrants from across the world (Mamadouh, 2012), implying an underlying perceived existential threat to their national identity or cultural continuity (Badea et al., 2018). The word ‘invasion’ has been used as a storyline by social and political actors as a vague conceptualization of immigration in Europe. Immigrants are generally perceived as ‘unarmed invaders,’ the exact phrase used by an official in the European Commission’s Directorate General for Trade (Migration Policy Centre, 2015).

Europe’s understanding of migration and attitudes towards migrants, particularly Muslim immigrants, have evolved. Since the 1970s, the form of perceived threat by migrants has changed from perceived realistic threat based on socio-economic issues (competition for jobs, housing, overcrowding) to perceived symbolic threat based on socio-cultural concerns
(lifestyles, norms, values that differ from those of the host society) (Mamadouh, 2012). In the 1970s, immigration was still mainly portrayed as a positive consequence of the rapid post-war economic growth (Karayalçın, 2015; Mamadouh, 2012). It began to be problematized based on labor issues such as unfair concurrence for jobs due to the acceptance of lower wages and worse working conditions, and housing problems (Mamadouh, 2012). Immigrant groups were defined by socio-economic status (guest workers) and less importantly by their national origin (Turks, Algerians, Moroccans). The growing numbers of refugees (Bosnians, Somalis and Iraqis) in the early 1990s, especially linked to the Yugoslavian conflicts, were resented for ‘stealing jobs.’ As a response to the perceived realistic threat based on socio-economic concerns, most European countries including the Netherlands and France, denied immigrants’ access to the labor market (Mamadouh, 2012). However, not being allowed to work resulted in compulsory reliance on welfare, which fueled the portrayal of refugees as ‘taking advantage of the welfare state.’ In the 1970s, the root of the perceived threat of ‘invasion’ was observed at the ‘neighborhood’ level based on socio-economic concerns (Mamadouh, 2012).

Over the years, the threat of ‘invasion’ spread beyond the neighborhood level to the whole nation and was considered as being more comprehensive. In other words, perception of invasion by immigrants continued to be fueled by symbolic threats based on cultural distinctiveness more so than perceived realistic threats based on socio-economic issues. When the second-generation immigrants grew up in the 1980s and gained visibility in public, immigrants’ cultural and religious backgrounds were increasingly portrayed as the core of the immigration problems by the anti-immigrant activists, politicians and the media (Mamadouh, 2012). Anti-immigrant parties emerged in the Netherlands and were able to obtain seats in Parliament in the 1990s (Mamadouh, 2012). Cultural issues such as different habits, dress codes, and signs in foreign languages; the issues of public space and public order such as problems of delinquency and insecurity were given more emphasis rather than the socio-economic issues. For instance, the Dutch community tended to perceive the discrepancies between the values associated with the ethnic and Muslim identity of the immigrants and Dutch ones as a threat to the Dutch unity (Karayalçın, 2015; Smeekes et al., 2011). The perceived threat implied an ethnic hierarchy (Hagendoorn, 1995) with Dutch being the dominant and Muslim immigrants being the subordinate ethnic group. The underlying message was that the Dutch values were superior over the minorities’ values, which were bound to be backward. The common argument was that (Muslim) immigrants were too incompatible with European norms, and Western secular values to integrate or assimilate in Europe (Mamadouh, 2012). This assumption was further strengthened by the positioning of
Muslim culture as a threat to Christian culture (Croucher, 2013; Smeekes et al., 2011; Trittler, 2019). Thus, Muslim immigrants and their descendants were alienated based on racial and religious terms: a dark skin color and/or Islamic faith and, not anymore, on their socio-economic positions. For instance, France, especially after the Algerian independence war, has taken measures against Arabs and Islam to defend the nation and national territory. In a study of Senegalese immigrants in France, Muslim Senegalese were found to experience worse life outcomes than Christian Senegalese immigrants particularly in income and work-related success (Adida et al., 2016). The negative views towards the Senegalese were found to be mediated by religion as opposed to race.

Attention to Islam and immigration has increased due to numerous confrontations in which the perpetrators of violence have invoked Islam as their justification such as the Salman Rushdie affair in 1989, 9/11, the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 in Amsterdam, the Madrid bombing in 2004, those in London on 7 July 2005, and the Danish cartoon affairs (Klinger et al., 2014; Mamadouh, 2012). As a result of such occurrences, stereotypes and negative change in public discourse, Islam has been constructed as a pervasive threat to national security and Muslims became the targets of frequent prejudice and discrimination in the West (Adida et al., 2016; Allen & Nielsen, 2002). In three weeks after 9/11, European Centre on Racism and Xenophobia reported 42 cases of hostile conduct and violence against Muslims in the Netherlands (EUMC, 2001).

Along with the growing cultural and religious diversity in Europe over the last decade (Mahfud et al., 2017), support for multiculturalism (Van de Vijver et al., 2008), populism also increased and the emerging right-wing populist parties gained extensive support from the wider population (Trittler, 2019). Leading politicians attacked Islam using harsher levels of anti-Muslim political rhetoric (Croucher, 2013) and defined Islam as a backward and fascist religion that seriously threatens Dutch society, and national identity and culture (Smeekes et al., 2011; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005). In public debates, Islam and Muslims were typically presented and perceived as threatening national identity, culture, and security, and were held responsible for the problems in the host society (González et al., 2008; Smeekes et al., 2011). The Netherlands was found to have the highest percentage (51%) of the unfavorable opinions about Muslims by the Pew Global Project among all countries examined, such as France with 36% (González et al., 2008). In these contexts, the integration of Muslim minorities and the recognition of their religious rights have raised political and public debates and became major challenges for Western European societies since at least the turn of the millennium (Foner & Alba, 2008). According to Zolberg and Woon (1999), the focus on Islam and Muslims in
political debates in Europe can be attributed to the fact that the European identity, even with national differences, is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition relative to which Islam constitutes a ‘bright boundary’ and Muslim immigrants are a visible ‘other’ (Alba, 2005). Even though North-West Europe is marked by increased levels of secularization in which religion is counter-normative to a great extent (Friedman & Saroglou, 2010), Smeekes et al. (2011) similarly found that a historical narrative which emphasizes the Christian roots of the European nations can mobilize people to increase their opposition towards the expression of Muslim identity.

Increased threat to a social group from a social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1978) and rejection by dominant host community based on RIM (Branscombe et al., 1999) may lead to increased in-group identification. Group members attach themselves strongly to their group values to counteract the negative effects of perceived threat or discrimination. In-group identification can be observed among both the European host community members who perceive threat to their national identity and Muslim immigrants in Europe who are subject to rejection and perceived discrimination. For instance, research has shown that Christianity is more salient to national identity in European countries with larger Muslim populations (Kunovich, 2006). On the other side, a study by Connor (2010) found that Muslims tend to be more religious in European countries in which the mainstream maintains strong anti-immigrant sentiments. In reaction to the climate of distrust in European countries, the descendants of Muslim immigrants, growing up as second and third-generations minority group members, who were never immigrants but have citizenship and education to exercise their political and civic rights, respond by explicitly demonstrating their Muslim identity in public spaces (through religious attire or growing a beard) and also demanding special institutions such as places of worship, religious schools, halal food, acknowledgement of Islamic holidays; available to the non-Muslim Europeans/immigrants. Therefore, it can be assumed that salience of the religious differences (boundary) in Europe strengthens the religious identity and the visibility of the second, third-generation Muslims, which paradoxically further intensifies the invasion fears of anti-immigrant groups and perceived threats to national identity and cultural continuity.

Given this migration landscape and the fears of invasion by the Muslim immigrants, European nations are facing a specific problem integrating the Muslim population (Koroutchev, 2016) and have remained reluctant to comply with international law concerning Muslim refugees. In 1990s, there were over 2 million refugees escaping the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Even though these people met the refugee status, most European countries
offered only temporary protection and implemented their own national laws due to the lack of consensus on temporary protection. In 2009, the EU aimed for the resettlement of 10,000 Iraqi refugees in Europe, however, only 5,100 were offered international protection. In 2012, UNHCR requested for the swift resettlement of 5,400 refugees from Libya, but the EU failed to respond quickly and settled only 801 refugees. The EU has had a similar approach in the case of asylum seekers from Syria allowing much less than their fair share of Syrian refugees in Europe and failing to provide fair, efficient and effective protection.

2.6.1. The European Union’s response to the crisis of Syrian refugees

The number of Syrian refugees admitted in Europe has remained very low due to the obstacles placed by the EU in reaching Europe such as difficulties in obtaining legal means to arrive Europe, construction of barbed wire fences at the European borders, withdrawal from the Dublin treaty by some European member states, and signing agreements with transit countries to restrain refugees. By the end of 2013, only 340 Syrians were resettled in Europe. In 2013, 50,470 Syrians submitted asylum applications in the EU almost doubling the number from 2012 (Orchard & Miller, 2014). By June 2014, fewer than 4% (approximately 123,600) of the 2.8 million registered refugees from Syria were able to find refuge in Europe (Orchard & Miller, 2014). Europe recognized the need for the resettlement of Syrian refugees when the UNHCR asked the countries to share the burden on Syria’s neighboring countries by resettling a quota of 30,000 refugees in 2013. Europe pledged to resettle and grant humanitarian admission to 31,797 refugees in 2014. In 2015-2016, UNHCR increased its call for resettlement of 100,000 refugees, which was still a very small number in proportion to the total number. According to the UNHCR data, there were 1,151,865 Syrian asylum applications in Europe between 2011-2016 (UNHCR, 2016a). Despite the rise in the refugee flows in 2015, the number of refugees in the EU was calculated to be less than 10% of the total number of displaced Syrians (Migration Policy Centre, 2016). Still, Syrians have accounted for the largest number of asylum applicants in the EU member states from 2013-2019 (Eurostat, 2019b). Due to the agreements, the EU established with transit countries to stop the refugee flows, the number of Syrian refugees in Europe started to decline as of 2016. The number of Syrian first-time applicants fell from 102,000 in 2017 to 81,000 in 2018 (Eurostat, 2019b).

At the outset of the Syrian crisis, the EU applauded the uprising against the Assad regime for its promise of democracy, human rights, and stability in the region. The EU perceived the Syrian crisis to be the part of the Arab Spring and expected it to end with the
transfer of the power to the opposition (Nas, 2019). However, when violence intensified in Syria and 5.4 million people started seeking refuge initially in the closest borders (UNHCR, 2018b), the EU focused more on security concerns given the situation in Syria, which included threats of terrorism and migratory pressures (Nas, 2019). Despite its initial support for the demonstrations in Syria, the EU has been slow, reluctant, and resistant to commit to burden sharing and offering resettlement within the EU, unlike four of Syria’s neighboring countries (Genç & Şirin, 2016; Nas, 2019). Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, with the exception of Israel, accepted refugees into their countries even though they are not signatories of the Refugee Convention of 1951 (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012; Genç & Şirin, 2016).

Provision of humanitarian and development aid, initial attempts to implement sanctions against the Assad regime, and seeking a political resolution to the conflict in Syria were the responses from the EU (Orchard & Miller, 2014; Fargues & Fandrich, 2012; Nas, 2019). The EU forfeited the normative aspects of its foreign policy concerning the refugee situation and adopted a defensive approach to shield itself against the spillover effects of the Syrian crisis without being directly involved (Nas, 2019).

The EU was not responsive to the refugee flows until the summer of 2015. The EU has not put its temporary protection regime in force for the Syrian crisis (Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016). Not having neither a coherent plan nor political will to take collective action (Genç & Şirin, 2016), the EU’s internal policy has been ‘maintain and protect’ whilst the external strategy has been ‘assist and contain’ (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). As an internal strategy, the EU sought to ‘maintain’ its present order; ‘protect’ its borders from the inflow of refugees and restrict Syrians’ movement to Europe. For that reason; when the violence peaked in Syria, and large number of refugees began crossing the borders, the EU increased its border security, tightened external border control by deploying 1800 border guards along the border, implementing seventeen rounds of EU restrictive measures between 2011-2012, constructing a 10,5-km-long, 4-meter-tall barbed wire fence along the Turkish-Greece border, fencing along the Turkish-Bulgarian border, and 26 floating barriers along the Meric (Maritsa) river dividing Turkey and Greece (Genç & Şirin, 2016; Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). The EU granted protection only to a limited number of refugees who already made it to Europe under difficult and dangerous conditions (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). Until February 2015, the EU admitted only 47,059 Syrians and confirmed some form of settlement. As an external strategy, the EU has provided aid to the hosting countries in order to contain the crisis in the region without offering settlement prospects in Europe. According to Orchard and Miller (2014), the
EU launched a Regional Development and Protection Program to help refugees within Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq rather than offering resettlement within the EU. At the peak of the refugee crisis between 2015-2016, the EU has received about a million Syrian refugees in search of legal status, better living standards and permanent solutions in Europe (International Organization for Migration, 2015; MiReKoc, 2019) challenging refugee reception capability of the EU both in terms of physical and administrative capacity and the political cost of receiving refugees (European Commission, 2017; Nas, 2019). In order to handle the challenges emanating from the crisis (1) in dealing with the threat of terrorism and (2) averting the refugee flows to Europe, (3) outsourcing Syrian refugees to other nations, the EU started collaborating with transit countries. It established deals with Turkey, and similarly with Georgia, Moldova, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon (MiReKoc, 2019). In order to avert migration across the sea, the EU negotiated with Turkey on several agreements (Readmission Agreement in 2013, the Joint Action Plan in 2015, Turkey-EU Statement in 2016) in return for financial and technical assistance for Syrian refugees in Turkey, reinforcing the accession process, upgrading the Turkey- EU customs union and accelerating the visa liberation process (Nas, 2019). Turkey was expected to tighten border controls, curb the refugee flow to Europe and readmit all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of March, 2016 (Genç & Şirin, 2016). The implementation of such deals has been successful in significantly decreasing the irregular crossings from the Mediterranean routes. The peaks of mass inflows in 2015-2016 have subsided by the end of 2017-2018. The number of first-time asylum applicants decreased considerably by 551,000 first-time applicants from 2016-17 to 665,000 in 2017 and to 581,000 in 2018 as a result of significantly lower numbers of applicants from Syria and Nigeria (Eurostat, 2019b). However, Turkey could not achieve progress in the revitalization of accession talks and visa liberalization promised as part of the negotiations, in return for Turkey’s fending off the risks and threats to the EU.

There is significant variation in the attitude of the EU governments toward the Syrian refugee situation, the quality of the programs offered for the asylum seekers, the interpretation and practices of the legal framework, the number of refugees within the countries and the amount of financial and humanitarian aid offered. It is possible to divide the EU countries roughly into two groups in order to explain the existing variation: the southern border countries of Greece, Bulgaria and Italy; and Central and Western European countries such as Germany and Sweden. The attitudes of the southern border countries can be characterized as
less welcoming and unfriendly towards the Syrian refugees, with allegations of mistreatment towards the asylum seekers.

The southern border EU countries: Greece, Bulgaria and Italy, are the first countries where refugees enter Europe either by land or the sea routes. The most popular routes to Europe are by land from Syria via Turkey to Greece and Bulgaria; and by sea from the Turkish coast to Greek Islands and Italy (Orchard & Miller, 2014). Due to the strict visa regulations, border control mechanisms and security features making it exceedingly difficult to legally enter Europe, many people have chosen the perilous sea route mainly through Greece and Italy. Greece is the major arrival country in Europe with 814,750 arrivals between January 1, and December 21, 2015 (Genç & Şirin, 2016). According to the International Organization for Migration, 990,671 refugees are estimated to have arrived in Europe mainly by the sea route at the end of 2015 (Genç & Şirin, 2016).

Greece and Italy do not have regular resettlement programs, if at all. For instance, Greece does not have a refugee resettlement program and has not pledged to resettle or grant humanitarian admission to Syrian refugees (Orchard & Miller, 2014). Moreover, Greece is known to have an inaccessible asylum system where refugees are unable to claim asylum. Instead, they wait to go to other friendlier European countries to apply for asylum. For instance, since 2011 until the end of 2013, of the 17,000 Syrians that entered Greece, only 275 applied for asylum in Greece. Greece is known to systematically deny asylum to Syrian people and force their return to Turkey. Similarly, nearly 94% of Syrians arriving in Italy seek asylum in other countries. For instance, only 695 of the 11,300 Syrians who reached Italy by sea in 2013, applied for asylum in Italy (Orchard & Miller, 2014). These occurrences were counter to the Dublin Treaty, according to which the asylum seekers need to be processed where they arrive, and should not be forwarded elsewhere.

Practices of detaining asylum seekers vary significantly among European states even though under international law asylum seekers should be detained only in exceptional circumstances (Orchard & Miller, 2014). There are allegations of unlawful detention, detention in poor conditions, serious abuse of Syrians in some states, particularly in border countries (Orchard & Miller, 2014). In Greece, Bulgaria, and Italy alike, there have been several cases of Syrian refugees being detained and arrested for protracted periods of time in inappropriate, overcrowded, and illegal conditions violating international and EU law (Orchard & Miller, 2014). There are reports of maltreatment by the border guards, such as being taken off the boat to be left adrift at sea and physical abuse. The southern border EU
countries have been criticized for their approach internationally and by the Central and Western EU countries.

There is also significant variation among European countries in their assessment of Syrian asylum application and the type of protection granted even though organizations such as UNHCR acknowledge that Syrian asylum seekers meet the criteria for refugee status and international protection (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012; Orchard & Miller, 2014). For instance, while Sweden offers permanent residency to all people regardless of the type of protection they qualify for, Greece have arrested some asylum seekers for illegal entry even though there is no legal system of entry in place. The interpretation and the meaning of refugee status and subsidiary protection vary depending on the country.

Syrian refugees are not evenly distributed among the member states in the EU. Out of 28 member states, only Germany and Sweden had a friendly stance and opened their doors to the largest number of refugees in the EU (Genç & Şirin, 2016). Syrian asylum claims made in Germany and Sweden accounted for more than half of the total in Europe in 2013 (Orchard & Miller, 2014). Germany has been recognized as having the largest humanitarian admission program for Syrians in Europe. Sweden is distinguished for being the first country in Europe to grant permanent residence to all refugees from Syria regardless of their status (Genç & Şirin, 2016; Orchard & Miller, 2014). Germany, with more than 380,515 cumulated applications, and Sweden with 109,590, were the EU’s top receiving countries in 2016 (Syrian Refugees, 2016). The highest number of Syrian applicants in Europe was registered in Germany with 44,000 in 2018. The Syrian refugee population in the remaining 26 EU countries excluding Germany and Sweden, accounted to 0.7% of the Syrian refugee population in the main host countries in 2016 (Genç & Şirin, 2016).

2.6.2. The legal framework in European Union

The EU is expected to assume responsibility in the case of Syria because it is linked to the region through several policy agreements (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). One of them is the Association Agreements in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership also known as the Barcelona Process designed to promote peace, stability and prosperity in 1995 (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). Syria and its neighboring countries have links with Europe via the European Neighborhood Policy instrument, Global Approach to Mobility and Mobility Partnerships (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). Also, member states are required to comply with international law and to follow instructions from the UNHCR. Aside of legal considerations, it is arguably a humanitarian disaster occurring on Europe’s doorstep that affects the stability of the whole
region. Therefore, there is crucial need for European countries to resettle more refugees to help alleviate the overwhelming burden on the hosting countries neighboring Syria (Orchard & Miller, 2014).

The EU countries that are the signatories to the 1951 Convention leading to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol are mandated by the international refugee law to follow UNHCR’s requests in helping the refugees (Orchard & Miller, 2014). However, these countries are not obligated to provide resettlement places, even though the UNHCR has been encouraging resettlement as a lasting solution (Orchard & Miller, 2014). The Council of Europe legal system and the EU legal system are the two legal systems in Europe that govern the international protection in Europe. The Council of Europe protects people from refoulment but does not give refugee status (Orchard & Miller, 2014). On the other hand, the EU law gives rise to refugee status; and subsidiary protection for those who do not meet the criteria as refugees in the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol but require international protection. The Charter of Fundamental Rights that allows for the right for asylum in Europe was accepted into the EU law by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 and is binding on the EU member states. In short, the EU is mandated by the EU law and the international law to offer protection to asylum seekers legally entering Europe, although the type of protection offered may vary.

Nevertheless, there are significant gaps in the legal system and limitations to attaining legal rights. The main limitation is that Europe ceases to have a legal entry system for people fleeing life threatening conditions. Although people can apply for asylum in the EU, the right to apply for asylum is only given to those who are already in Europe or at its borders. Since the EU has not created a legal mechanism for lawful entry for people to claim asylum, only a limited number of refugees can enter the EU through legal route. Otherwise, people entering the EU have been detained, arrested for illegal entry or pushed back from the borders. Another important limitation is that rejection of a person’s asylum application at a border is not considered refoulment if the person came from a third country regardless of having a legal status in the third country (Orchard & Miller, 2014). Thus, asylum seekers can be returned from the borders without being offered resettlement in the EU to third countries even when they are not offered legal status in the third countries.

2.7. Conclusion and discussion

The high number of Syrian refugees has social, economic, and political costs for Turkey, which complicate the protection of the socio-economic, social and psychological well-being
of Syrian refugees. Given the long-term stay of high number of refugees, Turkey was able to meet only the basic needs of the Syrian refugees. Therefore, conditions provided to Syrian refugees in Turkey can be significantly improved. There is urgent need for better reception, orientation, and settlement programs, creation of work opportunities, and provision of mental health care services. The Netherlands hosts a significantly lower number of Syrian refugees in comparison and therefore has been able to channel more resources into resettling the Syrian refugees, such as providing opportunities to learn the native language, receive a monthly loan, and study or work in the Netherlands.

In terms of handling the refugee crisis, Turkey’s role has been drastically different than those of the EU countries including the Netherlands. Turkey has been involved in the Syrian conflict first-hand and was more directly exposed to the imminent threats feared by the EU. Since Turkey opened its borders to the Syrian refugees at the very beginning, it was confronted with the threats of terrorism and large population of migrants, consequences feared by the EU countries. In terms of its Syrian policy, Turkey followed a more assertive strategy in order to provide a secure zone along Turkey’s border while the EU followed a resistant and defensive strategy to remove the dangerous spillover effects of the crisis from the doorsteps of Europe. Therefore, for the EU, the threats have been more distant and indirect, in comparison and were handled via the transit countries including Turkey. Turkey’s policy toward Syria had an important positive effect on EU security (Nas, 2019). At the same time, however, Turkey’s role as a barricade against potential threats to EU was met with rising populism, anti-immigration approach in the Europe’s public opinion and politics and a growing opposition to its membership in the EU (Nas, 2019).

The perception of threat significantly impacts intergroup relations between Muslim minorities and European host majorities, and the acculturation of Muslim immigrants in Europe (Croucher, 2013; González et al., 2008). Host country nationals’ perception of symbolic threat based on cultural and group differences is a strong predictor of prejudicial and discriminatory reactions towards (Muslim) immigrants (Badea et al., 2018; González et al., 2008). Research shows that when natives feel threatened, they are more likely to believe that (Muslim) immigrants do not want to assimilate (Croucher, 2013). Assimilation is a hierarchy-enhancing ideology that endorses the dominant position of majority group members by using their cultural characteristics to define national identity (Badea et al., 2018). Thus, promotion of assimilation as an acculturation ideology can create a sense of security for host group members with strong national identification, like a shield protecting against perceived threat of immigration (Badea et al., 2018). However, presumptions of lack of assimilation of
Muslims and a sense of their incompatibility of in the European culture may cause host group members to become less receptive and accepting of immigrants, which undoubtedly leads to lower levels of immigrant acculturation and increased intergroup conflict in the migration context (Berry, 2005; Croucher, 2013). Furthermore, existential threat to a national group increases the motivation to protect the in-group and reject the out-group (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011). Thus, majority groups tend to intensify the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, namely (ethnic, linguistic, religious) differences/boundaries in order to protect themselves (Croucher, 2013; Trittler, 2019). Bright religious boundaries in the case of immigrants in Europe are well known to significantly impact the integration of immigrants (Foner & Alba, 2008) and lead to heightened tensions between the majority and immigrant groups such as the 2005 bombings in London among others (Croucher, 2013).

Based on the study of the migration contexts, one is able to draw parallels and make connections between contemporary Turkey and post-war Western Europe in terms of perception of threat and attitude towards immigrants. Syrian refugees in Turkey were initially welcomed by the Turkish natives and the Turkish government (İçduygu, 2015a; Lazarev & Sharma, 2015; Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). As their numbers grew, they were considered to pose a realistic threat based on socio-economic concerns (costs on the national budget, raise in local rent prices, depressed wages) (Kirişçi, 2014), as it was the case in the 1970s with the guest workers in Germany and the Netherlands. The socio-economic threat was felt initially in the neighborhoods that hosted a noticeable number of Syrian refugees. High levels of unemployment and underemployment among the Syrian refugees have made them depend on government aid, which has further created a negative perception of Syrians as freeloaders. As years went by and Syrian refugees stayed beyond their welcome, the perceived socio-cultural threats have become more pronounced, such as Arabic signs, proliferation of Arabic culture, and Islamization of urban life, especially in some Turkish regions that embrace a republican and secular identity (Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). Perceived symbolic threats based on socio-cultural concerns along with the perceived realistic threats based on socio-economic concerns have quickly surpassed the neighborhood level and came to be perceived as being more prevalent. Such forms of perceived threats gave rise to political debates in the country and the case of Syrian refugees has become a highly politicized issue. As response to the growing perception of economic and cultural threats, Syrian refugees are exposed to hostility and discrimination in Turkey, exacerbated by their extended duration of stay, economic, religious and political reasons (Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019).
Based on the analysis of the migration history of the countries, migration concerns that are not dealt in the short term seem to turn into greater long-term challenges impacting not only the first-generation immigrants but the second and third-generation descendants. For that reason, Turkey should anticipate long-term concerns and find durable solutions should it remain as the permanent host of Syrian refugees. For instance, Turkey should consider adapting its labor markets to the magnitude of the Syrian refugees. Increasing employment and better working conditions will facilitate the economic well-being, social integration of Syrian refugees and minimize the perceived socio-economic threats by the majority, lessening hostility and prejudice against Syrian refugees. Precautions should be taken to prevent potential intergroup conflicts and heightened tensions among the groups involved.

It is recommended that the EU member states work towards making the refugee migration and settlement more manageable in their countries and offer resettlement to Syrian refugees who are no longer fully safe in the transit countries. The EU should commit to alleviating the migration concerns in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and thereby improve the living conditions of Syrian refugees. Migration policy is crucial to solving the refugee crisis in the EU and alleviating its unwanted effects in the long-term. The EU countries should make reforms in their migration policy if needed, to create a favorable climate for the minority groups by (1) minimizing the negative impact of the populist movements and the anti-immigrant discourse of the media and (2) creating a more inclusive society and facilitating more frequent interaction between the majority and minority groups. Thereby, the majority groups will be less likely to exhibit socio-cultural distance, which will cause minority groups to feel accepted and be motivated to initiate contact with the host society and identify with the host culture. Future research should be directed towards understanding the antecedents of negative intergroup relations in the host countries in an attempt to promote a positive acculturation experience for all the acculturating groups.
CHAPTER 3

Being a Syrian university student in Turkey: Intergroup relations, psychosocial issues and boundary formation

3.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter reports on a qualitative study that investigated the experiences of 15 Syrian university students in Izmir, Turkey, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The research was geared towards exploring the social, academic, and linguistic issues emerging in the acculturation period; factors facilitating the acculturation process as well as students’ coping strategies. The results are discussed within the framework of Berry’s acculturation model (1980), the acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) and Bourhis et al.’s (1997) interactive acculturation model (IAM), theory on boundary formation (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2002) and intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel et al., 1971). On the basis of the participants’ self-reports, it was found that intergroup relations in the host society, perceived attitudes of the host group members, language, financial and academic issues, and lack of institutional support emerge as major factors affecting acculturation. An important finding of this study is that religiosity appears to be a major boundary marker although the refugee and host groups share the same religion, affecting intergroup relations, psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. In-group support from other Syrian refugees and social support from the host group members seem to be main factors facilitating adaptation along with acquiring the host language. The implications of the study are beneficial to the policy makers in anticipating the acculturation-related concerns, creating preventative measures and implementing long-term solutions.

3.2. Introduction

This chapter is based on a research project that set out to explore life experiences of Syrian university students in Izmir, Turkey in order to identify social, cultural and linguistic issues, explore factors facilitating adaptation and understand coping strategies emerging in the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, 5.6 million people have fled Syria primarily heading to neighboring countries like Lebanon,

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Jordan and Turkey as well as Europe to seek safety. Of Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1.74 million people fall between the ages of 0-18 and approximately half a million are between the ages of 19-24 in 2020 (Mülteciler Derneği, 2020). Syrian youth makes up a significant portion of Syrian refugees in Turkey, not only in terms of numbers but also as the forefront of conflict resolution to rebuild civil society and achieve peace in the area (Rogers et al., 2016). Syrian youth with higher education backgrounds are expected to mediate Turkish-Syrian relations and to inform Turkey’s integration policies and reforms in the higher education system. However, with the collapse of the education system in Syria and barriers to education in the host countries; university-aged Syrian refugees have been disconnected from higher education and referred to as the ‘lost generation’ (Watenpaugh et al., 2014). In Turkey, only 3% of the university-aged Syrian refugees were able to get registered in higher education programs in 2016 (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetimi Sistemi, 2017). Thus, this study aims to explore the life experiences of Syrian university students in Izmir, Turkey; explore their major difficulties, the factors facilitating their adaptation process and their coping strategies.

To better understand the context of Syrian acculturation, the following subsections provide background information on the recent history of Syrian refugees in Turkey, evaluation of Turkey’s response to Syrian asylum seekers and major difficulties faced by refugees, theories of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1980; 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997), boundary formation theory (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2002) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1982) on group formation and intergroup behavior.

3.3. Turkey’s response to Syrian refugees and main challenges

Turkey, as the biggest host to Syrian refugees in the world, accommodates over 3.7 million Syrian refugees, according to UNHCR (2020a). To integrate refugees in the Turkish society, Turkey formally transformed its migration and asylum policies with the enactment of a comprehensive law applicable to all foreigners. Syrian asylum seekers were granted ‘temporary protection’ on October 22, 2014, which made them eligible for health, education, and other social services (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). Despite the benefits and opportunities made available to Syrian refugees under temporary protection, there seem to be barriers to accessing these rights. Syrian refugees are impacted by difficulties in education, language barriers, unemployment, poverty, difficulties with registration; all of which leave them vulnerable to the lack of services, limited access to resources and exploitation in the labor market.
Education has been a major challenge for Syrian refugees in Turkey and around the world. In 2016, only 14% of the school-aged refugee children were reported to be enrolled in schools in Istanbul (European Economic and Social Committee, 2016). This problem was caused partly by the conditions of the refugees themselves and partly by the barriers in Turkey. Among the reasons for lack of enrollment in schools were families’ prioritizing children’s work for financial gains over schooling and being unable to pay for educational expenses (Orchard & Miller, 2014). The barriers to education in Turkey consisted of insufficiency and location of the schools, fears around safety, bullying and discrimination. According to the most recent data, since 2019, 680,000 school-age Syrian refugee children has been registered in the education system in Turkey, yet, 400,000 still remain out of school (UNICEF, 2020).

University-aged students also face challenges in the pursuit of higher education. According to the registered data from the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetimi Sistemi, 2020), there were over 480,000 university-aged refugees between the ages of 19-24 in 2018. In spite of the tremendous number of Syrian young population, only 3.1% of the Syrian university-aged population in Turkey was admitted to universities in 2016-2017 compared to the 2% in 2014 as estimated by Watenpaugh et al. (2014). There was nearly 53% increase in the number of Syrian university students from 2016-2017 academic year compared to the previous year. As of the 2016-2017 academic year, around 15,000 Syrian university students were registered in the universities in Turkey, 1149 of which are graduate students and 352 are doctoral students (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetimi Sistemi, 2020). For the academic year of 2018-2019, more than 27,000 Syrian university students registered in Turkish universities (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetimi Sistemi, 2020), which makes up approximately 5% of all university-aged Syrian refugees in Turkey. There has been a distinct gender difference in the number of admitted students as female students make up one third of total number of Syrian university students in Turkey, which is also reflected in the study cohort.

Watenpaugh et al. (2014) noted that language problems, financial problems, the decentralized admission process, frequent changes in regulation regarding Syrian students, documentation requirements, and difficulties navigating the system in Turkey constitute the main barriers to higher education. Aydın and Kaya (2017) found language to be the main challenge Syrian students faced in Turkish schools. They found that language barrier among other factors directly affect their academic performance. A study conducted by Biçer (2017) on the perception of Syrian refugees on Turkish language and culture indicated that speaking
Turkish has a significant role in building social relationships with the Turkish mainstream, finding jobs, and pursuing education. Biçer (2017) noted that language learning will increase majority acceptance of refugees and the refugees’ sense of belonging and adaptation in Turkey. Similarly, Kanat and Üstün (2015) stressed that learning Turkish is in most cases imperative to studying in Turkey and is considered of great importance for better integration into the Turkish society.

3.4. Theories of acculturation

Theories on acculturation (Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1980; 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997) inform the basis of this study, determining the aim of the study, research questions, and frame the approach to the study design, the interviews, and the analyses. Interviews were structured in a way to address the three facets of acculturation, which will be described in detail below.

According to the traditional view, the central aim of the field of acculturation research has essentially been to investigate what happens to individuals who have developed in one cultural context when they attempt to re-establish their lives in another one as a result of migration (Berry, 1997). Acculturation is classically defined as the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). Most recent conceptualizations of acculturation expand the classical definition of acculturation beyond the required ‘continuous first-hand contact’ as they consider cultural references of belonging as being fluid, multiple and at a distance (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2015).

The original conceptualization of acculturation has evolved from a unidimensional model developed by Gordon (1964), which implied a one-way change process in that maintenance of the heritage culture and adoption of the host culture were assumed to be the polar ends of a single continuum. Criticism of the unidimensional assimilation model prepared the ground for the development of bidimensional models. Berry’s psychological bidimensional model of acculturation remains to be one of the most comprehensive and useful models of immigrant acculturation in which cultural maintenance and cultural adoption are cast as independent orthogonal dimensions as opposed to extreme points of a single bipolar continuum (Bourhis et al., 1997). Contemporary research builds on tridimensional conceptualization of acculturation and multidimensional models, according to which people have more avenues of contact (Tausova et al., 2019) and can endorse more than two acculturation orientations towards multiple host communities rather than one single dominant
host culture (Ferguson et al., 2012; Ferguson et al., 2014). Individuals increasingly have to navigate multiple cultural references points; and global, inclusive, and multiple cultural identifications are commonplace (Tausova et al., 2019).

The acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) distinguishes three main categories: 1. acculturation conditions (also known as antecedent factors), 2. acculturation orientations (also known as acculturation strategies, intervening conditions) and 3. acculturation outcomes (also known as consequences, outcome variables) (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011; Te Lindert et al., 2008). Acculturation conditions describe contextual variables and the setting, which serves as the background of the acculturation process. More specifically, they refer to the characteristics of the receiving society, the host context, the society of origin, their socio-economic resources, languages and migrants among others. Acculturation orientations involve the extent to which immigrants prefer to relate to the dominant culture and/or maintain their original culture (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011). Acculturation outcomes represent the final component of the acculturation process and refer to the consequences of acculturation (Te Lindert et al., 2008), which are categorized into psychological and socio-cultural outcomes (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychological outcomes refer to immigrants’ internal adaptation, including personal/life satisfaction, mental health and psychological well-being in the new cultural setting. Socio-cultural outcomes denote external adaptation, which explains immigrants’ progress in full participation in host society, acquisition of culturally appropriate knowledge and skills to successfully carry out everyday situations (Searle & Ward, 1990). Language proficiency, level of social contact in the host society, ability to deal with regulations and daily problems in work, school and family life are considered indications of socio-cultural adaptation (Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008; Te Lindert et al., 2008).

One of the most elaborated and widely quoted models of acculturation has been proposed by Bourhis et al. (1997). To establish a link between the contextual influences and acculturation, the interactive acculturation model (IAM) by Bourhis et al. (1997) has been applied. It is a social-psychological framework of acculturation orientations showing the dynamic relationships between the state policies, host members and immigrant groups regarding acculturation. Based on IAM, states’ immigration policies which concern the number, type and national origins of immigrants, legal statuses and legal rights of immigrant groups as well as states’ integration policies that refer to the approaches and measures taken to help immigrants integrate and cope with their adaptation issues constitute important elements of ethnic relations research (Bourhis et al., 1997). States can shape the acculturation
orientations of both majority and minority groups through their immigration and integration ideologies and policies. Host communities can in turn have some impact on the state policies adopted by the government decision/policy makers through elections and establishment of political parties and display of intergroup attitudes (Bourhis et al., 1997). IAM also emphasizes the vitality of immigrant groups in the acculturation process. Group vitality represents the relative strength of a group’s economic, political, social and linguistic influence and the extent of its social advantages in terms of the sheer number of its members and visibility of group’s history, culture, language in the society (Bourhis et al., 1997; Giles & Giles, 2013). Immigrant groups can affect the acculturation orientations of the host members through group vitality while dominant groups shape the acculturation orientations of immigrant groups through intergroup contact. The final piece of IAM are the three different relational outcomes (consensual, problematic and conflictual), which include patterns of intercultural communications, attitudes, stereotypes, acculturative stress and discrimination between immigrants and host community members as the product of the combination of their acculturation orientations.

Studies of immigration and acculturation recognize the formation of social groups of people that come into contact in a plural society and the existence of power difference between the groups, giving rise to terms such as ‘mainstream,’ ‘dominant,’ ‘refugees,’ or ‘minority’ (Berry, 1997; Stephens, 2016). Ethnic groups have preferences for contact with out-groups as more or less attractive social partners, forming an ethnic/social hierarchy, which is a societal rank order of groups based on perceived differences among groups (Hagendoorn, 1995). Ethnic groups that have economic and political superiority on the top of the social hierarchy in the host country may seek to differentiate themselves from the minority groups by establishing conceptual boundaries, which are criteria of inclusion and exclusion, thereby obstructing them from enjoying the same privileges as the mainstream. Group formation and boundary formation processes in the receiving society play a critical role in the acculturation experiences of the immigrant groups. Therefore, the findings of the study are discussed within the light of theories on group formation, intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel et al., 1971) and boundary formation to convey an understanding of the acculturation conditions, which encompasses the characteristics of refugees, their perceptions of the migration context and the intergroup relations.
3.5. **Group formation and intergroup relations**

Formation of a social identity necessitates the existence of a social group, which is a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be the members of the same social category (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Literature indicates that development of a social group is a culmination of psychological factors such as cognitive processes and social factors (Tajfel, 1982). Social identity theory describes that cognitive processes form the psychological foundation of group formation because it requires a stage of identification or self-categorization (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Two components are recognized as necessary for self-identification in a group: a cognitive one such as the awareness of membership; and evaluative one such as ascribing value connotations to the groups (Tajfel, 1982). These two components of self-identification are also referred as internal criteria. Internal criteria are a necessary condition for the existence of the group but not a sufficient condition. In order for the group to exist, internal criteria have to be complemented by external criteria, which refer to an outside agreement (by others or other groups) that the group exists (Tajfel, 1982).

Studies of intergroup behavior emphasize the role of general cognitive processes in determining in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). In-group is a social category with which one identifies whereas an out-group is a social category with which one does not identify (Giles & Giles, 2013). Categorizations of in-groups and out-groups are functional for rendering a guide for social conduct by giving order, coherence, and meaning to social situations, and thus enabling the individual to behave in a way, which is sanctioned as ‘appropriate’ (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Differential intergroup behavior occurs when there is a criterion for categorizing individuals into an in-group or out-group. Several factors causing and influencing differential group behavior are examined. Literature shows that when the intergroup categorization has a value connotation, when the individuals’ own interests are not involved and future interaction is anticipated; individuals engage in in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel et al., 1971). Research finds that social boundaries are critical determinants of intergroup relations. Language, for instance, can be a vivid intergroup boundary, which dichotomizes individuals’ into ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Giles & Giles, 2013). Another concept influencing intergroup relations is group vitality, which refers to how much a group has social advantages in terms of pride in its history, sheer number of its members and visibility of its culture and language in the important layers of society (Giles & Giles, 2013).
3.6. **Boundaries and boundary processes**

Alba (2005) indicates that native majorities impose and maintain boundaries in order to distinguish themselves from the immigrant minority groups as a way of creating social distance and preserving privileges. According to Barth (1969), boundaries create and maintain ethnic groups by constructing social processes of exclusion and incorporation. Formation of an ethnic group necessitates criteria of evaluation that will dichotomize ‘us’ and ‘them’, namely who belongs with the group and who does not (Barth, 1969). The ethnic group imposes a certain set of standards that place constraints on who one can or cannot be, what sort of roles, identities one is allowed to hold or not. In other words, an ethnic category implies being a certain kind of person; it also implies a claim to be judged, or to judge oneself, by the standards relevant to the identity. Boundaries give expression to some forms of identity, privilege, distinctions while obstructing others (Paasi, 2003).

Alba (2005) further argues that the boundary processes depend on the nature of boundary: bright or blurred. The nature of boundaries denotes the social distance that separates groups, and the processes through which individuals gain access to the privileges or reach parity with the mainstream. In the case of bright boundaries, the distinctions are salient and there is no ambiguity in terms of which side of the boundary individuals belong. Individuals are forced to leave one group for another, which may lead to accusations of disloyalty in the group of origin and fear of exclusion in the subsequent group which discriminates. When boundaries are blurred; the location of the boundary is ambiguous and the distinctions are less clear. Blurred boundaries allow individuals to maintain their cultural elements while assimilating into a new society (Alba, 2005).

3.7. **The present study**

This study aims at enriching understanding of Syrian refugee experience in Turkish context focusing on the experiences of Syrian university students. In this vein, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the most common themes in the acculturation experiences of Syrian university students in Turkey?
2. What are the factors that make the acculturation process more difficult?
3. What are the factors that facilitate the adaptation process of Syrian university students and help them overcome the challenges?
4. What coping strategies do Syrian university students employ in the face of the difficulties?
A valuable aspect of this study is the focus on this under-studied population. Acculturation experiences of Syrian university students, their challenges and mechanisms of support in Turkey are explored in order to inform the steps that need to be taken for improved integration of Syrian students in Turkey and long-term settlement of the younger refugees.

3.8. Methodology

3.8.1. Approach

A qualitative design was adopted for this study, as it is uniquely suited to the exploration of the dynamic, multilayered and contextual nature of acculturation. Qualitative research tends to employ procedures that are less structured than quantitative methods, which facilitate a broader exploration of the issues. It allows flexibility for researchers to find more novel and diverse information and generate unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to allow flexibility for participants to voice their unique perceptions and experiences without the constraints of structured methods or measures used in quantitative research. Structured instruments with fixed response formats such as likert scales are useful to test specific theories of cross-cultural differences, but less suitable for more exploratory approaches in which there is no theory that guides the choice of an instrument (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Qualitative research is compatible with the investigation of under-researched cultural groups because relatively unstructured instruments and an open-minded attitude by the researchers hold the promise for gathering detailed information in a short time period, building models, and generating hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010).

3.8.2. Participants

In order to collect data, 15 university students around the city of Izmir were interviewed. Three of the 15 participants were female. At the time of the interview, the age range of the participants was 21-27 with an average of 24 years of age; their average duration of stay in Turkey was 2.8 years. One of the participants stated being of Kurdish descent and the rest identified as Arabs. Fourteen individuals were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student. All participants reported being Muslim except for one person who reported no religious affiliation.

3.8.3. Data collection and instrumentation

Fifteen university students of Syrian descent were recruited from several different universities in Izmir through purposeful/convenience and a two-step snowball sampling method. In the
first round, staff in international offices of the universities were approached in order to recruit students from Syria. Once the first set of participants was recruited, they were asked for referrals to increase the sample size.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, some respondents were initially hesitant to participate. The respondents were given oral and written informed consent and were invited to a semi-structured in-depth interview. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed based on the theories of acculturation. Some interview questions were linked directly to the research questions. For instance, ‘Have you faced difficulties since your immigration?’ and ‘How have you dealt with these difficulties?’ explored the major difficulties and coping strategies.

The respondents were allowed to talk freely and report significant experiences. Thirteen of the interviews were digitally recorded, since two of the participants did not consent to being audio-recorded. Two of the interviews were carried out by word for word note taking during the interview process. Although it looks like a drawback, it helped the participant to feel comfortable to express himself, reinforced by the fact that the interviewer was alone. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours and were conducted in Turkish or English depending on the participants’ preference. Four of all 15 interviews were conducted in Turkish; the rest were conducted in English. The first researcher continued conducting interviews until data saturation was achieved. She determined that she reached data saturation when the interviews did not add new information as the responses to the interview questions were mostly similar in content during the data collection. All the researchers confirmed data saturation after transcription and during data analysis when there were mounting instances of the same codes in the data with no additional new emergent codes (Urquhart, 2013). Interviews took place at a quiet, private meeting room in the universities, free from distractions. The interviews were completed without any problems both for the participants and the interviewers during the May of 2016. The research data such as recordings and transcripts were securely kept. Anonymity of participants was protected by masking their names and personal information in the data.

3.8.4. Data analysis procedures

Content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) and inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) were applied for qualitative analysis in order to derive study findings from the data and ground results on the real-life experiences of the participants from their own perspective. Content analysis and inductive approach are not labeled within a specific
tradition of qualitative research but can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Inductive approach is most consistent with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that it is a systematic procedure of analyzing qualitative data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions, expectations, or hypothesis. Yet, unlike grounded theory, it does not explicitly separate the coding process into open coding and axial coding and limits their theory-building to the presentation and description of the most important categories (Thomas, 2006). Content analysis emphasizes the manifest and latent context of the raw data to derive the findings (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). Both methods indicate that analysis is not a linear but an iterative process that requires continuing revision and refinement of the meaning patterns (codes, categories and themes) evident in the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003; Thomas, 2006). The analysis is carried out through multiple readings of data, organization of data from the bottom up into increasingly more abstract units of information, and interpretation of the underlying structure and meanings of the experiences and processes in the raw data.

The data was derived from the interviews with 15 Syrian refugees. The first researcher conducted and transcribed all the interviews, which allowed her to familiarize herself with the depth and breadth of the content and gain an understanding of the themes and events covered in text. Data analysis was conducted by the first researcher; the second and the third authors of the manuscript read all the transcripts, provided peer examination and reevaluated the data analysis after the initial coding process and also after the completion of data analysis. All the transcripts were coded and analyzed in English. They were given a code and the anonymity of participants was protected by masking their names and personal information. After the completion of all transcripts, each transcript was reread in its entirety in detail and prepared manually in a common format for the coding process using an excel file. The raw data was separated into chunks of meaning units that allowed the researcher to assign labels for potential codes, sub-categories and categories, in an increasing level of abstraction, as demonstrated in Table 1 in Appendix B. In doing so, the researcher aimed to abstract the condensed material and group together under higher order headings.

The meaning units were condensed into codes and codes were given a label. Initial codes were compared to identify sub-categories and categories, which constitute manifest content. When the underlying meaning between the categories was similar, the categories were combined or linked to a superordinate category. The researcher did not leave any data out to identify as many potential patterns as possible. A coding framework was developed,
continuously revised and refined as new codes and categories emerged in the coding process of the other transcripts. The framework started out as a basic list of codes and evolved into a table (i.e. Table 2 in Appendix B) showing the hierarchical relationship with all the other codes and categories such as superordinate, parallel, and subordinate categories (Thomas, 2006).

After the initial coding of each of the transcripts, all transcripts were reread according to the revised coding framework. Codes and categories were compared to assess the commonalities and differences among them based on the interpretation of all the transcripts. They were judged on how well they reflect the majority of the raw material. Second and third researchers evaluated and revised the codes and categories identified by the first researcher. Each transcript was recoded at least two more times in order to reflect the whole understanding of the text and revision by other researchers. Once the coding process was finalized, a category template was created, which shows each participant’s narrations that were abstracted into all the relevant codes and categories, as exemplified in Table 3 in Appendix B.

The category template allows the researchers to review all the categories and codes that emerged in all participants’ interviews. It also allows the researchers to evaluate the prevalence of the codes under each relevant category by counting the number of different participants who articulated the codes. Even though the number of times a code is mentioned may not always be a sign of the relative significance of the code, it allows the researchers to use phrases such as ‘some, many, majority of the participants’ while reporting the data and inform the readers that codes, categories and themes really existed beyond the interpretation of the researchers. After a careful review of the category template, the researcher revisited the coding framework and finalized the labeling of all codes, sub-categories and categories. Then, the researcher formulated and labeled themes that cut across and within all the categories, which denote the interpretation of the underlying structure and meaning, the latent content. The coding framework included all the higher order headings and the links among them, as demonstrated in the Table 2 in Appendix B.

Finally, the researcher selected the categories that captured the key aspects of the raw data and the most significant themes given the evaluation objectives. The researchers completed the analysis by selecting extracts from the transcripts that best reflect the selected categories and themes.

During the data analysis process, several strategies including a code-recode strategy, peer examination, and member checking were used to ensure trustworthiness of the findings.
The first researcher performed the data analysis. Data was reread several times after being transcribed by the first researcher in order to ensure that the research findings drawn from the raw data are an accurate reflection of participants’ reality. Three researchers other than the first researcher read all the transcripts and analyzed the data to audit the credibility of the identified meaning patterns. A code-recode strategy was used to ensure dependability, that is, the data were recoded after a month-long period between each coding and both results were compared to gauge consistency of the researcher (Anney, 2014). Peer examination was used to seek support from the other researchers who provided scholarly guidance to improve the dependability, credibility and confirmability of the findings. To ensure credibility and confirmability of the findings, member checking was used (Anney, 2014). One of the participants was asked to read the findings of the research to eliminate any researcher bias (Creswell, 2012). To ensure transferability, purposeful sampling was used to provide greater in-depth findings and detailed description of the context, research processes and data collection was provided to allow for replication of the study.

3.9. Results

The analysis of the participants’ experiences starting from the initial period of migration to Turkey reveals that their acculturation processes were inevitably impacted by several multifaceted factors such as the quality of their interactions with the host nationals; and were molded by the factors facilitating as well as impeding the process both in and out of the academic institutions. Three overarching themes emerged from the self-reports of the participants: intergroup relations, socio-cultural adaptation and academic issues. Categories, sub-categories and codes within each overarching theme are discussed in the following sections.

3.9.1. Intergroup relations

This theme is investigated under three major categories that emerged from the participants’ narrations. The first category addresses the acculturation conditions, which involve the refugees’ perception of the contexts in which cultural exchange takes place, and the second category highlights their perception of host group members and host group members’ perceived attitudes towards Syrian students and the third category explores perceived discrimination. Table 3.1 is designed to provide a summary of the first two categories, the related sub-categories and codes that emerged under this theme. Table 3.2 below lists all the sub-categories and codes that emerged under the third category of perceived discrimination.
Table 3.1
Factors Affecting Intergroup Relations in the case of Syrian University Students in Turkey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Intergroup Relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>Perception of the contexts of acculturation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-categories</td>
<td>Preference for Istanbul, Perceived cultural similarity vs. cultural distance, Convergent qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preference for Izmir, Perceived attitudes towards Syrians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>desire to stay in Istanbul, encouragement from family and friends to stay in Istanbul, likening Istanbul to Damascus, Izmir being different, supportive, welcoming attitude towards Syrians, standing in solidarity with the refugees despite economic and political disadvantages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceiving Izmir as being dull, overrated, undeveloped compared to Istanbul, prevalence of practicing Muslims in Istanbul, feeling religious freedom in Istanbul, practicing Muslims being a minority in Izmir, expecting religious discrimination in Izmir due to wearing headscarf, having more religious freedom in Izmir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>preferring to stay in Izmir, Istanbul accepting refugees, not experiencing discrimination in Istanbul, Izmir not accepting refugees, rejection of the Arab culture and the world in Izmir</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.9.1.1. Perception of the contexts of acculturation

To lay the groundwork for the exploration of intergroup relations, it is critical to understand the context in which group interactions take place. This study involved university students studying in Izmir, a city culturally different from Anatolia, Eastern Turkey and even Istanbul. Most of the participants lived in other cities before relocating in Izmir so they were able to notice and compare the cultural differences and understand their impact on their experiences. They tended to compare Izmir more so to Istanbul than other cities in Turkey, probably because they are two of the biggest metropolitan areas in the country. The category that emerged throughout the interviews was perception of the contexts of acculturation, which was
analyzed under 3 sub-categories: preference for Istanbul, aversion to Izmir, and preference for Izmir. These sub-categories were found to be affected by three parallel sub-categories, which were perceived cultural similarity vs. distance, religion related reasons and perceived attitudes toward refugees. That is, refugees’ perception of contexts of acculturation and whether they felt a sense of belonging or a sense of rejection in İzmir or İstanbul seem to be impacted by cultural similarity vs. distance, religion, perceived attitudes of the host nationals.

The majority of the participants reported a strong preference for Istanbul due to a higher level of perceived cultural similarity to their culture of origin, similar religious practices, and perceived positive attitudes of its host nationals toward foreigners. Based on their self-reports, Syrian university students identified with and felt accepted by the Anatolian culture epitomized by Istanbul as it was reported to be more similar to their heritage culture as opposed to the culture of Izmir. Istanbul was reported to bear physical similarities to Damascus and epitomize the Muslim culture. Except one student, all the other participants reported to be religious, practicing Muslims. According to their self-reports, they have a stronger religious identity compared to Turks in general. The prevalence of mosques, prevalence of practicing Muslims and religious diversity in Istanbul reminded them of Damascus and increased their sense of belonging as many participants expressed ‘feeling at home’ in Istanbul. The participants praised Istanbul for its host group members’ positive attitudes towards foreigners. They indicated that they had more interaction with the host group members in Istanbul and received more social support from them compared to the host group members in Izmir. They highlighted that the host group members in Istanbul were open to forming relationships with foreigners and speaking other languages and that they did not experience ethnic discrimination. The quotation below illustrates how perceived cultural similarity, religious reasons and host group members’ positive attitudes towards refugees contributed to their preference for Istanbul.

Istanbul is very similar to us in terms of culture and social life. Izmir is a little different but in Istanbul I did not feel any difference. Izmir, how should I explain, is open, secular and I can’t say they like foreigners. People in Istanbul are used to foreigners, I think. [In Izmir] I felt as if Turkish people like only Turkish people. (Participant #13)

Several participants reported an aversion to Izmir based on perceived cultural distance from their culture of origin, attitude towards Islam and perceived negative attitudes towards Syrians. As exemplified in the quotation below, participants reported that Izmir is culturally different from Istanbul and Syria as Izmirians distance themselves from the Anatolian/
Islamic culture by adopting a Western identity, which is reflected in their rejection of refugees from the Middle-East, Middle-Eastern values, and anti-Islamic sentiments.

Young people in Izmir don’t like the East. I felt that there is much difference between Istanbul and Izmir. You live in a Muslim city but there are many bars and Muslims drink. Turks here [Izmir] think that they resemble Europeans. But how are they similar? Only in terms of clothing and smoking? They resemble Europeans only in appearance. The mentality is Arabic but the physical appearance is European. I am sorry, maybe you disagree with me! When I go to Istanbul I feel as if I am in Damascus. The mosques, the people, they speak Arabic or English, they want to build a relationship with you. They love speaking foreign languages and it does not matter to them when I say I am Syrian. (Participant #3)

Only one of the participants reported a preference for Izmir due to religious reasons because s/he no longer identified as Muslim and felt distanced from her/his culture of origin. The majority of participants found that host group members in Izmir had a diverging interpretation of Islam. As depicted in the quotation below, the religious differences impacted their social life and social interactions with fellow native students.

Islam is so different here [in Izmir], actually, for example, drinking alcohol and bars. But Istanbul is better than here. For example, there is no halal or haram[^9] [in Izmir]. We speak a lot about this with my friends. They say sometimes we will go drinking. I said I will not go, they asked why. [I said] it is haram; they say it is not haram. I said it is written in the Quran. They said no, I opened the Quran and translated this, but they went anyways. (Participant #1)

Participants found that Izmirians were not accepting of Syrian refugees and reported that they expected religious and ethnic/refugee discrimination in Izmir, which contributed to the aversion to Izmir, and preference for Istanbul as demonstrated in the quotation:

Especially in Izmir, Turks did not accept Syrians very much. [They said] ’Why did you come here, go back to your country!’ Some Turks [outside of Izmir] told me before coming here, ‘don’t wear this [headscarf]’ if you are going to Izmir. I said, ‘I will never leave this. I will leave Izmir, my scholarship but I won’t leave my headscarf.’ (Participant #3)

[^9]: Halal: permissible in Islam; Haram: forbidden in Islam
3.9.1.2. Perception of host nationals and their perceived attitudes toward Syrians

It is important to state that the participants’ perception of host nationals was formed through their experiences and interactions in Izmir where the participants settled long term. The majority of the participants perceived host group members as positive and supportive towards Syrians. They attributed Turkish people positive qualities such as standing in solidarity with the Syrian people despite economic and political disadvantages, as depicted in the following quotation:

60-70% of Turkish people accepted us and they were even hurt by us, both the government and the people. For example, economy! They paid for the expenses in the camps for the past five years. The world stood with the tyrant and Turkey stood with the oppressed. Because of us, Turkey was hurt in terms of political relationships and economics. If 25% of Turkish people don’t treat us well, it does not mean we don’t see the rest of the nation. If some people treat us badly, we know that it does not reflect all the Turkish people. (Participant #7)

The participants described host nationals mostly in terms of their multicultural stance. Some participants perceived Turkish people as being less tolerant to other cultures, less open to speaking other languages, socially distant, avoiding close relationship with foreigners, being resentful of Arabs and being xenophobic. The following quotation illustrates the language boundary, Turkish people’s perceived attitude to speaking other languages, and the tendency to avoid close relationships with foreigners.

Young Turkish people feel scared to speak English and so [they] put a barrier between us. I am in my third year and don’t have any close relationships [with host group members]. We speak but never go out together. It is either because I am a foreigner, Syrian or there is a psychological issue, I don’t know exactly. I met a lot of kind people, but I could not make strong relationships. (Participant #13)

The majority of the participants felt that Turkish people were not knowledgeable about Syria, were unaware of its culture, history, and politics despite it being a neighboring country. It was also reported that host group members were tactless, and their everyday questions reflected misconceptions about Syria. The quotation below draws attention to host group members’ rejection of other cultures and misconceptions about Syria.

Turkish people have a wrong idea [about Syria]. Syria is next to Turkey so Turkish people should know what is happening in Syria now. My friends in my flat ask me ‘do you have cars in Syria?’ I swear! I answered, ‘no, we don’t have’ [sarcastic reference]. (Participant #11)
Some participants reported having close interpersonal relationships with other minority groups in Turkey, which seemed to contribute to a sense of being understood and a sense of solidarity, which appeared to counter the sense of exclusion by some Turkish people, as indicated in the following excerpt.

If there are 20 people in my class, 15 people treat us well, and there are the other 5 that hate us. Five of those 15 people treat us very very well and I came to realize that they are all Kurdish people. I later talked to my other Syrian friends about this and asked how they felt. They all agreed with me and that they also realized we have some type of closeness with them. I talked to a Kurdish friend of mine and he said we also have issues in Turkey, like you and we understand you very well and try to help out.

(Participant #8)

3.9.1.3. Discrimination

Most participants reported experiencing discrimination although the experiences were reported to be rare. As demonstrated on Table 3.2, the most frequent type of perceived discrimination was reported to be discrimination related to Syrians’ refugee status, which may also be wrongly identified as ethnic discrimination because ‘discrimination due to being Syrian’ as articulated by the participants, refers both to refugees’ ethnic identity as well as undervalued refugee status. Refugee discrimination reflects host group members’ perception of threat due to economic, political and ideological reasons, sense of loss and resentment towards refugees. It usually is expressed in the form of asking Syrian refugees questions such as ‘Why don’t you fight for your country? When are you going back?’ and blaming them for taking unfair advantage of Turkey’s economic, political, and educational resources, mainly due to the common misconceptions such as ‘Syrian students do not have to take exams to study in the university’ or ‘They receive monthly scholarships that are equivalent to a Turkish person’s monthly salary.’

When participants were asked about the reasons for perceived discrimination, extended stay of an increased number of Syrian refugees was the most frequently mentioned category, followed by economic reasons such as being perceived as threat in the labor sector, Syrians being financially vulnerable, and political reasons such as being perceived as supporters of the AKP\textsuperscript{10} government and polarization over politics in Turkey and lastly due to the lack of promotion of diversity and multiculturalism in Turkey.

\textsuperscript{10} Stands for the ‘Justice and Development Party’ which is the ruling party in Turkey.
Table 3.2

Perceived Discrimination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Perceived Discrimination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-categories</td>
<td>Type of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Refugee discrimination,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language discrimination,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnic discrimination,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious discrimination,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wage discrimination</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Subordinate</td>
<td>being questioned and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>categories</td>
<td>blamed for immigrating,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>being stared at for</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>speaking Arabic in</td>
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<td></td>
<td>public, being ostracized</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for not drinking,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>receiving reduced wages</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.9.2. Socio-cultural adaptation

Under this theme, the factors affecting socio-cultural adaptation are addressed under three major categories: (a) factors that make the adaptation process more difficult, (b) factors that facilitate the adaptation process, and (c) coping strategies employed by the participants. Participants’ socio-cultural adaptation outside the academic institutions is emphasized in this section while their integration in the education system is discussed separately under the ‘academic issues’ section. Table 3.3 provides a summary of categories, sub-categories and the codes that emerged under this theme.
Table 3.3

Factors Affecting Socio-cultural Adaptation of Syrian University Students in Turkey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Factors Affecting Socio-cultural Adaptation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>Factors impeding the adaptation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factors facilitating the adaptation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-categories</td>
<td>Language difficulties,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social difficulties,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial difficulties,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accommodation issues,</td>
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<td>Personal difficulties,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Work related difficulties,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educational difficulties,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bureaucratic difficulties</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Initial adaptation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Long-term adaptation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In-group support,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Turkey-related factors,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prior migration experience,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language-related factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language-related factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial factors,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Procedural factors,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational factors,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prior migration experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>See Table 3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syrian friends finding housing, Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>officials being welcoming at the border,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cultural similarity between Turkey and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syria, having been to Turkey or other</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>countries, being in an Arabic speaking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>region in Turkey</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Turkish people offering guidance, learning</td>
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<td>Turkish, having scholarship, learning how</td>
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<td>the system works, being accepted to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>university, having been to Turkey or other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>countries beforehand</td>
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<td>See Table 3.4</td>
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3.9.2.1. Difficulties in migration country

This category includes the participants’ perspectives regarding factors that make their adaptation difficult. Table 3.4 reveals the most commonly reported 23 difficulties under 8 different sub-categories in a descending order of frequency: language difficulties, social difficulties, financial difficulties, accommodation issues, emotional/personal difficulties, work-related difficulties, educational difficulties and bureaucratic difficulties. Although difficulties in the adaptation process have been structured under the following sub-categories, they seem to be interconnected based on the self-reports of the participants, as explained below.
Table 3.4

Difficulties Experienced in the Migration Country

**Language difficulties**
- Refugees’ low level of proficiency in Turkish
- Turks’ low level of proficiency in English

**Social difficulties**
- Discrimination and xenophobia
- Not being familiar with surroundings
- Food related issues
- Sexual harassment
- City of residence related difficulties

**Financial difficulties**
- Drop in the socio-economic status

**Accommodation issues**
- Finding accommodation
- Having to live in overcrowded houses

**Emotional/personal difficulties**
- Split family situation
- Feeling homesick
- Difficulties related to young family member’s adaptation
- Dealing with uncertainties

**Work related difficulties**
- Difficulty in finding work
- Difficulty in finding employment after graduation

**Educational difficulties**

**Bureaucratic difficulties**
- Dealing with legal procedural requirements for residency
- Not being familiar with the procedural system
- Difficulties related to family reunion
- Not being able to leave Turkey to visit family
- Being unable to use the rights of the temporary protection
- Enduring conditions set by beneficiaries of scholarship
- Policy related difficulties

As reported by all the participants, language difficulties were the most pervasive in all aspects of the participants’ lives. Five participants reported that language difficulty is the biggest and/or the only problem in the migration context and two participants stressed that it was key to adaptation. Participants emphasized that language issues are responsible for most difficulties in social relationships with host group members, and in the academic context. Based on the participants’ self-reports, language emerges as a major social boundary separating the Syrians from the host nationals. The following quotation exemplifies how the language boundary is perceived to lead to social difficulty and/or isolation, which in turn hampers the language learning process.

The problem is the language. If someone doesn’t know Turkish, the students here don’t try to speak to him. If I want to have friends, I should learn Turkish very well. And when you are learning Turkish, you are on your own. (Participant #1)

At the same time, speaking Turkish is a factor that facilitates the adaptation process because it eliminates the social boundary and struggles that result from the language
boundary. Furthermore, it leads to social inclusion, acceptance and sense of belonging, as depicted in the quotation below:

I have noticed, unless you speak Turkish, Turks don’t come to talk to you. But if you speak Turkish well, it does not matter for them. They no longer see you as Syrian or a foreigner. (Participant #15)

Categorized under social difficulties in Table 3.4, sexual harassment is a difficulty encountered exclusively by the female participants. Since the disproportionate ratio of male-female Syrian students in Turkey was reflected in the study sample, problems specific to female gender did not emerge as a major category in a male-dominated sample. However, 2 out of 3 female participants in the present study alluded to sexual harassment, as presented in the quotation below:

In Syria, we could talk normally with boys and girls, we are friends, but here there is something, I don’t know. And even with the professors. [They think] ‘Oh you are not married, so I may think differently about you.’ I went to the post office to receive a package, not from Syria. I needed to write down my phone number on the registration form. The clerk took my number and called me saying, ‘Oh hey, I want to get to know you!’ I asked ‘Why?’ These things happen a lot. (Participant #2)

After language difficulties and social difficulties, financial difficulties constitute the third most relevant adversity for Syrian students. Lack of finances appears to impede students’ socio-cultural adaptation in the Turkish society by delaying the language learning process through attending language courses and the pursuit of university education as well as creating several social and psychological obstacles. Based on the self-reports, several students were obliged to work at low-paying and demanding jobs in order to collect enough funds to pursue their personal goals. Financial difficulties faced by students are illustrated in the following quotation:

My brother pays for me and my family in Syria and when he gives me money and I finish this money… Because he is married, I don’t want to make him feel pressured. I feel shy to ask him again and I have these difficulties. And I told you I smoke more (because) I feel bad because my money is finishing quickly, and I want to stay till next month with no money. (Participant #3)

Lastly, emotional/personal difficulties as shown in Table 3.4 can be described as an amalgamation of social, family related, and migration related concerns that appear to result from the unfavorable conditions in which participants leave their country, the abrupt and forced nature of migration, uncertainty of reuniting with their families, and being unable to
return to Syria due to procedural difficulties. The feeling of homesickness was reported to be heightened in the initial period with social isolation as a result of the language boundary and inability to form relationships with host nationals.

3.9.2.2. Factors facilitating the adaptation process

One of the research questions deals with the factors facilitating the adaptation process of Syrian university students. Based on the self-reports, two distinct categories emerged: factors facilitating the initial process of migration and factors facilitating long-term adaptation in Turkey. The initial process refers to the period from when refugees leave their country of origin until roughly the first 6 months in the migration country. Long-term constitutes the period after these initial 6 months of stay in the host country.

According to the self-reports of the participants, 22 facilitating factors were identified in the initial period and categorized under 4 sub-categories: social factors such as in-group support; Turkey-related factors such as Turkish officials being welcoming at the border and cultural similarity between Turkey and Syria; knowledge about Turkey; pre-migration experience such as having been to Turkey or other countries beforehand; and lastly language-related factors such as being in an Arabic speaking region in Turkey or having someone who can speak Turkish. The quotation below illustrates the importance of in-group support, Turkey-related factors, knowledge about Turkey, prior migration experience and language-related factors in the initial period:

The first day I arrived in Hatay. I stayed there for a couple of hours. I didn’t have any problems. Turkey and Syria are very close. I was born in Saudi Arabia and stayed in Dubai and Jordan before. That is, I am used to living abroad. In Hatay, everyone can speak Arabic there, there was no problem. I took the bus to Istanbul from Hatay. I did not have any difficulties in Istanbul as well because my family was there; they took me from the bus station. I had been to Istanbul in 2010 to visit my father. That is, I knew my way around. Also, I had friends there who spoke Turkish and also my siblings spoke Turkish, so I did not have any problems. (Participant #13)

Categorized under social factors, in-group support from other Syrians was the most frequently reported facilitating factor in the initial period. A participant highlights the impact of in-group support and social factors in the initial period:

I stayed in the dorm, I met good people. They helped me a lot even though I did not speak Turkish. It was beautiful but, you know, there is nothing like close (old) friends.
I had some close Syrian friends here; I would meet with them once in a while and it was like a breath of fresh air. (Participant #12)

Participants reported relying heavily on in-group support and have preference for in-group interaction at the initial period of migration mostly due to the language barrier and difficulty in forming relationships with host nationals. Based on the participants’ self-reports, the most reported types of in-group support were supporting educational endeavors, providing temporary accommodation, finding housing, being picked up at the place of arrival, providing information about the migration country and emotional support.

In addition to factors facilitating the initial period, 17 factors facilitating long-term adaptation in Turkey were identified and grouped under 6 sub-categories: social factors such as having support from host nationals; language-related factors such as learning the host language; financial factors such as having scholarship, and free housing; procedural factors such as learning how the system works; educational factors such as being accepted to university, Turkey-related factors, and prior migration experience such as having previously been exposed to other cultures.

In contrast with the in-group support being the most frequently reported factor facilitating the initial process; having a supportive relationship with host nationals was the most commonly reported factor facilitating long-term adaptation. Based on the participants’ self-reports, host group members offered support by providing information about the existing opportunities for Syrians, offering guidance, helping with housing and educational endeavors. In addition to the social factors; financial factors, language-related factors and participation in the larger society through the pursuit of higher education in the case of Syrian university students were also commonly reported to facilitate long-term adaptation. The subsequent quotation highlights the impact of social support from Turkish housemates on the participant’s adaptation in Turkey.

The sincerity at home caused me to forget that I was a foreigner. I had very good friends at home. I felt very comfortable when I was at home chatting with my friends.

(Participant #7)

3.9.2.3. Coping strategies with difficulties in migration country

In order to address the final research question of this study, participants were asked to explain how they deal with the difficulties they encounter. They reported 23 coping strategies, which were summoned under three sub-categories shown in Table 3.3: active, passive and religious coping strategies. Strategies which require conscious effort, taking initiative and interpersonal
contact denote active coping strategies. Strategies which involve social, emotional avoidance, disengagement and distancing from the problems are represented under passive coping strategies. Lastly, religious coping strategies involve reappraisal of the problem and modification of thinking to reduce the emotional impact of the problem and to alleviate stress.

In a descending order of frequency, the most commonly used coping strategies were making use of social support, family support, minority support, comparison of oneself with the less fortunate, learning Turkish and relying on in-group support. In the present study, the most commonly reported coping strategies all fell under the active strategies category except ‘comparison of oneself with the less fortunate’, which was grouped under the religious coping strategies category.

**Table 3.5**

*Coping Strategies with Difficulties in the Migration Country*

**Active coping strategies**
- Making use of social support
- Making use of family support
- Making use of minority support
- Making use of in-group support
- Learning Turkish
- Making use of institutional support
- Pursuing an advanced degree
- Contacting other Arabic-speaking minorities
- Speaking Arabic
- Initiating contact with host group members
- Living like host group members

**Passive coping strategies**
- Self-isolation
- Avoidance of contact
- Using return intention as a coping strategy
- Withdrawal
- Crying
- Avoidance of family support
- Hiding Syrian identity
- Avoidance of trouble

**Religious coping strategies**
- Comparison of oneself with the less fortunate
- Perceiving difficulties as destiny
- Praying to God
- Finding an inner solution

In the quotations below, participants mention the use of family support and comparison of oneself with the less fortunate, as examples to some of the most common coping strategies used by Syrian students.
I sometimes talk to my mother and father. They tell me ‘we are waiting for you and inshaAllah you will be fine. Thank God, I haven’t lost my parents, I haven’t lost anyone. But other people for sure are in deep pain. (Participant #12)

Our Prophet says ‘Compare yourself with people who have less than you, rather than those who have more.’ When I do that, I think I am in good shape. Considering what we have been through in five years, I feel content because we lost people, people lost their eyes, arms and legs. I have many friends who cannot study. Some of my friends were martyred in the war. When I consider my situation, it is not great, but it is not bad. But this is how life is. No one is fully content with what they have. Everyone wants to be better. (Participant #7)

Some participants reported reaching out to other minority groups in Turkey for support, as shown in the quotation below. This is an indication that Syrian refugees have several avenues of contact and multiple identification with several sub-cultures in Turkey.

When I first came here, I used to hang out only with one or two people and they were not Turkish, they were Kurdish. I have one friend who is Kurdish, we have a very close relationship, and we study together. I even stayed in his house. He invites me often and we hang out together a lot. (Participant #15)

### 3.9.3. Academic issues

As previously indicated, one of the overarching themes of the study is academic issues. Since the participants are chosen from Syrian university students, the main context of their acculturation involves the university environment in which they spend most of their time. Therefore, their acculturation in the education system offers a microcosm of their acculturation in Turkey. This section addresses students’ integration in the higher education environment in the light of the first three research questions. More specifically, Syrian students’ experience of learning Turkish, their efforts to study in the university, educational difficulties in Turkey, and factors facilitating integration in higher education are investigated. Table 3.6 provides a summary of categories, sub-categories and codes that emerged under this theme.

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11 God willing
### Table 3.6

**Academic Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Academic Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Categories</strong></td>
<td>Evident efforts to learn Turkish, Efforts to pursue higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-categories</strong></td>
<td>Financial efforts, Admission related efforts, Language learning, Finding housing, Procedural endeavors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes</strong></td>
<td>Attending formal classes, learning through personal efforts, working in the summer/taking time off school to finance education, having to take the entrance exam, learning language (English and Turkish), getting registered in a dormitory, preparing necessary documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factors impeding integration in higher education</strong></td>
<td>Language difficulties, Financial difficulties, Procedural difficulties, System-related difficulties, Personal difficulties, Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factors facilitating integration in higher education</strong></td>
<td>Language related factors, Support, Institutional regulations, Life satisfaction, Personal efforts</td>
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</table>

For the majority of the participants, learning Turkish was usually the first step in pursuing a higher education in Turkey because knowledge of Turkish is advantageous if not necessary in order to navigate the educational system and follow the application process. Based on the participants’ descriptions, the most common strategy of learning Turkish was to take language courses. Three of the participants learned language completely on their own. According to their self-reports, having a close circle of friends and Turkish being the medium of instruction in the university facilitated language learning. Three of the participants had not yet learned Turkish but had plans to learn it in the near future.

Among the participants’ efforts to study in the university the most common were applying to several universities, learning the mainstream language, taking the year-long English preparation course, getting to know the universities and professors, securing scholarships and taking the admission and language exams. Almost all the participants had to relocate within Turkey in order to learn Turkish or pursue a university education because big cities offered more educational opportunities.
In the light of the 2nd research question, difficulties encountered within the educational environment were investigated. Table 3.7 contains 39 educational difficulties reported by the participants, grouped under six sub-categories: language, financial, system-related, procedural, personal difficulties and discrimination. The main difficulties reported by the majority of the participants were language, procedural and financial difficulties.

Table 3.7

Educational Difficulties

**Language difficulties**
- Studying in a foreign language
- Turkish as a language barrier
- Being limited to specific universities due to language
- Professors violating the rule of giving lectures in English
- Teachers in the language courses being unprofessional

**Financial difficulties**
- Educational life being interrupted due to financial hardship
- Inconsistent nature of scholarship
- Having to work and study at the same time
- Having to pay for the entrance exam for some universities
- Turkish language course being too expensive

**System-related difficulties**
- Incompatibility between the educational systems in Turkey and Syria
- Perceived differences in the profiles of professors in both countries
- Decentralized education system
- Not being allowed to register in the state dormitory
- Having to start from the beginning
- Incompatibility between the curricula
- Lack of understanding of the system
- Unfair transfer of course grades lowering GPA
- Difficult admission procedures for universities in Istanbul
- Having to retake some courses
- Free Turkish language courses lacking quality

**Procedural difficulties**
- Having to reapply and bureaucratic delay
- Long period of waiting
- Dealing with legal procedural requirements

**Personal difficulties**
- University not having the desired major
- Being rejected by universities
- Taking time off school
- Not having the necessary credentials to study the desired major
- Feeling excluded by peers
- Losing academic years
- Finding exams difficult
- Being unable to attain high grades
- Being older than classmates
- First academic year being the hardest
- Missing deadlines due to unexpected nature of migration
- Not having the necessary documents from Syria for applications
- Not having high enough scores for admission
- Not having enough time or materials to study for the entrance exam

**Discrimination**
- Feeling discriminated by the school/system
The language difficulties and financial difficulties Syrian students have encountered within the educational system in Turkey are illustrated in the following quotations:

We study in English here but not all of our professors speak English. We have a professor in the lab, who does not speak English at all. They have to speak English 100% but then our Turkish classmates don’t understand. (Participant #8)

I went to a private university in Istanbul and studied there for 3 months but the economy was getting worse. The university gave me a discount and to all other Syrian students. 1 dollar is 600 Syrian liras. That’s why I had to drop out. It was too expensive for me even with the discount. (Participant #12)

In dealing with the educational difficulties mentioned above, participants reported 16 facilitating factors, which were grouped under 5 sub-categories: language related factors, support, institutional regulations, life satisfaction and personal effort, as shown in Table 3.8.

**Table 3.8**

*Factors Facilitating Integration in Higher Education*

**Language related factors**
- Speaking Turkish
- Medium of instruction being English

**Support**
- Support from professors
- Turkish government workers’ taking initiative/ Positive discrimination
- Social support from Turkish mainstreamers
- Turkish government workers’ positive treatment
- In-group support

**Institutional regulations**
- Being able to transfer course credits
- New government legislation on accepting transfer students
- Not having to start from the beginning
- Turkey accepting the foreign exam scores for university admission

**Life satisfaction**
- Satisfactory housing
- Getting quality education

**Personal efforts**
- Having a strong previous academic standing
- Finding out admission opportunities outside Istanbul
- Compensating with online courses

Having a support system within the educational institution such as support from professors and government workers in the university was reported to be the most helpful factor facilitating students’ adaptation within the system. This quotation stresses the impact of support from government workers in overcoming educational issues:

I entered his office and I explained to him ‘I am a student, this happened and that happened to me.’ He said ‘I know all of this stuff,’ Mr. B told me, ‘but I wanted to
hear your English, if your English is good, I will accept you.’ He said ‘your English is fine and you can start from here.’ I cried that time. (Participant #3)

In addition to support, English being the main language of instruction increased students’ adaptation and confidence in their academic abilities. However, in cases when professors switched to the host language in class, having some knowledge of Turkish was reported to help Syrian students both socially and academically.

3.10. Discussion

The study was designed to identify the major issues in the acculturation experiences of Syrian university students in Turkey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to tap into factors either impeding or facilitating the adaptation process, and to shed light on the students’ coping strategies with the difficulties encountered in Turkey. Three overarching themes that emerged from this study – intergroup relations, socio-cultural adaptation, and academic issues – are discussed in the light of the theoretical models on acculturation, group formation, intergroup relations and boundary formation.

The intergroup relations section draws a portrait of the acculturation conditions in Turkey, describes the characteristic features of the acculturation contexts as well as the perception and attitudes of the host nationals within these contexts affecting the experiences of the Syrian students. In order to explore the impact of the societal context on acculturation and understand the interactive relationship between host groups, immigrant groups, state ideologies and policies regarding immigration and integration, IAM by Bourhis et al. (1997) has been applied. State ideologies, migration and integration policies as well as the acculturation orientations of host groups and Syrian refugees in Turkey varied in time. Although the Turkish state did not have a formal immigration policy that granted legal rights and statuses to Syrian people or an integration policy that endorsed their long-term integration in the local communities, it promoted a positive and welcoming reception context to Syrian ‘guests’ who were not expected to be temporary. The welcoming attitudes of the host nationals were replaced by negative attitudes in time, as expressed in the excerpt below, probably due to the dissolution of the positive effects of the government’s initial attempts at recategorization of Syrian refugees based on a shared religion and history, in line with the common in-group identity model by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000).

After 2015, their attitudes toward us have changed for the very negative. I cannot remember a specific event but before people used to talk and interact very closely with us, there was no mention of ‘Turks vs. Syrians’ but after some time… (Participant #6)
Based on Bourhis et al.’s explanation of state ideologies, Turkey’s early migration policies were in line with the ethnist ideology as only the people of Turkic backgrounds were accepted as immigrants. In the case of Syrian refugees, it appears that Turkey’s ideology behind its integration practices falls on the continuum between civic ideology and assimilation ideology. Harmonization, which is the officially declared state integration policy stipulated by Law and in the duties of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM, 2021), seems to correspond to civic ideology according to which the state respects the distinctiveness of immigrant groups but does not contribute financially to promote their cultural values. Although it is explicitly indicated that harmonization is neither an assimilation nor an integration orientation (DGMM, 2021), it seems to reflect an assimilation ideology as it emphasizes Syrian people’s cultural adoption and participation in the host culture.

Host members’ attitudes towards immigrant groups may or may not reflect state’s ideologies, as indicated by Bourhis et al. (1997). Based on the narrations of the Syrian students, context appears to have an impact on host nationals’ attitudes towards the state’s migration and integration policies and concomitant attitudes towards Syrian refugees. As explained in the results section, Syrian students tend to highlight the comparison of two contexts; Izmir and Istanbul in their narrations. They categorize Izmir as having a distinct culture separate not only from Istanbul but also the Anatolian culture. Izmir is known for its closeness to the left-wing politics and dislike for the AKP, which has been welcoming to Syrian refugees. Therefore, Syrian students feel that they are put in the same category as the right-wing politicians, seen as a threat to secularism and national identity and treated in a negative way by Izmirians, as shown in the following quotation. Accordingly, it appears that the attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Izmir may not reflect state’s immigration and integration ideologies, policies and practices.

Some people look at us and they don’t like us, and it is connected to politics. If a Turkish person does not like the president Erdoğan, he thinks we are on Erdoğan’s side. If he does not like Erdoğan, he does not like us. I spoke with some people about that. [They say] Erdoğan used you for his party, all of you, Syrian people like Erdoğan. (Participant #1)

Participants do not identify with Izmir in the same way as they identify with Istanbul due to the distinct intergroup boundaries. In Izmir, a city that prides itself on secularism, Syrians’ already strong religious identity may be triggered and become central to defining

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12 The current president of Turkey
who they are; and how others define and treat them. Religious differences seem to emerge as a distinct boundary between Izmirians and Syrians creating ‘us’ and ‘them’. Therefore, in line with the social value hypothesis (Gebauer et al., 2016), in Izmir where religiosity is perceived to have little value, religious people may feel less good about themselves. Syrian refugees may be perceived as culturally distant by the host society and may feel the increased differential treatment as the out-group in Izmir. Based on this interpretation, the boundary processes seem critical to intergroup relations determining favoritism versus differential treatment in the migration contexts, confirming the theoretical models guiding this study.

Conversely, Syrian students seem to feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and increased adaptation in Istanbul due to cultural similarities, religious reasons and host group members’ positive attitudes toward themselves. From a cognitive standpoint, as described in the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), Syrians perceive and categorize themselves as the members of the same social group as the host nationals in Istanbul because of strong religious identity. Religion being reflected in the lifestyle and the culture of the host nationals in Istanbul provides a cognitive base for assuming commonality and general similarities shared with the Turkish people. Perceived social similarities between Syrians and the host nationals increase social attraction and promote psychological group formation through identification, in line with the theoretical framework on group formation.

Apart from religion as a boundary marker in Izmir; language and ethnicity are clearly the other intergroup boundaries for Syrians almost all-around Turkey, except the Eastern Turkey where Arabic is spoken as the native language. However, the language and ethnic boundaries are blurred in Istanbul because Syrians’ ethnicity due to their high numbers and the Arabic language are more visible compared to Izmir. In other words, Syrians have high group vitality in Istanbul, which refers to the relative strength of an immigrant group that makes the group likely to act as a distinctive and collective entity in the host society (Bourhis et al., 1997). Istanbul has neighborhoods that are replete with ethnic cafes, restaurants and symbols. Syrians have a wider linguistic landscape, such as signs in Arabic, which is a powerful means of establishing and legitimizing a sense of in-group pride and vitality (Giles & Giles, 2013). High group vitality combined with host nationals in Istanbul being more multicultural and open to speaking foreign languages create a sense that Syrians’ presence is recognized, validated and legitimimized.

On the other hand, immigrant groups that have low group vitality are more vulnerable to the impact of dominant host groups (Bourhis et al., 1997). Thus, Syrians in Izmir may feel more exposed to the orientations of the host groups due to their relatively low group vitality.
Since the religious, linguistic, and ethnic intergroup boundaries are more pronounced in Izmir, in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination may be salient. From the perspective of Syrian students, Izmirians place a value of superiority on adopting Western lifestyle and tend to have an aversion for things that are related to the East such as the Middle-Eastern culture, religious practices such as not drinking alcohol, wearing the hijab; and right-wing politics that promote Sunni Islam. This perception of the host nationals in Izmir in relation to Syrian refugees may enforce differential intergroup behavior that may lead to reduced sense of acceptance and belonging. On a positive note, however, even with the distinct intergroup boundaries in Izmir enforcing differential treatment of Syrian refugees, participants revealed few instances of discrimination.

Considering the salient intergroup boundaries in Izmir, a proportion of the host community in Izmir appears to be more likely to maintain an assimilation and exclusion orientation towards Syrian refugees in line with an ideology that ranges from assimilation towards the ethnist pole of the continuum, as indicated by Bourhis et al. (1997). As indicated in the narrations of Syrian refugees, Izmirians do not seem to find it acceptable that Syrians maintain their religious, linguistic and cultural heritage and expect that they adopt the Turkish culture that looks up to the Western ideals. Considering the assimilation-ethnist ideology behind the acculturation orientations of host members in Izmir, who may reject contact and distance themselves from Syrians, Syrian refugees may be channeled towards adopting a separation orientation from the Turkish society. Based on Bourhis et al.’s relational outcomes of host community and immigrant acculturation orientations, it seems that a combination of assimilation adopted by Izmirians and separation by Syrian refugees may lead to a conflictual relationship, which indicates high levels of negative intergroup attitudes, intercultural conflict and discrimination.

On the other hand, host nationals in İstanbul appear to maintain an integration orientation in line with pluralism and civic ideology. Based on the narrations of the participants, host members seem to find it acceptable that Syrians maintain their religious, linguistic and cultural heritage and also expect that they adopt the Turkish culture. A combination of integration orientation by the host community in İstanbul in combination with an integration orientation adopted by Syrian refugees may result in consensual outcomes, which indicates positive verbal and non-verbal communications, mutual positive attitudes, low intergroup tension and acculturative stress.

Bourhis et al.’s model (1997) talks about a pluralist society, which may consist of more than one host community and several minority groups. The findings of the research,
such as Syrian refugees’ perceived positive interpersonal relationships with minority groups, particularly Kurdish people and Arabic-speaking minorities, and the sense of support they claim to draw from these groups are in line with IAM and the tridimensional/multidimensional acculturation model, which accounts for orientation towards multiple cultures both within refugees’ heritage culture and contemporary settlement societies (Ferguson et al., 2012). Refugees’ culture of origin in Syria along with the culture of destination in Turkey cannot be considered as homogenous entities. Thus, the Turkish mainstream culture is not the sole destination-reference for Syrian refugees, who may associate with different and multiple cultures both in Syria and Turkey. Even though Berry’s bidimensional acculturation model (1997) has been used in the study, an expanded acculturation model seems necessary to fully describe Syrian refugees’ orientation towards multiple cultures in Turkey.

Given the abovementioned acculturation conditions, Syrian students encounter multiple challenges. In the initial period, students described the challenges of pursuing higher education in Turkey. They reported that being unable to gain admission to universities in Turkey despite making all the efforts such as learning Turkish, navigating the decentralized Turkish educational system and internal migration within Turkey, creates disillusionment and frustration. Thwarted aspirations may also lead to a negative self-concept, decreased sense of accomplishment, decreased life satisfaction and poor psychological well-being, as indicated by previous research (Warfa et al., 2012).

Consistent with the results of previous studies (Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Biçer, 2017; Watenpaugh et al. 2014), language is, without question, the major challenge transcending over Syrian students’ acculturation experiences. However, once the students overcome this challenge by learning the Turkish language, the impact of other difficulties is minimized or completely removed. With the removal of the language boundary, they report that ethnic and religious boundaries become blurred and they experience a sense of full acceptance by the host group members, a sense of belonging and adaptation in Turkey. Along with acquiring the knowledge of the Turkish language, in-group support by other Syrians in Turkey and social support from the native Turkish people, minorities in Turkey or other foreign students are the main facilitating factors.

Syrian students adopt active coping strategies such as initiating contact with host group members, their in-group, pursuing advanced academic degrees, and have a positive attitude towards taking initiative to participate in the larger society. Therefore, the necessary language support at the initial period of immigration may facilitate the adaptation process of
Syrian students in Turkey, tremendously. Speaking the Turkish language may blur the intergroup boundaries and increase the social support from the host nationals in Turkey; which will in turn alleviate the other academic, social, emotional and financial challenges. An orientation that will offer proper language instruction and navigation of the education system seem necessary for their integration in Turkey.

One of the limitations of the research is that the self-reported data may contain several potential sources of bias such as selective memory. It is also possible that snowball sampling created a higher similarity, leading to a sample selection effect in the research sample as opposed to having recruited participants independently from one another. Further, given the small sample size, the nature of qualitative research methods, and the vast contextual differences in Turkey, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the experiences of Syrian students. Still, the sample allowed us to obtain a good insight into acculturation processes of Syrian youth.

In conclusion, the process of acculturation is impacted by perceived cultural similarity, host nationals’ attitudes toward Islam and refugees; and their openness to linguistic differences. Syrian refugees perceive the majority of the host nationals as positive and supportive and report that act of discrimination is infrequent. However, based on their narrations, Syrian refugees’ adaptation in Turkey and interaction with the host nationals will be ameliorated by host group members’ increasing cultural awareness, sensitivity, and openness to speaking foreign languages. The acquisition of the Turkish language is vital for full acceptance in the Turkish society. Furthermore, in-group support, social support from the mainstream, employment opportunities are the main facilitating factors. Providing professional language courses for the university-aged Syrian refugees; creating orientation programs which explain the procedural system in Turkey, the university application process, their rights as refugees; and creating part-time employment opportunities will assist the acculturation of refugees to a great extent.
CHAPTER 4

Acculturation experiences and psychological well-being of Syrian university students in Turkey: A qualitative study

4.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter is designed to communicate the findings of a research project that investigated the acculturation experiences and psychological well-being of Syrian university students in Turkey. Syrian university students’ contexts of acculturation that shape their acculturation experiences; their acculturation orientations; psychological and social adaptation in the migration context were investigated in association with their intergroup perceptions using semi-structured oral interviews among 15 students. Based on Berry’s acculturation model (1997) and the acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003), the research revealed that the majority of the Syrian university students chose an integration strategy in the public domain; and a separation strategy in the private domain as their acculturation orientations. Majority of the participants reported high levels of life satisfaction in Turkey and described a positive influence of the refugee experience on their lives. In contrast, they described a negative psychological state such as experiencing depressive feelings and intrusive thoughts about the past; and poor social well-being.

4.2. Introduction

The world has witnessed the largest refugee ‘crisis’ since World War II and the global refugee population continues to increase reaching records high between 2012 and 2015, driven mainly by the Syrian conflict (UNHCR, 2020b). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2019e) reports that every two seconds one person is forcibly displaced due to conflict or persecution. Over the past two decades, the global population of forcibly displaced people has increased from 33.9 million to 70.8 million by the end of 2018 (UNHCR, 2020b). This total includes 25.9 million refugees, over half of whom are children, 41.3 million internally displaced people and 3.5 million asylum seekers. The highest number of the world’s refugees comes from Syria. The Syrian war that started in 2011

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14 This chapter reports on the same data of the research project on Syrian university students as presented in the previous chapter.
has led to the displacement of 6.6 million Syrians inside Syria and 5.6 million people outside of Syria. Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world with 3.7 million people (UNHCR, 2019f, 2020b).

With more than half of the global refugee population being under 18 years of age, refugee youth remain a significant population to investigate, particularly in terms of their educational needs and challenges. Most refugees are unable to continue their interrupted education and lack direct access to education in their host countries. Approximately 4 million refugee children in the world have no school to attend. More than half of the total population of Syrian refugee children living in Lebanon did not attend school in 2016 (Rollings, 2016; UNHCR, 2016b). Refugee children are five times more likely to drop out of school than non-refugee children. Although primary education is available, albeit limited for refugee children, higher education remains largely neglected. Despite the importance of higher education in refugees’ transition to new societies, only less than 1% of the world’s refugees have access to higher education, compared to 34% of non-refugee students globally (Student et al., 2017; UNHCR, 2019e). About 2% of all students in Germany are refugee students (Streitwieser et al., 2018). Only 3% of the university-aged Syrian refugees in Turkey, 6% in Lebanon and 8% in Jordan were registered in the higher education programs in 2016 compared to 20% of Syrian students in pre-war Syria (Hohberger, 2018).

One of the most severely affected groups of massive displacement is Syrian youth. Previous research has reported that along with the physical needs of youth, higher education should be given higher priority for several reasons (Kamyah, 2017). Particularly, limited access to education outside Syria for university-aged refugees will lead Syria to lose its ability to repair itself when the war is over (Watenpaugh et al., 2014). Therefore, the present Syrian youth can be perceived as the prospective rebuilders of Syria. Additionally, getting high quality and accredited university education will help Syrian refugees successfully adapt to their host countries. Turkey has been chosen to be the country of focus as it is the host to the largest Syrian refugee population in the world and Syrian university students are the target research population as they have been grossly neglected and deserve scholarly attention.

This paper aims to explicate acculturation experiences of Syrian university students in Turkey based on Berry’s acculturation model (1997) and the acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003). In particular, the study sets out to identify the acculturation conditions such as Syrian students’ real-life and internal experiences in the pre-migration and migration contexts, perceived reasons for immigration, their reception in Turkey, their perceptions of Turkey; their acculturation orientations, which signify refugees’
degree of maintaining their original culture and/or adopting the mainstream culture; and the psychological and social outcomes of acculturation. The following sections provide background information on the challenges of the refugees and refugee students, significance of higher education in the integration of refugees, the Syrian conflict, Syrian refugee students, Turkey’s role in the integration of Syrian refugees in higher education and lastly the theories of acculturation.

4.3.  Challenges experienced by refugees

The distinction between immigrant and refugee statuses is of high significance. Immigrants decide to move for economic and political reasons while refugees are forced to leave their countries to escape life-threatening consequences (El Khoury, 2019). According to the widely-recognized 1951 Refugee Convention’s definition (UNHCR, 1951), the term refugee applies to ‘a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’. Refugee and refugee-related statuses can vary depending on the country (El Khoury, 2019). For instance, Turkey does not grant refugee status to non-Europeans, and thus Syrians in Turkey have been referred to as ‘guests’, ‘asylum seekers’, and ‘individuals under temporary protection’. For this article, the term ‘refugee’ is used to refer to all refugee and refugee-related statuses.

The challenges and stressors that affect refugees are enormous (Al-Rousan et al., 2018; Şımşek, 2018). Previous studies explored these challenges roughly in three categories: pre-migration challenges such as traumatic experiences resulting from civil war and conflict (Watkins et al., 2012; Streitwieser et al., 2018), loss of loved-ones, home and identity (Grüttner et al., 2018; Mupenzi, 2018); challenges during migration such as dangerous travel conditions (Mupenzi, 2018; Şımşek, 2018); and postmigration difficulties such as learning a new language (Detourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Grüttner et al., 2018; Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2012), getting used to a new culture environment (Berry, 1970), socio-economic difficulties (El Khoury, 2019; Grüttner et al., 2018), planning for family reunification (Mupenzi, 2018), dealing with discrimination (Mupenzi, 2018; Şımşek, 2018) and coping with psychological issues (El Khoury, 2019; Şımşek, 2018; Watkins et al., 2012). While host language acquisition is a major predictor of economic, political, social, academic and cultural integration (El Khoury, 2019; Watkins et al., 2012; Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016), language barriers are also a major, if not the biggest obstacle that impacts refugees’ well-being, socio-cultural integration and academic performance (El
Khoury, 2019; Grüttner et al., 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017; Watkins et al., 2012). Watkins et al.'s study (2012) on Karen refugee women in Australia indicates that language acquisition is the biggest problem affecting refugees’ well-being. El Khoury’s study (2019) investigating the socio-cultural adjustment and well-being of Syrian refugees in Germany shows that 40% of the participants reported language learning to be the most difficult obstacle they experienced in adjusting to life in Germany. Similarly, Aydın and Kaya (2017) explored the needs of Syrian refugee students based on the perspectives of school teachers and found language to be the main challenge Syrian students encounter in Turkish schools. Language barriers limit refugees’ ability to communicate and build friendships, which in turn negatively influences their sense of acceptance and belonging in the host countries and exerts a strong impact on their overall level of feeling integrated at the academic settings (El Khoury, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2018).

Refugee youth are confronted with additional educational barriers (Al-Rousan et al., 2018), along with the above-mentioned obstacles that are specific to all refugees. Humanitarian and refugee organizations focus exclusively on primary education provision mostly because the 1951 Refugee Convention draws a distinction between primary education as a required human right and higher education as a qualified one (Grüttner et al., 2018). Even with additional efforts, primary education provision remains limited, uneven and of poor quality while post-primary education remains largely neglected (Grüttner et al., 2018). UNHCR (2019g) has reported that ‘the chances of a refugee completing secondary school are slim and the chances of reaching university verges on statistical fantasy.’ The main obstacles on the pathway to higher education include but are not limited to, learning gaps, interrupted education (Detourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Student et al., 2017), language barriers (Grüttner et al., 2018; Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2012;), lack of documentation (Streitwieser et al., 2018), lack of appropriate information to apply and enroll (Grüttner et al., 2018), bureaucratic and confusing institutional systems and procedures (Student et al., 2017), unfamiliar teaching, learning and assessment styles (Mupenzi, 2018; Student et al., 2017), emotional distress relating to previous trauma (Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017), discrimination, racism, perceptions, stereotypes, fear of stigmatization (Grüttner et al., 2018; Mupenzi, 2018; Student et al., 2017), inadequate support, worries about family abroad, financial pressures to support families (Grüttner et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017), financial burden (Grüttner et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017). In other words, by the time refugees enter a higher education institution, they will have already overcome various obstacles (Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018).
4.4. Importance of higher education for refugees and host countries

Refugees place immense importance on pursuing a higher education in line with the phenomenon of immigrant paradox, which refers to the tendency of recently arrived immigrants to outperform established immigrants and host nationals in the host country on a variety of health, education and conduct-related outcomes in spite of several challenges (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Moore, 2018). Several scholars argue that despite the academic and non-academic barriers, refugee students show high educational resilience and capacity to learn finding ways to negotiate their adverse circumstances (Abkhezr et al., 2015; Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017). A number of factors contribute to refugee students’ increased levels of motivation for higher education. Higher education has the potential to transform their lives socially, psychologically and economically. It is a source of hope for the future and a way of fending off despair (Grüttner et al., 2018; Mupenzi, 2018; Student et al., 2017). It is a means of building self-esteem and self-confidence through recognition of their skills in the host country. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for poverty reduction, economic growth, security, stability and provision of better living standards for their families and communities (Grüttner et al., 2018; Mupenzi, 2018; Sheykhjan, 2017; Student et al., 2017).

From the perspective of host countries and humanitarian institutions, integration of refugees in higher education is of utmost importance for several reasons. A growing body of evidence shows that education has implications for refugees’ full integration in the host settings (Barışcil, 2017; Watenpaugh et al., 2014), their physical and psychological health (Al-Rousan et al., 2018), well-being (Al-Rousan et al., 2018), recovery from trauma (Sheykhjan, 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2018), livelihood (Sheykhjan, 2017), social cohesion (Al-Rousan et al., 2018; Sheykhjan, 2017), and prevention of undesirable future outcomes such as crime, social conflicts, radicalization, child labor and child brides (Bircan & Sunata, 2015; Seydi, 2013; Watenpaugh et al., 2014). The study by Al-Rousan et al. (2018) on Syrian refugee students in Jordan shows that lack of educational opportunities can lead to a sense of hopelessness, unnecessary idleness, feelings of insecurity and instability and a propensity to unrest, increased psychosocial stress and mental illness. According to Barışcil (2017) and Watenpaugh et al. (2014) disconnection from higher education will hinder Syrian refugees’ ability to fully integrate and function in Turkey. Furthermore, higher education is significant in fostering skills necessary for rebuilding the home country, preventing the creation of ‘lost generations,’ a term used to refer to the Syrian youth (Al-Rousan et al., 2018; Detourbe &
Goastellec, 2018; Sheykhjan, 2017; Watenpaugh et al., 2014) and cultivating refugees’ potential that can benefit the host societies. Both for the refugees and their host societies, access to education is an essential step into eventually fostering successful integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Therefore, due to the increasing number of refugees in the world and the significant role of education in the integration of refugees in host countries; refugees are expected to inform host countries’ integration policies and reforms in higher education.

4.5. Turkey’s response to Syrian refugees and students in higher education

In political, social, and economic terms, Turkey is one of the most affected countries of the Syrian crisis, as the host to the largest number of Syrian refugees (Bircan & Sunata, 2015). At the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Turkey had an open-door policy that allowed a large number of Syrian refugees to enter the country until 2016. At the early phases, Turkish authorities as well as the first groups of Syrian asylum seekers assumed that the crisis would end quickly with the collapse of the Assad regime and that the displaced Syrians would repatriate only after a short period of time (Barışçıl, 2017; Erdoğan, 2015; İçduygu, 2015a).

By disregarding the possibility of long-term or permanent stay of the unanticipated number of Syrians, Turkey has focused on providing aid and assistance to her ‘guests’ instead of taking measures to integrate ‘refugees’ in the Turkish society. This political approach to social phenomenon has neglected the psycho-social need and processes as well as the long-term integration of Syrian refugees. However, the prolonged stay of Syrian asylum seekers compelled Turkey to formally transform its migration and asylum policies with the enactment of the new Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2014. As Turkey has limited the geographic scope of 1951 Refugee Convention to European asylum seekers, non-Europeans are not given refugee status (Hohberger, 2018). Therefore, with the new legislation, Turkey replaced the ‘guest’ category and granted ‘temporary protection’ to Syrian asylum seekers in October 2014, which made them eligible for health, education, and other social services (Kaya & Kıraç, 2016).

In order to resume or begin their studies, Syrian students actively seek educational opportunities in their host countries. Based on the estimates for the year of 2019 by the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of Turkey, there were 552,000 university-aged Syrian refugees between the ages of 19-24, with 322,000 male and 230,000 female refugees. According to the most-recent data from the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetimi Sistemi, 2020) that governs and regulates Turkey’s higher education system, there were 27,024 Syrian university students registered in Turkish
universities for the academic year of 2018-2019 with 17,096 male and 9,938 female students, compared to a total of 19,052 students for the academic year of 2017-2018, with 12,012 male and 7,039 female students, 15,042 Syrian students in 2016-2017 and 9,684 students in 2015-2016. Based on those statistics, the number of Syrian university students formally registered in higher education institutions in Turkey is on the rise. However, merely 5% of the Syrian university-aged population in Turkey is currently enrolled in higher education institutions based on the most recent data from the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetimi Sistemi, 2020).

The statistics indicate a distinct gender difference in the number of admitted students each academic year. Female students make up one third of the total number of Syrian university students in Turkey even though the university-aged female Syrian refugees make up approximately half of the overall university-aged Syrian refugee population in Turkey, with the male-to-female ratio of 58.3 to 41.7% (DGMM, 2019). The gender difference in higher education of Syrian refugees in Turkey can be attributed to several reasons as pointed out by Watenpaugh et al. (2014). Parents may have more fears about their daughters’ security in a new society as compared to their sons (Hohberger, 2018). Given the limited resources, families may prefer to support their sons due to strategic, economic, and cultural reasons (Watenpaugh et al., 2014). Men may be encouraged to study to achieve better living standards as they are seen as the breadwinners while women can be married off at a young age leaving the financial responsibility to their husbands (Hohberger, 2018).

The experiences of Syrian university students are related to Berry’s theory of acculturation (1997), which is one of the most prominent theories used to explain intergroup contact in cross-cultural psychology. The acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) provides a comprehensive layout to understand the experiences of Syrian refugee students in Turkey, by drawing connections between the students’ conditions; their ways of relating to the new society; and their social and psychological well-being in Turkey.

4.6. Theories of acculturation

The classical definition states that acculturation is the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other’ (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). Most recent conceptualizations of acculturation expand the classical definition beyond the required ‘continuous first-hand contact’ as recent research considers fluid and remote cultural references of belonging, and multiple avenues of contact (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2012; Ferguson et
al., 2014; Tausova et al., 2019). Acculturation involves both the host communities and the immigrant groups; however, there has been a greater emphasis on the acculturation processes of immigrants as the process often induces more change in the immigrant group (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1997).

The acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) distinguishes three main categories as shown in Figure 4.1 (from Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006b, p. 143): 1. acculturation conditions, 2. acculturation orientations and 3. acculturation outcomes (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011; Te Lindert et al., 2008). Acculturation conditions are the contextual variables and the setting, which serves as the background of the acculturation process. More specifically, it refers to the characteristics of the receiving society, the host population, the society of origin, and refugees. Recent studies show that pre-migration factors combined with characteristics and state integration policies of the receiving country shape acculturation orientations of both immigrants and members of the host society (Bourhis et al., 1997; Stephens, 2016). The pre-migration context includes psychological and socio-economic characteristics of refugees, perceptions of conflict and human security (Stephens, 2016). Thus, it is crucial to examine acculturation conditions to have a deeper understanding of the acculturation orientations and outcomes.

**Figure 4.1**

*Framework of Acculturation*
In his acculturation model, Berry (1997) distinguishes two acculturation dimensions immigrants can engage in when going into a new culture. The first one is cultural maintenance that refers to the decision (not always a conscious one) to maintain the key aspects of one’s culture of origin. The other is cultural adoption, which signifies the degree to which immigrants want to relate to the mainstream culture (Berry, 1997). The intersection of the two attitudes generates four prototypical acculturation orientations: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The integration strategy reflects the preference for maintaining the heritage culture while adopting key aspects of the dominant culture. Assimilation occurs when the migrant rejects the culture of origin and adopts the mainstream culture instead. In separation, the migrant maintains the culture of origin while rejecting the dominant culture. Marginalization signifies the rejection of both the heritage and the mainstream culture (Berry, 1997). It is maintained in the literature that these strategies may vary across individuals’ life domains and contexts, which is referred to as domain-specificity (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003). For instance, a migrant may prefer integration in the public spheres while choosing the separation strategy in the private domain (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003). Psychological outcome denotes internal adjustment and involves well-being, mental health and satisfaction with life in a new cultural setting (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011). Social outcome, on the other hand, denotes external adjustment and indicates how a person interacts with the majority groups and participates in the mainstream culture (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011).

4.7. The present study

This article expands on the acculturation conditions, orientations and outcomes of the Syrian university students in Turkey. In this vein, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main push and pull factors for migration to Turkey?
2. What are Syrian students’ perceptions of Turkey?
3. What acculturation strategies do the Syrian students prefer in public and private domains?
4. What are the social and psychological acculturation outcomes for Syrian students?

The present study fills the gap in the literature by using qualitative research methods to explore the experiences of refugees in the higher education in order to illustrate a more comprehensive picture of the multilayered factors affecting acculturation. It seeks to
investigate the issue from the perspective of refugees as opposed to using the data provided by university administrations, state institutions or governments. It approaches the phenomenon from a psychosocial standpoint in contrast with previous studies that focused on the education of Syrian refugees, explored the refugee problem generally from political and economic perspectives and/or analyzed the educational needs and challenges of the refugees without referring to acculturation experiences of the individuals. The acculturation process of Syrian university students remains an underresearched topic in Turkey.

The present study can be used as a guide for politicians, policy makers, educators, counsellors, psychologists and academics working with Syrian refugees. It is designed first and foremost to create awareness on the issue of Syrian refugees by paying attention to this overlooked population despite their high numbers. It aims to tone down the negative connotation of being a refugee that has been supported by the media and some politicians highlighting the unpleasant conditions associated with hosting refugees. Syrian refugees are frequently presented as a homogenous group who are fleeing war, seeking refuge, but also are dangerous and pose a security threat and economic burden to the receiving countries (Koc & Anderson, 2018). By focusing on the highly educated group of refugees, the strength and resiliency of Syrian refugees are highlighted to create a more balanced perspective.

4.8. Methodology

4.8.1. Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach given the complex and dynamic nature of acculturation. Qualitative research tends to employ procedures that are less structured than quantitative methods, which facilitate a broader exploration of the issues. It allows flexibility for researchers to find more novel and diverse information and generate unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to allow flexibility for participants to voice their unique perceptions and experiences without the constraints of structured methods or measures used in quantitative research. Structured instruments with fixed response formats such as likert scales are useful to test specific theories of cross-cultural differences, but less suitable for more exploratory approaches in which there is no theory that guides the choice of an instrument (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). The qualitative approach is best suited to this study as it provides the most adequate understanding of perceptions and meanings attributed to personal experiences in a social-political context through a cultural lens (Creswell, 2012).
The nature of the qualitative method requires researchers to state positionality. None of the researchers identified with neither the Syrian nor the Dutch culture as it might discourage the participants to reveal their ideas freely. However, both researchers (who are the first and the second authors of the published manuscript) come from cultures similar to those of the participants, such as religion, traditions, and social manners, which facilitated recruiting participants and assisted developing rapport. Both researchers are female. Both pursued their postgraduate degrees as ‘foreign’ students abroad. Coming from relatively ‘shared experience’ position, they were equipped with insights and the ability to understand the experiences and struggles of immigrant students. However, they lacked any understanding of what it is like to be a ‘refugee student’.

4.8.2. Participants

In order to collect data, 15 university students around the city of Izmir were interviewed. Three of the 15 participants were female. At the time of the interview in 2016, the age range of the participants was 21-27 with an average of 24 years of age. Most participants were much older than their classmates because time had passed while coping with the challenges of forced displacement and other barriers before resuming or restarting their university education in Turkey. Fourteen individuals were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student. At the time of the interviews, their average duration of stay in Turkey was 2.8 years. One of the participants stated being of Kurdish descent and the rest identified as Arabs. All participants reported being Muslim except for one person who reported no religious affiliation. Most participants lived away from their parents either because the parents resided in different parts of Turkey or Syria or abroad. Most participants had very limited financial support from their families even though they came from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds in pre-war Syria. It was common for the participants to take semesters off to make sufficient financial savings to continue studying at university. Most students expressed an intention to return to Syria and work towards rebuilding their country, if the war ended.

4.8.3. Data collection and instrumentation

Due to the nature of the research population, a convenience/purposive and a two-step snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants. Researchers chose three state universities in Izmir with the largest Syrian student populations as the recruitment sites. In the first round, researchers approached staff in the international offices of the universities to identify Syrian students that were enrolled. Some participants were called on the phone and
some others were approached on university campus. Once the first set of participants was recruited, they were asked them for referrals to increase the sample size. All the participants except one person whom researchers contacted decided to participate. One person did not accept participation due to being in a different city during the time of data collection. The criteria for participation in the research were being of Syrian descent, having refugee status in Turkey, and being enrolled in a university in Izmir. Syrian students who did not come as the result of forced displacement were excluded from the study.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, some respondents were initially hesitant to participate. Prior to commencing the interviews, researchers outlined the purpose and procedures of the interview process, protection of their confidentiality, participants’ right to refuse to answer any question(s) and voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time. Participants gave their oral and written informed consent. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were structured to explore the acculturation conditions, orientations and outcomes to portray a comprehensive picture of the participants’ acculturation experiences. For instance, participants were asked ‘Do you feel changed in any way as a result of this experience?’ to explore the psychological outcomes of acculturation.

The respondents were allowed to talk freely and report significant experiences. Thirteen of the interviews were digitally recorded, since two of the participants did not consent to being audio-recorded. Two of the interviews were carried out by word for word note taking during the interview process. Although it looks like a drawback, it helped the participant to feel comfortable to express himself, reinforced by the fact that the interviewer was alone. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours and were conducted in Turkish or English depending on the participants’ preference. Four of all 15 interviews were conducted in Turkish; the rest were conducted in English. The first researcher continued conducting interviews until data saturation was achieved. She determined that she reached data saturation when the interviews did not add new information as the responses to the interview questions were mostly similar in content during the data collection. All the researchers confirmed data saturation after transcription and during data analysis when there were mounting instances of the same codes in the data with no additional new emergent codes (Urquhart, 2013). Interviews took place at a quiet, private meeting room in the universities, free from distractions. The interviews were completed without any problems both for the participants and the interviewers during the May of 2016. The research data such as recordings and transcripts were securely kept. Anonymity of participants was protected by masking their names and personal information in the data.
4.8.4. Data analysis procedures

Content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) and inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) were applied for qualitative analysis in order to derive study findings from the data and ground results on the real-life experiences of the participants from their own perspective. Content analysis and inductive approach are not labeled within a specific tradition of qualitative research but can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Inductive approach is most consistent with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that it is a systematic procedure of analyzing qualitative data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions, expectations, or hypothesis. Yet, unlike grounded theory, it does not explicitly separate the coding process into open coding and axial coding and limits their theory-building to the presentation and description of the most important categories (Thomas, 2006). Content analysis emphasizes the manifest and latent context of the raw data to derive the findings (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). Both methods indicate that analysis is not a linear but an iterative process that requires continuing revision and refinement of the meaning patterns (codes, categories and themes) evident in the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003; Thomas, 2006). The analysis is carried out through multiple readings of data, organization of data from the bottom up into increasingly more abstract units of information, and interpretation of the underlying structure and meanings of the experiences in the raw data.

The data was derived from the interviews with 15 Syrian refugees. The first researcher conducted and transcribed all the interviews, which allowed her to familiarize herself with the depth and breadth of the content and gain an understanding of the themes and events covered in text. Data analysis was conducted by the first researcher; the second and the third authors of the manuscript read all the transcripts, provided peer examination and reevaluated the data analysis after the initial coding process and also after the completion of data analysis.

All the transcripts were coded and analyzed in English. They were given a code and the anonymity of participants was protected by masking their names and personal information. After the completion of all transcripts, each transcript was reread in its entirety in detail and prepared manually in a common format for the coding process using an excel file. The raw data was separated into chunks of meaning units that allowed the researcher to assign labels for potential codes, sub-categories and categories, in an increasing level of abstraction, as demonstrated in Table 1 in Appendix B. In doing so, the researcher aimed to abstract the condensed material and group together under higher order headings.
The meaning units were condensed into codes, which were given a label. Initial codes were compared to identify sub-categories and categories, which constitute manifest content. When the underlying meaning between the categories was similar, the categories were combined or linked to a superordinate category. The researcher did not leave any data out to identify as many potential patterns as possible. A coding framework was developed, continuously revised as new codes and categories emerged in the coding process of the other transcripts. The framework started out as a basic list of codes and evolved into a table (i.e. Table 2 in Appendix B) showing the hierarchical relationship with all the other codes and categories such as superordinate, parallel, and subordinate categories (Thomas, 2006).

After the initial coding of each of the transcripts, all transcripts were reread according to the revised coding framework. Codes and categories were compared to assess the commonalities and differences among them based on the interpretation of all the transcripts. They were judged on how well they reflect the majority of the raw material. Second and third researchers revised the codes and categories identified by the first researcher. Each transcript was recoded at least two more times in order to reflect the whole understanding of the text and revision by other researchers. Once the coding process was finalized, a category template was created, which shows each participant’s narrations that were abstracted into all the relevant codes and categories, as exemplified in Table 3 in Appendix B.

The category template allows the researchers to review all the categories and codes that emerged in all participants’ interviews. It also allows the researchers to evaluate the prevalence of the codes under each relevant category by counting the number of different participants who articulated the codes. Even though the number of times a code is mentioned may not always be a sign of the relative significance of the code, it allows the researchers to use phrases such as ‘some, many, majority of the participants’ while reporting the data and inform the readers that codes, categories and themes really existed beyond the interpretation of the researchers. After a careful review of the category template, the researcher revisited the coding framework and finalized the labeling of all codes, sub-categories and categories. Then, the researcher formulated and labeled themes that cut across and within all the categories, which denote the interpretation of the underlying structure and meaning, the latent content. The coding framework included all the higher order headings and the links among them, as demonstrated in the Table 2 in Appendix B. Finally, the researcher selected the categories that captured the key aspects of the raw data and the most significant themes given the evaluation objectives. The researchers completed the analysis by selecting extracts from the transcripts that best reflect the selected categories and themes.
In order to exemplify the coding and analysis process, an example is provided. To explore the consequences of the refugee experience, the participants provided rich experiences regarding their psychological state. Participants explained the perceived causes of their psychological state such as (1) lack of wide social circle of friends, (2) lack of social support, (3) discrimination, (4) worries about Syria, (5) worries about family, (6) language difficulties. These codes were grouped under the category of ‘reasons for negative psychological well-being.’ The other codes such as (1) having the chance to continue education, (2) escaping the negative conditions in Syria, (3) speaking the mainstream language, (4) host group members' being supportive, (5) having a satisfying social life, (6) having in-group support, (7) having good professors, (8) cultures being similar (9) having the skills valued in the social circle (10) family members doing well (11) positive thoughts about the future of Syria, were grouped under the ‘reasons for positive well-being in migration context’ category. These codes and categories were then merged into the theme of ‘Psychological Outcomes of Acculturation’. During the data analysis process, several strategies including a code-recode strategy, peer examination, and member checking were used to ensure trustworthiness of the findings.

4.9. Results

The research questions of this study are designed to investigate the three facets of acculturation: acculturation conditions, acculturation orientations and acculturation outcomes (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003) in the case of Syrian refugees focusing on the experiences of Syrian university students. Therefore, major themes that emerged from the study are analyzed thoroughly under three topics: acculturation conditions, acculturation orientations and acculturation outcomes.

4.9.1. Acculturation conditions

The first and the second research questions address push and pull factors for migration and perceptions of the host country. Thus, this section focuses on the participants’ life conditions and experiences in Syria prior to migration as well as in the reception context in Turkey and participants’ perception of the migration context and the host population. Table 4.1 provides a summary of all the codes, categories and sub-categories that emerged under this theme.
### Table 4.1

**Acculturation Conditions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Acculturation Conditions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Categories</strong></td>
<td>Life conditions in Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-categories</strong></td>
<td>Danger, Lack of basic needs, Coping for survival, Geographical and religious divide, Interruption of education</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Codes</strong></td>
<td>Life threatening conditions, near-death experiences, financial difficulty, constant change of housing, internal migration, sunni-shia polarization, unable to graduate</td>
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Based on the participants’ descriptions, the reported conditions in Syria before migration revealed several codes evaluated in four sub-categories: danger, lack of basic needs, coping for survival, geographical and religious divide and interruption of educational life. Most participants described living in dangerous conditions and in a constant state of coping with deteriorating conditions. They explained that in order to survive the life-threatening circumstances, they had to change places of accommodation such as going from house to house. Five of the participants were internally displaced before migrating to Turkey.

When the bombs were thrown, at first, we went to our relatives and we all gathered in a very small place, in a bathroom, for example. (Participant #3)

The quotation above shows the dangerous conditions and people’s attempts to cope with the deteriorating conditions by changing locations and gathering in concealed places.

Most participants reported not having access to basic needs, deterioration of their financial conditions and interruption of their educational lives. Despite constantly deteriorating and dramatic conditions, all the participants reported to have postponed their migration mainly due to reluctance to delay graduation and all other educational plans.

I was facing difficulties, but I said I can keep on going because I was in the second year and I did not want to lose my study. I remember that during the final exams, I was reviewing some information outside just before the exam, there were two bombs thrown at the college. I was very near. We were very afraid, I ran inside with the people around and the people inside were running outside. We were running in and out, we did not know what to do. When this happened, I said I don’t want to go on anymore… Students were lying on the ground and they were killed (Participant is crying profusely and stuttering). My sister was inside the college and I just wanted to know if my sister was safe. (Participant #3)

The quotation above is chosen to reflect the dangerous conditions in Syria, participants’ resilience to study even under life-threatening conditions, reluctance to drop university education and leave Syria to the point of extreme near-death experiences.

Participants were also asked about their internal experiences prior to and following migration. On the day of migration, most participants expressed that they felt reluctance to leave, sadness about their families/ communities left behind, worry about their future and reunion with their families. After migration, participants described a range of experiences from negative feelings such as feeling worried, feeling disappointed and indecisive; to positive feelings such as feeling safe, and well-adapted in Turkey. The following quotation states the internal experiences of a participant who lived in the camps in Turkey.
When one first arrives in the camps, s/he falls in depression. (One questions) “Where did I come, what happened to me?” One feels great disappointment: I worked so hard, I made a lot of effort; I was not expecting this to happen. (Participant #4)

Their reasons for migration were analyzed under six categories: Security concerns, traumatic experiences, financial reasons, encouragement from family and/or fellow Syrians, educational reasons and having to extend a temporary stay. Most participants reported the insecure conditions of the home context as a push factor to leave Syria. Most participants reported having gone through traumatic life experiences including being kidnapped, imprisoned and tortured; witnessing mass-shooting and mass-murder of close family members and friends, having near-death experiences and having family members lost or kidnapped for ransom. Safety concerns as a result of having gone through traumatic experiences and risk of compulsory military service in Assad’s forces were among the major reasons for migration. The excerpt below is chosen to display the impact of the traumatic experiences in Syria:

I have experienced much evil in prison, we were disgraced. I felt worse after I left the prison because the soldiers trampled on the most valuable things for a person: your soul, your personality. Man loses his self-worth; and humanity loses its meaning. I stayed in prison for 15 days and I was tortured. I did not drink water for two days in prison because they forced us to drink water from the toilet. But I could not stand it for too long. I can never forget that. Some things are better off not told. (Participant #7)

Six participants reported that their main motivation to leave the country was to continue their education. Support and encouragement from family, friends, relatives and others who had already immigrated was listed as a motivating factor. It is noteworthy to point out that some participants had no intention or awareness of actually migrating to Turkey or staying in Turkey long term. Their intention was to return to Syria after a temporary stay in Turkey until the war subsided. However, they could not return because the conflict had unexpectedly escalated. In some cases, it was their family’s decision to migrate and participants were kept in dark of the family’s intention to stay long-term. The subsequent quote provides an example of participants’ not having an intention of long-term stay in Turkey and in-group support as a motivating factor for migration.

We had acquaintances and a neighbor who were coming to Izmir. He told me that he had an older brother in Izmir and offered me to go with him. I thought I will give it a try and it will be a new experience. Also, I thought I would come back. But I did not know it will be this bad, too bad to return. Things have gotten much worse after I left. (Participant #6)
In addition to the push factors explained above, the first research question also explores participants’ pull factors: reasons for choosing Turkey for migration. Four categories emerged under this theme: the geopolitical position of Turkey, existing support in Turkey, economic and/or educational opportunities, and discouragement by the Arab countries. Most participants stated that factors related to the geopolitical position of Turkey and reception policies such as, easy legal entry, proximity and easy access to Syria, cultural similarity, a welcoming attitude of the Turkish government, and Turkey being the best option compared to neighboring countries/potential destinations were the major pull factors. The following excerpt shows that Turkey being the only country allowing Syrian refugees and its proximity to Syria were the main reasons for choosing Turkey.

We did not have anywhere else to go. Turkey was close. (Participant #4)

Existing in-group support in Turkey, affordable life conditions in comparison to other Arab countries and cultural similarity were also among the main pull factors, as shown in the excerpt below.

Turkey was the most suitable country for us, it is a Muslim country, it is very close, the people are nice, and the cultures are similar. It may be a bit expensive for us but Lebanon and Jordan are even more expensive. Also, Lebanon and Jordan require visas but not Turkey. (Participant #15)

Six people reported educational opportunities as their motivation to come to Turkey as shown in the following excerpt.

I told my father, grandfather, mom, uncles about my opinion of Turkey. I told (them) (if) I need to commit my study, I must come here (Turkey). They said, that is your future, your study, you know better than us. (Participant #14)

Characteristic features of the migration contexts were analyzed from the perspectives of the participants. All the participants perceived Turkey as being similar to Syria, a beautiful country and supportive of the Syrian refugees. There is a high cultural similarity between Turkey and Syria. Among its neighbors, Turkey shares the longest border with Syria as well as a common history and religion. Arabic is widely spoken in the southern part of Turkey and Syria has a ‘Turkmen’ population who speaks Turkish. The first quote below shows the perceived high cultural similarity between Turkey and Syria. The second excerpt is an example of participants’ perception of Turkish people and sense of social support in Turkey.

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15 Syrian citizens of Turkish origin, who are mostly descendants of migrants who arrived during the Ottoman rule from Anatolia
Turkey is very similar. Sometimes I feel like I am in Syria. (Participant #9)

I like the friendliness of the people very much. They helped us without expectations and unconditionally. I learned a lot from these instances. I thought to myself, if the Turkish people help us so much, then I should also help other Syrian people.

(�Participant #15)

On the other hand, participants also felt that Turkey and Turkish people had no to little experience with refugees. They perceived Turkey as being culturally reclusive, which refers to the disconnection from and unawareness of other cultures. The following quotation offers Syrians’ perception of Turkish people’s lack of multicultural awareness.

People are friendly here, but the problem is that they are closed, not so good socially. For example, it was raining in the market last week and the people there asked us ‘Where are you from?’ and we said ‘Syria.’ They asked, ‘Does it rain in Syria?’ This is a normal question for everyone here. Syria is so close, and they don’t know anything about Syria. Just this problem. (Participant #1)

Most participants perceived the attitudes of the host group members as highly positive. Several participants reported that Turkish natives were eager to support and showed willingness for social interaction with Syrian people. Interestingly however, participants perceived a shift in their positive attitudes toward the Syrian refugees over the years as a result of their period of stay becoming longer than expected and an increasing number of refugees, as indicated in the quotation below.

After 2015, their attitudes toward us have changed for the very negative, unfortunately. I cannot remember a specific event but before people used to talk and interact very closely with us, there was no mention of ‘Turks vs. Syrians’ but after some time… (Participant #6)

Participants also perceived implicit prejudice and discrimination towards Syrians. Nonetheless, they described that people with negative attitudes constituted a minority in Turkey and did not reflect the attitudes of the majority of Turkish people. They explained that instances of discrimination were rare.

It is significant to state that participants’ perceptions of Turkey and host nationals were fundamentally formed through their experiences and interactions in Izmir where the participants settled long-term. Izmir is known for embracing secularism, Western ideals and left-wing politics. Participants perceived Izmir as being different from Anatolia, Eastern Turkey, and Istanbul in terms of its culture, attitude towards religion, and politics. Participants
tended to compare Izmir to Istanbul, which they perceived as the ideal representation of a Muslim city that embraced ethnic and linguistic differences and physically resembled Damascus. Therefore, due to the perceived cultural similarity between Syria and Istanbul, the welcoming attitudes toward Syrian refugees and positive attitude towards religion; participants felt an increased sense of belonging and acceptance. In contrast, participants felt aversion towards Izmir due to perceived cultural distance, the perception of negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees and Islam. The first quote below showcases the perceived cultural similarity between Syria and Istanbul; and the perceived cultural distance between Syria and Izmir in terms of religion and the impact of cultural similarity on refugees’ feeling of belonging in Turkey. The second quote below explains the perceived negative attitude towards Syrians in Izmir.

Istanbul was very beautiful; I did not feel like a foreigner because there were mosques everywhere. You can go to a mosque in 4-5 minutes when you hear the call to prayer. But there are not any mosques in Izmir, or much fewer mosques. This is a difference. (Participant #7)

The students in Izmir may feel strange around foreigners or around Syrians actually. I don’t know why. (Participant #13)

4.9.2. Acculturation orientations

One of the research questions of the study concerns acculturation orientations which denote the extent to which individuals prefer to maintain their own culture and adopt the mainstream culture in the migration country. It summarizes a person’s sense of belonging which is demonstrated in the adoption and maintenance of culture-specific behaviors such as language use, choice of food, and music; as well as values such as relational style, beliefs about human nature and the world (Alamilla et al., 2017). Based on the self-reports, we aimed to identify which of the four acculturation orientations participants prefer.

According to the participants’ narratives, Syrian university students adopt some behavioral dimensions of the Turkish culture such as choice of food and music, Turkish customs and traditions, and the Turkish language, as well as values, such as a more liberal attitude towards gender equality, religion, and politics. They adopt the Turkish language while maintaining their native language and show a desire to teach Arabic to host nationals. In the quotation below, a participant talks about maintaining the behaviors and values of the Turkish culture upon an eventual return to Syria.

There is so much freedom in terms of religion here and equality between men and
women. I did not experience any difficulty in these cases in Damascus but maybe in other places in Syria. There are tiny differences in food, festivals, holidays and weddings which can be transferred between the two cultures. For example, people give out lokma on religious holidays (in Turkey), which I love. Or the tea culture here versus the coffee in Syria. There are a lot of things like these, which I want to maintain and transfer. (Participant #6)

In the meantime, they reject un-Islamic practices such as drinking alcohol, close personal contact with the opposite sex and wearing revealing clothing, which they associate with Izmir/Turkish lifestyle. That is, Syrian students adopt the Turkish culture and customs as well as the language but reject the liberal attitude towards religion in Izmir and maintain a stronger religious identity. Hence, it is concluded that most Syrian university students in the present sample have chosen the integration strategy. Some participants, especially those who have lived in Turkey for relatively shorter period seemed to adopt a separation strategy due to a preference to rely on in-group support, a lack of social relationships with the host group members, and a lack of knowledge of the Turkish language. Only one participant appeared to adopt a marginalization strategy due to a lack of contact with the host population as well as the Syrians, maintaining intense social contact only within his family.

The acculturation orientations may differ across individuals’ life domains, known as domain-specificity. Participants talked about four important concepts: religion, culture, language and ethnicity in three different contexts such as marriage, childrearing which can be classified as private domain; friendships and social encounters which can be classified as public domain. Syrian university students find religion important in the private domain but not in the public domain. Some students also find culture and language important in the private domain. Most students do not find ethnicity important in the private domain. Based on the findings, it can be said that most participants prefer separation in the private domain and integration in the public domain. The subsequent excerpt shows the importance of religion and language in the private domain in contrast with culture and ethnicity.

I would marry a Turkish person, but I have a lot of conditions. He/she won’t drink alcohol. He/She needs to speak Arabic because I will not live alone with him/her. I have my family. My older sister is now engaged to a Turkish man. He speaks Arabic

16 Dessert from Izmir
very well. He studied in Syria before the war. He speaks Turkish and gets along very well with my sister and my family. (Participant #4)

4.9.3. Acculturation outcomes

Acculturation outcomes refer to the psychological and social reflections of the acculturation process on the acculturating individuals. Expansions on the conceptualizations of acculturation emphasize psychological acculturation, which describes individual changes resulting from socialization to dominant cultural norms (Alamilla et al., 2017). In order to gain insights into the acculturation outcomes of Syrian university students, participants were asked about their life satisfaction, well-being, and mental health, which are indicators of psychological adaptation; and also, the type and quality of interactions and relationships in the migration context, which are the signs of socio-cultural adaptation.

Table 4.2 provides a summary of the sub-categories and codes that emerged under the category of psychological adaptation. In order to gauge the psychological adaptation of the participants, participants were asked about their life satisfaction, psychological well-being, mental health, the influence of the refugee experience on their self-perception.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Adaptation of Syrian University Students in Turkey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category Sub-categories</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
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</table>
Most participants reported high levels of life satisfaction and three people reported relatively low levels of life satisfaction in Turkey. In contrast with the reported high levels of life satisfaction, most participants described being in a negative psychological state. They described experiencing depressive feelings and intrusive thoughts about the past. Some people described a fluctuating psychological mood such as feeling happy one day and sad the next. Some people reported feeling positive and more self-confident. As causes of negative psychological well-being, most participants pointed to the social difficulties in Turkey such as lack of a wide circle of friends in Turkey, loss of their circle of friends from Syria, discrimination, language difficulties, emotional difficulties regarding Syria such as homesickness and worry about the present situation in Syria. The following quotation shows the impact of the language barrier on the internal experiences of a participant who asked to have a smoking break during the interview saying he is ‘smoking terribly’ for the past two months because his ‘psychology is not good.’

I felt that I have two personalities. In general, I have a sense of humor and I am very funny and I do funny things with my friends. But here, when I get to university, I am very serious, I don’t talk, I just want to finish the class and go home. I feel like, ‘What am I doing? Why should I do that?’ I wanted to try to change this. I tried to be more kind but I could not. Because, in fact, the language problem is very big to me because I can’t express myself. When I cannot express myself, I feel very bad. (Participant #3)

They informed us that the refugee experience gave birth to deep changes in the course of their lives, as shown in the subsequent quotation. As a result of the refugee experience, most participants stated that they acquired a wider perspective on life and an increased intellectual capacity, and that they had to assume more responsibility, and thus gained increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. They reported that they feel grown, stronger, and changed in a positive way. Some participants mentioned being less conservative and religious.

I have changed so so much. I did not think the same way before the war. I was going to graduate, work in a governmental job, get married and build a family. My plan was only this. After coming to Turkey, I met many foreigners, people from Africa, other Arab countries. I am observing life from a different angle now. We had a superficial outlook there (Syria), because we had a comfortable life before the war. After having seen blood, difficulty and making contact with foreigners, we understood we need to take more responsibility. If we make small plans, people like Putin will become leaders and create evil. (Participant #7)
In order to gauge the socio-cultural outcomes of the acculturation process, participants were asked about their social lives, type and quality of social relationships in Turkey and their perceptions of the future. Table 4.3 provides a summary of the codes and the sub-categories that emerged under the category of socio-cultural adaptation.

Table 4.3

Socio-cultural Adaptation of Syrian University Students in Turkey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Socio-cultural Adaptation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-categories</td>
<td>Quality of social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type of relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of relationships with (Turkish) host group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>high satisfaction with social life, average-low satisfaction with social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mostly with Syrians, only with Syrians, with minority groups, mixed social contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>close social contact, poor social contact, no social contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inability to foresee a future, resistance towards making future plans, return intention</td>
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Some of the participants stated being very active socially and reported increased levels of satisfaction with their social lives. Three people stated living in social isolation such as staying at home most of the time. The majority pointed to the language barrier as the main reason for not having a very active social life, as shown in the following excerpts.

My social life is not very good. It is very problematic. Turkish is the reason for my difficulty. (Participant #9)

We don’t talk with the Turkish families. We talk only with the Syrian families. Why? Due to the language issue. Language is the biggest issue. (Participant #5)

Four participants reported being in social contact only with the Syrian people. All participants except one person reported being in social contact mostly with Syrians in Turkey. Most participants described establishing relationships with foreign students from other countries and minorities in Turkey. Three participants highlighted that they have increased social contact with the Kurdish natives of Turkey, as indicated in the quotation below.

We have never gone out together with Turkish friends. Two weeks ago, there was a conference which I attended with 6-7 Turkish students. We went together for the first time. It was a nice day. I have one friend who is Kurdish. We have a very good relationship. We study together. Sometimes I go over to his house, sometimes I invite
him to my house. We go out together. (Participant #15)

Four participants reported having mixed social contact with host nationals as well as Syrians. When asked about the quality of social contact with the host group members, seven people reported having intense social contact such as going out and socializing together and living in the same house (usually a flat rented off campus grounds). Five people stated being in poor social contact with host nationals such as meeting only in the university context. One person reported having no social contact with host group members whatsoever.

Previous research indicates that planning for the future is among the biggest factors that predict acculturation (Pantiru & Barley, 2014). As an indication of adjustment, we interviewed participants about their future perceptions. Participants reported being hesitant to make long term plans since their plans in the past were shattered by war and they feel uncertain about what they can do considering their limitations as refugees. Most participants reported that they plan to pursue a post-graduate degree and go abroad to Europe, USA, or Arab countries, as shown in the following quotation.

I want to finish medical school. Then, my brother who is in Norway is telling me ‘go to England’ but I don’t know yet. It is too early to decide now. I can also work in Turkey, I know people who are doctors who studied medicine here. I can work in the private hospitals but not in the state hospitals in Turkey. It is not allowed. I keep my options open. I speak English and Arabic. The East or the West can be options. I don’t think I will stay in Turkey. There are 22 Arab countries where I can go. Or Europe or the USA... Because even the Turkish people have hard time finding jobs in Turkey. (Participant #7)

Some participants explained their desire to return to Syria once the war is over. Some people described plans related to their families, such as leaving Turkey to reunite with them, work with their family members or try to bring them to Turkey.

### 4.10. Discussion

The present study explored acculturation conditions, orientations and outcomes of Syrian university students in Turkey. They are a critical group to consider in terms of their higher levels of education, increased socio-economic advantages compared to the general population of Syrian refugees in Turkey, which are indications of future possibilities in Turkey and power to inform Turkish-Syrian relations in the future. Despite having less critical circumstances than other refugees, the conditions of their acculturation are especially severe
because of the sudden and involuntary nature of their immigration to the host country. Despite their high numbers, their needs, particularly their educational needs, are neglected.

In terms of their acculturation orientations, Syrian university students in the present study have chosen integration in the public sphere and separation in the private sphere—consistent with previous research findings with other migrant groups (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2004). It is common for new immigrants to want to develop a sense of identification to the new context and thus prefer integration or assimilation strategy (Van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998; Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). However, based on the notion of the integration paradox, refugees’ higher education, improved language skills, better understanding of host group members, the culture, and the media may interrupt or reverse their acculturation process in the following years. The integration paradox describes the phenomenon of the economically integrated and higher educated immigrants turning psychologically away from the host society, as opposed to having a stronger orientation toward it (Buijs et al., 2006).

Individuals that choose assimilation or integration, especially highly educated immigrants, become more exposed to increased levels of discrimination; and more aware of prejudices towards their groups due to their openness for intergroup contact and active consumption of national media and political information compared to the lower educated immigrants (Kepperman, 2018; Verkuyten, 2016). Such sense of rejection and discrimination, despite their efforts to perform well, cause immigrants to distance themselves from the host society, also in line with the rejection-disidentification model (RDIM) by Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. (2009). The grounds for higher educated immigrants’ disengagement from the host society may be that they feel relatively deprived due to their perception of unfair disadvantage in comparison with others in the host society, such as having to accept jobs below their educational level and their qualifications not being as valued (Verkuyten, 2016). Confirming the integration paradox, based on a study on four immigrant groups in the Netherlands, Verkuyten (2016) found that higher educated immigrants perceived lower acceptance in the Dutch society and more discrimination than lower educated immigrants resulting in a less favorable attitude toward the majority population. In the case of Syrian university students, given the increasing change of attitude in the Turkish society, their uncertain future and lack of career opportunities upon graduation in Turkey; it is predicted that their acculturation orientations may be negatively impacted in the following years.

The research findings indicate that Syrian refugees may be oriented towards other subgroups in Turkey other than the Turkish mainstream, in line with the tridimensional/multidimensional acculturation model, which accounts for orientation towards multiple
cultures within contemporary settlement societies (Ferguson et al., 2012). Refugees’ culture of origin in Syria along with the culture of destination in Turkey cannot be considered as homogenous entities. Thus, the Turkish mainstream culture is not the sole destination-reference for Syrian refugees, who may associate with different and multiple cultures both in Syria and Turkey. Syrian university students reported positive interpersonal relationships with minority groups, particularly with Kurdish people and Arabic-speaking minorities and other international student groups in Turkey and claimed to draw a sense of support from these groups. Even though Berry’s bidimensional acculturation model (1997) was applied in the study, an expanded acculturation model seems necessary to fully describe Syrian refugees’ orientation towards multiple cultures in Turkey.

In terms of acculturation outcomes, the role of acculturative stress should be considered. Acculturative stress is known to lead to stress-related health problems and is associated with poor physical and psychological health (Fox et al., 2017). Berry (1995) showed that acculturative stress may trigger lowered mental health status, especially confusion, anxiety, depression, decreased self-esteem, feelings of marginality, and alienation. The study by Janssen-Kallenberg et al. (2017) demonstrated higher prevalence rates of depression in Turkish migrants of the first and second migration generation in two major cities in Germany, compared to the host population and with higher severity than the host population. Yako and Biswas (2014) evaluated the acculturation experiences of 154 Iraqi refugees in two communities in the USA through a mixed-methods approach and identified high acculturative stress within this group as well as social isolation, language barriers, religious and ethnic persecution all contributing to sustained hopelessness, distress about a future of their own. Consistent with these research findings on immigrants and refugees, this study found that Syrian university students experience depressive feelings, some degree of social exclusion, nostalgia regarding their wide social circle in the home country, some level of hopelessness, and deal with uncertainty of the future. It should also be noted, however, that these negative emotional states experienced by the present sample may also be attributed to the history of adversity in Syria in addition to acculturative stress.

It should be stressed that while some factors such as uncertainty of the future, sense of hopelessness and cultural distance may elevate acculturative stress for Syrian university students in Turkey, several other factors such as pursuit of higher education, host language acquisition, social support and cultural similarity may alleviate acculturative stress. In Syrian students’ narration of their future, there is a clear sense of uncertainty, unpredictability, and hopelessness about finding further educational and employment opportunities. In the case of
the Syrian university students, employment opportunities and work authorization legalities largely determine whether the students make long-term plans to stay in Turkey. They seem to be cautious about making firm plans given the fluctuating circumstances, which may be a realistic assessment of their possibilities in Turkey, and they think about going abroad to Europe, the US, or other Arab contexts. Thus, it is suggested that the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future increases acculturative stress, impacts Syrian students’ acculturation experiences negatively, prevents them from completely engaging in the larger society, and decreases their sense of belonging.

A study by In (2016) shows that hope is an important factor in deciding to stay in the migration country and overcome career challenges. Based on the participants’ self-reports, they have a clear aspiration towards a better life, however, students do not seem hopeful about their futures firstly because of the revival of their past trauma and learned helplessness; and secondly due to the limited employment opportunities in Turkey’s job market. With limited hope for a better life, students may not have the motivation to face the challenges and adversities of staying in Turkey. In (2016) found that not having hope to sustain and maintain career plans is positively associated with low adoption of the host culture. Low adoption of the host culture might also have a negative effect in the future career hopes of international students, creating a vicious circle. Lack of hope about the future opportunities in Turkey damages Syrian students’ perception of control over their lives and renders them unable to shape a desired future in Turkey. Thus, they might not fully commit to adapting to Turkey.

On the other hand, it seems that the adverse impact of acculturative stress on refugees’ psychological health can partially be alleviated by the pursuit of higher education. This study found that Syrian students describe negative feelings, but also experience an increased sense of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy. This finding is reflected in numerous studies that show that higher educational opportunities can elevate the well-being of refugees because of greater self-esteem, improved social and psychological skills through acquiring knowledge (Al-Rousan et al., 2018). Similar to the findings by Al-Rousan et al. (2018) on Syrian university students in Jordan, it is found that pursuing higher education appears to serve as a protective factor to actively cope with acculturative stress. It has a positive impact on students’ psychological well-being through acquiring knowledge, increasing social network, and learning the host language.

This study discovered that language acquisition in the migration context and social support from the host nationals greatly impact acculturation orientations and psychosocial outcomes. As participants learned Turkish, they felt an increased sense of confidence to
initiate interactions with the mainstream and the host nationals offered more social support, in return. Therefore, participants felt an increased sense of acceptance from the host nationals and sense of belonging in Turkey. It is significant to note that knowledge of the Turkish language seemed differentiate among the four prototypical acculturation orientations through stimulating increased social interactions with the host group members. The results of this study are in line with the previous research findings that found that increased social support in the host country was an important part of decreasing acculturative stress and encouraging adaptation in the host country (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Apart from the language factor and social support, another important variable that impacts acculturative stress, acculturation strategies, and the well-being of the refugee students is perceived cultural similarity/distance. The study on the acculturation process of international students in the Netherlands by Tausova et al. (2019) found a positive association between perceived cultural distance and acculturative stress. Berry and Annis (1984) found that acculturation prompts more psychosocial stress when there is greater discrepancy between heritage and host environments. Consistent with these findings, Syrian university students reported more acculturative stress in Izmir, where they perceived a larger cultural distance than Istanbul and other cities in Anatolia. The research participants expressed that they had a smoother acculturation experience in Istanbul due to the cultural similarities between Damascus and Istanbul, which was lacking, to an extent, in Izmir. They perceived Izmir as vastly different from their home environment and thus they struggled to get acquainted with the new system, ways of living, beliefs, values and social relationships. In Izmir, students reported an increased sense of marginality, isolation, and exclusion than they felt in Istanbul. Coupled with lack of language skills and lack of social support from the host nationals; the newcomers are discouraged from reaching out to wider social groups in Turkey. Even though lingering within the Syrian in-group may offer a shell of protection and a buffer against acculturative stress in the initial period, it may also delay psychosocial adaptation in the host country.

This study has several limitations. First of all, the self-reported data can contain several potential sources of bias such as selective memory. Secondly, only three female participants versus 12 male participants were in the study sample which creates a large gender difference. Female students in higher education were underrepresented in the present study because there were fewer female students in the universities in Izmir. All female participants who were approached agreed to participate in the study, that is, there were no cultural or religious reasons which created a barrier for female students to join the study. Thirdly, it is
possible that snowball sampling created a higher similarity, leading to a sample selection effect in the research sample as opposed to having recruited participants independently from one another. Fourth, researchers have observed that participants avoided speaking about their negative experiences mostly because Islamic teachings argue against ‘complaining’ as it is thought to create resentment in the heart towards God and recommend gratitude even in the times of hardship. Lastly, the comparatively small sample size, the nature of qualitative research methods, and the vast contextual differences in Turkey can influence the transferability of the findings. Even though a full description of the research context was provided and a purposeful sampling was used to ensure transferability, it is with caution that one transfers these findings to another population. A larger-scale quantitative study might complement the findings of this research given the small sample size and longitudinal studies are needed to disentangle a causal direction. Nonetheless, participant-focused research puts the refugee voices at the center of the research and serves as a starting point for understanding the nuances of the resettlement experience from the perspectives of the refugees themselves. The sample allowed us to obtain deep insight into acculturation processes of Syrian youth.

Results of this study have implications for professionals working with refugee students. The present study is designed first and foremost to draw links among acculturation conditions, orientations and psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in the case of Syrian university students under temporary protection in Turkey. This study makes references to the regional differences in Turkey in terms of perceived cultural similarity, religious differences and perceived attitudes towards Syrian refugees, to showcase the impact of the acculturation contexts on acculturation orientations and acculturation outcomes. It also emphasizes that, as the largest group of the migrants who are not of Turkish descent in Turkey, Syrian refugees bring up issues regarding ethnic, linguistic and religious boundaries, potentially leading to disengagement from the larger society, decreased sense of belonging, low adoption of the host culture. To counter the negative impact of the boundaries on acculturation, Syrian refugees may seek identification with multiple culture groups within Turkey other than the Turkish mainstream based on shared cultural, ethnic, linguistic or minority identities, which are not accounted for within Berry’s bidimensional acculturation theory (1997). Future studies should consider an expanded understanding of acculturation accounting for the heterogeneity of the heritage and the host cultures. Policy makers may use the implications of this study to improve accessibility and quality of higher education, language education as they appear to alleviate acculturative stress and lead to higher levels of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation.
CHAPTER 5
Psychological and socio-cultural adaption of Syrian refugees in Turkey

5.1. Overview of the chapter

The chapter informs about the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation processes of Syrian refugees in Turkey using semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews among 15 participants. The study explored the themes and issues emerging in the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation processes such as life-satisfaction, contact with the host community and future plans of Syrian adults. Berry’s acculturation model (1997) is used to form the theoretical basis of this research. Based on the qualitative analysis, this study revealed that psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees are reported to be strongly influenced by economic concerns, pre-migration expectations, perceptions of Turkish natives’ expectations/attitudes towards Syrians and religion. From the perspective of the participants, economic concerns and uncertainty regarding duration of stay have a negative impact on refugees’ acculturation, leading to delayed psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. Positive perceptions of host group members’ expectations/attitudes towards Syrians are perceived to increase motivation to seek social support, which promotes well-being and life satisfaction in Turkey. Yet, negative perceptions such as prejudice and discrimination, may pose a risk for psychological health and low socio-cultural adaptation. One major finding of the paper is the two-fold impact of religion on Syrian refugees: Religion can be considered a binding/equalizing function subsuming refugee and native groups under a superordinate identity. Nonetheless, it also appears to generate social distance when perceived as a threat to the secular national identity. The findings of this research can be used to minimize factors that undermine favorable acculturation outcomes and promote factors that facilitate high levels of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. The implications of the study are valuable to the policy makers in anticipating the acculturation-related concerns for refugees and the host countries and creating preventative measures before potential integration concerns come into existence. It will further contribute to the work of academics, psychologists, social workers,

counsellors, educators and other professionals assisting in the process of cross-cultural adaptation of refugees.

5.2. Introduction

The crisis of Syrian refugees represents the biggest migration crisis since World War II. Despite the expectations of it being short-lived, the Syrian civil war, which started in 2011, still has no foreseeable end. The number of Syrian refugees received by the European countries, Canada, and the USA are small compared to the number of refugees in Turkey and other neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon: Canada accepted 40,081 Syrian refugees from 2015 until 2017 (Government of Canada, 2017) while the USA admitted 21,060 people from 2011 until 2018 (Yiğit & Tatch, 2017), which is less than half the number of Syrian refugees admitted every month in Turkey in 2014 (Turkish Policy Quarterly, 2016). With 3.7 million Syrian refugees, Turkey remains one of the most affected countries of the Syrian conflict beyond the Syrian borders (UNHCR, 2019h).

An assessment of the prevailing migration policies of the receiving country, the general orientation of the society towards immigration and attitudes towards immigrants is crucial for a comprehensive study of acculturation (Bourhis et al., 1997). Since the early phases of the war, the Turkish government adopted an open-door policy and endorsed a welcoming and accepting attitude towards Syrian refugees by emphasizing religious solidarity, brotherhood and a shared Ottoman identity (Lazrev & Sharma, 2015; Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). Initially, both incoming Syrians and the Turkish government incorrectly expected the war to end quickly, and Syrians to repatriate after a temporary stay (Erdoğan, 2015; İçduygu, 2015). Syrian refugees cannot make any decisions for permanently settling down in Turkey because Turkey does not have a legal framework for giving refugee status. Besides, Turkish government constantly emphasizes the temporary nature of Syrians’ stay in Turkey, which increases the feeling of uncertainty. Finally, having almost no legal perspective of moving to a third country negatively influences psychological well-being of refugees.

Pre-acculturation/acculturation expectations, such as expected duration of stay, play a major role in the acculturation process as they affect migrants’ acculturation attitudes that further determine post-migration adaptation (Tartakovsky, 2007; Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2010). In his study on Syrian university students in Turkey, Karipek (2017) found that the majority of refugees hold firm return intentions, indicating that they may not invest in acquiring culturally appropriate knowledge and skills in the host country, which negatively
affects their adaptation. The incongruity between expectations and actual circumstances may lead to psychological dissatisfaction among immigrants (Ward et al., 2001).

Not only refugees’ expectations but also their perceptions of the host groups’ expectations regarding their in-group influence their acculturation (Bourhis et al., 1997). Refugees are particularly sensitive to the negative perceptions of the majority groups because their legal status to settle in the host country is determined by the state institutions that represent the majority groups (Roblain et al., 2017). Bourhis et al. (1997) demonstrated how immigrants’ acculturation orientations are influenced by the integration policies adopted by the state that reflect the acculturation orientations of host country members. They showed that the interaction between state integration policies, acculturation orientations of immigrants and host groups lead to consensual, problematic or conflictual relational outcomes (Bourhis et al., 1997). Badea et al. (2011) found among Romanians and Moroccan immigrants in France that perception of rejection from the host community negatively impacts immigrants’ French identification and acculturation orientations. A study on potential Russian migrants to Finland found that immigrants’ perceptions of their future hosts’ preferences for immigrants’ cultural maintenance and contact with hosts are the most important predictor of their pre-migration acculturation attitudes (Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2010). In other words, the perceived expectations and attitudes of the host society can either positively or negatively affect immigrants’ willingness to adopt the host culture and participate in the host society.

In the same vein, negative discourse about immigrants, prejudice and discrimination are shown to affect their acculturation strategies and play a negative role in their acculturation outcomes (Berry & Hou, 2017). Phillimore (2011) found that negative discourse in the media regarding refugees and their propensity towards criminal activity reduce their confidence in the host society and lead them to endorse either a separation or marginalization strategy, despite newcomers’ willingness to adopt an integration strategy and motivation to participate in the host society as indicated by empirical research conducted on various immigrant populations (Roblain et al., 2017; Sam & Berry, 2006). A consistent finding from recent empirical research is that discrimination is one of the greatest risk factors for physical, mental and psychological health (Berry & Hou, 2017; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2007). The experience of discrimination is found to be the single most important factor negatively impacting the well-being of immigrant youth (Berry et al., 2006) and to have a significant and long-lasting impact on both life satisfaction and mental health of immigrants (Berry & Hou, 2016).

Syrian refugees are increasingly exposed to negative perceptions and attitudes of the mainstream in their host countries (e.g., Koc & Anderson, 2018; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018).
Despite the low population density of Syrian refugees in the US, 52% of US citizens feel that Syrians are a threat to national stability, 82% believe that they are hurting American jobs and lowering wages; and half the respondents think that they receive unfair economic assistance (Yigit & Tatch, 2017). As the number of refugees grew over the years, the welcoming attitude of the Turkish majority has shifted into resentment and hostility towards Syrian refugees who experience prejudice, xenophobia, and discrimination. According to research on public perceptions of Turkish foreign policy by Kadir Has University (2019), 57.6% of respondents prefer to end receiving refugees and only 7% are content with the existing Syrian refugees in Turkey in 2019, compared to 17.5% in 2017. Given the decreasing support for Syrians in Turkey, Syrian refugees deserve scholarly attention for social and psychological intervention.

5.3. Theories of acculturation

This study applies the theories of acculturation (Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1997) to the case of Syrian refugees in Turkey to discuss the inductively derived findings based on a qualitative study. The most commonly used definition of acculturation was proposed by Redfield et al. (1936, p. 149) as ‘the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other.’ Acculturation framework as formulated by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) distinguishes three main categories: 1. acculturation conditions, 2. acculturation orientations and 3. acculturation outcomes (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011). Acculturation outcomes refer to the consequences of acculturation (Te Lindert et al., 2008), which are categorized into psychological and socio-cultural outcomes (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Psychological outcomes explain immigrants’ internal adaptation, including personal/life satisfaction, mental health, and psychological well-being in the new cultural setting. Socio-cultural outcomes refer to external adaptation, which explains immigrants’ progress in full participation in host society, acquisition of culturally appropriate knowledge and skills to successfully deal with everyday situations (Searle & Ward, 1990). Language proficiency, level of social contact in the host society, ability to deal with regulations and daily problems in work, school, and family life are considered indications of socio-cultural adaptation (Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008; Te Lindert et al., 2008).

5.4. The present study

Research on the acculturation of forced migrants are lacking as acculturation studies focus extensively on voluntary migrants. Even though the case of Syrian refugees is no longer a
new phenomenon, their acculturation processes remain understudied. To understand the adaptation process better, this article reports on a qualitative study using content analysis with an inductive approach that explores the acculturation outcomes of Syrian refugees with a particular emphasis on their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in Turkey. It explores the indicators of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation from the perspective of Syrian refugees as opposed to the perspective of mainstreamers, media, and governments, or a theory-driven approach, which has often been used in refugee research (Ingleby, 2005). Relying on prior assumptions in the examination of refugee experiences can fail researchers to capture diverse human experiences linked with extreme events (Cantekin, 2018). Thus, this study utilizes a qualitative approach, which is well-suited to gain a deeper insight into the contextual aspects of the acculturation process. Qualitative approach allows flexibility for the expression of individual refugees’ own narratives to arrive at unanticipated insights about this under-researched group and a broader exploration of the phenomenon. Another novel aspect of the research is that it aims to fill the gap in the literature by emphasizing the social and psychological aspects of the refugee experience, an approach that seems to be lacking despite the growing number of research projects on Syrian refugees in the areas of international relations, political science and education (Tumen, 2016). In the investigation of Syrian refugees’ acculturation outcomes, this study specifically sought to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the most common themes and issues emerging in relation to the acculturation outcomes for Syrian refugees in Turkey?
2. What are the underlying factors and variations that can support or hamper the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees in Turkey?

5.5. Methodology

5.5.1. Approach

A qualitative design was adopted for this study, as it is uniquely suited to the exploration of the dynamic, multidimensional, multilayered and contextual nature of acculturation processes. Qualitative research tends to employ procedures that are less structured than quantitative methods, which facilitate a broader exploration of the issues. It allows flexibility for researchers to find more novel and diverse information and generate unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to allow flexibility for participants to voice their unique perceptions and experiences without the constraints of structured methods or measures used in quantitative
research. Structured instruments with fixed response formats such as likert scales are useful to test specific theories of cross-cultural differences, but less suitable for more exploratory approaches in which there is no theory that guides the choice of an instrument (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Qualitative research is compatible with the investigation of under-researched cultural groups because relatively unstructured instruments and an open-minded attitude by the researchers hold the promise for gathering detailed information in a short time period, building models, and generating hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010).

5.5.2. Participants

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Syrian refugees settled in three cities (Istanbul, Kocaeli and Sakarya) in Turkey. Table 5.1 below presents an overview of participants’ demographic characteristics. At the time of the interview, the ages of participants ranged between 18-60 with an average of 31.3 years; their duration of stay in Turkey ranged between 2.5 to 7 years with an average of 4.7 years. Eight of 15 participants were female. Nine participants were married with an average of 2 children. Four people had immigrated to one other country such as Lebanon, Libya and Egypt, prior to deciding to move to Turkey. Ten participants commented on years of separation from close family members such as parents and siblings who had either stayed behind in Syria or migrated to other destinations. Three participants stated being of Turkmen descent with one participant being of Kurdish descent, who spoke either Turkish or Kurdish respectively, in their family environment while in Syria. All participants reported that Islam is a very important aspect of their identity and way of life. Most of them reported middle socio-economic status in pre-war Syria.

Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th># of years in Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Idlip</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>dirAlzor</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Turkmen</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Kurdish</td>
<td>Afrin</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Family Size</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Length of Stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3 (adults)</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Turkmen</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Daraa</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Idlip</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Turkmen</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.5.3. Data collection and instrumentation

Participants were recruited using purposeful/convenience and a two-step snowball sampling method. For the first round of recruitment, the first researcher, who is the first author of the manuscript, approached Turkish professionals associated with organizations such as ‘provincial directorates of immigration administration’ and ‘Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH),’ which actively and directly work with Syrian refugees. In the second round, she contacted Syrian refugees who were referred to her by the first set of participants. Interviews were conducted in three cities (Kocaeli, Sakarya, and Istanbul); in locations most convenient for the participants, such as their homes or nearby cafes.

The participants gave oral and written informed consent prior to the interview. The interview questions were designed deductively based on theories of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1997) to explore acculturation conditions, orientations, and outcomes. Key areas explored in the interviews were the difficulties encountered in the pre-migration, migration and post-migration process, resources and strategies to deal with the difficulties, and perceived differences and boundaries in the migration context. Specific questions were asked to explore acculturation outcomes and factors that can support or hamper the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees in line with the research questions. Table 5.2 provides a summary of the interview questions that correspond to the research questions.
Table 5.2

*Interview Questions Exploring Psychological and Social Adaptation of Syrian Refugees*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Psychological Adaptation</th>
<th>Socio-cultural Adaptation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the most common themes and issues emerging in relation to the acculturation outcomes for Syrian refugees in Turkey?</td>
<td>Can you tell me about your feelings when you first arrived in Turkey?</td>
<td>What are your impressions of Turkey and Turkish people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you feel about yourself and your current life in Turkey?</td>
<td>What do people in Turkey think about Syrians?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you ever felt that you have been treated differently?</td>
<td>Who do you interact with the most in Turkey and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel changed in any way since you came from Syria?</td>
<td>How is your social life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What are your future plans?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Are you planning on returning to Syria?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are the underlying factors and variations that can support or hamper the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees in Turkey?</td>
<td>What has been helpful in your psychological adaptation process (in terms of feeling positively about yourself and your life in Turkey) so far? What has been difficult?</td>
<td>What has been helpful in your social and cultural adaptation process (in terms of initiating contact with others, participation in the host culture, leading a good social life) so far? What has been difficult?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The semi-structured interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted in Arabic, English or Turkish depending on the participants’ preference. Seven of the participants were interviewed in Arabic with the assistance of an interpreter who was a Syrian refugee. The first researcher continued conducting interviews until data saturation was achieved. She determined that she reached data saturation when the interviews did not add new information as the responses to the interview questions were mostly similar in content during the data collection. All the researchers confirmed data saturation after transcription and during data analysis when there were mounting instances of the same codes in the data with no additional new emergent codes (Urquhart, 2013).
5.5.4. Data analysis procedures

Data analysis was performed based on content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). An inductive approach to qualitative analysis was adopted in order to derive findings from the data and ground results on the real-life experiences of the participants from their own perspective (Thomas, 2006). Content analysis and inductive approach are not labeled within a specific tradition of qualitative research but can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Inductive approach is most consistent with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that it aims to allow research findings to emerge from the meaning patterns inherent in raw data without the restraints imposed by preconceptions, or prior expectations, hypothesis or theories. Yet, unlike grounded theory, it does not explicitly separate the coding process into open coding and axial coding and limits their theory-building to the presentation and description of the most important categories (Thomas, 2006). Both methods indicate that analysis is not a linear but an iterative process that requires continuing revision and refinement of the meaning patterns (codes, categories and themes) evident in the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003; Thomas, 2006). The analysis is carried out through multiple readings of data, organization of data from the bottom up into increasingly more abstract units of information, and interpretation of the underlying structure and meanings of the experiences and processes in the raw data.

The data was derived from the interviews with 15 Syrian refugees. The first researcher conducted and transcribed all the interviews, which allowed her to familiarize herself with the depth and breadth of the content and gain an understanding of the themes and events covered in text. Data analysis was conducted by the first researcher; the second and the third authors of the manuscript read all the transcripts, provided peer examination and reevaluated the data analysis after the initial coding process and also after the completion of data analysis.

All the transcripts were coded and analyzed in English. They were given a code and the anonymity of participants was protected by masking their names and personal information. After the completion of all transcripts, each transcript was reread in its entirety in detail and prepared in a common format for the coding process using an excel file. The raw data was separated into chunks of meaning units that allowed the researcher to assign labels for potential codes, sub-categories and categories, in an increasing level of abstraction, as demonstrated in Table 1 in Appendix B. In doing so, the researcher aimed to abstract the condensed material and group together under higher order headings.

The meaning units were condensed into codes and codes were given a label. Initial codes were compared to identify sub-categories and categories, which constitute manifest
content. When the underlying meaning between the categories was similar, the categories were combined or linked to a superordinate category. The researcher did not leave any data out to identify as many potential patterns as possible. A coding framework was developed, continuously revised and refined as new codes and categories emerged in the coding process of the other transcripts. The framework started out as a basic list of codes and evolved into a table (i.e. Table 2 in Appendix B) showing the hierarchical relationship with other codes and categories such as superordinate, parallel, and subordinate categories (Thomas, 2006).

After the initial coding of each of the transcripts, all transcripts were reread according to the revised coding framework. Codes and categories were compared to assess the commonalities and differences among them based on the interpretation of all the transcripts. They were judged on how well they reflect the majority of the raw material. Second and third researchers evaluated and revised the codes and categories identified by the first researcher. Each transcript was recoded at least two more times in order to reflect the whole understanding of the text and revision by other researchers. Once the coding process was finalized, a category template was created, which shows each participant’s narrations that were abstracted into all the relevant codes and categories, as exemplified in Table 3 in Appendix B.

The category template allows the researchers to review all the categories (in the upper row) and codes (in the intersection of the categories’ row and the participants’ column) that emerged in all participants’ interviews. It also allows the researchers to evaluate the prevalence of the codes under each relevant category by counting the number of different participants who articulated the codes. For instance, under the category of expectations from Turkey, the code ‘finding a job’ was mentioned by 2 of the 3 participants. Even though the number of times a code is mentioned may not always be a sign of the relative significance of the code, it allows the researchers to use phrases such as ‘some, many, majority of the participants’ while reporting the data and inform the readers that codes, categories and themes really existed beyond the interpretation of the researchers. After a careful review of the category template, the researcher revisited the coding framework and finalized the labeling of all codes, sub-categories and categories. Then, the researcher formulated and labeled themes that cut across and within all the categories, which denote the interpretation of the underlying meaning, the latent content. The coding framework included all the higher order headings and the links among them, as demonstrated in Table 2 in Appendix B. Finally, the researcher selected the categories that captured the key aspects of the raw data and the most significant themes given the evaluation objectives. The researchers completed the analysis by selecting
extracts from the transcripts that best reflect the selected categories and themes. During the data analysis process, several strategies including a code-recode strategy, peer examination, and member checking were used to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. The first researcher performed the data analysis. She had long been engaged in the field and gained insight into the lives of Syrian refugees in other countries previously, which increased the credibility of the findings. Data was reread several times after being transcribed by the first researcher in order to ensure that the research findings drawn from the raw data are an accurate reflection of participants’ reality. Three researchers other than the first researcher read all the transcripts and analyzed the data to audit the credibility of the identified meaning patterns. A code-recode strategy was used to ensure dependability, that is, the data were recoded after a month-long period between each coding and both results were compared to gauge consistency of the researcher (Anney, 2014). Peer examination was used to seek support from the other researchers who provided scholarly guidance to improve the dependability, credibility and confirmability of the findings. To ensure credibility and confirmability of the findings, member checking was used (Anney, 2014). One of the participants was asked to read the findings of the research to eliminate any researcher bias (Creswell, 2012). To ensure transferability, purposeful sampling was used to provide greater in-depth findings and provided detailed description of the context, research processes and data collection was provided to allow for the replication of the study.

5.6. Results

Acculturation outcomes of Syrian refugees in Turkey are investigated under two major themes: psychological adaptation and socio-cultural adaptation. To evaluate the psychological outcomes, this study explored variables reflective of psychological well-being: participants’ feelings about themselves, and their migration experiences to Turkey, and life satisfaction. In order to explore the participants’ socio-cultural adaptation, their perception of Turkey and host group members, the type and degree of social contact in Turkey were investigated, as well as their future plans and return intentions.

5.6.1. Psychological adaptation

Psychological adaptation was investigated by exploring variables reflective of psychological well-being: participants’ feelings about themselves, evaluation of their migration experiences and life-satisfaction. Factors that can support and hamper overall psychological adaptation were also explored. As the narrations highlighted that discrimination apparently affected
psychological adaptation of the participants extensively, their reflections on the perceived discrimination and perceived reasons of discrimination were also included. Table 5.3 is designed to provide a summary of the categories, sub-categories and codes that emerged under this theme.

**Table 5.3**

*Psychological Adaptation of Syrian Refugees in Turkey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Psychological Adaptation in Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>anxiety, sadness, dissatisfaction, relief, appreciation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants’ narrations on their feelings regarding migration ranged from anxiety and dissatisfaction to relief and appreciation. It should be noted that participants often reported experiencing a mix of positive and negative emotions simultaneously. Anxiety referred to participants’ apprehension before migration for not speaking the native language, travelling to an unfamiliar place, concern about natives not having similar religious sensitivities, earning
their livelihood in Turkey and the future. The excerpt below provides an example for common sources of pre-migration anxiety among Syrian refugees about acquiring a new language, finding work and maintaining their valued religious identity.

When I came here, I started from the numbers first. It was difficult but little by little I started (to learn Turkish). But I was afraid, I was very afraid that it will be difficult here. But, alhamdulillah\textsuperscript{18} I had faith (belief in God) so whether I had a job or not, it did not matter. Before coming here, I thought that Islam was not as prevalent here. But I saw a lot of mosques and Jumma\textsuperscript{19} prayers were very crowded. The first place I went was a mosque in Istanbul. (Participant #1)

This excerpt shows the resourcefulness and motivation of the participant who made effort to actively cope with anxiety by learning Turkish and initiating contact with the host community. Positive religious coping has been used by participants to reframe negative life events, regulate difficult emotions by making cognitive reappraisal of the difficulties and to find social support, as posited by Terreri and Glenwick (2013).

Along with anxiety, some participants described experiencing sadness about leaving their homeland. Some expressed feeling like they need to suppress sadness and vulnerability to remain/appear strong, as reflected in the quotation below. Withholding or concealing negative emotions or commentary can be partly attributed to the Middle Eastern cultures. Underlying sadness, participants reported a sense of grief regarding the loss of a large community, loneliness, and hopelessness.

I feel very confident, but I also feel sad. I do not show my sadness, of course, I always laugh, I have conversations with people, I act normal. I do not want anyone to see my sad side, I live my emotions inside. (Participant #7)

Dissatisfaction refers to participants’ sense of disillusionment and resignation as a result of several unfulfilled expectations such as studying in Turkey, moving to Arabic speaking countries or Europe after a temporary stay in Turkey. The quotation below reflects a participant’s sense of powerlessness for not actualizing his personal goals.

I am always sad; I don’t know why. I have some dreams. When I first came to Turkey, I had the intention to go to Europe, but it did not happen because of financial reasons and now it is forbidden. I wanted to study at the university or find a good job but the only thing I can do is to wait. So, I am waiting. I told you I wanted to be a pilot, but I don’t think it will happen. (Participant #6)

\textsuperscript{18} Islamic expression of gratitude meaning ‘Praise be to God’

\textsuperscript{19} A congregational prayer offered in mosques on Fridays.
On a positive note, some participants described feeling relieved for reaching a safe place and happy that they had survived. Appreciation category defines participants’ expression of deep gratitude for being able to live and work in Turkey and for feeling a sense of belonging. Participants’ feelings about themselves and current lives after migration were similar to their feelings regarding migration. Participants expressed experiencing more negative feelings such as feeling worse than before migration, sad, lonely, heart-broken, uncomfortable, hopeless, disappointed and grieved, than positive feelings such as feeling well, well-adapted and self-confident.

Participants spoke about their level of life satisfaction in Turkey and the factors that can support or hamper psychological adaptation. Almost half of the participants reported being somewhat satisfied with their lives in Turkey. Their reasons for life satisfaction and increased psychological adaptation were reflected under four categories: opportunity to work, religious maintenance, appreciation of natives and cultural similarity. Having work was reported to be the most significant component of psychological adaptation as participants are encountering financial difficulty that permeated all aspects of their lives. Religious maintenance is paramount to Syrian refugees’ psychological adaptation in Turkey as all participants reported religion to be highly important in their lives. Common codes that emerged under religious maintenance category included Turkey being a Muslim country, having places of worship, and the availability of religious education for children. The quote reflects the importance of religious maintenance for participants’ psychological adaptation.

My husband came home one day and told me about going to Canada. I was afraid for my religion. People say it is better for the children, they will learn new languages, etc. But when I hear Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar20, I feel better, as if I am in my own country. I love Turkey. I love Turkish people. I did not sleep that night, it felt like something heavy came over me, I kept crying. He said, ‘OK, we are not going. You did all this just because I just spoke about going; you would probably die if we actually went. (Participant #10)

The interviewees report that their level of psychological adaptation was enhanced as a result of natives’ positive treatment of Syrian refugees. Most participants described natives as being supportive, helpful and trustworthy. They reported that the large cultural similarity between Turkey and Syria in terms of lifestyles and religious practices facilitated their psychological adaptation, sense of belonging and life satisfaction in Turkey.

20 The beginning verse of the Athan (call to prayer) meaning ‘God is Great, God is Great’
On the other hand, more than half of the participants reported decreased levels of life satisfaction in Turkey compared to their lives in pre-war Syria. Decreased life satisfaction and psychological adaptation was attributed to three main reasons: personal difficulties, work-related difficulties and perceived discrimination. Personal difficulties refer to emotional, social, and family-related difficulty associated with forced migration such as split family situation, loss of a sense of community support and homesickness. Work-related difficulties involve unfavorable working conditions, a decreased socio-economic status, long working hours, and low wages. The following quote demonstrates the negative impact of split family situation, loss of parents and homesickness as well as the work-related difficulty on psychological adaptation.

I have two sisters whom I have not seen for the past 5 years. I lost my parents. I want to see my grandparents, but it is hard. I need to work 12-17 hours every day. I always work; I work outside in the cold to pull in customers. Then I have to go home to nobody, wash clothes and fix a meal. I have to do everything on my own. That’s my life for the past 7 years. (Participant #7)

The discrimination category includes experiences of personal discrimination and discrimination towards the participants’ children. More than half of the participants reported having had a personal experience of discrimination even though the frequency of discrimination was reported to be low. Based on their narrations, four types for discrimination emerged: language discrimination, ethnic discrimination, refugee discrimination, discrimination towards Syrian children by native children. Under the category of language discrimination, participants described natives as being intolerant of minority languages and being stared at for speaking Arabic. Speaking Arabic seems to trigger discriminatory acts on behalf of the host group members, which emerges as a clear boundary between the host and the Syrian groups. The quote below exemplifies the impact of language discrimination on psychological adaptation.

I speak Arabic and people look at me. Some people like Arabs but not everyone. They do not say anything bad to us but their faces change. So, when I get a call, I do not answer in public. (Participant #1)

Ethnic discrimination involves change of natives’ attitudes when participants’ ethnicity is revealed, natives not speaking with Syrians, underestimating Syrians, talking about increasing safety around Syrians, using ‘Syrian’ as a pejorative term, and pointing fingers at ‘Syrians' in public places. Refugee discrimination appears to be the most common form of perceived discrimination. It appears to overlap with ethnic discrimination because the word ‘Syrian’
defines participants’ ethnic identity but it also synonymously refers to the devalued refugee identity. Even the Turkmen refugees, who share the same ethnic and linguistic roots with the majority Turks in Turkey, brought up experiences of stigmatization of being a ‘refugee’. Refugee discrimination involves being criticized for not having fought for Syria and coming to Turkey, being questioned about when Syrians will return, being told to go back, being blamed for receiving unfair humanitarian aid and abusing Turkey’s resources. The following quote demonstrates the discomfort Syrian refugees experience as a result of being criticized for not fighting for Syria and staying in Turkey beyond their welcome.

Turkish people do not understand what is happening in Syria. They are telling me, ‘Why did not your husband and son join the war? Why did you leave your country to the enemy? We would never leave our country like you. When are you going back?’ I tell them, it was not someone else who came to us; it was our own president who did this to us. They forcefully enlist people into the army and our brothers have to kill one another, they are not enemies. One soldier shot in the air in order not to shoot the other person, so they killed him. (Participant #10)

The following quote provides an example of discrimination based on the common misconception that Syrians exploit the economic resources in Turkey and that they are economically better-off than natives.

They tell us, ‘the government gives you monthly salary and pays for your bills’. Look at my house; it is cold because I don’t turn on the heat not to pay so much. My husband suffers from back pains, but he has to work. Why would he work in such harsh conditions if the government gave us money? (Participant #10)

Participants with children expressed concern for their children being discriminated against by other children particularly in schools in the form of being called ‘Syrians’ pejoratively, native children not wanting to sit and play with them, and being bullied for being older as they often have gap years due to war circumstances. The quote below illustrates discrimination against children.

Other children call my children ‘Syrian, Syrian.’ They say ‘you are Syrians, we won’t play with you.’ For example, one classmate left school for not wanting to sit with a Syrian child. When Rajab started first grade, he used to say ‘I am so sad, they keep calling me Syrian.’ (Participant #4)
5.6.2. Socio-cultural adaptation

Socio-cultural adaptation was explored by inquiring about the participants’ perception of Turkey and host group members, their perceived quality of social life, the type and degree of social contact they have in Turkey, their future plans and return intentions. Table 5.4 below provides a summary of the categories and codes that emerged under this theme.

**Table 5.4**

*Socio-cultural Adaptation of Syrian Refugees in Turkey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Socio-cultural Adaptation in Turkey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Categories</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of host group members</td>
<td>Perception of the host country</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-categories</strong></td>
<td>Divergent perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>unempathetic, unfriendly, prejudiced and discriminatory</td>
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Most participants held highly positive perceptions of Turkey. They described Turkey as an attractive country, a good place to live, and accepted Turkey as a second homeland. They perceived Turkey as being highly supportive of Syrian refugees as they are given rights to live in Turkey and have access to public services such as health care and education. The quotation below illustrates participants’ sense of solidarity with Turkey and appreciation of Turkey’s support.
Turkey is my second country. There is a video on YouTube asking Turkish people if they agree with Syrians being granted the Turkish citizenship. Some people say ‘Why should they be shareholders in our country.’ This is normal. I can accept every criticism from Turkey with pleasure because no one else has done what Turkey did for us. We came here, we worked and slowly got back on our feet. I thank the Turkish government very much for accepting us. (Participant #7)

The participants’ perception of natives was explored under two categories. Divergent perceptions refer to Syrian refugees’ negative perceptions of Turkish natives such as being unempathetic, unfriendly, prejudiced and discriminatory. Participants attributed natives’ discriminatory attitudes to the general dislike of Arabs, their reaction to Syrians’ speaking loudly in public, the perception that Syrians are a financial burden or exploiting Turkey’s resources and opposition to Syrians’ obtaining citizenship. In contrast, convergent perceptions refer to the positive qualities attributed to the mainstream such as being culturally similar, supportive, compassionate, transparent, trustworthy, and hard-working. It is noteworthy that most participants expressed divergent and convergent perceptions concurrently. ‘There are some good people and bad people, not all fingers on one hand are the same21’ was the most common response summarizing the refugees’ perceptions of Turkish natives.

Participants’ interaction with the host community and participation in the host culture are indicators of socio-cultural adaptation. Based on their narrations, participants had almost an equal amount of contact with Syrians and natives. Participants’ degree of contact with other Syrians was moderate because almost all participants reported large cultural differences among Syrians in Turkey, as shown in the following quote.

Syrians in Turkey come from very different places in Syria. When someone tells me this person is Syrian, I am surprised. We don’t know their traditions. People in this building are from Damascus, for example. People from other places are different, their faces even look different. (Participant #15)

The degree of contact with natives was comparatively advanced but not close enough to create a sense of acceptance and cohesion in the community.

Participants were asked about the quality of their social lives in Turkey. Most participants expressed being dissatisfied with their social lives in Turkey in comparison with their social lives in Syria because of a much wider network of family and friends. They

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21 Turkish expression indicating that the differences are natural and expected.
expressed feeling left-out, and lonely and unable to initiate a more active social lifestyle due to financial and work-related difficulties.

When asked about their future plans, the most common responses were to have a good job or desire for children to have good careers; to pursue a higher education, or desire for their children to get a good education; and to own a house instead of having to pay rent. Several participants openly expressed that they avoid making future plans as they were disillusioned about previous plans not being actualized due to the unexpected turn of events.

I don’t make plans and I don’t think about the future. I never thought I would leave Syria, but I did. For that reason, I don’t want to say ‘I will do this’ because only God knows. (Participant #4)

All participants expressed a strong desire to return to Syria once the war ends, except one person who wanted to remain in Turkey if they were granted the Turkish citizenship. The following excerpt provides an example for strong return intention and shows how the uncertainty of the future prevents participants from investing into their current lives in Turkey.

Sometimes we want to buy furniture for the house, but then I think that I will go back to Syria and then we end up not buying. I cannot take everything back with me. I can go now or a minute later, even. I would leave immediately if my children could go to school in Syria. (Participant #5)

5.7. Discussion

Syrian refugees’ subjective evaluation of themselves, their migration experiences, and their current life satisfaction in Turkey were explored to gauge their level of psychological adaptation in Turkey. The findings showed that refugees described more negative than positive feelings about themselves, about their migration experiences and expressed low to moderate life satisfaction, all of which seem to indicate a low to moderate level of psychological adaptation in Turkey. Likewise, their perception of Turkey and natives, quality of social life, attitudes towards social contact, future plans and return intentions were analyzed to evaluate their socio-cultural adaptation. The analysis of refugees’ narrations indicated low levels of socio-cultural adaptation due to perceived low quality of social life, moderate levels of interaction with host group members and other refugees, uncertainty of the future and strong return intentions.

The investigation of the common themes in the acculturation outcomes for Syrian refugees in Turkey revealed that economic concerns, extended duration of stay, religion and
perceived perceptions and attitudes of the host community are central to their acculturation outcomes, corroborating previous research findings (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Karipek, 2017; Tartakovsky, 2007; Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2010). In other words, these four dimensions seem to shape how refugees felt about themselves, their migration experiences, life satisfaction (indicators of psychological adaptation); their perception of Turkey and host group members, type and degree of contact with others, the quality of social life, future plans and return intentions (indicators of socio-cultural adaptation).

5.7.1. Impact of economic adaptation

Based on the participants’ self-reports, economic concerns play a critical role in the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees in Turkey, consistent with previous research findings with other immigrant groups (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2007). Aycan and Berry (1996) conceptualized adaptation as comprising of psychological, socio-cultural and economic aspects; and introduced the construct of economic adaptation to the acculturation literature. Economic adaptation refers to the sense of accomplishment and full participation in the economic life (Aycan & Berry, 1996). It involves having a steady job, improved financial/occupational status, and professional development.

Aycan and Berry (1996) examined the acculturation of immigrants from Turkey living in Canada with a particular emphasis on employment and its impact on psychological well-being and adaptation. They found that a large gap between socio-economic status in Turkey and Canada was associated with high acculturative stress and psychological well-being. People with greater loss of status reported lower levels of life satisfaction and decreased sense of accomplishment (Aycan & Berry, 1996). Studies on immigrant groups revealed that unemployment is linked to higher acculturative stress, low mental health, negative self-concept and alienation (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008; Tekeli-Yeşil et al., 2018). Alienation, in particular, is detrimental to adaptation as it prevents interaction with the larger community which increases refugees’ opportunity to improve cultural knowledge and skills necessary for full adaptation. Since adaptation is facilitated in interaction with the host society, work-related difficulty not only results in lower psychological well-being but also delayed socio-cultural adaptation (Aycan & Berry 1996; Thomas, 1990).

Syrian refugees report serious challenges in achieving economic adaptation in Turkey. Indicators of economic adaptation such as unemployment, low income level and unfavorable working conditions seem to be linked with lower levels of psychological well-being and poor health, corroborating previous research on large community samples, immigrant and refugee
populations (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2007). Syrian refugees’ narrations on their feelings about migration showed that economic concerns were prompted in the pre-migration period by pessimistic expectations about the post-migration period. The anticipation of financial difficulties in Turkey was a common theme creating high levels of acculturative stress that marked pre-acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees. According to their self-reports, socio-economic difficulties that refugees encountered in their host country led to a decreased sense of accomplishment, powerlessness, and resignation as they often prevented refugees from achieving personal goals, in line with the findings of Aycan and Berry (1996). Based on the research findings, poor working conditions were reported to negatively influence refugees’ life satisfaction as they created physical health problems and social problems. Refugees reported that long working hours with diminished wages made it difficult for them to express and satisfy their social needs, leading to alienation both from the host society as well as from their in-group.

5.7.2. Impact of extended duration of stay

A temporary duration of stay is one of the pre-acculturation and current expectations, which was reported to affect the acculturation outcomes for Syrian refugees in Turkey by shaping refugees’ post-migration attitudes, in line with previous research findings (Tartakovsky, 2007; Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2010). Expectations regarding the duration of stay in the host country or return intention to the country of origin are particularly important for refugees, who did not choose to migrate in the first place but were forced out of their homelands (Roblain et al., 2017). The acculturation attitudes and behaviors of refugees who intend on settling for long-term are different from those refugees who intend on temporary stay (Geurts & Lubbers, 2017). In their study with Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Belgium, Roblain et al. (2017) showed that refugees’ intention to settle for long-term is a key predictor of cultural adoption and participation in the host society. A study on return migration of Turkish immigrants in Western Europe revealed that immigrants who were expected to and mostly expecting themselves to return did not bother to learn the host language and had almost no or very limited contact with the host nationals, even though they have stayed in Western Europe much longer than originally expected (Kunuroğlu et al., 2015).

In the case of Syrian refugees, the migration itself was so abrupt and unexpected that refugees often envisioned an immediate return after the end of the Assad regime. However, the mismatch between Syrian refugees’ expected duration of stay in the pre-migration period and the actual length of stay in Turkey emerged as a common source of frustration. The
temporary nature of their settlement and expectations of temporary stay were reported to prevent refugees from setting future goals, engaging in goal-directed attitudes, and seemed to negatively impact refugees’ ability and motivation to invest into their lives in Turkey, all of which may delay psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. Thwarted aspirations may account for their negative self-concept, decreased sense of accomplishment, decreased life satisfaction and poor psychological well-being, as indicated by previous research (Warfa et al., 2012).

5.7.3. Impact of religion

Based on the analysis of refugees’ self-reports, religion seems to be linked with the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees. To start, in the pre-migration period, Syrian refugees were anxious about the maintenance of their Muslim identity in the host countries including Turkey. Some refugees migrated to Turkey with the apprehension that Turkish people did not value Islam. However, Turkey’s perceived positive relationship with Islam as reflected in prevalence of mosques, public prayers on Fridays and level of religious commitment in the population in actuality exceeded Syrian refugees’ prior expectations. Sharing the same religion has increased Syrian refugees’ affinity towards Turkey and created a sense of relief that their maintenance of religious identity will not pose a threat unlike in other non-Muslim countries. Maintenance of religious identity seems to be conducive to better mental health, consistent with the findings by Schnittker (2019), as Syrian refugees reported using positive religious coping in times of change and adversity.

Religion is a key element of cultural similarity for the majority of Syrian refugees, which was reported to contribute to their life satisfaction, positively affecting psychological adaptation. Refugees reported that Islam binds natives and refugees together and thus, they appealed to their shared identities to feel belonging in the new context. Perception of themselves as part of the members of the same community of faith seemed to increase their willingness to initiate contact with the native groups. Sharing the same religion appeared to create a common ground that encompasses similar customs, norms, beliefs, manners and festivals, which seemed to strengthen the relationship between the natives and the refugees, increase the level of participation in the host community, contributing to socio-cultural adaptation. In this way, religion summoned social support around refugees and contributed to their’ acquisition of culturally appropriate knowledge and skills, increasing their socio-cultural adaptation. Karipek (2017) similarly stated that the concept of ummah, the consideration of Muslims as one in-group, collects both the majority and minority groups
under the umbrella of religious similarity and increases the sense of loyalty in the host community. Religion, which is a main source of boundary in the case of Syrians living in the non-Muslim countries (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2020), can be a strong basis of recategorization of personal identity as a part of an encompassing, inclusive, superordinate identity in Turkey.

However, religion appears to have a paradoxical role in the host country: It can facilitate either tolerance or intolerance, in line with the recent meta-analytic review on religion and attitude towards migrants by Deslandes and Anderson (2019). Religion can be perceived both as a superordinate identity shared by majority and refugee groups, and simultaneously as a social boundary depending on natives’ religious orientations. Social group membership endorsing a social identity such as secular versus religious identity of majority groups is found to influence their attitude towards Syrian refugees (Carlson et al., 2019). Recategorization of Syrian refugees into one superordinate group by emphasizing a shared religious identity may reduce bias and increase Syrians’ expectations of positive treatment by the majority groups in Turkey in line with the common in-group identity model by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000). On the other hand, however, appeals to a strong religious identity may provoke opposition from secular Turks because religious identity may seem contradictory to the republic’s secular foundations established by Atatürk (Lazarev & Sharma, 2015). In this sub-context, where religion is not as valued, or even perceived as a threat, the concept of faith may actually produce social distance between refugee and host groups just like in non-Muslim host societies. An appeal to shared religious identity is a highly politicized issue and may significantly change Turkish perceptions of Syrian refugees. The secular Turks may direct their antagonism of the government onto the Syrian refugees due to the perception of Syrian refugees as key players in promoting Erdoğan’s agenda. Thus, religious recategorization may increase prejudice, exclusion, and discrimination by secular Turks - while at the same time increasing favoritism by religious and pro-government groups, in line with the common in-group identity model by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000).

Religion’s impact on the perception of refugees by mainstreamers was reported to be time and context-dependent in Turkish context (Girgin & Cebeci, 2017; Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). Its impact at the initial periods of acculturation appears to be different from its contemporary impact. At the beginning of the migration from Syria, the shared religious identity was more salient in creating a sense of solidarity with Syrian refugees, probably due to some extent to the Turkish government’s attempts to recategorize refugee and host groups under a joint superordinate religious identity. However, based on the self-reports of the
participants and previous research findings, perceptions and attitudes towards Syrians in Turkey have taken a negative turn in recent years (Girgin & Cebeci, 2017; Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019).

5.7.4. Impact of perceived attitudes of the host society

Perceived attitudes of the host society appear to be influenced not only by religion, as explained above, but also by refugees’ extended duration of stay and economic concerns. Due to the increasing number of refugees staying over extended periods of time, coupled with fragile economic conditions, and long-standing political, religious and ideological tensions, the natives’ perception of refugees has changed from ‘members of the common faith’ to ‘agents causing an economic burden on the national budget, raising local rents, hurting the labor market, and depressing wages’. In line with findings of Lazarev and Sharma (2015), when Syrians were perceived as an economic burden, the pro-refugee effects of religious recategorization reversed. This perception of Syrians increases natives’ desire to remain distinct from refugees (Karipek, 2017) and highlight cultural stereotypes such as ‘not having manners, speaking and laughing very loudly, being uneducated, having too many children’ (Lazarev & Sharma, 2015). With time, refugee and native groups seemed to dissolve from the superordinate identity resorting to separate identities and the shared religious identity became less pronounced. The positive binding impact of religion seems to be temporary against the dividing power of the economic threat.

A sense of economic loss forms the basis of the growing anti-Syrian sentiments in Turkey because the sense of loss of national resources to Syrians further fuels political, religious, and ideological tensions (Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). Syrians are increasingly perceived to be exploiting the limited economic resources of the Turkish government in the form of humanitarian aid and economic privileges that are reserved for the Turkish citizens. This perception of Syrians as recipients of unfair material benefits aggravates the mainstream’s sense of economic loss and ignites hostility towards Syrians given the fragility of the present economic conditions and the uncertainty of the future in Turkey (Akar & Erdoğan, 2019; Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). It strengthens the general perception among the political opposition of the government that it favors its supporters by unfairly allocating privileges and material benefits at the expense of the rest of the society (Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019).

The negative perception of Syrian refugees as the result of the sense of economic loss is constructed due to the rumors that Syrians are receiving monthly benefits from the
government, having priority in state hospitals and entering universities without exams. The sense of economic loss and concomitant resentment is also generated as a result of factual changes such as overstretched public services, overcrowded classrooms, hospitals, overpopulated districts, rising housing costs (Akar & Erdoğdu, 2019) and tax exemptions for Syrian businesses (Girgin & Cebeci, 2017). Furthermore, there has been a net displacement of low-skilled and low-educated natives in the informal labor market leading to increased levels of unemployment, underemployment, and depressed wages as Syrians constitute a significant segment of the cheap and disorganized workforce in Turkey (Girgin & Cebeci, 2017; Saracoğlu & Belanger, 2019). Syrian refugees are left with few options in the labor market and have to accept insecure, highly exploitative working conditions, and wage discrimination as business owners offer them a fraction of the standard wage without the social benefits or job security (Kaya & Kiraç, 2016). The supply of cheap labor from Syrian refugees intensifies wage deflation, increases unemployment for the host members, which creates social, economic, and ideological friction in the host country (Akar & Erdoğdu, 2019; İçduygu, 2015a). Consequently, Syrian refugees’ extended duration of stay, and economic challenges seem to contribute to natives’ resentment of refugees, significant levels of prejudice, social exclusion, and acts of discrimination, which may deter refugees from establishing new relationships with the host community, leading to low levels of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Akar & Erdoğdu, 2019; Lazarev & Sharma, 2015).

The negative impact of discrimination can be minimized with in-group support from other Syrians as in-group support has frequently been reported as a protective factor for minorities (Safdar et al., 2009). Yet, Syrian refugees in Turkey do not report being supported in their in-groups. There seems to be a level of intentional disconnect in the Syrian in-group for various reasons. Firstly, there seems to be vast regional/cultural differences among Syrian refugees as they come from different cities in Syria, accompanied by reported religious and political differences. Secondly, despite their high numbers, Syrians do not live close-by in some cities and do not have the economic means to travel to increase in-group contact. The protective value of a strong sense of ethnic group belonging as an important source of mental health and well-being against acculturative stress, as indicated by Smeekes et al. (2017) in their study with Syrian refugees in Turkey and a recurring theme found in previous studies with voluntary immigrants, did not emerge from the data.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, some participants were initially hesitant about the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of their narrations. They agreed to participate after a full disclosure about the study and reassurance that there are no
risks involved for the participants. Secondly, almost half of the interviews were conducted in Arabic with the help of an interpreter who was a Syrian refugee. Presence of an in-group member might have changed the flow of the interview process and influenced the content of participants’ narrations but at the same time it might help to eliminate the possibility to miss some important information resulting from language and cultural differences between the participants and the researchers. It should be noted that themes did not appear to diverge by interpreter’s involvement. Third, individuals were asked to retrospectively assess their pre-migration expectations, which makes it more likely to find recollection/hindsight biases. Fourth, it is possible that snowball sampling created a higher similarity, leading to a sample selection effect in the research sample as opposed to having recruited participants independently from one another. Another limitation researchers have observed is that participants avoided speaking about their negative experiences mostly because Islamic teachings argue against ‘complaining’ as it is thought to create resentment in the heart towards God and recommend gratitude even in the times of hardship. Thus, participants showed a tendency to focus on the positive aspects of their experiences. Lastly, a larger-scale quantitative study might complement the findings of this research given the small sample size and longitudinal studies are needed to disentangle a causal direction.

As an addition to the available quantitative studies on acculturation outcomes of Syrian refugees in various countries (e.g., Koc & Anderson, 2018; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018), this qualitative analysis provided a deeper insight into the factors blocking positive acculturation outcomes of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Many other studies might report negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees (e.g. Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018) but this study uncovers major causes of discrimination. In traditional immigration contexts, such as Germany or the Netherlands, the Syrian refugees are phenotypically distinguishable from the majority host community. In the Turkish context, they are hardly distinguishable from the mainstream Turks. As the qualitative data show, speaking in Arabic makes the Syrian refugees identifiable in public and makes them targets of discrimination. In this respect, Arabic language emerges as a clear boundary marker between the refugees and the mainstream Turkish speakers. However, the same Arabic language emerges as the solidarity marker in religious services in mosques that binds the native Turkish and Syrian refugees. Another addition of this study to the literature concerns the host society’s policies versus the host group’s acculturation orientations. As opposed to Bourhis et al.’s (1997) claims, in spite of supportive Turkish government policies, the mainstream public has negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees for the fear of social and economic instability in the society. Syrian
refugees are seen as the cause of most problems in the society, which undermines their successful acculturation in Turkey. This shows that government policies alone do not facilitate the acculturation and well-being of refugees. Positive host group attitudes seem to be more important than the government policies in facilitating well-being and acculturation outcomes of refugees.

The findings of this research can be used to increase host groups’ awareness of the intergroup dynamics and the impact of their perceptions and attitudes on refugees’ adaptation. It is of great importance to prevent a negative discourse against migrants and asylum seekers as it may delay their adaptation in the host country and cause unwanted long-term effects for the host communities such as growing intergroup conflicts affecting children, second- and third-generation descendants of Syrian refugees. Receiving countries should pay more attention to the factors that undermine favorable acculturation outcomes such as economic concerns and discrimination as well as the factors that promote high levels of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation such as refugees’ success in attaining educational, professional and social goals (Berry & Hou, 2017). The implications of the study are valuable to the policy makers in anticipating the acculturation-related concerns for refugees and the host countries and creating preventative measures before potential integration concerns come into existence. It will further contribute to the work of academics, psychologists, social workers, counsellors, educators and other professionals assisting in the process of cross-cultural adaptation of refugees.
CHAPTER 6

Acculturation of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands: Religion as social identity and boundary marker

6.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter reports on a study investigating the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 participants. The study addressed (1) how Syrian refugees perceived cultural distance caused by the differences and boundaries between the Syrian and Dutch culture; (2) how they coped with the boundaries and prejudice that they perceive; and (3) which acculturation orientations they preferred. The research built mainly on Berry’s theory of acculturation (1997). Religion emerged as a prominent issue in the acculturation process and is found to impact acculturation as it is perceived to be a cause of cultural distance, a salient social identity, a bright boundary and a source of prejudice in the host country. In line with Gebauer et al.’s (2016) religiosity as social value hypothesis, Syrian refugees’ psychological adjustment may be negatively impacted due to the cross-cultural differences in terms of the attitudes towards religion in the heritage and host countries as religion seems to be a significant component of how Syrian refugees carry themselves in their social environment. The findings of this study suggest that refugees’ religious identity may strongly influence their coping strategies and preferred acculturation orientations. Refugees with low/no religious affiliation were more in favor of an assimilation orientation whereas refugees with strong religious identity preferred an integration orientation.

6.2. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, high numbers of Syrians were internally and externally displaced in search of safety. According to the most recent statistics by UNHCR (2019j), 5.6 million people left Syria since 2011. The neighboring countries bear the brunt of the forced migration with 3.7 million registered Syrians in Turkey (UNHCR, 2020a) and more than 2 million in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan (UNHCR, 2019j). Between 2011 and 2017, 937,718 of the 5.6 million Syrian refugees applied for asylum in Europe (UNHCR, 2017).

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The Netherlands started receiving Syrian refugees in the summer of 2015 and the number of refugees started to diminish in 2017 (Van Heelsum, 2017). Based on UNHCR estimates, the number of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands was 27,400 in 2016 (Betts et al., 2017). According to the statistics by the Asylum Information Database (AIDA, 2020) managed by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), the total number of applications by Syrian asylum seekers were 2,956 with only 590 Syrians granted refugee status by the Netherlands in 2018.

The initial period of migration in Europe was not without its challenges for Syrian refugees who arrived in unfavorable conditions and were forced to search for legal refugee status in countries (Van Heelsum, 2017). Exhaustion, overcrowded living conditions, worries about family in Syria, traumatic experiences, lack of clarity about the future and being unable to work/study until obtaining formal refugee status are found to be the major difficulties during the asylum-seeking process, which may take approximately 2 years in the Netherlands (Van Heelsum, 2017).

While the literature is abundant with studies that focus on the difficulties experienced by refugees and migration-related concerns in the receiving countries, there are merely a handful of studies investigating the acculturation experiences of refugees (Phillimore, 2011), particularly Syrian refugees (Gürsoy & Ertaşoğlu, 2019), from a cross-cultural perspective. Most previous research adopts a political, economic or clinical perspective based on quantitative designs. This chapter addresses the gap in the literature and reports on qualitative research exploring the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands based on interviews with 15 participants. It aims to direct the attention of scholars to this underrepresented population in intercultural research by exploring (1) the perceived cultural distance from the Netherlands, (2) refugees’ coping strategies and (3) their preferred acculturation orientations. Since the study examines the impact of perceived cultural distance, generated by ethnic, social, religious and linguistic differences and/or boundaries between the heritage and host culture environments, which may be central to immigrants’ personal and social identity, the following sections provide an overview on acculturation (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1980), identity construction (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel et al., 1971), and boundary formation (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2002). The article further presents an evaluation of religion at the intersection of all these theories.

As all the participants except one person in this research were affiliated with Islam and the approach of the majority towards the participants were perceived to be impacted by the majorities’ attitudes towards Islam, the words religion and Islam will be used interchangeably.
for the sake of terminological clarity. Participants differ greatly in term of the strength of their religious identity, level of identification with Islam, multiple ties and allegiances with the locals, their in-group and other immigrant groups.

6.3. Theories of acculturation

Redfield et al. (1936) developed the most commonly used definition of acculturation as ‘the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other.’ In his conceptual acculturation model, Berry (1997) distinguishes four prototypical acculturation orientations, which describe the extent to which immigrants prefer to maintain the heritage culture and adopt the host culture (Berry, 1997). Integration reflects the preference for maintaining the key aspects of the both cultures. Assimilation refers to the rejection of the heritage culture and adoption of the host culture. Separation explains immigrants’ maintenance of the heritage culture and rejection of the host culture. Marginalization signifies the rejection of both cultures (Berry, 1997).

Acculturation is a dynamic, context-dependent, multidimensional process influenced by personal factors as well as the characteristics of the heritage and host countries. Perceived cultural distance, subjectively perceived discrepancies between social and physical aspects of the heritage and host culture environments, is one of the significant factors impacting acculturation (Galchenko & Van de Vijver, 2007; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). Berry (1997) suggests that a large perceived cultural distance can be a challenge to adjustment for migrant groups as it creates greater conflict in balancing aspects of both cultures and necessitates the need for greater culture shedding and culture learning. The greater the gap between immigrants’ perceived identity, cultural values and norms and those typical for the host country, the harder the acculturation process (Berry, 1997). Literature shows that perceived cultural distance, which predicts problematic adjustment (Galchenko & Van de Vijver, 2007; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009), is directly associated with acculturative stress and withdrawal from the host culture (Tausova et al., 2019). On the other hand, research has shown that perceived cultural similarity by the migrant groups is associated with strong host orientation (Özer, 2015), increased social ties with the mainstream (Nesdale & Mak, 2000), feelings of acceptance and self-belonging in the host community (Tausova et al., 2019).

Perceived cultural distance not only impacts refugees’ acculturation but also the perceptions and attitudes of the mainstream towards the refugees, which is critical for adjustment and intergroup relations. As suggested by Montreuil and Bourhis (2001), host
group members maintain a more favorable attitude towards immigrants whom they perceive as more culturally similar to the dominant group. In contrast, if host nationals form a negative perception of refugees such as being violent, needy, less intelligent, and less likely to integrate into host society because of the perceived cultural distance, they are most likely to maintain social distance (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). Social distance conveys a sense of rejection and will often lead refugees to turn towards their in-group for a sense of acceptance and belonging (Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Indeed, Suanet and Van de Vijver (2009) found that a large perceived cultural distance was associated with less psychological adjustment, more interactions with ethnic in-group and less with the host group members in the migration country. Thus, a desired level of social contact may not be achieved even though immigrants are willing to interact with the host society. The mismatch between the acculturation orientations of the host community and immigrant groups may lead to problematic and conflictual relational outcomes (Bourhis et al., 1997). Furthermore, large differences may generate unfavorable intergroup attitudes, and trigger greater culture conflict leading to poorer adaptation (Berry, 1997).

6.4. Social identity theory

Social identity theory developed primarily by Henri Tajfel (1978; 1982), suggests that individuals derive their sense of self largely from the social groups to which they belong (Stets & Burke, 2000). A social group is a collective of individuals who view themselves as members of the same category. A social identity is a person’s knowledge and self-categorization as a member of a social group in relation to other social classifications. People assume various social identities such as gender, ethnicity, religious affiliations that become activated or salient in certain social situations.

Social identity theory posits that when minority groups are confronted with threat, their in-group identity becomes salient (Tajfel, 1982). The rejection-identification model developed by Branscombe et al. (1999) confirms the predictions made by social identity theory and finds that attributions to prejudice are related to minority group identification. When an in-group identity becomes salient, it is likely that minority groups will behave as if they are the prototype of their social group as opposed to unique individuals, stress the differences with the mainstream, attach themselves more strongly to their in-group, and maintain their heritage culture. (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Côté (2006) stresses the importance of identity in understanding the acculturation processes of non-white, non-Western immigrants typically from traditional, collectivist
communities moving to Western nations where individualism is valued, and traditions and collectivist bonds are weakened. Without the existing community bonds and collectivistic support, immigrants are left to their own inner resources to make decisions on who they are and how they should live their lives in the new context (Côté, 2006). According to Erikson (1964), the key problem of identity is to sustain sameness, continuity and essential patterns in the process of change. Thus, he stated that a well-established identity becomes necessary to sustain continuity and adapt both to the external life changes as well as to the inner changes in the migration context (Erikson, 1964). Bauman (2004) argues that identities are not stable over time as individuals are forced to mould their identities. According to Bauman (2004), the notion of identity does not emerge ‘naturally’ as ‘a fact of life’ but is rather a forced consequence of the crisis of belonging and ‘a fiction congealed into a fact’.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) reflect that identity is an ambivalent term that contains several contradictory meanings and connotations. Identity has been used both to imply a deep, essential, enduring and foundational part of selfhood; and also, the unstable, multiple, changing and multilayered nature of the self. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) propose alternatives to all-purpose ‘identity’ (i.e. identification, self-understanding, commonality, connectedness, groupness) in order to avoid implications of sameness, homogeneity among group members and a clear boundary and sharp distinctiveness from non-members. They also draw an important distinction between self-identification and identification/categorizations by others. Internal identifications do not necessarily converge with external identification that may be developed by individuals, groups and by powerful and authoritative institutions.

6.5. Theories of boundary formation

Boundaries define the criteria of inclusion as the in-group or exclusion as the out-group. Boundaries are conceptual tools set by the mainstream to differentiate itself from minority groups in order to preserve power and privileges (Alba, 2005). They set the norms, impose a set of ideals and limit the roles and identities individuals can or cannot assume in order to be accepted as part of the mainstream. Research finds that social boundaries are critical determinants of intergroup relations (Giles & Giles, 2013).

As discussed in Yağmur (2019) in greater detail, Wimmer (2009) proposes that boundary formation between ethnic groups is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but the result of social processes of closure and distancing along markers perceived as relevant by the groups between which the boundary is erected. In line with the changing socio-political conditions, re-construction of the discourse on immigration and related issues by policy
makers, opinion leaders, politicians and the media, new social, cultural, linguistic and political boundaries are constructed. For instance, in the Netherlands, the public discourse and the accompanying social boundaries are too insurmountable for low-skilled, unemployed, and religiously different immigrants. On the basis of the characteristics of each immigrant group (as perceived by the mainstream community members), public institutions and opinion leaders define boundaries of belonging; as a result of which, desired and less desired immigrant groups emerge. Ethnic groups have preferences for contact with out-groups as more or less attractive social partners, forming an ethnic hierarchy, which is a societal rank order of groups based on perceived differences among groups (Hagendoorn, 1995). Various studies in the Netherlands reveal an existing social hierarchy where Turkish and Moroccan immigrants are considered the most culturally different from the Dutch majority (Schalk-Soekar et al., 2004; Van Osch & Bruegelmans, 2012). This perception of difference limits the inter-ethnic and social contact between these groups.

According to Wimmer (2008), the institutional environment and power differentials determine if and which strategies of boundary formation will be chosen. Depending on the logic of the situations and the characteristic of the persons interacting, institutional frameworks can make some boundary markers seem more plausible and attractive than others. Religious categorizations rather than other ethnic, linguistics or gender classifications will be adopted if there are incentives to promote perceived interests and increase endowment of economic, political and symbolic resources. The network of political alliances influences who will stay in and out of the constructed boundaries.

Wimmer (2008) states that boundaries have categorical, social and behavioral dimensions and consequently impact acts of social classifications and collective representation as well as everyday network of relationships through individual acts of connecting and distancing. According to Lamont and Molnár (2002) only when groups agree about the symbolic boundaries can social ones exist and lead to exclusion and segregation. Nevertheless, the concept of boundary does not necessarily imply that the world is composed of sharply bounded groups (Wimmer, 2008). Boundaries have differing degrees of political salience, varying levels of inclusion and exclusion, stronger or weaker implications for cultural differentiation and may or may not be stable over time (Wimmer, 2013). Distinctions or demarcations between groups may be fuzzy, soft or unclear allowing individuals to move between the boundaries and maintain several identifications simultaneously (Wimmer, 2008).

Alba (2005) argues that boundary processes depend on the nature of boundary: bright or blurred. Nature of boundary denotes the social distance that separates groups. In the case of
bright boundaries, the distinctions are salient and there is no ambiguity in terms of which side of the boundary individuals belong. Individuals are forced to leave one group for another, which incites accusations of disloyalty in the group of origin and fear of exclusion in the subsequent group which discriminates. When boundaries are blurred, the location of the boundary and the distinctions are less clear. Blurred boundaries allow individuals to maintain their cultural elements while integrating into a new society.

6.6. The impact of religion on acculturation as an identity and boundary marker

Religion has been shown to impact immigrants’ acculturation processes through its influence on identity. For religious communities and individuals, religion can be a core self-defining dimension for various reasons. Firstly, from adolescence to early adulthood, personal identity formation is greatly influenced by religion (Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007). Religiosity plays a key role in the way people carry themselves in their social environment and are influenced by it (Baumeister, 2002). Secondly, religious identity is a part of the cultural identity that is central to people’s sense of belonging. For example, research points to the positive relationship between religiosity and collectivistic lifestyle (Gebauer et al., 2016). Cultural systems based on religious values are often collectivistic because religiosity is practiced within groups (Ysseldyck et al., 2010). Therefore, people raised in cultural systems dominated by religion may desire more interpersonal contact that exists in collectivistic cultures in contrast with more secular cultures that value individualism (Diener et al., 2011), which may lead to better adjustment (Diener et al., 2011).

Thirdly, religion plays a vital role in the construction, preservation and/or abandoning of ethnic identities (Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007). Whitehead and Scheitle (2018) demonstrate that Christian identity in the USA has been linked to national identity over significant periods. A study conducted on Turkish immigrants in Europe shows that immigrants’ ethnic and religious identities are closely related and the meaning of being Turkish is strongly associated with being Muslim (Phalet & Güngör, 2004). However, while the ethnic identity of some groups may be strongly marked by religion, other ethnic groups may differ in the symbolic value that they attach to religion (Yağmur & Van de Vijver, 2012). Despite the varying strengths of association to ethnic identity in comparison with other symbolic markers, religion is crucial for some migrant groups. In the case of Syrian refugees, religion (Islam) is reported to be important for the refugees in the adaptation process to their new society (Hasan et al.,
Through self-report, Hasan et al. (2018) found that refugees viewed being Muslim as an integral part of their identity and a source of comfort.

Religion may impact the acculturation experiences of refugees as a profound boundary marker as it is often a significant constituent of perceived group differences and cultural distance (Triandis, 1994). According to Shadid & Van Koningsveld (2002), when the West is confronted with a significant number of Muslim immigrants, religion is often used to distinguish the differences between social groups, even though other ethnic, social and linguistic markers also exist. For instance, based on a study of Dutch majority members and five minority groups in the Netherlands, Van Osch and Breugelmans (2012) found that Dutch majority members felt the most different from the predominantly Muslim immigrants (of Turkish and Moroccan descent) among other immigrant groups. Larger perceived cultural differences between the host and minority groups has been found to be associated with higher feelings of threat (Guan et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2006; Van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012), which has been found to be the strongest predictors of negative attitudes toward minorities in an immigration context (Stephan et al., 2005). Indeed, Van Osch and Breugelmans (2012) showed that (Muslim) minority groups that were perceived as more different from majority members were also perceived as more threatening, less likely to adopt mainstream culture and more likely to maintain ethnic culture, stereotyped as less warm and competent, received less support for multiculturalism, and showed more discordance between majority and minority preferences of acculturation strategies. All in all, Islam constitutes a ‘bright boundary’ and Muslim immigrants are a visible ‘other’ in Europe (Alba, 2005) because Islam is thought to pose a threat to the European identity which still emphasizes the Christian roots of the European nations (Smeekes et al., 2011; Zolberg & Woon, 1999).

It can be expected that religion may be used to highlight differences and incompatibilities among Syrian refugees in Europe and majority groups for the following reasons in line with the abovementioned research findings. Firstly, the Syrian refugee crisis brought together Syrian refugees and Dutch natives whose personal and social identities have developed in diverging cultural systems that revolve around Islam on the one hand and Christianity and secularism on the other. Secondly, Islam is publicly criticized in the West (Buber-Ennser et al., 2018), perceived as culturally distant and contradictory to the Dutch national identity (Bender & Yeresyan, 2014; Van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012; Verkuylten & Yildiz, 2007) and viewed as a problem for the integration and adaptation process of immigrants (Foner & Alba 2008; Schmiedel & Smith 2018). Given the preconceived notions about Islam and Muslims, natives’ religious/secular identity gain salience against the religious
identity of the Muslim immigrants who are considered to pose a threat to the Dutch society (Mahfud et al., 2017; Smeekes et al., 2011; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005). Moreover, as indicated by Wimmer (2004), based on the institutional framework, power differentials and the network of political alliances in Europe, religion may be a conducive boundary marker to actors’ self-interests; and social, economic and political gains. Therefore, religion becomes a salient resource to construct boundaries around the Dutch identity in order to distinguish the Muslim minority groups.

To conclude, the impact of religion on acculturation of notably Muslim immigrants is evident and can be explained through religion’s vital role in identity and boundary formation, both of which contribute to the creation of perceived cultural distance and influence intergroup relations between natives and refugees.

6.7. Religion as a source of prejudice and coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as: ‘the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.’ Coping strategies denote the range of responses to the stress that an individual has available and can use successfully (Sahler & Carr, 2009). Coping is a natural, necessary and inevitable aspect of acculturation and plays an important role in mitigating the effects of acculturative stress (Kuo, 2014). As individuals undergo acculturation, they manage and cope with the stressors and major life changes caused by migration, cultural transition, and being in prolonged contact with a new society.

Religious discrimination can be a major source of acculturative stress and has been shown to influence the acculturation orientation of minorities (e.g., Berry & Sabatier 2010; Te Lindert et al., 2008). Islamophobia, a form of religious discrimination directed at Muslims, is found to affect Muslim minorities’ identity formation in the S>ZWest (Kunst et al., 2012), which can be predictors of acculturation attitudes and strategies (Badea et al., 2011; Baştuğ & Akça, 2019; Safdar et al., 2003). Muslim groups face increased levels of threat, social rejection and discrimination based on their religious background due to growing anti-Muslim sentiment particularly post 9/11 (Perry, 2005). Muslims view themselves as victims of religious targeting and members of stigmatized groups (Franjie, 2012). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the rejection-identification model (RIM) (Branscombe et al., 1999), and the rejection-disidentification model (RDIM), (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009) explain the influence of perceived rejection from the host society on the identity formation of minority groups and minority groups’ reactance to prejudice and stigmatization in detail.
Social identity theory states that minority groups tend to cope with in-group devaluation, rejection, social distance and discrimination by attaching themselves strongly to their in-groups in order to draw collective support and establish a sense of belonging and self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The RIM, proposed by Branscombe et al. (1999), and the RDIM, developed by Jasinskaja-Lahtı et al. (2009) confirm the predictions made by social identity theory and find that attributions to prejudice are related to minority group identification and host group disintegration. The RIM acknowledges that systematic rejection and exclusion by the dominant group has a direct and strong impact on mental health and psychological wellbeing of minority groups (Branscombe et al., 1999), has been found to result in lowered self-esteem, lower levels of life satisfaction, delinquency, substance use, depression, and anxiety (Cozzarelli & Karafa, 1998; Jasinskaja-Lahtı et al., 2006; Leary et al., 1995; Rivas-Drake et al., 2008; Seaton et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2003). According to Branscombe et al. (1999), perception of self as a victim and target of systematic rejection by the dominant group is so aversive and detrimental to well-being that devalued group members are in fact reluctant to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice. When prejudice is not pervasive, people tend to cope with prejudice by strategically attributing failure to their own inadequacies, to less valued aspects of their personality in order to protect their self-esteem. Thus, victims often minimize the extent of their own victimization and underestimate the probability of discrimination. Experimental research by Branscombe et al. (1999) has shown that perceiving oneself as a victim of prejudice increases identification with the threatened in-group so as to buffer negative consequences of discrimination, protect well-being and restore levels of self-esteem equivalent to that of dominant groups (Ramos et al., 2012). Similarly, the RDIM explains another way minority groups cope with perceived rejection and argues that perceived rejection from the host community increases disidentification from the national out-group (Jasinskaja-Lahtı et al., 2009). Experiences of unfair treatment such as any form of rejection or perceived discrimination discourage minority groups from identifying with the superordinate national group and result in a tendency to disengage from it (Phinney et al., 2006). Such disidentification may also create hostility toward the majority groups (Jasinskaja-Lahtı et al., 2009; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002).

Accordingly, perceived group rejection by Muslim minorities in European societies based on their religious background may reinforce a stronger identification with their fellow Muslims while weakening the ties between minorities and the host communities, causing alienation and disidentification from the out-groups. Some studies offer evidence supporting the RIM and RDIM in the case of Muslim minorities living in Western countries. Based on a
sample of Turkish and Moroccan Muslims living in five European cities, Fleischmann et al., (2011) found that perceived discrimination is positively associated with religious identification. The study by Verkuyten and Yıldız (2007) showed that a sample of Turkish and Muslim immigrants identified more with the Turkish and Muslim in-group when they perceived more rejection from the dominant out-group in the Netherlands. The participants with strong religious identity reported lower commitment to the Netherlands as well as stronger distancing and rejection of the Dutch. Another study by Connor (2010) found that Muslims tend to be more religious in European countries in which the mainstream maintains strong anti-immigrant sentiments. The condemnation of Islam is shown to increase the salience of Muslim identity in the West (Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007).

In addition to being a marker of prejudice used by dominant groups, religion can be a source of coping. Religion can be used to enhance the internal coherence of a minority group under threat, which will strengthen minority identification and thus well-being of devalued members. Adam and Ward (2016) found that religious maintenance among acculturating Muslim minorities in the West acted as a coping resource against acculturative stress resulting from religious discrimination and other barriers to adaptation. Religious coping predicted increased life satisfaction, enhanced stress management, and attenuated acculturative stress by cultivating a shared sense of meaning and coherence (Adam & Ward, 2016).

6.8. The present study

The purpose of the current study is to understand the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and to shed light on factors impacting their acculturation orientations. In this regard, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main differences and boundaries between the Syrian and Dutch culture as perceived by the participants?
2. How do Syrian refugees cope with the perceived differences and boundaries?
3. What are the acculturation orientations preferred by Syrian refugees?

6.9. Methodology

6.9.1. Approach

A qualitative study design was adopted for this study as it is well-suited to investigate the dynamic and complex nature of refugees’ acculturation processes. Qualitative research tends to employ procedures that are less structured than quantitative methods, which facilitate a broader exploration of the issues. It allows flexibility for researchers to find more novel and
diverse information and generate unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to allow flexibility for participants to voice their unique perceptions and experiences without the constraints of structured methods or measures used in quantitative research. Structured instruments with fixed response formats such as likert scales are useful to test specific theories of cross-cultural differences, but less suitable for more exploratory approaches in which there is no theory that guides the choice of an instrument (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Qualitative research is compatible with the investigation of under-researched cultural groups because relatively unstructured instruments and an open-minded attitude by the researchers hold the promise for gathering detailed information in a short time period, building models, and generating hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Data analysis was performed based on content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) and adopted an inductive approach in order to derive findings from the data and ground results on the real-life experiences of the participants from their own perspective (Thomas, 2006).

The nature of qualitative methodology requires researchers to state positionality. The first author of the published manuscript who conducted the interviews and analyzed the findings is neither a member of the host society nor that of the heritage society. However, she comes from Turkey, a culture similar to that of the participants, in terms of religion, traditions, and social manners although participants’ level of identifications with these aspects as well as the other characteristics of their upbringing such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, spoken languages and gender roles in the family show variation. Additionally, some of the participants had lived in Turkey as asylum seekers before coming to the Netherlands, had some knowledge of the Turkish language and made connections with Turkish people. The cultural similarity between the researcher and the participants and having established connections with Turkey may have facilitated the recruitment process, discussion on various aspects of the host country and assisted in developing rapport. Even though she lacked a personal understanding of what it is like to be a ‘refugee’, she pursued her postgraduate degrees as a ‘foreign’ student outside her home country. Coming from a relatively ‘shared experience’ position, she was equipped with insights and the ability to explore refugees’ acculturation experiences.

6.9.2. Participants

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Syrian refugees settled in various cities in the Netherlands including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Arnhem, Breda, Tilburg, and
Eindhoven. At the time of the interview, the ages of participants ranged between 24-47 with an average of 34 years; their duration of stay in the Netherlands ranged between three months to three years with an average of 18 months. All participants except one person had been living as refugees at least in one other country such as Turkey, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon prior to moving to the Netherlands. All of them reported middle-high socio-economic status in Syria before the war.

Only two of the 15 participants were female. The skewed male-female ratio seems to reflect the male-female ratio of Syrian refugees who were able to make it to the Netherlands (one fourth of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are female in 2019 (AIDA, 2020). The treacherous conditions of the journey, women’s vulnerability to abuse while travelling under extreme conditions and gender roles assigned to women in the Syrian community may be some of the factors that make it more difficult for women to come to the Netherlands compared to men. In addition, it was observed that women’s lives were more private than public, with less interaction with the outer community, which made it difficult to establish firsthand contact with them. For instance, the female participants spoke neither Dutch nor English, did not work outside the home and had not yet started their language schools.

All participants were granted the refugee status in the Netherlands and they had moved out of the refugee centers. As part of the dispersal policy, they were randomly assigned housing in a municipality in the Netherlands. In the time of the interview, they were all attending language schools as part of their asylum requirement. They were not allowed to work full-time as they had not yet achieved the desired level of the Dutch language. Only one person reported having a part-time job. They described having good relationships with Dutch people who helped in the homemaking process. However, participants expressed having less than desired contact with the Dutch community during the time spent in the refugee centers, which constituted the majority of their stay in the Netherlands. They also reported difficulties about not being able to work or study the Dutch language, which restricted their interaction with Dutch people.

6.9.3. Data collection and instrumentation

Recruitment of participants was started through purposeful/convenience and snowball sampling. The first set of participants was contacted via social media and were asked for referrals of other Syrian refugees to increase the sample size. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached. Meetings were held in several cities such as Tilburg, Breda,
Rotterdam, and Amsterdam, in locations most convenient for the participants, such as their homes, a private room in the university, or nearby cafes.

The participants gave oral and written informed consent prior to the interview. The interview questions were designed to explore acculturation conditions, orientations, and outcomes; difficulties encountered in the pre-migration, migration and post-migration process, resources and strategies to deal with the difficulties, perceived differences and boundaries in the migration context, type and frequency of social contact, and participants’ future plans (see Appendix A). Specific questions were asked to address the research questions such as: ‘What are the similarities/differences between the Syrian and Dutch culture?’ ‘In what ways do the boundaries/cultural differences impact your adjustment to the Netherlands?’ ‘How do you cope with the difficulties?’ The semi-structured interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hours and were conducted in English or Arabic depending on the participants’ preference. Four participants were interviewed in Arabic with the assistance of an interpreter who was a cultural insider. The first researcher continued conducting interviews until data saturation was achieved. She determined that she reached data saturation when the interviews did not add new information as the responses to the interview questions were mostly similar in content during the data collection. All the researchers confirmed data saturation after transcription and during data analysis when there were mounting instances of the same codes in the data with no additional new emergent codes (Urquhart, 2013).

6.9.4. Data analysis procedures

Content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) and inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) were applied to qualitative analysis. Content analysis and inductive approach are not labeled within a specific tradition of qualitative research but can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Inductive approach is most consistent with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that it aims to allow research findings to emerge from the meaning patterns inherent in raw data without the restraints imposed by preconceptions, or prior expectations, hypothesis or theories. Yet, unlike grounded theory, it does not explicitly separate the coding process into open coding and axial coding and limits their theory-building to the presentation and description of the most important categories (Thomas, 2006). Both methods indicate that analysis is not a linear but an iterative process that requires continuing revision and refinement of the meaning patterns (codes, categories and themes) evident in the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003; Thomas, 2006). The analysis is carried out through multiple readings of data, organization of data from the bottom up into
increasingly more abstract units of information, and interpretation of the underlying structure and meanings of the experiences and processes in the raw data.

The data was derived from the interviews with 15 Syrian refugees. The first researcher conducted and transcribed all the interviews, which allowed her to familiarize herself with the depth and breadth of the content and gain an understanding of the themes and events covered in text. Data analysis was conducted by the first researcher; the second and the third authors of the manuscript read all the transcripts, provided peer examination and reevaluated the data analysis after the initial coding process and also after the completion of data analysis.

All the transcripts were coded and analyzed in English. They were given a code and the anonymity of participants was protected by masking their names and personal information. After the completion of all transcripts, each transcript was reread in its entirety in detail and prepared in a common format for the coding process using an excel file. The raw data was separated into chunks of meaning units that allowed the researcher to assign labels for potential codes, sub-categories and categories, in an increasing level of abstraction, as demonstrated in Table 1 in Appendix B. In doing so, the researcher aimed to abstract the condensed material and group together under higher order headings.

The meaning units were condensed into codes and codes were given a label. Initial codes were compared to identify sub-categories and categories, which constitute manifest content. When the underlying meaning between the categories was similar, the categories were combined or linked to a superordinate category. The researcher did not leave any data out to identify as many potential patterns as possible. A coding framework was developed, continuously revised and refined as new codes and categories emerged in the coding process of the other transcripts. The framework started out as a basic list of codes and evolved into a table (i.e. Table 2 in Appendix B) showing the hierarchical relationship with other codes and categories such as superordinate, parallel, and subordinate categories (Thomas, 2006).

After the initial coding of each of the transcripts, all transcripts were reread according to the revised coding framework. Codes and categories were compared to assess the commonalities and differences among them based on the interpretation of all the transcripts. They were judged on how well they reflect the majority of the raw material. Second and third researchers evaluated and revised the codes and categories identified by the first researcher. Each transcript was recoded at least two more times in order to reflect the whole understanding of the text and revision by other researchers. Once the coding process was finalized, a category template was created, which shows each participant’s narrations that
The category template allows the researchers to review all the categories (in the upper row) and codes (in the intersection of the categories’ row and the participants’ column) that emerged in all the interviews. It also allows the researchers to evaluate the prevalence of the codes under each relevant category by counting the number of different participants who articulated the codes. Even though the number of times a code is mentioned may not always be a sign of the relative significance of the code, it allows the researchers to use phrases such as ‘some, many, majority of the participants’ while reporting the data and inform the readers that codes, categories and themes really existed beyond the interpretation of the researchers.

After a careful review of the category template, the researcher revisited the coding framework and finalized the labeling of all codes, sub-categories and categories. Then, the researcher labeled themes that cut across and within all the categories, which denote the interpretation of the latent content. The coding framework included all the higher order headings and the links among them, as demonstrated in Table 2 in Appendix B. Finally, the researcher selected the categories that captured the key aspects of the raw data and the most significant themes given the evaluation objectives. The researchers completed the analysis by selecting extracts from the transcripts that best reflect the selected categories and themes.

During the data analysis process, several strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. A code-recode strategy was used to ensure dependability, that is, the data were recoded after a month-long period between each coding and both results were compared (Anney, 2014). Researchers reached 85% of inter-rater reliability. Peer debriefing strategy was used to seek support from the other researchers who provided scholarly guidance to improve the quality of the findings. To ensure confirmability of the findings, member checking was used to make sure that the findings presented are drawn from the participants’ original data and is a correct interpretation of participants’ views (Anney, 2014). One of the participants was asked to read the findings of the research to eliminate any researcher bias (Creswell, 2012). To ensure transferability, researchers used purposeful sampling and provided detailed description of the context and data collection to allow for replication of the study.

6.10. Results

The findings of this study will be presented in four clusters: perceived differences and boundaries, perceived reasons for boundary formation, Syrian refugees’ coping strategies and
preferred acculturation orientations. Themes will be presented in categories which will then be explained through codes. For instance, ‘perceived differences’ is a major theme, which is organized into categories such as ‘social life’ that contain codes such as ‘traditions.’

6.10.1. Perceived differences and boundaries

All of the participants expressed that they observed the Syrian and Dutch cultures to be entirely different, which indicates large perceived cultural distance. Table 6.1 demonstrates the major theme of perceived differences under six categories listed from the most frequently mentioned to the least. Across these categories, the most common differences between the Syrian and Dutch cultures are found to be social customs, traditions, religious attitudes/practices, hospitality, freedom of expression, and food, as underlined in the table below.

**Table 6.1**

**Perceived Differences between Syrian and Dutch Cultures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Perceived Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>Social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td><strong>social customs, traditions, culture, friendships, Dutch people not being sociable, social contact, hospitality, freedom of expression, food</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A strong relationship between religion and social differences is explicit in the data. Religious and social differences appear to be intertwined. Syrian refugees come from a cultural context greatly influenced by religion. Religiosity appears to encourage a collectivistic lifestyle which necessitates an increased level of social contact and hospitality, compared to a secular context that yields an individualistic lifestyle. Thus, most Syrian refugees, even those with low/no religious identity, place much meaning into close and frequent social contact because it is associated with family life, a sense of belonging, and
acceptance. They express an intense desire to recreate a similar collectivistic setting in the Netherlands. The excerpt below offers an example of differences in social customs and traditions and the desired frequency of social contact.

R: Why do you have more Syrian friends than Dutch friends?
P: Here if I invite (a Dutch person) and cook a lot of things, when I go to him, he won’t. When we go out, after two hours he will say ‘I am tired.’ If you are friends, OK, (you meet) just one time a week, or once a month. But with Syrians if you are friends, you will see each other every day. I was with a Dutch person, he invited me for coffee and said ‘I am free all the time.’ We drank tea together, saw a movie and in the middle of the movie, he said ‘I want to be alone.’ ‘OK,’ I said, ‘you want me to go out?’ He said, ‘yes!’ So, I got my jacket and left. I was so annoyed. (Participant #5)

Based on the participants’ narrations, the most common boundaries were identified to be religion, language and culture. Almost all participants expressed religion to be a clear boundary, which becomes manifest in refugees’ maintenance of religion-based traditions, dietary habits, abstaining from social drinking and relationships with the opposite sex. Participants stated that the religious boundary impacts their involvement and acceptance in the social life the most. They reported difficulty in creating a social network because of religious restrictions and social distance placed by host nationals in reaction to these restrictions. The excerpt below shows the links between religious boundary, decreased social involvement and perceived social distance.

P: My religion is a red line; I cannot go out of the red line. I cannot drink alcohol and it is very difficult here because at everything, drinking drinking drinking.
R: Do you think that religion impacts your adaptation here?
P: (Dutch) can make it bigger than it is. Some may say ‘Oh, he does not drink, he does not eat pork. And (therefore) not contact me. I don’t have a problem with their drinking but for me it is *haram* (forbidden in Islam). I have a Dutch friend, it is a girl, I cannot go with her to disco or another activity in the night. If something is not *haram* and good for me, I can be like the Dutch people but if it is *haram*, I cannot be like them. (Participant #6)

### 6.10.2. Perceived reasons for boundary formation

The interviews explored participants’ perceptions of the reasons for the existing boundaries between the Syrian and Dutch culture. Two diverging perspectives emerged from the data. Contrary to the theories of boundary formation, the first group of participants held Syrian
refugees and Islam responsible for boundary formation. These participants believed that the boundaries exist because Syrian people establish social distance by limiting their social activities and interactions with Dutch people due to religious reasons and excluding the non-Muslim Dutch natives as the out-group. Such behaviors these participants observed within their Syrian in-group seem to be in line with the predictions made by the RIM and RDIM in that Syrian refugees may seek in-group identification and disengage from the host society to avoid the perception of themselves being associated with a minority-related status (Branscombe et al., 1999) and to cope with perceived rejection from the host community (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). The following excerpt delineates participants’ perception on how the boundaries are enforced by refugees as opposed to host group members.

To be honest religion is a wall. Because in Islam, they put non-Muslims as the other. If you’re Muslim, you’re with us; if you are not, you are the other side. I can’t eat from your food because you don’t eat halal (allowed by Islam). I can’t pray in your house because you have a dog. I can’t come to your house because you drink wine.

(Participant #1)

On the other hand, the second group of participants held external reasons such as host group members’ misperceptions about Islam and Syrian refugees; and the influence of media responsible for boundary formation. They explained that boundaries are instigated by Dutch natives’ establishing social distance and limiting contact with Syrian refugees due to prejudice regarding religion, ethnicity, and their refugee status as well as the media painting a negative image of Syrian refugees. The following quote offers an example for the social distance established by host group members based on negative perceptions of Muslims.

I met a lot of people who are not Muslims, sometimes it is not easy to talk to them, because they don’t believe in anything and they hate Muslim people, especially.

(Participant #11)

6.10.3. Coping strategies with boundaries and prejudice

In order to answer the second research question, the interviews explored coping strategies used by the participants to eliminate the impact of the boundaries and prejudice on acculturation. The coping strategies were found to be consistent with the perceived reasons for boundary formation. The first group of participants, who identified refugees and Islam to be the causes of boundary formation, were more inclined to blame and feel resentment towards their fellow refugees, their culture of origin and Islam for their acculturative stress in the Netherlands. Therefore, they used an avoidance coping strategy (Billings & Moos, 1981).
They chose to distance themselves from their ethnic in-group, ethnic identity and Syrian culture; and either kept religious practices minimal/private or completely rejected Islam. The excerpt below shows the participant keeping a distance from religious identity as a coping strategy.

Not so many Syrian people are religious, but it is just the religion that makes some difference in the culture and traditions. When you just remove the religion, you can adapt easily, or start a new beginning easily. I never was religious, but I am also trying to be just without a religion. (Participant #9)

When Islam was perceived as a burden to the acculturation in the Dutch society, religious avoidance emerged as a main coping strategy. Therefore, changes in the participants’ religious identities after immigration to the Netherlands were explored. One person identified as Christian and fourteen participants expressed that they had identified as practicing Muslims prior to leaving Syria although their level of identification with Islam differed. However, on the day of the interview, three of the participants expressed no longer having any religious affiliation. Two people indicated being less religious and no longer fully practicing Islam. In the following excerpt, the participant eluded to having changed his religion to cope with the negative perceptions of Islam and prove himself to the Dutch community. The quote highlights a common issue perceived by the Syrian refugees: Dutch tend to perceive Syrians as Muslim and religious. Thus, even the experiences of refugees who are non-Muslims, ex-Muslims and non-religious are not exempt from religious prejudice primarily because Europeans misperceive all Syrians as Muslim and religious; and also, because their cultural, social and ethnic identity have developed in a context heavily influenced by Islam.

R: Do you think these boundaries have an impact on your adaptation in this country?
P: Yea, of course. I told you I don’t believe in any religion but at last I am Syrian and I don’t have to stand on the street and shout ‘I don’t believe in any religion’ (Dutch people will assume I am a Muslim and thus dangerous, by default). Like Wilders’ thoughts. Of course, I will feel dangerous (in the eyes of people who support Wilders). (Participant #14)

The second group of participants who considered host group members’ misconceptions and prejudice as the reasons for the boundary formation; used active/approach coping strategy. They attempted to increase the social contact with host group members by

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23 Dutch politician, a right wing populist, founder and leader of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid-PVV)
learning to speak the native language, creating events for cultural exchange such as coming together around food, contributing to Dutch society through studying and working, and increasing their visibility in society through expression of personal talents, work and business. The following excerpt offers an example of a participant who created cultural events that revolved around Syrian food to eliminate the impact of boundaries.

In the past 6 months, I have made Syrian food for my friends. I have 2-3 projects. You meet with people, you give them food and you give them the recipe, so it’s for breaking the wall (between the cultures). Have Syrian food and have the answers to your questions. I have cultural nights for talking about Syria, I invite the Dutch people.

(Participant #11)

6.10.4. Syrian refugees’ preferred acculturation orientations

In an attempt to ascertain the acculturation strategies used by Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, they were asked about their involvement in the Dutch society and type of social contact with Syrians and/or Dutch natives. Their responses were grouped under three major sub-categories listed from the most occurring to the least: distancing self from Syria, seeking integration in the Netherlands, and actively seeking recognition in the Dutch society.

The most common sub-category ‘distancing self from Syria’ indicates that participants preferred not to be associated with Syrian culture, their in-group, and Islam. The most common codes under this sub-category included distancing self from other fellow refugees, preferring to make only Dutch friends, desire to start a family with a Dutch partner based on Dutch values, rejection of Syrian culture, preferring to always use the Dutch language, and distancing oneself from Islamic practices. This category showed that most participants chose to immerse themselves completely in the Dutch culture at the expense of their heritage culture and thus preferred an assimilation strategy. This type of assimilation seems to be more in line with the opportunistic dimension of assimilation, as explained by Stephens (2016), as it does not appear to be an effortless adoption of the host culture while preserving an authentic sense of self but seems to be driven by a desire to be accepted into the perceived ‘culturally, economically and politically superior’ ranks of the host society. The quote below shows a participant’s desire to make Dutch friends only, as an assimilation strategy.

R: In your daily life, do you have friends who are Syrian, Dutch or both?
P: Dutch. Most of my friends are Dutch because I need to start to integrate and start a new life. With the Dutch people, I can do it. (Participant #9)
The following excerpt shows the paradox between a participant’s desire to be accepted in the Dutch community and disassociate from his in-group identity, and his/her difficulty of foregoing a collectivistic lifestyle and needs for in-group affiliation.

P: Now I want Dutch friends, but it is difficult to be in touch (with Dutch people) for a long time, going out together. It is different with Dutch people. Mostly (I hang out with) Syrian people because we understand each other more. Maybe after more years I won’t go to Syrian people, I want just the Dutch people. (Participant #5)

Even though refugees may be vocal in rejecting their heritage identity and values, they continue to socialize mainly with members of their in-group, as indicated in the quotation above. It seems that they prefer to assimilate, not because they are a natural fit for the individualistic environment of the host country or they have idiocentric personalities with low original culture salience or low needs for in-group affiliation but because they feel as though they are more likely to face an unfavorable host context including discriminatory attitudes, otherwise.

Some of the participants chose an integration strategy as indicated in the second sub-category ‘seeking integration.’ They expressed a desire to integrate and worked actively to be a part of the Dutch community. Codes under this sub-category included initiating social contact with host group members, creating awareness about Syrian refugees, acting in accordance with the rules and regulations in the host country, and learning Dutch. In contrast with the participants that distanced themselves from other refugees, Syrian culture and Islam, these participants expressed pride in their culture, ethnic identity, nationality, language, and religion while committing themselves to building close social relationships in the Dutch society, living according to the Dutch rules, and speaking the Dutch language. The following excerpt is an example of a participant who chose an integration strategy.

R: Is keeping Syrian culture important for you?

P: For sure, I still go to mosque, I still pray, I go to the Turkish shops for food, special things to make food, I still have my Syrian identity, I am still a typical Syrian in the house, we still speak Arabic with my children. I will not let them forget the Syrian nationality for sure, it is my country, I’m proud to be Syrian. I am proud of being Muslim. This is very important. And I am proud that I am doing good in the Netherlands, I speak Dutch. I have a (Dutch) family here, they love me, and they take care of me. They give me a lot of respect, something I missed a lot time ago, I am very comfortable in the Dutch community. (Participant #11)
The third sub-category ‘actively seeking recognition in the Dutch society’ included codes such as expressing a desire to be famous in the Netherlands, doing things that will draw attention in the Dutch society such as making art exhibitions, arranging concerts, organizing a European refugee theater festival, and having interviews with national TV and newspapers. Syrian participants took initiative to make themselves visible through skills, productions, and hard work in order to be recognized for their individuality and skills rather than being reduced to their ethnic background and refugee status in the Netherlands. Through highlighting positive characteristics such as productivity, they sought to minimize the perceived differences between the cultures and host nationals’ negative perceptions about refugees, Syrians and Muslims. This sub-category mostly reflects individuals who have chosen the assimilation strategy but also the integration strategy. It appears to be consistent with the abovementioned opportunistic dimension of assimilation and integration orientations in that participants seem to be overcompensating for their perceived devalued low-status position to counteract the perceived negative perceptions of the host society. The overcompensation appears to stem from a desire to fit in as equal members of the host country and to protect against potential rejection or discrimination.

Consequently, participants’ perceived reasons for the differences, boundaries and prejudice were found to influence their choice of acculturation orientations. The first group of participants who perceived religion to be the major cause of cultural divide between the Syrians and Dutch natives; and changed their religious identity were found to choose an assimilation strategy. On the other hand, the second set of participants, who maintained the religious identity, chose integration. Assimilation and integration were found to be the main acculturation orientations chosen by the Syrian participants in the Netherlands.

6.11. Discussion

This study explored (1) the perceived differences and boundaries between the Syrian and Dutch culture, (2) the coping strategies used by the refugees to counter the boundaries and prejudice and (3) their chosen acculturation orientations. Based on the qualitative analysis, religion emerged as a common theme in all three areas. Firstly, religion appeared as a common difference, and a main boundary accentuating cultural differences. Secondly, refugees’ attitude towards religion seemed to determine their strategies of coping: Refugees with a strong religious affiliation used an active/approach coping strategy whilst refugees with low/no religious affiliation used avoidance coping. Thirdly, religion impacted refugees’
acculturation orientations: strong religious identity was associated with the integration strategy whereas low/no religious affiliation was related to the assimilation strategy.

The impact of religion permeates several aspects of Syrian refugees’ lives starting from the pre-acculturation period due to religion’s role as a salient social identity, a bright boundary and a source of prejudice in the Netherlands. The way that refugees imagine their host country before migration based on the economic and cultural dominance that exists between the receiving and sending societies seems to shape how they acculturate in the host county, in line with Stephens’ (2016) theorizing on the role of intercultural hierarchy in contemporary immigrants’ acculturation. The intercultural hierarchy that exists between the countries, which reinforces the low-status and ‘newcomer’ position of immigrants relative to the powerful and ‘majority’ position of the host society based on numerical, social, economic and political inferiority/superiority emerges as a factor that may impact refugees’ engagement with the host culture and psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, similar to other contextual factors. Prior to migration, Syrian refugees were well-aware that they were immigrating to an economically and politically well-developed, Christian/ secular Western society in which Muslim identity (along with other identities related to their minority status) may be devalued, and Muslim groups may be exposed to Islamophobia and discrimination. In other words, Syrian refugees expected a religious boundary and anticipated to be treated differently, regardless of any real experience of discrimination.

After settling in the Netherlands, the anticipated religious boundary was actualized with its ramifications on social relationships. According to the participants’ narrations, religious boundary impacted their acculturation indirectly by accentuating social differences and creating a social boundary. Social differences can largely be attributed to the divergent need/desire for social contact between the refugees raised in an Islamic collectivistic culture that associates frequent social contact with a sense of belonging; and the Dutch natives’ individualized lifestyle formed in Christian/secular environment. Given the importance of collective community bonds in the heritage culture, Syrian refugees have an intense desire for creating new social bonds in the Netherlands, but they are deterred by social/religious boundary. Refugees recognize the role of host group members in the endorsement of boundaries, as Dutch people may respond to the social differences and religious restrictions by establishing social distance, which further magnifies refugees’ feelings of rejection. That is, host group members may thwart refugees’ attempts to initiate contact, contributing to poor adjustment in the migration context. Lack of frequent social contact with host group members
summons an increased sense of grief over the loss of family/social life in Syria and a profound sense of isolation in the Netherlands.

The research results show two diverging acculturation orientations and coping strategies in the Netherlands. Refugees with a strong religious identity chose an integration orientation. Refugees with low/no religious identification chose assimilation and sought distance from religious and in-group affiliations. This finding is consistent with the previous research results by Saroglou and Mathijsen (2007), which showed low faith to be related to strong identification with the host country and European identity, but low attachment to the heritage identity.

For the first group of refugees with a strong religious identity, religion may be a source of coping as it strengthens in-group identification, enhances a sense of acceptance, predicts greater life satisfaction and offsets the negative impact of acculturative stress, in line with the findings by Adam and Ward (2016). However, based on the findings by Gebauer et al. (2016), the positive relation between religiosity and psychological adjustment that emerges in religious cultures may be restricted in a secular environment such as the Dutch society, where religiosity possesses limited social value. Thus, refugees with high religiosity may feel a lower fit in the Netherlands. In contrast, the second group of refugees perceive religion as a source of cultural distance and a hindrance in their adaptation and thus seem to detach themselves from the devalued identities associated with the Syrian in-group, driven by a desire to be accepted into the perceived high status host group. Thus, abandoning religious adherence may be used as a coping strategy to facilitate acceptance by the Dutch society.

The research results of this study are inconsistent with the findings of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), RIM (Branscombe et al., 1999), and RDIM (Jasinskaja-Lahtı et al., 2009), which predict increased levels of in-group identification and less interaction with the out-group in the face of recognition of threat to minority identity. Based on these theories, it would be expected that Syrian refugees acted according to their minority group criteria, emphasized the cultural differences with the host country, attached themselves strongly to their in-group and chose a separation strategy. In contrast, most Syrian refugees did not behave according to the value criteria of their in-group. To increase affinity and establish mental similarity with the mainstream, they attempted to present themselves in a manner accepted by the Dutch people and in contrast with the stereotypical expectations of their in-group. They tended to minimize the cultural differences and highlight the similarities with the host culture. Moreover, the participants who preferred an assimilation orientation stressed the differences between themselves and their ethnic group. The findings of this research
corroborate the findings of Baştuğ and Akça (2019) on Turkish-Canadian immigrants, Kunst et al. (2012) on Norwegian Pakistanis, who avoided increasing religious identification with their in-groups due to fears of being perceived as radicals by the host societies and the findings of Kaya (2004) on American-Turks who identified themselves by dissociating with other ethnically different Muslim groups.

Several explanations for this inconsistency are possible. First, Syrian refugees do not attribute negative events to prejudice either because they are reluctant to see themselves as victims or that the instances of prejudice are not pervasive, as indicated by Branscombe et al. (1999). Although refugees anticipated discrimination prior to migration, they did not describe high levels of discrimination in the Netherlands. Second, refugees may seek inclusion with the out-group as they are motivated to avoid the perception of themselves being associated with a minority-related status. Such a perception reflects rejection by the dominant group, which may be detrimental to their self-esteem. Refugees with low/no religious identity are reluctant to make references to their Muslim, Syrian or refugee identities, which are associated with devaluation. They seek distance from other refugees to dissociate themselves from the Syrian identity, which is perceived to be associated with the devalued Muslim identity. Additionally, they work towards attaining another legal residence status to dissociate themselves from their ‘refugee’ identity.

Third, Syrian refugees have positive future expectations concerning prejudice and feel that their acceptance and fair treatment are probable in the Dutch community, which is negatively correlated with in-group identification, as suggested by Jetten et al. (1999). In addition, they feel that social mobility is possible among the refugees in that they can move up to a higher status in the Netherlands where the expectation of prejudice is not a systematic barrier. According to Ellemers (1993), identification was higher among low-status group members who felt that they could not move to a higher status on their own compared with people who felt individual social mobility was possible. In the Netherlands, refugees have a sense of trust in the Dutch government that provides financial, linguistic, and procedural support as in the fair legal system to counteract negative ramifications and create a sense of equality. Therefore, the most adaptive strategy to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging might be to increase one’s investment in the out-group. However, even though opportunistic form of assimilation adopted by almost half of the participants, as described earlier, can maximize socio-cultural competencies such as language proficiency and future career possibilities, the prevalence of identity deletion/concealment may negatively affect well-being by promoting cognitive dissonance, inauthenticity through denial of original needs for in-
group support and affiliation, anxiety towards establishing relationships with host group members who may discriminate (Stephens, 2016).

Lastly, there is a level of distrust in the Syrian in-group for various reasons. Firstly, there seem to be vast regional/cultural differences among Syrian refugees as they come from different cities in Syria, accompanied by stark religious and political differences. Secondly, building a strong in-group in the Netherlands is discouraged by the efforts of the Dutch government to place Syrian refugees in different municipalities. For these reasons, the protective value of the strong sense of ethnic group belonging as an important source of mental health and well-being against acculturative stress, as indicated by Smeekes et al. (2017) in their study with Syrian refugees in Turkey and a recurring theme found in previous studies with voluntary immigrants, did not emerge from the data.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, some participants were previously approached for interviews and were initially hesitant about the purpose of the research. They agreed to participate after a full disclosure about the study and reassurance that there are no risks involved for the participants. Secondly, the first researcher being an overtly Muslim woman may have affected Syrian refugees’ narrations in that the refugees might have restrained their opinions about the negative impact of Islam on their acculturation in the Netherlands in an attempt not to be judged by the researcher. Thirdly, a larger-scale quantitative study might complement the findings of this study given the small sample size, and a gender bias with only 13% of the participants being female.

Results of this study have implications for professionals working with Syrian refugees in the West such as government officials, journalists, academics, educators, counsellors, psychologists, policy makers, law makers and other service providers. The findings create awareness into the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees and their willingness to be a part of the Dutch society. The professionals should be able to communicate this acquired awareness to the wider Dutch society in an attempt to decrease social distance and public anxiety about Muslim refugees. This study also highlights the resourcefulness of Syrian refugees as young, educated and determined individuals as opposed to their negative portrayal by the media and some politicians. Additionally, the research findings have academic implications for future studies exploring acculturation orientations of migrant groups. Superiority of integration/assimilation strategy over other acculturation orientations has traditionally been assumed in terms of predicting better long-term psychological well-being (Berry, 1997). However, Berry’s (1997) acculturation model does not account for types and dimensions of these acculturation orientations that emerged in the study sample, which may
not always facilitate adaptation. Therefore, refugees’ goals and motivations for adopting the acculturation orientations, and the authenticity of these strategies should be considered, as there is variation, particularly on individual level. In addition, refugees’ ways of coping with intercultural hierarchy between their heritage and host countries should be accounted for in the future studies, especially in the case of refugees, and migrants moving from countries to Europe, where there is a large perceived cultural distance. To conclude, religion should be considered as a critical factor affecting the acculturation processes of Muslim refugees in the West. If the barriers and the boundaries are eliminated, refugees are expected to benefit their new societies as they remain determined to improve their living conditions by pursuing higher education and/or better career prospects.
CHAPTER 7
Conclusion and discussion

7.1. Introduction

This dissertation contributes to the literature on acculturation, group identification, and boundary formation processes and offers a qualitative analysis of Syrian refugees’ migration experiences in Turkey and the Netherlands. To our knowledge, it is one of the first comparative investigations of Syrian refugees’ acculturation and intergroup processes in different host countries. Little attention has been paid to the varied adaptation experiences of individual refugees, or how personal, cultural and contextual factors interact to facilitate or hinder acculturation experiences. In order to gain insights into the complex permutations of these factors, refugees’ subjective reflections of their own transformations, and their negotiations of change and continuity, this study adopted qualitative research methods. It explored acculturation based on the personal narratives of Syrian refugees who first-hand experienced cultural and psychological changes as opposed to the perspectives of the receiving countries, the host society members, government agencies or based on quantitative data.

This dissertation addressed four overarching research questions:

1. What are the most common themes and issues emerging in the acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands?
2. What are the most significant acculturation conditions surrounding Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands?
3. What are the acculturation orientations sought by Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands?
4. What are the psychological and socio-cultural outcomes for Syrian refugees’ acculturation in Turkey and the Netherlands?

These research questions guided the formulation of three separate qualitative studies that formed this dissertation. The chapters of the dissertation reflected the content, procedures and conclusions of the studies designed to respond extensively to the overarching research questions. In the following sections, I will provide a synthesis of my research findings and critical assessment of the dissertation.
7.2. Theoretical implications

Acculturation is increasingly far more significant and complex in our contemporary times than observed before. The growing significance and complexity can be attributed to globalization, global spread of internet, other mobile technologies, unprecedented levels of international migration and heterogeneous groups of immigrants and minorities within host countries. Such forces interact and generate dynamic and multilayered social relationships and identifications. The vast majority of the Syrian participants currently residing outside of Syria’s neighboring countries had lived in at least one country before embarking on another journey to their last destination. They had interacted with multiple groups of people belonging to different mainstream cultures and sub-cultures, learned languages and made a living. Thus, they had naturally started a process of acculturation in their previous countries of migration where they might have acquired cultural values and practices, linguistic abilities, and group identifications, which they might, to a certain extent, have carried to their new societies.

Simultaneously, Syrian refugees have stayed in long-distance relationships with other Syrians, friends and family members both in Syria and spread around the world, who were also acculturating to their own host contexts, remotely but collectively forming a new understanding of themselves as the Syrian community and what it means to be Syrian. Thus, Syrian refugees have multiple allegiances with different groups of people, whether it is the host nationals, other Syrians, minority groups, religious and linguistic groups beyond national boundaries, through either first-hand or remote or indirect contact. Consequently, their acculturation seems to influence or to be influenced by several contexts such as the mainstream or minority cultures in the current and/or previous countries of migration and other Syrian refugees’ acculturation contexts.

In order to explore the acculturation of Syrian refugees in their host contexts, I used Berry’s bidimensional acculturation model (1980; 1997), the acculturation framework by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2003) and interactive acculturation model by Bourhis et al. (1997), which have been used extensively to understand the cultural and psychological changes that occur as the result of intergroup dynamics. The combination of these approaches towards acculturation offers a comprehensive understanding of the connections between immigrants’ conditions, needs and challenges, their ways of relating to the new society; their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. However, the bidimensional approaches towards acculturation and the traditional split between host and heritage culture can no longer fully describe the multiple identifications of Syrian refugees in multiple culture societies for the
following reasons. Firstly, Berry (2005) focuses on acculturation within the country of settlement, however, transnational attachment and sense of belonging to one’s own group within one’s country of origin is not considered in his model (Klok et al., 2017; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006). The transnational dimension (encompassing transnational contacts, activities and sense of belonging), which denotes the complex whole of affiliations and connections that migrants employ thereby linking host and heritage societies (Glick Schiller et al., 2006), was found to be relevant for the acculturation processes among older migrants such as Turkish and Moroccan guest workers in Europe (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006) and also seems to apply to the case of Syrian refugees, especially in Turkey. Secondly, the acculturation process of Syrian refugees calls for an understanding of remote acculturation as their social life and identities may be intermittently and indirectly shaped by other fellow Syrian refugees who are concurrently acculturating to geographically and historically separate cultures, through the use of internet and social media which refugees have relied on to keep in contact with their loved-ones through the migratory movements around the world. Third, their case also calls for tridimensional and multidimensional models of acculturation as they have multiple identities that are salient to them, which cannot be reduced to their heritage identity. Some refugees may position themselves in their host countries by increasing identification with sub-cultures. For instance, Syrian Kurdish refugees may orient towards Kurdish natives in Turkey due to a common language and cultural background. Similarly, Syrian Turkmens may orient towards the Turkish natives based on a shared native language and may even be blamed for being disloyal to their Syrian in-group. Likewise, Syrian refugees who had lived in Turkey prior to migrating to the Netherlands may feel a sense of belonging among Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands based on their acquired knowledge of the Turkish culture, language and common religion. Fourth, the acculturation process of Syrian Turkmens in Turkey may beg for an understanding of return migration or re-acculturation processes. In order to describe such level of complexity, there is a need for a nuanced approach of acculturation that may adjust for the variations among migrants and their circumstances, and incorporate multidimensional acculturation, remote acculturation as well as re-acculturation and recurrent acculturation (for the lack of a terminology that describes the fragmented acculturation experiences of refugees who may have to move from one country to another).

Additionally, given the multidimensional and complex nature of acculturation, there are some issues that can be raised with Berry’s theory of acculturation. First, Berry’s description of acculturation orientations seems to be an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon because assigning individuals into one of the four profiles may not provide
sufficient information on the type and the level of cultural practices, values and identities adopted in the migration context (Schwartz et al., 2010). The degree of change that occurs in one aspect of acculturation (practices, values and identities) does not call for the same level of change in another aspect (Schwartz et al., 2010). Although Berry’s profile analysis portrays a good illustration of acculturation orientations, it can lead to immense data loss regarding cultural and psychological changes a person experiences as the result of intergroup contact. Second, Berry’s theory of bidimensional acculturation assumes that attitudes towards two cultures allow for only four possible orientations, and thus, acculturation to multiple cultures cannot be sufficiently described by using this theory. In consideration of this research, however, acculturation of Syrian refugees into multiple cultures/sub-cultures is possible, can take place simultaneously and in different forms than their orientation towards the host culture, in a way that may not fit the assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization options in Berry’s theory of acculturation. Third, in the case of acculturation to multiple cultures and emergence of complex identities, integration strategy needs to be redefined. Does integration refer to the orientation towards the host and the heritage culture in isolation of other cultural influences or is it the balanced or individual synthesis of all the proximal and remote cultures to which individuals may feel a sense of connection? Can presumed integration into a sub-culture or remote culture other than the mainstream culture lead to the same assumed psychological health benefits of integration? The abovementioned criticisms regarding the meaning and possibility of integration along with other acculturation orientations and their health-related benefits are relevant in the study of Syrian refugees’ acculturation. I question the possibility of determining the acculturation orientations of refugees who are exposed to multiple and remote cultural influences as well as the prediction of health benefits based on the acculturation orientations in cross-sectional studies by using the existing theories of acculturation. With the ever-growing complexity of acculturation and refugee numbers reaching an all-time high, researchers can aim for longitudinal studies to introduce a theory of acculturation accounting for the implications of refugee migration based on human-made catastrophes beyond push and pull factors causing forced displacement and the heterogeneity of social groups and contexts that are drawn together (proximally and remotely) in the process of acculturation.

7.3. **Contextual implications**

Berry’s theory of acculturation lacks an explanation of the connection between individuals’ preferred acculturation orientations and the contextual forces underlying varied goals and
motivations that people may have for adopting their individual strategies. The theory does not provide an understanding of different types/sub-categories of the four acculturation orientations, which indicate the various goals and motives underlying the orientations. Syrian refugees’ acculturation orientations as found in this project necessitate a nuanced understanding of these motivations in order to identify their implications for psychological health and acculturation outcomes. It was found that individuals’ adoption of the same acculturation orientation may not always result in similar psychological health outcomes depending on the underlying motivations. For instance, integration strategy may not always facilitate psychological adaptation for all individuals in all contexts. This finding was the most explicitly observed in the study described in Chapter 6, which accounted for the authentic and opportunistic motivations (i.e. being accepted as an equal member, climbing the socio-economic ladder and so on) underlying participants’ orientations in the Netherlands. An understanding of the sub-types of acculturation orientations necessitates an investigation of the impact of contextual forces on the acculturating individuals.

To establish a link between the contextual influences and acculturation, IAM (Bourhis et al., 1997) was applied for exploring the societal context and SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) was used for analyzing the immediate social context. SIT posits that an understanding of the contextual framework is necessary for understanding intergroup relations, as it shapes the cognitive and motivational processes underlying identification strategies between social groups (Turner, 1999). Researchers emphasize that these socio-structural variables and processes always manifest themselves within a specific historical, political, and ideological context (Tajfel, 1981) and therefore people’s perception of themselves and others cannot be divorced from the broader social context (Turner, 1999). Stephens (2016) and Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008) highlight structural forces or socio-structural characteristics of the host countries that influence individuals’ cognitive and motivational processes underlying their acculturation strategies that shape their mental health outcomes. Interaction of these socio-structural variables affect acculturation orientations through identity development strategies, which range from original culture identity deletion or concealment to derogation of the threatposing dominant group or individuation (Stephens, 2016; Verkuyten, 2004; Verkuyten, & Reijerse, 2008). To demonstrate the chain of associations between contextual factors, identification strategies, acculturation orientations and health outcomes, I would like to draw attention to the two main contextual factors in the subsequent sections, which seem to be relevant to Syrian refugees’ acculturation experiences in Turkey and the Netherlands.
7.3.1. Intercultural hierarchies

Hierarchical relations that typically exist between the heritage and host cultures, which is one of the under-researched contextual factors as pointed out by Stephens (2016), seem relevant to understanding Syrian refugees’ motives underlying their identification processes and acculturation orientations, particularly in the Netherlands. Power and status differentials are reproduced by global, national, regional and local circumstances, resources and boundaries, which may place individuals and groups in subordinate or dominant positions by a range of discourses and practices (Verkuyten, 2004). Against the backdrop of a large socio-economic and political power difference between the Netherlands and Syria and due to their migration type as refugees, the low-status position of Syrian refugees is reinforced relative to the host population. A clear shift in the Netherlands from multiculturalism to assimilationist thinking that provides justification for the superiority and unchanging character of the dominant identity (Joppke, 2004; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005) may also contribute to the Syrian refugees’ perception that the Dutch society is superior than their society of origin, not only in terms of having a stronger economy but also a better culture, lifestyle and better people.

The large power differential between the heritage and the host countries combined with the existence of anti-migration movements and prevalence of Islamophobia in the West insinuates the possibility of rejection of Syrian refugees (Verkuyten, 2011). As demonstrated in the quotations from Syrian refugees in Chapter 6, expectations of negative treatment, ethnic and religious discrimination marked the pre-migration experiences of Syrian refugees who anxiously anticipated social rejection in the European host countries. Perceived discrimination can be treated as an antecedent variable (Te Lindert et al., 2008), which appeared to be a driving force behind the identification and acculturation process of Syrian refugees, who were motivated to strategically act in a way to offset the possibility of discrimination and other forms of social rejection in the host society. To summarize, the intercultural hierarchies, as a contextual variable, seem to impact refugees’ perceptions of superiority/inferiority and accompany a fear of social rejection, both of which may motivate refugees towards (often subconsciously) adopting appropriate identification and acculturation strategies that will serve to protect against the negative social repercussions and maintain their positive sense of self as a valued and accepted member of the society.

Based on Stephens’ (2016) description of the types of integration and assimilation, the opportunistic dimension seems fitting to the context of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands given a relatively large cultural distance, accompanied by significant cultural, economic and political status differentials between the heritage and the host countries, and expectation of
discriminatory attitudes. Perceptions of host culture high-status legitimacy relative to the low-status position of refugees, expectation of discrimination, being numerical minority with a perceived inferior socio-cultural background and the impossibility of returning to the country of origin may take on a coercive role, leading to identity deletion/concealment and host culture idealization.

Based on the narrations of some Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, as elaborated in detail in Chapter 6, there was a sense of compulsion to actively adopt the host culture with maximum effort to the rejection of their heritage culture and ethnic group, which seems in line with the opportunistic dimension. Some of the refugees seemed to even explicitly disidentify from their heritage culture and manifested hostile attempts to change it. As Islam was part of their heritage culture that appeared to be the most salient boundary in the Netherlands, some Syrian refugees attempted to disidentify from their religious identity, in particular. Yet, religion, even when it is no longer adopted as belief system, seemed to complicate the sense of belonging in the Netherlands through its connection with culture (collectivism) as indicated by Güngör et al. (2012). Despite their rejection of any identification with Islam and their in-group, refugees still expressed a strong desire for interdependence, sociability, family connectedness, group solidarity, sharing and hospitality, which existed in their collectivistic heritage culture largely shaped by Islam (Güngör et al., 2012; Güngör, 2020; Saroglou, 2011). Identification with the individualist culture seemed difficult even for refugees who attempted to cross the religion boundary in order to assimilate into the Dutch culture. Nonetheless, they had a tendency to deny their psychological needs for their ethnic community for the possibility of being accepted by the mainstream, even when the process turned out to be psychologically unsatisfying, anxiety-ridden, or resulted in discrimination and exclusion by the mainstream (Stephens, 2016). Alternatively, some refugees were vocal in affirming perceived host culture and rejecting the heritage culture values despite socializing mainly with members of their ethnic diaspora. It is expected that although opportunistic acculturation can expand refugees’ socio-cultural competencies such as language proficiency and advanced career possibilities, the prevalence of identity deletion/concealment strategies can negatively impact psychological well-being by promoting cognitive dissonance, inauthenticity through denial of original needs for in-group affiliation and even depression (Stephens, 2016).

Such an approach behind integration and assimilation seems distinct from the mechanical approach, adopted by some of the participants, which is an effortless and authentic adoption of the host culture due to increased cultural similarity between cultures,
refugees’ immigrant personality (low need for in-group affiliation or family centrality, self-orientation, and low salience of original culture) and low levels of discrimination or prejudice (Stephens, 2016). Mechanical dimension is in line the social and psychological needs of the individual and does not lead to inauthenticity and cognitive dissonance. In sum, even though refugees may adopt the same acculturation strategy (i.e. assimilation or integration), the underlying motivations resulting from refugees’ perception of the contextual factors, may lead to different psychological outcomes, with the opportunistic approach being suggestive of conflict driven and psychologically stressful outcomes while the latter possibly resulting in unproblematic connection with the mainstream and better psychological well-being.

7.3.2. Perceived nature of group boundaries

In addition to the investigation of intercultural hierarchy as a contextual variable that shapes group identification and acculturation processes, Verkuyten (2004) focused on the interaction of three socio-structural variables: stability, legitimacy of the status system and nature of group boundaries to understand people’s responses to status hierarchies. Social psychological analyses of intergroup relations offered by Verkuyten (2004), and Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008) are relevant for understanding Syrian refugees’ group identification strategies and stereotypes. Based on the narrations of the research participants in the Netherlands, they perceive the social structure of the Dutch context to be stable and legitimate and also permeable, that fit with the idea of assimilationist ideological position gaining ground in the Netherlands (Joppke, 2004; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005). The perception of Syrian refugees and the Dutch mainstream regarding their status positions and the intergroup hierarchies and acculturation expectations seem to match, leading to consensual relational outcomes, as indicated by Bourhis et al. (1997). Syrian refugees conform to the assimilationist ideology in the Dutch community reinforcing the superior position of the ethnic Dutch, partly due to their heritage culture based on the fact that Syria is a hierarchical society, in which society’s hierarchical order is likely to be accepted without justification (Hofstede Insights, 2021b). Their acceptance of the host’s superiority may also be due to their under-valued migration status as refugees: They accept and confirm the legitimacy and the higher status of the host nation, which accepted them as refugees, bestowed rights and opportunities for their self-advancement. Thus, based on their favorable reception and given rights in the Netherlands, refugees feel that seeking a higher status position is possible in the host community on the condition that they cross over the permeable boundaries in the way of their acceptance as equal members.
According to the social identity theory, when the interethnic relations and status differences are perceived to stable and legitimate and group boundaries as permeable, the simplest way to achieve a positive social identity and acceptance in the higher status out-group is to follow an individualistic social mobility path (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984; Wright et al., 1990). This strategy implies dissociating oneself from the devalued in-group to gain access to the higher status out-group, akin to an opportunistic assimilation strategy, as described by Stephens (2016). Distancing from the in-group and increasing identification with the high-status group combined with perceived permeability and social mobility is found to be associated with relatively negative stereotypes about the ethnic in-group and positive stereotypes about the high-status group (Guimond et al., 2002; Reynolds et al., 2000). This finding may explain some Syrian refugees’ negative perception of their in-group’s traits and attributes, and their tendency to ascribe fewer positive characteristics to their heritage culture, ethnic group and religion, and create more positive stereotypes about the host society in the Netherlands, as found in the research described in Chapter 6.

Identification with the Dutch community, disassociation from the in-group and choosing an individualistic/opportunistic approach may be the most rational strategy given the low number of Syrian refugees dispersed throughout the Netherlands. Increased group vitality in the Netherlands would allow for acting as a distinctive and collective entity within the larger society, and adopting acculturation orientations reflective of in-group’s priorities rather than those determined by majority group members (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006a). For instance, Turkish and Moroccan-Dutch form the largest (Verkuyten, 2004) and the most discriminated and stigmatized ethnic-minority groups in the Netherlands (Huijnk & Andriessen, 2006) with consistently strong levels of ethnic identification (Slootman, 2017). Given high levels of group vitality, Turkish and Moroccan-Dutch attach high value to culture maintenance, fall predominantly in the separation category (Güngör, 2020) and strongly identify with their ethnic and religious label in response to perceived discrimination (Slootman, 2017; Verkuyten & Yıldız, 2007). However, in the absence of strong group vitality, Syrian refugees do not have the option to segregate from the host society, may need to turn towards the dominant out-group for a positive social group identity and self-enhancement. Additionally, separation from family, which fosters behavioral involvement in tightly-knit ethnic communities as an important protector of heritage/collectivistic culture and religious identification (Güngör, 2020), seems to make individual mobility or opportunistic assimilation strategy an easy option for Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Moreover, Syrian refugees’ migration status as refugees and the continuous conflict in its tenth year prevent
them from imagining a future in Syria and Syrian community so they may feel that their
destination is no longer tied to their ethnic group or to war-ridden Syria, unlike Turkish and
Moroccan guest workers. The guest workers expected to remain in their host countries for a
limited period of time, had a transnational sense of belonging, transnational contacts and
activities with their countries of origin (Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998), with always a
possibility to repatriate (Kunuroğlu et al., 2016). Syrian refugees may want to avoid
attachment with Syria, heritage culture, religion and the in-group in order not to be reminded
of the pain of severe losses they endured, which seems to be an adaptive coping strategy to an
extent because transnational sense of belonging, which is supposed to function as a protective
mechanism against loneliness in the host context is shown to increase loneliness in actuality
(Klok et al., 2017) and lead to ‘double absence’ (Sayad, 1999). Finally, expectation and
perception of discrimination based on cultural, ethnic and religious differences, which are
perceived as the boundaries for acceptance into the host community and social mobility in the
Netherlands, seem to play a role in Syrian refugees’ tendency to distance themselves from
their stigmatized heritage culture, in-group and also religion. To summarize, based on Syrian
refugees’ low group vitality, split-family experiences, lack of prospects of repatriation, post-
traumatic emotional responses related to violence and displacement due to war, perceived
permeability of group boundaries and possibilities for social mobility in the host context, the
research findings on Syrian refugees in the Netherlands do not seem to support RIM
(Branscombe et al., 1999). In contrast with the postulations of RIM, Syrian refugees show a
tendency for ethnic disidentification in response to perceived forms of social rejection, similar
to Iranian refugees, who were found to stand out among other refugee groups in the
Netherlands with such a tendency, as demonstrated in the research by Bobowick et al. (2017).
As a young, educated, entrepreneurial, economically-sound group of individuals, they tend to
choose an individualistic strategy and handle socio-emotional needs and social rejection with
their own resources.

Syrian refugees perceive the socio-structural processes in Turkey differently and thus
the cognitive and motivational processes that affect their responses to intergroup contact are
different. There is a higher level of cultural and religious similarity and less economic and
political status differentials between Syria and Turkey than Syria and the Netherlands,
indicating relatively less intercultural hierarchy. Based on their narrations, I find that Syrian
refugees perceive the group positions in Turkey as unstable due to the changing nature of
immigration practices, and also impermeable due to the lack of a legal migration status and
limited socio-economic opportunities for social mobility. Yet, they accept the legitimacy and
the higher status of the host nation. As explained in the relevant empirical chapters (i.e. Chapter 3, Chapter 5), there is clearly a sense of appreciation of Turkey and acknowledgement of its superiority for having accepted a large number of Syrian refugees, showed humanitarian concern and provided instant support starting from the initial stages of the Syrian conflict.

Based on the cultural similarity and diminished intercultural hierarchy, the mechanical dimension of integration, as described by Stephens (2016) may apply to the cases of some Syrian refugees in Turkey. In this dimension, pursuit of assimilation or integration orientation is not based on a utilitarian intention of being accepted into the high-status group, in contrast with the opportunistic dimension that seems relevant to the case of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Integration seems to occur naturally due to the small cultural distance between the heritage and host culture, which facilitates the adoption of host values without significant cognitive dissonance or high risk of acculturative stress (Stephens, 2016). Syrian refugees can embrace the host culture relatively effortlessly, while preserving an authentic sense of self. In the meantime, separation orientation is feasible for some Syrian refugees, as found in the research described in Chapter 4. Some refugees seemed to find it more convenient to maintain their culture of origin without pressures to assimilate or integrate. Syrian refugees in Turkey have more of a higher group vitality given a larger and more cohesive network of ethnic nationals than in the Netherlands, so they may not feel compelled to adopt the host culture beyond minimal effort for daily living. Similar to the guest workers in Western Europe and in contrast with the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, they seem to display more transnational sense of belonging and activities such as travelling back and forth to visit family members in Syria. Probably due to the cultural/physical similarity and closeness to Syria, they are reminded of their country of origin through experiences of flashbacks of vivid memories and feel a sense of nostalgia in the physical and social sense, and express a yearning for locality in Syria. Under the conditions of uncertainty, less social mobility as a result of perceived unstable and impermeable status positions in Turkey in combination with higher group vitality, increased family belonging, Syrian refugees in Turkey seemed to act as a collective entity as opposed to choosing an individualistic social mobility orientation, have higher ethnic group pride and association, as suggested by RIM, as well as host group identification based on cultural and religious similarity.

Although Turkey and the Netherlands present two very distinct contexts for the acculturation of Syrian refugees, the comparative analysis revealed some parallel dynamics in the acculturation of Syrian refugees in the two separate countries. Religion seemed to emerge
as a salient boundary in the Netherlands as well as in Izmir-Turkey, which is known to endorse secularism and Western values. Perceived attitudes of host nationals towards Syrian refugees in the Netherlands were reported to be similar to the perceived attitudes from some native groups in this region. An explanation for Syrian refugees’ perceptions of regional differences in Turkey in terms of natives’ attitudes may be that natives with high national identification may see Muslim refugees as threat to the national unity in Turkey, as found by Yitmen and Verkuyten (2016). Since national identification seems to be closely related with religious disidentification in secularized parts of Turkey that epitomize European values and standards (Göl, 2009), Syrian refugees can be perceived as a threat to the national unity due to fears or Islamization of the migration contexts, corroborating the findings by Saracoglu & Belanger (2019). Thus, some Syrian refugees expected and experienced difficulties in social life, in the maintenance of intergroup contact with the dominant groups, exclusion and discrimination based on religious and ethnic identity in Izmir. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 4, some Syrian refugees perceived natives in Izmir to be less multicultural compared to natives in Istanbul. The reason for this finding seems to be in line with the explanations provided by Yitmen and Verkuyten (2016) that people with high national identification may not support multiculturalism for minority groups, who are a perceived threat to the unity of the nation. What differentiates Turkey from the Netherlands with regards to their approach towards Syrian refugees is that formation of the religious boundary may be specific to some regions in Turkey or some sub-culture groups. As indicated in Chapter 5, Syrian refugees reported that they received pro-refugee sentiments and support from the majority of natives and other minorities in Turkey and felt a strong sense of belonging and identification with cities such as Istanbul which embody many Islamic symbols and resemble major Syrian cities. Also, in contrast with the boundary processes in Europe, which seem to take the form of boundary crossing, the salience and significance of the religious and ethnic boundaries often diminish with the adoption of the native language in Turkey, in the form of boundary blurring. Moreover, boundary shifting, namely the relocation of the boundary, was observed especially at the initial period of their reception in Turkey. Syrian refugees were often considered as part of the large community of Muslims, a superordinate identity, as suggested by the common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), resulting in more favorable attitudes and behaviors.

Refugees’ interaction with other minority groups in the host countries is an important part of their intergroup contact that affects acculturation processes and thus should be considered in future studies. Based on the narrations of Syrian refugees, some Syrian refugees
in Turkey tend to orient towards Kurdish natives and draw social support from them. Similarly, Syrian refugees in the Netherlands with high ethnic and religious identification, often the people who are united with their families in the Netherlands, seemed to lean towards other Muslim minority groups to recreate a collectivistic culture, in the absence of a large Syrian community. However, Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, who seemed to choose the opportunistic assimilation orientation or individualistic mobility strategy, appeared to distance themselves from Muslim minority groups along with their ethnic in-group. They may reason that association with low-status culture or groups may reduce their social desirability from the perception of the Dutch natives, which would impede their acceptance and membership to the high-status majority group.

7.4. Comparison with other Muslim ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands

The group identification strategies adopted by Syrian refugees seem to be distinct from other Muslim immigrant groups in the Netherlands based on their different perceptions and interpretations of the contextual variables. For instance, based on the study by Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008), Turkish-Dutch immigrants perceived the interethnic relations as more stable, less legitimate, and less permeable, which indicates that the Turkish-Dutch considered the existing structure as difficult to change, unfair and relatively closed for ethnic minorities to seek a higher status position. Their perceptions are more in line with the multicultural ideology, which supports more open, equal positions among social groups and permeability of ethnic boundaries in contrast with the assimilationist perspective of the Dutch mainstream. In other words, the match between ideological positions of the Syrian refugees and the Dutch did not exist in the case of Turkish-Dutch, leading to social competition, higher in-group identification and less positive stereotyping of the Dutch mainstream among the Turkish-Dutch immigrants. Turkish-Dutch were motivated to stress their distinctive ethnic identity and distance themselves from out-groups, as indicated by RIM and RDIM, in contrast with Syrian refugees who distanced themselves from their ethnic group and sought identification with the Dutch society.

Differences in the perceptions of Syrian refugees and the Turkish Dutch immigrants may be the reflection of the differential attitudes and treatment of host society towards these minority groups. There is scientific evidence that perceptions of majority members’ attitudes towards refugees in various countries affect their desire to participate in the host society (Phillimore, 2011) and also that minority members’ perceptions of majority members’ acculturation expectations shape minority members’ acculturation preferences (Zagefka et al.,...
The reception and perception of Syrian refugees by the Dutch society might be more favorable than those of Turkish immigrants. Indeed, the Netherlands had moderately favourable migration-integration policies when it started receiving Syrian refugees in 2015 (MIPEX, 2015), and continues to have moderately positive attitudes towards refugees, and the lowest rates of unemployment compared to countries with high population of Syrian refugees (Sweden, Turkey, Belgium and France) (De Coninck et al., 2020). The first generation of Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands were labor migrants, who belonged to low socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. They were considered necessary for the economic development of the host nations but were unwanted by the European host governments and some parts of the host nations (Göksel, 2019). Thus, they were considered as temporary migrants, who were expected to stay their segregated ethnic enclaves. Expectations of temporary stay is related to the less improvement in adaptation and in Dutch language skills (Geurt & Lubbers, 2016), which was relevant in the case of Turkish guest workers. Moroccan and Turkish-Dutch were reported to be less familiar with the Dutch language, culture and habits than the other minority groups (Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). Perceived discrimination, expectation of segregation and limits on their social mobility beyond their position as guest workers may have contributed to a sense of rejection from the Dutch society, increased in-group identification and perception of interethnic structure to more stable, impermeable and less legitimate. Though the largest migration group in the Netherlands, the ethnic and religious identities of Turkish-Dutch immigrants remain to be problematized. Research also shows that Turkish-Dutch immigrants reported higher rates of discrimination in the Netherlands than other dominant and minority groups (Schalk-Soekar et al., 2004; Van der Berg & Evers, 2006; Verkuyten, 2002).

In the case of Syrian refugees, however, the Netherlands was more informed about the duration of stay so they could expend much effort for their adaptation. The Netherlands could systematically control the number of Syrian refugees and their reception and distribute them to various municipalities, in which they were expected to participate in the Dutch society. Expectations of integration of Syrian refugees and intergroup contact may have contributed a sense of acceptance and favorable relationships in the Dutch community. Additionally, based on their status as refugees, they are given socio-economic opportunities for learning the Dutch language, and pursuing higher education, all of which increase their orientation to the host country and social mobility to higher status positions. Therefore, favorable reception and acculturation conditions and more investment in the refugees may contribute to their perception of more stable, legitimate and permeable intergroup conditions in the Netherlands.
7.5. Limitations and recommendations

Readers of this dissertation should be mindful of the fact that refugees who participated in the research projects consisted mostly of young individuals who had high educational attainment and a middle-to-high socio-economic standing in Syria, which may affect refugees’ perceptions of the contextual variables, group boundaries, level of social support and accessibility of socio-economic opportunities within their society of settlement, thereby impacting their identification and acculturation strategies. The acculturation processes explained in this dissertation may not apply to the experiences of other refugees who may not possess these characteristics. As these research projects are based on the narrations of the participants, who may be motivated for reasons of their own to present their acculturation story in a certain way, the findings cannot be overly casually interpreted. Another limitation of this study is the ‘here and now’ focus of qualitative research that insufficiently addresses the continuities and changes over time. This research can be considered a snapshot of the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees taken at the specific time and context, which can provide a misleading picture of their acculturation if generalized beyond that particular time and context. Acculturation is not a singular process that occurs in a single pace. The long-term psychological consequences of acculturation process are highly variable, depending on social and personal variables that reside in the society of origin, the society of settlement and phenomena that both exist prior to, and arise during, the course of acculturation (Berry, 1997). Hence, longitudinal studies are necessary for understanding the dynamic nature of interaction among multiple components of acculturation. Additionally, I recommend the use of a mixed method approach that allows for the openness of qualitative methods and the reliability, validity and generalizability framework of the quantitative approach (Van de Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010).

Based on the exploratory nature of the qualitative research methods, novel aspects of acculturation emerged from this research project that deserve further academic attention. My recommendation for future research is to expand research on remote, tridimensional and multidimensional acculturation models as they apply to the case of Syrian refugees. Future research should investigate Syrian refugees’ identification with the sub-culture groups in their host countries to understand how refugees position themselves within the society, cope with difficulties and discrimination. Additionally, acculturation processes of Syrian refugees may be compared with the acculturation processes of internally displaced Syrians to understand whether remote acculturation is relevant phenomenon that shapes the dynamics in the Syrian
community. Another recommendation would be to focus on refugees’ acculturation after the reunification with their families as they are significant agents of cultural maintenance. Having a family versus separation from family seemed to be one of the significant differences between the refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands, which seemed to greatly alter their group identifications and acculturation processes. As religion was found to be a social variable susceptible to change in sustained contact with otherwise religious or secular persons or groups, religious acculturation of Syrian refugees may have implications for psychological health and long-term adaptation in the migration context.

7.6. Significance

As one of the first comparative studies of Syrian refugees’ acculturation processes in different host countries, this research provided an extensive social psychological analysis of intergroup relations. In its comparison of Turkey and the Netherlands, the findings of the research underlined the significance of the contextual features for the acculturation process, which have received less attention in research. Distinct from previous studies, this dissertation combined the external/ contextual factors, which consist of the historical, political, ideological context and the socio-structural processes, with the internal/ psychological processes, which comprise the cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses to the intergroup contact and coping strategies, to name a few, instead to studying them separately, to arrive at a wholesome understanding of refugee acculturation. Attention on the context has allowed not only a deeper understanding of refugees’ level of psychosocial and socioeconomic adaptation, social mobility, and the degree of solidarity they are able to muster in the migration contexts but also the factors that foster or deteriorate these dynamics.

One of the novel aspects of this research project was that it directed scholarly focus both on traditional and non-traditional countries of migration. In contrast with the traditional countries of migration, Turkey does not present a wide dichotomy between the cultural characteristics, social norms, religious beliefs and socioeconomic conditions of the receiving society and Syrian refugees. Thus, the comparison of Turkey and the Netherlands showcased the variations in terms of Syrian refugees’ impact on the collective identity of their host communities, their perceived acceptance and perceived discrimination in the host contexts and the historical and ideological factors affecting acculturation. This research also demonstrated the city-level differences within the host contexts that diversify acculturation orientations and outcomes as well as the commonalities of Syrian refugees’ acculturation processes between the different host countries.
Additionally, this study met the need for refugee perspective and psychological approach in acculturation, as refugee migration is mostly researched from a political and economic standpoint. The refugee perspective together with the use of qualitative research methods underlines the complexity and the uniqueness of each human beyond the refugee label that reduces him/her to their displacement. The human experience often gets lost behind the numbers and statistics and in the use of academic terminology that affects social change and policy. Psychological standpoint enables the readers to hear the personal narratives of refugees and build empathy with their experiences at a personal level, which are vital in fostering positive host group attitudes facilitating well-being and acculturation outcomes of refugees.

Finally, this research attempted to tone down the negative connotation of being a refugee that has been supported by the media and some politicians highlighting the unpleasant conditions associated with hosting refugees. Syrian refugees are frequently presented as a homogenous group who are fleeing war, seeking refuge, but also are dangerous and pose a security threat and economic burden to the receiving countries (Koc & Anderson, 2018). By focusing on the highly educated group of refugees, this study brought out the strength and the resilience of Syrian refugees to create a more balanced perspective.

7.7. **Practical implications**

Syrian refugees are often the largest group of refugees in their host nations and their effect on the demographics and the collective identity of their receiving countries is expected to be tremendous (Newsham & Rowe, 2018). Thus, positive acculturation experiences will contribute to the cohesion in the migration context and the well-being of all acculturating groups. In contrast, migration concerns that are not dealt in the short-term may turn into greater long-term challenges impacting future generations.

This project aimed to understand the antecedents of negative and positive intergroup relations in the host countries in an attempt to promote a positive acculturation experience for all the acculturating groups. The context specific factors facilitating and deteriorating the acculturation process and the potential causes of the difficulties faced by Syrian refugees in the receiving countries are the starting points for improvement. Economic adaptation is one of the major impediments on the acculturation process that needs to be addressed. As indicated in our findings and by previous research (i.e. Aycan & Berry, 1996), economic adaptation is interrelated with social and psychological adaptation. Problems related to employment or under-employment cannot be separated from mental health issues as they bring up symptoms
such as feelings of uncertainty, frustration and injustice. For that reason, host societies should consider adapting their labor markets to the magnitude of Syrian refugees. Increasing employment and better working conditions will facilitate the economic well-being, social integration of Syrian refugees and minimize the perceived socio-economic threats by the majority, lessening hostility and prejudice against Syrian refugees. Context specific policies should be adopted in consideration of the conditions of the native population in order to prevent negative attitudes towards refugees.

Nonetheless, economic adaptation alone cannot be sufficient. One of the success criteria of refugee adaptation for the host countries should be based on psychological measures of refugees’ self-esteem and self-confidence as indicators of their overall well-being in the society, which are based on refugees’ perceptions of recognition, acceptance, respect for their contribution to their host nations. This research showed that Syrian refugees’ sense of rejection is not based on by actual experiences of discrimination in everyday life, as they did not report frequent experiences of daily discrimination. Rather, it is rooted in their anticipation/ expectation of discrimination, starting even before migration to the host context, based on their devalued in-group identities given the prevalence of populist movements and widespread Islamophobia, especially in the European countries. As indicated by our findings, anticipation of discrimination based on in-group identities seem to lead refugees to deny such identifications, which creates psychologically unsatisfying outcomes. Yet, a level of competence in the heritage culture in terms of individuals’ interaction with the in-group members, maintenance of skills and behaviors related to the heritage culture are a necessary part of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, as indicated by Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2006b). Thus, providing a sense of acceptance of Syrian refugees’ in-group identity and heritage culture, and allowing them to fulfill their needs for the in-group without the fears of social rejection are vital for long-term adaptation and mental health.

To foster positive host group attitudes and create a favorable climate for the minority groups, the host counties should make reforms in their migration policy if needed, by (1) minimizing the negative impact of the populist movements and preventing the anti-immigrant discourse of the media, (2) increasing host groups’ awareness of the intergroup dynamics and the impact of their perceptions and attitudes on refugees’ adaptation, and (3) facilitating more frequent interaction between the majority and minority groups to create a more inclusive society. Thereby, the majority groups will be less likely to exhibit socio-cultural distance, which will cause minority groups to feel accepted and be motivated to initiate contact with the host society and identify with the host culture. Conveying a sense of understanding and
acceptance of refugees’ heritage culture will improve refugees’ adaptation and diminish the potential negative backlash as a result of stigmatization of minority groups in terms of disidentification, hostility and reactive religiosity, to name a few. Such issues should be considered by policy makers and decision makers in this regard.

7.8. General conclusions

This study presented an overview of the literature and four empirical chapters devoted to the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Netherlands. The focal group of this dissertation was refugees displaced due to a human-caused catastrophe, through the use of violence since the Syrian war that started in 2011. Theories of acculturation were used to understand the internal processes of refugees in the intergroup context such as their socio-cultural and psychological adaptation while social identity theory, common in-group identity model, rejection-identification model, rejection-disidentification model and theories on boundary formation were used to understand the impact of contextual factors, the interaction between low-status and high-status groups, and the role of discrimination on identification and acculturation processes.

Based on the social psychological analysis of refugees’ personal narratives, and the extensive research in the acculturation literature, it can be concluded that forced nature of migration adds several layers to the level of complexity of acculturation, which is in itself already a multilayered and multidimensional process caused by multiple interrelated factors. Refugee migration greatly differs from voluntary migration. In voluntary migration, one’s home and family, heritage culture and country are likely to stay as contained entities to a certain extent, at least geographically, except for the migrant that moves away with the potential of return. In the case of refugee migration, there is an atmosphere of uncertainty and traumatic separation from one’s home, family and country, all of which are going through their own transformations, with a dim possibility of return or reunion, complicating refugees’ attachments to the heritage country, ethnic culture and the in-group, and identifications in the new environment. As a result, the bidimensional theory of acculturation does not suffice to explain the level of complexity in the acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees, and thus, several approaches towards acculturation and intergroup relations should be applied in a complementing manner.

To sum up, the investigation of Syrian refugees’ acculturation processes provided us with a broad perspective on the links between the contextual factors, refugees’ unique acculturation orientations and their socio-cultural and psychological adaptation in their new
environments. Refugees’ expectations in the pre-acculturation period regarding their host countries, perceived attitudes towards refugees, cultural distance, religion, availability of support, language attainment, group vitality, solidarity with minority groups, separation from family were some of the most common issues that were found to affect acculturation in both countries. Based on our understanding, the acculturation processes of Syrian refugees will be significantly ameliorated with policies concerning their economic adaptation in Turkey. Yet, given large number of refugees, structural change and economic developments are likely to take time. In the Netherlands, there is a need for a wider acceptance of Muslim minorities and values associated with the Middle-East, in order to allow Syrian refugees the possibility of building socially valued identities in their new community, which also correspond with their own self-acceptance.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your life in Syria?
2. How did the idea of coming to the host country come about?
3. What were your expectations from the host country?
4. When you think of the first time you arrived in the host country, what can you tell me about your feelings/thoughts/experiences?
5. Have you had any difficulties during or since migration? How have you dealt with these difficulties? Have you received any support (personal, emotional, financial, social and so on)?
6. Can you tell me about your life in general now? How do you feel about yourself and your current life in Turkey/Netherlands?
7. Have you ever felt that you have been treated differently?
   a. What do you think is the reason for discrimination?
8. What is the perception of your ethnic group in the host community? / What do host nationals think about Syrian refugees?
9. What are your impressions of the host society and the host culture?
10. What languages do you prefer in your daily life?
11. How important to you is to keep your Syrian culture?
12. How important is religion in your life? Do you consider yourself religious?
13. Would you marry a Turkish/Dutch person?
14. In your social life, who do you interact with the most?
15. How do you feel about your social life? What kind of things do you do in your personal time?
16. How do you think you changed personally in this process? How do you feel in general?
17. What are the things that are the most similar and the most different in the host culture compared to the Syrian culture?
18. What are the biggest differences between the Syrian people and the host national (cultural practices, linguistic practices, social habits, day to day experiences and so on)?
19. Have you ever been impacted by these differences you have mentioned?
   a. Socially?
   b. Economically?
20. Has this situation (that you just described) had an impact on your adaptation in this country?
21. Are you planning on returning to Syria?
22. What are your future plans?
23. What binds these two groups the most? What other common factors might join these two groups?
## Appendix B

### Table 1

*A Demonstration of the Coding Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant X</th>
<th>Initial Code</th>
<th>Secondary Code (Sub-category)</th>
<th>Selective Code (Category)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I experienced a lot of difficulty when I came here. For example, I did not have a job, I did not have much money,</td>
<td>Lack of employment</td>
<td>Financial difficulties</td>
<td>Difficulties experienced in the initial period of acculturation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not speak the language.</td>
<td>Not speaking Turkish</td>
<td>Language difficulties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

*A Demonstration of the Coding Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Type of discrimination</th>
<th>Perceived reasons for discrimination</th>
<th>Coping with discrimination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Sub-categories</td>
<td>Language discrimination, Refugee discrimination, Discrimination towards children</td>
<td>Media, Perceived characteristics of natives, Financial reasons, Political reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>natives not speaking with the participant, being questioned/blaming about not having stayed in Syria to fight and being in Turkey, children being called 'Syrian' as a pejorative term by other children in school</td>
<td>media portraying Syrians negatively, natives' lack of knowledge about Syrians, perceiving Syrians as financial burden</td>
<td>speaking Arabic at home, abiding by natives' expectations in public, believing good will come around if it goes around, initiating interaction with natives, remaining silent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(modified from Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p. 108)

### Table 3

*A Demonstration of the Category Template*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants/Categories</th>
<th>Expectations from Turkey</th>
<th>Feelings about Migration</th>
<th>Efforts to Stay in Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1 DM</td>
<td>Finding a job, Reuniting with family members</td>
<td>Worries about the future, A sense of relief</td>
<td>Securing a place of accommodation, Finding a job, Learning Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2 ZT</td>
<td>Finding a safe place, Being able to study</td>
<td>A sense of relief, Anxiety about not finding a job, Sadness about leaving Syria</td>
<td>Learning Turkish, Looking for work, Sending children to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3 BW</td>
<td>Finding a job, Learning Turkish</td>
<td>Worries about the future, Anxiety about not finding a job, Sadness about leaving Syria</td>
<td>Securing a place of accommodation, Learning Turkish, Starting a business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>