

Experiences of First-year Doctoral Students in a Turkish State University

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Abstract: The current study was an attempt to explore the experiences of doctoral students at a state university. The subjects of the study were six PhD students (3 F, 3 M) in the first semester of their doctoral program. To gain a deep understanding of the subjects' experiences, multiple devices were applied to collect data. To measure the general well-being of the subjects, Goldberg's 28-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) was administered. Moreover, interviews were performed followed by complementary questions drawn from the questionnaires. Finally, the subjects were asked to write two anecdotes. The obtained anecdotal evidence provided a valuable source of data to grasp the overall experiences of the students since they revealed their general perceptions of the doctoral journey. The major findings of the study indicated that the main challenges of the students were high stress imposed by the assignments, unfavorable attitudes of supervisors towards students, and lack of time to manage family life, work and studies efficiently. Longitudinal research is required to examine if/how the doctoral students' experiences change over time.

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Comparative studies between state and private universities can also yield interesting findings.

Keywords: Doctoral students, well-being, study experiences, GHQ-28, Turkish state universities.

Introduction

In the dynamic society we live in today, where everything is interconnected and hypercompetitive, the key to prosperity and success is to possess both material and mental well-being. To clarify the concept of well-being, I subscribe to Medin and Alexanderson (2001: cited in Schmidt and Hansson, 2018) who described well-being as a personal experience of one's health. This brief, yet inclusive definition highlights the ever-changing experiences of individuals. Mental well-being of an individual is improved by the ability to achieve social and personal goals, and accomplishing a sense of meaning and purpose in society (Kirkwood et al., 2014). Among other professions and disciplines, researchers are under substantial psychological and emotional pressure due to the demanding nature of research, which diminish the well-being of the researchers (Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018). Stress, anxiety, fatigue, and loss of interest might result in quitting work and education. In addition, well-being or ill-being in the course of studies can have long-run impacts on career life (Stubb et al., 2011). Although there are many studies that have researched occupational well-being, few have dealt with well-being development in PhD studies (Stubb et al., 2011). Doctoral students of today are the researchers of the future so it is crucial to perceive how they experience this journey (Appel & Dahlgren, 2003).

Researchers have studied the issue of well-being from different perspectives: spiritual aspects of mental well-being (e.g. Ziapour, 2017; Omidvari, 2010), female experiences of well-being (e.g. Schmidt and Umans, 2014; Haynes et al., 2012), and the role of supervisors in how PhD students perceive well-beings (e. g. Cornér et al., 2017; Pyhalto et al., 2015). A search in the body of research carried out on the issue reveals that a number of recent studies have investigated university students' mental well-being in Turkey (Aygün, 2004; Bilican, 2013; Uraz et al., 2013; Oyekcin et al., 2017; Yildirim et al., 2017).

According to the main report of a study by Vossensteyn et al. (2015), one of the key targets of Europe 2020 strategy is to decrease the attrition rates and increase the completion rates of higher

education students. One of the key findings of this Europe-wide survey, presented in its executive summary report, lists Turkey among the European countries that do not have the issue of study success on their agenda.

Given the importance of PhD students' mental well-being and the necessity for executing further research, this study aims to address the existing gap by investigating the status and prevalence of problems experienced by a sample population of new doctoral entrants in English Language Teaching (ELT) program at a large public university in Turkey. The current study is an effort to turn the attention of researchers to the issue and the findings are meant to be of particular interest to policy makers and practitioners. The following research questions will address the research problem:

- 1) How do doctoral students experience this journey?
- 2) What are their perceptions of their well-being?

2. Literature Review

Conventionally, universities and academic institutions have known to be the least stressful environments. However, studies conducted on academics' work stress discredit this assumption by alarming that the issue is dramatically on the rise (Reevy&Deason, 2014; Kinman, 2001). Despite the long history of occupational health researches, few studies have scrutinized the determining factors of well-being for doctoral students (Levecque et al., 2017). Evans et al. (2018) investigated the graduate students' mental health and the results revealed that the likelihood of experiencing anxiety and depression by graduate students is six times more than other people. Negative experiences can also lead to attrition and failing to complete doctoral programs. For both universities and candidates, attrition is of great concern financially and personally for candidates, it entails emotional sufferings (Bourke et al., 2004).

Among the studies investigating the issue of PhD students' experiences, Schmidt & Umans (2014) and Haynes et al. (2012) have researched the female perspective of the matter in the USA and Sweden, respectively. The findings of Schmidt & Umans' study reported that the female doctoral students of the study had difficulty creating a balance between fulfilling the

responsibilities imposed by external sources and their personal priorities and values. The results of the study carried out by Haynes et al. (2012) revealed similar outcomes to that of Schmidt & Umans' as they reported experiencing role conflict resulted by several roles female students have to manage and struggling to maintain social support. In another study conducted by Ziapour et al. (2017), the role of demographic variables in predicting the dimensions of university students' spiritual well-being was scrutinized. The results displayed that women enjoyed higher spiritual well-being than men. However, the struggle to cope with multiple roles and create balance is not unique to female students. Martinez et al. (2013) have confirmed the same issues experienced by both genders. Martinez et al. (2013) explored the experiences of PhD students in relation to school, work and life balance. They found that students who were single and had no children, confronted more challenges to obtain balance between school, work and life compared to their peers with families and children. Martinez et al. add other factors such as problems in managing time, priorities, responsibilities, and maintaining health and stress expressed by students.

A recent research carried out in Denmark by Corner et al. (2017) studied the relationship between experiences of burnout and the amount of supervision received by doctoral students. The findings emphasized the role of the main supervisor followed by other sources of supervisory support in students' satisfaction. A direct relationship was found between supervision and burnout, in that students who were satisfied with the quantity and quality of the supervision they received were at a lower risk of burnout and in turn, burnout experiences with intentions of attrition from behalf of students.

Levecque et al. (2017) investigated the mental health of PhD students in Belgium using GHQ-12 (12-item General Health Questionnaire). The results of their multivariate analyses demonstrated that the most decisive predictors of psychological distress were job demands and work-family conflict as well as inspirational leadership styles. Kinman (2001) took an inclusive approach to review the research in UK universities on the occupational stressors among academicians. The author summarized the stressors as poor faculty communication, ambiguity and heavy loads of roles, striving for publication, competing demands of family life and career, limited time and lack of technical and human support. Kinman warned that stress levels among academicians are on the rise, so is the desire to quit higher education and this would have serious implications, both for the individual and for the quality of higher education in the future.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

A total number of six PhD students consisting 3 females and 3 males, with the mean age of 33 years old participated in the current study. All the subjects were studying the first semester of their doctoral program in English Language Teaching at a state university in Turkey. All but one of the subjects worked as university lecturers in their own cities of residence and had to commute for their doctoral program courses every week. The demographic information of the subjects are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Subjects

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Married during MA studies</i>	<i>Had children during MA studies</i>
A	Female	33	Single	No	No
B	Female	22	Single	Yes	No
C	Female	30	Single	No	No
D	Male	40	Single	No	No
E	Male	33	Married	Yes	Yes
F	Male	30	Single	No	No

3.2. Data collection tools and procedures

To begin with, the aim of the study was explained to the subjects and they were given informed consent form to declare their volunteering in the study. Next, the data were collected through Goldberg's 28-item general health questionnaire (GHQ-28) to be investigated later (extracted from Stuart et al., 1993). GHQ is a globally recognized device for psychometric measurement purposes (Sterling, 2011). Consequently, a semi-structured interview with five main open-ended questions was carried out individually with each subject in a quiet classroom. The interviews were being audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. It must be noted that the interview questions were verbalized carefully after being consulted and reviewed by a panel of researchers to ensure the face validity of the questions. At the end of each interview, extra questions were asked on the basis of the questionnaire, in case additional clarifications were required. In order to increase the validity and credibility of the results, the subjects were asked to write two anecdotes from their doctoral journey so far: one anecdote on an experience that lowers their mood and one on an experience that boosts their mood in relation to their doctoral journey.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Questionnaires

Goldberg's General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) is a screening tool that has been prevalently applied in many studies regarding the mental health (Kadioglu et al., 2013). There are different versions of the questionnaire. The one I used for the current research was the 28-item version of GHQ. This version comprises four subscales, each consisting of 7 questions, which are designed to measure the following elements: somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction and severe depression (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). Review of the questionnaires yielded the number of responses to each item, the results of which are presented in four distinct tables for each subscale in tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 below.

As is evident in the table, the analysis of the somatic symptoms reveals the health impacts of the doctoral studies on the subjects. We will go through each item of the subscale in terms of its significance based on the weight given by subjects to each category. The most striking health impact is shown to be 'feelings of tightness and pressure in head' because 5 out of 6 subjects have pointed to it. The three next effects that are equally pointed to by half of the subjects are 'feeling worse than usual', 'feeling in need of a good tonic' and 'getting pain in head'. See the responses in Table 2 below. Table 2

Analysis of Somatic Symptoms (Questions 1-7)

<i>Have you</i>	<i>Number of Responses (out of 6)</i>			
<i>recently:</i>				
feeling perfectly well and in good health	Better than usual	Same as usual	Worse than usual	Much worse than usual
	0	1	3	2
feeling in need of a good tonic	Not at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	1	0	2	3
feeling run down and out of sorts	Not at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	1	1	2	2
felt that you are ill	Not at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	2	2	2	0
getting any pains in your head	Not at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	2	1	3	0
getting a feeling of tightness or pressure in your head?	Not at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	0	1	5	0
been having hot or cold spells	Not at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	2	1	2	1

The next subscale measured the anxiety and insomnia effects. Majority of the subjects (4 out of 6) expressed that they have been ‘getting edgy and bad-tempered’ and ‘feeling nervous and stung-up all the time’. The next items which are of higher significance are ‘losing sleep over worry’ and ‘finding everything getting on top on them’. See the responses in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Analysis of Anxiety/Insomnia (Questions 8-14)

<i>Have you</i>	<i>Number of Responses (out of 6)</i>			
<i>recently:</i>				
lost much sleep	Not	No more	Rather	Much
over worry	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
	0	2	3	1
had difficulty in	Not	No more	Rather	Much
staying asleep once you	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
are off	1	3	2	0
felt constantly	Not	No more	Rather	Much
under strain	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
	0	2	2	2
been getting	Not	No more	Rather	Much
edgy and bad-tempered	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
	1	0	4	1
been getting	Not	No more	Rather	Much
scared or panicky for no	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
good reason	0	3	2	1
found everything	Not	No more	Rather	Much
getting on top of you	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
	0	2	1	3
been feeling	Not	No more	Rather	Much
nervous and stung-up all	at all	than usual	more than usual	more than usual
the time	0	1	4	1

Analysis of social dysfunction subscale demonstrated that majority of subjects (4 out of 6) have been feeling ‘less satisfied than usual’ with the way they have been doing their tasks and ‘have enjoyed their day-to-day activities much less than usual’. See the responses in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Analysis of Social Dysfunction (Questions 15-21)

<i>Have you recently:</i>	<i>Number of Responses (out of 6)</i>			
been managing to keep yourself busy and occupied	More so than usual	Same as usual	Rather less than usual	Much less than usual
	3	1	1	1
been taking longer over the things you do	Quicker than usual	Same as usual	Longer than usual	Much longer than usual
	1	3	1	1
felt on the whole you were doing things well	Better than usual	About the same	Less well than usual	Much less well
	0	3	3	0
been satisfied with the way you've carried out your task?	More satisfied	About same as usual	Less satisfied than usual	Much less satisfied
	1	1	4	0

felt that you are playing a useful part in things	More so than usual	Same as usual	Less useful than usual	Much less useful
	1	4	0	1
felt capable of making decisions about things	More so than usual	Same as usual	Less so than usual	Much less capable
	0	4	2	0
been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?	More so than usual	Same as usual	Less so than usual	Much less than usual
	0	0	2	4

The last set of questions belong in severe depression subscale. A glance at the results declares no sign of severe depression among the subjects. You can see the responses below in Table 5.

Table 5
Analysis of Severe Depression (Questions 22-28)

<i>Have you recently:</i>	<i>Number of Responses (out of 6)</i>			
been thinking of yourself as a worthless person	No t at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	3	2	1	0
felt that life is entirely hopeless	No t at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	2	3	1	0
felt that life isn't worth living	No t at all	No more than usual	Rather more than usual	Much more than usual
	2	3	1	0

thought of the possibility that you might make away with yourself	1 De finitely not	4 I don't think so	0 Has crossed my mind	1 Definitely have
found at times you couldn't do anything because your nerves were too bad	1 No t at all	3 No more than usual	1 Rather more than usual	1 Much more than usual
found yourself wishing you were dead and away from it all	0 No t at all	4 No more than usual	1 Rather more than usual	1 Much more than usual
found that the idea of taking your own life kept coming into your mind	4 De finitely not	1 I don't think so	0 Has crossed my mind	1 Definitely has
	2	3	1	0

4.2. Interviews

The interviews began with factual questions about the demographic information of the subjects, followed by five questions about their expectations, experiences and feelings regarding their doctoral studies. The interview wrapped up by complementary questions drawn from the questionnaires. The complementary questions were customized for each subject based on parts of their questionnaire which required further elaboration. The demographic information was summarized and presented in Table 1. The results of the next questions will be cited here.

I start by presenting the results of the main interview questions. To analyze the responses to the questions, all interviews were transcribed and read through completely. Later, a preliminary

exploratory analysis was done to achieve a general sense of the data (Creswell, 2005). The subjects' responses to the first five questions will be presented below.

Q1. Why did you decide to do a PhD?

Three of the subjects asserted that their main purpose for doing a PhD was to improve their knowledge in ELT field and specialize in it. Two of the subjects maintained that they intend to be an academician in the future and/or land a more prosperous career. One subject replied that "I am doing PhD because that is what my father has always wanted me to do".

Q 2&3. What were your expectations of PhD journey? How do you compare your expectations to what you have experienced so far?

Two of the subjects expressed that they expected it to be a lot less difficult than it actually is. Contrary to these students, two subjects maintained that they knew it would be difficult, even one of them added that it is easier than what they had expected. Some of the subjects declared that their courses are not in line with the title of the program they have applied for. Despite the title of the program (English Language Teaching), the content and emphasis of the courses are on Linguistics and this has been the source of disappointment for the students. One subject mentioned that they expected to study in a more research-oriented environment and this university does not meet their expectation in that regard. Overall, the subjects evaluate the program as an overly demanding one in terms of the assignments so that they find it almost impossible to handle at times.

Q4. Can you describe your experiences in the last 2 or 3 months regarding the PhD program as a whole?

The overall experience of all the subjects was reportedly a stressful one. They expressed that they have spent an extremely tough semester due to the heavy assignments and the pressure of the deadlines. Here are some excerpts from the interviews: "not knowing what to do is so bothering", "it took me a long time to figure out what I'm supposed to do" which show that students felt confused over the objectives of the courses and assignments. It was also mentioned that, in addition to the heavy loads of assignments and their difficulty, students do not find them very productive and realistic- as one of the subjects put it: "my first experience is that I haven't learned anything".

Q5. How do you feel about doing phd now?

The interviews were conducted towards the end of the semester so you can see its reflections in the responses. Majority of the subjects expressed feeling happy and relieved because the semester is going to end soon and the pressure of the deadlines is decreasing since they are submitting the research papers. However, they added that they feel worried because they know there will be two or three more semesters to cope with. One subject worded their feeling this way: “I am worried about future of my PhD as I’m not sure I can put up with the difficulties of the PhD in the following terms”.

Complementary Questions

Following the main questions of the interview, subjects were asked to elaborate on some of their responses to the questionnaire. The aim of this part of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the subjects and explore the underlying reasons for their experiences. The elaborations on the responses provide a genuine insight into the actual experiences of the subjects.

Regarding the somatic symptoms, all the subjects acknowledged that their health has been affected negatively by stress of the doctoral studies. Feelings of tightness and pressure in head and other health issues were attributed to worrying about not being able to meet the deadlines. Similar reasons were reiterated for insomnia and anxiety symptoms; having to spend lots of time to complete the course requirements leaves no time to rest. Four subjects also complained about the fact that they have to commute every week from far cities to university and this is a major problem for them since it wastes much of their time and also makes them too exhausted to focus on their studies. All the subjects blamed the limited time on unrealistic expectations of the course instructors. These are some excerpts from their interviews: “...when I think about the things I have to do and I feel I won’t be able to complete all of them perfectly, it makes me feel uncomfortable and causes sleep problems...”, “...I am nervous because I don’t have time and I am supposed to present the papers in a few weeks and I have no time because I work...”, “...each professor thinks that we only take their course . In the end, we have to finish lots of research and papers...”. However, only one student assumed responsibility for their negative feelings. The subject declared that “... I

overthink a lot and only thinking about not being able to meet deadlines is enough for me to lose sleep... so my bad feelings are the result of my personal characteristics and not PhD studies...”.

The third subscale assessed the social dysfunction symptoms. Expectedly, the ramifications of the issues we observed so far revealed themselves in social aspects of life, as well. All the subjects indicated that their whole life was influenced by their doctoral studies. They have little time to spend with family, friends and to socialize. Here are some excerpts from their comments: “...There are certain things that I need to sacrifice due to PhD. For example, I don’t have enough time to spend with my nephews, my family members...”, “...When I cannot take care of my son, spare time with my family, and my work due to phd, I get exhausted and sad so it makes me feel run down...”, “...I sometimes didn’t enjoy my daily activities because I felt guilty when I wanted to go out...”, “...If I spend time with my friends and don’t study, I feel guilty for not studying and I feel less satisfied with the results of my studies...”.

4.3. Anecdotal Evidence

The word *anecdote* is originally derived from the Greek word *anekdota* which means “things unpublished” or “not given out”. Patton (2014) maintains that a systematic, deliberate and meticulous reporting of anecdotes which are purposefully sampled and carefully analyzed has the potential to act as evidence. For the purpose of this study, the subjects were asked to write two anecdotes: one describing an experience during the doctoral program that boosts their spirits and one experience that lowers their moods. Their written accounts will be presented below in two parts highlighting the recurring themes.

Positive anecdotes

Reviewing the anecdotes revealed one major theme that was common among almost all the writings: peer motivation. Cooperative atmosphere and joyful moments with classmates were recurring descriptions by most subjects. Here are some excerpts from their accounts: “... I’m glad that I met really enthusiastic and friendly people thanks to PhD program...”, “... I have a classmate and a dear friend with whom we laugh at silly things. She is really fun and assisting...”, “... having wonderful classmates, a cooperative classroom environment and amusing moments with my friends are among reasons that make me feel better in this journey...”. Additionally, one subject stated that being given the freedom to write my research paper on my own topic by one of the

professors make them feel good. Another subject added that they feel elated after achieving a task despite seeming impossible at the beginning.

Negative anecdotes

Investigating the anecdotes revealed some common points: lack of understanding from some professors and poor manners towards the students, unmanageable assignments, long and tiring journey to and from university. Here are some excerpts that exemplifies each theme: "... sometimes they (professors) complain about our inadequacy... that we are indifferent... but we are only exhausted...", "... their (professors') manners towards us and the density of assignments lowers my mood...", "... one day, a classmate made a simple suggestion about the use of language... the professor got angry and said that you won't graduate if you say things like that... I was surprised... now I'm worried about my new academic environment...". Some of the subjects also complained about the long trip that they have to take every week in order to take part in the courses, they described it as time-consuming and tiring. Concerning the heavy assignments, some of the subjects expressed worry about the low quality of the produced work and low learning outcomes of the courses.

5. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the experiences of PhD students at a state university. The findings indicate the diversity of experiences, notwithstanding many commonalities shared by subjects. To mention the major common features of the experiences, I can point to 'highly demanding professors', 'lack of understanding expected of professors', 'pressure of deadlines', 'weekly long and tiring journey to university', 'dissatisfaction from the quality of studies and research papers due to limited time', 'conflict of responsibilities', along with some positive experiences, such as 'peer motivation'.

The results of the study regarding the role conflict and difficulty of doctoral students to create balance between various responsibilities they have, are mainly in line with the findings of Schmidt & Umans (2014), Haynes et al. (2012), Ziapour et al. (2017) and Martinez (et al. (2013). Although the first two studies confirmed the issue among female students, the last two studies

maintained that these issues are not unique to female students and both genders are equally involved, as found in the current study. In terms of the impacts of supervisors in students' satisfaction, it was found that unfavorable attitudes of some professors towards the students and their poor manners with them was an essential determinant of disappointment for the subject. It must be noted that course supervisor is meant here. This finding is in accordance with the results reported by Corner et al. (2017) discussed in the literature review. Similar to the present study, Levecque et al. (2017) had applied GHQ questionnaire to investigate the mental health of doctoral students in Belgium. Their findings ties well with the findings of the current study, in that professional demands and conflict between fulfilling family and work responsibilities were found to be the main predictors of psychological distress. One of the most comprehensive studies on occupational stressors at universities that was discussed in the literature review was Kinman's research, which identified several stress factors in higher education environments. The findings of this study are partially consistent with the results of Kinman (2001), in that poor faculty communication, ambiguity and heavy loads of roles, competing demand of work and family and limited time were also confirmed by the findings of this study.

The findings of this study were intended to be of special interest to academic authorities and educational policy makers. Although the current study investigated the experiences of new entrants in a doctoral program, its findings can be alarming. As shown earlier in this report, several studies have warned about the adverse consequences of dissatisfaction and psychological distress in students at higher education levels. According to Evans et al. (2018), graduate students are prone to depression six times more than other people. Bourke et al. (2004) suggested that negative psychological experiences can lead to attrition. Attrition is an immense financial concern for universities and for students, it is the source of serious emotional, personal and financial sufferings. Kinman (2001) also warned about the detrimental effects of stressed academicians on the quality of higher education in the future.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The findings of the present study displayed how doctoral students' experiences are diverse and inter-related. In other words, one experience leads to another; for example, demanding professors assign heavy coursework, heavy coursework leads to limited time and limited time, in turn, makes it difficult to create balance between school, work and family responsibilities. Although this research studied a small population of doctoral students, its findings provide a base

for future studies. Longitudinal studies can be implemented in order to monitor how quality and nature of experiences of doctoral students change over time. Comparative studies can be executed between experiences of doctoral students at state and public universities or between different fields of studies.

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