

KATIE GAEBEL

AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF RESISTANCE: TURKISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN GERMAN SCHOOLS

Abstract

This paper focuses on two main guiding questions: first, what are the experiences of Turkish women in the German educational system; second, to what extent do state policies, cultural pressure, and personal choice influence the decision to pursue higher education? Using intersectionality as a methodology, this paper elucidates how women navigate the educational system to reduce educational and social marginalization. These main topics are explored through document and cultural artifact analysis and semi-structured interviews with women of Turkish descent in Berlin. Results of this study reveal that, far from the reductionist view often held of the Turkish female population in Germany, which places them as victims of an oppressive and traditionally patriarchal culture, each woman provided unique perspectives on educational achievement, gendered family dynamics, and their self-identification.

Introduction

In the early 1960s we brought the guest workers to Germany. Now they're living with us. ... Of course the multicultural approach -- living side by side, being happy with each other -- this approach has failed, utterly. (Merkel, in Helmy, 2010, para. 2)

Angela Merkel's 2010 speech to members of her conservative Christian Democrat party (CDU) highlights the tenuous relationship with cultural differences in Germany society which the government continues to have, despite the Turkish population having been in Germany for more than 50 years. In 1998, over ten years before Merkel's speech, when the country was precariously perched on the threshold of new citizenship laws, Zafer Şenocak, a popular writer of Turkish descent, offered reflections on the state of Turkish-German relations in an article entitled "Aber das Herz schlägt noch türkisch" ("But the heart still beats Turkish"):

Even after forty years of continuous immigration, Germany still clings to the illusion that it's not an immigration country, that the multicultural society is a condition that one can magically vanish with a few pithy slogans... Germans and Turks in Germany have come closer to each other than people think. All the problems that are currently associated with the failure of multicultural society have to do with this closeness and with the realization that this closeness is not necessarily accompanied by the disappearance and assimilation of all that is foreign. (Şenocak, 1998, p. 1)

While Merkel asserts integration attempts under an agenda of multiculturalism have failed in large part because of immigrants' reluctance to adapt to and adopt German culture and values, Şenocak states that the nation cannot both maintain its stance of being a non-immigration country and attempt to adopt the philosophy of

multiculturalism. The tension between these perspectives underscores the ambivalence of the nation-state towards their minority populations and illuminates the marked silence of the Turkish women's voices that are excluded from these conversations.

The absence of women of Turkish descent within the German context is apparent not just in the academic literature but also the highly-regimented and tracked German educational system. Although more than 50 years after the arrival of the first Turkish guest worker, educational inequality continues to be rampant, with rates of second-generation immigrants as low as 3.3% in German universities (Schittenhelm, 2009). Often the higher education training females of Turkish descent receive is through vocational training, which itself is highly-gendered and tracks women into jobs that have a high risk of unemployment and are vulnerable to market trends. While the government, through its 2005 Immigration and Integration Law, has officially taken the stance that it is the onus of the immigrant to integrate by learning German and by parents enforcing the importance of education for their children, others maintain that Germany's program is one of assimilation rather than integration and that the educational underachievement is due to structural deficiencies, not the deficiencies of the immigrant population.

Method and Methodology

Guided by these tensions, this research has two main foci: first, the ways in which Turkish women's educational experiences were guided by (positively or negatively) personal choice, cultural pressures, and educational policies and immigration laws that were passed at the state and national level, and second, if an analysis of documents and cultural artifacts parallel or diverge from the individual narratives. Framed by intersectionality as the methodology, this paper explores overlapping categories of identity to examine the ways in which gender, ethnicity, culture, immigrant status, and religion converge in particular ways to influence women's educational attainment. Intersectionality as methodology enables an examination of the interplay between multiple categories of identity which work to construct particular experiences. Here, the use of intersectionality also takes social, historical, and political contexts into account, offering a more textured analysis of the lived experiences of Turkish women in the German educational system.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with five women who were connected to two different women's organizations in Berlin. Four of the women were of Turkish descent and had at least one parent who identified as a guest worker. I identified Fatma, a social worker and the first woman I interviewed, as an informal gatekeeper; once I conducted my initial interview with her, she contacted a number of other women within her association and at other organizations in Berlin to invite them to participate in the study. The interviews illuminate how macro structures and policies have affected educational achievement and analyses of educational policies, newspaper articles, election campaign platforms, and Turkish hip-hop and poetry provide a triangulation and a contextualization of women's individual accounts.

Discussion of Findings

While research on the educational inequalities within the German educational system is extensive, little data and academic research exists on the ways in which this affects women of Turkish descent or their navigation of the educational system (Alba et al., 1998; Auernheimer, 2006; Crul & Schneider, 2009; von Below, 1997). Four emerging themes were identified from the women's interview data: laying claims to belonging; the use and significance of language; retrospective attitudes toward educational experiences; and gendered cultural identity. Each woman spoke to these themes in unique ways, revealing their educational experiences counter the dominant narrative of Turkish immigrant women as 'reluctant immigrants'. Through their emphasis on the importance of education and language acquisition, their self-identification which pushes the boundaries of citizenship and the nation-state, and the how they make sense of their own educational attainment, these women present direct contradictions to the discourse that faults immigrant for the failure of the multicultural project in Germany.

The Turkish immigrant women interviewed regarded education and German language acquisition as an integral and vital part of their and their children's economic and social advancement in Germany. This extends previous qualitative studies conducted with immigrant women in Germany which found that education was viewed as central to their success; however, the women also confronted extremely difficult roadblocks to attaining the education they wanted (Erel, 2003; Mandel, 2008; Schittenhelm, 2009). Although Fatma, who came to Berlin to attend college and become a social worker, indicated she and her father had constant struggles due to her insistence on pursuing and completing her university education rather than joining him in Germany with the goal of finding immediate work, she and the other women indicated financial, emotional, and practical support from their parents and siblings.

The critiques of educational achievement fell largely on the German educational system which, because of the women's immigrant status or language capabilities, tracked them into lower educational tracks with little opportunity for advancement or placed them in Turkish-German schools where the teachers were from Turkey and the entire school population consisted of the children of Turkish guest workers, paralleling existing literature regarding the German educational system's function as a sorting mechanism to maintain the educational status quo (Auernheimer, 2006; Duru-Bellat et al., 2008; Faas, 2008). Lale's, the child of two guest workers, educational narrative speaks to discrepancies between official discourse which places the onus on the individual immigrant and what is occurring at the individual level:

They always say, both in school and in politics, regardless of whatever topic they're discussing, 'the parents, the parents, the parents' are bad or they're migrant children and that's why, but [my experiences] can't confirm that! I was here, and my parents could read, write, etc, but I was in Turkey with my grandparents and they couldn't read, write, or speak [Turkish]. Despite this, I always received very good grades. I believe that school is more important than where one's family comes from. And that [what is said in schools and politics] is false and it stinks a little of racism.

This quote exemplifies the complexities of the relationship between educational policies which target immigrant children, official discourse about the state of immigrant children in German schools, and the individual experience of the daughter of a Turkish guest worker who, despite being a non-native speaker and being placed on a non-university track, still achieves a university education. Lale's experiences parallel other accounts from Turkish women in the German educational system and exemplify the need for an intersectionality approach to adequately identify and describe the ways in which state structures both maintain and construct power relations even at the level of the individual student (Mandel, 2008; Schittenhelm, 2008).

Limitations and Trends for Future Research

This research provides preliminary evidence that Turkish women's individual educational experiences counter the commonly-held conception of the Turkish woman as the 'reluctant immigrant' who refuses to learn German or further her educational attainment. These women's narratives reveal active participation within the educational system and an emphasis on educational attainment and language acquisition which spans at multiple generations. Limitations include a small number of participants and the short time in the field. These aspects have limited the research, but should be seen as opportunities for future lines of inquiry, particularly how this approach can be used with immigrant populations in other contexts; additionally, because this is the first time this line of inquiry has been taken up specifically through an intersectionality approach, the direction of this research can be used as a guide for future projects.

While I chose to employ in-depth interviews with a small group of women to adequately capture the individual effects of educational policies, the women I interviewed were connected to organizations which worked to empower immigrant female populations in Berlin; this connection to organizations which celebrate women's heritage and work to increase self-esteem played a role in the kinds of experiences these women had. Children of guest workers born in and educated in Turkey, the Turkish women (excluding Yeşim) occupied a unique status as the 1 ½ immigrant generation. Having received education in both Turkey and Germany, this 'in-between' generation can offer a comparative educational reflection in ways which guest workers and children born in Germany cannot. Including participants with these traits will enable the researcher to more fully examine the intersections of ethnicity, social class, gender, and immigrant status (Mahalingam et al., 2008).

Three significant trends emerged from the interview data which also point to future paths for continuing research with the Turkish women's population in Germany. First, there was a positive correlation between women's educational attainment and their level of dissatisfaction with the educational system, such that the higher the level of education completed by the women, the more likely they were to critique both their own experiences and the current state of the educational system in regards to students of migrant background. Contrary to my expectation that women who had achieved higher educational attainment would be more invested in the system and thus have a more positive outlook towards Germany's education, I found the opposite to be true. Future research should consider whether longer exposure to the inequalities in the German educational system is correlated to the

women's dissatisfaction and resistance. Institutes of higher education, including resources offered to Turkish and other minority students, should be examined to trace possible links between the women's dissatisfaction and the ways in which the universities constructed their educational experiences.

Second, each woman made explicit the ways in which educational attainment and language acquisition were linked cross-generationally, not just between themselves and their children but also between their own parents and siblings. This cross-generational linkage is worthy of note for two reasons: first, the women I interviewed indicated their parents were largely uneducated, with many of them completing their formal schooling in Turkey before the sixth grade; and second, the women indicated that the motivation to pursue German language acquisition and higher education did not stem from their experiences in Germany but rather from Turkey. Future research should include in-depth interviews with different generations of women within families to trace this trend and more fully describe the ways in which it plays a role in the educational attainment of Turkish women in German schools.

The third unexplored trend to emerge from this dissertation involves the central role of the organizations in the lives of the women I interviewed. While most of the women I spoke with worked within the respective organizations in some capacity (providing social services, tutoring assistance, and general administrative services), some had been connected to similar organizations while they were still in school. According to Erel (2003), women's roles within their communities are often constructed around their identities as mothers and wives, thus only "in relation to and depending on men" (p. 160). Organizations which cater exclusively to the female population, such as the two I worked with in Berlin, force a reimagining of the gendered constructions of identity and stretch the common conception of an ethnicized female immigrant. Educated female role models of similar cultural backgrounds could provide young students with motivation to pursue higher education; further research could support this hypothesis.

Conclusion

What factors have led to the educational attainment of Turkish immigrant women in the German educational system and how have they navigated the socially-constructed categories of Turkishness and Germanness? These women's individual definitions of belonging, significance they place on language acquisition and education, and their gendered cultural identity dispel the dominant classification of Turkish women as reluctant immigrants who maintain social, cultural, and educational distance from German society. Far from the reductionist view often held of the Turkish female population in Germany, which places them as victims of an oppressive and traditionally patriarchal culture, each woman provided unique perspectives on educational achievement, gendered family dynamics, and their self-identification (Erel, 2003). Taken holistically, the findings in this research provide a critical lens into the complex and often misunderstood educational experiences of Turkish immigrant women in Germany.

The results are not simply about affirming Turkish women's continued underrepresentation in the German educational system; rather, they engage women's voices to reveal the outcomes of their educational situations and foster of an

understanding of their particular ways each woman constructed a unique agency to combat the imposition of identity. The most important result to emerge from the data is that the women themselves never identifies as oppressed or victimized; surprisingly, those who expressed frustration with the system and who offered the most critique were the women who had completed a university education. Although the women who had finished formal schooling in 10th grade were less critical of the educational system, they surprised me with the amount of agency they held. Yeşim felt empowered by her assertion that she and her family were successfully socially integrated into German society, while Ayşe's sense of agency within her Turkish community was directly connected to the work she did with the Turkish women's organization. While I expected the women with whom I spoke to feel largely isolated, marginalized, and hesitant to identify in any way with the Berliner society, each woman expressed her sense of belonging as being explicitly tied to being a particular type of Berliner, a kind of hybrid self-reclamation of identity far from the idea of the Turkish woman as a reluctant immigrant.

In the end, this dissertation issues a challenge to those who pursue research with populations who have been traditionally underrepresented (and misrepresented) by the dominant discourse in their society and by academic discussions which render such populations one-dimensional and static. An approach which includes voices that have been silenced is critical to both understanding the complexities of the issues and seeking to change them. This challenge can be felt in the women's words below:

With our work we are building bridges between the female migrants and German society. We overcome barriers that impede our access to our rights and to regular services... and they make it clear that here in Berlin there are too few migrant- and women-specific facilities and services! (Forum Berliner Migrantinnen Projekte, 2009, p. 31)

References

- Alba, R. E., Handl, J. & Müller, W. (1998): Ethnic inequalities in the German school system. In P. Schuck & R. Münz (Eds.) *Paths to inclusion: The integration of migrants in the United States and Germany* (pp. 115-154). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Auernheimer, G. (2006): The German education system: dysfunctional for an immigration society. *European Education*, 37(4), 75-89.
- Crul, M. & Schneider, J. (2009): Children of Turkish immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands: The impact of differences in vocational and academic tracking systems. *Teachers College Record*, 111(6), 1508-1527.
- Duru-Bellat, M. D., Kieffer, A. & Reimer, D. (2008): Patterns of social inequalities in access to higher education in France and Germany. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 49(4-5): 347-368.
- Erel, U. (2003): Gendered and racialized experiences of citizenship in the life stories of women of Turkish background in Germany. In J. Andall (Ed.) *Gender and ethnicity in contemporary Europe* (pp. 155-176). Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Faas, D. (2008): From foreigner pedagogy to intercultural education: an analysis of the German responses to diversity and its impact on schools and students. *European Educational Research Journal*, 7(1): 108-123.

- Forum Berliner Migrantinnen Projekte (2009): *Migrantinnenprojekte – Luxus Projekte?* Berlin, Germany.
- Helmy, H. (2010, October 19): Merkel: Multiculturalism in Germany a failure. *Newsy: Multisource video news*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsy.com/videos/merkel-multiculturalism-in-germany-a-failure/>
- Mahalingam, R., Balan, S. & Haritatos, J. (2008): Engendering immigrant psychology: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex Roles*, 59(5-6), 326-336.
- Mandel, R. (2008): *Cosmopolitan Anxieties: Turkish Challenges to Citizenship and Belonging in Germany*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Schittenhelm, K. (2009): Social risks in successful educational careers of young female immigrants in the German education system: Coping strategies, self-help and support services. *International Journal of Migration, Health & Social Care*, 5(3), 3-16. doi:10.5042/ijmhsc.2010.0048.
- Senocak, Z. (1998): But the heart still beats Turkish. In K. H. Jarausch & H. A. Welsh (Eds.) *One Germany in Europe, 1989-2009*. (pp. 1-4). From German History in Documents and Images, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC (www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org).
- von Below, S. (2007): What are the chances of young Turks and Italians for equal education and employment in Germany? The role of objective and subjective indicators. *Social Indicators Research*, 82, 209-231.

Dr. Katie Gaebel
Assistant Professor of Education
Central College, Iowa
USA
gaebelk@central.edu