

Received: 13 April 2021 Accepted: 24 June 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v19i2.1483>

Analysing the Psychological Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic among Turkish Immigrants

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Abstract

COVID-19 Pandemic has already triggered a variety of psychological problems including fear, depression, anxiety, and suicidal attempts. This study aimed to investigate Turkish immigrants' psychological conditions and top concerns in Germany during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Demographics and current psychological conditions of participants were collected and analysed by means of a structured survey. A questionnaire was completed by 170 Turkish immigrants in Munich, Germany. The results demonstrated that Turkish immigrants with low income and education level as well as an unemployment status were worried more during the Pandemic. Moreover, the risk of elderly people getting infected by COVID-19 was one of the top concerns of participants. Therefore, main concerns of participants in our study were the deterioration of their economic situation and the possibility of older adults getting infected by COVID-19.

Keywords: Germany; Turkish immigrants; mental health; psychological concerns; COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Infectious diseases are considered as one of the most challenging health problems and they have shown how vulnerable we remain. The COVID-19 plague, commonly known as coronavirus pandemic, is the latest outbreak that causes unprecedented health crises and threatens global security and triggers a variety of psychological problems including depression, and anxiety. Not only in Germany but across the world, all countries implemented several preventative measures including lockdowns, social distancing, wearing face masks, disinfecting the hands and isolation in tackling the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and to reduce the number of infections and mortalities. The first detected and confirmed case of COVID-19 in Germany by the Federal Ministry of Health (German: Bundesministerium für Gesundheit) was on the 27th of January in 2020 near Munich (Robert Koch Institute, 2020). Since the early stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic Bavaria has been among the highest affected states in Germany. As a result of strict measures such as lockdowns, travel bans or social distancing, immigrants, and socio-economically disadvantaged people suffered more from mental disorders during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Acharya et al., 2021; Singh, G. P., 2021). The current outbreak from immigrants' perspective was not much assessed yet and illustrates a variety of difficulties such as special needs, fears, and a lot of financial and mental problems. Several immigrant workers have currently found themselves in severe conditions due to the Pandemic. Unemployment rates in the United States of America almost reached 15 per cent in April 2020 and especially immigrant workers were left without a proper job (Capps, Batalova, & Gelatt, 2020). Additionally, unemployment rates in Germany also increased

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(5.9%) as the restrictions also affected the German economy. Therefore, some people either lost their current jobs or started reduced working hours. Due to travel bans, especially immigrants were affected as they could not visit their families and relatives in their home countries. Thus, immigrants are economically affected by the Pandemic and have several additional concerns.

Data and Methods

This descriptive study investigates the psychological impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Turkish immigrants living in Germany.

The participants of the study were Turkish origin psychotherapy patients from the Neuro-Psychiatric Centre Riem (NPZR) and Turkish immigrants who study or work in Germany. The participants were mainly first and second-generation Turkish immigrants. The respondents were randomly sampled, and they were assured that their personal data collected during the study would be handled anonymously. A questionnaire was completed by 170 participants.

The researchers of the NPZR developed the Personal Information Form to obtain information about the participants such as age, gender, education level, marital and employment status, as well as the fears they experienced, their satisfaction with government measurements, and use of health services. COVID-19 Phobia Survey developed by (Dilbaz, Noyan, Alpar, & Kazan, 2020) were used in data collection. The participants were asked about their current mental conditions and top concerns during the Pandemic. To understand the severity of the psychological conditions of the participants, they were asked to answer following question 'How do you feel about the latest situation regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic?' To answer, please choose appropriate options: '*worried, fearful, panicking, curious, confused, optimistic*'. To investigate main concerns of Turkish immigrants during the Pandemic, they were also asked 'What are the top concerns affecting you during the COVID-19 pandemic?' Possible answers to choose from where: '*economic situation, risk of my child/children getting infected, risk of the elderly getting infected or people in risk groups getting infected, being in quarantine, having severe disease symptoms or the fear of dying from the virus infection*'.

The questionnaires were self-administered by participants aged 18 and over in Munich, Germany. We have also conducted a questionnaire survey via Google Forms. Data collection was completed between July and December 2020. der Ethik-Kommission der Bayerischen Landesärztekammer (the Ethics Committee of the Bavarian State Medical Association) has confirmed that no ethical approval is required. The data was analysed with the SPSS 21.0

Results

Within the sample of 170 participants, 51.8% were male (n=88) and 48.2% were female (n=82). Of the participants, 60,6% (n=103) were married, 10% (n=17) were living with a partner, 29,4% (n=50) were single. As seen in Table 1, most respondents had an average income level (n=93; 54,7%), followed by participants with low income (n=59; 34,7%) and high income (n=18; 10,6%). Most participants (n=58; 34,1%) were primary school graduates, followed by high school graduates (n=51; 30%), university graduates (n=32; 18,8%), master's degree level (n=21; 12,4%) and Doctorate/PhD degree level (n=8; 4,7%). Only 49.4% had an employment status reported as full time (n=84), 10% as part time (n=17), or self-employed



(n=6; 3,6%). 29,4% were unemployed (n=50), and 5,3% were students (n=9). The distribution of the demographics of the participants is demonstrated in detail in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	n	%	
Gender	Female	82	48.2
	Male	88	51.8
Marital Status	Married	103	60.6
	Living with a partner	17	10.0
	Single	50	29.4
Age	Below 20 years old	1	0.6
	21-30 years old	21	12.4
	31-40 years old	34	20.0
	41-50 years old	31	18.2
	51-60 years old	71	41.8
	Over 60 years old	12	7.1
Employment Status	Full Time	84	49.4
	Part Time	17	10.0
	Self-employment	6	3.6
	Unemployed	50	29.4
	Student	9	5.3
Education Level	Primary School	58	34.1
	High School	51	30.0
	University	32	18.8
	Master's Degree	21	21.4
	Doctorate /PhD	8	4.7
Income	High	18	10.6
	Average	93	54.7
	Low	59	34.7
Living Status	I live with my family	110	66.3
	I live with my parents	8	4.8
	I live with my friends	10	6.0
	I live alone	37	22.3

Table 2 demonstrates how the mental state of the participants was affected during the outbreak. More than half of the participants (n=112; 65.9%) responded to worried about the coronavirus pandemic. About one-third of all participants (n=59; 34.7%) stated to feel in panic and almost half of the respondents (n=81; 47.6%) stated to feel fearful. Interesting that 13,5% of participants found the current circumstances optimistic (n=23), 34,7% even felt curious (n=59). Only 10% described their state of mind as being confused (n=17) concerning the whole situation around the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Table 2. Participants who Responded 'Yes' to Multiple Choice Questions Regarding their Attitudes towards COVID-19

Emotions	Yes (N)	Ratio
Worried	112	65.9 %
Fearful	81	47.6%
Panicking	59	34.7%
Optimistic	23	13,5%
Confused	17	10,0%
Curious	59	34,7%

Participants were asked which top concerns they had during the COVID-Pandemic. Major concerns participants reported were the possibility of elderly people getting infected (n=105; 61,8%), problems with their economic situation (n=99; 58,2%), the possibility of dying from the pandemic (n=82; 48,2%), the risk of their children getting infected (n=81; 47,6%), being in quarantine (n=45; 26,5%), severity of symptoms (n=41; 24,1%). Most of the responders (n=110; 64.7%) were living with their family and 21,8% (n=37) of participants reported living alone during the COVID-19 crisis. 7.6% of the participants had more than one relative or friend who got infected. A critically low amount of 40% the participants (n=68) were satisfied with governmental regulations and restrictions against the current Pandemic. Only about 50% of the respondents stated that the closing of shopping opportunities and travel restrictions did not affect their mental health.

Table 3. Top concerns of Turkish Immigrants during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Concerns during the Pandemic	Number	Ratio
Risk of elderly people getting infected	105	61,8%
Economic situation	99	58,2%
Dying of Pandemic	82	48,2%
Risk of children getting infected	81	47,6%
Being in quarantine	45	26,5%
Severity of symptoms	41	24,1%

Table 4. Demographic Variables influencing psychological conditions of participants

Emotions	Unemployment	Low Income	Low education	p
Worried	.003	.001	.001	< 0.05

The results showed that there is a significant relationship between those who stated that they were worried during the Pandemic and participants with a low income ($p=.001$), low education level ($p=.001$), as well as unemployment status ($p=.003$). Participants with the stated characteristics did worry significantly more during the Pandemic.

Table 5. Analysis between the pandemic-related stress factors and negative emotions

Demographics	Economic Situation	p
Gender	0.001	< 0.05

The results of the analysis are demonstrated in *Table 5*. There is a significant relationship between gender of the participants and those who stated to worry about the latest economic situation due to the Pandemic ($p=.001$). Male participants reported that the economic situation was their top concern during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to observe Turkish immigrants' mental state and investigate their main concerns and possible socio-demographic factors influencing their mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak. Previous research, dating back as early as 2004, illustrated a significant association between employment status, lifestyle of people, and the psychological impact of SARS (Nickell et al., 2004). However, there have been recently only a few studies about the current COVID-19 pandemic effects on immigrants' psychological well-being in our society. Another research stated that changing people's daily habits, their isolation from social networks due to the ongoing Pandemic, are factors causing mental problems such as fear and stress (Huang, Han, Luo, Ren, & Zhou, 2020). In line with previous studies, our findings in



our study demonstrated that about half of the participants felt worried (depressed) and fearful, negative emotions such as fear and anxiety increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Loneliness and social isolation increase the level of stress and have harmful effects on people's mental health. Previous research stated that loneliness and feeling more stressful are main negative mental impacts of the COVID-19 crisis (Rajkumar, 2020). However, we did not observe any significant relationship between living alone and feeling worried among Turkish participants in our study group. But only 29,4% of the study participants are actually living alone; they were mostly living with their parents or family, which seems to be a protective factor during the Pandemic.

The findings of our research showed that participants with low income and education level as well as unemployment status expressed worries about COVID-19 Pandemic, which could be explained by increased economic pressure. Some study participants stated the fear of losing their living and working permit in Germany. Participants with higher education degrees had less worries. As it is reported in literature, education helps people to increase their consciousness and awareness, it supports individuals to cope with stress and trauma and increases their level of psychological resilience (Dalgard *et al.* 2007).

Moreover, low-income earners such as cleaning, catering, or transportation workers are mostly in occupations where online work e.g., from a home office is not possible. Reduction of working hours or even job losses are more common among people with low-income jobs which consequently causes more mental health problems. Many employers cut their working hours as a response to the current pandemic crisis. 17% of the population in Germany had reduced working hours as of April 2020 and people with low education level had a higher percentage of “short-time work” (Grunau, Steffes, & Wolter, 2020). Additionally, similar findings were reported in a research based on mostly German and Dutch populations, which illustrated that low-income earners and individuals with low education level suffer more from the COVID-19 Pandemic (Tholen & Gaudecker, 2020).

In line with our hypothesis, the current economic situation during the Pandemic was one of the most important concerns of the participants. Similar studies (Ozil & Arun, 2020) reported that the current Pandemic might have a devastating impact on the economic situation of countries besides its negative impact on the health sector. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, people were concerned about securing their incomes and consequently their living conditions. Analysis of our data showed that male and unemployed participants' significant main concerns were the economic situation during the Pandemic. This is most possibly explained by the increased job losses and the decrease in income among male Turkish immigrants.

According to current statistics average life expectancy in Germany for men is 78.2 years and for women is 83.1 years (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021). Because Germany's middle-aged and elderly population is higher than the total population, the risk of elderly getting infected by the COVID-19 is seen as one of the topmost concerns of people. And as expected, according to statistics published by the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) from May 2020, the average age of those who died due to the Pandemic in Germany is 82 years old and 87% of COVID-19 related deaths were among the age group of 70 years and older (Robert Koch Institute, 2021). Since many Turkish immigrants in Germany prefer to live with their elder relatives or are in very close contact to them, our findings contribute to the literature that the risk of elderly

getting infected by the coronavirus was a main concern of Turkish immigrants during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

In Germany, the government implemented some preventative measures such as isolation, travel bans, and the closure of shopping centres, which was expected to cause stress and anxiety among the people. The preliminary results of our study indicated that travel bans did affect the lives of the immigrants and did have a negative impact on their mental health. Further investigation into these important topics is needed. Furthermore, Germany as a social state provides the opportunity for everyone to access health services easily and her citizens have equal rights to benefit from the health system. Since March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Bavaria, the country was able to offer the necessary treatment and care for all patients infected by the COVID-19. One of the most important strategic management goals during the pandemic process was to increase the number of intensive care beds and ventilators in hospitals and the overall test capacity to detect infected patients and break infection chains early. Therefore, the German health system has never exceeded its capacity during the pandemic outbreak (Böcken&Preusker, 2021).

Germany performed well in the international arena in terms of access to health care during the outbreak. Our findings showed that a critical number of Turkish immigrants did not feel disadvantaged or had any difficulty accessing health services or getting personal protection materials. But their major complaints are that there is not enough Turkish speaking professional staff such as doctors and nurses to help them understand the measures taken by the government and during the medical treatments. The immigrants were satisfied with the opportunity to be treated in a centre with professional staff speaking Turkish and translating all important steps and measurements taken by the government.

Overall, the psychology and mood of our study participants were altered during the current COVID-19 Pandemic. More than half of respondents expressed worries about the outbreak. Turkish immigrants with low income and education levels as well as unemployment status were those mostly affected during the COVID-19. The top concerns of participants in our study were the deterioration of their economic situation and the possibility of elderly people getting infected by COVID-19. In addition, certain social groups, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged populations, require intensive psychological support and health care. Hence, further investigation and observation of the psychological health parameters of all patients and especially immigrants throughout the Pandemic and post-pandemic are essential to comprehend the long-term impacts of the Pandemic.

Clearly, though, this research has some limitations, which need to be addressed here. First, there were only 170 participants from different layers of the Turkish population who took part in our study. Therefore, the findings of this paper might not be generalised into the larger Turkish immigrant community in Germany. Hence, limitations of this paper should be taken into consideration.

Other relevant aspects that may be associated with the study participants' psychological conditions were not considered during the COVID-19 crisis - for instance, previous physical and mental conditions of the Turkish immigrants. On the other hand, the strength of this paper is the timely data collection period during the COVID-19 Pandemic throughout a good distribution and cross-section of the Turkish origin population in Munich, Germany, thus portraying the immediate effects of the current outbreak.



Acknowledgement

The authors received no financial support for this research, the authorship, and/or the publication of this article. Therefore, the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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