

Immediate and Future-Oriented Tactics of Syrian Students in Istanbul as an Integrational Bridge between the Past and Future

Şeyma Karameşe¹

Abstract

This study mainly analyses the power relations between native Turks and Syrian students in the public spaces of Turkey. The bulk of the literature sees migrants as passive victims who face exclusion and discrimination. However, this research not only sees migrants as active agents in power relations, but also examines both present and future constructions of migrants. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation of 30 Syrian students in Istanbul, I show how these students produce immediate and future-oriented tactics. While immediate tactics exist to provide temporary protection in daily relations, the migrants also have long-term solutions for the future with their “make a difference” capacity based on the resources they have. In this regard, “future-oriented tactics” not only protect against discrimination but also offer a means of long-term integration into society. This is an important contribution to migration studies in terms of power relations.

Keywords: *Immediate Tactics; Future-oriented Tactics; Syrian Youth; Migration*

Introduction

Approximately 4% of Turkey's population are recent arrivals: Syrian migrants escaping from the harsh conditions of war in their country (Erdogan & Erdogan, 2018). With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, as a result of the conditions in the region and its open-door policy, Turkey now hosts more than three million Syrian people under temporary protection status (Interior Directorate General of Migration Management (IDGMM), 2021). Understanding this long migration flow is not possible without focusing on power relations between the host country and the newcomers in Turkish context. In that sense, power relations have always been an inseparable part of migration studies and should be analysed along with spatiality arguments. This is because space is the main concept for constructing majority–minority power relations. If space and society are examined as dialectical relationships, spatiality is a vital dimension of social power (Cresswell, 2006: 11–12). In this regard, symbols, beliefs, and meanings are all part of the production of power relations in space, and places are the essential creators of the difference between “us” and “them” (Cresswell, 2020).

However, power, the sense of an agent's or group's ability to affect other agents' or groups' actions (Menge, 2018), is a controversial concept discussed from different perspectives based on macro and micro theoretical backgrounds. Macro orientations generally see power as an abstract and general thing flowing from the top to the bottom of organisational hierarchies,

¹ Dr. Şeyma Karameşe, University of Essex, Sociology Department. E-mail: sk18853@essex.ac.uk / seykaramese@hotmail.com.
ORCID: 0000-0003-4125-1175.



whether symmetrically or asymmetrically (Pulantzas, 1975; Dahrendorf, 1959). Micro perspectives, on the other hand, emphasise the processes of negotiation and bargaining between actors, and thus see power as symmetrical between agents, thereby highlighting the processes of interaction inherent in power (Blau, 1964).

In my view, both the macro and micro theoretical discussions are incomplete. What is needed is a complementary approach that brings together the negotiated power relations between agents (from the micro perspective) and the creation of objective conditions in the social relations within a place (from the macro structural approach). I see dialectical cooperation between these two perspectives as necessary to achieve social reality as a whole.

To do this, I combine parts of Anthony Giddens' and Michel de Certeau's theoretical legacies to explore the possibility of integration in the common places used by both migrants and natives. Giddens criticises objectivist schools or structural sociological understanding for claiming that individuals have no choice under power pressures, arguing that "make a difference" capacity actions have transformative potential. "Make a difference" capacity means that actors always have some resources to change relations that are targeted or intended by power or dominant groups (Giddens, 1984: 16-18).

Like Giddens, de Certeau is aware of social actors' structural positioning (Karner, 2008: 255) and the role of these agents during power relations. Both scholars agree that power is not independent of actors, and they are not passive victims of structural relations. While Giddens articulates this through his "make a difference" capacity, de Certeau calls it "the art of the weak". Crucially, however, and unlike Giddens, de Certeau provides operational tools to apply his theory for empirical research from a micro perspective. Accordingly, the "strategy/tactic" concepts of de Certeau's theory are used for this research. Strategy refers to authority and how the dominant groups use their hegemony over ordinary people. However, tactics are the tool of powerless groups who seek their own interests against the suppression of interest groups: the weak are always trying to find opportunities to eliminate unequal power relations.

As ordinary people, our actions, practices, and reproduction in daily life are tactics against power groups' strategies. From Giddens's (1984) perspective, "resources" can be seen as the essence of the transformative capacity of operational performance against power relations. Tactics show us that rationality cannot be considered separate from daily struggles; however, they are also hidden in the place of power for objective calculation. As a result, people who produce their own tactics and use their "make a difference" capacity can be found in each minority group, such as migrants targeting integration into a new society.

The theoretical arguments of this paper are supported in different contexts. Fischer (2020) studied the interaction between macro structural relations and micro relations in the everyday life of Zürich, Switzerland. She explored how integration is experienced and transformed by the self or others. She used de Certeau's theory of daily life to show how borders and limits affect meaning-making, self- and other- perceptions, and social positioning. She showed that not only does the interplay between borders and boundaries influence migratory governance, such as integration policies, but also that people use tactics based on integration enunciations to act on the social position they are assigned based on racialised markers of difference. Teodorowski (2020) added that since integration is a two-way process involving refugees and the host population, it needs a micro-level approach. In this regard, he argued that micro-level



activities such as education in schools, lifelong learning and community activities foster the integration process of Syrian refugees in Scotland. Yılmaz (2014) argued the meaning of tactics produced by Turkish people in the German context. According to her, to eliminate disadvantages in daily life and discrimination against Turkish people, as migrant groups, they produce different tactics such as eating, reading and speaking. Similar to Yılmaz's arguments, Karamese (2017; 2018) specifically discussed Turkish students in German schools to show how they produce different tactics to be integrated to German society without excluded. Religious tactics in every day life is one of them.

However, the main difference of this paper is that migrants not only produce tactics for the protection of their present circumstances but also integrate them into the future. This perspective not only makes migrants the active actors of power relations but also looks at both today and the future together to understand how the migrants construct it.

Methodology

Among Syrian migrants, I chose youth as the target group because the average age of Syrians is 22.2 in Turkey (IDGMM, 2021). Then I focused on Syrian students, because when compared with other youth groups (workers, house women, or entrepreneurs), students had adapted to daily life by attending various locations, creating a new sense of space with a new lifestyle, speaking different languages, and negotiating their own identities. They were integrated into the educational system and socialised through interactions with various groups. Since they are migrant students, their experiences are comparable to mine. As a Turkish migrant student in the UK myself, I was able to relate to what these students are going through in another country both as an insider and the outsider.

In-depth interviews and participant observations are the two main methods used for this qualitative research. Interviewing and listening while spending time together with people may mean there is no clear distinction between conducting participant observation and conducting interviews (O'Reilly, 2012). In other words, "the qualitative interview can be seen as the verbal counterpart to participant observation, the former involving questioning and the latter involving observing" (Corbetta, 2003: 264). My personal experience in the field confirmed this view: interviewing and observing go together, feed off each other, and cannot be easily separated.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews, the content of which was designed, but not the form (Corbetta, 2003: 272), were conducted with the research group for specific information about their experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006:3). Research was conducted in Istanbul between 2019 and 2020. Using the advantages of all the data I obtained from my observations, 30 Syrian students were interviewed in quiet spaces such as cafés or houses. Interviews were conducted in either English or Turkish, depending on the students' preferences. All students were preparing for exams to enter universities or were current undergraduate students or graduates. Their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years. I asked them to sign consent forms. To protect their anonymity, their names were changed to Arabic names.

Besides the advantages and strengths of this qualitative research, there is also a limitation. Although I visit my respondents at home and participate in family and friendship relationships, language has always produced limitations as a barrier. I spent time with them long hours, but I could not observe them enough in natural environments where they spoke

Arabic comfortably. Although I speak Arabic in formal level, I think that I stayed away from the jokes, ironic uses, and allusions that are part of the daily use of Arabic, and I see this as a limitation.

I conducted the study in accordance with the British Sociological Association's code of ethics. The University of Essex has granted me "Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants". To analyse the data, I used the NVIVO program.

Findings

1. Immediate tactics

This type of tactic is for overcoming the power relations in daily life and for existing within the system without changing it, as in the theorisation of de Certeau (1984). They involve calculation and are "a form of subversion of the logic of power, more than an attack" (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2017: 64). Such tactics temporarily alter the meanings in the space without aiming for long-term structural change. That is, the migrants are timid, invisible, and focused on acting like locals.

1.1. Language tactics

Language "represents individual identity as a group member", and therefore language and identity complement each other (Felemban, 2012: 43). Language is the key to adjusting to a new society's identity; therefore, it extends beyond communication. Due to unfavourable stereotypes, speaking Arabic is an indication of being Syrian in Turkey. Avoiding Arabic is a language-based tactic for overcoming public exclusion in Istanbul, where many Arabic individuals are stigmatised as Syrians. So, they speak Turkish or English on public transportation.

Elif shared her experiences with these words:

"When my mother calls, I don't answer to avoid speaking Arabic, or I speak quietly. We speak Turkish when I'm with friends. I'm worried that my neighbour doesn't speak Turkish. She's fine, but because I understand discriminatory words, I'm stressed." (female, undergraduate, 20 years old)

Mutschlechner (2020) argued in the article "The Hierarchies of Languages" that the multi-ethnic Habsburg Monarchy used similar categorisation. More than a dozen languages were spoken in the region, but some were more prestigious (Mutschlechner, 2020). Similarly, in this context, Arabic is not respected in Turkey, since it signifies the East and backwardness. This relates to the Turkish language revolution. The linguistic and cultural policies of the Republican period were impacted by the basic mindset changes required for Westernisation and national unity and integrity (Sadoğlu, 2010:198). The state strategy was to replace Arabic script with Latin letters. Hence, Arabic signifies travelling back in time and migrating from the West to the East.

Choosing English as a language is based on how languages are ranked in the Turkish context, and Syrian students do this on purpose to avoid prejudice that would put them at the bottom of society. This is a short-term invisibility tactic to prevent discrimination. Even though they consciously selected English, they wanted to eliminate historical disadvantages. While Western tourists or migrants have the advantage of speaking Western languages, Arabic speakers, by



employing different languages, manipulate the system without fighting with it. As a result, they avoid stigma by speaking Turkish and English or by being silent.

1.2. Consumption tactics

Minorities feel inferior in new spaces owing to power relations; thus, they consume the majority culture's patterns by manipulating stereotyped notions. This disturbs the patterns of the dominant culture by acting differently from their expectations and labels (de Certeau, 1991). First, consumers manipulate preconceptions by dressing like Turks. Being invisible in public is the goal. This tactic aims to help them escape public exclusion by appearing like a Turk. This method includes shopping at Turkish clothing stores, wearing sports clothes like Turkish youths, and women not wearing headscarves, or wearing them like Turkish women if they do.

Esra, as a female student, clarified her experiences with these words:

"We wear Turkish clothes to avoid exclusion. We want to look like Turks, I think. People think I'm strange when I dress like a Syrian. I can't explain it, but I always feel protected. My sister wore a Syrian head covering once. Locals insulted her, saying, 'Syrians are everywhere and have occupied our country'." (female, undergraduate, 20 years old)

Consuming things from their own cultures in their own homes is another consumption method. Immigrants who suffer exclusion live in their own culture at home. Yılmaz (2015) claimed that Turkish people want to protect their cultural values and existence "as a living Turk" in their houses in Germany. Similar to the German-Turkish context, Syrians need cultural values and cultural continuity in their domestic relations. Food also reflects culture and identity. They like to buy Arabic coffee, bread, and wort (a typical Syrian plant) from Syrian marketplaces. "The table is a place of pleasure; this is an ancient finding, but it clings on to its truth and mystery, since dining is always more than just eating." (de Certeau et al., 1998: 151).

Tayma clarified the difference between home and public spaces in her daily life by pointing to the cultural continuity of the home country in the host one:

"The house is different. The anxiety outside is not inside the house. It is safer. You can cook whatever you want and speak in whatever language you want. Is it like this outside? You have to pay attention to what you wear, what you eat, and the places you sit." (female, undergraduate, 21 years old)

At this point, it could be argued that there is a clear border between the outside (public space) and the inside (home). The migrants have turned their homes into places of resistance. Public space-based consumption tactics are employed to protect themselves from exclusion; however, domestic-based consumption tactics try to produce a continuity of cultural values.

Hence, as with the language tactic, the consumption tactic mainly seeks to protect its own interests and is hidden within the place of power. Against the strategies of the Turkish hosts (labelling by language, clothing, and cultural codes), Syrian youths have employed immediate tactics, mainly based on language and consumption patterns.

Future-oriented tactics

De Certeau sees immediate tactics as expressions of everyday life because ordinary people oppose the system with such tactics. They never capture or overcome the system and aim to

disrupt power. However, young Syrians also plan their futures and aim for structural spatial changes to be integrated into Turkish society by using tactics that I term future-oriented. The students plan their future as a project based on manipulation and their own resources, such as education and social networks. Long-term objectives are integrated into everyday contacts to build their future lives, unlike immediate tactics used to reduce prejudice and defend themselves. These are not hidden or temporary. This tactic prioritises integration into Turkish society.

2.1. Institutional tactics

Institutions are characterised by their actors' identities and connections (Barley and Tolbert, 1997: 96). Agents may have distinct relationships with institutions, since formal institutions are regulations and informal institutions are norms and codes of behaviour. They restrain actors through incentives and disincentives that channel human behaviour, establishing stable systems that improve efficiency in human interactions by lowering uncertainty and transaction costs. They align the activities and expectations of a society's members (Friel, 2017: 212).

Institutional strategies include understanding the education system and pursuing a university education. Most of Turkey's students are in Istanbul (DrDataStats, 2022). Similarly, refugees from other countries prefer Istanbul's top institutions. The city also has more job opportunities. Choosing departments is tactical and dependent on student expectations. They are building a life in Turkey and planning for the future. Depending on the conclusion of the war, the students will reside in Turkey or Syria. If the conflict ends and they return to Syria, they will have important skills. They choose medicine or engineering because they are functional. Since becoming a doctor is difficult, women generally pursue nursing, pharmacy, or nutrition instead, whereas men prefer engineering.

Muhammed, a civil engineering student at one of Turkey's top universities, explained his motivation:

“After the conflict, we must reconstruct Syria from scratch. I selected engineering because of the post-war conditions. My university's engineering department is prestigious in Turkey even if we do not ever return to Syria.” (male, graduate, 25 years old).

Meryem asked me to correct some grammar mistakes in her scholarship application. Her motivation letter explains the meaning of education and her choice of department:

“I want to become a doctor. The biggest reason is the health problems we encountered during the war in Syria, but the biggest problem we have is the lack of doctors” (female, preparing for exam, 18 years old)

Turkey's young population makes higher education increasingly competitive (Erdogan & Erdogan, 2018). In Turkish culture, education signifies upward mobility. Syrian youth's desire for integration into the education system has increased competitiveness. Education gives both native and migrant youth better future possibilities. Migrants must adapt to school, gain survival skills, and prepare for uncertainty. Due to this uncertainty, they prepare for it both in Turkey and Syria. Hence, Syrian youth must be integrated into educational institutions to support and strengthen themselves. The contexts of both countries are important in students' educational choices. Migrants prefer to study subjects with which they can easily find work in either Turkey or Syria. Diplomas and degrees become Turkish-approved tools to achieve better living standards. They have also prepared for post-war life in Syria if they return. As a



result, war conditions and trauma create plan-based educational choices and job opportunities in the host country.

2.2. Spatial tactics

De Certeau used neighbourhoods to explain the relationship between tactics and strategies, which can be applied in this paper. He sees the city as a place of strategy and the neighbourhood as a space of tactics disrupting the strategies. In everyday usage, the neighbourhood symbolises the privatisation of public spaces. It is a middle space within a dialectical existence, lying between a personal level and a social level. Moreover, it lies between the inside (private space) and outside (the totality of the city) (1998: 11).

According to this approach, the city is “poeticised” by the subject: the subjects have used and disrupted the urban space, and it has been consumed. The subjects have also imposed their own laws on the city space. Relations with neighbours are part of the usage of the city. All the conditions are assembled there to favour this exercise. Relations with neighbours also open up a space for tactics within the place of the other, so the practice of the neighbourhood comes from a tactic whose place is with others (de Certeau, 1991).

Making a neighbourhood can be seen as a resistance tactic by migrants against native dominance with the theorization of de Certeau. However, in this paper, it is found that, this educated group is different from other migrants. Although migrants prefer to settle in neighbourhoods where they have a chance to practise similar lifestyles, different from the dominant culture, Syrian students avoid being in labelled places, and they prefer to be in more common places used by the locals. In other words, while ordinary migrants choose to settle in certain neighbourhoods, such as Fatih, for practical reasons, including language, employment, and social support (Kaya, 2016), young migrants are pleased to visit these and shop in Syrian marketplaces for a short period, but then return to their comfort zones, where the Turkish population predominates. While touching Syrian locations reveals a reliance on immediate tactics to meet daily necessities, picking Turkish neighbourhoods to stay and spend leisure time in is aimed at integrating into Turkish culture. I call this a future-oriented tactic.

Hasan clarified two districts for himself:

“When I first came, I only knew Fatih. Now I'm uncomfortable when I stay in Fatih because you're only dealing with Syrians there. I eat my food, buy the Syrian bread, and immediately return to Üsküdar.” (male, undergraduate, 21 years old).

He continued expressing the meaning of Üsküdar district to him:

“I was sitting there in a cafe when I discovered Üsküdar. There were people from different social groups. There were people from each group: Conservatives, Islamists, Kemalists, and Nationalists. We were all together... I feel I am in my country” (Hasan, undergraduate, 21 years old).

Üsküdar's diversity contrasts with Fatih's significant Syrian community. Üsküdar is seen as a link between Europe and Anatolia. Due to its flexibility, many students reside there or spend time in its cafés. Syrians like the heterogeneous culture in Üsküdar. As a result, Syrian students do not prefer segregated places. They temporarily go to isolated areas.

Using social media as a place to overcome negative discourses against Syrians is another spatial tactic. “Historically, social media was enough to have an online presence on the internet for one-way broadcasting and dissemination of information. Today, social networks such as

Facebook and Twitter are motivating new forms of social interaction, dialogue, exchange, and collaboration. Social networking sites enable users to exchange their ideas, to post updates and comments, or to participate in activities and events, while sharing their wider interests” (Vyas and Trivedi, 2014:2). Moreover, according to Kapoor et al. (2017: 531), “Social media comprises communication websites that facilitate relationship-forming between users from diverse backgrounds, resulting in a rich social structure. User-generated content encourages enquiry and decision-making.”

I see social media as a public space rather than a private space. In this, I concur with Burkell et al. (2014). According to their findings, “online social spaces are indeed loci of public display rather than private revelation: online profiles are structured with the view that ‘everyone’ can see them, even if the explicitly intended audience is more limited. These social norms are inconsistent with the claim that social media are private spaces; instead, it appears that participants view and treat online social networks as public venues.” (2014: 974).

Students post positive news and responded to unfavourable news on social media to fight discrimination. Syrian student activists deal with anti-Syrian news. Social networking is a long-term tool for peacefully influencing opinions. Migrants want to change the attitudes and decision-making processes of groups that contribute to negative stereotypes.

According to a student campaigner against disinformation via Twitter:

“Social media says 40 billion dollars have been spent on Syrians. This money has been spent on Syrian refugees to prevent a tragedy. As Syrians, we work to survive.” (Ahmet Hamou, 2020).

Although Ayşe has some concerns about the effect of disseminating reality against disinformation, she believes that common sensitivities in both countries increase the possibility of sharing the truth with the target group. She expressed her feelings in the following statement:

“Sometimes I get angry with my friends because of their posts on social media. I want to tell them the truth, but they seem so one-sided. But I feel forced to share when a Syrian child is killed, or a woman is raped. What person could ignore them? Then they may understand how difficult being Syrian is and how much we are excluded.” (female, undergraduate student, 19 years old).

According to Skop (2014), migrants are located between here and there over internet-based activities. Her perspective considers identity to be a composition of complex lifestyles and worldviews and is always under negotiation. Within this negotiation, the internet mediates the existence of migrants between the host country and the original country. Via the internet, technologies, practices, representations, and places are bound by the intersections of culture in the lives of the migrant population. From this perspective, Syrian students, instead of escaping exclusions and isolating themselves from negative news in social media, produce place attachment, disseminate positive news against negative discourses and new ways to be integrated into Istanbul and Turkey.

Furthermore, social media is used to connect with immigrants in other countries. Migrant students engage with Syrian youths in other countries while acquiring Turkish citizenship and planning their futures. Mainly through social media, they maintain transnational ties. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp are their major means of contacting friends, family, and target groups.



Bilal, one of my participants, explained his aim of introducing Turkey to immigrants in *other parts of the world and creating networks with them*:

“I am a YouTuber and I develop content such as life in Istanbul, travelling in Turkey, etc. I started with English, but then I added some content in Arabic. Because many Arabic people also watch and like my content, I started to do it. For instance, I introduced Antakya Hatay Province in the south of Turkey. Their food is very similar to Syrian food, and most people speak Arabic” (male, graduate, 26 years old).

Bilal drives attention by claiming that YouTube is a tool for him to connect to Syrians in different parts of the world. In this regard, YouTube not only produces a new sense of space but also combines people from other ethnic groups with transnational connections. Moreover, during their relations via social media, they affirm their identification with the homeland ‘through memory, nostalgia, or imagination’ (Levitt & Schiller, 2004: 12).

Hence, whether they are physical locations, such as districts, or online places, such as social media, public spaces are employed as the centre of tactics because the meaning of space is modified once migrants participate in everyday contact. Fatih and Üsküdar as districts, and social media use, are not the same any more. These students use spatial tactics to become part of society and visualise their future in Turkey. Moreover, they create transnational connections.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper shows that in this power relationship in the host country, migrants are very active in improving today’s conditions and planning for the future. To categorise the relationship between today and the future, I have divided the tactics into “immediate” and “future-oriented”. Immediate tactics, as a tool and game of subordinate groups (young Syrian migrants), manipulate the relations in the shared places to make themselves invisible. This manipulation is mainly intended to protect themselves against discrimination and is a temporary solution. I use the term ‘immediate tactics’ as de Certeau uses everyday life theory (1991). In the immediate tactics section, I discussed language and consumption-based tactics.

The main contribution of this study is seeing tactics not only as temporary acquisitions but as tools that build for the future and provide long-term integration into society, calling them future-oriented tactics. By using the resources they have, such as education and social networks, the students use their capacity to “make a difference” (Giddens, 1984) in the long term. Two forms of this kind of tactic have been identified. Institutional tactics refer to those involved in fulfilling institutional requirements and eliminating the possibility that institutions may prevent migrants’ aspirations from coming true. They include the acquisition of a good education. Second, spatial tactics, whether based on physical public spaces or online public spaces, are important for these young persons’ hopes for the future and the process of integrating. The integration process is possible at the national and international levels through the use of networked public spaces. Thus, in addition to the relations in the public spaces of Turkey, the migrants are producing transnational spaces and connections. As a result, institutional and spatial tactics, defined as future-oriented tactics, show how the integration process of migrants is possible.

Future-oriented tactics open a door for a new discussion of how space and migration are not only directly related to the past and present but also the future. Space-based interactions today are constructing the future of migrants, both within national borders and international

contexts. Everyday encounters with Syrian students give clues about their futures. Based on this discussion, further studies can discuss perspectives on citizenship, transnational connections, and the economic and social activities of these students not only as a plan, but also by looking at the traces of these activities for the future.

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