Emotional Reflexivity in Social Work with Refugees: Implications from Turkey

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Abstract

Reflexivity refers to the process of taking the role of others and evaluating oneself from the other's perspective in the general sense (Rosenberg, 1990). Using reflexivity while conducting research and working with complex issues such as trauma, assault, and abuse assist researchers and employees to be self-aware and reflective of the meaning-making process. This research aims to examine the role of emotional reflexivity for staff working with refugees. Therefore, emotional experiences resulting from engaging with issues of trauma and cultural diversity are analyzed in the scope of emotional reflexivity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants working at different NGOs and of different ages. There are mainly two themes that emerged from the data analysis: praxis and reflexivity. Theme called praxis has two codes as advocacy and reflective action. Theme referred to as reflexivity has three codes: psychological awareness, social distance, wider social and political context, and coping strategies. This study reveals the emotional experiences and the needs of the NGO workers engaging issues with trauma and diversity.

Keywords: *Reflexivity; refugees; refugee research; qualitative research; social work; phenomenology*

Introduction

84 million people who forcibly left their homes worldwide as of 2021. 35 million resettled in a new country and were entitled to refugees; more than 4 million settled in Turkey (UNHCR, 2021). Turkey, has become the country with the most significant number of refugees globally (ECHO, 2020). There are many refugees, including Syrians and Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians, Somalians, and Turkmenians in Turkey (UNHCR, 2019). In the meantime, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were transformed into a vital element of the refugee adaptation in Turkey. According to the European Commission Fact Sheet (ECHO, 2018), 19 out of 45 humanitarian projects agreed with the organizations in Turkey to meet the needs of the Syrian refugees. According to the OCHA (2020), there are 10 thousand US dollars given to different NGOs in Turkey for Syrian refugees from several governments such as Switzerland, Germany, Norway, Luxembourg, and Japan. As these numbers signify the importance of NGOs in Turkey, various countries from all over the world that help Turkey while dealing with this refugee crisis.

Since the NGOs in Turkey gained a significant role during the adaptation of Syrian refugees, NGO workers become the key agents for Syrians and their adaptation (Sever & Özerim, 2019). These NGOs have translators, psychologists and educators gathered under the same roof. Therefore, Syrian refugees can consult NGOs for any problem they have encountered during their daily lives. The aim of this study is to understand the role of emotional reflexivity for the staff working with refugees at several NGOs. In line with this objective, emotional

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experiences as a result of engaging with issues of trauma and cultural diversity are examined in the scope of emotional reflexivity. It is intended to consider the refugee adaptation process from a holistic point of view while focusing on the refugee workers' emotions and experiences. This study helps to promote a healthy adaptation process for refugees while considering the refugee workers' perspectives.

Literature Review

Turkey signed the Geneva Convention in 1967 with the restriction on 'geographical limitation.' Thus, Turkey can give the 'refugee' status only for the people who come from European countries. Turkey started to receive Syrian citizens in 2011 with the beginning of the war. The government in Turkey started to take short-run measures for Syrian citizens at the beginning of the war since the war was expected to be ended soon (Çelik & İçduygu, 2019). In 2011, governmental institutions started to be insufficient to meet the basic needs of refugees. Therefore, international NGOs collaborated with governmental institutions in Turkey. As a result of the temporary protection status, Syrian refugees' adaptation process to Turkey accelerated. The Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) was established as a governmental NGO responsible for their protection and the legal issues (Balcı & Göcen, 2018). Thus, NGOs started to gain more importance for the refugee issue in Turkey (Sever & Özerim, 2019).

Working with Refugees

The government in Turkey is working with international NGOs such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and Save the Children to meet the needs of the refugees. At the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011, only The Ministry of International Affairs, AFAD (the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority), and Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent) were the primary institutions to manage the emergency (Seyidov, 2021). Besides these national institutions, the number of NGOs in Turkey exceeded 150.000 in 2011, including associations and foundations (İçduygu, Meydanoğlu, & Sert, 2011). However, since the refugee numbers in Turkey are increasing dramatically, collaborative projects started in 2013 to meet the basic needs of Syrian refugees (Bayrak, 2018). Thus, NGOs in Turkey started to gain importance in facilitating the needs and overcome the issues of refugees in Turkey. It can be said that the refugee influx and the emergencies brought along with the influx have contributed to the importance of NGOs in Turkey (Sunata & Tosun, 2018).

Both international and national NGOs are working collaboratively to supply humanitarian aid and conduct the social integration process in Turkey by providing consultancy, advocacy, education services, and healthcare services to refugees (Akpınar, 2017; Mackreath & Sağniç, 2017). NGOs are vital institutions in Turkey to moderate the social cohesion between the Syrian and Turkish people. Çebi (2017) stated that the NGOs facilitate the governmental and semi-governmental organizations on refugee's adaptation process by conducting various projects including local and refugee people to understand the adaptation process.

Services provided by NGOs have expanded in Turkey and Europe with the refugee crisis. They started to work several hours have load casework with low payments (Eurofound and International Labour Organization, 2014). Although the NGO involvement is critical to meet the needs of the refugees (Maniatis, 2018), working conditions of NGO workers worsened over time (Sundqvist et al., 2015).

A wealth of research focuses on the effects of working with trauma survivors on professionals (Adams, Boscarino, & Figley, 2006; Adams & Riggs, 2008) and revealed that secondary trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue reactions could be seen in the staff working with asylum-seekers and refugees. Mental health professionals working with refugees and asylum-seekers may feel unoccupied in terms of their profession (Century, Leavey & Payne, 2007). They may not cope with the clients' issues, unrealistic demands, and expectations (Drennan & Joseph, 2005; Fisher 2004). Furthermore, they may have difficulties setting a professional boundary with their refugee/ asylum- seeker client (Misra, Connolly, Klynman, & Majeed, 2006).

Most of the studies define that the workers who are working with refugees and asylum-seekers should explore their cultural assumptions, boundaries, and assumptions to handle the vicarious trauma, stress, and sense of powerlessness (Century et al., 2007; Guhan & Liebling Kalifani, 2011; Robinson, 2013). Reflexivity assists researchers and employees working with complex issues like trauma, assault, and cultural differences to examine themselves and their effects on their work. They need to be self-aware and reflective of the meaning-making process (Aluwihare Samaranayake, 2012).

Emotional Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the process of taking the role of others and evaluating oneself from the others' perspective (Rosenberg, 1990). According to Holmes (2015), emotional reflexivity is the interpretation of one's own and others' emotions and their interaction. Since the social interactions transformed into a more complex and diverse relationship, emotional reflexivity becomes a more pivotal part of the individuals' interaction. Especially when people face new situations and feelings, learned rules of emotions might be unclear for them. Therefore, they may draw new emotional roads to navigate themselves (Holmes, 2010). Emotional reflexivity contributes to this process and assists individuals in creating convenient road maps for their newly- emerging interactions.

Reflexive processes are a part of emotional logic, which occurs due to the socialization process and is affected by social consensus and cultural scenarios (Coulter, 1986; Gordon, 1990; Wouters, 2007). It is a fact that researchers' statements and work are affected by their emotions (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Widdowfield, 2000). Emotions are part of human nature. However, emotions should be recognized and controlled during professional work such as research, interview, or intervention. Emotional reflexivity is not just helping people and creating road maps to self, but also promoting reflexive professional work.

Reflexive Research

Reflexive research and the role of emotional reflexivity gain little attention in terms of methodological guidance and investigation. There is a text analysis method to reflexivity proposed by Elias (2000). However, reflexivity through interviews with the participants is considered as a mythical issue (Brownlie, 2011; Reay, 2006). Most studies refer only to researchers' reflexivity, which includes their reflections on their thoughts and the relationship with the participants. Reflexivity is also used in ethnographic research with the interviews (Walby, 2010). However, emotional reflexivity of the participants was not used in these research (Holmes, 2015). It might be hard to analyze the emotional reflexivity work. Since it is self-report data, it does not provide an objective perspective (Fineman, 2004). Interpreting

the sentences and the words of participants might be challenging to decide (Holmes, 2015). Thus, interviews might give more accurate insights about emotional reflexivity than the text analysis because of observing the participants and asking in-depth questions (Holmes, 2014).

In this context, is study aims to analyze the role of emotional reflexivity for staff working with refugees. Therefore, emotional experiences resulting from engaging with issues of trauma and cultural diversity are examined in the scope of emotional reflexivity. It is intended to consider the refugee adaptation process from a holistic point of view while focusing on the refugee workers' emotions and experiences. This study paves the way for a healthy adaptation process for refugees in Turkey by shedding light on the refugee workers' issues.

Methodology

This qualitative phenomenological research aimed to understand the feelings and the experiences of NGO staff working with refugees. The data collection process was conducted between November 2019 and January 2020. Since the interview technique provides interaction and observation to understand the role of the emotions in certain events (Holmes, 2015), semi-structured interviews were used in this research to understand the emotional experiences of NGO workers. Interviews were conducted with 12 NGO staff currently working with refugees in Turkey. The participants were selected using the snowball technique to reach the diversity in terms of age, tenure, educational level, and working conditions. Participants were contacted through both phone and e-mail to inform them about the study and decide the time and location for the interview. The researcher was flexible about the time and the place for the interviews; the only vital point was selecting the most comfortable place for the participants. The recruiting of the participants was ended when the same patterns started to emerge from the interview.

The age of the participants varied from 24 to 40 years who are experienced between one and 15 years working with refugees. On the other hand, most of the participants were recent university graduates with limited experience in the field (see Table 1). All participants have first-hand contact with the refugees they are working with.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Participants

Participants	City	Gender	Age	Highest Level of Education
P1	Ankara	Female	26	Masters
P2	Ankara	Female	34	Bachelor
P3	Ankara	Female	38	Bachelor
P4	Ankara	Male	27	Masters
P5	Ankara	Female	28	Masters
P6	Ankara	Female	38	Masters
P7	Ankara	Female	29	Masters
P8	Ankara	Female	24	Bachelor
P9	İstanbul	Female	25	Bachelor
P10	İstanbul	Female	28	Bachelor
P11	Sakarya	Male	40	Masters
P12	İstanbul	Female	32	Bachelor

The semi-structured interview protocol is developed with consultation from an expert from the Faculty of Education at Middle East Technical University (METU) to ensure trustworthiness and transferability. The interview protocol was designed by referring to five areas: (1) Demographic information of the participants (2) Organization that the participant is working/worked (3) Needs of Refugees and Experiences of the participant (4) Feelings of the participant while s/he is working with refugees (5) Suggestions for the people who start to work with refugees.

After developing the interview protocol, ethical permission was obtained from METU Applied Ethics Research Centre (Ethics Committee). The informed consent was recorded for each interview and participant information sheets were provided to each respondent. Interviews started with the demographic questions and shared experiences to warm-up. Prompts and probes were used to understand the phenomena in-depth during the interviews. Interviews took between 45to 90 minutes.

Pre-established themes and codes were not used in this study to understand the data with unforeseen details and provide an unbiased interpretation of the data (Richard, 2005). The pure verbatim method was used for the transcription of the interviews (Mayring, 2014). The analyst triangulation process was carried out by two academics. Transcribed raw data were shared, and analysts' themes and codes were compared with the researcher's findings. The intercoder reliability was calculated high (Kappa value .974).

Findings

The qualitative content analysis of the semi-structured interviews with people working with refugees demonstrated two main themes: (1) Praxis and (2) Reflexivity. In Table 2, themes and codes that emerged during the data analysis are presented.

Table 2. Themes and Codes Emerged
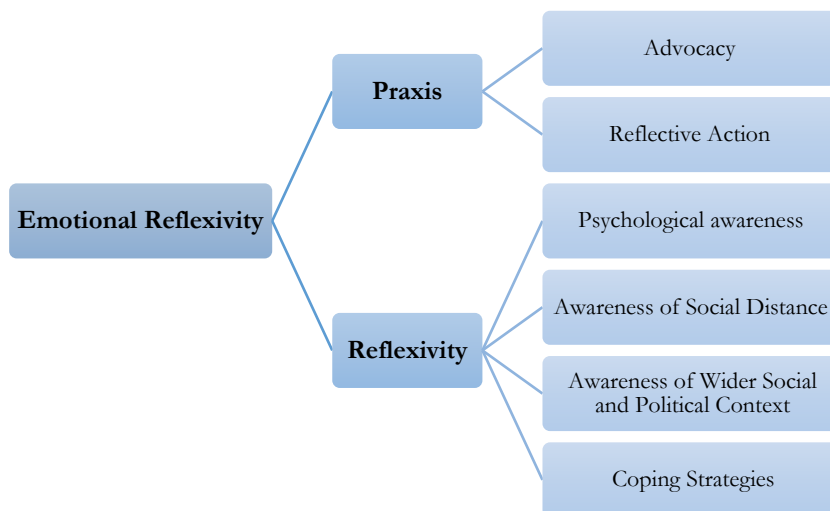
Praxis

Participants mentioned that they are engaging in self-creative activities while considering the socio-political background in their institutions. Eight participants stated that the refugee crisis

in Turkey should be considered a political problem not just a social issue. They also indicated that since the dominant political discourses in Turkey impact on public opinion and attitudes towards refugees, they have an impact on the refugee adaptation process too. This theme were divided into two codes: advocacy and reflective action. In the advocacy part, human rights issues were highlighted. Furthermore, since Turkey's political and social climate is constantly changing when it comes to the refugees, refugees need to be informed about changing systems, particularly in health, education, or the law. As one responded stated, some of the participants needed to be involved in refugee education process and defend refugee students' rights.

> "They face serious cases at the schools and streets. They are complaining not just about their peers but also about their teachers. I contact the school in such cases. We may discuss what we can do together a few times with the school counselor. I usually go to District National Education Directorate and write petitions in their parents' stead asking to include these students into the school system." P7

In addition to advocacy issues, they were taking actions about the topic they consider to have a considerable effect coded as reflective action. As the third participant stated, some of the participants developed projects and seminars which is not in their job definition in the scope of their competency to reach more individuals to ease the adaptation process of refugees.

> "The number of people that I can reach on my own few. If we can get this information and share it with more people to grow like branches of a tree and become green, I think it would be more effective. Therefore, I am working on projects where they aim the trauma." P3

NGO workers realized areas that wasn't handled or dealt in their organization. Thus, they started to take steps by writing projects, organizing seminars for refugee families and children. Furthermore, all participants indicated that they encountered with human rights issues when they were trying to meet the basics needs of refugee. Thus, they were taking reflective actions in these cases by informing local people about the human rights, and the rights of the refugees in Turkey.

Reflexivity

Participants' reflections on their emotions and behaviors are considered and coded under reflexivity theme, which has four codes as psychological awareness, awareness of social distance, awareness of wider social and political context, and coping strategies. First of all, some participants were able to realize the effect of working with refugees on their emotional and psychological health which is coded as psychological awareness. As the third and ninth participants mentioned, some participants got traumatized, and their emotional and mental health started to impact their social life as well.

> "I am quieter, and I am not energetic anymore. It is so tiring for me to listen to my friends' concerns after work." P3

> "We are all traumatized in here. Even the designers who do not go to the field have secondary trauma because of what we are telling them. We need some help." P9

As voiced in the interviews, participants began to feel lonely and disconnected from their social life when they started to work with refugees. Also, these respondents were two NGO workers working in the field. Especially the NGO workers conducting field work and visiting refugees at their homes, tend to be affected much more than the NGO workers working with refugees in their offices. Nine participants conducting field work had depression, anxiety, flashbacks and staying away from social life issues more than the other three NGO workers.

The second code, awareness of social distance, refers to the participants' ability to keep a distance from the refugees they are working with. As the fifth participant indicated, some of the participants think that their job is professional and they shouldn't create personal bonds with refugees who receive services from them.

> "You need to learn to keep distance between your job and your social life. No personal bound should be developed." P5

On the other hand, some participants do not become aware of the importance of the social distance with the refugees they are working with. As the sixth participant stated, they think that developing personal bonds with refugees is necessary for their jobs. They consider this relationship as 'ties of affection.'

> "I think that the job we are doing is about the ties of affection. There is nothing to do here, but it makes me happy to be with them psychologically. In the evenings, I am calling them at; I am visiting them if I can do it, I am taking care of their children. I continue with my ties of affection with them outside the job." P6

Another code, awareness of wider social and political context, refers to the participants' awareness of the wider social and political issues during the refugee issue in Turkey. Nine participants stated that the refugees' situation in Turkey was affected by the wider political components such as the political power in the United Nations and the United States of America and their effects in Turkey. Furthermore, social context such as the local citizens' point of view towards refugees affected by social media influences and frames the problems refugees face in Turkey.

> "I really think that it is a political issue since they (refugees) are coming. Such a country does not have any infrastructure for refugees. For example, there are huge differences between the funding after the war and the funding now. After like ten years, there may not be anyone working on this issue, and it will not matter what they (refugees) doing there is no infrastructure, why are those people still coming here and not going and why are those people still coming here and not going to Europe. There is funding from bigger political powers such as Europe and America. On the other hand, they do not accept refugees in their countries." P2

The last code, coping strategies, refers to the plans that participants use to cope with the emotional and psychological burden they have because of working with refugees. Some of the participants indicated that they are traumatized because of the issues the refugees face. The participants who were aware of these emotional and psychological effects found ways to cope with these issues.

> "You are doing a session with a client or go to provide training, and you never know what you will hear and what you are hit by. The people working here mostly were

not graduated from this field (Guidance and Psychological Counseling Department), they don't know how to cope with these issues, and they don't have any defense mechanisms." P2

As the second participant stated, most people who have not graduated from psychology or related departments cannot even realize that they need help for their emotional and psychological difficulties while working with refugees. Some of the participants stated that they started going to the gym, began getting psychological help from a professional, and enrolled in some hobby classes such as painting and writing to cope with their emotions adaptively.

Discussion

National and international NGOs in Turkey contribute to the development of social cohesion and integration to meet the needs of refugees since 2011. Thus, the experiences of NGO workers are critical in facilitating refugee integration. Two main themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews conducted: Praxis and reflexivity.

One of the main findings of this research is that the NGO workers engaged with refugees personally are young graduates with no or limited experience. There were only two experienced participants working at different NGOs for years with refugees and children. These participants with limited experience started to work with refugee since refugee crisis in Turkey emerged. Thus, NGO workers who had primary contact with trauma survivors had limited experiences. The high demand for NGO workers emerged rapidly with the Syrian war (Maniatis, 2018). Therefore, this need for "professionals" were compensated by people with limited or no experience. Turkey's economic hardships made working with refugees an opportunity rather than a political and humanitarian commitment (Robinson, 2014). As shown with reference to the reflexivity theme, NGO workers may engage with activities and take irrelevant roles in organizations. Thus, the refugee influx in Turkey brings along a potential crisis for service providers. Teloni (2011), and Teloni et al. (2020) reported similar results regarding the job definition and caseload of NGO workers.

All of the participants were not supported through supervision and personal sessions. Ten participants stated that this impacted their work since they felt depressed, anxious and unmotivated in their personal lives. In addition, research shows that the lack of supervision in social work have an impact not only on the working conditions and the social workers but also on refugees and users who are getting help from these workers (Guhan & Liebling Kalifani, 2011; Robinson, 2013, 2014; Teloni, 2011). Supervision should not be considered a "luxury" but a mandatory service to help social workers understand their role, skills, and ethical dilemmas (Teloni et al., 2020). Furthermore, NGO workers wellbeing is vital to provide effective services to refugees (Masters & Masters, 2014). Since the participants cannot get a professional supervision help, they mostly show psychological symptoms which is stated under the psychological awareness code.

The participants who can use reflexivity in their job are aware of their problems and how these problems affect their careers. These reflective participants can reflect on their emotions when they are helping refugees and try to be objective and consider this situation like a job rather than an emotional issue as a human sentiment. Furthermore, these participants search for coping mechanisms in their institutions and personal lives. On the other hand, some

participants stated that they consider their job as a "heart affair" and are "helping" refugees because they have feelings not because it is their job. These participants were unaware of their secondary traumas and the cases in which they were affected. They were not looking for any coping mechanism since they thought that they were not affected by the services they were providing to refugees. Since they couldn't reflect on their emotions, they also show less psychological awareness as a result of the difficult event they faced with.

This study demonstrated that participants' educational level does not have an impact on the reflexivity level. On the other hand, participants who graduated from psychology or psychological counseling departments have a higher emotional reflexivity than the other participants. In addition to these emotional and psychological difficulties, participants indicated the importance of the political context on their work. Ambiguity of the refugee integration process in Turkey (Çelik & İçduygu, 2019) leads to the uncertainty and lack of trust towards to NGO workers in the field. Furthermore, the immigration policy in Turkey make the working environment of NGO workers vulnerable.

In addition, this research revealed that NGO workers use advocacy and praxis to promote human rights and social justice issues through their position. However, only two participants stated their role as a human rights defender. Considering the growing hate and prejudice in Turkey towards refugees, human rights and social justice issues should be more focused in social work.

Conclusion

Reflective activities enable the objectivity and egalitarian relationship with the people underserved, refugees in this case (Aluwihare Samaranayake, 2012). As a result, it can be said that participants who can reflect on their emotions can stay objective, analyze the wider social and political aspects of the refugee issue, search for coping mechanisms in their job and create a balanced relationship with the refugees. On the other hand, participants who cannot reflect upon their emotions consider themselves from a superior position, which needs to help them and feel sorry for them. Furthermore, they are not aware of the secondary traumas and cases affected by. Thus, they are not searching for any coping mechanisms. Ultimately, they start to feel insufficient and inadequate. They are not working as professionals but as a "heart affair."

 All the participants who can reflect upon their emotions are graduated from the related field (psychology, guidance, and psychological counseling), or they have at least a 10-year-experience in working with disadvantaged groups (women, people with disabilities, prisoners). It can be concluded that people working with refugees or any disadvantaged group should be graduated from related fields and be educated on how to reflect upon their emotions while working with these underprivileged groups. Also, these people need additional training and supervision from an experienced employee in their institution at least for five years to learn how to cope with emotional issues and how to take care of themselves as human beings.

The current study had some limitations concerning its design and application. Since few participants were interviewed for the data collection process, results cannot be generalized to larger populations. Besides, using interviews as a qualitative data collection method includes the interviewer effect threat by its nature.

Although the adaptation process requires an ecological perspective, including all stakeholders of the refugee adaptation issue with the employees working with refugees, an examination of

the employees' needs and problems stay restricted in both number and scope. Adaptation of refugees is a multidimensional issue in which all stakeholders' coordination is necessary. There is an urgent need to analyze the employees' needs and give them a voice, considering them during refugee people's adaptation process.

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