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Older Turkish Migrants in Germany: Why Do They Have a Higher Risk of Feeling Lonely?

Background

Since the 1960s, an increasing number of labour migrants, particularly from countries with lower wage levels, came to Northwestern Europe. As a response to shortages of unskilled labour, European governments recruited so-called guest workers, initially from Southern Europe and subsequently from the Maghreb region of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) and Turkey. Despite the 1973 oil crisis and contrary to those migrants from Southern Europe, the Turkish and Maghrebian guest workers did not return en masse to their home countries. Instead, an additional flow of immigration arised through family reunification and family formation. In Germany, for instance, the number of migrants increased from around 686,200 (Western Germany) in 1961 to 7,186,179 in 2010; the number of Turkish migrants, representing the largest group of foreign residents in Germany, increased from a estimated 6500 to 7000 in the beginning 1960ies to 1,629,480 in the last 50 years.

The first generation of these migrants is now approaching retirement age. Despite their persistent wish to spend their later life in their country of birth, most of the older immigrants will stay in the host society. One of the main obstacles to return home are: presence of (grand)children and high-quality social and healthcare services in the destination country, fear to lose one's residence permit and pension rights, and women's fear of restriction in their freedom of movement in their country of birth. Instead of returning permanently, they opt for travelling back and forward, spending several months a year in their country of birth while keeping official residence in Europe (de Haas & Fokkema 2010). This phenomenon of pendular migration is also becoming increasingly popular among the current older Turkish migrants in Germany. For example the percentage of stays with a duration longer than 6 month in Turkey increased from 11% in 1996 to 30% in 2002 (Uslucan 2004).

As the group of older migrants has become larger in numbers and hence more visible, there is a growing interest for them, not only by practitioners and policymakers but also by researchers. The main interest is especially focused on their disadvantaged and vulnerable position in society (e.g., Lindert et al., 2008; Mackenbach et al., 2008; Micheel & Naderi, 2009; Scheppers et al., 2006; Solé-Auró & Crimmins, 2008; Treas & Mazumdar 2002). Older migrants experience higher levels of financial hardship, health problems and housing deficits compared with their native peers. In addition, due to their poor linguistic skills and different cultural values and norms and forms of expression, they often lack a network of native citizens and are less likely to take part in social activities. Moreover, older migrants make less use of healthcare services, particularly long term care services for the elderly like nursing homes, home care and homes for the elderly.

Given their less favourable position in western society, it is not surprising that older migrants are often assumed to be lonelier than their native peers. Prior research repeatedly found a strong positive correlation between poor health and financial difficulties, whether measured objectively or subjectively, on the one hand and loneliness on the other hand (e.g., Wenger et al. 1996; Havens & Hall 2001). A number of past studies also have shown a relationship between housing and neighbourhood characteristics and loneliness feelings: for instance, those living in deprived neighbourhoods are specifically at risk of feeling unsafe, dissatisfied and lonely (Deeg & Thomése 2005; Scharf & De Jong Gierveld 2008; Scharf et al. 2004; Patsios 2006; Van der Meer 2006).

Empirical evidence for higher levels of loneliness among older migrants, however, is meagre. Due to the lack of large-scale survey data among older migrant populations, only some qualitative studies on their subjective well-being have been conducted so far (e.g., Karamat Ali, 2001; Treas & Mazumdar, 2002; van den Hoogen & Pallast, 2003). Outcomes of these qualitative studies largely confirm the general idea that low socioeconomic status, poor health and living conditions are the main determinants of loneliness amongst

older migrants, apart from some group-specific risk-enhancing factors like homesickness, missing family members and friends left behind, and experiences with racial discrimination, stigmatization and other negative reactions from the outside world. However, no quantitative indication is given of the extent to which older migrants are more likely to be lonely than their native peers, neither of the differences in impact on loneliness of these diverse factors.

Furthermore, little is known about the extent to which specific features of migrant families are likely to protect them from loneliness. In this respect, a general strong religious and family orientation among migrants seems to be relevant. With regard to religious orientation, numerous studies have shown that religious affiliation (being member of a religious community, denomination, or religion) as well as religious participation (attending religious meetings) are higher among migrants, especially those coming from non-European cultures and Muslim countries in particular, than non-migrants. With regard to family orientation, migrant families are generally characterized by high levels of family cohesion or family togetherness and, related to that, a high degree of intergenerational support exchange. However, while previous studies are rather conclusive about the protective effect of religiosity on loneliness, less agreement exists on the exclusively beneficial effect of a strong kinship-oriented (support) network. High levels of interaction and support exchange do not only increase the sense of belonging but also can lead to conflict and tension, feelings of dependency among recipients, and a high burden on care providers. Moreover, migrants' strong family orientation is often accompanied by a strong sense of family obligations (de Valk & Schans, 2008; Merz et al. 2009). Accordingly, as loneliness refers to one's subjective experience of a difference in actual and desired social relations, migrants' stronger kinship ties and intergenerational support exchange might be counterbalanced by their greater emphasis on family commitments.

Aim, research questions and hypotheses of the paper

Against this background, the aim of our study is to examine the difference in prevalence of later-life loneliness and its determinants between Turkish older migrants living in Germany and their German peers with no migration background. We addressed the following research questions:

- (1) Are older Turkish adults in Germany lonelier than their native peers?
- (2) If so, what are the main explanatory factors for their higher levels of loneliness?; and
- (3) Are there factors that specifically protect older Turkish adults from loneliness?

Two groups of hypotheses will be tested:

H1: The level of loneliness amongst older Turkish adults is higher due to

- Lower socioeconomic status
- Poorer health status
- Higher relational standards

H2: Those risk factors will be (partly) compensated by

- Greater social embeddedness in family
- More informal support exchange

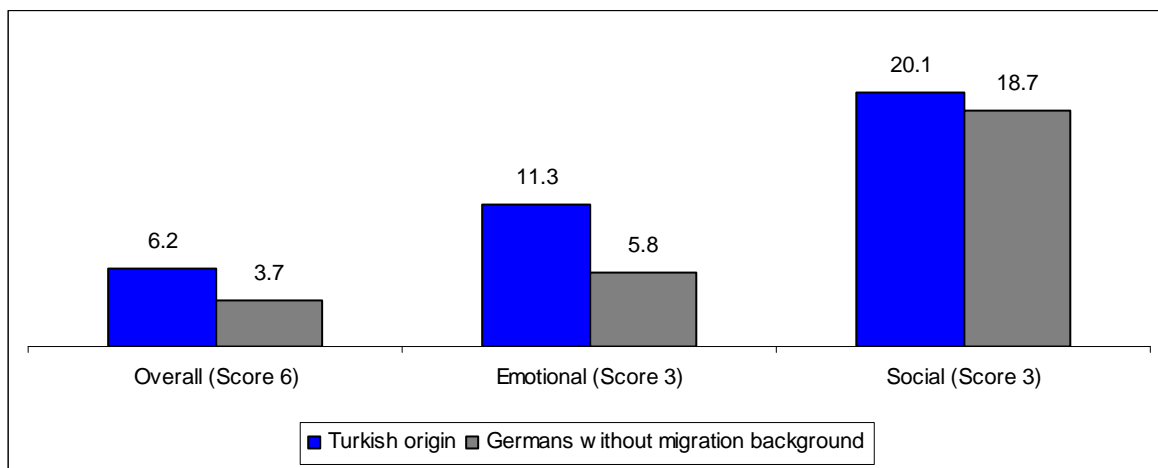
Data Source and Method

We will use data from the first wave of the German Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). In two different samples, about 10,000 Germans and 4,000 migrants of Turkish origin were interviewed face-to-face in 2005 and 2006, respectively. Both surveys were restricted to non-institutionalised individuals aged 18-79 and carried out by the German Federal Institute for Population Research ((BiB,,*Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung*) together with TNS Infratest under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva (Vikat et al., 2007). For Turkish migrants a translated questionnaire was available if needed.¹ The German questionnaire was translated into Turkish (forward translation) by an independent bilingual translator; no backward-translation was undertaken. Completion of the questionnaire took, on average, 57 (natives) and 73 (Turks) minutes. For our study, a selection of older adults aged 50-79 born in Germany (3,431) or Turkey (602) and with non-missing information on relevant variables has been conducted.

¹ One out of five was permanently (12.3%) or regularly (6.2%) interviewed in the Turkish language.

Loneliness, the dependent variable, is considered to be the outcome of the evaluation of the match between the quantity and quality of existing relationships and one's relationship desires (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Hence, loneliness does not only refer to the number of persons in a network but also on the quality of contacts (De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg 2010). Moreover, the concept of loneliness differs from objective social isolation and is therewith only measurable by subjective viewpoints. In this study, loneliness will be measured by the shorter, 6-item version of the De Jong Gierveld Scale (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006). Three items are positively formulated – “There are plenty of people that I can lean on in case of trouble”, “There are many people that I can count on completely” and “There are enough people that I feel close to” – and three items are negatively formulated – “I experience a general sense of emptiness”, “I miss having people around” and “Often, I feel rejected”. The answer categories are “no,” “more or less” and “yes.” Counting neutral and positive answers (“more or less”, “yes”) on the negatively formulated items and neutral and negative answers (“more or less”, “no”) on the positively formulated items result in the loneliness scale score, ranging from 0 (not lonely) to 6 (intensely lonely). Disagreement on the three positively formulated items express feelings of social loneliness, absence of broader, engaging social networks; agreement on the three negatively formulated items express feelings of emotional loneliness, absence of intimate relationships.

Percentage of maximum scores from the Loneliness index



Source: Generations and Gender Survey Germany, first wave main survey (2005) and supplemental survey of Turkish immigrants (2006)

Preliminary descriptives (see the figure above) indicate that older Turkish migrants are especially more emotionally lonely than their ‘native’ counterparts. Besides showing some more important descriptives in this paper, the results of regression models will be presented. The regressions will not only be performed for the overall loneliness score, but also for social and emotional forms of loneliness separately. In order to test the hypotheses, at least the following independent variables will be taken into account:

Models	Description
Control variables	Age, Sex
Socioeconomic status	Education, Employment, Financial hardship
Health	Subjective rate, Physically or mentally disabled
Relational standards	Filial obligation scale
Social embeddedness in family	Partner and Marital status Co-residence/contact frequency with children
Informal support exchange	Looking after grandchildren, Emotional support received, Emotional support given

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