

THE IMPACT OF SHARED IMMIGRATION PROCESS
ON COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS:
INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF TURKISH IMMIGRANTS IN GERMANY

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ASLI UZUN

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**THE IMPACT OF SHARED IMMIGRATION PROCESS ON COUPLE
RELATIONSHIPS: INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
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Aslı Uzun
122647001

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yudum Söylemez
İstanbul Bilgi University

Assist. Prof. Dr. Anıl Özge Üstünel
İstanbul Bilgi University

Prof. Dr. Mehmet Eskin
Koç University

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Name Surname: Aslı Uzun

Signature:

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how couples who immigrated from Türkiye to Germany experience changes in their relationship dynamics. Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (1996) provide the framework for examining how relational patterns change throughout the immigration process. The scope of the thesis includes both a theoretical and an empirical analysis. The first part of the study evaluates the literature on contemporary migration trends, psychological adaptation processes, and systems theories that explain relational changes experienced during the adaptation process. The second part presents the qualitative research conducted with seven Turkish couples who immigrated to Germany in the last decade. Four main themes emerged by utilizing the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis method: (a) Social Influences on Immigration Decision, (b) Adaptation as an Emotional Transition, (c) Impact of Entrenched Relational Patterns on Adaptation, and (d) Systemic Shifts Post-Immigration. The findings show that immigration is a significant transformational process for couples and that roles are redefined, forms of intimacy change, and coping strategies transferred from the past become influential. The findings are discussed in light of key concepts such as resilience, differentiation of self, multigenerational transmission, and societal emotional processes. This study contributes to the limited literature on contemporary Turkish immigration by providing insights on how couple relationships evolve under immigration challenges. It also offers culturally sensitive intervention suggestions for therapists who will work with immigrant couples.

Keywords: Immigration; Couple Systems; Bowen Theory; Family Resilience; Post-Immigration Adaptation

ÖZ

Bu tez, Türkiye'den Almanya'ya göç eden çiftlerin ilişki dinamiklerindeki değişiklikleri nasıl deneyimlediklerini incelemektedir. Bowen'ın Aile Sistemleri Teorisi (1978) ve Walsh'un Aile Dayanıklılığı Teorisi (1996), ilişki örüntülerin göç süreci boyunca nasıl değiştiğini incelemek için temel kavramsal çerçeveyi oluşturmaktadır. Tezin kapsamı hem teorik hem de empirik bir analizi içermektedir. Çalışmanın ilk bölümü, çağdaş göç eğilimleri, psikolojik uyum dinamikleri ve bu süreçte yaşanan ilişki değişiklikleri açıklayan sistem teorileri hakkındaki literatürü değerlendirmektedir. İkinci bölüm, son on yılda Almanya'ya göç eden yedi Türk çift ile yürütülen nitel bir araştırmayı sunmaktadır. Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz yöntemi kullanılarak dört ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: (a) Göç Kararında Sosyal Etkiler, (b) Duygusal Bir Geçiş Olarak Uyum, (c) Yerleşik İlişki Kalıplarının Uyuma Etkisi ve (d) Göç Sonrası Sistemik Değişimler. Bulgular, göçün çiftler için önemli bir dönüşüm süreci olduğunu ve rollerin yeniden tanımlandığını, yakınlık biçimlerinin değiştiğini ve geçmişten aktarılan başa çıkma stratejilerinin etkili olmaya başladığını göstermektedir. Bu çıktılar, dayanıklılık, ayrışma, kuşaklararası aktarım ve toplumsal duygusal süreç gibi temel kavramlar ışığında tartışılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, göç zorlukları karşısında çift ilişkilerinin nasıl evrildiği hakkında bilgi sağlayarak çağdaş Türk göçüyle ilgili sınırlı literatüre katkıda bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca göçmen çiftlerle çalışacak terapistler için kültürel açıdan hassas müdahale önerileri sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç; Çift Sistemleri; Bowen Teorisi; Aile Dayanıklılığı; Göç Sonrası Uyum

To my family across generations...

With gratitude for the traces of immigration woven into our shared story.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DoS:	Differentiation of the Self
FOO:	Family of Origin
IPA:	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
MTP:	Multigenerational Transmission Process
SEP:	The Societal Emotional Process
PI:	Primary Investigator

2. INTRODUCTION

Immigration is a major life event that affects individuals and their close relationships, and its psychological consequences have been widely studied (Berry, 1997; Van Hook & Glick, 2020). However, the relational experiences of couples who have recently immigrated from Türkiye to Germany (Türkmen, 2019; Güzel, 2024) have not been included in clinical psychology studies to date. Existing studies have mostly focused on the guest worker generation or the psychological consequences experienced by individuals (Chapin, 1996; White, 1995; Shirpak et al., 2011).

The aim of this thesis is to review the effects of immigration on couple relationships within the framework of the literature and to propose an understanding based on systemic and resilience-oriented processes. The first article covers a literature review that examines migration dynamics (De Haas et al., 2019), psychological adaptation processes (Berry, 1997; 2001; Bhugra, 2004), Bowen's Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (Walsh, 1996; 2002; 2016). The literature examines the historical, social, and psychological contexts of migration from Türkiye to Germany, revealing the effects of immigration on individual adaptation and couple relationships.

The second article investigates the shared immigration experiences of Turkish couples who immigrated from Türkiye to Germany after 2013. The qualitative research questions are as follows: (a) How do couples who are in early adulthood and immigrated from Türkiye to Germany after 2013 experience the shared immigration process? (b) What are the risk and protective factors that affect couple adaptation during and after the shared immigration process? In order to analyze the experiences of the participants Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method was utilized (Smith et al., 2009). Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (1996) established the framework for the discussion of the findings. In that sense, the study aimed to provide both theoretical and empirical contributions to the immigration literature by presenting a relational and systemic perspective on the adaptation processes of couples.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ARTICLE

2.1. Understanding Migration

Today, with the increasing phenomenon of migration, the effects of this process have become more noticeable, not only on individuals but also on couples and family systems. Migration creates a multidimensional transition process in the lives of individuals. The psychosocial, cultural, and structural changes experienced during this process are known to affect relational dynamics. Migration is often conceptualized as a three-stage process (pre-migration, migration, post-migration), and each is associated with specific psychological stressors (Bhugra, 2004). The model suggests that the impact of migration on mental health is correlated with the expectations, uncertainties, losses, and adaptation difficulties encountered during these stages. Therefore, understanding the effects of the migration experience should be addressed not only through the lens of individual psychopathologies but also through relational structures and resilience processes in a systemic context. In order to ground these relational experiences within a broader sociohistorical context, the following section first outlines global migration trends and motivations. This is followed by a more focused discussion on emigration from Türkiye. Finally, Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Framework (1996) are introduced as theoretical foundations to conceptualize the effects of immigration on couple relationships.

To begin with, this contemporary period is often referred to as “the age of migration” not because of the increase in the moving population in the world but due to the concept’s political salience. It is also the very reason why most of the migration literature lies in political science fields. Migration patterns have significantly changed with the start of European expansion in the sixteenth century and the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, leading to a large-scale shift of populations from rural regions to urban centers, both domestically and internationally. The long-distance migrations that began after 1945 and grew significantly from the 1980s now encompass all regions of the world. In that sense, one can suggest that the advancements in transportation and

communication technologies have made mobility easier. Migrants can now stay in close contact with family and friends in their home countries and travel more frequently between locations. As a result, international migration has become a key factor in the process of globalization. These changes are connected to the essential economic, social, and political transformations that define the modern world (De Haas et al., 2019).

De Haas et al. argue that the age of migration is likely to continue due to persistent wealth inequalities between rich and poor countries, which will drive large numbers of people to seek improved living conditions. Additionally, political and ethnic conflicts in certain regions are expected to trigger future mass refugee movements and the creation of new free trade zones will enable labor migration regardless of government intentions. However, migration is not only a reaction to difficult conditions in their home countries. It is also fueled by the pursuit of better opportunities and lifestyles. Economic development in poorer nations often increases migration by providing individuals with the resources to move. Although some migrants face exploitation or abuse, most benefit from migration and improve their lives through mobility. In many cases, migration offers better prospects than the poverty, insecurity and lack of opportunities at home, which is why it keeps continuing (De Haas et al., 2019).

The current migration literature interrogates certain general trends. However, before moving on with these, it is important to clarify who a migrant is. Many countries follow the UN's definition, which refers to someone living outside their home country for a year or more. If we look at migration from this perspective, answering the question "Who is a migrant?" might seem simple. In contrast, the answer is more complex in reality. To begin with, the term 'migrant' by nature encompasses a diverse group of individuals in various situations. Next, accurately counting migrants and determining how long they've been abroad is challenging. Also, in order to be able to define someone as a migrant, one has to answer the question "When does someone stop being a migrant?". From a legal perspective, this can happen by either returning home or gaining citizenship in a new country, with procedures for the latter differing widely. Finally, due to globalization, new 'types' of migrants have emerged, often referred to as members of transnational communities or diasporas (Kosler, 2016).

In order to clarify the term itself, there have been various attempts to categorize migrants: voluntary vs. forced, political vs. economic reasons and legal vs. irregular migrants. A common way to classify migrants is by distinguishing between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration. Forced migrants are individuals compelled to leave their home country due to factors such as conflict, persecution, or environmental issues like drought or famine. Another common distinction is between those who migrate for political reasons and those who migrate for economic reasons. Political migrants, typically refugees, are individuals forced to leave due to political persecution or conflict. Economic migrants, often referred to as labor migrants, move to seek employment or better job opportunities and working conditions. Labor migrants are frequently divided into low-skill and high-skill categories. Additionally, among political and economic migrants, there are people who move primarily for social reasons, such as women and children relocating to join family members abroad through family reunification. It's important to note, however, that a growing number of female migrants today are migrating independently for economic reasons (Kosler, 2016).

The last key distinction is between legal and “illegal” migrants, though Kosler proposes that the term “irregular” might be more precise and less stigmatizing than “illegal” when referring to migrants. Irregular migrants include various groups, primarily those who enter a country without proper documentation or with fake papers, as well as those who arrive legally but overstay their visa or work permit (Kosler, 2016). Understanding these categories is significant not only for gaining conceptual clarity but for better understanding the sample of this thesis and the experiences of the participants. The nature of migration, the motivations for migration, and the legal status of individuals directly shape the emotional and relational outcomes they encounter after migration. As Acartürk et al. (2011) claim, whether they are forced migrants, those migrating for economic reasons, or individuals relocating through family reunification, the psychosocial stressors and adaptation processes that each group encounters are different. Taking these differences into account will enable us to evaluate the relational experiences of migrant couples from a more holistic and nuanced perspective.

2.1.1. Current Migration Patterns

Migration today shows some clear patterns. It has become more global, with more countries involved and receiving migrants from a wide variety of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Migration patterns have also changed, especially after World War II, as Europe shifted from being a region of emigration to a major destination. There has been an increase in 'South-North' migration and new migration hubs such as the Gulf region have risen. On the one hand, many traditional emigration nations, such as Poland and Mexico, are becoming immigration destinations. On the other hand, some Latin American countries have seen the reverse. Additionally, women started to take on a central role in many migration flows, which used to be dominated by men. Thus, women increasingly characterize labor migration instead of men. Last but not least, migration has become a politically charged issue, which influences domestic policies, international relations and national security across the globe (Kosler, 2016).

2.1.2. The Historical Journey of Turkish Migration to Europe

In “Migration in European History”, Bade (2003) discusses Turkish migration to Europe, focusing on the significant flow that began in the 1961. This migration was largely shaped by labor recruitment agreements between Türkiye and several Western European countries, particularly Germany. The initiative was known as the “Gastarbeiter” (guest worker) program and its aim was to bring in temporary laborers to fill workforce shortages after the Second World War economic boom. Consequently, Turkish migrants were expected to return to Türkiye after a limited period. However, many stayed and their families joined them through family reunification programs. Thus, the program, which was designed as temporary labor migration, was transformed into permanent settlement. Over time, the Turkish community grew to become one of the largest immigrant groups in Germany and other European countries (Bade, 2003). These historical migration patterns have led to Türkiye becoming a country of emigration since 2.9 million people born in Türkiye were living overseas, mostly in Europe. In that sense, Turkish diaspora began to reach a considerable point, especially in Germany (De Bel-Air, 2016).

Consequently, they also started to have a significant impact on the social and cultural life of these countries. Simultaneously, they began to face different challenges such as integration, discrimination, and transition from temporary workers to permanent residents. Although they had a lot to struggle with, they maintained their strong communities and are still an important part of European society (Bade, 2003).

Their strong position not only drew attention from their host countries but also from their homeland. In her article "Explaining the Evolution of Türkiye's Diaspora Engagement Policy: A Holistic Approach," Arkılıç looks at how Türkiye's policies toward its diaspora have changed since the early 2000s due to a mix of domestic, transnational, and international factors. She explains that Türkiye underwent political and economic changes with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which created a new identity influenced by neo-Ottoman and Sunni Muslim ideologies. Arkılıç argues that this shifted Türkiye's approach to its diaspora. The growing influence of Turkish immigrants in their host countries encouraged Türkiye to seek support from them both to secure their votes and exert influence abroad. In addition, international factors, such as Türkiye's stronger position in EU talks and rising Islamophobia in Europe after 9/11, also contributed. Arkılıç argues that the AKP's rise has been the most significant factor, shaping Türkiye's outreach to its diaspora to favor conservative groups while often excluding protesters (Arkılıç, 2021).

2.1.3. Evolving Trends in Turkish Migration: From Guest Workers to High-Skilled Professionals in Germany

The nature of Turkish immigration to Germany is still evolving. As stated above, Turkish immigrants have originally come to Germany as part of the "Gastarbeiter" (guest worker) program in the 1960s. This group was primarily composed of low-skilled laborers. However, the second and third generation who were born there increasingly integrated into German society and began to contribute in a variety of fields such as education, business, and politics (Türkmen, 2019). For instance, the famous newspaper "Der Spiegel" brought Özlem Türeci and Uğur Şahin to its first cover of 2021 and described them as "heroes" (Danış & Zırh, 2021).

It is also important to note that recent migration flows to Germany were to some extent triggered by domestic events in Türkiye, such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests (Türkmen, 2019). Akçiğit's data shows that migration became more likely in the late 1990s, slightly decreased in the early 2000s and then grew significantly after 2015 (Akçiğit et al., 2023). An increasing number of highly skilled professionals and students began to move to Germany. It led to the Turkish diaspora becoming more heterogeneous and changed the traditional image of Turkish immigrants. Consequently, one can argue that identity and integration of immigrant Turks have been continually evolving and this transition is also in line with broader trends of migration and globalization. The Turkish community in Germany is attempting to redefine its role and challenge outdated perceptions of what it means to be Turkish in Europe (Türkmen, 2019).

Although it is not really possible to make sharp distinctions between these categories, the new generation of Turkish migrants are highly skilled individuals who seek opportunities in other countries in order to create a better life for themselves. In that sense, they consist of mostly voluntary and legal migrants, who might have both political and economic reasons for migration (Arslan & Okumuş, 2021). For instance, the article "New Wave Turks" portrays this group as highly educated individuals who moved due to higher education or career opportunities. They perceive themselves as distinct from the older Turkish diaspora because they don't think that their lifestyle or ambitions align. Thus, they tend to create their own communities, social circles and networks, which also paves the way for distancing themselves from traditional Turkish immigrants (Oldac & Fancourt, 2021).

Another study exploring high-skilled migration from Türkiye, authored by Ozcurumez and Aker (2016), characterizes highly skilled Turkish nationals as individuals with advanced qualifications who pursue international opportunities for career advancement, education, or personal reasons. These professionals, such as managers, directors, technicians, and students, often move within global labor markets and multinational corporations. According to the study, their desire for personal growth, improved work-life balance and career development emerges as the driving factors for their migration in addition to the financial incentives. Germany's migration and citizenship policies attract

such individuals, as these policies cater to their needs (Ozcurumez & Aker 2016). An illustrative example is the growing number of doctors who immigrated from Türkiye to Germany in a growing number in the last two years. Data from December 2022 highlights that 1,889 doctors holding Turkish citizenship were working as physicians in Germany. This represents a 23% increase between 2021 to 2022 (Güzel, 2024).

2.1.4. Complexities of Turkish Integration into German Society: Historical, Social, and Cultural Dynamics

The literature in the field shows us that complex factors have shaped the integration of Turks into German society. Germany historically positioned itself as a nation with limited immigration history. In addition, as mentioned before, Turkish immigrants initially arrived as temporary workers. These dynamics led to policies that restricted their rights and accordingly, Turkish migrants experienced difficulties due to their foreign status and cultural differences. The tension existed not only between Turkish and German communities in terms of discrimination and social resistance but also within the diaspora, especially between Turks and Kurds (Chapin, 1996).

White (1995) brings another perspective into the issue by examining the German-language literature and suggesting that there are problematic assumptions in the studies because they define and measure ‘integration’ in terms of adopting ‘German’ behaviors. Consequently, she argues that in some of the studies, structural barriers like citizenship and racial discrimination remain ignored. However, White also highlights context-sensitive studies, which explore migration as a continuous process. In such studies, the focus is placed on the shifting identities within the Turkish community and how cultural or religious markers take part in the process. Likewise, it is argued that there is a vibrant immigrant subculture that can be traced in the art, film, or literature that the community is producing with their hybrid identities. Taking a different approach, specific studies that were conducted with women explore their experiences with socialization, family roles and adapting to both societies’ expectations. Additionally, some others examine migration back to the home country and give us insights about the emotional and social challenges of returning (White, 1995).

Kağıtçıbaşı's studies have also been seminal in revealing the complexities of the integration of Turks into German society. Kağıtçıbaşı has focused on how family dynamics have evolved when faced with such socio-economic changes through both psychological and cultural lenses. She calls into question the assumptions of modernization theory which suggests that nuclear family structures shift from interdependent to independent with socio-economic development. Instead of this binary mapping, she proposes three different family patterns: total interdependence, independence and emotional interdependence. As is the case with Turkish immigrants, socio-economic progress does not necessarily result in Western-style families and we observe emotional interdependence, integrating autonomy with close family connections (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2002).

Another perspective is brought into the issue by Idema and Phalet (2007) who delved into the transmission of gender-role values within guest worker families. They found a difference between the sons and daughters of such families. On the one hand, sons typically continued more conservative values like their fathers which was also prompted by religious socialization. On the other hand, daughters adopted more egalitarian values, especially when their mothers were educated and egalitarian. According to their study, acculturation plays a role, too. They concluded that adolescents who were fluent in German and who faced less discrimination were more likely to adopt egalitarian views. Their inference from their work is that both family dynamics and societal context shape gender-role transmission (Idema & Phalet, 2007).

In contrast with the growing number of Turkish immigrants in Germany, recent migration flows remain relatively understudied. Most of the information covers only their basic demographic data. For instance, we know that they come from larger cities like Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara and many in this group are university graduates. Accordingly, there are many professionals, students, academics, or political exiles who decided to migrate due to political instability, economic hardship or repression in Türkiye. They embrace secular values and modern lifestyles and their differing identity from the established Turkish community in Germany makes them feel disconnected at times. Türkmen (2019) argues that their distinct image leads to comments like "but you don't look Turkish." This

results in a feeling of isolation from both Türkiye and Germany, and they often feel the need to explain their identity in both social and work settings (Türkmen, 2019).

2.2. Psychological Perspectives on Migration

Migration is a multi-layered process in which individuals are relocated not only geographically but also psychologically, socially, and relationally. Theoretical approaches developed to make sense of this process take into account the contextual conditions in which the migrant is located as well as their internal resources. To begin with, Bhugra (2004) considers migration as a three-stage process: pre-migration, migration, and post-migration. The experiences, such as separation, uncertainty, pressure to conform, and social exclusion in these three stages, directly affect the individual's mental health. Bhugra's model emphasizes that migration is not only an individual decision but also a process in which cultural identity, social roles, and relational structures are renegotiated (Bhugra, 2004).

Similarly, Berry's (1997) acculturation framework offers a perspective that examines how immigrants adapt to a new cultural context. As a result of his study, Berry suggested that immigrants can adopt four adaptation strategies. These are integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. In the integration strategy, individuals can maintain their own cultural identities while also establishing an active relationship with the host society. Assimilation, on the other hand, is defined as the individual moving away from their own cultural origins and completely adapting to the culture of the host society. In the case of separation, the individual remains attached to their own cultural identity and either has limited or no interaction with the host society. Finally, marginalization refers to moving away from both their own culture and the culture of the new society, resulting in the individual not being able to establish a strong bond with either culture. The study suggests that the healthiest form of adaptation in psychological and social terms is the integration strategy (Berry, 2001).

Although Berry's theoretical framework (1997) does not focus on couple or family relationships, his in-depth study of individual-level adaptation strategies is also important

for understanding the relational dynamics of immigrant couples. It allows us to ask other questions such as which adaptation strategies partners display, whether adopting different adaptation strategies creates tension in the relationship or creates opportunities for development. Consequently, this individual-level acculturation process might manifest itself in more complex ways within the family system or couple relationships. At this point, Carter and McGoldrick's (1980) family life cycle theory offers a complementary framework in terms of making sense of the systemic effects of migration. According to this model, families go through certain developmental stages throughout their lives. In other words, families undergo turning points, such as getting married, having children, or becoming empty nesters. All of these stages demand different tasks and adaptational needs. A major transition process such as migration can disrupt this life cycle in both timing and content, causing couples to redefine their roles, boundaries, and functions. Acartürk (2016) emphasizes that this structural transformation is shaped not only by external factors but also by family dynamics, coping strategies and relationship patterns transmitted from the past. The limited sense of agency, loneliness and expectations disconnected from reality observed especially in individuals who migrate through marriage are important factors affecting both individual mental health and couple relationships (Acartürk, 2016).

As a result, it is necessary to address the psychological effects of migration with a multi-layered approach that connects individual, relational, and developmental levels. When acculturation strategies, life cycle transitions and the multi-stage nature of migration come together, migrant couples are forced to redefine their place in a new society, as well as each other and themselves. In this context, the migration experience can be evaluated as a process that brings to light both the vulnerabilities and the potential for transformation of the relational system.

2.2.1. Couple Dynamics in Immigration

The complex challenges faced by immigrant families and couples are reviewed in various meta-analyses due to immigration's notable effects on family and marital relationships as well as broader social structures. To begin with, Van Hook and Glick (2020) highlight

several factors that affect their family life. An important element appears to be transnational family connections because family members maintain ties across borders, which in turn influence their family roles and expectations. Another crucial factor emphasized by the authors is the legal and societal context of the host country since bureaucratic procedures tend to disrupt family stability by creating psychological, economic, and social stressors. Acculturation and enculturation processes play a role particularly in the context of multigenerational relationships, since family members try to find a balance between preserving cultural values and adapting to new social norms (Van Hook & Glick, 2020).

A meta-synthesis focuses more specifically on the effect of migration on marital relationships in Canada. The researchers summarize the key changes that emerge in marriages after migration as the change in gender roles, the loss of social support and the inability to practice one's profession or demonstrate one's skills in the new community. Communication also appears to be a critical point in managing these transitions. In some studies that they have investigated, partners evolve together during these experiences and demonstrate resilience skills like improving their communication or renegotiating household responsibilities. However, some others face heightened marital conflict due to changes in traditional gender roles or employment status. When a partner becomes unable to practice their professions after migrating, that person feels more frustrated and disempowered, which further strained marriages. Consequently, factors such as social support and the couple's ability to adapt to new roles and responsibilities shape each couple's unique experience and determine whether migration would strengthen or strain their marital relationships (Guruge et al., 2010). This section will explore in more detail the studies that highlight the challenges for couples and the factors that contribute to their resilience after immigration.

2.2.1.1. Post-Immigration Challenges for Couples

Several studies shed light on the challenges that immigrant couples face and one of the determinant factors appears to be the gap between the cultural adaptation of married partners. Spouses adjust to their new cultural environment in distinct ways and multiple

cases have found that this led to tensions and conflicts within marriages. For instance, the study conducted by Rapaport and Doucerain (2021) highlight that during the immigration process partners may face different challenges and they lead to disparities in cultural adaptation and employment or legal status. As a result, they become a source of stress in couple relationships. Another factor is put forward by Kanat-Maymon et al. (2016), who argue that differing language proficiency also leads to declines in marital satisfaction and increases in conflict. In a similar manner, Shirpak et al. (2011) conducted a study with Iranian couples in Canada. They discovered that one spouse, often women, adapts more quickly to the egalitarian gender norms of the host country and the other spouse struggles to adjust, which in turn creates tension in the relationship. The shared theme in these studies is the gap between the partners which disrupts the balance of their relationship and they become forced to navigate these new power dynamics. Thus, one can suggest that alignment in cultural adaptation serves to maintain marital harmony in immigrant families.

Another prevalent theme that appears in multiple studies is the shift in gender roles after migration. Shirpak et al. (2011) argue that in Canada Iranian women gained more access to education and employment opportunities that enhanced their autonomy. It challenged the patriarchal structures. Darvishpour's (2002) research on Iranian families in Sweden also has similar findings. Women's independence increased and men struggled to adapt to their declining roles as primary breadwinners. These dynamics are reflected as tensions in the relationship. Another interesting study has been carried out with two different populations migrating to the same country, Moroccan and Pakistani women in Italy. Accordini et al. (2018) report that while Moroccan women generally gained greater autonomy, Pakistani women kept their traditional roles that made them feel isolated in the process. Combined, these studies document that migration can become a new path for empowerment and equality for women but disruption of established gender roles contributes to marital conflict.

The loss of extended family support and the concurrent feelings of isolation also emerge in the literature. Rapaport and Doucerain (2021) emphasize that the loss of extended family support in Canada intensifies stress in relationships because couples are forced to

manage conflicts on their own. Similar findings are apparent in Darvishpour's (2002) study, which notes that Iranian families in Sweden feel the lack of mediation of extended family members in their relationship. In addition, Hyman et al.'s (2008) study of Ethiopian immigrants in Toronto highlights the absence of household help and emotional support from family members as factors that create an increase in conflict and a decline in marital satisfaction. In these cultures, familial support systems function as a key source of stability and their loss makes it more challenging to adjust to their new social environments and to maintain marital harmony.

Last but not least, couple dynamics play a role when managing such a demanding transition period. The absence of effective communication and shared decision-making determine the amount of discord within marriages. For instance, Rapaport and Doucerain (2021) reported unilateral decision-making, which stems from differences in cultural adaptation or legal status, resulted in resentment and struggles in marriage. This theme is also present in Sim et al.'s (2021) study who claim that couples should find effective ways to communicate and combine their strengths to navigate challenges. All in all, importance of communication and mutual support come forward from these studies as qualities that couples should embrace in order to overcome the pressures of migration.

2.2.1.2. Post-Immigration Couple Resilience

The factors that were mentioned as challenges in the previous section can also be experienced as a growth opportunity depending on the resilience skills of the couples. To begin with, a shift in traditional gender roles contributes to higher levels of marital satisfaction when both partners adapt to new responsibilities and shared decision-making. For example, Hyman et al. (2008) found that Ethiopian immigrant women in Canada began to play a more influential role in family decisions after gaining more independence. Similarly, Cheung's (2008) study shows that when women enter the workforce, household duties had to be redistributed and men started to take on responsibility in their homes. As in such cases, when more flexible gender roles were internalized by both partners, women began to feel more empowered, which contributed to the couple's marital satisfaction and fostered a healthier balance in relationships.

Secondly, loss of family support and shrinkage in social networks can also be experienced as a chance to increase emotional intimacy and mutual dependence. With such changes, couples often have to rely more on each other both for emotional and practical support. There are many unexpected stressors that come with migration and it was found in Cheung's (2008) research that overcoming them together enhanced the reliance of partners on each other and strengthened their emotional bonds. In a similar manner, Ethiopian immigrant couples in Hyman et al.'s (2008) study had to manage household and financial tasks together which made them more interdependent after migration. In these studies, participants reported deeper intimacy and cooperation because they felt that the experience was shared and they were able to deal with new challenges together.

Thirdly, due to the changing nature of struggles in the migration process, resolving conflicts effectively comes forward as a critical factor to sustain relationship satisfaction. A supporting finding is present in Johnson et al.'s (2019) study which investigated conflict frequency among couples. They revealed that although there are additional stressors for immigrants, their conflict frequency resembled German couples and remained stable over time, suggesting that conflict is not a compulsory by-product of the migration process. Cheung (2008) also claims that clear communication and compromise help immigrant couples to resolve conflicts and maintain satisfying relationships. This finding aligns with Shirpak et al.'s (2011) work which highlights that Iranian couples in Canada have shown improved emotional intimacy and communication as they made their decisions collaboratively. These studies suggest that effective communication and conflict resolution strategies enable couples to be relationally more resilient despite the pressures of migration.

Lastly, utilization of cultural adaptation gaps makes a difference in the relationship dynamics of immigrant couples. Sim et al. (2021) found that such gaps can become a complementary feature in their relationships. For instance, a partner can maintain stronger ties to their native culture while the other acculturates more quickly. Consequently, if they are able to draw on their respective strengths, it can promote resilience in their relationship. This finding is also supported by Cheung (2008) who noted that couples, who were able to find a balance between keeping their former ties and adapting to their

new environment, experienced greater life satisfaction. Thus, one can argue that support networks, whether in the home or host country, help couples navigate the challenges of the adaptation phase if the mismatch in acculturation is handled with cooperation by spouses.

2.3. Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Understanding how couples adapt relationally and emotionally to immigration requires a systemic lens that considers patterns of interaction, emotional regulation, and multigenerational influences. Precisely because of that, Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) provides a foundational framework for examining how individuals function within the emotional unit of the couple and family system, particularly under stressors such as immigration. Its emphasis on differentiation of self, emotional reactivity, and multigenerational transmission is especially relevant for analyzing the relational dynamics of immigrant couples navigating systemic transitions.

As stated, Bowen's family systems theory is based on the patterns that families develop to cope with adversity and how they manage anxiety. According to Bowen, the tension between emotional closeness and individual autonomy is one of the major sources of anxiety in family dynamics. Families might slide to extremes by creating too much closeness with togetherness or keeping too much distance by separation. He claims that this is the very source of the stress in relationships and all families are always engaged in an ongoing effort to balance these forces (Bowen, 1978).

In order to elaborate more on Bowen's theory, his concepts (individuality and togetherness) should be understood. For Bowen, these two concepts, no matter how contradictory they may seem at first, form the basis of all human relationships in life. On the one hand, individuals gravitate towards individuality in order to make sense of their own identities, while on the other hand, they try to stay emotionally connected to their environment, which fosters closeness (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). While both of these forces play a major role in family relationships, they can also become a source of conflict as family members struggle to find the balance between connection and independence. The

level of tension within a family is not only affected by external stress factors, but also depends on the family's general emotional maturity, their sensitivity to emotional themes and often their degree of self-differentiation. Bowen argues that families with higher differentiation levels address challenges more effectively. However, families with lower differentiation levels tend to have more reactive responses, including anxiety that leads to chronic stress (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

For this very reason, Bowen makes a distinction between acute anxiety, which emerges from real life difficulties and chronic anxiety, which continues in the absence of adverse events and becomes a lasting stress response. It begins to have an impact on all interactions and relationships in the family. In order to better explain the foundation of his theory, he elaborates on a framework that consists of eight interrelated concepts. These include differentiation of self (maintaining connection with autonomy), triangles (utilizing a third party to manage relational tensions), nuclear family emotional system (how emotional issues are manifested within the family), family projection process (how parents transmit their emotional challenges to children), emotional cut-off (if one distances himself or herself emotionally from family members), multigenerational transmission process (how emotional patterns are passed on across generations), sibling positions and societal emotional process (how such dynamics are reflected in broader society) (Brown, 1999; Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) is the main theoretical framework that guides the analysis of this study. Migration is one of the major life events that carries unexpected tensions in the family system and the process necessitates the management of this anxiety in the system. Thus, Bowen's theory emerges as a substantial framework when trying to understand their experiences. Differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional system, and multigenerational transmission process will serve as the foundation for examining how couples navigate their immigration journey. Given the multicultural nature of the study's participants, the concept of societal emotional process is also relevant, as it provides a broader context for analyzing how societal influences and cultural factors impact family dynamics (Brown, 1999). This section will delve deeper into the definitions and analyses of the interconnections between these core concepts.

2.3.1. Differentiation of the Self

Bowen's Family Systems Theory is based on the concept of differentiation of self and can be defined as the ability of an individual to make a distinction between their emotional and cognitive functions. In other words, differentiation refers to the ability to think and act independently without being subject to emotional pressure from others. According to Bowen, this ability allows the individual to make more independent decisions, to make self-reflections and to act purposefully. It encourages one to remain flexible and make thoughtful decisions even in times of anxiety (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In the context of immigration, this capacity becomes especially significant, as partners are often faced with heightened emotional stress, shifting roles, and systemic uncertainty that demand both personal clarity and relational stability (Bhugra, 2004). In contrast, undifferentiation or ego fusion leads to emotionally reactive behaviors. In other words, the individual's behavior becomes predominantly directed by the emotional dynamics around them. Thus, it is challenging for a person with a low differentiation level to maintain autonomy, which makes them more prone to external validation or sensitive to the opinions of others. Such people are more likely to confuse their thoughts with their emotions (Nichols & Davis, 2016).

Differentiation exists on a continuum and Bowen claims that a person's stance on it is largely determined by the degree to which they have achieved emotional separation from their family of origin. According to Bowen, this variability in differentiation levels is affected by two major factors. The first is their parents' emotional separation from their own families. The second is the nature of their relationships with parents, siblings and other relatives. Because each child has a unique relationship with their parents, emotional separation also varies among siblings (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

At this point, it is important to highlight that Bowen does not refer to emotional distancing by differentiation. In Bowen's theory, togetherness is as important as differentiation. These are explained as the interplay of two instinctual life forces. On the one hand, differentiation directs individuals to be more autonomous and self-regulated. On the other hand, togetherness pulls family members toward emotional closeness and

interconnectedness. These two forces function by counterbalancing each other (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) proposes that individuals in collectivist cultures often strive for a self that is both autonomous and relational. This culturally embedded model aligns conceptually with Bowen's notion of differentiation of self - particularly in the way immigrant couples must navigate individual needs and family obligations under stress.

Kerr and Bowen (1988) argue that complete emotional separation from the family of origin is uncommon because early attachments remain unresolved to varying degrees. In that sense, therapy and the interventions derived from the theory help individuals achieve self-efficacy. From a therapeutic perspective, an individual can enhance their ability to remain autonomous while maintaining their emotional connections with others. This enhances one's ability to navigate relationships and consequently, the individual develops more emotional resilience and adaptability across life's challenges (McGoldrick, 2016).

2.3.2. Multigenerational Transmission Process

In line with Bowen's concept of multigenerational transmission, migration experiences also contribute to the emotional and cultural heritage passed down within families. McGoldrick et al. (2005) highlight that for instance, all Americans, whether they acknowledge it or not, have faced the intricate stresses of migration. These effects may persist across multiple generations. The circumstances surrounding a family's migration, such as their reasons for leaving, what they sought (survival or progress) and what they left behind (wealth or poverty), shape the family's cultural values and identity. Parents' views on both the past and future play a big role in the messages that they pass on to their children which can be either spoken or unspoken in the family (McGoldrick et al., 2005).

To better understand this concept, multigenerational transmission process (MTP) describes how family dynamics relate to the transmission of emotional patterns and emotional maturity from one generation to the next. Bowen (1978) argues that parents project their own level of emotional maturity onto their children, thereby influencing their children's emotional functioning and capacity for differentiation. Intense and high emotional reactivity of family members may lead to fusion within the family, often

referred to as "undifferentiated family ego mass" (Bowen, 1978). This situation can cause children to become emotionally too involved with their parents or to experience emotional cutoff. In the latter cases, emotional distancing from the family, experiencing emotional or physical problems, conflict and projection of unresolved issues to their own children can be observed (Nichols & Davis, 2016).

The extent to which children are affected by family fusion is proportional to the extent to which they are involved in the family's emotional processes. We would expect the child who is least involved to have higher levels of differentiation and less chronic anxiety. Conversely, the child who is most fixated on fusion will have lower levels of differentiation and higher levels of chronic anxiety. In such cases, children struggle to develop independent thought because they either conform to or rebel against their parents' anxieties. It is observed that such children often continue to repeat emotional patterns inherited from their parents even when they leave home (Nichols & Davis, 2016).

Bowen's theory emphasizes the importance of examining at least three generations when working with family issues, as it facilitates making inferences about how emotional cycles and anxiety are transmitted over time. In this way, an individual can make sense of their own experiences within relationships and discover his or her own role in this process. Gaining awareness of the family's emotional transmission history strengthens one's sense of self and continuity while promoting neutrality about the patterns of relating within the family. According to Kerr, understanding the functioning of previous generations helps family members detach from current struggles and better understand how emotional forces shape the present (Brown, 1999).

2.3.3. The Societal Emotional Process

In the context of immigration, Bowen's final addition to his theory, societal emotional process (SEP), is expected to become particularly relevant, as immigrant couples are directly affected by the anxieties, tensions, and polarization present in the host society. SEP allows for drawing parallels between anxiety-related processes within families and broader social dynamics. Just as anxiety within the family causes reactive and automatic

responses and limits problem-solving ability, societal anxiety manifests itself in similar symptom-focused precautions within society. For instance, institutions may concentrate on specific groups just like anxious parents do on their children, which accommodate their insecurities instead of offering principled leadership. This dynamic frequently fosters the formation of polarized “us vs. them” discourse around controversial social issues, where emotional reactivity drives division (Brown, 1999).

Bowen also recognized a reciprocal relationship between anxious families and anxious societies, where stress within one side can intensify social anxiety on the other side. In turn, it contributes to a feedback loop of sustained tension and uncertainty (Brown, 1999). For instance, anticipations about social forces might have an impact on family functioning. Social issues such as gender or class discrimination, or ethnic prejudices, are characterized in Bowen's work as toxic emotional processes that increase social stress (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Additionally, Bowen's societal projection process concept can also be traced in how dominant groups in a society perceive more marginalized populations (McGoldrick et al., 2005). It becomes particularly relevant when considering immigrant communities in the present study. These dynamics can pave the way to understand how societal anxiety leads to migration decisions or guides the experiences of immigrant populations in the host country.

Bowen's work acknowledged not only the adversities in societies but also focused on the potential for development and maturity within social systems. According to Bowen, just like families, social groups can work on finding more balanced ways to overcome their challenges and thus break their dysfunctional cycles (Brown, 1999). It is important to note that Bowen claimed families with higher levels of differentiation were more resilient in resisting any harmful influences (Nichols & Davis, 2016). Thus, it can be suggested that differentiation emerges as a protective factor against the negative emotional processes within both families and society.

2.4. Family Resilience Theory

Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (1996) will also be utilized to make sense of the outcomes of this thesis. This theory is particularly relevant for this study, as it offers a strengths-based framework to understand how immigrant couples adapt and maintain their functioning in the face of migration-related adversity. Walsh explores resilience not as an individual trait but as a group process by focusing on how families adapt during challenging times. Walsh's developmental systems framework (2016) explains that each life stage brings new demands from family members that can be perceived as immediate crises or long-term stressors. The birth of a child, a serious illness or the loss of a family member are all examples of such key life transitions. What works during one period may become less effective as circumstances change and thus, each life phase may require unique resources and strategies. Consequently, Walsh highlights that in such a transitory period, roles of family members and dynamics in the family might shift (Walsh, 2016).

Adaptability comes forward as a significant quality in a changing context. According to Walsh, flexible structures, good communication and shared beliefs are common factors observed in resilient families because these are the very traits that foster unity and hope. In addition to these internal strengths of the family, they are also able to get more support from their communities, helping them turn challenges into growth opportunities. Consequently, Walsh claims that both family dynamics and the broader social environment have an impact on family resilience (Walsh, 2002).

Building on this foundation, Walsh's (2002) family resilience framework provides practical methods to help families who are facing various challenges, either as a crisis or a prolonged stress. By utilizing different strategies, this framework aims to help families mobilize their resources and strengthen family bonds by focusing on building family strengths. During the intervention process, families learn to view difficulties as growth opportunities. Psychoeducational groups can be given as an example for an intervention, in which families acquire skills in problem-solving and stress management. Walsh's framework is also applied in programs developed for families affected by war, which

provide culturally sensitive support to help families share their experiences and find strength within their communities (Walsh, 2002).

Falicov (2012) expands on Walsh's concepts and focuses on the resilience in immigrant families, arguing that migration is also a challenging process that necessitates adaptation. In the case of migrants, resilience manifests itself as the ability to balance cultural preservation with embracing elements of the new culture, leading to a bicultural identity. Immigrant families can strengthen their sense of continuity and stability by maintaining communication with the opportunities provided by digitalization and making visits to the home country. Meanwhile, they should also strengthen their belonging to and unity in the host country by blending traditional and new cultural practices. All in all, resilience for immigrant families requires being able to adapt creatively to both cultures and preserve what they have inherited while building a new life (Falicov, 2012).

Buckingham and Brodsky (2015) also benefited from the family resilience framework to study immigrant families especially focusing on acculturation gaps. They conducted their studies with Salvadoran immigrant families in the USA. In their studies, it was observed that traditional resilience skills such as having a positive perspective or solving problems collaboratively were utilized in cultural conflicts. However, novel strategies also emerged. Being open-minded, acceptance and the priority given to the family strengthened the sense of unity in the family, even though there were differences in cultural adaptation. Development of new organizational patterns and reduction of exposure to potentially divisive cultural practices also found to be effective when dealing with acculturation gaps in the family because they helped to minimize conflicts. These processes requiring flexibility and adaptation demonstrate how immigrant families attempt to balance family unity with cultural adaptation (Buckingham & Brodsky, 2015).

2.5. Summary & Conclusion

Global migration trends have been shaped by developments in communication and transportation, as well as major historical events such as the Industrial Revolution (De Haas et al., 2019). This large-scale phenomenon has become one of the fundamental

elements of globalization and has created challenges as well as opportunities for individuals and societies (Kosler, 2016). One of the specific cases of migration is the Turkish migration to Europe, especially to Germany. This migration process began in the 1960s with the "Gastarbeiter" (guest worker) program which was initially meant to be temporary to fill labor needs after World War II. However, most of them stayed despite the integration and discrimination challenges that they faced due to limited rights and cultural differences (Bade, 2003; Chapin 1996).

The recent waves of Turkish immigrants in Germany differ from previous generations since they are to a great extent highly skilled professionals with motivations ranging from political to economic reasons (Arkılıç, 2021; Türkmen, 2019). They are attracted by better job opportunities and challenge the traditional views of Turkish immigrants, which adds complexity to how the diaspora is perceived (Güzel, 2024; Ozcurumez & Aker, 2016). Recent Turkish migrants feel caught between these older communities and stereotypes about them (Türkmen, 2019).

Over the years, not only has the Turkish immigrant profile changed but so have studies on their integration. Previous studies used to approach integration as adopting German values but the latter ones began to view it as an evolving process, also taking into account the changing gender roles and mixed identities (White, 1995; Idema & Phalet, 2007). Still, there is a lack of research on the unique challenges faced by Turkish families who have immigrated to Germany in recent years and the coping strategies they use. In that sense, Berry's acculturation model focuses primarily on individuals. However, it also provides a structured approach to consider how mismatches in adaptation strategies between partners can create tension or growth opportunities within couple relationships (Berry, 1997, 2001).

Similarly, Bhugra's (2004) model, which conceptualizes migration in three stages (pre-migration, migration, and post-migration), provides a useful lens for understanding the emotional stressors that emerge at different stages of the journey. In this context, Acartürk et al. (2016) emphasize that migration pathways are linked to distinct psychosocial stressors and adaptation demands; whether forced, economic, or through family

reunification. Recognizing these differences is of great importance in understanding how relational experiences vary among immigrant groups.

The literature highlights that migration, as a significant life transition, can interfere with the normative progression of the family life cycle, disrupting not only its timing but also the developmental tasks associated with each stage (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). Events such as marriage, childbirth, or role transitions require adaptive responses, and when burdened by the challenges of immigration, these tasks become more complex and emotionally demanding. Moreover, Acartürk (2016) highlights that beyond structural factors, family dynamics and intergenerationally transmitted coping strategies play a decisive role in the adaptation phase of couples. For instance, individuals who migrate through marriage may face a limited sense of agency, isolation, and unmet expectations; each of which significantly impacts both their mental health and their intimate relationships.

Studies conducted in different countries with various nationalities clearly show that immigration has a significant impact on couples and families. Relationship dynamics change as tension between partners arises due to adaptation, language proficiency and employment status dissimilarities. In cases where women gain more autonomy in the host culture, couples have conflicts unless they are able to adjust to their new roles (Rapaport & Doucerain, 2021; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2016; Shirpak et al., 2011; Darvishpour, 2002; Accordini et al., 2018). Moreover, immigrant couples must cope with these challenges alone because of the loss of extended family support in the new country. The lack of emotional and practical support and the stabilizing presence of family members add to their stress (Rapaport & Doucerain, 2021; Hyman et al., 2008).

Immigration can also benefit relationships. During and after immigration, couples have to overcome many anticipated and unforeseen problems together. In this process, they have to rely more on each other and the bond between them becomes strengthened (Cheung, 2008; Hyman et al., 2008). Compromise, open communication and shared decision-making are found to be important pillars of conflict management that facilitate resilience and reduce stress (Cheung, 2008; Johnson et al., 2019; Shirpak et al., 2011; Sim et al., 2021). In some studies, researchers have discovered that shifts in gender roles after

migration enhance marital satisfaction since women gain more independence while men take on more household responsibilities (Hyman et al., 2008; Cheung, 2008). Lastly, findings indicate that balancing their traditional values with their new way of life enables couples to experience greater satisfaction and resilience (Sim et al., 2021; Cheung, 2008). The increasing number of individuals migrating from Türkiye to Germany (Akçiğit, 2023; Güzel, 2024) highlights the need to better understand their unique immigration experiences in order to develop preventive and supportive interventions. Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (1996) are employed as complementary frameworks to analyze the impact of immigration on couple relationships in this thesis. On the one hand, Bowen's model (1978) helps to understand how migration-related stress increases emotional reactivity, challenges the balance between individuality and togetherness, and triggers old relational patterns in couples. On the other hand, Walsh's resilience-focused approach (2002) shifts the focus to strengths and shows how couples use their relational resources, create meaning together, and adapt under pressure and uncertainty. Taken together, these two theories offer a foundation for understanding how immigration affects not just living conditions, but also the inner workings of close relationships.

Bowen's family systems theory examines how families handle anxiety and maintain a balance between emotional connection and individual independence. The disruption of the balance often creates tension within the family (Bowen, 1978). Differentiation of self lies at the core of the theory, which can be defined as the ability to maintain emotional connection with the family while preserving autonomy. This ability enables families to cope more effectively with stress (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Concerning this study, nuclear family emotional system, multigenerational transmission, and societal emotional processes will also be employed. These concepts demonstrate how emotional patterns and family structures are transmitted across generations and within larger social environments (Brown, 1999). It is expected that the application of Bowen's theory to immigrant couples will provide insights into their shared experiences, especially in terms of managing autonomy and connection in a new cultural context.

Walsh's family resilience theory focuses on the ability of families to adapt together during crises. The theory treats resilience as a group process, and in this respect, it will have a complementary function to Bowen's family systems theory in this thesis. Families with high resilience have been shown to have more flexible structures, open communication and shared beliefs. These families can turn challenges into opportunities for growth (Walsh, 1996; 2016). In both crises and prolonged stress situations, the family's internal strengths and available community resources can be utilized according to Walsh's framework (Walsh, 2002). For immigrant families, resilience involves balancing cultural values with adaptation to the host culture; developing a bicultural identity; and maintaining continuity through transnational connections (Falicov, 2012).

3. RESEARCH ARTICLE

3.1. Introduction

Immigration is one of the life events that significantly affects relational systems as well as individuals. Although the psychological consequences of immigration, such as depression and anxiety, have been widely studied (Berry, 1997; Van Hook & Glick, 2020), the relational processes of couples experiencing immigration have received relatively less attention in studies. Consequently, there is a significant gap in how close relationships are reshaped by the immigration experience. Most of the research has focused on the adaptation of cultural values, with a focus on the individual as the unit of analysis. As an example, Berry (1997, 2001) identifies four adaptation strategies in his acculturation framework study. These are integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Berry (2001) defines integration as maintaining one's cultural identity while interacting with the host society, which has been associated with the most positive psychological and relational adaptation outcomes. Similarly, Bhugra (2004) conceptualizes migration as a three-stage process of pre-migration, migration, and post-migration. Different psychological stressors come into play at each stage. This model highlights how emotional strain can accumulate across stages and affects not only individual well-being but also relational stability (Bhugra, 2004).

There are also studies examining Turkish immigration to Germany. These studies have focused on issues such as cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, and socio-economic integration, and employed guest workers as their sample (Chapin, 1996; Idema & Phalet, 2007; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2002; Phalet & Güngör, 2009; White, 1995). However, recent immigrants from Türkiye to Germany have distinctly different characteristics than previous immigration waves. In other words, this “brain drain” phenomenon, characterized by highly educated individuals seeking professional opportunities (Türkmen, 2019; Güzel, 2024), has not yet been systematically examined. Although the number of highly skilled immigrants increases every year, the relational dynamics within this new population, especially between couples, have not been investigated to date.

Relational and systemic dimensions of migration have received more focused attention in international scholarship (Sluzki, 1979; Falicov, 2012). Falicov (2012), who conducted one of these studies, conceptualized migration as a “multi-stage family transition” involving emotional rupture, loss, reorganization, and reconnection across borders and generations. Similarly, Walsh’s (2002) studies support that resilience processes in immigrant families are reinforced by shared belief systems, flexible organizational patterns, and open emotional communication. Family systems theories emphasize that migration affects the entire family unit and triggers emotional, structural, and functional reorganization (Falicov, 2012; Walsh, 2002). Therefore, Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (1978) will provide a framework for understanding how relational patterns, differentiation of self, and multigenerational processes may affect couples’ adaptation to immigration-related stress. Additionally, Bowen’s concept of societal emotional process (Bowen, 1978) will provide the lens for how social forces, such as economic instability or social polarization, impact relational functioning by intensifying anxiety within family systems.

In addition to these frameworks, Carter and McGoldrick’s (1980) Family Life Cycle Theory offers a developmental perspective on how major life transitions, such as migration can disrupt the expected progression of relational milestones. According to this model, families move through normative stages (such as, marriage, parenting and launching children). Each stage requires specific developmental tasks and relational adjustments. Migration can interfere with the timing and content of these transitions within the couple system. This model complements systemic theories by emphasizing that relational stress during immigration might also be an interruption in expected developmental trajectories.

Studies addressing the psychological health of immigrants have highlighted both risks and opportunities. They have reported increased sensitivity to difficulties associated with anxiety, depression, and relational strain. They have also reported increased risks of social isolation and conflict in the family. These difficulties are often worsened by unfamiliar cultural norms, language barriers, and the loss of extended support systems (Shirpak, Maticka-Tyndale, & Chinichian, 2011). These studies provide valuable insights, but they

have often conceptualized immigrants as passive recipients of stress rather than active agents driving social and relational changes. In this regard, Acartürk et al. (2011) emphasize that migration patterns with different purposes expose individuals to different psychosocial stress factors. These varying migration experiences can shape their emotional and relational reactions in different ways. Acartürk (2016) adds that the psychological impact of immigration is not only shaped by external stressors but also by the family system's coping capacity and pre-existing relational dynamics, which may be transmitted across generations.

Migration has also been associated with opportunities for relational growth and increased closeness. Studies show that adjusting to life in a new country together can foster deeper emotional bonds and a stronger sense of cooperation between partners (Cheung, 2008; Guruge et al., 2010; Hyman et al., 2008). For some couples, the loss of broad social support and increased dependence on each other have served as catalysts for mutual support and shared decision-making. In studies, this shift has been interpreted as strengthening relational resilience. When both partners adopt more flexible gender roles and develop collaborative coping strategies, migration-related stressors are more likely to be experienced as opportunities for growth (Cheung, 2008; Hyman et al., 2008). Additionally, Johnson et al. (2019) found that despite the challenges of migration, the frequency of conflict among migrant couples did not differ significantly from native couples. In this context, effective communication and relational harmony are thought to serve as protective factors. However, within these positive relational changes, systemic processes such as individual differentiation, role renegotiation, and multigenerational transmission of coping strategies have not been sufficiently investigated.

Based on this background, the present study aims to examine the shared experiences of Turkish couples who recently immigrated to Germany in order to fill these gaps in the literature. The study adopts a systemic lens and investigates how immigration affects relational dynamics. Drawing on Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (1996), the study examines how established relational patterns interact with the process of adaptation. These theories were chosen because they provide complementary perspectives for understanding how immigration activates pre-existing

relational patterns (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) while also illuminating the protective and adaptive processes that foster resilience in couples facing prolonged systemic stress (Walsh, 1996; 2002; 2016). In doing so, it focuses on how couples renegotiate their identities and relationships, both within the couple unit and in their connections with their families of origin. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the appropriate method to capture the depth and complexity of the couples' lived experiences. IPA's emphasis on the meaning-making processes of the participants and its idiographic and contextual understanding (Smith et al., 2009) closely align with the systemic and relational focus of this study.

The study explores how relational systems are reshaped by the immigration experience through semi-structured interviews with seven Turkish couples who immigrated to Germany in the past decade. Specifically, this study explores how couples make sense of their relational histories in light of immigration, manage communication processes under stress, balance autonomy and togetherness in a new cultural environment, and how their family of origin impacts their adaptation. The aim is to illuminate the systemic changes that occur as couples navigate emotional, cultural, and relational transitions. By situating the experiences of contemporary Turkish immigrant couples within a systemic framework, this study hopes to enrich the migration literature with a relational perspective that acknowledges both risk and resilience factors. Furthermore, it aims to offer insights for clinicians working with immigrant populations by emphasizing processes that can support relational adaptation and well-being during such major life transitions.

3.2. Purpose of the Study

Existing studies on Turkish immigration to Germany have focused mainly on the guest worker generation through the lens of intercultural psychology (Chapin, 1996; Idema & Phalet, 2007; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2002; Phalet & Güngör, 2009; Türkmen, 2019; White, 1995). The more recent wave of immigration, though, is often described as “brain drain” and is distinguished from previous immigration structures due to its unique characteristics. This group has not yet been extensively studied from a systemic perspective, particularly

regarding relational dynamics. As a result, there is a significant gap in the literature on how contemporary Turkish immigrant couples manage the emotional and relational transitions triggered by immigration. Migration studies aligned with the clinical psychology framework emphasize the psychological difficulties faced by immigrant groups and mention high rates of depression, anxiety, and family conflict (Shirpak et al., 2011). However, the relational resilience and adaptation experiences of immigrant couples have not been addressed. Systemic processes such as the differentiation of self in romantic relationships, emotional patterns, and multigenerational influences have not been researched to date.

When immigration is approached as a life transition that reshapes relational ties, a qualitative and systemic approach is necessary to capture this complex dynamic. Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Framework (1996) are well-suited to provide strong theoretical foundations for examining how couples change relationally throughout the immigration experience. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative design that allows for an in-depth examination of couples' lived experiences. Therefore, the current study aims to examine the shared immigration experiences of Turkish couples who were in early adulthood when they immigrated to Germany after 2013. In detail, it seeks to understand how relational dynamics change, how systemic factors impact these changes, and how couples develop resilience in the face of immigration-related challenges.

In line with the aim of this research, the following research questions were formulated:

- a) How do couples who are in their early adulthood years and immigrated from Türkiye to Germany after 2013 experience the shared immigration process?
- b) What are the risk and protective factors that influence the couple's adjustment during and after shared immigration?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a relational, systemic and resilience-focused understanding of the adaptation processes of immigrant couples. The study aims to contribute to the systemic migration literature. In this regard, the results of this study can pave the way for community-based preventive programs in order to foster the resilience of couples, strengthen couple relationships and support them during a challenging life event, such as immigration.

3.3. Method

3.3.1. The Primary Investigator (PI)

I am a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology graduate program at Istanbul Bilgi University, specializing in Couple and Family Therapy. I hold bachelor's degrees in both Psychology and Sociology, and my interest in couple and family therapy emerged from my enthusiasm for topics that bridge these fields.

Migration is a deeply personal subject for me. When tracing my family's roots, one would encounter four different points on the current world map. I grew up hearing stories of migration from previous generations who had moved across borders and within the borders of Türkiye, shaping our family's history. Being raised surrounded by these narratives and later witnessing many of my friends move abroad during my seven years of professional life, the topic naturally resonated with me. When I returned to academia to pursue my graduate studies, immigration was the only subject that truly excited me. What attracted me most was that it touched both psychology and sociology, while also offered opportunities for practical application.

Recognizing a significant gap in the contemporary literature on this subject, and with the approval of my thesis advisor, I finalized my decision to focus on it. I approach the study from a systemic perspective and employ a qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of immigrant couples through their own narratives.

3.3.2. Participants

The study included seven heterosexual couples who migrated from Türkiye to Germany following the guidelines for sample selection proposed in graduate-level IPA studies (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Smith et al., 2019). Prior to data collection, a pilot interview was conducted to refine the interview schedule and procedure. Participants were eligible if they were born in Türkiye, spoke Turkish as their mother tongue, were between 25 and 40 years old at the time of immigration, held at least an undergraduate degree, migrated

due to one partner's employment or education opportunity, were in a romantic relationship for at least one year before migration, and had lived in Germany for at least six months. The age range was selected to capture early adulthood, a developmental period characterized by tasks such as achieving autonomy, establishing financial independence, and forming committed romantic partnerships (Santrock, 2019). The one-year relationship duration was determined based on Fisher, Aron, and Brown's (2006) findings suggesting that couples typically enter the early attachment phase after the first year of romantic involvement. Similarly, the six-month post-migration criterion was informed by Oberg's (1960) work, which describes this initial period as the "honeymoon" phase of cultural adjustment.

Participants were excluded if they had a diagnosed psychological disorder, had children or did not identify as being in a heterosexual relationship. Individuals with psychological diagnoses were excluded to minimize emotional risk during the interview process. Couples with children were not included, as the transition to parenthood introduces significant changes to relational dynamics from both a systemic and developmental life cycle perspective (Walsh, 2016). Likewise, same-sex couples were excluded, as LGBTQ+ migration may involve distinct motives and relational trajectories, often conceptualized in the literature as "sexual migration" (Yue, 2013), which falls outside the scope of this study.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 3.1. The following is a brief overview of each couple, summarizing their backgrounds, reasons for immigration, and relationship histories to provide context for the relational dynamics explored in the study. The first couple interviewed (M: 35, F: 35) both held master's degrees and had been together for six years. The male partner is an engineer and the female partner is a teacher. They had lived in various major cities in Türkiye, although their families reside in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions. The couple immigrated to Munich two and a half years prior to the interview. Their decision to immigrate was shaped by multiple factors, including dissatisfaction with their professional lives in Türkiye, the lack of personal time, and concerns about the challenges of raising a child in their home country. They described their immigration as a proactive step toward building

a more balanced and secure future. They were married before moving abroad and emphasized that their decision was also guided by a desire for long-term well-being and stability.

Table 3.1. Participant Information

	Age	Years Together	City	Years Since Immigration	Employment Status	Degree
W1	35	6	Münich	2.5	No	Masters
M1	35	6	Münich	2.5	Yes	Masters
W2	35	16	Berlin	10	Yes	Masters
M2	35	16	Berlin	11	Yes	Masters
W3	33	4	Münich	1	No	Bachelors
M3	32	4	Münich	1	Yes	Masters
W4	30	6	Hannover	3	Yes	Bachelors
M4	31	6	Hannover	5	Yes	Bachelors
W5	31	5	Berlin	1	Part-time	Bachelors
M5	29	5	Berlin	1	Part-time	Bachelors
W6	31	2.5	Berlin	1	Yes	Masters
M6	35	2.5	Berlin	2.5	Yes	Bachelors
W7	29	5	Hamburg	2	Part-time	Bachelors
M7	28	5	Hamburg	6	Yes	Bachelors

The second couple (M: 35, F: 35) had been together for 16 years and were married one year prior to the interview. They are both working in white-collar corporate jobs. They met during their university years in Central Anatolia and later relocated to Germany, where they have lived for the past ten years in various cities. Their families reside in Central Anatolia and the Aegean region. Their reasons for immigration were multifaceted, including the desire to pursue further education, access different life opportunities, and create distance from a difficult family environment. For them, immigration symbolized not only a search for professional development but also a step toward emotional independence and a new beginning as a couple in a more autonomous context.

The third couple (M: 32, F: 33) were married and had been together for four years at the time of the interview. The male partner is an engineer and the female partner is a lawyer. He holds a master's degree while she holds a bachelor's degree. They had been living in Munich for one year, having moved from Türkiye where both of their families reside in Central Anatolia. Their decision to immigrate was driven by a growing sense of economic instability and dissatisfaction with the working conditions in Türkiye. They expressed concerns about the rising cost of living, housing difficulties, and a general belief that these challenges would only worsen in the future. For them, immigration represented a search for greater stability and a more sustainable future.

The fourth couple (M: 31, F: 30) had been in a relationship for six years and were married during the immigration process. The male partner works as a medical doctor and the female partner is a nurse, both holding bachelor's degrees. They decided to get married in order to proceed with a family reunification visa, which allowed them to live together in Germany. The male partner had been living in Germany for five years, while the female partner joined him two years later. Over this period, he had lived in multiple cities across Germany. The male partner grew up mostly in a small Aegean town, although his family lives in the Marmara region now and the female partner's family resides abroad. Their decision to immigrate was shaped by professional dissatisfaction and a lack of future prospects in Türkiye, especially in the medical field. Immigration, for them, was both a practical and existential choice in search of personal and professional alignment.

The fifth couple (M: 29, F: 31) had been in a relationship for five years and chose to marry shortly before immigrating. Both partners hold bachelor's degrees and were enrolled in master's programs in Berlin at the time of the interview. Originally from the Aegean and Inner Western Anatolian regions, they had met while studying in the Marmara region and later chose to live for a while in a rural village in Türkiye as part of a shared lifestyle decision. Their immigration to Germany occurred one year prior to the interview and was primarily motivated by difficulties in finding meaningful employment in Türkiye, as well as the availability of graduate programs aligned with their career goals. For the female partner, social pressures and prevailing narratives within their peer and

family networks also played a role in shaping the decision. The couple decided to get married before relocating abroad.

The sixth couple (M: 35, F: 31) had been together for two and a half years and were already married at the time of the interview. The male partner holds a bachelor's degree and the female partner holds a master's degree. Both work in white-collar positions within corporate companies. Originally from the Marmara and Aegean regions, they had relocated to northern Germany, where the male partner had been living for two and a half years and the female partner for one year. Their decision to immigrate was influenced by a combination of deteriorating conditions in Türkiye, professional opportunities in their respective fields in Berlin, and a desire for long-term stability, including the prospect of acquiring citizenship. Their relationship began around the same time the male partner decided to move abroad, and shortly thereafter, they got married in order to initiate the family reunification process.

The seventh couple (M: 28, F: 29) had been in a relationship for five years and got married after the male partner had immigrated. Both are medical doctors with bachelor's degrees. The male partner had been living in Germany for six years and the female partner for two. They had resided in several small cities in the northern part of the country and were, at the time of the interview, living in a small town near Hamburg due to being employed in different locations. Their decision to leave Türkiye was largely driven by the difficulties of working as a doctor in the Turkish healthcare system, including job insecurity, lack of future prospects, and growing fears of violence against healthcare professionals. Their families reside in Southeastern Anatolia and the Aegean region. For this couple, migration was a strategic and safety-driven decision, grounded in professional concerns and long-term life planning.

All interviewed couples could be characterized as socially liberal and professionally ambitious, many of whom came from more traditional family backgrounds. Notably, each partner had graduated from top Turkish universities and held well-respected positions or were pursuing advanced degrees, earning middle or above-average incomes in Türkiye. Despite their socioeconomic standing, they cited multiple pressing factors driving their decision to immigrate, such as economic instability and political suppression. Turkey

ranked last among OECD countries with a score of 4.98 compared to an OECD average of 6.69 in the life satisfaction index. (TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2024). These contextual pressures highlight how broader structural issues shaped their immigration trajectories and strengthened their pursuit of professional, personal, and relational well-being abroad.

3.3.3. Procedure

Firstly, approval was obtained from the Istanbul Bilgi University Ethics Committee, and then purposive snowball sampling was employed in order to recruit participants. The PI prepared a flyer containing the research information and inclusion criteria. The PI shared this flyer on her personal social media accounts and WhatsApp groups. The PI's friends who were immigrants shared it with the immigrant communities they were a part of, which provided access to a larger pool of potential participants who met the sampling criteria. Participation was completely voluntary. Those who were acquaintances with the PI were not included in the study to minimize bias.

Potential participants were first asked to fill out a demographic screening form (Appendix B) via email. The PI sent an informed consent form to those who met the inclusion criteria and did not fall into exclusion criteria (Appendix A). Those who did not meet the criteria were excluded from the study and their personal data was immediately deleted in accordance with ethical standards. In addition, an email was sent explaining the reason for not being included in the study and offering the opportunity to contact the PI for further information.

After obtaining informed consent, interview appointments were scheduled. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via the Zoom platform, with both partners interviewed simultaneously. Access to the meetings was password-protected to prevent unauthorized entry and ensure confidentiality. The PI attended each session from a private location using a headset, and participants were instructed before the interview to participate in a private area where they could express themselves comfortably.

Interviews were conducted within the framework of a semi-structured guide based on the literature (Appendix C). A pilot interview was planned to test the interview guide before

the main study. Two revisions were made after the pilot interview. The questions the PI asked at the beginning to warm up the participants were shortened to allow more time for foundational relational questions that came later on during the interviews. In addition, the salary question in the first demographic screening form was changed to questions about current employment and percentage change in salary due to the variability in salary values over the years. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and each session lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. They were recorded using Zoom's video recording function to capture both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Upon completion of data collection, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) according to the PI's research objectives. Video recordings were used in the analytical phase to interpret contextual and nonverbal communication. Emerging themes and subthemes were shared with participants for member-checking. No participant offered changes or corrections. Three participants stated that reading about other couples' experiences was personally meaningful and emotionally supportive.

3.3.4. Data Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is useful for examining in detail the meanings that individuals attribute to significant life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The idiographic and experiential focus of IPA closely aligns with the aims of this study, taking the immigration literature into consideration. Therefore, IPA was employed to make sense of the shared immigration experiences of Turkish couples. The basic assumption of IPA, namely that participants are experts in their own experiences (Allan & Eatough, 2016) and IPA's attention to persons-in-context (Braun & Clarke, 2013) were also consistent with the systemic and participant-centered approach adopted in the study.

All interviews were recorded as audio and video. They were then transcribed verbatim by the PI. In addition to the recordings, field notes taken during the interviews were also consulted during transcription. Throughout the process, the PI engaged in reflexive journaling to stay aware of her own assumptions and emotional responses, which could

shape the interpretation of participants' narratives. Personally identifiable information was removed from the data during the transcription process to ensure participant confidentiality. In order to organize and code the data, MAXQDA software was used.

The steps outlined in IPA by Smith et al. (2009) and refined by Engward and Goldspink (2020) were followed for data analysis. First, the PI familiarized herself with her data through repeated readings of the transcripts and field notes. Three different levels of exploratory commentary were sought during this phase. These were descriptive comments that focused on the lived experiences of the participants, linguistic comments that examined how the participants expressed their experiences, and conceptual comments that provided insights. Coding was iterative and reflexive. In other words, emergent themes were allowed to surface through close engagement with the participants' meaning-making processes, in line with the interpretative nature of IPA (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Themes emerged from the transcripts, and comparisons were then made across cases to identify general patterns and differences. The emergent themes and the PI's initial analyses were reviewed by a triangulated investigator to increase reliability. Additionally, a peer debriefing was conducted. The PI and a classmate independently coded a transcript and compared their findings to ensure consistency and relevance across the emerging themes. Finally, participants were invited to comment on whether the themes and sub-themes accurately represented their experiences through a member-checking procedure. These steps collectively aimed to enhance the credibility and transparency of the analytic process, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived realities.

3.3.5. Trustworthiness

In order to ensure trustworthiness in this study, a variety of strategies were used in accordance with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were collected through videotaped interviews, and field notes provided additional context. A reflexive journal was kept throughout the research process to increase the researcher's awareness of positionality and potential biases. As part of the peer debriefing process, the PI's classmate independently coded one of the interviews. The resulting codes were

compared and discussed to ensure consistency. An audit trail was created, which included interview recordings, full-text transcripts, field notes, reflexive journal, coding memos, and documentation of the theme development process. The aim was to ensure transparency and traceability. Finally, the resulting themes and subthemes were emailed to participants and their feedback was sought on whether the themes accurately reflected their experiences. No changes were suggested by participants. Three participants found reading the accounts of other couples meaningful and emotionally supportive.

3.4. Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: Social influences on immigration decision, adaptation as an emotional transition, the impact of entrenched relational patterns on adaptation, and systemic shifts post-immigration (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Summary of Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Social Influences on Immigration Decision	Immigration as an Escape Seeking a Value-Based Belonging Role of the Family
Adaptation as an Emotional Transition	Adaptation Begins Before Immigration Catalysts and Constraints Immigration's Emotional Landscape Adaptation as an Ongoing Process
Impact of Entrenched Relational Patterns On Adaptation	Internal Narratives About the Relationship Communicative Indicators Balance of Self and Togetherness Inherited Coping Strategies
Systemic Shifts Post-Immigration	Becoming a Team Under Pressure Reconfiguration of Couple Roles Reconstructing Intimacy Building Relational Resilience Transforming Family Bonds

Each quote is labeled with a code (e.g., W1, M2), where the woman and man are identified as 'W' and 'M' respectively. The number indicates the order in which the interview was conducted (e.g., the woman in the third couple interview is labeled W3).

3.4.1. Social Influences on Immigration Decision

Under this theme, participants highlighted how immigration was often driven by a desire to escape worsening political, social, and economic conditions in Türkiye, rather than solely pursuing opportunities abroad. The common discourse in their social environment, “let’s just go somehow”, played a role in encouraging this decision. Participants also cared about whether the country they were going to shared similar values to theirs. In this process, hearing from friends or acquaintances who had immigrated before was influential. Germany was often chosen not only because of shared values, but also because it is in geographic proximity to family. The desire to maintain emotional closeness with family, without being completely cut off, was another factor that stood out in their decisions.

3.4.1.1. Immigration as an Escape

In all the interviews conducted, the most important factor in the participants’ decision to immigrate was dissatisfaction with the conditions in Türkiye. Participants not only expressed their dissatisfaction with the current conditions, but also shared concerns about the negative trajectory of political, social, and economic developments, and anticipated that conditions would continue to deteriorate. One woman stated, “After experiencing some problems in the last year, both with what was happening around us, in the country, and in our own business lives, the overseas life started to become more important. That's why we decided to immigrate.” (W3)

Along with these, the poor working conditions in Türkiye were a prominent topic. Participants referred to long working hours, the inability to maintain a healthy work-life balance, and the salary being increasingly insufficient to create the life they dreamed of. For example, M7 said:

For five years, I will give up on my life, almost erase it as if it doesn't exist, and work non-stop, just to start living a life afterwards. But even then, I don't know whether that life will truly be lived or not. It becomes such an unbalanced job. Work takes away almost everything from your entire life.

For this reason, although participants may have immigrated to Germany for educational or professional opportunities, it became evident that to a large extent their primary motivation was not necessarily to pursue these goals, but rather to escape the challenges they were facing in Türkiye. M5 explains:

There was a commonly heard discourse in our surroundings: Let's just somehow make it to Germany, or abroad in general. The economic and social conditions in Türkiye were highly uncertain and increasingly deteriorating. So, the general sentiment was that anyone who had the means was already leaving. As a result, people started thinking, let's just go, no matter how, just go.

3.4.1.2. Seeking a Value-Based Belonging

After making the decision to immigrate, the prominent narrative in choosing Germany was that the values of the destination aligned with the individual's own values. Various topics were mentioned, such as nature, peace, obeying the rules, respect for life, the rule of law, a sense of safety, and the presence of a social welfare state. One of the participants expressed his feelings about the harmony of his values after immigration by saying, "I already belong here." (M1) Another participant shared how the process became easier when she realized that her values matched, even though she did not want to come to Germany at first, with the following words: "As I realized how suitable Germany is for me in many ways, that adaptation process was actually quite positive for me. It's all about having a set of rules, people following them, I like things like that." (W2)

According to the participants, one way to understand the compatibility of values before immigrating is to talk to friends or their networks who have migrated before. Having similar people from work or school who immigrated beforehand and listening to their experiences creates motivation and a sense that their values may be compatible. One

participant reflected on the role of the social environment in understanding the compatibility of values, stating the following: “We had a couple of friends here too. After their positive comments, I started looking here as well although I was considering the Netherlands in the beginning.” (M3)

3.4.1.3. Role of the Family

This subtheme emerged from the narratives of all participants and highlights how the family can act as either a reinforcing or challenging influence throughout the immigration process. This influence is shaped both by real-life experiences (such as whether there are family members who have previously immigrated and how they evaluated that experience) and by how families perceive and approach the idea of immigration. In this study, what is shared is not only how participants' families acted but also how these attitudes - rooted partly in lived history and partly in perception - were transmitted across generations.

For example, M2 explained how the presence of immigration stories in his family history, and the generally positive view of those experiences, made his own journey feel more natural and less questioned:

Like I said, my grandfather came from there too, his parents also moved and they kept going. So it kind of felt like this was how things were meant to be in our family; there wasn't really that whole, 'You're immigrating? Where are you going?' kind of response.

In contrast, W7 described a very different family pattern. She explained that for generations, no one had even left the city they were born in, and even if they moved away for education, they always returned. Reflecting on this, she shared:

There's this story in my family that kind of repeats itself, like 3–4 generations back. My mom's grandfather, maybe even someone she never met, was exiled to Istanbul. They left behind all their land, their gold, everything... started over in a tiny house, worked new jobs and did not get to learn their mother language. And

then, after like 20 years, they went back - same house, same life, like picking up where they left off.

After hearing this family story, W7's reflections such as "If it were up to me, I wouldn't have immigrated. I wouldn't recommend it. I feel like a stranger here no matter what." took on deeper meaning and emotional context.

Another striking point that emerged in participants' narratives was that, even though families were not physically living with their children in Türkiye, they still described the resulting loss of closeness as a sacrifice they themselves had made. While one participant (W5) said that her family strongly supported her decision to leave, she also recalled them saying: "Of course I want you to be with me, but why would you face such treatment in this country? I mean, just because you will be with us." As a result, many participants reported choosing a destination where they could maintain some level of closeness or accessibility to their families. M4 reflected on this by saying:

I was close to my family. I chose Germany so that I wouldn't be too far away from them. You have to think about those parameters - what are you leaving behind in Türkiye, how far away do you want to go, things like that.

3.4.2. Adaptation as an Emotional Transition

This main theme is composed of narratives describing the complex emotional journey that accompanies immigration. This deeply felt journey, which begins even before physical displacement, continues long after arrival. Different levels of readiness for the process, the availability or absence of relational support, and external challenges such as language barriers or cultural differences stand out in participants' experiences. While emotions such as struggle, anxiety, and sadness were frequently emphasized during the interviews, participants also described efforts to remain resilient by focusing on the feeling of security, small gains, or long-term goals such as citizenship. Participants' experiences showed that the process goes far beyond the adaptation to daily life and is an emotional transition, painting a picture of ongoing negotiations between loss, hope, comparison, and belonging.

3.4.2.1. Adaptation Begins Before Immigration

While some participants moved forward with the process by conducting research and making preparations for many years in line with their immigration goals, for others, it happened much more quickly and felt like an experience they could not adequately prepare for. Participants who prepared more before physically migrating shared more positive views about adaptation. For instance, M7 expressed his experience with following words:

Instead of preparing for the medical specialization exam in Türkiye, I focused entirely on learning German after deciding to move to Germany, which helped lay a strong foundation for my adaptation. In addition, I actively tried to connect with Germans even before migrating - through meeting tourists in Istanbul - and those early connections became a strong support network for me, especially during difficult times like the pandemic.

In contrast, those who felt they had not done enough research or were unprepared reported more difficulties during the adaptation process. W5 explained how this affected her as:

The immigration process was very difficult for me because we made no preparations beforehand - unlike others who study the language and plan for years, we moved quickly after receiving the acceptance in July and arrived in Berlin by the end of November. Arriving in winter without knowing the language, lacking close connections, and feeling no attachment to the city made it even harder; I had never been to Berlin before and found it cold, dark, and unwelcoming.

For this reason, it can be said that the seeds of emotional adaptation are often planted before physical immigration.

3.4.2.2. Catalysts and Constraints

During the interviews, participants talked about factors that made their adaptation both easier and harder. Having a partner in the country they immigrated to or immigrating with them, being satisfied with the new environment and being able to make long-term plans

were mentioned in terms of facilitators of adaptation. While they talked about steps to stabilize dynamics that have an important place in their lives such as home, work, and social environment within long-term plans, how they spend their free time was also noted as a contributing factor. W4 said:

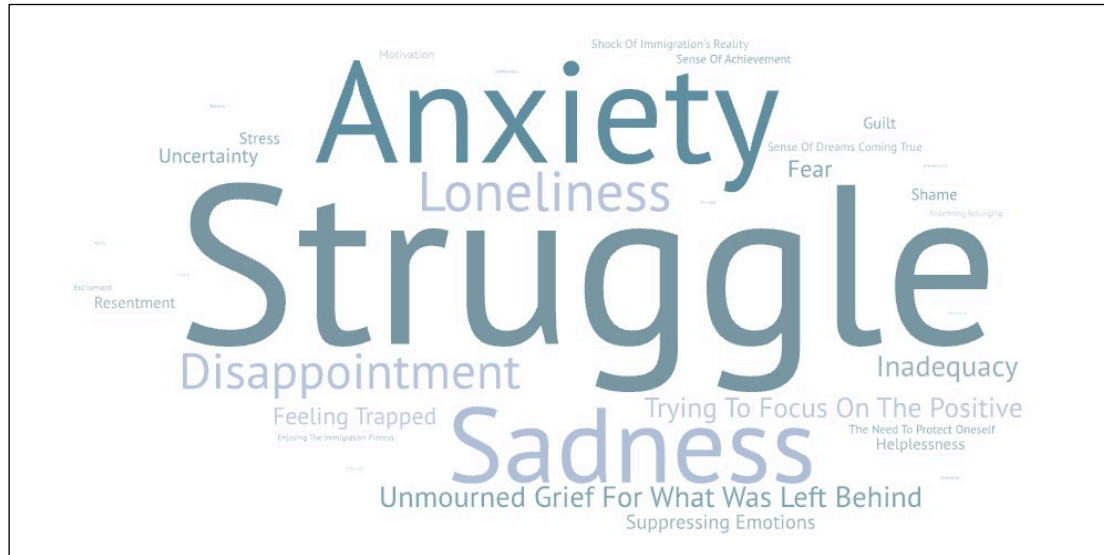
Waking up one day in a place where you don't even know where to buy bread can feel strange, but for me, the process went quite smoothly. Since my partner had already gone through the challenges of settling in, I arrived with guidance and didn't have to deal with things like finding a home or starting from scratch - almost like coming with a user manual.

On the other hand, the main factor that makes adaptation difficult is not knowing the language spoken by five couples. For instance one of the participants talked about the chronic cognitive load of processing a second language saying: "Because there, I think everything over like three times in the background, in my head. I mean not there, here. And this still makes me find myself in a very stressful daily life." (W7) It was also interesting that while she was talking about her difficulties with the language, she referred to the place where she lived as 'there'. Other complicating factors include the feeling of starting from scratch in the place of immigration, the difficulties experienced by the unemployed partner in finding a job, and cultural differences.

3.4.2.3. Immigration's Emotional Landscape

In the interviews, couples consistently mentioned their feelings in response to each question. The word cloud in Figure 3.1. visualizes all the emotional expressions used in the participants' narratives, highlighting the complexity and intensity of the feelings involved. Emotions that appear larger were mentioned more frequently by more participants, while smaller and minor ones reflect the experiences of fewer participants.

Figure 3.1. Word Cloud Depicting Emotional Responses



Since struggle, anxiety and sadness were constantly emphasized as the most prominent emotions in the interviews, we can understand the psychological weight of immigration within the couple system. For example, a participant (M2) who immigrated to Germany 10 years ago recalls the feeling of difficulty of the process even when evaluating it retrospectively and says: “There were difficulties, I mean, being an immigrant, even though I wasn't aware of these things at that time... When I thought about it later, I started to realize that I had actually gone through a lot of struggles.” Other frequently mentioned emotions such as loneliness, frustration, and fear further reflect the emotional cost of leaving familiar structures behind and facing uncertainty in a new environment. W6 described the ambivalence in her emotions by saying so far everything was very exciting for them but adding:

For example, when I think about the future, I feel very anxious—what if something happens to us and the healthcare system, which already makes us wait, fails us? We're married and thinking about having children, but questions like whether I can keep them safe, raise them without family support, and trust the system here are what scare me the most.

Although negative emotions are strikingly visible when we first look at the word cloud, we can understand that participants are making an effort to adapt and maintain emotional

resilience by the presence of statements such as trying to focus on the positive, feeling a sense of accomplishment, and feeling motivated. W1's emotional experience depicts such an example:

In those moments, I try to comfort myself by focusing on the positive—reminding myself that we are in Germany and looking for the good in that. I started to see things more optimistically, like people calmly walking with their children, the clean air, the greenery, and the overall sense of safety. For example, I don't have to worry about my child being hit by a speeding car, because drivers really slow down and respect pedestrians here—and that helps me focus on these reassuring aspects.

All in all, this visual representation reinforces the importance of viewing immigration not just as a logistical transition but also as a deeply emotional process, emphasizing that even couples who appear to be coping well still carry significant emotional baggage.

3.4.2.4. Adaptation as an Ongoing Process

The theme of adaptation as an ongoing process emphasizes that immigration is not experienced as a single event, but as a continuous and evolving journey. As can be understood from the other subthemes under this main theme, the participants' narratives reveal that adaptation extends far beyond the moment of physical displacement. M6 talks about two different starting points for their immigration experience:

Let me put it this way, on paper, I've been in Berlin since July 2022 but in my mind, it really started in January 2024. That's when my wife and I picked our home and I finally felt like I had actually moved here. Before that, it was more like a preview... Figuring out the city, dealing with paperwork, just trying to get used to everything and honestly I still laugh at the strange, almost tragicomic moments from that time.

While the participants emphasize that the sense of settling comes with time, their narratives also reveal that they continue to compare the country of origin with the host country. M2 openly discusses the process with following words:

I think we're kind of in a trade-off, even if we don't realize it, like an unspoken social contract. There are good sides to being in Germany, but also tough things, like facing racism sometimes. In the end, you just try to stay where the positives feel a little heavier, even if it's not exactly where you want to be.

Comparing pre- and post-immigration experiences sometimes leads them to keep the possibility of return open, in other words, to re-evaluate their decision to migrate, and sometimes to maintain their emotional or practical ties to Türkiye.

For some, adaptation is tied to a goal such as acquiring citizenship, while for others, not feeling like they belong to either place reinforces their sense of the continuity of the process. W7 says that even though two years have passed since her immigration, she still feels in adaptation mode and adds:

Actually, there is definitely a problem with where I stand, because I know the things I wouldn't be happy about if I were in Türkiye - since I've worked and lived there - but there are things that bother me here too, and there is a real feeling of not belonging.

In the participants' narratives, it is felt that the negotiation between the past, present and imagined futures continues. This shows us that adaptation is shaped by changing contexts, relationships and thoughts and therefore cannot be fully captured at a single point in time.

3.4.3. Impact of Entrenched Relational Patterns on Adaptation

The participants' narratives showed that adaptation to the new country during the immigration process was deeply intertwined with the relational patterns that the couples incorporated into the process. The effects of established relational dynamics on adaptation were evident in all participants' narratives. In some couples' narratives, unspoken roles, emotional habits, and decision-making tendencies that had been established before immigration frequently resurfaced and continued to shape the couples' adaptation processes to the new context. There were examples of both conscious maintenance and unconscious repetition of these patterns. Some couples shared that they reviewed, reinterpreted, and at times transformed them in the face of the new environmental and

emotional demands they encountered. Throughout the narratives, it became clear that how couples understood their relationships, how they communicated in times of difficulty, and how they negotiated the space between self and togetherness played a central role in their adaptation journeys.

3.4.3.1. Internal Narratives About the Relationship

All couples described how the history and the felt sense of their relationship shaped their ability to navigate immigration-related challenges together. In this context, participants' retrospective meaning-making about their relationship history and the ways they constructed their identities within the relationship held significant weight in their narratives. In the narratives of some couples, it was seen that the effort they put into establishing friendships before or after starting a relationship was very functional for them, especially under systemic pressures.

M4 explained how his sense of harmony with his partner laid the foundation for their ability to cope by stating:

There was always something there between us, you know? Even by the end of the first month, I felt like I'd known her for ten years - our families, experiences, and views were all so similar. The way I saw her back then is still about 90% the same after six years, and honestly, that's exactly what I expected.

Similarly, W6 emphasized that their shared outlook helped them navigate difficult times. She asserts:

Of course, I mean, may God not let anything bad happen - but if it does, I'm okay with that. I'm moving forward with the idea that yes, there will be hard days, but let's go through them together so we can bond even more. Maybe the immigration process could have felt harder but because I approached it this way - and because we think alike - it actually made things a bit easier.

On the other hand, when participants reflected more critically on the early stages of their relationship, these narratives often revealed a more fragile or anxious relational dynamic

that shaped how they coped with immigration-related stress. For example, W3 described the first two years of their relationship as “really chaotic” and emphasized how difficult it was to get along when they first started living together. However, she noted that things began to improve in their third year, which allowed them to reflect more positively on the decision to move abroad. She suggests that they have approached immigration with a hopeful mindset, describing it as a new home, a new energy, a new chance. Despite this, she thinks that they are still pushing each other a little too hard in their current life in Germany, and that unresolved dynamics from earlier stages of the relationship could resurface under the pressures of relocation.

3.4.3.2. Communicative Indicators

When participants were asked what advice they would give to couples planning to immigrate and what resources they believed were necessary to maintain their relationship after immigration, the most common response was the importance of communication. Some emphasized this because they benefited from open communication throughout the process, while others emphasized its importance because of the deprivation they felt, stating that many of their relational struggles were rooted in communication breakdowns. W2 stressed the significance of staying emotionally connected through dialogue, saying: “Talk, talk, talk in your relationship. Don’t suppress things. Be open with each other. The most important thing is staying on the same wavelength, not losing touch with one another.”

Participants who avoided conflict, failed to communicate openly, interrupted each other with sarcastic or accusatory language, or fell into blame-defensiveness cycles appeared to have more difficulty with adaptation. M1 shared how immigration made him realize unresolved dynamics:

Until I came here, I wasn’t fully aware of what I was carrying with me. When my wife looked upset and said, ‘We came here because you really wanted this,’ it hit me - because we had never actually talked about it like that while we were in Türkiye.

In contrast, couples who expressed care through active listening, emotional attunement, and intentional communication (i.e. taking turns, using a mentalizing tone, being curious about each other's inner experiences) seemed less affected by the challenges. W4 explained how she learned emotional expression from her partner:

I wasn't really someone who could do that before. I used to withdraw after arguments and think silence was enough. But my husband would say things like, 'This happened, and I felt this way.' Over time, I learned to do the same—now I can say, 'When you said that, it made me feel this way.' I can express those things now.

This couple states that even if they do not think alike, being able to talk and find a middle ground made their job much easier during the immigration process.

3.4.3.3. Balance of Self and Togetherness

Participants' narratives revealed that couples' approaches to problem solving were also shaped by how they managed to balance individual agency and relational closeness. In some cases, setting clear and supportive boundaries appeared to facilitate adaptation. For example, W4 reflected on how her partner's ability to respect her autonomy without withdrawing his support made a difference during her adaptation:

One of the biggest challenges can be that the person who comes in later can feel dependent on the person who is already here, as if every little task has to involve them. What really helped my adaptation was my partner never falling into that mindset. He drew a clear line from the beginning, saying, 'I'm here if you need me, but these are things you can do on your own,' and that made all the difference.

Other participants detailed their difficulties with differentiation in terms of daily tensions. M6 provided the following example:

It's not directly about immigration, but during this process shaped by it, I'd grab the vacuum and start cleaning, and she'd say, 'Is this really the time?' or 'I was

going to do that later.’ And I’d just think, ‘Well, I saw dust and wanted to take care of it.’ It’s small things like that, little irritations that turn into control.

These moments don’t necessarily reflect a deeper conflict, but they do illustrate how self in the context of the relationship is being renegotiated in everyday life.

While couples’ ability to balance self and togetherness clearly influences their adaptation process, how flexible they perceive this balance to be also plays a critical role. Adaptation appears to be supported not only by where couples position themselves on this spectrum, but also by how open they are to growth and change within the relationship. A key element that emerged in participant narratives was an awareness and willingness to work on oneself and one’s relationship. This type of reflective stance appears to have strengthened couples’ ability to adapt throughout the immigration process. M5 reflects on his own experience in this regard:

We are both people who are actively trying to work on ourselves; to understand our own emotions, to express ourselves better, and to understand who we are. I think we have made real progress over the years, but we both had this struggle before we came here and even before we got together.

He went on to describe how this openness shaped his experience after immigrating: “Compared to back then, I now take on more solo missions... It opened up a new space for me, in social life, in education, and I think that’s nourished both me and our relationship overall.”

3.4.3.4. Inherited Coping Strategies

Participants’ narratives revealed that the coping strategies they observed in their families of origin (FOO) could affect them in a double-edged manner. Most participants reported using strategies that were both similar with and different from their families. Some participants expressed these choices as conscious ones, while others noted that they realized it in the moment after reflecting on the questions.

Some participants have internalized the FOO strategies which were carried over into couple dynamics that created a sense of continuity for the individual. W6 reflected on this when she described how the strong sense of teamwork she learned from her family shaped her understanding of conflict and decision-making:

The sense of teamwork definitely comes from my family. There was no ‘this is your problem’ or ‘this is mine’. If there was a problem, it was ours. Whether it’s decision-making or problem-solving, we’ve always done things together. It’s just how I naturally operate.

In contrast, some participants shared how they developed different patterns than those modeled by their families, either in response to discomfort or a desire to approach problems differently. M4 explained how his and his partner’s way of relating contrasts with his family’s more emotional and traditional style:

The biggest problem with my family is fighting instead of solving problems. If they spent the energy they spend fighting on solving problems, the problems would be solved much faster. That’s a bit of inefficiency. We try not to do that. We don’t act as emotionally or traditionally as my family does. Sometimes they’re even surprised by how we handle things. But we find a way that works for both of us, and that becomes our way of making decisions.

These narratives show how family-inherited coping styles, whether reinforced or reshaped, play a subtle yet meaningful role in how couples face immigration-related stress together.

3.4.4. Systemic Shifts Post-Immigration

In the couples’ shared experiences, immigration initiated systemic changes that went beyond emotional adaptation or daily adjustments. This main theme therefore explores how the broader structure of the couple system is reshaped as they start over in the host country. The participants’ narratives reveal changes in how they work as a team, redistribute roles, understand and express closeness, build resilience, and renegotiate relationships with their families of origin. We can say that these changes are not

situational, as they reflect deeper transformations in how couples relate to each other and their environment. This is precisely why this main theme emphasizes the systemic nature of post-immigration adaptation.

3.4.4.1. Becoming a Team Under Pressure

Participants' narratives showed that immigration often required couples to function as a team in ways they had not needed to before. The lack of a support network similar to the one the participants left behind and the necessity of managing daily tasks within a new and unfamiliar system make it necessary for couples to rely on each other more. From handling bureaucratic procedures to coordinating grocery shopping without home delivery options, they come to handle the wide range of demands of daily life together.

Six couples emphasized how this process required them to make decisions together, overcome unexpected challenges and align around shared goals. For many, this mutual support acts as a protective factor that helps them feel more grounded in uncertainty. W2 describes her own experience stating: "We built this life here together and we built it alone, without support or assistance from family or close friends. Here, each person hangs by his own leg, but we hang together and supported each other throughout this process."

Even couples who did not previously define themselves as a team described feeling a stronger sense of partnership as they adapted to the pressures of immigration. W3 reflected on how this shift unfolded in her relationship:

In Türkiye, we had a lot of support; family, people around us; and it felt like most of the responsibility fell on me. But since we came here, I've seen that my partner can actually do a lot, and we started handling things together. I realized it's not that he couldn't, maybe he just stepped back because I was already doing them.

In contrast, participants who had difficulty operating collaboratively often described more pronounced struggles in adjusting to their new environment.

3.4.4.2. Reconfiguration of Couple Roles

Closely linked to the previous subtheme, this section explores how the couple system itself, including the roles each partner takes on within it, undergoes significant shifts after immigration. This was a pattern that was strongly present across all participants' narratives. In four of the couples, one partner was either unemployed or working part-time. The changes in work status appeared to trigger a reactivation of traditional gender roles, particularly due to the absence or high cost of domestic help in Germany. As a result, household responsibilities became unevenly distributed, falling disproportionately on the women in the relationship.

All female participants who experienced this dynamic expressed dissatisfaction and frustration. W3 reflected on this bluntly: "In the end, I was the one stuck with all housework and that became Germany's finest slap in the face!" W5 explained inquiringly:

We always shared tasks before, but when he started working full-time, everything at home suddenly became my responsibility. It was the first time I felt like a domestic woman with endless chores shaped by cultural expectations. It opened up a strange, unfamiliar space in me. I am a bit scared about this and am wondering; is this what it's going to be like from now on? Do I just have to accept it?

One woman, despite being employed herself, shared that the burden of household tasks remained solely hers. After expressing her discomfort to her partner, he hesitated to take action and she eventually gave up trying to challenge the dynamic.

For women in these partnerships, particularly those who faced barriers to entering the labor market, the imbalance also extended to the relational power dynamic. Interestingly, participants did not describe this as conflict around money itself, but rather as a psychological weight. While these women were talented and career-oriented individuals in Türkiye, they experienced a shift toward feeling dependent and unproductive in the country they migrated to. W1 illustrated this tension by reflecting on how dramatically her role had changed:

In Türkiye, I handled everything from changing tires to dealing with contractors. Here, my partner took over those roles and while it relieved me in one sense, it also made me feel useless. I started to feel like I couldn't do anything anymore. It wasn't just a burden lifted, it became a different kind of burden on me.

This internalized sense of disempowerment was not only experienced as a personal struggle with identity and agency within the new system, but also contributed to tension between partners.

3.4.4.3. Reconstructing Intimacy

One of the important changes brought about by immigration is the transformation in how intimacy is understood and practiced within the couple system. The interviews revealed that the changes in the participants' lifestyles, social networks and emotional needs due to the conditions of immigration also lead to changes in how intimacy is experienced and expressed between partners.

The couples who felt that immigration had strengthened their closeness shared that the time they spend together increased and even they were able to engage in a wider range of activities together. For example, they noted that the change in working conditions, such as being able to work from home, has increased their free time. Additionally, as their social circles became more limited, they began to meet the increased need for closeness from each other, which allowed them to create more opportunities to bond. M3 described this change as follows: “We needed each other more, we felt like we owned each other. We spend more time with each other here. I think this has an impact on closeness.” Similarly, M7 emphasized the importance of shared routines as a factor that increases closeness:

One of the biggest contributions of immigration is that we can cook and eat together. Since we live in a small city, we usually stay home and try to cook together. I think these kinds of activities contribute to the closeness between us.

Some participants mentioned that immigration may have negatively affected their closeness, especially in the early stages. Stress factors that heightened couples' need for

closeness also strained their emotional capacities, which in turn leads to distance. W1's experience provides an example of how emotional tensions caused by immigration can temporarily hinder closeness. She reflects on this tension and explains:

I think immigration may have distanced us a little bit at first. I was deeply angry and, to be honest, I blamed my partner for the immigration. When I feel bad, I withdraw into myself, and there were months when I really withdrew.

When we consider these narratives together, we see that closeness is continually reshaped by the emotional demands of immigration. In the process of adapting to a different life context, couples renegotiate closeness both in their practices and in their shared meanings.

3.4.4.4. Building Relational Resilience

This subtheme explores how couples became required to increase their relational resilience in response to immigration-related stressors, which they gradually build through strategies such as shared flexibility and mutual support. These stressors include but are not limited to the dynamic and often unpredictable circumstances of the process. Consequently, many participants described how openness to change, spontaneity, and discovery helped them navigate unfamiliar experiences. These narratives can be summed up under flexibility as a key strength and M5 reflects on this transformation by stating:

Now, I have regained the world citizenship mindset. I see myself as more universal, more flexible, and at the same time, more tolerant and understanding. I think these qualities also reflect positively in our relationship. Just as I'm becoming more open and non-judgmental toward the diversity I see around me, the same openness is being repeated in our relationship.

Some partners shared how immigration allowed them to discover new sides of one another, and how embracing these changes deepened their bond. W6 expressed this by saying, "It's such a gift to give each other a chance, to challenge one another, and to rediscover each other on this journey in a different place."

Participants elaborated on how both individual and shared endurance were tested and strengthened over time. In that sense, psychological resilience and how couples cared for one another were highlighted in their narratives. For instance, 4 couples had to go through a temporary separation during moving to the new country. They described this temporal long distance relationship period as time of increased solitude but not as a threat and rather as an opportunity for personal growth. Their narratives also suggest that the absence of this perspective would have weakened their emotional resilience. Consequently, being solution-oriented and mutual recognition of each other's approach come forward as values that couples adopted in order to preserve their resilience. Couples especially emphasized the value of sense of cooperation and shared purpose. From time to time, all couples have experienced imbalances that challenge their endurance. In such moments, they claim, their ability to reorganize and maintain equality in effort and sacrifice appeared to be protective. W4 illustrated this through a powerful metaphor:

From the very beginning of our relationship, it's always been like this... You know, when you're climbing somewhere, one person goes ahead and pulls the other up, and later it switches. If one of us is ahead, that one pulls the other along. I think we're good at keeping that balance.

In addition to cognitive and emotional strategies, many couples developed new tools to regulate their emotions and maintain stability. Whether as simple as cooking dinner together or sticking to a shared evening routine, everyday rituals served as anchors amidst uncertainty. These small, consistent practices were seen as grounding, helping couples stay connected and maintain continuity even in the face of change. W7 described one of their solutions with a vivid image:

We're both going our separate ways during the day, exactly two opposite directions from where we live. And then meeting at the same train station in the evening to come home together. We don't arrive at the same time, but this is the solution we've found.

3.4.4.5. Transforming Family Bonds

The transformation of the participants' relationship with their families of origin after immigration stood out as one of the important systemic changes they experienced. This subtheme explores how couples engage with physical and emotional distance when renegotiating family ties in the context of immigration. Five couples distinctly expressed their desire and preference for physical distance from their families of origin. Some shared past tensions or unresolved issues as reasons, while others cited a desire to reduce their families' excessive involvement or to be able to establish their own nuclear families. The geographical distance imposed by immigration was described as a facilitating factor for these participants to set boundaries. M4 expressed this change in the following words:

Being able to stay away from family was a positive reflection of immigration. We hear from many of our friends that families cannot keep their distance in Türkiye. We did not experience this, for example. They could not interfere too much because there was an automatic distance. We were able to live our relationship as a couple in this way.

Participants also reported that visits to their families were perceived as more meaningful after immigration. Participants stated that they, as well as their family members, began to approach these more limited meetings more carefully. They emphasized that they started to do activities that they had not done before and that there was an apparent effort to avoid conflict during these encounters. W3 observed a change in her mother's attitude during one of these visits, saying:

It's like my mother is trying to get a little more in line with us. You know, 'my daughter is here for a certain period of time, let me try to be more gentle with her'. It's a little more pronounced in my mother, so I noticed that.

At the same time, some participants explained that they made an effort to prevent physical distance from turning into emotional distance. These individuals had developed various ways to maintain closeness with their families, or in other words, to compensate for physical distance. For example, they had developed various practices to maintain the feeling of closeness, such as frequently video-chatting with their families after

immigration or prioritizing seeing their families when they arrived in the country. M5 explained how this perspective changed his choices:

I became much closer to my father during the immigration process. I also started to feel different feelings for my grandparents on my mother's side. Maybe we used to see them every 3 or 6 months, and that hasn't changed. But now I have an awareness that maybe I won't be able to see them next time. So now, when I go to Türkiye, even if I don't stay long, I try to see them first. I want to kiss their hands, spend time with them. This has become my priority.

Similarly, W6 emphasized their ongoing efforts to maintain emotional ties with their families: “We call our families every week, we video chat. Sometimes even more than once a week. We never let that bond fade away.”

If we consider all these experiences together, we can say that immigration not only reshapes the excessive involvement of families of origin, but also invites couples to think more consciously about how they maintain emotional ties with them. This renegotiation process often involves both separation and preservation of connection simultaneously.

3.5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the decision to immigrate emerges from a complex web of relational dynamics and systemic pressures rather than stemming from isolated personal motivations. All participants described their decision to immigrate as an escape from political unrest, social polarization, and economic instability in Türkiye. These experiences reveal that the motivation to immigrate was not only about seeking better conditions abroad, but also about creating distance from emotionally burdensome dynamics at their home country. The narratives of couples disclose that immigration was an attempt to preserve or reclaim their sense of autonomy in the face of collective anxiety. Consequently, immigration appears as a relational act. This finding is consistent with Bowen’s concept of the Societal Emotional Process (SEP), which explains how broader social tensions, such as political instability, can intensify emotional pressure within family systems and lead to reactive decisions (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). From

this perspective, immigration comes forward not just as a logistical solution but as a systemic strategy for reducing anxiety.

When these findings are evaluated through Bowen's concept of DoS, they also open up a field of discussion in which the homeland can be considered not only as a geographical or sociopolitical structure but also as an extension of the individual's relational system. Individuals attempt to emotionally separate from their parents while at the same time maintaining a meaningful bond (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It can be argued that a similar dynamic can be observed in some participants' relations with their homeland. While immigration can be read as an attempt to emotionally distance themselves from collective anxiety, restrictiveness, or sociopolitical tensions associated with Türkiye for some participants, it is also seen that symbolic ties are maintained through language, culture, or ongoing relationships. From a systemic perspective, distancing oneself and remaining connected at the same time creates a two-way movement and can be evaluated as a broader form of differentiation. The ability to develop a critical stance towards one's homeland without a complete cut off or idealization can be interpreted as an indicator of differentiation at the level of cultural identity.

In addition to external social influences at their home country, many participants reflected on the importance of the value system in the host country. These couples sought environments where they could live in accordance with their personal and relational values. In that sense, their decisions were not driven solely by material gain. This perspective reflects a desire to align one's relationship-based sense of self with the values and norms of the larger sociocultural environment. The relational meaning of immigration contrasts with traditional "push-pull" migration models in the literature, which focus on economic or safety-based motivators (De Haas et al., 2019). It is possible that this framing was shaped by the socioeconomic profiles of the participants because they were urban, highly educated, middle-class people. They were not particularly dissatisfied with their living conditions in Türkiye but the future anxiety prompted by the social and political atmosphere has led them to seek a "value-based belonging." Their level of cultural and

economic capital may have provided greater flexibility in framing immigration as a values-driven and relationally motivated choice.

Some participants' devaluation of Türkiye or using expressions distant from their cultural background in interviews conducted post-migration can be interpreted in a multi-layered way. These narratives might be reflecting a genuine disappointment with current political or social conditions in the home country but they may also be related to a tendency to affirm the choice they have made. Mather, Shafir, and Johnson (2000) have shown that people exhibit choice-supportive memory distortion when recalling past choices. This bias not only attributes positive characteristics to the chosen option, but can also lead to incorrectly attributing negative characteristics to the rejected option. This process can serve as a mental regulation to reduce cognitive dissonance and stand behind the decision made. In this context, idealizing the country of immigration and devaluing Türkiye can be a psychological strategy used to justify the decision to immigrate and reduce feelings of regret.

Akhtar (2011) examines this situation within a psychoanalytic framework. According to Akhtar, immigrants, especially those from colonized or historically marginalized countries, may internalize Western values and reflect feelings of shame about their origins. This internalized devaluation may serve as a "narcissistic repair" as part of immigrants' efforts to build a sense of belonging and self-esteem in their new environment. Although Türkiye does not have a traditional colonial past, the emotional dynamics Akhtar describes may also apply to Turkish immigrants who are affected by processes such as comparison with the West, exclusion, or idealization of the West. Such psychological and cognitive processes can profoundly shape how individuals make sense of their immigration experience and how they establish their relationships with their country of origin.

In addition, it was observed that many participants' approaches to immigration were shaped by narratives passed down through generations within their families. It was not the mere presence or absence of previous immigrants in the family, but rather how these experiences were interpreted within the family, that influenced participants' attitudes toward immigration and even their subsequent adaptation process. For instance, although

one participant's older sibling had migrated before, the participant emphasized the family's reaction during that time—opposing the sibling and leaving him unsupported—which was told as a significant story in the family. This participant's difficulty in adapting also provides a clue about how migration attitudes are transmitted multigenerationally. All participants were able to connect these family narratives with their own stories after being asked about their families' migration histories and attitudes. Some even stated that they had never thought about it in that way before, but now had a more clear understanding of their motivations. These stories are often narratives that involve hardship, failure, or trauma and are not openly discussed. Bowen's concept of the MTP helps to contextualize these findings (Bowen, 1978). Participants' perceptions, expectations, and relational positions regarding immigration appear to be shaped by unresolved emotional content transmitted across generations.

The influence of FOO also played a significant role in how participants made sense of their immigration experience. Some felt supported or emotionally anchored by their FOO and some bonds were strengthened due to the support that participants felt from certain family members. However, immigration was frequently referred to as a means to set new boundaries by participants, often in response to experiences of emotional enmeshment or unresolved tension. In these narratives, physical distance was used as a way to enhance differentiation of self (DoS) as the couple began their own lives. In the context of the historical past of Türkiye, being a traditional agricultural society, children are seen as economic assets that provide security for the family, especially in their old ages. This understanding has led to the development of a relational model in which emotional closeness is intertwined with structural dependency and has made it difficult to draw individual boundaries within the family (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2017). Consequently, the physical separation brought about by immigration may have provided an opportunity for participants to establish DoS that would not have been easily possible in their own sociocultural environments.

These findings gain further support from studies on long-term happy marriages. For example, Kılıç (2021) found that couples who successfully maintained emotional differentiation from their FOO reported higher levels of marital satisfaction. The study

emphasized that establishing clear boundaries with the family, especially in the early stages of marriage, made it easier for them to establish their own couple identity. Although participants still valued emotional closeness with extended family, they mentioned the disruptive effects of overly involved family dynamics on couple functionality (Kılıç, 2021). This aligns with the findings of the present study, in which several participants repeatedly emphasized that being physically distant from their families after immigration allowed them more space to build their own lives as a couple. This suggests that the physical distance created by immigration can serve as a regulatory mechanism that facilitates differentiation and thus increases relational satisfaction.

Although such moves occasionally resembled Bowen's notion of emotional cutoff (Nichols & Davis, 2016), participants also emphasized the persistence of emotional ties, ambivalence, and guilt. Consequently, these findings are in line with McGoldrick et al.'s (2005) observation that even when migration introduces physical separation, emotional loyalties and inherited expectations often continue to shape relational experiences across borders. In that context, these findings also resonate with Falicov's (2012) conceptualization of migration as a multi-phase family transition that activates emotional ties, losses, and reconfigurations across generations.

This relationally layered structure of motivations for immigration underlies couples' experience of the relocation as an ongoing emotional process rather than a completed decision. Participants' narratives revealed that adaptation began well before the moment of physical relocation and continued as an emotionally layered process long after arrival. Their reflections point to a transition that is not only logistical but also deeply psychological and relational. The process is shaped by ambivalent feelings such as, anticipation, loss, comparison, excitement and uncertainty. This understanding resonates with Bowen's (1978) emphasis on how individuals respond to chronic stress based on their capacity for emotional regulation and DoS. Couples who prepared both practically and emotionally often experienced a more stable adaptation process. This echoes the idea that pre-existing clarity in emotional functioning can act as a buffer in times of systemic change (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

At the same time, the experience of migration challenged emotional regulation even among prepared couples. Language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and professional losses intensified emotional load, particularly when expectations clashed with early realities. These stressors triggered both internal anxieties and external tensions, requiring couples to continually recalibrate. Bowen's concept of emotional reactivity becomes a particularly relevant construct here: participants who reported becoming overwhelmed or easily destabilized by minor difficulties often described relational withdrawal or tension escalation, which are the indicators of low differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These relational processes are also shaped by broader institutional contexts, as highlighted by Van Hook and Glick (2020), who argue that legal and societal frameworks in the host country play a substantial role in amplifying or mitigating family stress among immigrant couples.

One striking finding was that some couples were notably able to find emotional anchors in small routines, environmental comfort, or symbolic meanings such as safety or nature. These micro-adjustments functioned as protective elements, aligning with Walsh's (2002) concept of relational resilience. In certain couple systems, it became evident that the ability to hold stress collaboratively - rather than individually - helped foster emotional coherence even during periods of transition. For instance, approaching adaptation as a fluid process and accepting its challenges from the outset appeared to reduce pressure and enhance flexibility within the relationship. This meaning-making and symbolic anchoring process can also be understood through Falicov's (2012) framework of immigrant resilience, which emphasizes the creative negotiation between cultural continuity and adaptation in sustaining emotional well-being.

The narratives also show that adaptation is experienced as a continuous emotional negotiation shaped by personal factors and relational variables. None of the participants (including the one with the longest migration history of 10 years) described their adaptation as a completed achievement. It is evident across all narratives that participants continued to compare their lives in Türkiye and Germany. The sense of belonging is constantly re-evaluated, and the possibility of return remains open as an emotional option for six couples. These cyclical evaluations suggest that migration is not a one-time change

but an evolving process in which identity and relationship are continually renegotiated. This is consistent with Bowen's observation that in systems under chronic stress, unresolved emotional processes tend to resurface, requiring a constant effort toward DoS (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Couples faced external pressures during adaptation, but the emotional patterns they already had also played an important role in how they dealt with those pressures because the findings suggest that couples did not enter the immigration process as blank relational slates. Instead, their long-established relational dynamics continued to shape their adaptation journey one way or another. Some participants saw migration as a chance to escape past conflicts and start fresh, while others relied on the harmony they had previously built in their relationship. There were also those who, without much reflection, carried their usual patterns into the new environment. Regardless of these differences, their relationship histories influenced how they responded to the pressures of relocation. Bowen's concept of the nuclear family emotional system provides a helpful perspective here, suggesting that couples tend to retreat into familiar emotional roles and responses when faced with systemic stress (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). When couples' existing emotional templates are flexible and reflective, they serve as a source of strength during the adaptation period; however, when these templates are rigid or unprocessed, they often intensify feelings of helplessness or emotional overload.

One of the central mechanisms that played a role in maintaining or challenging these established relational patterns was couples' communication styles. Participants who had already developed an open and emotionally attuned communication style before migration were also more likely to navigate uncertainties through joint decision-making and collaborative dialogue. These couples often referred to "meeting in the middle" or "working things out together" as natural responses during stressful moments. In contrast, participants who had kept their motivations or opinions unspoken and preferred indirect communication prior to immigration described higher levels of emotional reactivity, conflict avoidance, and role-based expectations. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of open communication in the immigration context. For instance, Sim et al. (2021) argue that couples who communicate effectively and share

responsibilities show higher marital quality in the face of acculturation challenges. Similarly, Rapaport and Doucerain (2021) highlight how a lack of mutual communication exacerbates relational tension under migration stress. These findings also resonate with Cheung (2008) and Hyman et al. (2008), who suggest that shared problem-solving and clear dialogue increase emotional intimacy and relational stability in immigrant couples.

If we bring a systemic perspective to this similarity in findings, we can refer to Bowen's concept of triangulation. According to Bowen, triangulation usually occurs when individuals cannot tolerate relational anxiety and seek indirect ways to regulate tension (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In patterns where communication is more closed and superficial, dyadic tension cannot be directly addressed. Perhaps a third party (such as extended family, work, or friends) may have been more involved when participants were still living in their home country. Since the participants did not explicitly mention this, it remains only an interpretation. However, based on the current study, it can be said that the dyadic systems of participants who avoided conflict and instead externalized stress through behaviors, such as withdrawal, defensiveness, or blame, tended to be more unstable.

Another important dynamic in the narratives was couples' negotiation of the boundaries between autonomy and togetherness. This was especially apparent in narratives where participants' entrenched relational patterns (whether enmeshment or rigid separation) were further intensified by the immigration process. This struggle reflects Bowen's concept of DoS, in which individuals tend to either merge with or distance themselves from their partners under stress (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Couples with higher levels of differentiation appeared to be more adept at maintaining their own emotional stability while remaining emotionally open to their partners. In participants with lower levels of differentiation, it was observed that the degree of reliance on one's partner influenced how well the individual adapted to the host country as well. These relational patterns also play a significant role as difficulties at either the individual or relational level appear to significantly impact the couple's overall adaptation capacity (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This interpretation is also supported by Calatrava et al.'s (2022) review, which highlights that DoS is positively linked to psychological well-being,

marital satisfaction, and adaptive relational functioning across cultural contexts. Their findings emphasize that promoting emotional differentiation may serve as a protective factor in navigating transitions such as migration, especially when relational stability is challenged.

In line with these systemic insights, research findings point to the role of multigenerational coping models in shaping the adaptation experience. Gerson et al. (1993) emphasize how individuals unconsciously repeat or react against familiar patterns learned in childhood through what scholars refer to as modeling and reversal frames. These frames help explain how early experiences shape coping repertoires. Some individuals imitate parental behavior (modeling), while others take the opposite route (reversal) to heal the dysfunctions they have perceived (Gerson et al., 1993). In this study, participants described both modeling and reversal strategies which they had observed in their FOO. In many cases, these inherited styles were not consciously adopted or rejected. Rather, they were recognized during the interview process. For example, they appeared in participants' narratives as tendencies to avoid dysfunctional conflict or idealization of the teamwork. On the one hand, some participants demonstrated efforts to break away from FOO patterns long before the immigration process and constructed new, more functional coping models. On the other hand, others noted how deeply embedded habits continued to influence their relational behavior even in a radically new environment. These findings resonate with Bowen's concept of MTP as well, according to which, emotional maturity levels are passed down across generations through repeated interactions in the system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Walsh (2002) also suggests that multigenerational family narratives, belief systems, and coping repertoires shape resilience by influencing how families interpret and respond to adversity. Whether couples employed modeling or reversal strategies, it was ultimately the functionality of the behavior that determined whether it contributed to the couple's adaptation in the host country. The current findings are compatible with Falicov's (2005) conceptualization as well, who claims that migration is a multistage family transition that reactivates generational emotional scripts, themes of loss, and relational roles.

In addition to the effects of established relational patterns, the fact that migration triggered systemic restructuring in the couple relationship, which was not limited to daily arrangements, showed how much the system allowed change in line with the demands of a new life context. One of the most obvious reflections of this transformation was the emergence of a stronger sense of “teamwork” under pressure. Participants frequently emphasized that they became each other’s primary emotional and practical resource in the absence of social and familial support in the host country. This collaborative adaptation process is consistent with Walsh’s (1996) approach, who argues that resilience develops through mutual dependency and joint problem solving in times of crisis. The difficulties of immigration were still a source of stress but also served as opportunities for bonding for couples who were able to develop a common orientation. This is consistent with the results of the meta-synthesis study conducted by Guruge et al. (2010), which found that migration can increase interdependence and emotional closeness when couples can adapt to their changing roles and environmental conditions together.

The same structural transformation has also brought about significant changes in couple roles. In interviews, there were women who used to work in Türkiye but can no longer work in Germany because their diplomas are not equivalent. Such couple systems that have experienced changes in their employment status also reported the change in the balance of power within the relationship. The fact that one partner is working has caused an unequal distribution of responsibilities and has often revived traditional gender roles. The emergence of dynamics after migration that women did not experience in Türkiye has caused them to describe intense disappointment and anxiety in their narratives. From a systemic perspective, this tension can be explained by Bowen’s (1978) view that systems with increased anxiety tend to regress to rigid roles or multigenerational patterns when they are challenged. It has been observed that the sudden disappearance of supports such as extended family or outsourcing (such as, cleaning and food delivery services) makes this change rapidly felt and puts additional pressure on the balance of responsibility and power within the relationship.

Interestingly, most international studies, especially those from Canada, have emphasized that migration empowers women through education and participation in the workforce.

(Shirpak et al., 2011; Darvishpour, 2002; Accordini et al., 2018). In this thesis, the opposite effect was observed. Rather than gaining autonomy, the women participants stated that they entered a process in which roles were re-traditionalized. This difference can be explained by the socioeconomic and educational levels of the women in the sample. While these participants were already strong, educated and professionally active individuals in Türkiye, they lost their financial independence due to structural obstacles in the host country after immigration. This situation changed not only the practical roles in the relationship but also the perception of power. In the words of participant W1: “A burden has not been lifted from me, I have taken on a different kind of burden.” In this context, contrary to previous findings, immigration narrowed down the existing space of the women in this study rather than opening up new areas for movement. This shows how decisive the pre-immigration positioning is when interpreting gender role changes after the process.

This shift may also reflect deeper cultural and generational tensions. Söylemez’s (2011) study of Turkish families shows that even women who aim to raise their children differently from their mothers often reproduce similar gendered stereotypes, particularly in terms of caregiving. Many of the participants in the study experienced an internal conflict between modern ideals of autonomy and traditional expectations inherited from previous generations. This multigenerational continuity is also supported by recent research. Perales et al. (2021) found that both mothers and fathers transmit their gender beliefs to their children, with maternal influence being particularly strong for daughters. Similarly, Halpern and Perry-Jenkins (2015) emphasized that parents' actual behaviors, such as division of labor, may be even more influential than their stated beliefs in shaping children's gender attitudes. These insights align with Bem’s (1981) gender schema theory, which suggests that children internalize gender roles through repeated exposure and build cognitive structures around them, making later shifts more emotionally and cognitively demanding.

If we look at the context of Türkiye, Sirman (1989) points out that although women were granted legal rights during the Republican reforms, they were still expected to act in ways that supported family and national ideals. In a later study, Sirman (2000) highlights that

romantic love and marriage in Turkish cultural narratives are often linked to sacrifice, responsibility, and collective identity. These deeply internalized ideas can easily resurface in times of stress, particularly during migration, when women feel as if they are being pulled back into the roles their mothers once held.

Bayrakdar and Güveli (2020) suggest that migration can create opportunities for women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, for women who were already empowered before migrating, the experience can sometimes feel like a step backward. This tension between former autonomy and post-migration role regression can also be traced in the findings of Üstünel et al. (2022). Their study shows that married women in Türkiye relate to gendered expectations in different ways: some comply silently, some resist actively, and others succeed in forming more egalitarian partnerships. These narratives show that gender role change is rarely a straightforward process. Instead, it is shaped by factors such as socioeconomic background, relationship dynamics, and cultural values carried across generations.

Another critical transformation described by participants involved how couples established and expressed closeness and intimacy. The working conditions in the host country were frequently mentioned. They were the main reason participants cited for having increased free time and consequently, more time spent together. Some couples reported developing a new sense of closeness through interdependence and shared routines, such as cooking together. Others spoke of a more subtle process of emotional restructuring and linked their changing intimacy practices to this, for example, changes in how needs are expressed and met. These shifts are consistent with Walsh's (2002) theoretical framework, which highlights the role of emotional expression and mutual empathy in navigating relational change. In this context, closeness was not only preserved, but often redefined in response to new environmental and emotional circumstances.

In addition to these transformations, the study highlights the development of a process that can be defined as "relational resilience." It is evident in the narratives that couples who experience immigration as a process of growth have the capacity to maintain emotional accessibility even under pressure. These couples also use strategies to enhance

their flexibility, evaluate difficulties together and reframe problems. Therefore, as can be seen in these examples, resilience does not come from the absence of stress, but from the ability to bear difficulties together and make joint adjustments in the midst of chaos. In this sense, the findings support Walsh's (2002) view that resilience involves adaptive processes rooted in emotional responsiveness and mutual support. Additionally, when evaluated from a Bowenian perspective, the ability of these participants to manage their own reactivity while maintaining emotional connections with their partners, may also be indicative of higher levels of DoS (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These findings resonate with Calatrava et al.'s (2022) review, which shows that higher levels of differentiation predict not only individual psychological resilience but also greater dyadic adjustment and lower levels of conflict. This reinforces the idea that couples with higher emotional regulation are better equipped to manage systemic stress, such as immigration.

Although this study provides meaningful insights into how couples experience immigration together, some relational tensions or emotional distances may not have been fully expressed during the interviews. Since the interviews were conducted simultaneously with both partners, couples had the opportunity to emotionally tune into each other during the conversation. This helped to reduce potential tension, for example, through eye contact or supportive nonverbal gestures. It was observed that couples who had more difficulty adapting were more likely to engage in such behaviors. If the interviews had been conducted separately, more conflicting narratives or hidden disagreements may have emerged. Therefore, although the simultaneous interview format may have fostered a sense of connection between the couples, it may have limited the visibility of some relational difficulties.

In summary, the findings show that immigration triggers both individual changes and comprehensive relational restructurings. The study shows that these shifts reflect systemic transformations that continue to evolve over time. When evaluated from a systemic perspective, immigration can be defined not only as a process of adaptation to changing external conditions, but also as a process of redefinition regarding how couples establish relationships both among themselves and within the new society, and how they develop a sense of belonging with the inheritance they receive from systems passed down

from generation to generation. From this perspective, immigration serves as a context that reveals the flexibility of couple systems when navigating emotional, cultural, and multigenerational challenges. It becomes a process through which longstanding relational dynamics are not only tested but also potentially transformed.

3.6. Clinical Implications

The findings of this study aim to make significant contributions to therapeutic studies conducted with immigrant couples. Immigration is not only an individual transition but as emphasized throughout this thesis, it is also a process that leads to radical systemic changes in couple relationships. The participants' narratives revealed that immigration is not only an external source of stress, but also a decisive experience in terms of relationality, to which the couple attributes common meanings. This situation overlaps with Bowen's concept of SEP, which suggests that anxiety experienced at the social level can cause increased emotional reactivity within family systems (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Consequently, it may be useful to address the meaning of immigration at the relational level in addition to the individual level in the therapeutic processes. Mutual understanding can be fostered when couples evaluate what they leave behind, what needs led them to make the decision to immigrate, and how this process impacts their relationship dynamics. The participants stated that the immigration process is not limited to the moment of relocation, but begins long before that and involves a long-term emotional transformation. Feelings such as grief, hope, uncertainty, and identity change are important parts of this transition. Making room for these feelings in the therapeutic process can increase partners' awareness of each other's inner worlds (Falicov, 2003).

In addition, the study observed that relationship patterns formed before the immigration continued in the new context, and in some cases even became more pronounced. Issues such as communication problems, changes in power dynamics, or difficulty in balancing individuality and togetherness were frequently mentioned. At this point, Bowen's concept of DoS can guide clinical interventions (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Learning to regulate their own emotions without disconnecting from each other or learning to co-

regulate can contribute to the development of more flexible and functional relationship patterns.

Another prominent finding in the study is that couples who face the challenges of the immigration process together maintain their relational resilience more easily. This finding is consistent with the protective factors emphasized by Walsh (2002) in her family resilience model. Shared meaning creation, flexible role sharing, and open communication can all be fostered therapeutically as protective processes, especially for immigrant couples who lack social or extended support.

Another experience that can be embedded in therapeutic process of immigrants is the focus on their coping strategies and their transmission from their FOOs. Patterns such as enduring silently, suppressing emotions, or taking on excessive responsibility can further complicate their post-immigration relational adjustment. This situation is consistent with the suggestion of McGoldrick and colleagues that multigenerational transmission should be taken into account in the therapeutic process (McGoldrick et al., 2005). Therapy provides a safe space where the origins of these strategies can be questioned and, if necessary, reconstructed.

In this context, strength-based genograms can serve as a valuable tool to map how previous generations responded to life challenges and which coping strategies supported resilience. As Taylor et al. (2013) propose, enriching genograms with positive symbols, such as hearts to indicate closeness or weights to represent strength, can help individuals recognize not only sources of distress but also the relational resources and adaptive capacities that have been passed down. Integrating such tools may offer deeper insight into how immigrant couples activate relational strengths inherited from family systems. This perspective allows clients to build a more balanced and empowering family narrative, where functional patterns are not only remembered but intentionally carried forward.

The increasing wave of highly educated and sociopolitically motivated immigration from Türkiye to Germany in recent years (Türkmen, 2019; Güzel, 2024) prompts the question whether there is a need also for preventive programs in addition to interventions in the field. In this context, inspired by Falicov's ecosystemic and culturally contextual

approach (Falicov, 2012) and community-based clinical models, a ten-session preventive psycho-education program called “Together Through Transition” is proposed in the context of this research.

Informed by the findings of this study, the program that is structured for newly immigrating couples, would aim to explore the relational meaning of immigration, support emotional regulation and communication under stress, work on changing role expectations, and increase relational resilience. The program may pay special attention to possible gender role changes following immigration. Sessions can provide space for reflection on the emotional impact of this transition, support the understanding of loss of professional identity, and help couples renegotiate roles in ways that align with their values. By encouraging mutual understanding and shared decision-making, the program will aim to prevent couples from experiencing relational dissatisfaction and to maintain a sense of personal self-efficacy in the relationship. This program can be implemented in community centers or online platforms and would aim to support couples before their emotional burden reaches a dysfunctional level. In conclusion, an approach that combines systemic theory with cultural sensitivity in a preventive support model can be effective in strengthening the relational adaptation of immigrant couples in their new life contexts.

3.7. Limitations and Further Research

This study provides an in-depth look at the relational dynamics of immigrant couples, but it also has some limitations. First, the sample is limited to seven heterosexual, highly educated Turkish couples who immigrated to Germany in the last decade. Since the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method focuses on the depth of individual experiences, the findings cannot be generalized to couples with different cultural, socioeconomic, or legal conditions. A qualitative method was preferred in the study and the meanings of participant experiences were prioritized. However, quantitative studies with larger and more diversified samples can be conducted in the future, which may increase the generalizability of the findings. For example, the relational experiences of couples can be assessed more systematically with measurement tools such as the Differentiation of Self Inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), the Dyadic Adjustment

Scale (Spanier, 1976), or the Couple Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Using qualitative and quantitative methods together can provide a more holistic view of the adaptation processes of immigrant couples.

Another limitation that stems from the population of this study is that it is limited to couples who immigrated voluntarily and did not experience serious psychosocial difficulties. Therefore, the experiences of more vulnerable groups coping with factors such as legal uncertainty, trauma, or economic pressure may not have been adequately reflected. Studies conducted with more inclusive and diverse samples may address the different experiences of immigrant couples in a more representative manner. Furthermore, sample diversity is not limited to the migration profile alone. The inclusion of same-sex couples, couples with children, intercultural couples, couples with different belief systems, and immigrant couples from different generations will contribute to a better understanding of the cultural and structural dimensions of relational adjustment. In addition, longitudinal designs can be used to track the changes in the relational dynamics of immigrant couples over time.

In addition, although conducting interviews with couples supported the interrogation of shared meaning, it may have limited the ability to express individual thoughts comfortably. In future studies, conducting individual interviews in addition to such dyadic interviews may provide a more detailed explanation of the differences within the couple.

Another notable limitation of the present study is that, due to the length of the interviews—which often lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours—it was not feasible to incorporate genogram work into the data collection process. Including genograms could have enriched the exploration of multigenerational transmission patterns by providing a more structured view of how coping strategies, roles, and family values are passed down over time. Future research may benefit from integrating genogram mapping to more clearly trace multigenerational patterns that shape relational dynamics in the context of immigration.

Another limitation arises from conducting the interviews in Turkish while making the analysis and reporting in English. This may lead to translation-related losses in emotional

tone and nuanced expressions, despite efforts to preserve meaning. Bilingual analysis processes or collaboration with a translator may be recommended to minimize such losses.

Finally, the preventive psycho-education program called “Together Through Transition” proposed within the scope of this thesis provides a meaningful starting point for applied research. The development of such a program in real-life settings, testing it with pilot applications, and its evaluation can contribute to the formation of early intervention models for immigrant couples. Evaluations, based on measurable outcomes combined with participant feedback, can provide a holistic view of the program's effectiveness and cultural adjustment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to reveal that migration is a life event that deeply affects not only individuals but also relational systems. While the existing literature mostly addresses migration through individual adaptation processes or psychological symptoms, this study adopts a systemic perspective based on Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (1996). The study examines how relational patterns are reshaped in the new cultural context, stress coping styles, and the impact of family origin dynamics on the adaptation process through the meanings couples attribute to their immigration experience. In this context, immigration is not only a crisis but also a transformation process at an emotional and relational level.

Interviews with seven Turkish couples who immigrated to Germany in the last decade showed that the phenomenon leads to comprehensive changes not only at a practical level but also at a structural and emotional level. Participants stated that they mostly made their immigration decisions for reasons such as political uncertainty, social anxiety, and value incompatibility. In the post-immigration process, the patterns of closeness, the distribution of couple roles, and the decrease in social support resources, as well as increasing interdependence, were among the notable changes. In particular, communication styles, levels of self-differentiation, and coping strategies transferred from the family played a decisive role in this adaptation process of the couples. This process is not linear; it is cyclical, emotionally intense, and highly relational.

When evaluated from a systemic perspective, the immigration process emerges as both a challenge and a development opportunity for the couples. Bowen's concept of societal emotional process was reflected in the narratives in which the participants defined immigration as an effort to distance themselves from social anxiety. The process of differentiation from both their family origins and from each other stood out as an important element in the couples' coping with new cultural demands. While some couples cooperated more and became emotionally closer during this process, others had difficulty coping with changing roles and finding new means of intimacy. These findings show that

relational functioning after immigration is shaped not only by external factors but also by patterns embedded in the relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, & Bowen, 1988).

In terms of clinical applications, this study emphasizes that both systemic patterns carried from the past and current stressors should be taken into consideration in therapeutic work with immigrant couples. Therapists should address the balance of autonomy and togetherness, multigenerational transmission processes, and the couple's capacity for resilience, and support awareness development in these areas. Interventions that support emotional separation, cooperation, and the reconstruction of shared narratives can strengthen relational adjustment. The findings of this study highlight the need for therapeutic frameworks that move beyond problem-focused assessments. Approaches that also trace inherited resilience (such as strength-based approaches that trace inherited resilience) can facilitate differentiation of self in immigrant couples facing systemic transition.

Future studies can provide more comprehensive data on systemic adjustment processes when conducted with larger samples with different immigration histories, family structures, and cultural contexts. Comparative analyses of couples with varying legal, economic, and social conditions can reveal the interaction of structural and relational factors. In addition, longitudinal studies can monitor how relational dynamics change at different stages of the immigration process. In addition, quantitative studies using validated scales can increase the generalizability of these findings by testing the associations between systemic variables and relational adjustment.

In conclusion, this thesis offers a systemic and relational perspective on the limited but emerging literature on immigrant couple relationships, revealing that immigration is not only a challenging experience but also a space where new forms of intimacy, collaboration, and resilience can develop.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Result of the Evaluation by the Ethics Committee

Result of the Evaluation by the Ethics Committee is available in the printed version of this dissertation.

Appendix B. Consent Form

Gönüllü Katılım Onam Formu

Projenin Adı: Ortak Göç Sürecinin Çift İlişkileri Üzerindeki Etkisi: Almanya'daki Türk Göçmenlerle Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz

Araştırmacının Adı: Psk. Aslı Uzun

Araştırmacının E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu: -

Araştırmacının Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. Yudum Söylemez

Danışmanın E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu: -

Bu araştırma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Aslı Uzun tarafından Doç. Dr. Yudum Söylemez danışmanlığında yürütülmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, ortak göç sürecinin çift ilişkisi üzerindeki etkisini anlamaktır. Araştırmanın son yıllarda giderek artan Türkiye'den Almanya'ya beyin göçü hareketinin ilişkisel etkilerine ışık tutarak, koruyucu faktörleri ve risk faktörlerini incelemesi beklenmektedir. Bu kapsamda göç eden çiftlere yönelik geliştirilebilecek psikoloji çalışmalarına katkı sağlaması hedeflenmektedir.

Bu araştırmaya katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde, partnerinizle birlikte yaklaşık 120 dakika sürecek bir görüşmeye katılmanız beklenecektir. Bu görüşmede, partnerinizle ilişkinize, birlikte yaşadığınız göç deneyimine ve göç ettikten sonraki yaşamınıza dair düşüncelerinizi ve deneyimlerinizi anlamak adına size çeşitli sorular sorulacaktır. Yanıtlarınız, sonraki analizlerde kullanılmak üzere video kaydına alınacaktır.

Bu araştırma bilimsel bir amaçla yapılmakta ve katılımcıların kişisel bilgilerinin gizliliği esas alınmaktadır. Video kayıtları araştırma süresince sadece araştırmacının ve danışmanının erişimi olan bir harici bellekte muhafaza edilecek, araştırma sona erdiğinde silinecektir. Araştırma bulgularının sunumu ve raporlamasında kişi isimleri kullanılmayacak, bulgular görüşmelerde ifade edilen ortak konuları özetleyecektir. Görüşmelerde paylaştığımız görüşlerinize ve deneyimlerinize ilişkin örnek cümlelere bulguların raporlamasında yer verilecek olursa bu cümleler isminizle ilişkilendirilmeden anonim şekilde bilimsel yayınlarda kullanılacaktır.

Bu araştırmaya katılım tamamen isteğe bağlıdır. Görüşmeye katılmanın sizin ya da partnerinizin üzerinizde herhangi bir olumsuz etki yaratması beklenmemektedir. Ancak görüşme sırasında sizin ya da partnerinizin yanıt vermek istemediğiniz, size kendinizi rahatsız hissettiren sorular olursa bu soruları yanıtlamadan geçebilirsiniz. Görüşme sırasında siz ya da partneriniz dilediğiniz zaman video kaydının durdurulmasını isteyebilirsiniz. Görüşme başlamadan önce, görüşme sırasında veya sonrasında dilediğiniz zaman soru sorabilirsiniz. Siz ve partneriniz katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde çalışmanın herhangi bir aşamasında herhangi bir sebep göstermeden araştırmadan

çekilme hakkına sahipsiniz. Araştırmadan çekildiğiniz durumda verdiğiniz bilgiler değerlendirmeye alınmayacak ve o ana kadar yapılan kaydınız silinecektir.

Görüşmenizin sonuçları, araştırma sonlandırılmadan önce gözden geçirmeniz için sizinle ve partnerinizle mail yoluyla paylaşılacak ve geri bildiriminiz doğrultusunda gerekli değişiklikler yapılacaktır. Burada amaç, görüşlerinizin ve deneyimlerinizin en doğru şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlamaktır.

Araştırmayla ilgili bilgi almak, soru sormak veya yorumlarınızı paylaşmak isterseniz, araştırmacı Aslı Uzun ile iletişime geçebilirsiniz.

Eğer araştırmaya katılmaya onay veriyorsanız, bu metni imzalayarak mail yoluyla araştırmacıya iletebilirsiniz.

“Ortak Göç Sürecinin Çift İlişkileri Üzerindeki Etkisi: Almanya’daki Türk Göçmenlerle Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz” isimli araştırma projesinin detaylarını okudum ve bu projeye ilgili sorularım cevaplandı. Bu çalışmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum. Çalışmaya katılmayı ve verdiğim bilgilerin bilimsel amaçlı yayınlarda kullanılmasını kabul ediyorum.

İsim – Soyisim:

Tarih:

İmza:

Appendix C. Demographic Screening Form

1. Cinsiyetiniz:
2. Yaşınız:
3. Doğum yeriniz:
4. Eğitim durumunuz:
 - a. İlkokul
 - b. Ortaokul
 - c. Lise
 - d. Üniversite
 - e. Yüksek lisans
 - f. Doktora
5. Şu anki çalışma durumunuz:
 - a. Çalışmıyor
 - b. Yarı zamanlı çalışıyor
 - c. Tam zamanlı çalışıyor
6. Şu an çalıştığınız şirket ve pozisyon:
7. Göç etmeden önceki çalışma durumunuz:
 - a. Çalışmıyor
 - b. Yarı zamanlı çalışıyor
 - c. Tam zamanlı çalışıyor
8. Göç etmeden önce çalıştığınız şirket ve pozisyon:
9. Türkiye'den Almanya'ya göç ederken maaşınızda artış ya da azalma oldu mu?
 - a. Artış oldu
 - b. Azalma oldu
 - c. Aynı kaldı
10. Maaşınızda artış ya da azalma olduysa yüzdesel olarak nasıl bir fark gerçekleşti?
11. Cinsel yöneliminiz:

12. Medeni durumunuz:

13. İlişki durumunuz:

14. Çocuğunuz var mı?

a. 0

b. 1

c. 2

d. 3 ve daha fazla

13. Kısaca göç etmeye karar verme sebebiniz:

14. Göç etmeden önce partnerinizle ne kadar süredir birlikteydiniz?

15. Almanya'ya göç ettiğinizden beri geçen süre:

16. Bildiğiniz diller

a. Ana dili:

b. Diğer:

16. Göç ettikten sonra herhangi bir sebeple psikolojik destek talep ettiniz mi?

Evet ise, nedenleri:

17. Göç ettikten sonra bir uzman tarafından herhangi bir psikiyatrik/psikolojik tanı aldınız mı?

Evet ise, hangi tanı ve zamanı:

Appendix D. Interview Questions

Görüşme Soruları

Merhaba, öncelikle bu çalışmaya katıldığınız ve benimle kişisel deneyimleriniz hakkında konuşmayı kabul ettiğiniz için teşekkür ederim. Bugün sizinle göç etmiş olmanızın ilişkiniz üzerindeki etkilerinden, başa çıkma yollarınızdan ve aile ilişkilerinizden bahsedeceğiz. İhtiyaç duyduğunuzda ara verebiliriz ya da görüşmeyi tamamen durdurabiliriz.

Genel

Öncelikle sizden göç öncesi dönemdeki ilişkinizle ilgili bilgiler paylaşmanızı rica edeceğim.

1. İlişkiniz nasıl başladı?
2. Göç etmeye nasıl karar verdiniz?
3. Taşınma nasıl ve ne zaman gerçekleşti? Sizin için nasıl bir deneyimdi?

Göç Süreci ve Sonrasındaki Deneyimler

Şimdi de göç sürecinde ve sonrasında yaşadıklarınızı anlamaya çalışacağım.

4. Almanya'ya uyum sürecinizi nasıl tanımlarsınız?

Ayrıntılandırmak için:

- a. Uyum sürecinde yaşadığınız olumlu deneyimler neler oldu?
- b. Sizce uyum sürecinizi neler kolaylaştırdı?
- c. Uyum sürecinde yaşadığınız olumsuz deneyimler neler oldu?
- d. Sizce uyum sürecinizi neler zorlaştırdı?

5. Göç deneyiminiz ilişkinizi nasıl etkiledi?

Ayrıntılandırmak için:

- a. Almanya'ya göç ettikten sonra ilişkinizde yaşadığınız ana çatışmalar nelerdi?
 - i. Bu çatışmaları çözdünüz mü?
 - ii. Evet ise, nasıl çözdünüz, nelerin işe yaradığını düşünüyorsunuz?
 - iii. Hayır ise, çatışmaları çözmek konusunda nerede tıkanıldığınızı/ zorlandığınızı düşünüyorsunuz?

- b. Almanya'ya göç ettikten sonra ilişkinize olumlu yansımaları neler oldu?
 - i. Yakınlığınızı etkiledi mi?
 - ii. İletişim becerilerinizi etkiledi mi?
 - iii. Birlikte sorun çözme becerilerinizi etkiledi mi?
 - iv. Evdeki iş dağılımında değişiklikler oldu mu?
- c. Bundan sonrasında bu olumlu gelişmeleri devam ettirebilmeniz için neler size destek olabilir?

Kök Aile Etkileri

Şimdi de biraz kendi kök ailelerinizle ilişkinizi anlamaya çalışacağım.

6. Kök ailenizde kimler var?

Ayrıntılandırmak için:

- a. Annenizle nasıl bir ilişkiniz var? (Yakın / mesafeli/ çok yakın/ çatışmalı)
- b. Annenizle ne sıklıkla konuşursunuz ve görüşürsünüz?
- c. Annenizle ilişkinizde sınırlar nasıldır? Örneğin gerektiği zaman ona hayır diyebilir misiniz? Sınır koyduğunuzda nasıl tepki alırsınız?
- d. Babanızla nasıl bir ilişkiniz var? (Yakın / mesafeli/ çok yakın/ çatışmalı)
- e. Babanızla ne sıklıkla konuşursunuz ve görüşürsünüz?
- f. Babanızla ilişkinizde sınırlar nasıldır? Örneğin gerektiği zaman ona hayır diyebilir misiniz? Sınır koyduğunuzda nasıl tepki alırsınız?
- g. Annenizin ve babanızın birbiriyle ilişkisi hakkında aklınıza gelen ilk 3 sıfatı söyleyebilir misiniz?
- h. Bu cümledeki boşluğu nasıl tanımlarsınız?
“Biz bir aileyiz.”

7. Aileniz göç kararını verirken sürece dahil oldular mı?

8. Aileniz göç etme kararınızı ilettiğinizde nasıl tepki verdi? Taşınma sırasında nasıl tepki verdi?

9. Göç ettikten sonra ailenizle ilişkinizde değişiklik olduğunu düşünüyor musunuz?

10. Ailenizde daha önce göç etmiş (iç ya da dış göç) biri var mı? O/ onlar için nasıl bir deneyim olmuş, biliyor musunuz?

11. Anne – babanız zorlu hayat olaylarıyla (taşınma, kayıp vb.) nasıl başa çıkarlardı?
Böyle bir olay hatırlıyor musunuz?

Kapanış & Sorular

12. Sizce aile ilişkilerinizin göç deneyiminiz üzerinde nasıl bir etkisi olabilir?
13. Sizce ailenizin önceki göç deneyiminin (ya da başka bir zorlu hayat olayından bahsettilerse) sizin göç deneyiminiz üzerinde nasıl bir etkisi olabilir?
14. Sizce zorluklarla başa çıkmak konusunda ailenizden neler öğrendiniz?
15. Zorluklarla başa çıkarken onlardan farklı yaptığınız neler oldu?
16. Kendi deneyimlerinizden yola çıkarak yeni göç edecek çiftlere neler önerirdiniz?
17. Bugün konuştuklarımızı siz de aranızda konuşmuş muydunuz? Şimdi konuşmak size nasıl geldi?
18. Sizin bana sormak istediğiniz ya da eklemek istediğiniz bir şey var mı?

Çalışmaya katıldığınız ve verdiğiniz samimi cevaplar için çok teşekkür ederim.