

## Social Comparison and Affective Well-Being among Turkish Immigrants in the Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

This study among Turkish immigrants (n = 80) in the Netherlands explored the role of social comparisons in relation to affective well-being. Turkish immigrants felt in general that the Dutch were better off, and this upward comparison was negatively related to their well-being. These immigrants perceived themselves as better off than people still living in Turkey, and most other Turkish immigrants as being in a similar bad situation as they were themselves. The worse off Turkish immigrants perceived themselves in comparison to the Dutch, the lower their well-being was. Remarkably, their well-being was also lower, the better off they perceived themselves in comparison to other Turkish immigrants. This latter finding is explained by referring to equity theory.

**Keywords:** Social comparison, Immigrants, Turks, Well-being

### INTRODUCTION

Within a few decades, The Netherlands has become a truly multicultural society. In 2020, around 24.4% of the Dutch population had a migration background, including 13.9% with a non-Western background. Since the independence of the former colony Surinam in 1975, many Surinam people have migrated more or less permanently to the Netherlands. In addition, people from the Netherlands Antilles - six islands that are still part of the Kingdom of The Netherlands - have migrated, to the Netherlands. Moreover, since the 1960s, many men from Mediterranean countries (in particular Turkey and Morocco) came to the Netherlands as guest workers. Originally, it was expected that these workers would stay in the Netherlands only temporarily, and that they would eventually return to their home countries. However, it became increasingly clear that many preferred to have their families join them and to stay permanently in the Netherlands. Consequently, they became gradually considered as real immigrants, and governmental policies became more and more oriented towards integrating them in to Dutch society. Currently, the largest group with a migration background in the Netherlands is of Turkish origin, and comprises in 2020 around 420.000 individuals, of which about half were born in The Netherlands, i.e., about 2.5% of the total number of inhabitants (Central Bureau of Statistics). In the present study, we examined how Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands evaluate their situation in comparison to others, and how such comparisons are related to affective well-being. While many studies have focused on the well-being of Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands [1], the role of social comparisons has been largely unexplored.

However, it has been noted for long that through comparisons with others, individuals may make an assessment of their situation in terms of being deprived or advantaged [2,3]. The literature on relative deprivation especially emphasizes that individuals feel deprived when they perceive that others are better off [4], and there is evidence that migrants may perceive more relative deprivation than both the people in the area they came from as the area they moved to [5,6]. In various theoretical analyses it has been suggested that individuals often compare themselves with multiple others, rather than with a single comparison group [7]. From the perspective of social comparison theory, Turkish immigrants who have left their own country, may be interested in three different comparison groups to evaluate their situation. First, Turkish immigrants may compare their situation with that of other Turkish immigrants who are, of course, in many ways similar to them. Second, Turkish people still living in the country of origin may continue to be a very relevant comparison group for Turkish immigrants. Immigrants

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usually maintain many bonds with people in their country of origin, and the situation of these people reflects how the immigrants' own situation might have been, if they had not emigrated. Finally, because most Turkish immigrants have decided to stay permanently in the Netherlands, they may compare their situation with that of native citizens in this country. Preliminary interviews with Turkish immigrants confirmed that these were the three most frequently mentioned comparison groups.

The first issue examined in the present research is how Turkish immigrants consider their situation in comparison to the various target groups, i.e., the extent in which they feel that they are better or worse off than these groups. Such assessments are referred to as comparative evaluations [8-10]. Assuming that immigrants are aware of their relatively unfavorable situation in Dutch society, it seems likely that they feel on average deprived in comparison to the Dutch majority in terms of the opportunities to get ahead in society. They might consider themselves equally well-off as other Turks in the Netherlands. In turn, immigrants probably feel that their opportunities are better than those of individuals who are still living in the country of origin. Indeed, many Turkish people originally came to the Netherlands because of their bleak socio-economic prospects in Turkey, and they probably would have returned if the situation in their home countries had been better than that in the Netherlands.

The second issue examined is whether comparative evaluations are related to affective well-being. Many theorists and researchers have pointed out that well-being may depend on the outcomes of social comparisons with other individuals and groups, including on-line comparisons [5,11,12]. Specifically, the perception of being better off or worse off than most others tend to be intrinsically linked to life satisfaction [2,3,13]. Although comparisons with certain groups and individuals may be more important than those with others, in general, the more downward comparative evaluations are (i.e., the better people perceive their opportunities in comparison to others), the higher their well-being is, and vice versa, the more upward comparative evaluations are (i.e., the worse people perceive their opportunities in comparison to others), the lower their affective well-being is. These predictions focus upon correlations between social comparison and well-being, without claiming a particular causal direction. It seems likely that well-being and social comparisons may develop in a reciprocal causal process. We focused on purpose on affective well-being, i.e., on the extent to which people experienced positive and negative feelings in response to their current life situation. More cognitive measures of well-being (e.g., evaluating one's situation in terms of good or bad), might be considered conceptually overlapping with measures of comparative evaluation.

## METHOD

## Respondents

Fifty-one men and 29 women of Turkish origin participated in the study. They lived in the city of Groningen, which is the largest city in the northern part of the Netherlands. Nearly all respondents reported to be Muslims, and had Turkish nationality. Their mean age was 30 years (range: 18-53 years). The women were somewhat younger than the men. On average, the respondents had lived in the Netherlands for 11 years (range: 7-281 months). Half of the respondents stated that they spoke Dutch as well as Turkish, the other half spoke Turkish better than Dutch. Thirty-nine percent of the men and 17% of the women were employed. The men were approached through Turkish Societies. The women were asked to participate during language and sewing lessons.

## PROCEDURE

The questionnaire was pretested and subsequently translated into Turkish by native speakers. The interviewer personally asked the respondents if they wanted to fill out a questionnaire. Almost all respondents completed the Turkish questionnaire. Completing a questionnaire took 30-45 min for most respondents. In order to save the interviewer's time, most questionnaires were completed in small groups. Because the interviewer was always present, the respondents could ask questions when something was not clear to them.

## MEASURES

**Comparative evaluation.** Comparative evaluation was measured by asking the respondents to compare themselves with the different groups examined in this study. The question was: "If you compare your chances to get ahead in Dutch society with most Dutch people/Turkish people living in the Netherlands/Turkish people living in Turkey, do you think you are worse or better off?" The five possible answers ranged from I'm much better off via I'm equally well off to are much better off. A high score meant feeling better off than others.

**Affective well-being.** The measure for this variable was based on the widely used Positive and Negative Affect Scale [14]. The respondents were asked how often they experienced five positive and five negative emotions. Examples are: "How often are you satisfied with your situation?" and "How often are you angry about your situation?" The possible answers ranged from very often 1 to never 5. A higher score indicated a higher well-being. Coefficient Alpha was 0.83.

## RESULTS

### Comparative evaluations

It was examined how Turkish immigrants perceived their situation in comparison to the Dutch majority, to other Turkish people in the Netherlands, and to Turkish people

who still lived in Turkey. T-tests were performed between the group means (score on perceived evaluation for the opportunities to get ahead in society compared to each of the three comparison groups) on the one hand, and the scale midpoint on the other hand. In line with the predictions, on average the respondents appeared to feel deprived compared to the Dutch,  $M=2.01$ ,  $t(78)=-10.78$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), to feel as well off as other Turkish people in the Netherlands,  $M=3.18$ ,  $t(78)=1.90$ , ns, and to feel somewhat better off than people in Turkey,  $M=3.66$ ,  $t(78)=2.75$ ,  $p<0.01$ . As **Table 1** shows, a considerable majority of 69% felt much or somewhat worse off than the Dutch, whereas virtually nobody felt better off; in contrast, in comparison to other Turkish immigrants 71% felt as well off, whereas a small majority (53%) felt better off than Turkish people who lived in Turkey. Thus, comparisons with the Dutch constituted in general an upward comparison, comparisons with other Turkish people in the Netherlands predominantly a lateral comparison, and comparison with Turkish people living in Turkey in half of the cases a downward comparison (**Table 2**).

**Comparative evaluations and well-being**

To examine whether comparative evaluations were related to affective well-being, a hierarchical regression was

executed with affective well-being as dependent variable, and the three relative evaluation measures as independent variables. To control for possible effects of demographic variables on well-being, age ( $r=-0.19$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), being unemployed (1=No, 2=Yes,  $r=-0.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and gender (1=male, 2=female,  $r=0.13$ , ns) were entered in the first step. This analysis showed that the demographic variables generated a significant increase in variance,  $R_{ch}=0.14$ ,  $F_{ch}=4.18$ ,  $p<0.01$ , with only a significant negative contribution of being unemployed,  $\beta=-0.31$ ,  $p<0.01$ . In the second step, the comparative evaluation variables added a significant amount of variance,  $R_{ch}=0.20$ ,  $F_{ch}=7.48$ ,  $p<0.001$ . This effect was largely due to comparative evaluation with respect to the Dutch,  $\beta=0.40$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Comparative evaluation with respect to Turkish people in the Netherlands contributed negatively to well-being,  $\beta=-0.26$ ,  $p<0.05$ , whereas comparison with Turkish people living in Turkey did not independently contribute to well-being,  $\beta=0.18$ , ns. For the total equation,  $R=0.59$ . Thus, in line with the expectations, the worse off the respondents felt in comparison with the Dutch, the lower their affective well-being was. However, unlike what had been expected, feeling better off than most other Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands was related to a relatively lower well-being.

**Table 1.** Comparative evaluations among Turkish immigrants.

	Much Worse	Somewhat Worse	As well	Somewhat Better	Much Better
<b>Comparison group</b>					
<b>Dutch</b>	31%	38%	30%	1%	0%
<b>Turkish people in the Netherlands</b>	4%	5%	71%	10%	10%
<b>Turkish people in Turkey</b>	10%	10%	28%	40%	13%

**Table 2.** Correlations between the variables among Turkish immigrants.

		1	2	3
<b>1</b>	Comparative evaluation Dutch		-	
<b>2</b>	Comparative evaluation Turkish people in the Netherlands	-0.06	-	
<b>3</b>	Comparative evaluation Turkish people in Turkey	0.02	0.42**	-
<b>4</b>	Subjective well-being	0.33**	-0.18	0.10

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

**DISCUSSION**

As suggested by various authors [2, 7] the assumption in the present research was that people may compare themselves with various groups and individuals, rather than, as

traditionally supposed in the social comparison literature, with a single comparison other. In line with the predictions, the present findings showed that in general the Turkish immigrants in this study had a rather transparent comparison pattern: they felt deprived compared to the Dutch, about as

well off as other members of their ethnic group in the Netherlands, and better off than people still living in Turkey. Thus, while the comparison with Turkish people in the country of origin was the only downward comparison, the comparison with the Dutch was the only upward comparison. Particularly this last comparison was related to affective well-being: the worse off Turkish immigrants felt compared to the Dutch, the lower their well-being was. Thus, apparently, the Dutch were an important reference group, and a sense of deprivation in comparison with the Dutch seemed to be associated negatively with well-being.

Unexpectedly, the perception that one's opportunities to progress in Dutch society were better than those of other Turkish immigrants, was negatively related to affective well-being. One explanation for this finding is offered by equity theory. Comparisons with other Turkish immigrants constitute an in group comparison. In general, it is in the interests of a group to develop an equity outlook among its members [15]. In a similar vein, social identity theory would predict that Turkish people may experience solidarity and identification with members of this in group, and may therefore feel guilty when they perceive that they are doing better than other Turkish immigrants, and will concomitantly have a lower well-being [16]. The fact that, on average, the respondents felt as well off as other Turkish immigrants is congruent with this interpretation. Another explanation of these data which reversed the casual relationship, would be that that people who experience a low well-being emphasize that they are better off than other group members, i.e., engage in downward comparisons as a way of coping with their situation [17].

Limitations of the present study must be noted. First, the respondents do not constitute a representative sample of the Turkish inhabitants of Groningen, nor of the Netherlands. Most of them were approached at group meetings, hence individuals who do not visit these meetings did not have the opportunity to participate. There are probably few people in the sample who were at home most of the time, and who did not have any contact with the Turkish community in the Netherlands. Individuals approached through the Turkish community may have a relatively strong identification with their home land and culture, and be relatively less acculturated. Therefore, one must be careful with generalizing the results of this study to the total group of Turkish inhabitants of the Netherlands. The present findings must thus be seen as preliminary in nature. Second, one could argue that comparative evaluations do not necessarily reflect the outcome of a social comparison process [10], and do not have actual effects upon well-being. Another perspective might be that when individuals with a low well-being are asked how their situation is compared with that of other people, they will simply indicate that their situation is worse, not because they have actually compared themselves with others, but because they conclude that others must be better off since their own situation is so bad. It seems

unlikely, however, that this reasoning can explain the present findings. If this explanation is correct, there would be reason to expect high correlations between well-being and all comparative evaluation variables. Moreover, this explanation cannot account at all for the fact that in one case comparative evaluations were adversely related to well-being. In addition, it must be noted that the present findings emerged while controlling for relevant demographic variables. Despite a number of potential limitations, the present research may help to illuminate how among immigrants who are in the process of adapting to a new society, the outcome of social comparisons is related to their well-being [18-20].

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