The Stress Experiences of Gypsies: A Qualitative Study in Thrace

Münire TEMEL[1]   **Sibel ÇAYNAK[2]**   **Nur Elçin BOYACIOĞLU[3]**

[1]Dr.Öğr. Üyesi, Tekirdağ Namık Kemal Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Meslek Yüksekokulu, Sosyal Hizmet ve Danışmanlık Bölümü, Tekirdağ /Türkiye, muniretemel@nku.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-8099-6287

[2]Araş. Görevlisi, Akdeniz Üniversitesi, Hemşirelik Fakültesi, Psikiyatri Hemşireliği Anabilimdalı, Antalya/Türkiye, sibeltimur86@hotmail.com, ORCID: 0000 0002 1579 0696

[3]Dr.Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Üniversitesi-Cerrahpasa, Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi, Geriatri Bölümü , İstanbul /Türkiye, nur.boyacioglu@istanbul.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-8138-7347

Abstract: The aim of this study is to understand the stress experiences of Gypsies. The study was carried out with a qualitative research method, phenomenological model. The data of the study were obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 Gypsy individuals between April and May 2018. Data were evaluated using descriptive analysis. Three main themes and related sub-themes were determined for the stress experiences of Gypsy individuals. These main themes are; the factors causing stress in Gypsies, the stress reactions of Gypsies; the methods of Gypsies for coping with stress. It was understood that Gypsies, who were thought to lead a stress-free and enjoyable life, tried to cope with poverty and other stressor related to it. Social support and bohemian lifestyles are the primary coping methods of Gypsies. Increasing employment, education, safety and health services in their neighborhood will help to reduce stressors and cope with stress.

Key Words: Gypsy, Romani, stress, coping

Çingenelerin Stres Deneyimleri: Trakya'da Kalitatif Bir Çalışma

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı, Çingenelerin stres deneyimlerini anlamaktır. Çalışma kalitatif yöntemlerden biri olan olgubilim modelinde yürütüldü. Araştırmanın verileri, Nisan-Mayıs 2018 tarihleri arasında 20 Çingene birey ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılarak elde edildi. Veriler betimsel analiz ile değerlendirildi. Çalışmada Çingene bireylerin stres deneyimlerini içeren üç ana tema belirlendi. Bu ana temalar şunlardı; Çingenelerde strese neden olan faktörler, Çingenelerin stres tepkileri; Çingenelerin stresle baş etme yöntemleri. Stresten uzak ve eğlenceli bir yaşam sürdüğü düşünülen Çingenelerin, yoksulluk ve buna bağlı diğer stresörler ile baş etmeye çalıştıkları anlaşılmıştır. Çingenelerin birbirlerine sosyal desteği ve bohem yaşam tarzları stresle başa çıkmanın başlıca yöntemleridir. Yaşadıkları mahallede istihdam, eğitim, güvenlik ve sağlık hizmetlerinin artırılması stres nedenlerini azaltmaya ve başetmeye yardım edecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çingene, Roman, stres, başetme

1. INTRODUCTION

Gypsies are an important ethnic group with their lifestyle habits, unique behavior, and socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics (Parsova, 2018; Reznikova et al., 2017). Gypsies left their homeland India more than a thousand years ago and spread to the world. Since they spread to other geographies from different branches, three different Gypsy populations have been formed today. The "Rom" group lives around Europe, the "Dom" group lives in the Middle East, the "Lom" group lives around the Caucasus. (Tarlan, 2018; İlhan and Fırat, 2017). Today, Gypsies are the largest ethnic minority in Europe (Fernández-Feito et al., 2019). One of the countries with the highest Gypsy population in Europe is Turkey (Ministry of Family and Social Policies, 2016).

Although Gypsies have adopted the language and religion of the countries they live in, they still maintain their own culture and traditions. Gypsies, who are in strong solidarity among themselves, live in isolation from the other part of the society (Gökçe, 2018; İlhan and Fırat, 2017). Gypsies have been described as colorful-looking, brunette people who are intertwined with music and dancing, love entertainment, seize the day and choose to be free in many countries of the world (Reznikova et al., 2017; Zachar Podolinská and Škobla, 2018). They have also been reflected on media almost the same way, for many years. In many films and TV shows, the Gypsy neighborhoods are portrayed as places where fun too. Gypsies are projected as cheerful and happy people who live a stress-free life and do not like to work (Parsova, 2018; Pasqualino, 2008). On the other hand, the studies reveal that the Gypsy ethnic identity appears to be different in real life from what is presented on media. Majority of them live in inconvenient houses far from urban spaces and can barely find a place in public spaces. Due to having lower level of education, working in the informal sector and lacking social security, they live in a deep poverty (Burchardt et al., 2018; Coe and Cvorovic, 2017; Cvorovic and James, 2018; Çetin,

2017; Minority Rights Group International and The Zero Discrimination Association, 2017).

Additionally, Gypsies have always been perceived as "others" and marginalized for their culture for centuries (Reznikova et al., 2017; Tremlett, 2013; Tüzün, 2018). Another reason why Gypsies are externalized is that they are perceived as dangerous individuals engaged in illegal activities (Aşkın, 2017; Condon et al., 2019; Reznikova et al., 2017; Zachar Podolinská and Škobla, 2018). In a recent study examining the attitudes and views of education, health and welfare workers of Greece concerning the Gypsies; it has been indicated that fears, anxieties, negative attitudes and stereotyped judgments toward this ethnic group continue (Asimopoulos et al., 2019). Since the identity of the Gypsy population was largely not reflected in national statistics and since they were rarely given a chance to participate in political life, the societies where they live recognize and accept Gypsy people very little (Human Rights Council, 2016).

In recent years, with an increase in awareness on the needs of the Gypsies in Europe, many interventions for social and economic integration have been performed. However, Gypsies continue to be remembered only in election times by majority of governments and other political parties in Europe (Zachar Podolinská and Škobla, 2018). Awareness on the conditions of the Gypsy citizens living in Turkey has come into public attention in the 1990's, and concrete steps on the subject have been taken since 2012 (Çetin, 2017; Ministry of Family and Social Policies, 2016). However, Gypsies have stated that these projects did not fulfill participatory principles sufficiently and thus did not reach the desired results (Tüzün, 2018).

The limited knowledge on the Gypsy population is an obstacle before the development of appropriate program and strategies for them (Fernández-Feito et al., 2019). Different studies have been conducted both in Turkey and in other countries, to determine the living conditions, culture and physical health of the Gypsies. But less attention has been paid to their psychological aspects. Lifestyle and living conditions are significantly associated with stress experiences of individuals. The personal and environmental conditions of each individual such as economic status, social support levels, and coping skills have an effect on how stress is experienced (Bernard et al.,2016; Uludağlı, 2017). There is sparse literature describing the stress experiences of Gypsies. Considering the living atmoshere and social existence style of the Gypsies; it is important to understand their stress experiences. Thus, the aim of this study is to try to understand the stress

experiences of a group of Gypsies living in Turkey. The research questions were as follows.

Research Question 1: What are the factors that cause stress in Gypsies? Research Question 2: What are the stress reactions of Gypsies? Research Question 3: How do Gypsies cope with stress?

2.MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study design and sampling

Qualitative descriptive studies focuses on discovering the nature of the specific events under study (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Lambert and Lambert, 2012; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011). The study was carried out in one of the qualitative research methods, phenomenological model. Snowball sampling method was used in this study.

2.2. Participants

The study was conducted between April and May 2018 in city in Thracia region of Turkey. 'Rom' group Gypsies live in this region and they are called 'Romani'. Study data was obtained from 20 settled Gypsies living in one Gypsy neighborhood in this region. To be included in this study, Gypsy participants were required to be over the age of 18 years and belonged to a different family. This Gypsy neighborhood isolated from the other parts of the city and lacking in social and technical substructure. Families live in one or two-room homes far from today's comfort. Only one third of the Gypsy individuals in the neighborhood have a permanent job; the remaining majority are either part-time jobs or unemployed. There is a crime zone in the neighborhood that poses a security threat to both residents and others. A group of people lived in this zone, earning their income through theft, drug dealing, arms smuggling and trafficking (Gökçe, 2018).

2.3. Data collection tool

A form including socio demographic information prepared by the researchers. The socio demographic characteristics of the participants were given in Table I. In order to determine the stress experiences of the participants, a semi structured interview form prepared by the researchers was used (Aşkın, 2017; Condon et al., 2019; Duval and Wolff, 2016; Ekmekçi, 2015; Uludağlı, 2017). The questions in this form were given in Table II.

2.4. Procedure

The researcher (MT) is familiar with the Gypsy culture because she has lived in the Thrace region since her childhood. However, like the other Gypsy districts, there are security problems especially for foreigners in the place where the research is carried out. Foreigners cannot freely go and walk around this neighborhood. On the other hand, Gypsies also avoid mingling with strangers. For this reason, the researcher wandered the neighborhood accompanied by her friend living in this neighborhood and contacted the Gypsies. The participants were informed about the content of the study. The study was carried out with individuals who agreed to participate in the study and gave voluntary informed consent. Data was collected through one on one face to face interviews that took approximately 30-45 minutes. The interviews were performed in garden or front of the house of the participants. The researcher and the participant sat face to face on the same level during the interviews. The researcher spoke less and listened more during the interviews. Since the participants did not allow audio recording, the researcher recorded everything said in writing. At the end of all interviews, the researcher (MT) received their approval by showing the participants what she had written and summarizing what she understood. In this way, it was aimed to ensure the external validity of the study.

Table I. Characteristics of participants

No	Gender	Age	Education	Marital status	Occupation
1	Female	64	Illiterate	Divorced	Housewife
2	Female	45	Illiterate	Divorced	Casual worker
3	Male	18	Literate	Single	Casual worker
4	Male	22	Primary school	Single	Tradesman
5	Male	27	Secondary school	Single	Worker
6	Male	19	High school	Single	Student
7	Female	35	Primary school	Married	Tradesman
8	Male	31	Primary school	Married	Casual worker
9	Female	29	Primary school	Married	Housewife
10	Male	32	Primary school	Married	Tradesman
11	Female	42	Secondary school	Divorced	Tradesman
12	Female	26	Primary school	Married	Housewife
13	Male	28	Primary school	Married	Casual worker
14	Female	49	Primary school	Widow	Housewife
15	Female	36	Illiterate	Married	Housewife
16	Male	24	Secondary school	Single	None
17	Female	18	Primary school	Single	None
18	Male	53	Primary school	Married	Worker
19	Male	46	High school	Married	Tradesman
20	Male	27	Primary school	Married	Peddler

Table II. Semi-structured Interview Form

Questions
• What do you understand from the words stress and coping with stress?
• What are the situations that cause the most stress for you?
• How often do you experience these situations, and how long do they last?
• How do you feel under stress and how do you behave?
• What do you do when you experience stress to relieve this situation? Do you think what you do works?
• Do you ask for help from a health institution or health worker when you can not get over a stressful situation?
• Is there anything you would like to add?

2.5. Data analysis

Descriptive analyses for the data obtained from the interviews were performed. Qualitative data are not intend to be reduce to numbers, as in quantitative research. In qualitative analysis data presentation is made via a straight descriptive summary of the data that is organized in a logical manner Descriptive qualitative analysis is a type of qualitative data analysis that includes summarizing and interpreting data according to predefined themes. The purpose of descriptive analysis is to present the findings to the reader in a summarized and interpreted manner (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Lambert and Lambert, 2012). In this analysis, direct quotes that reflect the opinions of the individuals who participated in the research are often included. These applications increase the validity and reliability of research data. Descriptive analysis takes place in four stages. In the first stage, a framework for data analysis is created, based on research questions, the conceptual framework of the research or the dimensions involved in interviews and observations. Then, data is read and edited based on this framework. In this process, it is important to gather the data in a meaningful and logical way. In the next step, the edited data are defined. For this, direct quotations are also used where necessary. At the last stage, the findings that have been described are explained, related to each other and given meaning (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011). These stages were followed in the analysis of this study. Analyzes were made by two researchers (NEB, SÇ) who were not involved in data collection.The determined themes were then presented to the researcher (MT) who collected the data. After the consensus of the three researchers, the themes and sub-themes were finalized. As a result of the analysis of the data; it was checked whether the findings emerged consistent with the conceptual framework previously formed. In this way, it was aimed to ensure the internal validity of the study.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in a manner appropriate to the Helsinki Declaration Principles. Before the interviews, the participants were informed on the aim and method of the study as well as the facts that participation was on a voluntary basis and their identities would be kept secret. The participants gave verbal and written consent. In the study, abbreviations such as P1, P2, P20 were used to keep the identities of the participants confidential. The Ethics Committee of Tekirdağ Namık Kemal University Medical Faculty (2018/17/02/02) approved this study.

3. RESULTS

The findings regarding the stress experiences of Gypsies were defined under three main themes.

Theme 1:The factors causing stress in Gypsies

Subtheme 1: *Poverty*

Almost all of the participants pointed to poverty as the main factor causing stress. The cause of poverty is seen as unemployment or lack of a lasting job. Since financial difficulties caused domestic disturbance, it is seen by participants as a multidimensional stressor. Some of the statements on the subject were as follows:

> *... Poverty is the thing that affects stress most. When financial status is not good, other problems always follow in a chain. There is unrest in the house for this reason...P9)*

> *...Not having a regular job, being broke, the nagging of my wife because of this. These cause stress for me, I even get depressed sometimes…(P13)*

Gypsy individuals want to have a job that has enough income to support them. Their goal is not to make a lot of money.

> *… I wish I could provide better conditions for my children, but I can't....(P11)*

> *… I want to have a home, and I want health and pleasantness. I don't want anything else…(P2)*

> *…I want to find a lasting job. I want to take my children to the park, and get them what they want there....(P8)*

Subtheme 2: *Security issues*

The Gypsy neighborhood where the study was conducted is often pronounced with fights, injuries, illegal substance use and sale. More than half of the participants stated that they feared something bad would happen to them or their families and that they were under constant stress because of this.

> *…My grandchildren are in prison. They were victims of their friends. Our neighborhood is bad. The Aydogdu district is a stressor by itself…(P1)*

> *…Constant bad events in the neighborhood and the presence of drug dealers and users cause stress for me…(P7)*

Subtheme 3: Lack of education

Some Gypsies identified lack of education in both children and adults as well as lack of interest in education as stressors. For example:

…My kids goes to school, They are very unwilling. I have to force the kids to do homework, and it causes stress…(P12)

… People here are ignorant.. The children drop out school too. The stress is caused by getting married at 15 or 16. If you expect a kid that age to be a woman, the child collapses. This is the situation now. They can't find money and they turn to bad things, and that is how stress begins …(P10)

Theme 2: The stress reactions of Gypsies

Subtheme 1: Physiological and psychological reactions

Most of the participants stated that they experienced symptoms such as crying, slowing down, chagrin, and pessimism when under stress. Some participants reported reactions such as anger, shouting, or even violence. Additionally, there were participants reporting symptoms such as ache, shaking, and fatigue. For example:

…I feel exhausted. I don't want to do anything. I enjoy nothing. My day becomes monotonous…(P5)

…Blood rushes to my head. My hands and feet contract. I can't control myself and I start seeing red... (P4)

Subtheme 2: Short term reactions

Most of Gypsies stated that their stress reactions were usually short term. Statements appropriate for this theme were given below:

...I get over it quickly. It doesn't last ...(P14)

…It doesn't take long, I accept events quickly…(P18)

... When I come home in the evening and my family smiles at me, all my anger and annoyance pass...(P19)

Some participants said longer term reactions in relation to the continuity of the stressor. For example:

... My boredom continues until I solve the cause of the stress...(P6)

Theme 3: The methods of Gypsies for coping with stress

Subtheme 1: Sharing problems with family and friends

Almost all of the participants stated that they used methods such as spending time with family, relatives, and friends, sharing their concerns with those people, and getting their opinion to cope with stress, and reported that they similarly supported their friends and family. For example;

…I ask for my friends' help and support. When I'm troubled I go and share with them. Material, mental whatever the issue is…(P20)

…My family, bless their hearts, are always by my side. For both the good days and the bad. They never shy away from supporting me…(P8)

Subtheme 2: Spending time in nature and outdoors

Most of the Gypsy participants prefer to walk away from the environment and go outdoors into nature when they experienced stress.

…I go to fields and gardens when under stress. I walk, wander around and try to get some fresh air...(P18)

… I go into nature, to village tours when I'm stressed. Going outdoors calms me down, even if a little. It drives me away from my worries… P16)

Subtheme 3: Short-term mental preoccupation with the stressor

Gypsies said mostly triy to not intensively be involved in stress factors and distance themselves if they can not solve the problem. For example;

…You can't lose sleep over everything. Every problem surely has a solution. There is no need to make ourselves sick over nothing…(P11)

…I always try to think positive so that everything works out…(P17)

Subtheme 4: Considering mental health services unnecessary

Despite their difficulties, Gypsies stated that they did not refer to mental health services and that this was not necessary. It was understood that awareness on mental health services was low, and that there was even a certain stigmatization.

…I don't think about going to a health professional or using medication for my stress related problems. I don't want to be addicted person and I'm not that bad…(P12)

…I don't go to a health institution in stress problems… they would certainly prescribe drugs. I heard that those drugs make people stupid. A friend of mine told so…(P7)

4. DISCUSSION

In this study, the stress experiences of Gypsies were researched. Gypsies saw unemployment, or the poverty brought about by not having a lasting job, among the most important reasons for experiencing stress. They also considered poverty as the cause of other stressors such as domestic disputes. Economic conditions are directly associated with not only meeting physical needs (such as food, water, sheltering) but also having better opportunities such as health, education, housing and transportation. Thus, economic inadequacies are a cause of stress for all individuals. When the studies on Gypsies were examined, it was seen that unemployment, working in unsecure, unskilled, unwanted, traditional jobs, low income, and ensuing poverty were pronounced in the Gypsy population and that their living conditions were thus poor (Aşkın, 2017; Burchardt et al., 2018; Coe and Cvorovic 2017; Gökçe, 2018).

In this study, Gypsies pointed to their low education level as another cause of stress. It has been stressed in the literature that the Gypsies mostly only complete mandatory basic education with high drop off rates (Costachie, 2017; Cvorovic and James, 2018; Diktaş et al., 2016; Duval and Wolff 2016; Eskiocak and Akbaşak 2017; Gökçe, 2018) Financial difficulties and exclusion from society may have role in the Gypsies not continuing education (Diktaş et al., 2016; Tanrıverdi et al., 2012).When the other reasons behind this were researched, it was understood that they had no desire to increase their success, that they continued life by hanging on to what they had, and that they preferred to quit education in case of failure (Genç et al, 2015). In a study conducted by Rosario et al. Gypsy children stated that their expectation from education was only to learn how to read and write and basic mathematics since they needed to perform as salespeople to contribute to the family budget. Additionally, they also stated that they believed the basic skills taught at elementary school were sufficient to lead a life as a Gypsy (Rosario et al., 2014). Education which promotes individual and social development and is one of the important instruments of socialization, enables individuals to develop life skills that are necessary to lead a humanely life. Due to lack of education, the Gypsies are unable to adapt to their society, attain opportunities that can increase their life standards and evaluate these opportunities even if they are able to attain them (Aşkın, 2017). Factors such as the continuous reconstruction of negative stereotyped judgments toward the Gypsies and their isolation from the general society, condemn this ethnic group to unemployment or push them into finding cheap, temporary and unsecured labor force in the informal labor market (Parsova, 2018). This situation causes the continuity of basic poverty and deprivation for the present and future Gypsy generations.

In this study, Gypsies pointed that security problems in Gypsy neighborhood. In their observations regarding the Gypsy neighborhood, Gökçe stated that the non Gypsy population see the neighborhood as a dangerous area that can not be entered (Gökçe, 2018). It can be seen that the areas where the Gypsies live across the country are of similar quality mostly in the outskirts of town and within a ghetto culture. Since these neighborhoods are bereft of education and left to their own devices, they become unsafe areas that potentially harbor crime (Aşkın, 2017; Costachie, 2017)

Being at a social disadvantage within the society can be a important stressor (Sanchez and Awad, 2016). It is often seen that Gypsies are exposed to exclusion and stigmatization by other populations in the areas they live in (Çetin, 2017; Coe and Cvorovic, 2017; Cvorovic and James, 2018; Diktaş, 2016). In this study, although the participants stated that they were exposed to exclusion from time to time, they did not define it as an important stress factor. Gypsies may have accepted exclusion from community and turned it into a lifestyle (Genç et al., 2015).

In this study, it was understood that Gypsies often received social support from friends and family to cope with stress and that they saw this as very important. In other study, Gypsy adolescents were reported to have higher levels of social support compared to other adolescent groups (Kolarcık et al., 2012). The Gypsies usually live in extended families, and extended family is a basic source of help and support. They have a strong sense of solidarity among themselves and approach others with caution (Coe and Cvorovic, 2017; Condon et al., 2019; Gökçe, 2018]. They have a cultural expectation to support each other when a problem is encountered without referring to any institution (Van Cleemput, 2018). This approach is preferred for reasons such as protection of identity, the continuity of culture, fighting inequality and poverty, solidarity, and protecting each other from strangers (Gökçe, 2018).

In this study, Gypsies stated that they experienced physical and psychological stress symptoms, but their symptoms were usually short-lived. They also stated that they tried to cope with the stress factor by trying not to think for a long time and by spending time in open areas and nature. These findings indicate that the free and bohemian

lifestyles of Gypsies (İlhan and Fırat, 2017; Gökçe, 2018) are also coping methods.

Gypsies have low health awareness, health expectations, and health literacy, with important obstacles for reaching health services (Ekmekçi, 2015; Eskiocak and Akbaşak, 2017; Fernández-Feito et al., 2019; McFadden et al., 2018; Van Cleemput, 2018). The health perception of the Gypsies is generally tied to physical health and being able to perform daily activities. Traditional applications take priority in their treatment seeking behavior, followed by first step medical services (Tanrıverdi et al., 2012; Peters et al., 2009). There is a stigma against mental illness and they do not refer to advanced steps of medical services in case of mental illness (Van Cleemput, 2018). It has been stated that discrimination experiences (McFadden et al., 2018) and culturally sensitive health services not being provided (Ekmekçi, 2015) have underlying roles in the Gypsies not benefiting from health services sufficiently. The information obtained from this study, show that the Gypsies have no desire for health services for stress related problems and that they do not have sufficient awareness on mental health services. There are also opinions that Gypsies believe they have the power to actively cope with their problems despite all their disadvantages (Cvorovic and James, 2018).

The findings of this study are limited to the expressions of 20 Gypsy people, who volunteerad to take part in this research, so that they are not generalizable. The Gypsy individuals participating in this study are living settled life and the results may not reflect the nomadic Gypsy individuals. Other limitation of this study is related that the interview questions were derived from the semi-structured questionnaire. Therefore, the results are based on the questions asked by the researchers and do not evaluate stress in all aspects and do not show the stress level.

5. CONCLUSION

In the result of this study, it can be seen that poverty, lack of education and security problems are priority stressors for the Gypsy participants. These problems of the Gypsies trigger each other. In addition, it is understood that social support and bohemian lifestyles are important for the Gypsies to cope with stress.

In line with these results, our recommendations are as follows:

Gypsies should be encouraged to participate more in education and provided them appropriate employment opportunities. Health, safety and social services and activities in the neighborhood

they live in should be increased. This will allow them to participate more in life and meet with other members of the community. Awareness of Gypsies on preventive mental health services should also be ensured. While doing all this, it is also important to take into account their cultural characteristics and preferences.

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