ORIGINAL PAPER

Understanding Change in Romantic Relationship Expectations of International Female Students from Turkey

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Abstract In the light of grounded theory, the authors explored change in romantic relationship expectations of international students. Twelve female graduate students from Turkey were interviewed and several themes were identified explaining the presence and absence of change in participants' attitudes toward romantic relationships. The findings are discussed in relation to acculturation and direction for future research is presented.

Keywords Change · Acculturation · Romantic relationship · Romantic relationship expectations · International students

Introduction

In the context of globalization, the flow of international students has been increasing dramatically over the years (Altbach and Knight 2007). Seeking graduate level education in American universities has been a main driving force behind the international immigration into the US (Altbach et al. 1985; Chapman et al. 1988). The number of international students enrolled in US higher education institutions during the academic year of 2007–2008 reached a record level high with a total of 623,805 (Open Doors Report 2008). According to the Council of Graduate Studies, students from the Middle East and Turkey constitute 5% of all international students in the US (Bell 2009). In addition, Turkey has been ranked eighth in terms of international students studying in American universities with 11,506 students (Open Doors Report 2008).

Several studies within the acculturation domain have been conducted to understand international students' well-being and experiences in the US. Acculturation refers to the change process experienced by people who have contact with another culture. This change can be socio-cultural, focusing on social integration in the dominant society in the realm of

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school and work (Ward 2001), or psychological, examining individual well-being, personal and cultural identities, and personal satisfaction (Berry 1997). The majority of acculturation literature focuses on patterns of adaptation and mechanisms for survival in a new culture. More specifically, many researchers have examined psychological problems, academic performance, language barriers, financial difficulties, interpersonal problems with American students, racial/ethnic discrimination, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness among international students (Leong and Chou 1996; Mallinckrodt and Leong 1992; Mori 2000; Pedersen 1991). Similar studies have been conducted using Turkish samples (Duru and Poyrazli 2007; Kilinc and Granello 2003). Interestingly, compared to other international students, Turkish students living in the US have reported less satisfaction with social aspects of their lives (Tansel and Gungor 2002).

One of the overlooked areas in this body of research has been the acculturation process of international students' expectations vis-à-vis romantic relationships. Like their peers, international students are in the process of establishing romantic relationships and possibly thinking about marriage, which are two of the central developmental tasks of young adulthood (Erikson 1968). What is different about international students compared to their peers is that they experience this developmental stage in a foreign country, often with little social support, language barriers, and while their acculturation process is unfolding. The main goal of this study was to examine the change that international students from Turkey experienced in regards to their expectations, attitudes, and behaviors of romantic relationships as a result of living in the US.

Romantic Love, Marriage, and Culture

Although some studies have provided strong evidence that romantic love is universal across cultures (Jankowiak and Fisher 1992), it is important to understand the impact of culture on love and romantic relationships. Jankowiak and Fischer acknowledged that cultural factors may contribute to the likelihood that members of a given society will experience romantic love. Similarly, researchers have proposed that individualism and collectivism, which are dimensions of cultural variation, contribute to understanding romantic love (Dion and Dion 1993, 1996). Accordingly, in individualistic societies, romantic love is seen as a context in which one explores and reveals dimensions of self (Bellah et al. 1985). In these societies, self-actualization and personal interests are of primary concern, and thus romantic relationships and marriage are seen as a vehicle to achieve these goals (Lamanna and Riedmann 2009). On the other hand, in collectivistic societies, the most important bond for an individual is likely to be with one's family, even after one gets married (Ho 1981; Hsu 1981). In these societies, people tend to conform to societal norms, especially to the expectations of their extended kin (Lamanna and Riedmann 2009). This difference also can be seen in marriage practices. Most people in individualistic cultures choose their romantic partners, marry for love, and tend to believe that love is the most important factor for marriage (Zinn and Eitzen 2005). On the other hand, in collectivistic societies, marriage is seen as the joining of extended families and is a 'huge responsibility' that should not be handled by young people (Tepperman and Wilson 1993, p. 73; Hamon and Ingoldsby 2003). To demonstrate this argument, several researchers conducted a study asking students if they would marry someone who had all the qualities that they desired even if they were not in love. The results were indicative of individualistic vs. collectivistic cultural preferences vis-à-vis marriage. Eighty-six percent of American students said no, 11% were undecided, and only 3% of students said yes,

whereas only 39% of Pakistani students said no, 50% said yes, and 11% were undecided (Levine et al. 1995).

Romantic Relationships in Turkey

Geographically a bridge between the East and the West, the Republic of Turkey is a traditional and patriarchal culture in the process of modernization (Hortacsu 2003). With a 99% Muslim population, Turkey has been referred to as a collectivist culture by many scholars (Göregenli 1997; Imamoglu et al. 1993). In the Turkish culture, the meaning of marriage and courtship shows great variability based on socioeconomic status, educational background, and level of religiosity. The estimated rate of arranged marriages in Turkey is fifty percent, although this percentage is significantly lower among the urban, young, and educated (Atalay et al. 1992). Currently, in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, approximately one-fourth of marriages are arranged (Hortacsu 1999). Two more dating trends are also on the rise in Turkey. The first involves a process in which prospective spouses are introduced by families but are free to make their own decisions after a few dates. Secondly, Western-style love marriages are becoming more common among the urban, educated youth (Atalay et al. 1992). However, while Western-style dating is on the rise, there is still a clear marriage "script" (Hortacsu 2003) to be followed. In other words, choosing a partner is a "family-involved mate selection process" (Day 2010, p. 125) that is highly formal and structured. Through this process families of the youths inquire about each others' back-grounds, position in the community, and socio-economic class to make sure that they are compatible with one another. Thus, consistent with collectivistic values, harmony not only between the spouses, but also between the two families is highly emphasized.

Based on the different meanings given to romantic relationships in the American and Turkish cultures, the intent of this study was to explore whether Turkish graduate students' views on romantic relationships change as a result of living in the American culture, and if so, how this change was experienced. More specifically, we examined the extent to which participants' views changed vis-à-vis different aspects of romantic relationships including male–female interactions, sexuality, marriage, divorce, and child-rearing as compared with those held in their homeland culture.

Methods

For this study we adopted a grounded-theory approach to data analysis. In the absence of any existing theoretical framework, we aimed to conduct a data-based study (Creswell 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1997; Strauss and Corbin 1998). This inductive approach allowed us to identify factors underlying change and no-change in attitudes, expectations, and behaviors that happen during a specific aspect of acculturation: romantic relationships. Given that there is no existing theory or process model explaining shifts in romantic relationship experiences as part of acculturation, we also aimed at identifying a preliminary model explaining change.

Purposive and snow-ball sampling techniques were employed to obtain data; specifically, people of Turkish ethnic origin were contacted through the on-campus Turkish Student Association at a public southeastern university. Emails were sent to an active member list to recruit participants to take part in an interview. Initially, we had 7 students who showed interest, and through snow-balling we reached a total of 12 students who

agreed to participate in an interview. We limited our participants to females for two reasons. First, the students who showed interest were mainly females. Second, we wanted to focus on the feminine point of view in regard to romantic relationships based on the assumption that their experiences in the home versus host countries would be more drastically different than those of males.

Demographics of Participants

Our sample consisted of 12 unmarried female graduate students (6 M.A., 6 Ph.D.) from Turkey who have been living in the United States for at least 1 year. The participants were between the ages of 23 and 32 years ($M = 26.5$ years). Eight women were in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview. The length of these relationships varied: Four had been in a relationship for 1 to 6 months, one had been in a relationship between 6 months and 1 year, and three had been in a relationship for more than a year. Seven participants were in an inter-cultural/racial relationship. Of these intercultural relationships, three of the romantic partners were American, one was Lebanese, one was Indian, and one was Scottish. In terms of religious background, all of the participants identified themselves as Muslim. More than half of the participants identified themselves as "somewhat" to "very" religious.

Procedure

We conducted informal, open-ended, and semi-structured interviews (accompanied by a demographic questionnaire) that averaged 90 min in duration. Because we were interested in several aspects of romantic relationships, we asked participants questions on three different topics. The first topic was premarital relationships, and included questions on dating, premarital sex, and premarital cohabitation. The second topic was marriage, and included questions on marital roles, extra-marital affairs, and expectations related to finances and parenting. Lastly, we asked participants open-ended questions about alternative/non-traditional relationship arrangements, including questions on inter-cultural relationships, same-sex marriage, adoption, and step-families. We were mainly interested in whether participants' views in regards to these topics changed and if so, how and why this shift was experienced. Two questions from each category are presented below:

1. Did your attitude about pre-marital sex change? If so, how? If not, how?
2. Did your attitude about living together before marriage change? If so, how? If not, how?
3. Did your attitude about economic responsibility in marriage change? If so, how?
4. Did your attitude about the meaning of marriage change? If so, how?
5. Did your attitude about inter-racial/inter-faith/inter-national/inter-ethnic dating/marriage change? If so, how?
6. Did your attitude about alternative methods of having children (i.e., adoption, foster home) change? If so, how?

   The interviews were conducted in the native tongue of the participants and audiotaped in the participants' homes.

Data Analysis

Given that data analysis and data collection are highly intertwined in grounded theory, data analysis began immediately after data collection and was concluded when theoretical

saturation was reached (Rafuls and Moon 1996). Each interview was transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers and then, in order to ensure reliability and validity, was cross-checked by the other researcher (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The data were transcribed in Turkish, and only the portion cited in this article was translated into English. In addition to the interviews, research notes taken during the interviews also were included in the data analysis. As Hoshmand (1989) indicates, data analysis in qualitative research involves a cyclical descriptive process of categorization, coding, and recoding of data with the aim of achieving an internal order by identifying themes, categories, and subcategories. Accordingly, in analyzing our data, we used open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In the open coding process, we each did a line by line analysis trying to uncover and identify different concepts that were present in the individual interviews. This was followed by axial coding where we repeatedly examined and re-examined the concepts that emerged and made comparisons to determine similarities and differences in each transcript. Finally, selective coding was conducted in order to group concepts into a smaller set of categories based on obvious similarities until we reached thematic saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The respondents in this study reported their expectations as either changing or not changing in regards to various aspects of romantic relationships, and various themes emerged as to why this change had or had not occurred. In the following, we discuss the themes that emerged.

Findings

Because we were primarily interested in shifting attitudes about relationships, we identified two types of participants: participants who reported having experienced a significant change in regards to their attitudes on some aspects of romantic relationships (henceforth referred to as the 'change' category) and participants who stayed the same in regards to their attitudes (henceforth referred to as the 'no change' category). Our main point of interest was to identify why participants had or had not changed. Accordingly, we identified five themes for the 'change' category and three themes for the 'no change' category. We used a coding system such as student 1, student 2 instead of using names of students to honor the participants' confidentiality.

Change in Romantic Relationship Expectations

In exploring the participants' experiences of 'change' vis-à-vis romantic relationships, we came across five different themes. The topics in which participants experienced change varied; however, we aimed at capturing the underlying themes regardless of the topic discussed. In the following, we present examples demonstrating participants' experience of change relative to a variety of topics including the meaning of dating, premarital sex, number of sexual partners, cohabitation, inter-cultural dating, cheating, divorce, and same-sex relationships.

Theme 1: High Occurrence in the Host Country Makes Certain Issues More Normative and Acceptable

Some of the participants who said that they experienced a significant change in regards to their attitudes about romantic relationships attributed this change to certain issues being more normative and accepted in the host country. Participants mentioned having become

more comfortable both observing and doing certain aspects of romantic relationships as a result of their frequent occurrence in the US. In response to the question about the meaning of dating, five participants said that their idea of dating and marriage had changed. Ph.D. Student 2, 32 years old, living in the US for more than 3 years, and who has an American boyfriend reported:

> I used to think of dating as always leading to marriage. Parents know your boyfriend and it automatically gets serious, however seeing so many people date here and then break up made me realize that I can just date without having to get married.

Further, in talking about premarital sex, of the five participants who reported change, M.A. Student 3, 32 years old, and dating a Christian Lebanese, mentioned:

> Living in the United States made me more flexible, I was very much against pre-marital sex in Turkey, but observing most of my friends here has made me think that this is more of a personal choice, and a personal moral issue rather than a societal one.

Similarly, another participant, 27 year old Ph.D. Student 9 who has been living in the US more than 3 years and has an American boyfriend said that when living in Turkey, she thought about having only one sexual partner and spending a lifetime with that person, but living in the US made her realize that what is really important is feeling love and passion for someone and that she can have those feelings for more than one person. When asked about her views on cheating, Student 9 said that observing so many of her friends talk about their sexual and emotional affairs openly made her realize things like this "just happen."

Intercultural relationships was one of the topics about which seven of the participants said that their attitudes had become more accepting and positive as a result of exposure to these relationships in the host country. For instance, 23 year old Ph.D. Student 10, who is currently dating an American man, mentioned that as a result of living in the US, she sees intercultural dating as more normal and acceptable. She specifically added:

> Inter-cultural couples that I see look very happy, so, I think that if people are not extremely religious, you can be really happy and even possibly happier than you would be with a Turkish man. Because the person you are with would attribute a lot of your differences to cultural reasons rather than taking them personally. This is especially true for sex and virginity. If I were to ask my male friends, they would say that they would be more accepting of a non-virgin foreigner than a Turkish girl.

Echoing similar views, Student 3 said:

> I thought that being from different cultural backgrounds would cause a great deal of problems, because you come from different worlds, however living in the United States made me think differently. United States is like the 'living room' of the world where so many people of different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds come together and mingle. Living here made me see how a Chinese and an Indian can be in the same room and get along. I couldn't' imagine that while I was in Turkey.

When talking about divorce, three participants reported that their views on divorce changed significantly. For instance, 27 year old, Ph.D. Student 12, who has a Scottish boyfriend, mentioned that if a woman gets divorced in Turkey, people judge and think less of her, whereas in the United States, it's "perfectly ok, or at least acceptable and even probable to get a divorce, especially if two people cannot get along."

Although most of the participants' views on same sex relationships had not changed, those who changed their views attributed this to exposure to these relationships in the host country. For instance, Student 9 said:

> I was really turned off by the idea of same-sex relationships while I was living in Turkey, I can't even remember meeting any gay people in Turkey. However, now after meeting many people who are openly gay, I started to think that it is more normal and that it could be anybody. I also realized that if I am going to live here, I should be ok with this issue because it's everywhere and I also feel like if I don't accept it, I might be perceived as discriminating against a certain group of people and I certainly do not want that.

Furthermore, 27 year old Ph.D. Student 11, who has an Indian boyfriend, said:

> I thought that same sex marriages were unnecessary, I did not agree with their argument but having lived in the United States, I am now seeing the rights, especially the financial advantages, that are granted to married people, and I think everybody should be able to benefit from these rights. I feel that I would have never thought about this issue in such an accepting way, but living here definitely changed my views on same sex relationships.

Theme 2: Accepting of Others But Not of Self

The second theme that emerged from our interviews with the participants was that while they are accepting of certain issues, this acceptance is limited to others, and does not apply to their own lives. This partial change process was evident in various topics. For example, 27 year old M.A. Student 4, who only has had Turkish boyfriends, expressed her feelings about premarital sex as in the following: "I am not against it when others do it, but I will not do it myself." Similarly, on the issue of cohabitation she added: "I understand people want to live together, in fact I have a lot of friends who do that, but I could never do it. Men might think of sex independently of marriage but for me, if you have sex and you live with the person, you should be married as well."

Twenty-six year old M.A. Student 1 and 24 year old M.A. Student 6 had similar responses regarding the topic of premarital sex. Student 1, who has a Turkish boyfriend, said:

> Premarital sex in the Turkish culture is frowned down upon, that's why we are programmed not to do it. It's the value we grew up with, but if somebody else does it, I would not think of them as indecent.

Similarly, Student 6, who has a Turkish boyfriend, reported:

> I supported a lot of my friends in this matter; however, I couldn't have sexual relationships with a man prior to marriage. I would be worried sick that my parents would find out, and that I would disappoint them. That's a chance I do not want to take.

On the issue of remarriage, one of the three participants who reported change, Student 6, said:

> The Turkish society doesn't think highly of divorcées, there is a status loss that comes with divorce. Because I am planning on going back to Turkey, I don't want to get a divorce, but other people can divorce and get remarried as many times as they want. In the U.S., this is actually a very normal thing, it's almost an essential part of the American family life.

Theme 3: Less Social Control in the Host Country Compared to the Home Country

A third theme that emerged for participants whose views have changed related to the existence of less social control in the host country. In other words, some participants reported that they were more accepting of doing certain things because they did not feel like they were going to be criticized by their families and the society like they would have been in their home country. In the absence of social stigmatization and potential social isolation, participants became more accepting of certain aspects of romantic relationships. For instance, on the issue of cohabitation, one of the three participants who reported change, Student 2, who has an American boyfriend, said:

> I have always wanted to cohabitate with my significant other, however I could never do it in Turkey. I would worry about what my family and friends would say and more importantly I would not want to be judged and frowned upon by the society. But with my partner here, I was able to overlook that because nobody here would judge me on this.

On the topic of age of marriage, another participant, Student 10, said,

> There is a great amount of pressure in Turkey to get married. When you see all of your friends get married, and your parents and friends constantly ask you when you are going to get married and start a family, this puts a tremendous amount of pressure on you. If I were in Turkey, I would have probably gotten married by now, but here I do not feel that social control or that pressure.

About inter-racial dating, 30 year old Ph.D. Student 5, who has an Arabic boyfriend, said that she thought dating a man from a different racial or religious background would not work, and would not be accepted by the society at large. She then added, "There is no social pressure in US, you can date or get married to whomever you want without worrying about what your friends or family will say; that's why it all seems a lot more probable."

Theme 4: Increase in Individualism

The fourth theme that emerged was an increased sense of individualism as a result of living in the host country. In talking about sexual expectations from partners, four participants reported change. Student 5 said, "Living in the US made me think that it's not such a bad thing to be self-focused in bed and have my needs met. In Turkey, I always thought about sex as pleasing the other person, and never once have I thought about my own needs and wants. However, now I see that my needs are just as important as my partner's needs."

On the other hand, when talking about the amount of time spent with partner, eleven participants reported significant change. Student 12 said that while she was in Turkey she had a hard time finding personal time and space for herself away from the relationship. She added,

> In Turkey, couples are so enmeshed, they do everything together, and here I find it comforting to spend some time alone, or with different friends and do what I would like to really do as opposed to what my partner or others want me to do.

The tendency to embrace more individualistic values was also evident in Student 11's discussion of her parents' expectations about marriage. She said that she used to value a lot more their opinion about who she should marry, how the husband needed to be, however, living in the United States made the importance of her parents' view a lot less important.

She added: "Now, I feel like, I should decide about whom I want to marry, and not my parents. This is my life."

Theme 5: Becoming More Protective of Traditional Values

When explaining the change in their views, some of the participants expressed feeling more strongly and protective of the values of their home country compared to before they came to the US. This was usually a reflection of their disapproval of certain issues and how these issues were experienced in the host country. To illustrate, we selected Student 1's answer about parental expectations. She reported,

> Now that I am far away, I understand my parents better. Somehow, I started to believe that what they think is right for me is truly right for me. This is probably because I tried to follow what I thought was right for me, and somehow it never made me happy. So, now in picking a marriage partner, I am more inclined to select somebody that my parents approve of.

In talking about divorce, one of three students who reported change, Student 6, said that living in the US and observing so many marriages fail made her realize how important the institution of marriage was. She also added,

> I look around and see how disposable marriages are here, however, back in Turkey, people would think twice before they do anything about their marriage. Some of it is social pressure, but I have come to appreciate that social pressure. Living here made me want to embrace my own culture even more.

In talking about same sex relationships, 24 year old M.A. Student 7 reported, "I really got disgusted by the amount of same sex relationships I saw here. People almost see it as normal. In Turkey I was never exposed to that, and I am glad I was not."

No Change in Romantic Relationship Expectations

In our second category, we present experiences of participants who reported that they had not changed as a result of living in the host country. We identified three main themes in this category relative to various topics discussed during the interviews. Later, we discuss the possible implications of having a partner of the same background in the acculturation process of these participants.

Theme 1: No Change Because of Religious Beliefs

A lot of the participants who reported 'no change' referred to religion as the main reason. It seemed that for these participants religion served as an anchor and provided stability in the face of the different values of the host country. To illustrate, M.A. Student 8, 26 years old, an who described herself as 'very religious', reported,

> My views on premarital sex have not changed at all. Our religion forbids us from having premarital sex because sex is for marriage. If our religion dictates this, there is truth to it. It doesn't matter where I live, God is everywhere.

In talking about cohabitation as a substitute for marriage, Student 7, who also described herself to be 'very religious,' said that living in the US did not change her

views on marriage being a sacred and religious institution, and that she would never accept cohabitation as a substitute or precursor to marriage. In a very similar vein, Student 8 based her rejection of cohabitation before marriage on religious grounds and said, "Where I live is independent of my religious views, the latter will always prevail." In regards to housework, student 8 also said, "Housework should be done by women. Our religion suggests that this is the woman's responsibility."

Theme 2: No Change Because of Cultural and Social Values

Some of the participants explained that the reason why they haven't changed was mainly because they felt really strongly about the cultural and social values of their home country. For instance, while talking about gender expectations in dating, both Student 4 and Student 6 expressed strong feelings favoring traditional gender roles. More specifically, Student 4 mentioned,

> I expect men to be chivalrous and gentlemanly, that's what I grew up with and that is what I believe to be true. Gestures like asking out, paying the bill, and picking up the girl from their home should always come from men. I could not change this culturally instilled value in me even if I wanted to.

Similarly, when discussing economic responsibilities, Student 8 said that it is the responsibility of men to be the head of the household and to provide and that even though she plans on working, she sees this as a choice, whereas for men "it is a necessity." In a similar vein, Student 2 reported, "Man needs to take care of the household; my money should go to my clothes and kids." These traditional cultural norms were also prevalent in participants' understanding of gender and housework. Student 7 said, "There is no need for the man, men are not skilled, and can't really do any of the housework right anyways, so why bother?"

The overpowering influence of cultural values was also evident in talking about number of sex partners for some of the participants. For instance, Student 1 explained that in the Turkish culture, having more than one sex partner is indicative of lack of moral values and added that regardless of where she lives, she still carries this cultural piece with her. Similarly, on the topic of cheating, Student 7 said that she really is against the idea of cheating being so publicly discussed in the US. She then added,

> In my time in the US, I observed so many people cheating and sharing this with family and friends. To me, this is a topic that should not get discussed with outsiders. I simply can not understand people's attitudes toward cheating here.

Theme 3: Social Isolation Due to Language Barriers

Another theme that emerged in this group of participants who reported 'no change' was that their romantic socialization with Americans was limited due to language barriers. To illustrate, Student 4 said,

> Living in the US has not really changed me because I do not have any American friends. I find it very tiring to communicate with others in English. I can't really express myself the way I want to, that's why I only socialize with Turkish people, and also prefer to date within the Turkish community.

Similarly, Student 6 indicated that she can not ever think of herself as marrying a non-Turkish person because she does not feel comfortable expressing her feelings in English. She said,

> How am I supposed to talk about my problems with my partner in my second language? It takes away from the whole interaction. This is why I have not changed at all. I think that all of my interactions with Americans are superficial because of language barriers. How am I supposed to say "I love you" to the person I love in English? I can't just say 'I love you'.

Discussion

In this study we aimed at getting a better understanding about how international students' expectations and attitudes changed vis-à-vis romantic relationships. Given that the US, characterized as an individualistic culture, is very different than the collectivistic Turkish culture, we expected that participants would experience a significant amount of change in their expectations and attitudes toward romantic relationships. Using a grounded theory approach, we wanted to capture their experiences. When exploring the topics in which participants experienced 'change', we came across five different themes: frequent occurrence and acceptance in the host country, accepting of others but not of self, less social control in the host country, increased sense of individualism, and feeling more strongly and protective of the values of the home country. On the other hand, when exploring the topics in which participants experienced 'no change', we identified three main themes: no change because of religious beliefs, no change because of cultural and societal values, and no change because of social isolation stemming from language barriers.

Overall, for those who have changed, it seems that living in the US made them more accepting of certain topics whereas for others who have not changed, maintaining their cultural heritage was more important. This is in line with the two main dynamics underlined in Berry's (1997) acculturation strategies of immigrants: *acceptance (or not) of the dominant culture* and *maintenance of cultural heritage*. Berry suggests that people who become accepting of the host culture's values either get assimilated or integrated depending on their level of maintenance of cultural heritage. In other words, an immigrant who embraces both the values of the host and the home culture becomes integrated into the host society, which is ideal, whereas those who lose touch with their home culture's values become assimilated (Berry et al. 2002). Although international students are technically not immigrants, most of them stay in the country for at least 2 or 3 years and experience the American life to the fullest, with limited access to their home country. Our study revealed that some of the participants who reported 'change' either completely abandoned their home country values (assimilated) or compromised between the home and host country values (integrated). However, if an immigrant feels strongly about maintaining his or her cultural heritage at the expense of interacting with the society at large, this might lead to segregation/separation where the immigrant feels detached from the society at large. This was clearly evident in participants who reported becoming more protective of the home culture's values, rejecting the values of the host culture, and mainly socializing with people of their own cultural background.

The themes that emerged in this study also underline the factors related to motivation in understanding acculturation. Our findings revealed that one of the main motivational factors in understanding change for this sample was related to the acceptable behaviors in

the host country. Being from the collectivistic Turkish culture where conformity and interdependence is highly valued (Kagitcibasi 2007), embracing the commonly accepted American concepts such as premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce with the goal of fitting in the host culture might have served as motivating factors. In addition, being socially accepted and not suffering from social consequences also might have worked as motivators for some of the participants who desired to adapt to the host culture.

On the other hand, for other participants, the same commonly accepted issues in the host country (i.e., premarital sex, divorce rates) might have worked as demotivating forces as participants might have felt that the values in their home country were 'better'. In addition, individual factors such as religiosity, strong cultural ties to the home country, as well as lack of language proficiency might also have acted as barriers preventing some of the participants from adopting values of the host culture.

These motivational factors also can be understood within the framework of "locus of control theory" (Rotter 1954). While some of the participants expressed internal motivators such as the Islamic faith and moral values as reasons for not changing, especially regarding issues revolving around sexuality, others mentioned external factors such as societal and familial pressures as to why they have become more or less accepting of certain issues such as cohabitation, same-sex marriages, etc. According to the locus of control theory, individuals come to hold beliefs about what causes their actions. People with internal loci of control feel a strong sense of personal responsibility for events in their lives. On the other hand, people who have external loci of control believe that forces beyond their control, such as fate and society, determine event outcomes (Phares et al. 1968; Rotter 1954). One could speculate that for people with an internal locus control, being in the host culture would have a minimal influence on their expectations because they would mainly rely on their internal values such as religiosity and cultural norms in shaping their actions. On the other hand, people with an external locus of control would be more likely to be influenced by the society they live in. Although there are a lot of factors contributing to one's locus of control, some researchers suggest that women tend to be more external than men (De Man et al. 1985). In other words, women are more likely to gear their values and actions according to the societal norms and expectations. Given that all of the participants in this study were females, it's impossible to say if gender was a factor, however, future research could incorporate both locus of control and gender as factors to better understand the acculturation process of international students.

In addition, our findings indicated that change, rather than being an all-or-nothing process, involves a lot of gray area and a gradual progression. Some of the participants reported being accepting of certain issues with one big exception: when it doesn't involve them. One could speculate that change was a gradual process for some of the participants where they embraced values of the host culture to the extent that it didn't involve them, and that they will eventually be more accepting of them in time. Or it could be that, for these participants, this is the extent of the change they are going to experience vis-à-vis the values of the host culture.

Moreover, individual background characteristics also can explain why some of the participants experienced more change than others. Given that the current study is a qualitative study, we cannot make generalizations, however, we here present some of the patterns we have observed in understanding the change experienced by the participants. First, students who had non-Turkish partners consistently experienced more change compared to those who were currently not dating or had Turkish or Middle Eastern partners. More specifically, these participants expressed becoming more accepting of various issues that generally are considered taboo, such as premarital sex and

homosexuality, in their home country. Similarly, we also observed that those who were in ethnically homogamous relationships reported more 'no change' themes. This connection also can be attributed to the individual characteristics of those participants (i.e., language skills, personality) who decided to date outside of their ethnicity. Whether it is the individualistic characteristics leading to it or inter-ethnic dating alone, we cannot establish a cause and effect in understanding the change regarding romantic relationships.

Second, we observed that in the current study the length of time spent in the US was related to how much or how little change participants experienced. Most of the participants who had experienced change had been living in the host country for over 3 years. This is congruent with the acculturation literature, which suggests that time is one of the best predictors in understanding the amount of change experienced by immigrants (Bornstein and Cote 2006).

Third, religiosity was also a big influence on participants' acculturation experiences. Consistently, we found that students who reported 'no change' also reported higher religiosity compared to the other participants. This is in line with previous literature on the relative importance of religion compared to societal influences of the host culture (Sam 1998; Virta and Westin 1999). Another interesting finding was the link between the tendency to change and parental educational attainment and income. We observed that participants coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to adopt the values of the host-culture. This is in line with previous research suggesting that higher SES and education are associated with less traditional values in Turkey (Hortacsu 2003).

Finally, the topics about which participants reported the greatest amount of change were meaning of dating, premarital sex, divorce, same sex-marriages, and gender roles. These could be some of the topics about which the American and Turkish cultures differ the most. On the other hand, Kagitcibasi (2007) suggests that the first behaviors that change are generally perceived as adaptive to fitting in the host culture. Accordingly, these topics might have been perceived by participants as important in their adaptation to the American culture and thus were the first to change.

This study provides an important step towards understanding change as a process in the lives of international students and/or immigrants' vis-à-vis their romantic relationships. Given the increasing number of international students in the US, it's very important to understand how living in the US may change the attitudes and expectations of international students and/or immigrants. Future research also should investigate the behaviors of participants so that we can understand how changes in expectations translate into behaviors. In addition, more quantitative studies in this area also could give us more information on the expectations as well as behaviors of international students.

While this study contributed greatly to our understanding of the acculturation process of international students in the area of romantic relationships, it also had several limitations. One of the limitations was how the data was collected. Because of the face-to-face nature of the data collection, we might have created discomfort for the participants. This was especially true for the questions about sexual attitudes and behaviors during which we observed that participants looked more anxious. In addition, all of the participants who reported change mentioned that they have been more accepting of premarital sexuality as long as it did not involve them. Given that sex is seen as a taboo subject for women in Turkey (Altinay 2000), we feel the need to acknowledge the possibility of participants not being completely honest and open in regards to this topic due to discomfort. Another limitation of the current study was that all of the participants were females; future research should include males, and examine how gender factors into the change process of expectations in regards to romantic relationships.

Implications for Family Therapy

This study presents important information for practitioners who work with international students, especially in a college counseling context. International students are likely to have specific adjustment problems, which might then influence their relationships, so understanding their specific needs would be important in helping them. A systemic and contextual approach to understanding relationship struggles is especially important with members of this population, who are coming from a different context than that of the host culture. In addition, seeing change as a gradual and complex process might help therapists to meet the clients where they are at. Working with international students, it might also be helpful to adopt a social constructivist approach as applied in narrative therapy (Nichols 2010) and explore meanings behind important concepts such as pre-marital dating, marriage, gender roles etc.

Further, we hope that this study offers important information for clinicians who work with inter-cultural couples who have unique needs and challenges. In working with this group, it is often the case that couples experience conflict and communication problems due to cultural differences. A theoretical understanding of the acculturation process might help clinicians educate couples and design appropriate interventions that encourage empathy and acceptance of differences in the realm of romantic relationships.

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