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Research Article

# Strategies of Refugee Children in Response to Ethnic Categorization and Social Exclusion in Konya

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on how refugee children from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan resettled in Konya, Turkey, use coping strategies in response to the ethnic categorization and exclusion policies of the local population. Employing ethnographic methodology combined with grounded theory, we conducted participant observations, as well as in–depth interviews with 65 refugee children. The family members of the children, as well as the local population, were also within the scope of the study. Furthermore, we conducted extensive interviews and observations in two different religious secondary schools attended by refugees. We aimed to understand their local experiences and intergroup relations by expanding the field. As a result, we observed that these children resisted societal pressure by developing various coping strategies such as emphasizing Muslim identity, attending schools as spaces for socializing, choosing to speak Turkish, standing with the strong, and building shared enjoyment or joining existing ones. These findings show that the refugee children do not passively submit to the conditions they find themselves in and do not simply embrace the impositions of power as they are.

**Keywords:** refugee children, social exclusion, ethnic identity, coping strategy, ethnography, Turkey

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## 1. Introduction

Konya is a city that hosts many refugees from various countries. We conducted an ethnographic study focusing on the daily experiences of Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, and Sudanese refugee children living in a multi–ethnic area of this city. During the study, we observed tensions between the local population and refugee groups and children. Despite frequent daily encounters, close relationships were limited, influenced by widespread prejudice and often leading to the social exclusion of the refugees. We noted that exclusion and marginalization were primarily based on ethnic identities of the refugees. In this article, we discuss the strategies refugee children develop to counter prejudice and social exclusion related to their ethnic identities and how they position themselves within society.

Displacement poses significant challenges for migrants, especially children. Due to their age, children are often excluded from decision–making processes, increasing their susceptibility to exploitation. Research shows that after resettlement, refugee children and their families face economic difficulties, obstacles in accessing education and healthcare, and a lack of adequate social support, often due to discrimination during their adaptation to new cultures and living conditions (Al–Shatanawi, et al., 2023; Behrendt, Lietaert, Bal, & Deluyn, 2024; Thorleifsson, 2014).

Furthermore, ethnic relations and identity are frequently examined in migration studies to understand the dynamics between newcomers and locals. Refugee children, as members of an ethnic minority, often confront stigmatized ethnic identities in their new environment (Eroğlu, 2020). Thus, confronting and constructing their ethnic identity is crucial for their integration (Doğan & Buz, 2022; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Therefore, closely monitoring the experiences of children after they resettle and developing solutions for potential issues are essential for successful integration and the protection of children's rights.

On the other hand, refugee children do not remain passive and develop their own coping strategies to address social challenges. According to Benson, Sun, Hodge, and Androff (2012), younger refugees demonstrate higher coping skills. Other studies have also indicated that despite migration difficulties and traumatic events, children are more successful in coping and adapting (Groark, Sclare, & Raval, 2010; Kurt Akkoyun, 2020).

Coping generally refers to individuals' cognitive and behavioral responses to manage challenging situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Parker & Endler, 1992). In social psychology, these responses are often called strategies. De Certeau (2011, p. 50–54), however, distinguishes between tactics and strategies. According to him, strategies directly aim at gaining power or resisting authority to protect themselves from oppression, while tactics are integrated into daily life, allowing actors to exercise agency by interpreting rules and situations differently. Our research found that in response to ethnic discrimination, the refugee children both engage in strategies to gain power and use covert methods de Certeau calls tactics. Therefore, consistent with the literature, we use the term coping strategy to include both tactics and broader strategies.

According to the coping literature, the most commonly used successful strategies that children use to counter stress factors include avoiding negative situations or thoughts (Behrendt et al., 2024; Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber, & Mooren, 2016); attending school (Al–Shatanawi et al., 2023); praying or relying on religious faith (Al–Shatanawi et al., 2023; Benson et al., 2012); and socializing with peers and receiving support from friends, family, other refugee groups, and the local community (Daud, Klinteberg, & Rydelius, 2008; Sleijpen et al., 2016). Negative coping methods include violence, social isolation, and drug use (Alzoubi, Al–Smadi, & Gougazeh, 2019; Finklestein, Laufer, & Solomon, 2012; Small, Kim, & Mengo, 2017).

Many studies, both in Turkey and around the world, have approached coping strategies from a psychological perspective (see Arenliu, Weine, Bertelsen, Saad, & Abdulaziz, 2020; Behrendt et al., 2024; Coşgun, 2019; Esenoğlu, 2021; Groark et al., 2010; Kok, Khor, Hon, & van Schalkwyk, 2021; Kurt Akkoyun, 2020; Leppna & Szente, 2013). Additionally, those studies have primarily focused on Syrian refugee children. Our study aims to contribute to filling this gap by not only focusing on Syrian children but also by trying to understand children within the context of their entire social relationships rather than individually. Our study, unlike others, focuses on social relationships and identity interactions. We discuss how children cope with challenges in their social relationships because such challenges after resettlement are significant for social integration and identity construction (Tippens, 2016; UNHCR et al., 2022). Although host countries claim to prioritize the best interests of refugee children, relationships between groups often have a more decisive impact on children's experiences (Kok et al., 2021). Support from family, peers, neighbors, and teachers is vital for adapting to a new society and building resilience (Sarıpınar, 2019; Sleijpen et al., 2016; UNHCR, 1994).

We examined the children's coping strategies from a social and cultural perspective, particularly regarding ethnic identity. We visited their residential areas and observed their ethnic relationships in neighborhoods, parks, and schools. Through interviews, we aimed to understand their experiences and responses to counter exclusionary attitudes, thereby

addressing the gap in the literature on micro–social relationships. This research focuses on the transformation of ethnic identity within children's experiences and highlights such transformation as a strategy. Hence, our research question can be summarized as follows: What is the role of ethnic identity in the experiences of Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, and Sudanese refugee children in Konya? What coping strategies do refugee children develop in response to negative judgements of their ethnic identity?

In the subsequent sections of this article, we will first briefly discuss ethnic group identity and children's ethnic identity constructions, and then we will delve into the methods and techniques employed during the research. Then, we will relate and discuss the findings in connection with the existing literature.

## 2. Ethnic Group Identity and Inter–Group Relations

Ethnic group identity, traditionally rooted in primordial attributes such as shared ancestry, language, religion, and culture (Geertz, 1963), has been scrutinized by numerous theorists who emphasize its construction through social relationships, often involving power and interest dynamics (Chandra, 2006; James, 1989). Consequently, the differentiation of ethnic groups and the attitudes and discourses developed toward each other are posited to emerge not solely from inherent characteristics but from inter–group relationships and expectations. In this context, it is noteworthy that groups engage in a process of mutual categorization, constructing their ethnic identities through these interactions (Barth, 1994). Thus, ethnic groups, echoing Tajfel and Turner's (1986, p. 283) perspective, serve not only as social categories but also embody a distinct form of social identity. Membership in a group, whether voluntary or assigned, entails specific identity for its participants. Thus, it can be asserted that individuals—voluntarily or involuntarily—participate in the dynamics of these groups in their social interactions.

The judgments, attitudes, and behaviors of ethnic groups exhibit toward one another are directly related to their social distance. According to Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory, the more prevalent prejudices and lack of contact between groups are, the greater the social distance between them. Consequently, as contact between groups increases and they come together around common goals or gain shared identities, this distance can be bridged. Although many studies support Allport's claim (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Selvanathan, Techakesari, Tropp, & Barlow, 2018), some argue that overcoming social distance is a particularly arduous process and that suitable conditions for groups to interact without prejudice are not always met (Fırat & Ataca, 2020).

Narrowing the focus to local residents' perspectives and immigrants/refugees, it can be argued that the securitization of immigrants/refugees and the fear of losing one's societal position among the local population incite hostility toward immigrants (Bauman, 2016, 2017; Paerregaard, 2019). In this case, overcoming this negative attitude, often described as xenophobia, is not always easy. Moreover, a single negative incident between ethnic groups can snowball, increasing the distance between them and making it easier for the more powerful group to exclude the other (Pettigrew, 1998). The rapidly growing tensions between local populations and refugee groups both in Turkey and around the world exemplify this phenomenon.

On the other hand, ethnic identity is often used interchangeably with national identity. This stems from the claim that nation–states share a common belief in ancestry or are built around a dominant ethnic identity (Hobsbawm, 1990; Wimmer & Glick–Schiller, 2002). This situation gives rise to distinctions between *original owners* and *others*, creating majority and minority groups within the country. The transformation of immigrants and refugees into minority groups is also a consequence of this phenomenon.

The characteristic imparting an ethnic character to groups can be chosen by the group's members or emphasized by others. For instance, individuals valuing their national identity may be highlighted more for their Muslim identity in the West, causing their other identities to become momentarily invisible. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), the attitude of majority society toward other groups or intergroup conflicts can lead these groups to cling more to their identities. The increase in claims for rights based on identity can also be attributed to this phenomenon (Yinger, 1997). However, the advantages and disadvantages of a prominently featured identity may lead to either adherence to or rejection of that identity. A more opportunistic approach is possible in this regard (Hechter, 1986; Hobsbawm, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

### 2.1. Children and Ethnic Identity

Analyzing inter–ethnic relations in a society is crucial for predicting whether social harmony or conflict will arise. In this regard, studies focusing on post–migration experiences have frequently explored ethnic group relations. However, the role of children in these discussions has long been obscured. Yet ethnicity as an identity is not a sole concern for adults. As belonging to an ethnic group often occurs through ascription, children inherit the identity of a particular

ethnic group from birth based on their parents' affiliations. Consequently, a child instantly inherits the history, pains, and aspirations of the group into which they are born (Grosby, 1994). Like every member, children also bear a share of intergroup conflicts.

The emphasis on highlighting the agency of children in structure–agency debates and acknowledging that children are individuals who are not only affected by but also influence the social world through their interpretations has gained prominence, particularly in the last two decades (Corsaro, 2005). Recent research has shown that children begin constructing their ethnic identity at a very young age, and this process significantly influences the attitudes that they develop toward each other, especially in local and refugee/immigrant child contexts. For instance, Oppenchaim and Thalineau (2023), in their research with children aged 7–8, observed that the meaning of French identity for children is socially constructed and intricately linked to power relationships. Veerman and Platt (2021), as well as Verkuyten and Thijs (2002), concluded that not only parents but also neighbors, teachers, and even school curricula play a significant role in constructing ethnic identities for children. Consequently, various segments of society, ranging from broader to narrower contexts, exert considerable influence on children's identity construction. This research stands out by focusing on the role of refugee children in power dynamics arising from identity constructions and by emphasizing the agency of children.

For many refugee children, the significance of ethnic identity in their social lives begins after migration when the local population exhibits negative attitudes toward their or their families' ethnic identities (Eroğlu, 2022). This confrontation can be particularly pronounced and painful for refugee children during adolescence. For refugee children, who are generally in the process of developing their identities, forced migration means dealing with the traumas they have experienced, adapting to a new society, and striving to develop a successful identity (Doğan & Buz, 2020). The need for self–recognition, validation, and a sense of belonging is greater in this group, making it crucial to focus on the experiences of adolescent refugees. Adolescents, compared to younger children, have the capacity to recognize and evaluate group identities and the positive and negative judgments attached to these identities by other groups (Phinney et al., 2001). Thus, their attitudes toward their ethnic identity vary depending on their experiences and coping strategies. This study examines the relationship between ethnic identity and refugee children aged 12 to 17 years.

## 3. Method

This study was conducted through a synthesis of the methodological stances of ethnography and grounded theory. To gain a deep understanding of and explain refugee children's experiences and social relations, it is essential to know the children and their lives intimately (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Therefore, we designed an ethnographic research approach closely related to the field. In anthropology, understanding each culture or community's experiences in their own context, known as the emic perspective, is also necessary for understanding refugee children. Barth's emphasis on the fact that even if the identity names of the same ethnic group remain the same when they come together with different groups in different geographies, their ways of life often change, is noteworthy here. It is quite natural that the experiences of a Syrian or Sudanese child after forced migration are influenced by the people they interact with daily or the socio–cultural dynamics of the neighborhood they reside in. We believe that this local perspective is essential for a close understanding of groups.

In addition to ethnography, there are several reasons why we also adopted grounded theory. First, we prioritized data rather than starting from a specific theoretical perspective (Charmaz, 2014). This approach aims to open the field to all possibilities for researchers rather than interpreting it according to a specific theoretical framework. Therefore, we adopted grounded theory as another research strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 2006 [1967]). In this way, we started with what the field suggested and by discussing the literature together with our findings, we reached our conclusions. Second, grounded theory has strategies for modeling a theory based on data, whereas ethnography provides the in–depth and long–digested data that grounded theory needs. Third, grounded theory becomes a valuable research guide when dealing with large amounts of data obtained through ethnography, allowing for more focused and planned data analysis when necessary (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Finally, the flexible and descriptive nature of ethnography helps soften the sometimes-static nature of grounded theory. These reasons enabled us to combine the strengths of grounded theory and ethnography and tolerate their weaknesses (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2007).

Our ethnographic stance was predominated when accessing participants and collecting data. However, grounded theory came into play when making strategic decisions, such as deciding on new research areas, delimiting participant groups, and analyzing and interpreting data. Thus, we conducted a flexible and strategically focused study.

### 3.1. The field

The field research was conducted in four adjacent neighborhoods of Konya, a city located in central Turkey and one of the cities with the highest number of migrants and refugees in the country (GİB, 2023). Konya is a city with a developed industry and agriculture, making it open to labor migration. Additionally, as a city with significant religious conservatism, the idea of *religious brotherhood* initially ensured that immigrants from Muslim countries in the Middle East were mostly welcomed with tolerance (Koyuncu, 2014). The studied neighborhoods are in the city center and close to tourist attractions. During the research process, it was observed that these neighborhoods were shared by locals. The refugees frequently encountered locals—and even tourists—in their daily lives, indicating that these neighborhoods were not secluded or closed spaces.

Throughout the research period, in the four neighborhoods visited, refugees from the countries we could reach and more, internal migrants from the eastern and southeastern regions of the country, those who had immigrated from different countries many years ago and settled here, recently increasing Roma and Abdal groups,[1] and a few local groups who have been living in Konya for generations all lived together. During the research process, we always tried to understand the relationships that children established with other ethnic groups. Therefore, in this study, we included not only the refugee children but also their parents, schoolteachers, and local adults and children—specifically Turkish, Roma, Abdal, and Kurdish individuals—who frequently interacted with the refugee children in the neighborhoods. At the same time, places can tell us a lot about children and their practices. Thus, neighborhood streets, the children's homes, neighborhood parks, aid centers, and two middle schools located in the area were intensively observed in the field.

### 3.2. The Fieldwork Process

The researcher[2] visited four neighborhoods in the center of Konya, which are located side by side and have a high concentration of refugees, frequently over a period of 11 months between May 2019 and April 2020. The most important techniques used in this process were participant and non–participant observations and in–depth interviews, which are essential for ethnographic research. Focus group discussions were also used when necessary.

Our main target population was refugee children aged 12–17 from any nationality living in the research field. Sixty–five children from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan were included as participants. Holding temporary protection status (the Syrian children) and conditional refugee status (the Afghan, Iraqi, Sudanese children) and living in Konya with their families, these children were awaiting either return to their home countries or resettlement in a third country.[3] They did not have a permanent status, yet many had been living in Turkey for several years. Except for three Afghan families who settled in the city 2–6 months ago, the asylum experiences of the others in the country ranged from 2 to 8 years.

Some aid organizations and soup kitchens that the refugees frequently visit were our locations for access to the field. The time the researcher spent here provided opportunities for observation, meeting potential participants, and communication. Instead of directly contacting the children, she first contacted their families and obtained their consent. This approach built trust, provided prior knowledge about the child, and facilitated the conversation with the child. Before the interviews, she met the children and informed them about the research, emphasizing the importance of their individual consent for participation.

To ensure adequate representation of the groups, we aimed to reach at least 10 children from each refugee group included in the research, and we stopped looking for new participants when the data had reached sufficient saturation. The researcher visited the homes of each participant child and conducted face–to–face in–depth interviews with 16 Afghan (2 Pashtun, 6 Hazara, 5 Tajik, 3 Uzbek), 20 Syrian (Arab), 24 Iraqi (7 Turkmen, 17 Arab), and 5 Sudanese (Arab) children. The small number of Sudanese people in Konya compared to other groups limited the number of Sudanese participants. Nevertheless, we included these interviews as important data sources because they are representative of the field. The researcher also interviewed at least one of each child's parents (50 adults in total).

The children's experiences and relations with different ethnic groups, both local and foreign, living in the study area were the focus of the fieldwork. This led to the diversification of the participants. Thus, during the research process, 12 children and 18 adults from the local community, including Turks, Kurds, Roma, and Abdal individuals living in the same neighborhoods, were included in the study. The researcher conducted in–depth interviews with each participant in various locations, sometimes in their homes and sometimes in public spaces in the neighborhood. She spent two months in two religious (*imam hatip*) secondary schools where refugees attend intensively and conducted interviews with 27 teachers. Six focus group discussions were also held with 41 refugee students from all three countries mentioned above.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using the theoretical analysis method of grounded theory, incorporating data analysis from the moment data collection began (Charmaz, 2014; Emerson et al., 1995). All the data gathered from various segments of the society revealed the everyday experiences and interactions of the refugee children in a multi–ethnic society. Due to space constraints, this text focuses solely on the daily strategies these children employ as they establish themselves in society and encounter power dynamics. In the following section, we discuss these strategies. We used pseudonyms for the participating children whose statements are described below.

## 4. Findings and Discussion: Strategies Against Ethnicization

During our observations and interviews, we observed that the social pressure and exclusion experienced by the refugee children were primarily based on their ethnic identities. Most of the refugee children were unaware of the profound significance of being Syrian or Iraqi in their lives before migrating. Nor could they fully anticipate being deprived of many of their fundamental rights when crossing borders. Geographical displacement rendered ethnic identities highly relevant, while at other times, they were relatively unimportant (Bauman, 2014).

We observed that each child was ethnically categorized and excluded based on these identities, especially by the local children. Instead of being recognized for their individual traits or other types of group identities, they were primarily classified as Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, and Sudanese instead of migrant, foreign, or refugee adjectives. Thus, even though they might not self–identify as such, they become natural members of a group, often marginalized or unwanted. These dynamics were accompanied by a distinction between *hosting* and *guesting*. Despite their heterogeneous composition, when it came to refugees, the local population perceived themselves as a homogeneous group—the host of the city and the country. For instance, in terms of power hierarchy, the Roma and Abdal communities, positioned at the bottom rung of the society, exhibited a considerable level of intolerance toward newcomers, often employing the rhetoric of "*This is our home!*" most vocally. In particular, reactions toward the refugee children by the Roma and Abdal children often escalated to physical violence in Konya. This can be observed in neighborhood streets, parks, and schools.

Among the children, those who were primarily of Afghan origin had previously become aware of the burdens that came with being Afghan; most of them, except for a few, were born and raised in Iran and had their first experience of displacement there. As a result, during the research process, we observed that they were quite cautious and reserved as a strategy compared to the others, as if they were trying not to attract attention within the community. There was no possibility for them to return to their home country, but for others, if everything improved, they could return to their homeland.

The children's discourse and everyday experiences clearly demonstrated where they placed themselves. When facing discrimination, they were compelled to hold onto their group identities and defend their rights based on these identities (Goulbourne, Reynolds, Solomos, & Zontini, 2010). This was sometimes in the form of a separate positioning, such as for Syrians or Iraqis,[4] and sometimes in the form of unification around an Arab or Persian identity. For example, although ethnic and class divisions between Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras in Afghanistan occasionally became more accentuated, in Konya they were united under their nationality and supported each other. In some cases, regardless of ethnic identity, all refugee children were aware that they were part of a common group and perceived themselves as unwanted by the host community.

Nevertheless, during the research process, we also noticed that these children were not confined to these foregrounded ethnic identities, and they questioned their societal positions through their different identities and experiences. We found that they employed certain strategies during their integration into the society and in their interactions with power. The children managed to preserve a part of themselves from the oppression of power, created a space where they could exercise their agency to some extent, and sometimes challenged the rules of power through specific strategies and games (de Certeau, 2011). Additionally, although they shared many similarities, we also found that they did not undergo identical experiences. According to the research findings on how children navigate this ethnicization process and attempt to carve out a space for themselves within the society, the following headings can be mentioned.

### 4.1. Emphasizing Muslim identity

All the refugee children emphasized their Muslim identity, which they enjoyed highlighting. This was because it created a sense of commonality with the local community, allowing them to become a part of the power. While some studies have mentioned spirituality and worship as the most important coping strategies (Abraham, Lien, & Hanssen, 2018; Alzoubi et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2012), here, the refugee children's approach to religion was more about shared identity. Islam was the primary reason that many of their parents chose Konya as their settlement destination. Some

studies have indicated that the chosen city influences the religious attitudes of refugees and migrants (Akkır, 2019). In this sense, Konya, with its religiously conservative atmosphere, contributed to the reinforcement of religious beliefs. It was the easiest way for the refugee children to establish connections with their local communities. For example, Afghan–Tajik Zeynep (F, 12–year–old, 6m)[5] felt safer when she received a response to her religious greeting from Turkish children playing in the street:

> "It had been about a month since I came here. We went outside, and a few kids were playing with a ball on the street. I said, 'Selamun Aleykum,' and they replied, 'Aleykum selam.' I was happy. I asked my aunt how they understood me, and she said, 'They're Muslims, just like us'."

During the summer months when schools were closed, mosques became significant gathering places for children, often guided by their families (Güdürü, 2021). According to Goodall (2015) and Martinez and Sarmiento (2022), religious communities and centers are important places where refugees can find support. In neighborhoods, mosques can be cited as examples of such religious organizations in terms of their functions. On the other hand, according to Güdürü's (2021) research conducted in different cities in Turkey, refugee children struggle in Quran courses because of language and cultural differences and are often excluded by local children and parents because of their ethnic identities. However, our field observations revealed that both refugee and local children found an environment where they could come together for Quranic reading and religious education. Additionally, the concept of brotherhood in Islam provides a conducive atmosphere for children to become acquainted with each other. Furthermore, for Arabic–speaking children, the ability to read Arabic texts more comfortably created a space for self–expression. Therefore, going to a mosque, showcasing their religious skills, and emphasizing their Muslim identity became an important existential strategy for them. For instance, Sudanese Idris (M, 12–year–old, 5y)[6] explained that the children in the neighborhood had become accustomed to him during the Quranic reading course, and they no longer teased him about his skin color:

> "Now I am going to the Quran course. My mom told me to go every year, but I hadn't gone before. I started this summer... but it's nice. I love it. Now, I'm getting along better with the kids from the neighborhood. They don't tease me at all, and I enjoy going to the course."

However, it can be argued that while the concept of Islam and religious brotherhood retained its significance for refugee children and adults, it had lost its meaning for the local population.

### 4.2. Attending Schools as Spaces for Socializing

Schools, rather than just providing education, served as a means for refugee children to venture outside their homes, socialize, interact with local children and adults, learn the language, and acquire a student status, allowing them to obtain an identity beyond their ethnic background (Arıcıoğlu & Avcı, 2021). Schools have provided safe spaces for the refugee children to engage with the local community and have facilitated their inclusion in social networks alongside their student identities (Guo, Maitra, & Guo et al., 2019; Matthews, 2008). For family members as well, the student status of their children offered them an opportunity to build social capital through interactions with teachers, school administrators, and other parents.

We observed that many children had limited experiences outside their home, especially during their early days in the city, unless they were working. This was sometimes due to the family's protective attitude, and at other times, it was due to language barriers and a sense of foreignness. However, school played a significant role in introducing children to the outside world and facilitating their socialization. The primary reason for the children to attend school was to meet up with their friends. In fact, they did not like it when schools closed for holidays. Raziye (F, 13–year–old, 4y), an Iraqi, was a cheerful child with a fluent Turkish accent and an outgoing personality. When discussing how she spent her time, she expressed her dislike for schools being closed:

> "I'm very happy at school because I have my friends there. I'm talking to everyone, Turkish, Kurdish, Abdal, Syrian, you name it. I get along with everyone. We can spend the whole day together. It's quite bad when schools are closed. Even if I go outside, there aren't many friends around, and I get very bored."

There were variations in experiences according to gender. Boys had more freedom to experience the outside world than girls; therefore, they knew the city (at least their immediate neighborhood) better and encountered more people of different ethnic groups. For boys, going outside was generally not a problem for their families, except for some security concerns. However, girls adhered to the spatial and temporal limitations imposed by their families (Löw, 2016). The association of women with the private sphere in society also influenced the experiences and identity formation of refugee girls (Abraham et al., 2018). They began to embrace a form of femininity deemed appropriate by their families and group cultures. As highlighted in previous research in Turkey, the risk of early marriage increased, especially after menstruation, and the refugee girls were often confined to domestic life, preventing them from socializing (Bircan &

Sunata, 2015; Seta & Theirworld, 2017). The best place that allowed them to go outside was school. Therefore, those who could attend school were considered fortunate.

The school had transformed into the most conducive space for girls' socialization. The education allowance provided by the Ministry of Education (slightly more for girls) encouraged families, particularly sending their daughters to school (Serim, 2019). Many female students saw this as the sole reason why their fathers allowed them to go to school. The Syrian families especially exhibited a more conservative attitude toward the socialization and education of their daughters. For instance, during one of the focus group discussions with some Syrian children, the following conversation took place between two female students:

*Meryem (F, 13–year–old, 5y)*: "My father didn't want to send me to school, but I think he allows me to come because they [the government] give money. Otherwise, he wouldn't send me."

*Sara (F, 13–year–old, 5y):* "Yeah. In our families, they usually don't send girls to school, but I don't think they will send us to high school either."

### 4.3. Choosing to Speak Turkish

Among all the strategies, one factor was even more influential: speaking Turkish. For those at the beginning of their experience in Turkey, this was challenging, but those who had spent some time and learned the language preferred to speak only Turkish to avoid revealing their ethnic identities to those in power. For example, the Syrian and Iraqi children could not conceal their attributed Syrian identity among those who knew them, but when they were out in public, they spoke Turkish and tried to behave like local children to avoid being identified as outsiders. This strategy was developed in response to the pressure of authority. Seniha (F, 13–year–old, 3y), a Syrian, explained that she never experienced any difficulties outside because she and her siblings spoke Turkish:

"We don't experience any bad things outside because we speak Turkish. When we walk along the street, we never speak Arabic. We speak Turkish so that the Gypsies will not treat us badly or bother us. When they realize that we are Syrians, they start bothering us. But if they think we are Turkish, they don't do anything."

Even though Hazara, Uzbek, and Sudanese children spoke the language fluently, hiding their identities was impossible because of their phenotypic features. However, among them, those who spoke Turkish well still preferred to speak Turkish outside. According to Sudanese Maria (F, 16–year–old, 6y), this was a way of saying, "*Look, I'm not different from you, if we speak, we can understand each other*".

Chambers (1994, p. 45–50) asserted that language and history are processes that operate independently of us; therefore, our identities are complex and structured. Recognizing this reminds individuals that there are other possibilities and allows them to see other stories in their narrative. Language, of course, is not a certain way to transcend identity and reach power (Fanon, 2008), but as Chambers advises, the refugee children realized how much their identities were dependent on external factors and how much they were trying to function against their will. Being able to speak Turkish helped them to lessen the emphasis on forced identities. Iraqi Nur (F, 6–year–old, 6y) questioned identity divisions while also discussing the contributions of speaking Turkish to her *Turkification*:

"I don't want to be this or that. (. . . ) Being Iraqi is sometimes a problem here, but I think I can overcome those problems by speaking Turkish. At least I can express myself. I can explain my ideas. The problem is not that I am an Iraqi, I was not born here. I am a foreigner. Everything was difficult before I spoke Turkish. Then I felt like a foreigner too, but now I don't."

Speaking Turkish was also perceived among refugee children as a means to acquire status, advance in class, and get closer to the powerful. This perception extended to make fun of those who did not have a full command of the language or who struggled with its usage. For instance, during a focus group discussion with Syrian students, despite their limited proficiency, the children insisted on speaking Turkish. Subsequently, chuckles and laughter were directed at those with imperfect Turkish.

Moreover, children who were fluent in Turkish spoke Turkish with their siblings even at home. Syrian sisters Hayal (F, 12–year–old, 4y) and Farah (F, 14–year–old, 4y) said they felt more Turkish in this way. Hayal spoke very little Arabic, and Turkish had substituted her mother tongue as follows:

"I express myself more easily by speaking Turkish. My sister translates my conversations with my mother. I mean, even if I say three or five sentences, I always use Turkish words. (. . . ) You know, for me, Turkish is my mother tongue, and Arabic is like a second language. I think it is about where you grow up. I feel more Turkish now."

Hayal's statement questioned the place of identity and the emphasis on the mother tongue. For these children, speaking Turkish had not only become a daily life strategy but also showed them (and us) how fluid identities can be.

Finally, those who could not speak Turkish were creating micro spaces with other group members where they could

sustain their daily lives without the need for language (e.g., extended family networks, ethnic markets, etc.). Although they did not have the power to fulfill all their interests overall, they were able to perform their daily practices in these confined spaces. We can also interpret those who were learning Turkish and those who preferred to speak it as those whose interests and desires were growing within the dominant structure (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

### 4.4. Standing with the Strong: Excluding the Roma and Abdal Communities

The Roma and Abdal children were also marginalized groups in the society. They were concerned that their societal status would be further destabilized with the arrival of newcomers, and they exhibited the most discriminatory attitudes toward the new "others" within the community (Gencer, 2019; Paerregaard, 2019). Simultaneously, they attempted to align themselves with the dominant white Turkish identity to stand with the powerful. In a similar vein, the refugee children were aware that these groups did not have a good reputation in society and, as a strategy, distanced themselves from these groups to feel closer to the Turks. This situation often resulted in violence between the refugee and the Roma/Abdal children. During the times of conflict, the refugee children positioned themselves as part of a collective whole rather than segregating themselves based on their specific ethnicities or country of origin. Emir (M, 14–year–old, 6y), a Sudanese, thought that a Syrian boy in one of the neighborhoods had been stabbed by those children, and as he recounted the incident, he ceased to be a Sudanese and became just one of the foreigners in the city:

> "For example, a friend of mine here, a Syrian, 17 years old, was stabbed to death. My friends told me about it, and I also saw it on the TV news. I mean, those who stabbed him were younger than him. They wanted to take his belongings, and when he refused, they stabbed him and ran away. They were Gypsies. (...) Actually, I don't know him, but he is like us; a foreigner."

The refugee children had chosen to exclude the Roma and the Abdal just as they had been excluded by the authorities. As Allport (1954) suggested, for the refugee children, just like for the Roma and Abdal children, having a common enemy with the authority group could help bridge social distancing. When we examined Turkish children, we often observed that they supported the Roma and Abdal children, but when they had an issue with them, they appeared to support the refugee children. On the other hand, it was evident in the research that the Turkish student population in the research schools and neighborhoods gradually decreased. Therefore, encounters and mandatory interactions between the Roma, Abdal, and refugee populations were more frequent throughout the day.

The prominence of the children's ethnic identities primarily occurred when they faced discrimination or xenophobia. Schools were particularly significant sites where this phenomenon was evident (Ersoy & Turan, 2019). The schools in the field were predominantly attended by refugee children, and the limited number of local children delayed their integration, leading to the conversion of these schools into essentially refugee schools. The high number of the refugee children within the schools not only caused discomfort for the local students and teachers but also disrupted the educational processes of all involved. Factors such as refugee children conversing in their own languages, increased clustering, and teachers struggling to deliver the same curriculum to both local and refugee children contributed to the foregrounding of the children's ethnic identities, both for local and refugee children (Göktuna Yaylacı, Serpil, & Yaylacı, 2017; Sarman, 2022).

The media also influenced the children's experiences in schools and on the streets. Anti–immigrant discourses appearing in the media quickly found resonance within the schools and the streets (Burnett, 2013; Windle, 2017; cf. Pinson & Arnot, 2010). Apart from such situations, they were not inclined to define themselves solely by their ethnic identities or hold them tightly. On the contrary, they exhibited a positive attitude toward Turks who occupied the top of the power hierarchy. In fact, most families encouraged their children to do so. Particularly after becoming friends, they had no issues with local children (and even the Roma and Abdal children). Factors contributing to these friendships included attending the same school (despite some difficulties), speaking Turkish, and engaging in shared games. Team sports, in particular, have proven highly effective in breaking down identity barriers and fostering a friendly environment (Çağış, 2022).

### 4.5. Standing with the Strong: Avoiding Syrian Identity

In their experiences in Konya, the children were predominantly associated with their ethnic identities, often involuntarily. Defending their ethnic identity as a strategy was not always comfortable, and this was particularly evident among the Syrian children. When it came to migrants or refugees, the Syrians were the first group that came to mind, resulting in them being subjected to various negative stereotypes. It had reached a point where being labeled as Syrian began to greatly discomfort the children because being called Syrian also meant being labeled as "lazy," "dirty," "quarrelsome," "errand boy," or "undesirable" (Erdoğan, 2022). Hacer (F, 13–year–old, 3y) described how both she and her friends felt uncomfortable being called Syrian and how they responded to the situation:

"They are always shouting 'Syrian, Syrian'. I hate this word. Do I tell you to come here by calling you Turks or gypsies? My friends get angry too. The other day we were walking on the street, we were going to school, we were chatting at work and an aunt shouted from the window, 'Syrian, hey you, Syrian'. It's like it's written on my forehead that I am Syrian. I said, 'What's wrong, aunt?' She said something I didn't understand. Then I realized she was pointing at the underwear on the ground. I think she was saying, 'Hand it to me'. I was going to throw it, but my friend told me not to. She got angry because this woman had said Syrian. We didn't give it to her, she said something behind us, but we didn't understand it anyway."

Tajfel (1974, p. 69¬–70) discusses that the tendency to disengage from one group and seek a place for oneself in another group when evaluating intragroup relations and social identity is proportionally related to the positive contribution of the new group to one's social identity. When the group they belong to does not provide them with the desired satisfaction, individuals begin to seek it in other groups. The negative atmosphere developing in society toward Syrian identity often led Afghan, Iraqi, and Sudanese children to avoid Syrian children and instead adopt a strategy of trying to befriend Turkish children. In fact, the Syrian children have also tried to establish local friendships as much as possible and distance themselves from the Syrian label. Making Turkish friends was seen as a form of social advancement at one point. Betül (F, 14–year–old, 5y) was like a local child with fluent Turkish. She had just completed middle school. Betül explained that she had to choose between her Syrian and Turkish friends when speaking about her school friends:

"There were some Syrians in the class, but I did not really communicate with them. It's not because there was a problem, but the Syrians created their own environment in our school. They do not have a great relationship with Turks. So, I chose my Turkish friends. I had no communication with them [the Syrians]. (...) Even for the teachers, I was like a Turkish student."

There was also competition between the Syrians and the Afghans. Even if they lived in the same neighborhood, they tried to live a distant social life. However, school brought all the children together, even if only for necessity. The fact that the Afghan children were fewer in number, were new to the city than the Syrians, had a more temporary legal status than the Syrians, and spoke a different language than Arabs pushed them to the bottom of the hierarchy. Although the Syrian children never mentioned it, the Afghan children often said that they could not get along with the Syrian children and that they were mistreated. Physical violence was frequently employed among refugee children, particularly by Syrian children, to attain power in society or as a way of expressing themselves, just as it was observed among the Roma and Abdal children (Arıcıoğlu & Avcı, 2021).

### 4.6. Building Shared Enjoyment or Joining Existing Ones

We frequently encountered refugee and local children playing football while walking along the streets. Engaging in the sports that the local children enjoyed, playing the same games as them, and achieving success in school competitions were important ways for the refugee children to make friends with the local ones and to carve out a place for themselves. For example, football opened an important door for the boys to build friendships with the local children. When successful in this area, they became sought–after players in team sports. Bora (2014, p. 14) asks what is within football beyond the number of goals scored and who the winner is, emphasizing that football has meaning in and of itself. In this research, we also observed that football had a magical effect of bringing together children from diverse groups. Although the refugee children did not know Turkish and the local children did not know Arabic or Farsi, they met and communicated in the common language of football. Ali (M, 13–year–old, 9m), an Afghan–Tajik, could not speak Turkish yet, but he had quickly formed friendships with the local children. When we asked him how he had met his new friends, he replied that he liked football:

"While I was at school here, during break time, my friends were playing football in the courtyard. I was watching them, and the ball came to my feet, so I passed it. Then they told me to be come and play with them. After that, when I played well, they always wanted to play with me [he was also smiling and straightening his shoulders as he spoke]. My Turkish friends encourage me and say, 'You're playing well.'... It's better now [compared to the life in Iran]."

According to Elsner (2014, p. 30), football requires interpersonal collaboration; therefore, strong communication is essential for the success of a game. The refugee children who could play football were more open to communication with the locals. The lives they built in Konya also gave them more enjoyment. Emir (M, 14–year–old, 5y) from Sudan had encountered football here. Emir described the place of football in his life as follows:

"I never thought I would love football this much. I mean, it wasn't common in Sudan. When I arrived here, I was introduced to football, and I loved it. Then we started playing outside. ... The Turks taught my brother and I how to play football. Now when I go out, I immediately gather with my friends who live around me, and we play matches."

While football has become a sport that women also play, it is deeply entrenched in male dominance (Eliasson, 2015). Therefore, we observed that girls tend to engage more in games like jump rope. The refugee children always carried the

necessary equipment for games with them, if available, and this was a strategy that attracted the local children to play with them. Zehra (F, 13–year–old, 2y), an Iraqi Turkmen, explained that she always brought her jump rope to school, and when the local Turkish and Roma girls saw her rope, they wanted to play with it:

> "Even if they don't normally talk to me, when they see the jump rope, they come over and say, 'Let's play together.' I have made a lot of friends in this way. I always carry the rope with me."

Digital games provided the children with another space where they could play together and discuss their experiences. During the research, there was a game called *PUBG* which had gained worldwide fame and popularity among the children. Regardless of gender, many of them had an idea about this game and had already played it. Sometimes, they organized with their school friends to play together, and at other times, they competed based on their scores.

Additionally, they tried to stand out with their specific talents at school, such as achieving awards in art competitions or chess tournaments, and they participated in free social activities to make themselves visible and make friends. For example, Syrian girl Hayal (F, 12–year–old, 3y) had become a devoted follower of chess lessons at the school and had won a medal in a chess tournament. This not only boosted Hayal's self–confidence but also increased her friends' interests in her.

> "I was very happy when I received the medal. The principal applauded me at school. My friends in class also applauded. Then my friends came over and congratulated me. It was very nice. After that, everyone at school started to get to know me. Now I can say I am friends with everyone."

In addition to these, supporting the same sports team, following Turkish dramas and listening to the songs of the same groups and singers were other ways in which refugee children connected with local ones. All these allowed them to build common bonds with the local children.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of ethnic identity in the experiences of Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, and Sudanese refugee children in Konya and their coping strategies in response to negative judgments and attitudes. Our field observations revealed that ethnic identity pervades refugee children's daily lives, often leading to discrimination. However, many instances have demonstrated that they are not suppressed by power. Refugee children develop strategies by creating micro–spaces and responding to local community rules, sometimes even to exclusionary attitudes.

Ethnic class and foreignness were identified as factors preventing refugee children from being fully accepted in society. Each child was ethnicized, thus overshadowing their other identities. Their ethnic identities had negative connotations, and local residents did not want these ethnic groups in *their homes*.

Many refugee children learned to live with their ethnic identities and reshaped their lives in the face of ethnic influence after migrating to Turkey. Negative experiences sometimes united them based on their ethnic or refugee identities, leading to a reactive attitude. They strategically chose which identity to embrace in their struggles, never rejecting their ethnic identity but questioning its negative meanings in the society. Despite early research suggesting that exclusion promotes marginalization, these children engaged in defiance rather than retreat. They were more than their ethnic identities (Kaya, 2002; Şimşek, 2016), and we can list the most important strategies that children often developed in response to exclusion, rather than clinging to these identities: emphasizing Muslim identity; using schools as spaces for socializing; choosing to speak Turkish; standing on the side of power and rejecting the other; and building shared enjoyment or joining existing ones.

These observations demonstrate us that refugee children do not passively surrender to their conditions or embrace power impositions. They seek to stand out by their distinctive characteristics and develop social capital by forming friendships with local children. According to our observations, shared experiences reduce tensions between children of different groups and increase friendships (Allport, 1954). These efforts also help their families integrate into society and improve their living conditions. Overall, we suggest that like all children, refugee children are active agents in their social relationships.

More research is needed to understand and improve the experiences of refugee children in Turkey. Our study only reflects the experiences of a few neighborhoods in Konya. Although these findings are not generalizable, they offer comparable insights for similar settings. Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations for administrators and policymakers: consider refugee children's experiences and listen to them directly; recognize their agency and create spaces to enhance and support their strategies (e.g., strengthening language education or improving school atmosphere); provide opportunities for them to showcase their talents; organize sports and arts activities that unite refugee and local children around common goals; consider the social environment to strengthen families and communities; and prioritize small–scale, locally–driven research when developing policies. Child–centered and direct

engagement approaches, along with further research, can contribute to the well-being of refugee children and help manage social exclusion in society.

## Endnotes

1. The group referred to as *Abdal* forms a sub–branch of the *gypsy community*, much like the *Roma* people. The perception of Abdals in the city indicates a lower social position than that of the Roma community.
2. The field research was conducted by the first author. The co–author contributed to the analysis of all data and provided input for the theoretical interpretations.
3. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (YUKK) was adopted in Turkey in 2013, and migration and asylum management took its current form. According to this law, the temporary protection status is defined as follows: "Foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, who are unable to return to the country from which they left, who arrive at or cross our borders en masse in search of emergency and temporary protection" (YUKK, Article 91). Syrian asylum seekers have thus been granted temporary protection status based on the principle of temporary protection.
4. Unless otherwise stated in this text, all Syrians and Iraqis should be considered to have an ethnic Arab identity.
5. (F, 12–year–old, 6m): Female, 12 years old, living in Turkey for 6 months.
6. (M, 12–year–old, 5y): Male, 12 years old, living in Turkey for 5 years.
7. Our description of the children in this way throughout the text is merely a sociological categorization. We recognize that they are more than these adjectives and are different from them.

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