A Steep Mountain to Cross: An Evaluation of the Ph.D. Proficiency Process from the Perspective of Students

Ramazan ERDEM[*] Dilruba IZGUDEN[**] Sumeyye GUNGOR[***] Rabia FETTAHOĞLU[****]
Ayse GULEN ERTUMER[*****] Zeynep KUH[******] Elif OZER[*******] Begum CEYLAN YORULMAZ[********]
Hilal DEMIRHAN KELES[*********] Fatma UZUMCU[**********] Ebru YILDIZ[***********]

To cite this article:

Abstract: In Türkiye, postgraduate students are required to take the "Ph.D. proficiency exam" to pass the thesis stage and complete their education after completing their doctoral course period. The "proficiency process," which manifests itself as a long, difficult and stressful process, seems like a "steep mountain to cross" in the lives of doctoral students. This research examines the Ph.D. proficiency process from doctoral students' perspectives and determines the results. The interpretative phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used; with the criterion sampling method, which is one of the purposive sampling methods, interviews were conducted with 9 participants and 55 pages of data were obtained, and the data were analyzed with thematic analysis. When the proficiency exam is evaluated as a whole, it has been determined that it has some positive and negative results. At the end of this whole process, the proficiency exam has gained meaning as a "compelling process," "learning and development process," "great exam," "understanding of inadequacy," and "an indescribable process." The information obtained from the research is a guide for students who will take the exam in the future. In addition, based on the research results, suggestions for students and suggestions for the exam are presented.

Keywords: Postgraduate education, doctorate education, proficiency exam, proficiency process, qualitative research.

[*] Suleyman Demirel University, Türkiye, raerdem@yahoo.com

[**] Suleyman Demirel University, Türkiye, dizguden@hotmail.com

[***] Artvin Coruh University, Türkiye, sumeyye@artvin.edu.tr

[****] Kafkas University, Türkiye, rabiafettahoglu95@gmail.com

[*****] *Corresponding Author:* Suleyman Demirel University, Türkiye, ertumer95@gmail.com

[******] Trakya University, Türkiye, kuh.zeynep@gmail.com

[*******] Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University, Türkiye, elif.ozer@erzincan.edu.tr

[********] Izmır Kavram Vocational School, Türkiye, begum.ceylan@kavram.edu.tr

[*********] Hitit University, Türkiye, hilaldemirhan@hitit.edu.tr

[**********] Akdeniz University, Türkiye, fatmauzumcu@msn.com

[***********] Zonduldak Bulent Ecevit University, Türkiye, ebru.yildiz@beun.edu.tr

Introduction

Today, the increase in knowledge, which brings sharing and competition in many fields, has revealed the necessity of specialization. Universities, which undertake the responsibility of education and training, have an important place in the scientific field, professional life, and socio-culturally qualified workforce planning (Eggins, 2008; Limon & Durnalı, 2018, p. 27). Universities, where education and research are carried out, are institutions where individuals undertake different duties and responsibilities and are also responsible for revealing scientific knowledge and providing social development (Saracaoglu, 2008, p. 180). With the developing education system and increasing information demand, the education people receive in undergraduate programs is insufficient to provide specialization and requires a high-level education (Turhan & Yaras, 2013, p. 201). In order to specialize, it is necessary to complete postgraduate education after undergraduate education.

Postgraduate education contributes to higher efficiency and knowledge than undergraduate education. People apply to postgraduate education programs to become better equipped in a professional sense, to provide social status, to increase their economic earnings, or to develop academically by concentrating on the scientific field (Kosar, Er, & Kılınc, 2019, p. 386; Koksalan, İlter, & Gormez, 2010, p. 281). It is also possible to meet the scientific needs in the social context through postgraduate education (Guner & Pehlivan, 2021, p. 48). According to the Higher Education Law (1981), postgraduate education, which aims to specialize in a certain field and train a qualified workforce, includes "master's degree and doctorate, specialization in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and veterinary medicine, and proficiency in art."

The doctorate program, the highest level of postgraduate education programs, provides individuals with the skills to produce solutions to scientific problems, interpret critically, synthesize and analyze information, make predictions, and report (Postgraduate Education and Training Regulation 2016; article 15). Along with the need for specialization, there is an increase in demand for doctoral education, which is one of the steps of the academic career (Guclu & Yılmaz, 2019, p. 72). Doctoral education is an activity that educates the next generation of scientists and ensures that universities have a dynamic structure and are sustainable (Rosovsky, 1992). The doctoral education process requires the creation of a vision that will develop the research culture for the professional development of students (Ersoy, 2015, p. 550). Aforementioned; it is to determine how students can experience new methods and technologies for their research skills and to create a culture that will enable them to use the theoretical knowledge they have gained in this process and to take part in research projects (Ersoy, 2015, p. 550; Oztemel, 2013). Doctoral education includes gradual processes, one of which is the proficiency exam process.

The proficiency exam practices may vary according to countries, universities, and departments. For example, doctoral programs in many universities in Europe have a

mixed procedure that requires candidates to pass both an oral and a written exam during the proficiency process (Barnett, Harris, & Mulvany, 2017, p. 6). Exceptions exist in some countries, such as Sweden. In the USA, as in Europe, it is seen that in addition to an oral and written exam, students apply a comprehensive series of exams before they start working on their thesis (Academic Positions, 2020). Barnett et al. (2017, p. 6) also stated that in the proficiency process of doctoral programs in many universities in Europe, students are tested with a mixed procedure consisting of both an oral and a written exam.

In Türkiye, doctor candidates take the proficiency exam after successfully completing the course. The proficiency that provides the necessary characteristics and skills can be expressed as the process of acquiring knowledge, expertise, technology, and method in order to be able to research and understand within a certain discipline and with an interdisciplinary attitude (LERU, 2016, p. 37). Students who successfully pass the proficiency period start the thesis period, and those who successfully complete their thesis receive the title of "Doctor (Ph.D.)." As can be seen, the proficiency process varies, and it appears as a necessary exam for people to complete their doctoral education in Türkiye. The date of the proficiency exam is determined by the senates of the relevant universities and announced within the regulation. A student admitted with a master's degree must take the proficiency exam by the end of the fifth semester at the latest, and the student admitted with a bachelor's degree must take the proficiency exam by the end of the seventh semester at the latest (Postgraduate Education and Training Regulation, 2016; article 19). For the proficiency exam, students are given the right to take a proficiency exam for a maximum of two semesters in a year. There is a risk that the student who fails the proficiency exam in both semesters might be dismissed from the school. This situation causes the students, who are evaluated both with an oral exam and a written exam in front of a five-person jury, to experience the anxiety of being unsuccessful and inadequate and not conveying what they know. Those mentioned above have caused the proficiency exam process to be seen as a steep mountain that must be crossed. Students who pass the proficiency exam, which is a difficult climb to overcome, can move on to the thesis period. Although challenging and wearing, this process, which is an important stage of doctoral education, contributes to the development of students by increasing their knowledge.

When the relevant literature is examined, it can be argued that although there are several studies on the doctoral process (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Gardner, 2010; Kıral, 2019; Ozmen & Aydın Guc, 2013), are lack of studies in the field of proficiency exam (Gelmez Burakgazi & Yıldırım, 2017). The studies carried out were reviewed with various disciplines, and within this framework, the difficulties encountered and the physical, emotional, and cognitive levels experienced were discussed. Again, in research on the subject, self-evaluation of academic skills of Turkish and American doctoral candidates (Yılar, 2020), evaluation of doctoral programs in Türkiye and some European countries (Guclu & Yılmaz, 2019), and comparison of doctoral programs in Türkiye and England (Yagan and Cubukcu, 2019) have been made. In

Ozmen and Aydın Guclu's (2013) study on doctoral education, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten doctoral students studying in secondary school science and mathematics education and primary education at Karadeniz Technical University. It has been stated that doctoral students mostly experience difficulties with their supervisors regarding the difficulties they experience during their education and strategies to cope with these difficulties. They mostly resort to the strategy of self-sacrifice to solve the difficulties they experience. Barnes and Randall (2012) analyzed the data they obtained with the National Doctoral Program Questionnaire (NDPS). They asserted thatthat although satisfaction with doctoral experiences was similar in various disciplines (social sciences, humanities, and engineering), student satisfaction differed significantly according to disciplines and academic experiences.

Burakgazi and Yıldırım (2017) examined the cognitive effects of the doctoral proficiency process on students in a study they conducted at Middle East Technical University in 2011 with six students in three stages. The study revealed that the proficiency process affects people emotionally, physically, psychologically, and socially. It has been stated that people experience social difficulties due to limited time in the doctoral proficiency process; they cannot spare time for themselves and those around them, they have feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety, and they feel inadequate. It has also been determined that people experience health problems and sleep problems in the later stages of the process.

Importance of the Research

When the proficiency exam, which is an important part of doctoral programs, is considered a long process for candidates, it has been emphasized in various studies that this process stresses doctoral students (DiPietro et al., 2010; Gelmez Burakgazi & Yıldırım, 2017; Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008; Khanna & Khanna, 1972) and causes emotional problems such as anxiety (Gelmez Burakgazi & Yıldırım, 2017; Khanna & Khanna, 1972), fear and tension (Gelmez Burakgazi & Yıldırım, 2017). In addition, it has been stated that the proficiency process causes some physical problems such as fatigue, insomnia, and health problems for students (Burakgazi & Yıldırım, 2017). Although the study by Gelmez, Burakgazi, and Yıldırım (2017) is similar to our study in understanding the proficiency process of doctoral students, other studies helped to understand the different dimensions of the doctorate. However, they were insufficient in explaining the effects and processes of the proficiency exam. This study is expected to contribute to current literature in understanding the impressions of the proficiency process in the life of a group of students who are doing their doctorate in the health management department.

The research ensured that the students' experiences on the proficiency exam were obtained through interviews shortly after leaving the proficiency exam. This situation is

also critical as it allows to obtain proficiency exam experience in detail. The research results will serve as a guide to the candidates for the proficiency exam process.

Aim of the Research

This research aims to reveal how doctoral students make sense of their experiences related to the doctoral proficiency process. The main question of this research is, "How do doctoral candidates make sense of their doctoral proficiency experience?".

Method

For the aim determined in the research, interviews were conducted with the participants who had just left the doctoral proficiency process. It was ensured that the participants' experiencesand interpretations regarding the proficiency process period and before and after the proficiency process were demonstrated, and the depth of the experiences for the individuals was revealed.

Method and Design of the Research

Within the research framework, the qualitative research method, which interprets and examines social phenomena within the environmental factors in which they are experienced, is in question (Demir, 2017, p. 287). In this context, it aims to discuss the proficiency process and examine the phenomenon in depth by interviewing people who have experienced this process. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was preferred in the study. This is because interpretative phenomenological analysis focuses on exploring people's experiences in detail. The main purpose is to discover how people make sense of their individual and social worlds. For this purpose, people's perceptions are important. Here, the narratives of individuals who have personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation are discussed, and the phenomena are made sense by the interpretations of both the participants and the researchers. In this technique, since the researcher has an active role like the participant, the research process also has a dynamic structure (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 193; Sart, 2017a, p. 70-74; Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53).

Research Participants

It is called purposive sampling when researchers choose the participants, considering the important characteristics of the participants, in order to access in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation (Boke, 2017, p. 125-126). Within the scope of the research, participants were chosen through the criterion sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods. In this context,

the criteria of being a doctoral student in the health management department of the state university of the Anatolian city, which was discussed in the research, and having entered the proficiency exams in the 2020-2021 fall semester were taken into consideration in the selection of the participants. Following the criteria mentioned above, interviews were held with nine participants who had experienced the proficiency process simultaneously and were also among the researchers. All the participants are women, and only one of them is married; six of the participants work as academicians at various universities. Regarding the Ph.D. proficiency exam process, the preparation period of the participants varies between 3.5 months and five months. After examining the results of the proficiency exam, it was understood that all participants, except one participant, achieved successful results in the exam. The participants were given pseudonyms such as K1, K2, and K3… in the study. Participant information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Information

Pseudonym of the Participant	Gender	Marital Status	Working Condition (Job Status)	Exam Preparation Time (Months)	Exam Result
K1	Woman	Single	Working	5	Successful
K2	Woman	Single	Working	4	Successful
K3	Woman	Single	Unemployed	4	Successful
K4	Woman	Single	Unemployed	4	Successful
K5	Woman	Married	Working	4	Successful
K6	Woman	Single	Unemployed	3,5	Successful
K7	Woman	Single	Working	4	Successful
K8	Woman	Single	Working	4	Successful
K9	Woman	Single	Working	4	Unsuccessful

This research was shaped by revealing the experiences of the researchers. There are 11 researchers and 9 participants in the study. The fact that each of the participants also took part in the study as a researcher provided an advantage to the research in analyzing their own experiences, understanding the depth of the subject by better expressing the process, and making better interpretations.

Data Collection Process of the Research

Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, one of the qualitative data collection techniques. Semi-structured interview forms are frequently preferredin interpretative phenomenological analysis. In line with that we also used it in this study (Sart, 2017a, p. 75; Sekerler, 2017, p. 186). Within the framework of semi-structured interviews, six basic questions and final questions were asked to the participants shortly after they left the proficiency exam. The interview questions are as follows;

1. What does the Ph.D. proficiency process mean to you?

2. How did you study during the doctoral proficiency process?

3. What did you experience during your doctoral proficiency process?

4. What was the information about your situation during the doctoral proficiency exam?

5. What are the results of the doctoral proficiency process?

       Probe: What are the positive results?

       Probe: What are the negative results?

6. What are your suggestions regarding the doctoral proficiency exam and its process?

Analysis of Research Data

As a result of the transcript of the interviews with the participants, 55 pages of data were obtained. The data obtained in the study were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. In this context, the researchers read the interview transcripts many times, and then the coding phase started. After the coding phase, considering the relationship of the codes with each other, they were gathered under themes to make the analyzed phenomenon meaningful. Finally, the research was completed with the interpretation, commenting, and reporting of the findings. (Osborn & Smith, 1998, p. 68; Smith et al., 1999, p. 220-227).

The coding phase of the research was carried out simultaneously by seven researchers. The researchers' coordination and consensus meetings were held with the participation of all researchers for five days to determine the "consensus among the coders" (Creswell, 2018, p. 253), and after meetings, it was seobserved that the reliability was ensured. Regarding the validity of the research, among the validity strategies included in Creswell's (2017, p. 201-202) work, the first strategy was to spend a long time in the field, and the participants experienced the proficiency process, which is the examined phenomenon, for about an academic term. The final report, another validity strategy known as member control, was provided within the scope of the research. Namely, since the participants were also among the researchers, it was examined whether the determined themes were suitable for the meanings given in the interviews, and their accuracy was checked. In addition to these, the fact that two researchers who were not among the participants, in other words, were only researchers and observed the doctoral proficiency students in the process, also took part in the research, which shows that the use of external auditors was included. In-depth interviews, one of the qualitative data collection techniques, were mainly used in the research. Moreover, it was also possible for one of the researchers to take part in the observation as a reporter during the proficiency exams. Furthermore, another researcher was on the jury of some of the participants. By this, the participant

observation data collection technique (Sart, 2017b, p. 220) was also realized. Information obtained from participant observations was used in interpretations.

Ethics committee approval was obtained for this study from the Ethics Committee of Suleyman Demirel University with the decision dated 24.02.2021 and numbered 193/15.

Findings

In this part of the research, the findings obtained from the qualitative analysis are included. As depicted in Figure 1, the findings of the research include "strategies for studying for the proficiency exam," "experiences during the process of studying for the proficiency exam," "situations regarding the proficiency exam," and "results of the proficiency process," "recommendations regarding the proficiency exam and the process" and "meaning of the proficiency process" which are the six main themes.

Figure 1.

Concept Map of the Ph.D. Proficiency Process
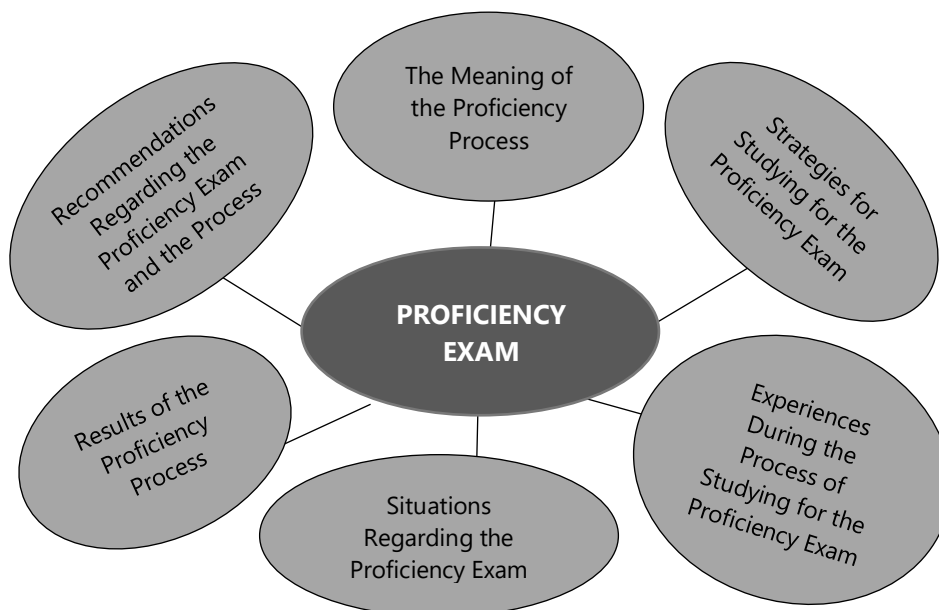
In order to see the findings obtained as a result of the interviews with the participants in general terms, information on the upper theme, theme, and sub-themes are also included in Appendix 1. As noticed, the stages of the doctoral proficiency process experienced by the students and the situations encountered in these stages are revealed within the scope of the research.

The following research sections give the most striking statements about the themes.

Strategies for Studying for the Proficiency Exam

There are themes within this upper theme, such as "planning the process, creating a systematic study, academic interaction, intensive work, and irregular/hectic work." Participants on the theme of planning the process touched on issues such as "mental preparation, planning the time, determining the materials to be read." One of the participants, K9, stated that the proficiency process started in the mind of the person but could not be acted upon immediately:

> The proficiency process started in my brain exactly as soon as the doctoral course period was over, but I can say that it took the first week of September to take action.

> One aspect of planning the process is determining the materials to be read. Participants touched upon issues such as "obtaining required books, identifying books, prioritizing books, obtaining current books, identifying critical books, studying on lessons before proficiency exam.

Regarding the theme of Creating a Study Systematics, the participants emphasized issues such as "planned work, creating a studying style, interdisciplinary work, detailed/surface reading, reading current issues, associating with daily life, reading books, taking notes, studying by highlighting, studying by telling, studying by memorization, studying according to the jury, asking questions and answering them and repetition." Participants stated that they determined their study style while creating a study systematics:

> I started to work by writing in general in the process... I started by writing only the important things and reading other topics a few times. (K5)

The statements of the participants regarding interdisciplinary work, stating that they work not only in their own field but also in other fields that the field is related to, are given below:

> In addition to the books on health sociology, health management, health economics, health policy, hospital management, hospital organization, and business management, starting from the sub-fields of health management... (K9)

Participants emphasized that they read current issues while creating a study systematics. They also stated that they read by classifying the detailed/superficial reading materials. Below is the statement of the participants:

> I took notes by reading some of them in detail, and some I read quickly. (K6)

The participants emphasized that while creating a study systematic related to daily life, they tried to establish a connection between the daily events in the flow of life and the subjects they studied. The statements of K2, one of the participants, are given below:

> I realized that I started to associate the topics constantly discussed with the course contents. However, instead of correcting this situation, I was trying to turn the crisis into an opportunity and keep the daily events in my memory by connecting them to my own issues. (K2)

Participants stated that they benefited from field books and method books in this process. Participants stated that they read the following books as method books:

Qualitative Research Methods (Ali Yıldırım-Hasan Simsek), Research Methods in Social Sciences (Sait Gurbuz-Faruk Sahin), Questionnaire (Turker Bas), Scientific Research Methods (Niyasi Karasar), Scientific Research Techniques (Open Education), Research Design (John W. Creswell).

Participants stated that they read the following books as field books:

Business Management (Tamer Kocel), Healthcare Management (Dilaver Tengilimoglu), Management and Organization (Erol Eren), Organizations and Their Structures (Henry Mintzberg), Organizational Behavior (Askın Keser-Mehmet Zencirkıran), Health Policy (Dilaver Tengilimoglu), Human Resources Management (Cavide Uyargil), Ethics in Health (Sumeyye Ozmen), Health Economics (Yusuf Celik), Hospital Management and Organization (İsmail Agırbas), Sociology of Health (Zafer Cirhinlioglu), Sociology of Health (Ataturk University Press), Health Economics (Open Education), Organization Theories (Selami Sargut), Quality Management and Accreditation in Health (Umut Beylik-Keziban Avcı), General View of the Turkish Health System (Fatih Santas-Gulcan Santas), Introduction to Behavioral Sciences and Behavior in Organizations (Serif Simsek-Tahir Akgemci-Adnan Celik), Introduction to Business Management (Omer Dincer-Yahya Fidan), Health Communication (Ayla Okyay), Strategic Management in Businesses (Hayri Ulgen-S. Kadri Mirze).

In the process of preparing for the proficiency exam, it is seen that the participants work by taking notes, and they have a notebook belonging to the proficiency exam. In addition, the statements of the participants that they work by underlining the important points are as follows:

While I was reading, I underlined the important points first. Then I re-read what I underlined. Then, in the section I underlined, I underlined the places that I considered very important with a different pen. (K4)

K4, one of the participants, emphasized "telling" in the learning process.

I tried to share and explain what I memorized with all living things. So, for example, when I was very bored, I went to our chickens and positioned myself as a teacher, and they were students, and I started to memorize with them all the time.

The participants stated that they studied by memorizing, and after the jury members were determined, they worked in this way:

After the jury was announced, I first took the books of my teachers who had books on the subject and quickly scanned them. Later, I focused more on the study areas of my teachers. I quickly read their articles. (K6)

K6, one of the participants, emphasized that he studied by "question and answer" in this process.

When we entered the last 20 days, we worked with a friend of mine for 1-2 hours a day, in questions and answers, to help convey what we know and reduce our stress.

Regarding the academic interaction theme, the participants mentioned "receiving supervisor support, getting advice from experienced people, interacting with fellow students, benefiting from past experiences.

Regarding supervisor support, participants emphasized that they were in contact with their supervisors and that their supervisors provided guidance. The participants stated that they consulted their teachers and friends because they did not know how to start the proficiency process, and therefore they received suggestions from experienced people. In addition, the participants stated that they interacted with their friends who took the same exam, received peer support, were in constant communication, shared questions, and worked together:

…We created a work plan in the form of questions and answers for an average of 3-4 hours a day, including video calls, and we tried to explain the missing topics to each other. (K2)

The participants stated that in this process, regarding the theme of intense work, they studied night and day, they stopped studying only for their needs, and they worked diligently until the last day:

I did not sleep at night. I studied until 4 a.m. or 5 a.m. (K8)

Among the participants, some stated that they studied unplanned, and those studied on the theme of irregular/hectic work. The participants also stated that they could not study as they wanted to the thought of being late:

I put step-by-step transitions in my head. I've never been a planned person. (K9)

Experiences During the Process of Studying for the Proficiency Exam

There are themes in this upper theme, such as "receiving support, disruption of life order, experiencing psychological problems, experiencing health problems, situations related to the exam, affecting social relations and non-exam situations." In the upper theme of what happened during studying for the proficiency exam, the long period the participants were preparing for the proficiency exam and what happened during this period were evaluated. Participants stated that they used various methods of getting support to get through this process more easily regarding the theme of getting support. In this context, they mentioned the issues of moral support, psychological support, and social support.

The participants tried to overcome the difficulties of getting spiritual support by praying and trusting. Below is the statement of the participant:

Even though I sometimes asked, "Are you late to study as the teacher said, can't you work, doesn't it work, can't you catch up?", I relied on myself and put my trust in myself. (K8)

Participants state that they consulted a doctor to receive psychological support, while others stated that they started using medication after consulting the doctor:

> I was clenching my teeth and waking up between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. I could not sleep again. So, I consulted the doctor. (K3)

Regarding receiving social support, it is observed that the participants spent a period in which they were in contact with their peers, who were also in this process, as well as with their friends and families, and received support from their teachers and environment. Below is the statement of the participants:

> On the other hand, our teacher had set up a "doctoral proficiency group," where there was a daily question exchange. This was very effective in terms of both motivation and peer support. (K4)

Regarding the theme of disruption of life order, it is seen that the participants emphasized issues such as changing their eating habits, postponing other tasks, changing priorities, disrupting routine, being exam-oriented, and disrupting sleep patterns. At the same time, the participants stated that they had sleep disorders, appetite disorders, irregular diets, and consumption of take-home foods.

> At night, I could not sleep even though I was sleepy most of the time, after turning over in bed dozens of times, I would suddenly find myself walking in the living room of the house. (K7)

On the theme of disrupting their life order, participants stated that they postponed their responsibilities other than the exam in general or had difficulty continuing with other work. The change in the participants' priorities is another reason for the deterioration of their life order. Participants stated that their priorities changed during this period, and they could not spare enough time for themselves as they had an exam-oriented process:

> I couldn't spare time for my family and friends. I couldn't do the activities in which I listened to myself and relaxed. (K5)

Regarding the fact that being exam-oriented disrupted their life order in this process, the participants stated that they put the proficiency exam at the center of their life, they talked about proficiency to everyone, saw everything else as a waste of time, and constantly thought about the exam:

> I was doing sports at the beginning of the proficiency process. When there was little time left for the exam, it started to seem like a waste of time to me, and I quit. (K3)

Regarding the theme of experiencing psychological problems, the participants mentioned issues such as distraction, loss of motivation, psychological fatigue, depression, introversion, being touchy, being aggressive, being distracted, numbness, and needing attention:

> When my friends said that I was constantly distracted at that time or that I took the stress of proficiency out of them, it was like a psychological fatigue on me. (K4)

Regarding the theme of experienced health problems, the participants mentioned issues such as "formation of mouth sores, headache, dizziness, wrist pain, bruxism,

trembling of the knees, trembling of the hands and feet, physical strain, burning in the eyes, weakness, anxiety about illness, weight gain, heart palpitations, arm numbness, shortness of breath, swelling of the fingers from writing, hair loss, back and waist pain, increased acne, feeling tired all the time, biting nails, experiencing forgetfulness, stiffening of the body, feeling tired and pain in the facial muscles." Below are some statements of the participants on the subject:

> Most of the time, I had situations such as going from place to place in the house and not being able to remember what to do. I once forgot what to do in the cupboard I opened to brew tea and tried to remember what to do for two or three minutes. (K7)

Regarding the theme of exam-related situations, the participants talked about issues such as "anxiety about the exam, experiencing exam stress, dreaming of the exam, efforts to continue the process, time pressure, mental preoccupation." In addition, the participants mentioned issues such as "fearing not being able to convey what I know, fear of the unknown, worrying, fear of embarrassment, fear of being disgraced, producing scenarios, fear of failing the exam, thinking of not taking the exam, drowning in details and fear of the process." The statements of the participants are given below:

> I realized that sometimes I was worried if everything I read would come my way. And that made me take notes on everything. (K1)

> I am generally a very excited person, and the fact that five teachers would constantly ask me questions made me very nervous and worried. Like what if I can't answer or if I'm locked out, like if I can't say it even though I know. (K3)

Experiencing exam stress of the participants is also among the situations related to the exam. The statements of the participants about experiencing exam stress, such as "stressing, having difficulty in stress management, not being able to sleep due to stress, seeing the supervisor in a dream, memorizing in dreams," are given below:

> I dreamed that I was constantly memorizing what I read before I went to sleep, and I can say that the items I had to memorize kept me busy until the morning. (K4)

The study participants stated that they are trying to continue the process related to the exam. They also emphasized that they try to continue the process with actions such as studying hard, making an effort, keeping motivation high, not breaking away from the process, and not giving up. The time pressure of the participants is also included in the situations related to the exam. The participants stated that issues such as getting into a vicious circle, worrying about not being able to finish the subjects, not going as planned, not being able to finish work on time, and not being able to study because of thinking about the excess of subjects, created time pressure on them. Below is the statement of the participants:

> The process took five months in my first preparation, and I spent the first two months worrying about what I should do, the abundance of books, the abundance of topics that I need to prepare for. (K5)

Regarding their mental preoccupation during this process, the participants talked about issues such as "focusing problem, magnifying the process in their minds, preoccupation, mental fatigue, difficulty in understanding what they read." In addition, participants stated that they exaggerated the exam during the proficiency process, and in this case, the exam was too big in their eyes and stuck in their minds:

> …even though I'm a detail person, I started to realize that I can't keep certain things in my mind anymore. Maybe there was a distraction, I'm not sure. (K1)

In addition, the participants stated that they had difficulty remembering the subjects they studied during this process because they were mentally busy, the days were endless, tried to control their excitement, felt remorse, and felt inadequate by thinking that they were studying insufficiently.

Regarding the theme of affecting social relations, the participants talked about "neglecting family, neglecting friends, reflecting on the environment, and isolating herself." Participants stated that they could not spare time for their families during the proficiency process and could not go to their hometown for a long time. In addition, they stated that they experienced situations such as putting the family in the background, keeping a distance from the family, and not being able to spare time for their family. The statements of the participants are as follows:

> We live in the same house with my sister, but I didn't see her, and I didn't talk to her… I hardly spoke to my parents on the phone. How are you, any changes? That's all. I was quickly hanging up the phone. (K3)

Participants stated that they neglected their friends and their families. In addition, K1 from the participants stated that she reflected the process in her environment, that she did not only experience the proficiency process herself but also that her environment was also affected by the process:

> I realized that I sometimes push my environment, but it wasn't something I did on purpose… Maybe I just pushed the limits of the people around me a little bit. Because of that, it was a difficult time not only for me but also for my environment in general. (K1)

Self-isolation of the participants in this process is also among the issues that affect social relations. At this point, the participants mentioned issues such as "isolating herself from everything, closing herself to communication, not being able to give herself to the conversations, asking for silence, not being able to spare time for social life, shortening phone calls." The statements of the participant K3 on the subject are given:

> I used to get up in the morning and started studying and going on studying until I went to bed. I wasn't doing anything else. (K3)

On the theme of non-exam situations, the participants touch on topics such as "her mother's illness, being adversely affected by the earthquake process, experiencing an earthquake, experiencing the negative effects of external factors on the exam, other

responsibilities causing division, other responsibilities making it difficult to focus, moving house, changing the city for the staff exam, experiencing heartbreak, not being able to study due to health conditions, changing cities due to health conditions, increased exam anxiety because of failures in the process, difficulty in finding a suitable studying environment, everything coming together, getting married and losing a relative." Statements of K2, one of the participants, are given:

> I had staff exams that I applied persistently and patiently, but I tried to continue my way in the end. I had to change cities to take the exams, and I had to get lost in the dreams and wonders I had involuntarily during this journey. On top of that, when the process was negative, I was fighting with myself about why I wasstudying. Unfortunately, this broke my belief in proficiency. (K2)

Situations Regarding the Proficiency Exam

Unlike the previous top theme, situations related to the proficiency exam were evaluated with participant statements regarding the exam moment and just before and after the exam. In this context, the top theme was gathered under three themes: "before the exam, at the time of the exam, and after the exam." The participants talked about the pre-exam preparations, setbacks, and emotional states regarding the pre-exam theme. Participants touched upon issues such as "physiological preparation, psychological preparation, and informational preparation" regarding preparation before the exam. When talking about physiological preparation, it is seen that the participants included expressions such as "to get up early, try to prevent tremors, get air, sleep well and fill her stomach":

> I had my breakfast reluctantly. I tried to suppress my tremors and reassure myself. (K5)

Participants included topics such as "praying, preparing herself for evil, feeling compelled to be ready, taking sedatives, calming herself" regarding psychological preparation before the exam. The statement of participant K8 is given below:

> I prayed so much that day, I almost didn't get up for a week. I think I put a lot of pressure on myself. (K8)

Regarding the informational preparation before the exam, the participants used the following statements about "studying until the last moment, repeating and asking questions in mind":

> After resting my mind, this time I had to study for the next day's oral exam. I sat down and started repeating all my notes as if I had never repeated them before. (K2)

Regarding the pre-exam emotional state, the participants emphasized issues such as "crying, being overly stressed, feeling under pressure, freezing, getting excited, being anxious, feeling like a sacrificial lamb, rejoicing that the exam will end, and wanting the exam to end":

> My hands and feet were freezing, and my heart was constantly pounding. I realized that if I took the exam in this way, I would not be able to convey what I knew, and after I sat down at the table and said to myself that I could do it and I would do it, I started the exam. (K6)

Regarding the setbacks experienced before the exam, the participants included statements such as "feeling forgotten everything, not being able to sleep, and arguing with the mother":

> I had an unnecessary argument with my mother while I wished to work with a calm mind for the last time on the issues on my mind on the exam day. (K8)

The participants mentioned three sub-themes regarding the exam moment theme: "situations related to the person, situations related to the questions, and situations related to the jury." Regarding the sub-theme of the personal issues at the time of the exam, the participants mentioned issues such as "experiencing severe exam stress, the effort to overcome the exam, the effect of knowing the questions, and the effect of not being able to know the questions." One of the personal issues is the situation of experiencing severe exam stress. Various aspects arise in this situation. It is possible to express these as the closure of perception, the state of forgetting, and the effort to overcome the exam. However, it is seen that the participants try to remain calm about overcoming the exam. Below are the statements of the participants:

> I don't know if I was ready, but I guess I had to be. While I was praying, when I saw the teachers in front of me, the hairless baby bird in me suddenly moved as if it wanted to learn to fly (but I think that was not the right time). I could hear the voices of the teachers and see them, but at the same time, I was trying to calm the baby bird inside me. (K2)

The state of thinking about good things and being motivated during the exam is an effort to overcome the exam. Therefore, K9 expressed this situation as follows:

> Imagine an L-shaped wall. You are kneeling right where two walls meet. If you raise your head, feeling the happiness of experiencing a spring day, you can see that everywhere is green, and most importantly, nature as a whole is covered with peace, and you see the blue sky in front of you. You want to reach there, but it doesn't seem likely because there are people standing side by side like walls, turning your environment into four walls, turning two walls into four walls. I felt so. It's like someone who wants to find peace but can't do it. (K9)

Another personal situation is the effect of being able to answer questions. Participants stated that they were relieved and happy as they could find the correct answers to the questions. Below are the statements of the participants:

> I was very excited until the teacher's first question. But when he asked, "What is CKYS?" I suddenly became happy. And can you believe it? Exactly 10 minutes ago, the last thing I studied was CKYS, the acronym for the Core Resource Management System in Turkish, and its role in the Turkish Health System. (K2)

The effect of not being able to answer the questions in personal situations related to the time of the exam is also among the topics mentioned by the participants. For example, the participant's statement that one of the situations that occurred under the

influence of not being able to answer the questions was to feel embarrassed when she could not answer the supervisor's questions is as follows:

> We have already discussed the questions a lot with my teacher which he asked in the exam, but I couldn't remember the answers… But at that moment, I felt that I was embarrassing my supervisor. (K4)

Regarding the sub-theme of situations related to questions at the time of the exam, the participants emphasized two issues "unexpected questions coming and perceiving questions." It is seen that the participants interpreted asking questions about subjects they had difficulty memorizing as unexpected questions coming. For example, the statement of K7, one of the participants, is given below:

> …and before the basic questions, which I can call warm-up questions, were asked, questions were asked about the subjects that I did not know directly, or rather, about the subjects that I had read but could not remember and could not memorize. (K7)

The following are the participants' statements emphasizing that they answered the wrong question regarding their perception of the questions:

> …then I looked at it and realized that I hadn't even heard what was asked in 2 or 3 questions. I don't know how I listened so wrongly, but I gave another answer. But it's not because I don't know the right answer; it's because of excitement. If I could manage that, it would be very different. (K8)

Regarding the sub-theme of situations related to the jury, the participants talked about not having difficulties with the questions of their department teachers. In addition, the calming state of the jury also attracted the attention of the participants. Another issue in the situations related to the jury was that the oral exam started with the supervisor. The statement of K3 from the participants is given below:

> Honestly, I was relieved that my supervisor started the exam by asking me questions. Since my supervisor started, I was comfortable and able to answer questions, and my self-confidence was restored. (K3)

Regarding the post-exam theme, the participants talked about four situations: "feeling numb after the exam, relaxation, happiness, and sadness." Regarding numbness, the study participants talked about the subjects such as being shocked when hearing the result, falling into a void when hearing the result, numbness when hearing the result, and not being able to believe that it was over. Regarding relaxation after the exam, participants stated that they felt relieved and felt themselves above the clouds when they heard the result. The state of being happy consists of the states of being proud and thankful for the participants when they hear the positive result. On the other hand, sadness expresses the sadness that the participant feels as a result of not passing the proficiency exam. Below is the statement of K2, one of the participants:

> I think the student is enough, but if you want, we can continue with the questions, my professors, said the teacher, which may be one of the proudest words I have heard. I remember myself saying, "Thank God." (K2)

Results of the Proficiency Process

This top theme consists of two themes: positive and negative results.

Positive results

Regarding the positive results of the proficiency process, the participants mentioned issues such as "academic development, achievements, personal awareness and development of social relations."

Regarding academic development, the participants mentioned issues such as academic enthusiasm, informational awareness, and mastery of the field. Regarding the importance of academic enthusiasm in academic development, the participants included topics such as getting one step closer to the goal, the pleasure ofstudying, experiencing the pleasure of learning, understanding the correctness of their choices, and finding research topics. The statement on the subject is given below:

> When the exam result was announced, all the teachers found it successful, and I cannot explain this pride. Once again, I knew I was on the right track. (K4)

> The pleasure of learning is very different; I cannot describe it. Then I can say to myself "I will regularly work from now on, and I will do it like this. (K8)

Informational awareness is also important in academic development. On this subject, the participants focused on understanding the power of knowledge, understanding the importance of labor, understanding that learning does not end, understanding the importance of learning, and understanding the importance of the process. The statements of the participants are given below:

> In this process, the information we have forgotten winks at us again. One feels the power of knowledge. The pleasure of learning is very different. I cannot describe it. (K8)

In the context of gaining a broad perspective on the field, there are subjects such as creating a concept map of the field, increasing knowledge, comprehending the leading books in the field, discovering the interdisciplinary aspect of the field, and better understanding the course contents and concretizing the concepts. The statements of the participants on the subject are given below:

> …I am very happy for myself. I feel as if I have a concept map of the field of health management in my mind. (K1)

Regarding the achievements sub-theme, the participants talked about two issues: skill development and acquiring positive habits. In skill development, the participants emphasized increasing the capacity to understand, gaining the ability to take a holistic view, developing a philosophical perspective, evaluating books, establishing relationships between books, learning time management, and making learning a lifestyle. In acquiring positive habits, the participants included issues such as gaining

disciplined studying habits, finding a studying style, and acquiring the habit of getting up early.

The statements of the participants regarding the sub-theme of self-awareness, such as the possibility of self-assessment, learning self-tolerance, recognizing their mistakes, realizing that their visual and auditory memory is good, and making a swot analysis, are given below:

> I learned tolerance along with the proficiency process. I tolerate myself. I realized that I was tough on myself in my previous works. (K4)

The sub-theme of the development of social relations includes topics such as strengthening family ties, improving the understanding of family members, increasing the support of friends, understanding the importance of friend support, and establishing friendships with peers.

Negative results

The participants talked about three issues regarding the negative results theme: "disruption of order, psychological effects, and health problems." First, participants emphasized that their work accumulated, and their sleep patterns were disrupted because of the proficiency process. At the same time, the participants stated that they were affected psychologically. Considering the psychological results, the participants mentioned psychological aging and wear issues. Below are the statements of the participants:

> … my sleep disorder persists. People's order is disrupted… I feel worn out… (K8)

One of the participants' negative results of the process is health problems. Because it is seen that the participants experience the effects of these negative situations even if the process is over. Therefore, the participants mentioned many health problems such as not being able to sit upright, yellowing of the teeth, weight gain, hair loss, waking up tired, inability to control facial muscles, and nail-biting.

> I consumed excessive amounts of tea, coffee, and cigarettes. That's why my teeth turned yellow. (K5)

> …it is a fact that I eat unhealthily and even gain weight as a result. (K7)

Recommendations Regarding the Proficiency Exam and the Process

Opinions and suggestions about the proficiency exam were asked from the participants. This top theme was examined in two themes, "recommendations for the exam system and suggestions for students." Regarding the theme of proposals for the exam system, the participants talked about three topics: the exam, the jury, and the supervisor.

Regarding exam suggestions, participants suggested a fair exam, paying attention to jury selection, determining juries earlier, increasing the exam duration, removing the exam from its one-dimensional structure, and changing the name of the exam. Suggestions are given below:

> I still don't know how necessary and efficient the proficiency process is. Even though I have been reading so extensively, I still have some uncertainty about this subject. If the purpose of this process is really to make us feel how inadequate we are, I felt it deeply. If so, I have understood the main purpose of the exam. (K7)

Regarding the suggestions for the jury, the participants talked about two issues: questions and attitudes/behaviors. Regarding the questions, the participants listed suggestions such as the participants' interpretation skills should be tested, questions related to the field should be asked, unknown questions should not be insisted on, the first questions asked should be among the basic subjects, the juries should also ask questions outside their own fields, the diversity of questions should be provided, and the number of interpretation questions should be increased. In addition, the participants mentioned the following statement regarding the insistence of the jury on an unknown question during the oral exam and waiting for comments on the question:

> Even the demeanor and manner of the jury can affect one's self-control. For example, it seems unreasonable to me to insist on an unanswered question and expect comments from the student. It seems to me that the student's knowledge can be measured with a different question. (K1)

In the suggestions for the jury regarding attitudes and behaviors, the participants referred to suggestions such as the participants should approach the jury with empathy towards the student, the jury should avoid behaviors that would distract the student, the jury should support the student, the jury should give the student an opportunity to overcome their excitement, the jury members should consider the student's psychology, the jury members should be understanding, the students should not be forced on purpose the exam should pass in a conversational mood. Below is the statement of K4, one of the participants, on the subject:

> I think it is important for the jury members to understand the psychology of the student and act accordingly. Because the moderate behavior of the teachers in my jury made me feel very comfortable. (K4)

In the suggestions for the supervisor, subjects such as the supervisor should support the student during the preparation process, and the supervisor should follow the process were mentioned.

> I think it is very important to follow the students who are preparing for the proficiency process in general, and the role of the supervisors is very effective here. I think every teacher should contact and motivate the student about how the proficiency process is going. I think such an approach will make the management of the process easier. (K4)

In the theme of suggestions for students, the participants mentioned that students should be willing to learn. They also emphasized issues such as resilience and study

method. In addition, the participants of the study talked about issues such as the learning process should continue in all areas of life, the willingness to learn, the examination should be seen as a development process, and accepting that proficiency in all subjects is not possible, the learning effort should be continued for life. Below are some statements of K1 on the subject:

> …So, seeing ourselves as proficient when we pass this exam will perhaps be the worst result. Since we are researchers in this field, it seems to me that we must integrate the effort of reading, learning, and understanding into every aspect of our lives. (K1)

Subjects such as students should be confident about psychological resilience, should not lose their belief that they will pass the exam, should not overestimate the process, should find methods for excitement control, provide excitement control, provide self-control, control stress, and should accept the difficulty of the process was mentioned. The expression of participant K1 is as follows:

> Of course, that's not the only thing that matters. If you can't manage your stress in an exam that you would normally be successful in, this can cause the exam to go badly. In this respect, managing stress is very important. (K1)

The participants talked about process management and study style regarding the study method. Participants made suggestions about process management, such as using time well, working regularly, planning, studying systematically, creating rest times, closely following exam procedures, and establishing a personal working order. Below is the statement of K7, one of the participants:

> First of all, I want to say that students need to find their own study style. The method that works for everyone changes. My biggest mistake was making the wrong decision and wasting a lot of time. (K7)

As for the study methods and techniques, participants mentioned suggestions such as should not take excessive notes, should review previous questions, studying hard, not drowning in details, completing missing information, following up-to-date information, paying attention to daily repetition, question and answer studies should be done during the preparation process, not focus on the jury, focus on the areas of interest of the jury members, should have detailed information about the members of the jury, take notes on important points, learn basic information, read basic books, and summarize basic books.

Meaning of the Proficiency Process

The last of the top themes obtained based on the participants' statements who have experienced the doctoral proficiency process is "the meaning of the proficiency process." There are some meanings attributed to proficiencys by students. As a result of the interviews with the participants, it was seen that these meanings were gathered under the themes of "a challenging process, a learning and development process, a big test, an understanding of inadequacy, and an indescribable process." Regarding the fact that proficiency is a compelling process, the participants of the study touched

on issues such as proficiency is a compelling process, being stuck in a swamp, drowning, depression, being stuck in the mud, suffering, being hit from wall to wall, a process that makes you sick, the period you don't want to remember, anxiety, crisis, conviction, a stressful process, an aging process, and a difficult process. The statement of K9, one of the participants, on the subject is as follows:

> I can liken the process to a swamp… You will go on a long road. Achieving your goal is important to you. You start the road and see a muddy area as you move forward. You say in your mind that there is no other way, I must go through here, my shoes will get just a little dirty, and that's all. You take the first step, everything is normal, but as you take the other steps, you see that your shoes are completely dirty. (K9)

When students interpret this process retrospectively, although it is seen that the meaning they attribute to proficiency is negative, it is noteworthy that they state that it is a learning and development process. Regarding the learning and development process, the participants focused on issues such as "a personal process, the effort to know, accumulation, an unending process, germination, learning with peers, personal satisfaction, reciprocation of what you have learned, learning process, a useful process and being on the road." The statements of the participant K3 on this matter are given below:

> Actually, I think that the proficiency process should not end because proficiency is always learning something, not knowing, not being enough for me. (K3)

Regarding proficiency being a great test, the participants focused on issues such as "a divisive process, a unique process, the last test of humanity, an unforgettable process, a process without excuses, a mountain that is difficult to cross, a process that stops life and affects the environment." Participants always felt the stress of the exam and, at some points, there were disruptions in their lives. The statements of K8, one of the participants, on the subject are given below:

> Proficiency was the point where life stopped for me. I took a break from everything except the responsibility of my job and school. (K8)

Regarding the awareness that the proficiency process ended in failure, the participants focused on issues such as inability, attendance, and inadequacy. For example, K5 said:

> I had an intense psychological problem of failure, feeling of inadequacy and anxiety. I always thought I would be a disgrace to my family, friends, manager, and teachers.

Regarding proficiency being an indescribable process, the participants used strange but beautiful and hard-to-describe expressions. The views of K9, one of the participants, on this issue are given below:

> Strange but beautiful… (K3)

> We have all taken exams with various difficulties until this age, but this exam is difficult to describe and cannot be experienced again. (K9)

Discussion

The research subject was doctoral education at the postgraduate level in Türkiye. Therefore, students who have completed the course period in doctoral education in Türkiye must pass the doctoral proficiency exam to transition to the thesis stage. The doctoral proficiency exam includes a process in which numerous sources are examined, readings are made, and detailed questions about the field in which the specialization will be made during the exam period. The exam consists of two stages; first, the written exam is taken, and the winners take the oral exam.

Within the scope of the research, the evaluation of the doctoral proficiency process was made through the eyes of university students in an Anatolian city in Türkiye. Burakgazi et al. (2017) also have a study on the subject. This study was carried out in 2011 with six students in the process of doctoral proficiency at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Türkiye. The research, as mentioned earlier, was carried out in three stages and discussed the cognitive effects of the process on students. In the results of Burakgazi et al., it was revealed that the proficiency process affects individuals emotionally, physically, psychologically, and socially. It has been determined that people experience social difficulties because they have limited time in the doctoral proficiency process; they cannot spare time for themselves and those around them, have feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety, and feel inadequate. In addition, it has been determined that people experience health problems and sleep problems in the later stages of the process. The results of Burakgazi et al. support the information given in the findings section of this study.

In the studies conducted by Karadag and Ozdemir (2017) on the evaluation of the doctoral education process, the views of doctoral students on the proficiency exam were included. In the study, it was understood that the students emphasized the necessity of evaluating the proficiency exam according to objective criteria and that the scope of the exam should not be limited to the expertise of the faculty members in the jury. In addition, there are statements that the proficiency exam should be an exam that includes measuring students' thinking skills and competencies in practice. The findings mentioned above are also consistent with the results of our study. In our study, it was seen that students said that being fair in the proficiency exam is very important. In addition, it has been determined that there are participant statements saying that the jury selection is very important in terms of the exam progress and that the faculty members in the jury focus on their fields of study in the last stages of the exam preparation process. The participants stated that they wanted the juries to ask questions outside of their fields, provide a variety of questions, and increase the number of comment questions. This situation reveals once again that the questions of the jury members can be limited to their fields, and it is important to change this situation.

Within the scope of the research, the participants interpreted the proficiency process as a fundamentally challenging process, the grand exam, the understanding of the inadequacy, and the learning and development process. Although it is not very correct to consider the doctoral proficiency process as a trauma here, it can be said that the process leads to post-traumatic development as a point of view. As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, p. 408) stated, post-traumatic development is a situation in which people can experience positive changes and transformations and negative consequences after difficult events and traumas.

It is understood from the research findings that the doctoral proficiency process is quite challenging and tiring for students. After considering the students' perspectives on the exam, it would be appropriate to use the metaphor of "a steep mountain to cross." Within the scope of the research, it has been seen that this difficult exam process forces students in physiological, sociological, and psychological senses and may even cause their health to deteriorate. The study by Lacey et al. (2000) on postgraduate students also supports the findings. Furthermore, it has been revealed that students experience exam stress, and this situation also affects their physical and psychological health.

Nietzsche's statement, "What does not kill me makes me stronger," is one of the sentences describing the post-traumatic development process (Colville and Cream, 2009, p. 919). The proficiency process also challenges students, but when we look at the positive outcomes, as shown in the findings, it helps people know themselves, see their limits, acquire positive habits, improve their social relationships, and experience academic development. For example, in the study of Burakgazi et al. (2017), it was seen that the participants experienced an increase in their personal development and knowledge levels in the interviews held after the exam.

As it is understood, the doctoral education process in general and the proficiency exam process, which is the subject of the research in particular, is extremely difficult. At this point, it has been understood from the research results how important it is for the students to receive supervisor support for the course of the process. Arastaman et al. (2020) also emphasized the importance of meeting with their supervisor regularly for doctoral students to be successful, determining the goals for the process, and following them together with regular feedback to be successful.

Conclusion

This research conducted in-depth interviews with students who had just passed the doctoral proficiency exam using the qualitative research method. In the study, the findings obtained from the interpretative phenomenological analysis regarding the proficiency process were evaluated. As a result of the analysis, 6 top themes were obtained: the strategies to study for the proficiency exam, the experiences during the process of studying for the proficiency exam, the situations related to the proficiency

exam, the results of the proficiency process, the suggestions regarding the proficiency exam and the process, and the meaning of the proficiency process.

Within the scope of the research, it was ensured that the proficiency stage, which is a part of the doctoral education in the postgraduate education process in Türkiye, was witnessed from the point of view of the students. The research results provide information as a guide for the students who will take the exam in the future about the proficiency process and the exam.

In addition to the fact that the proficiency process is an extremely challenging and tiresome process for doctoral students, it has been seen that they realize their inadequacies in their field of specialization and enabling them to enter the learning and development process.

Within the scope of the research, information was obtained about how the students were prepared for the proficiency exam. The information obtained here also guides the candidates who will enter the proficiency in the future. At this point, the students emphasized the necessity of planning the process up to the proficiency exam correctly and studying intensively with the study strategy developed by the person. At this point, it is important to prepare reading lists and which topics to focus on. Students' most common study method during preparation for the exam is to keep a notebook while completing their reading list, then move on to the memorization stage and finally answer questions. After the jury members were determined, the students stated that they made additional readings specific to the jury members' fields of study. In addition, the students have stated that it is extremely beneficial to contact the people who will take the exam together during the entire proficiency process, follow current issues in this way, and share information.

As it is known, the doctorate proficiency stage is not just an exam; it shows itself as a comprehensive process. In this context, it is not correct to consider only the exam preparation strategies in the process. Still, it is necessary to examine the students' experiences, knowing that they actually affect the exam. During the interviews with the participants, it was seen that many participants experienced problems due to the stress and pressure they were exposed to and tried to overcome them with the psychological and social support they received.

Since the proficiency process pushes people to an extremely intense period, their normal life patterns, social relations, and even their physiology have been affected by this situation. This experienced intense period causes people to be in constant preoccupation, causing them to break away from life. Participants stated that the proficiency process had positive and negative results. The participants emphasized that the most important benefit of the process to the individual is academic development. In addition, people stated that their awareness of themselves improved; they saw their limits and learned how to control their stress.

The emotional states of individuals regarding the proficiency exam were also discussed within the scope of the research. It was observed that the situation progressed in different ways before, during, and after the exam. When the processes during the day and the day before the exam were evaluated, it was understood that the people were extremely stressed, and they tried to prepare themselves for the exam in physiological, psychological, and mental terms.

The exam moment is perhaps the most critical point of the whole process, and it is understood from the participants' statements that many factors affect the exam. The most notable of these is the case of the jury. It has been understood that the words and behaviors of the jury members greatly affect the student and the exam moment in positive and negative ways.

People emphasized that they were stressed a lot during the exam and tried to keep their excitement under control. However, they also stated that this situation sometimes causes them to have difficulties perceiving the questions. After the exam, the participants stated that they felt relaxed and numbed in general.

Based on the results mentioned above of the research, a model as in Figure 2 was created.

Figure 2.

Ph. D. Proficiency Exam
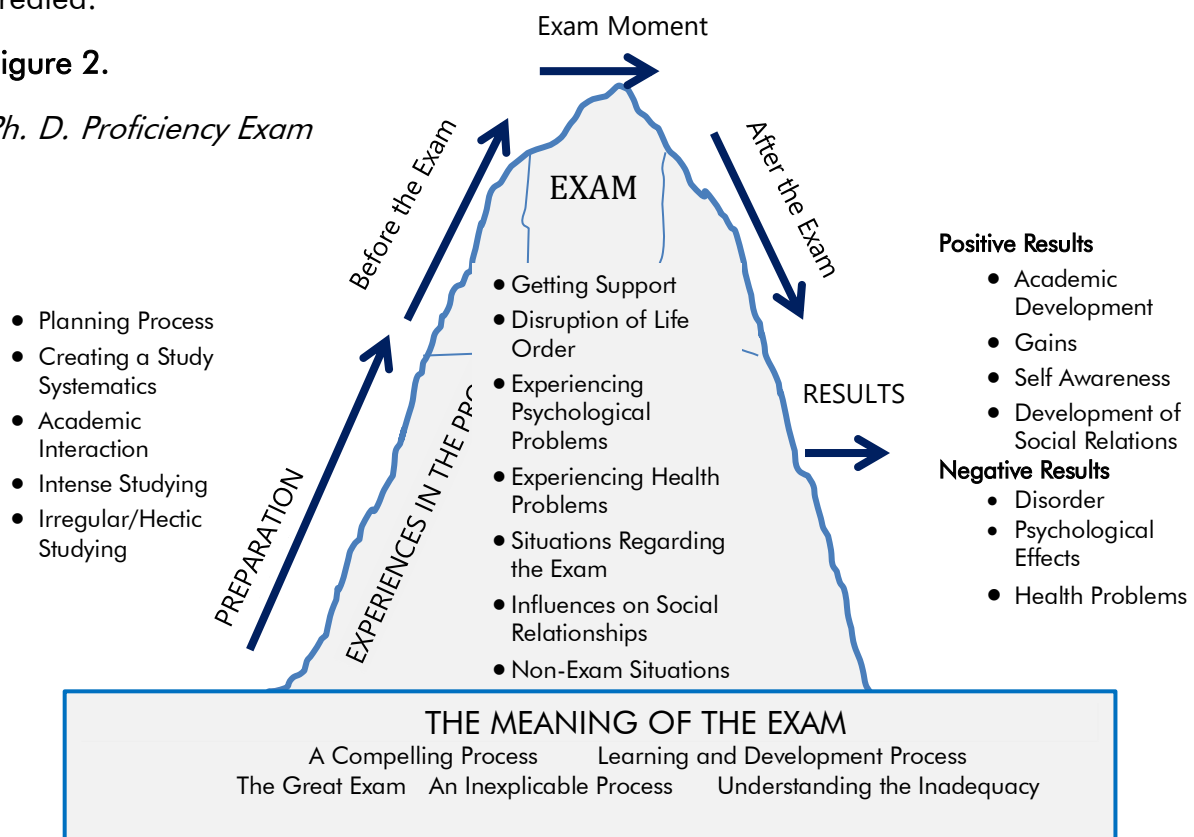
The proficiency exam was metaphorized as "a steep mountain to cross," and the model was designed to reflect it. Before the exam, there is a steep mountain to cross in the eyes of the candidates. In order to climb the mountain, it is necessary to make preparations beforehand. At the start of the examination process, the candidate first plans and then starts the journey by creating a study systematics for himself. In this process, they interact academically with their fellow students, those who have had previous exam experience, and their supervisors. Intense studying tempo refers to the difficulties during mountain climbing and the problems encountered in irregular/hectic work. The pre-exam process continues until the exam. While climbing the mountain, the candidate has many different experiences. When exam day comes, the candidate's excitement is at its peak. This also signifies that the summit of the mountain has been reached. It tells the three sections experienced on the top of the mountain just before the exam, at the moment of the exam, and right after the exam. Different emotions and experiences are experienced in these three sections. When the exam is evaluated as a whole, it has some positive and negative results. At the end of this whole process, the proficiency exam gains meaning as "a challenging process," "learning and development process," "great exam," "understanding of inadequacy," and "an indescribable process." The meaning of the exam deals with the vegetation of the mountain in the model, the roughness of the mountain, what the candidates encounter during the crossing of the mountain, what they see, and the candidates' perception and interpretation of the process. The proficiency exam is seen as the great exam, the difficult process, the obstacles and pits faced by the candidates while crossing the mountain, and the flowers they encounter on the journey of crossing the mountain, where learning and development are experienced.

Limitations

As the limitation of the research, it should be stated that this research is limited to the experiences of the group preparing for the exam in the health management department of the State University of the Anatolian city determined in the 2020-2021 Fall Term. Another limitation of the study is that all of the participants are women, and the interpretation of doctoral proficiency experiences is limited to the perspective of women. In addition, the fact that only one of the nine participants was unsuccessful has also limited the evaluation of the process. Finally, an element that threatens the study's internal validity is that one of the researchers takes part in the jury of a few of the participants, as mentioned. Here, the participants may have felt under pressure in their answers to the jury, even though the necessary conditions were met to prevent this from happening.

Suggestions

When it comes to the suggestions section of the research, based on the findings obtained within the scope of the study, suggestions are presented in two ways, for candidates who will take the proficiency exam and for practitioners.

Planning the proficiency process correctly and making good use of the time at this point are among the suggestions for candidates. Another recommendation for the candidates who will take the proficiency exam is that they should see this process as a development process for themselves and act willingly to learn, even though it is challenging and stressful. It is also extremely important to ensure stress control in the processes before and during the exam and develop appropriate suggestion methods. It is asserted that success might increase during the exam by studying more efficiently. In addition to these, during the preparation process for the proficiency exam, it is recommended that students determine the list of books they should read in their fields, keep a notebook, follow up-to-date information, examine the jury members' areas of academic interest, and review the subject by question-answer.

In addition to the suggestions provided to the candidates, it would be beneficial to include suggestions for practitioners. At this point, the most important issue is the observance of justice in the proficiency exam system and the necessity of ensuring this situation, especially when determining the jury members. In addition, extending the exam period for the exam system is among the suggestions. In addition, it is recommended to pay attention to the sufficient variety of questions asked in the proficiency exam and ask questions in a way that will measure the interpretation abilities of the students rather than memorization questions.

Regarding the proficiency exam process, the supervisor-student relationship is also an important factor in the student's preparation. Therefore, it is recommended that the supervisors support the students in this process to increase success. Finally, it is recommended for the jury members to consider the psychology of the students at the time of the exam and avoid distracting behaviors and attitudes that intentionally lower the student.

References

Academic Positions. (2019, September 28). Doing a Ph.D. in Europe vs. the US. https://academicpositions.com/career-advice/phd-in-europe-or-the-us

Arastaman, G., Cetin, O. U., Arslan, S. Y., & Kerimoglu, P. N. G. (2020). Being a doctoral student in educational administration: A phenomenological study from the perspective of postgraduate students. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Education*, 8(4), 1323-1346.

Barnes, B. J., & Randall, J. (2012). Doctoral student satisfaction: An examination of disciplinary, enrollment, and institutional differences. *Research in Higher Education*, 53(1), 47-75. 10.1007/s11162-011-9225-4

Barnett, J. V., Harris, R. A., & Mulvany, M. J. (2017). A comparison of best practices for doctoral training in Europe and North America, *FEBS Open Bio*, 7(10), 1444-1452. 10.1002/2211-5463.12305

Burakgazi, G. S., & Yıldırım, A. (2017). Journey into doctoral candidacy: A Grounded Theory study of doctoral proficiency exam process. *Croatian Journal of Education*, 19(1), 63-92. https://doi.org/10.15516/cje.v19i1.2017

Boke, K. (2017). Sampling. In K. Boke (Ed.), *Research methods in social sciences*, 5th Edition, Istanbul: Alfa Publications.

Capa Aydin, Y., Aksoz, I., & Gelmez Burakgazi, S. (2011). Exploring the predictors of doctoral students' academic satisfaction. Paper presented at the meeting of the ECER, Berlin, GE.

Colville, G., & Cream, P. (2009). Post-traumatic growth in parents after a child's admission to intensive care: maybe Nietzsche was right?, *Intensive Care Medicine*, 35(5), 919-923. 10.1007/s00134-009-1444-1

Creswell, J. W. (2017). Research design, qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches, (Trans. S. B. Demir), 3rd Edition, Ankara: Egiten Kitap.

Creswell, J. W. (2018). Qualitative research methods-Qualitative research and research design according to five approaches. M. Tum & S. B. Demir (Trans), 4th Edition, Ankara: Siyasal Kitabevi.

Demir, O. O. (2017). Qualitative research methods. In K. Boke (Ed.), *Research methods in social sciences*, 5th Edition, Istanbul: Alfa Publications.

DiPietro, J. C., Drexler, W., Kennedy, K., Buraphadeja, V., Liu, F., & Dawson, K. (2010). Using wikis to collaboratively prepare for qualifying examinations. *TechTrends*, 54(1), 25-32. 10.1007/s11528-009-0360-0

Eatough, V., & Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig, and W. Stainton-Rogers, (Ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Psychology*, 2. Edition, UK: Sage, (p. 193-211).

Eggins, H. (2008). "Trends and issues in postgraduate education: a global review. Trends and Issues in "Postgraduate Education: Challenges for Research International Experts Workshop," 5-7 March. Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland.

Ersoy, A. (2015). Examination of doctoral students' first qualitative research experiences through diaries. *Pegem Journal of Education and Training*, 5(5), 549-568. 10.14527/pegegog.2015.030

Gardner, S. K. (2010). Contrasting the socialization experiences of doctoral students in high and low completion departments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81, 61–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2010.11778970

Gelmez Burakgazi, S., & Yıldırım, A. (2017). Journey into doctoral candidacy: A Grounded theory study of doctoral proficiency exam process. *Croatian Journal of Education*, 19(1), 63-92. 10.15516/cje.v19i1.2017

Guclu, N., & Yılmaz, G. (2019). Evaluation of doctoral programs in Türkiye and some European countries. *Journal of Contemporary Management Sciences*, 6(1), 71-89.

Guner, P., & Pehlivan, T. (2021). Examination of psychiatric nursing doctoral education in Türkiye. In M. Kelleci (Ed.), *Psychiatric Nursing Education*, 1st Edition, Ankara: Turkiye Klinikleri, (p. 48-56).

Karadag, N., & Ozdemir, S. (2017). Opinions of faculty members and doctoral students on the doctoral education process in Türkiye. *Journal of Higher Education and Science*, (2), 267-281.

Kearns, H., Gardiner, M. & Marshall, K. (2008). Innovation in Ph.D. completion: The hardy shall succeed (and be happy!). *Higher Education Research & Development*, 27(1), 77-89. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360701658781

Kıral, B. (2019). A Qualitative study on patience in academic life. *Journal of Computer and Education Research Year*, 7(14), 250-283. https://doi.org/10.18009/jcer.570871

Khanna, P., & Khanna, J. L. (1972). Current status of the comprehensive examination: A survey. *American Psychologist*, 27(8), 761. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0033241

Kosar, D., Er, E., & Kilinc, A. C. (2019). Teachers' reasons for postgraduate education: A qualitative study. *Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 53, 370-392.

Koksalan, B., Ilter, I., & Gormez, E. (2010). A study on the socio-cultural characteristics and postgraduate education willingness of primary school teacher candidates (the example of Fırat, Erzincan, and Inonu University, classroom teaching department). *Ahi Evran University Journal of Kirsehir Education Faculty*, 11 (3), 277-299.

Lacey, K., Zaharia, M. D., Griffiths, J., Ravindran, A. V., Merali, Z., & Anisman, H. (2000). A prospective study of neuroendocrine and immune alterations associated with the stress of an oral academic examination among graduate students. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 25(4), 339-356. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-4530(99)00059-1

League of European Research Universities (LERU). (2016) Maintaining a quality culture in doctoral education at research-intensive universities, https://www.leru.org/publications/maintaining-a-quality-culture-in-doctoral-education-at-research-intensive-universities

Limon, İ., & Durnalı, M. (2018). Metaphorical perceptions of doctoral students towards doctoral education and faculty members. *Sakarya University Journal of Education*, 8(1), 26-40. https://doi.org/10.19126/suje.336878

Postgraduate Education and Training Regulation (2021). Official Gazette (No: 29690). http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/04/20160420-16.html

Osborn, M., & Smith, J. A. (1998). The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 3(1), 65-83. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8287.1998.tb00556.x

Ozmen, Z. M., & Aydın Power, F. (2013). Difficulties and coping strategies related to doctoral education: A case study. *Journal of Higher Education and Science*, 3(3), 214-219. 10.5961/jhes.2013.079

Oztemel, E., (2013). Creating a culture of research and innovation in higher education institutions. *Journal of Higher Education*, 3(1), 22-29. 10.2399/yod.13.006

Rosovsky, H., (1992). University: A dean explains, Ankara: TUBITAK.

Saracaloglu, A. S. (2008). The relationship between postgraduate students' academic motivation levels, research concerns, attitudes, and research competencies. *Yuzuncu Yıl University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 5 (2), 179-208.

Sart, G. (2017a). Phenomenology and interpretive phenomenological analysis. In F. N. Seggie & Y. Bayyurt, *Qualitative research: Methods, techniques, analysis and approaches*, Ankara: Anı Publishing.

Sart, G. (2017b). Observation. In F. N. Seggie & Y. Bayyurt, Qualitative Research: Methods, techniques, analysis and approaches, Ankara: Anı Publishing.

Smith, J. A., Jarman, M., & Osborn, M. (1999). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis in Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods, Michael Murray, Kerry Chamberlain sage 218-240.

Smith, J. A., & Osborn M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.) *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, 2. Edition, Sage Publications, Inc., (p. 53-80).

Sekerler, A. S. (2017). In-depth interview. In F. N. Seggie & Y. Bayyurt, *Qualitative research: Method, Technique, analysis and approaches,* Ankara: Memoirs Publishing.

Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). A clinical approach to post-traumatic growth. In P. A. Linley, & S. Joseph (Ed.), *Positive psychology in practice*, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, (p. 405-419).

Turhan, M., & Yaras, Z. (2013). Contribution of postgraduate programs to the professional development of teachers, administrators, and supervisors, *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(43), 200-218.

Yagan, S. A., & Cubukcu, Z. (2019). Comparison of doctoral programs in Türkiye and England. *Journal of Higher Education and Science*, 9(1), 134-143. 10.5961/jhes.2019.316

Years, M. B. (2020). Self-evaluations of Turkish and American doctoral candidates' academic skills: A qualitative study. *Ondokuz Mayıs University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 39(2), 385-410. 10.7822/omuefd.824316

Higher Education Law (2547 YOK). (1981, November 6). Official Gazette (No: 17506), 2021, https://resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/17506.pdf

Authors	Contact
Prof. Ramazan ERDEM He is an prof. of Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Healthcare Management.	Suleyman Demirel Unıversity Merkez/Isparta E-mail: raerdem@yahoo.com
Asst. Prof. Dilruba IZGUDEN She is dr. of Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Healthcare Management.	Suleyman Demirel Unıversity Merkez/Isparta E-mail: dizguden@hotmail.com
Res.asst. Sumeyye GUNGOR She is res.asst. of Faculty of Management, Department of Healthcare Management.	Artvin Coruh University Merkez/Artvin E-mail: sumeyye@artvin.edu.tr
Lecturer Rabia TATLIDIL She is a lecturer of Susuz Vocational School, Department of Healthcare Management.	Kafkas University Merkez/Kars E-mail: rabiafettahoglu95@gmail.com
Ph.D. Student Ayse Gulen ERTUMER She is a Ph.D. student at Suleyman Demirel University, Department of Healthcare Management.	Suleyman Demirel Unıversity Merkez/Isparta E-mail: ertumer95@gmail.com
Lecturer Zeynep KUH She is a lecturer of Uzunkopru Vocational School of Higher Education, Department of Management and Organization.	Trakya University Uzunkopru/Trakya E-mail: kuh.zeynep@gmail.com

Lecturer Elif OZER
She is a lecturer of Refahiye Bahar Yıldırım Vocational School, Department of Medical Documantation and Secretarial.

Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University
Refahiye/Erzincan

E-mail: elif.ozer@erzincan.edu.tr

Lecturer She is a lecturer of Izmir Kavram Vocational School, Department of Healthcare Management.Begum CEYLAN YORULMAZ

Izmir Kavram Vocational School
Merkez/Izmir

E-mail: begum.ceylan@kavram.edu.tr

Res.asst. Hilal DEMİRHAN KELES
She is a res.asst. of Hitit University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Healthcare Management.

Hitit University
Merkez/Corum

E-mail: hilaldemirhan@hitit.edu.tr

Lecturer Fatma UZUMCU
She is a lecturer of Akdeniz University Vocational School, Department of Medical Services and Techniques.

Akdeniz University
Merkez/Antalya

E-mail: fatmauzumcu@msn.com

Lecturer Ebru YILDIZ
She is a lecturer of Gokcebey Mithat Mehmet Canakcı Vocational School, Department of Healthcare Management.

Zonguldak Bulent Ecevit University
Gokcebey/Zonguldak

E-mail: ebru.yildiz@beun.edu.tr