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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Academic activism and its impact on individual-level mobilization, sources of learning, and the future of academia in Turkey

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Abstract

In January 2016, academics in Turkey distributed a peace petition calling for an end to hostilities and to restart negotiations with the Kurdish movement. The Turkish government responded by opening legal cases, jailing academics, and dismissing them from universities. In the state of emergency following the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the government's extended powers allowed them to fire thousands of civil servants from every branch of government, including thousands of academics. This increased the number of academics who organized to form and teach in academic collectives. The current study evaluates how politicization occurs in scholars removed from the university environment. Traditional approaches to collective action and politicization suggest that empowerment is an important catalyst in politicization and continuation of collective political engagement. With the social and political restrictions that decree law dismissals place on scholars, what is it that motivates them to politicize? The current study was conducted through semistructured interviews with nine academics who work in these collectives. Participants described their politicization in terms of previous practice, reaction to injustice,

and ideals of academia and academic freedom. They further evaluated current and prospective functions and possible barriers to academic collectives. Finally, although somewhat ambivalent, participants discussed feelings of efficacy, psychosocial support, and senses of solidarity and liberation in terms of being empowered. Their perspectives provide an opportunity to understand how and where academics engage in scholar activism for an independent and free academia in the context of consolidated political oppression.

KEYWORDS

collective action, empowerment, mobilization, scholar activism, Turkey

1 | INTRODUCTION

From a critical and liberation psychological perspective, the role of academics entails common knowledge production for the good of society and for the empowerment of progressive communities (Burton & Kagan, 2015). However, a harsh challenge to academics in enacting social justice has been set by the rise of populism and anti-intellectualism around the globe, of which Turkey's consolidated conservative regime has been one of the clear exemplifications of this contemporary challenge.

As in many other global contexts, academic independence and freedom have long been under attack in Turkey through the neoliberalization of universities and state control of agenda in science and education (Çamuroğlu Çiğ, 2018). However, since academics' declaration of the peace petition¹ in January 2016, which called on the government to repeal the curfews in Kurdish towns² and to restart the reconciliation process with Kurdish parties, the current Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government and its apparatuses have reacted more harshly against academic freedom and independence by threatening academics, opening legal cases against them, jailing them, and firing them from universities. Later, following the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the government put in place a state of emergency, allowing it to release decree laws, firing thousands of civil servants from every branch of government at a time. These decree laws have also meant that thousands of academics, from PhD students to those well established in their careers, have been dismissed from their positions, barred from working in any university in the country, and oftentimes prevented from leaving the country by having their passports rescinded (Amnesty International, 2017). Many opposing factions in Turkey have considered this academic purge as a follow up to the academic persecution that the government started in the beginning of 2016 against academics who signed the peace petition.

In response, a number of academics sought to continue their scholarly activities outside the university. One way they have done so is through Solidarity Academies³ and other academic collectives formed in cities across Turkey. These collectives mainly aim to function as a means not only for those academics dismissed from their positions to maintain their scholarly dignity—even as they cannot maintain their livelihood—but also as a catalyst for the politicization and organization of a new group of scholars, creating activism around learning, teaching, and acquiring knowledge practices in a way that could not be done in the more restrictive environment of Turkey's formal institutions. All together, these recent attempts of academics from Turkey resurge as a new movement of scholar activism, albeit with roots in past practices, against rising inequality and systematic deprivations, with a critical reflection on the role of the academic as a catalyst for social change.

Traditional approaches to collective action and politicization suggest that empowerment, or efficacy (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2005; Simon & Klandermans, 2001), is an important catalyst in politicization and continuation of collective political engagement. But with the social and political restrictions that decree law dismissal places on scholars, limiting or eliminating efficacy, what is it, in addition or in place of efficacy, that motivated them to mobilize, and how do they view the academic collectives in connection with this mobilization? The current study aims to utilize this theoretical framework to see how this type of politicization occurs in scholars removed from the university environment.

1.1 | Repression and collective action in academia: Contemporary global trends

As has been theorized as the “relationship between social production and biopower” by Hardt and Negri (2000, pp. 28–29) and experienced as the “hidden injuries” of academics (Gill, 2009), neoliberalization in universities has paved the way for the gradual loss of voices and rights in academia. On the one hand, as discussed previously by Derrida (2001) and Spivak (1999), the university as an institution has rarely had space for the multitude of voices from minority groups, even before its neoliberalization. With the rise of oppressive regimes, however, the already thin voice of the subaltern is totally erased from the university. On the other hand, academic staff is now seen as one of the apparent representatives of the precariat: job insecurity (i.e., “publish or perish” culture), lack of health and pension rights as well as threats to academic independence and freedom make academics vulnerable to governmental and state policies of totalitarian neoliberalism (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Faucher, 2014; Gill & Donaghue, 2016).

Parallel to the voicelessness and the inaction against social inequality and oppression at many societal layers, a realization of inequalities and oppression followed by attempts to mobilize to change the university from within as an institution has been rare (Çetinkaya, 2017; Giroux, 2015; Ivancheva, 2015). Still, contemporary approaches have involved the application of critical pedagogies into the curriculum, producing public academic knowledge and “slow science” initiatives (e.g., Mountz et al., 2015). Other reactions have involved traditional collective actions such as unionism, strikes, protests, and sit-ins (e.g., scholar activism in Mexico, Blackwell & McCaughan, 2015 and Wright, 2017; recent USS/UCU strikes in the United Kingdom, NovaraMedia, 2018).

Recently, more space has been devoted to alternative collective actions, which posit not a “change-within,” but a deconstruction of “neoliberal university” and reconstruction of academia, such as the “free university” movements and online academic collectives (Neary & Winn, 2017; Thompsett, 2017). These attempts signal that some academics have begun to refuse to accept what the university is becoming and many of them engage in creating alternative paths activism around critical learning, teaching, and acquiring knowledge practices.

Although there has been much research on mobilization and politicization in collective action research, fewer studies have focused on the types of in-group oriented action and solidarity acts (e.g., Stroebe, Postmes, & Roos, 2018) that have been seen with academic initiatives. Importantly, academic collective action has become a vital requirement for academics living under oppressive and conservative political regimes. Below, we connect contemporary trends in academic collective action to the ongoing academic initiatives and collective action in Turkey.

1.2 | Academic initiatives in Turkey

Academic initiatives working towards a peaceful society in Turkey date back to the 1950s with the statement of the Turkish Association of Peace Lovers (*Türk Barışseverler Cemiyeti*) against sending Turkish troops to Korea and have most recently been reflected in the declaration by the Turkish Medical Association (*Türk Tabipler Birliği*) against the Turkish military invasion of Afrin in January 2018 (Orman, 2005). These initiatives have generally been perceived as threats by Turkish governments and, hence, have been used as a pretext to repress academic independence and freedom by those in power.

For instance, after the September 1980 coup, Martial Law no. 1402, which allowed military personnel to take over all responsibilities of law enforcement officers in 1971, was broadened to authorize the dismissal of academics with “objectionable political profiles.” The Higher Education Council (*Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu*, YÖK), a governmental institution founded in 1981 as part of the September 12 coup, centralized the examination of all educational and academic activities and worked in tandem with military generals in imposing new curricula on universities. Some textbooks were declared harmful and destroyed. Seventy-one academics were removed from their positions, and many students were dismissed (Özen, 2002, cited in Başçı, 2017).

Similarly, with the introduction and rise of the AKP government, waves of regressive reforms in education, such as the reversal of the 8-year compulsory primary schooling system and the privatization of universities, accelerated the demolition of the education system and guaranteed the loss of academic independence and freedom (see Kandiyoti & Emanet, 2017). Hence, the repression against academic freedom and independence have been a long discussed societal and academic issue.

On the other hand, it would not be a mistake to say that the various trends of collective action in academia have oscillated against the “coups tradition” in Turkey. For instance, during the academic dismissals in the 1980s, other academics also “left their positions in solidarity with colleagues and in protest against the junta's intrusion into Turkey's intellectual and cultural institutions” (Başçı, 2017, p. 120). Furthermore, as a reaction to these repressions, academia in Turkey has also had a long history of collective action to create a common space for independent academia.

The first such independent academia initiative was the Scientific Research, Project, Consulting, and Organization Company (*Bilim Araştırma, Proje, Danışmanlık ve Organizasyon A.Ş.*, BILAR), established in 1985 as a collaborative attempt to conduct scientific research as well as politically driven cultural activities for the benefit of society during the increased academic oppression after the September 12 coup. Similarly, the Social History Research Foundation of Turkey (TÜSTAV), Social Research Foundation (SAV), and Research Institute Turkey can be listed among the collaborative initiatives, both online and offline, to construct an independent academia outside the neoliberal university.

1.3 | Contemporary trends and collective action dynamics in Turkey

The Turkish–Kurdish conflict has centred around the assimilationist policies of the Turkish state, which aimed to create a unified nation from the remnants of a multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic empire. In the last few decades, the conflict has resulted in the deaths of 50,000 people and up to 2 million displaced (see Uluğ & Cohrs, 2019). The conflict is understood in different ways from different political perspectives but is often construed as a “terrorism problem” (Başer, Akgönül, & Öztürk, 2017; Uluğ & Cohrs, 2016), meaning that in public discourse, not only is the Kurdish issue often considered taboo, it also allows for consideration of other perspectives to be written off as being in “support” of terrorism.

This helps explain why, following the initiative on the part of some academics to speak out about the human rights violations that occurred during the curfews in Kurdish cities at the end of 2015, known as the Peace Petition, academics were first targeted by the government and nationalist movements, then indicted with criminal charges of terrorist propaganda and dismissed from their universities. Later on, the attempted coup d'état on July 15, 2016, made it possible for the government to declare a state of emergency⁴ and to pass several decree laws through which academics and other public servants were massively purged from their institutions. By the time the state of emergency ended in July 2018, 6,081 academics (including 406 peace petitioners) had been purged via 12 decree laws (Kural, 2018). Moreover, as of March 2019, 666 academics have so far been indicted on the grounds of terrorist propaganda for signing the petition. Of those, 150 have concluded, with all defendants found guilty (Human Rights Foundation of Turkey's Academy, 2019). Many of the academics purged from the universities were either signatories of the Peace Petition or known for their oppositional position and activities.

The escalating repression against academic freedom has resulted in a new wave of academic independence action among academics in Turkey. It involves different groups of academics organizing public lectures and

workshops in the street and in spaces provided by different professional societies (though not within universities), lecturing their former students from universities, writing reports and books on social issues based on their academic scholarships, and seeking research funds for their groups. Their names generally signify either a deprivation, resistance, or solidarity theme, such as With NO-Campus Academics (*Kampüssüzler*), Street Academy (*Sokak Akademisi*), Solidarity Academies (*Dayanışma Akademileri*), Cihangir Atelier Scene (*Cihangir Atölye Sahnesi*) Conservatoire, and House of Culture (*Kültürhane*), among others.

These recent collective actions can be linked to an older tradition of grassroots movement of an “independent academia,” such as BİLAR and Özgür Üniversite (Free University).⁵ On the other hand, beyond the past traditions, the collectives of “independent academia” also stand as a unique example of decentralized but interrelated collective action initiations among academics in Turkey. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of this recent movement in terms of its dynamics of mobilization, its functions, as well as its processes of empowerment.

1.4 | Deprivation, disadvantages, and politicization of identity

Societal inequalities can play a triggering role in mobilizing collective action towards social change (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Both structural and incidental disadvantages that minority groups collectively (rather than individually) experience and appraise pave the motivational way for affective responses (anger, frustration, and resentment) based on perceived disadvantage and injustice (e.g., relative deprivation theory; for a recent distinction, see Grant, Abrams, Robertson, & Garay, 2015) as well as increasing (or sometimes decreasing) social identification with the minority group (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012).

While structural inequalities act upon existing social identities, incidental inequalities, such as the oppression of critical and leftist voices in the university, generally trigger new politicized identities (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). On the other hand, not all collective disadvantage results in collective action—an evaluation of existing resources, costs, and benefits that could influence both politicization of identities and collective efficacy beliefs—are at play (Stürmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2012).

As such, social identity (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985) is also a key component in understanding collective action. It is also important to remember that groups exist in system with asymmetrical power distribution (Acar & Uluğ, 2016; Ng, 1982). In acting against power imbalances, group members' social identities may politicize, hence becoming a collective identity that underlies group members' explicit motivations to engage in a power struggle (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Group members intentionally engage as a mindful and self-conscious collective in such a power struggle, acknowledging the wider societal context in which this struggle takes is orchestrated (Acar, 2018; see also Drury & Reicher, 2005).

1.5 | Continuing collective action through empowerment

A politicized identity still requires the intergroup context of collective action to help define and describe how individuals relate to one another. As well as showing the antecedents, experience, and immediate consequences of empowerment within episodes of collective action, recent studies also note examples of participants referring to a feeling of empowerment that endures after the immediate experience of the empowering event (Drury & Reicher, 1999; Stott & Drury, 1999).

Empowerment can be defined as a raised consciousness against inequality and oppression (Freire, 1970) and a social-psychological state of confidence in one's ability to challenge existing relations of domination (Drury & Reicher, 2005). If the feeling of empowerment endures beyond the collective action itself, it has the ability to affect participants' personal lives and motivate involvement in further collective action.

Also important to note is the change in understanding of what is considered effective collective action. The social cognitive tradition's view of efficacy is in line with antecedents to collective action. However, what is brought to the forefront through the social identity tradition is not only the feeling that an individual (or an individual in a collective) is effective, but that the emotional consequences of efficaciousness continue well beyond the initial protest, and that the relationship between identification, participation, and efficacy are not linear, but that each can continue to affect the others over time (Cocking & Drury, 2004; Drury & Reicher, 2005).

Although continued identification with the minority group, participation in collective action, and collective efficacy are important in determining empowerment, fieldwork in deprived communities also indicates that elimination of institutionalized unfairness, domination, and oppression are also required to create ground for empowerment (Sjöberg, Rambaree, & Jojo, 2015). With the social and political restrictions that decree law dismissals have placed on scholars, the motivations for their politicization and continued academic engagement through solidarity networks warrant further exploration.

2 | THE CURRENT STUDY

Considering the role of disadvantages and the importance of politicization of social identity for mobilization and continuation of collective action and maintenance of that identity through empowerment, we present a framework to understand the perspectives of academics engaging in scholar activism for an independent and free academia in the era of the neoliberal university and in the context of consolidated political oppression. We seek to understand what factors may motivate mobilization when other traditional factors (i.e., efficacy) are hard to attain, how the academic collectives function as a conduit for mobilization, and what outcomes the academic collectives have for dismissed academics. As such, the current study explores motivations for politicization as well as how empowerment can come about when engaging in collective action in a repressive context. Utilizing this framework, the current study focuses on how academics discuss the university as a place of learning, the centrality of academia in their lives, and upon being dismissed via decree laws or fired from their universities, how and why they continued to their academic activities outside of the university.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants were nine academics (two women, ages ranged from 31 to 63), ranging from PhD students to full professors, who were dismissed through decree law or fired from their universities due to pressure from the AKP government, and have since maintained active participation in some sort of academic collective. Though a large number of academics have been dismissed, a much smaller number of them have continued to engage actively in academic collectives—and even fewer of them willing to speak about their active engagement, especially with ongoing legal proceedings and arrests. As such, our data pool is very specific and thus limited. Interviews were continued until data was saturated, and no new themes were identified. Initial participants were reached through personal contacts; a snowball method was utilized to reach remaining participants. Participants were interviewed in Turkish, in person or via Skype.

Before starting the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participants were asked to reflect on their self-identification (e.g., “what does being an academic mean to you?”), how they view the university system and their role within that system (e.g., “how would you describe your experiences in academia?”), their dismissal, and their academic and social activities since their dismissal (e.g., “how would you describe your experiences with academic collectives outside of the university?”). Depending on participants' preferences, interviews were either tape recorded or the researcher would take notes and later confirm with the participant that notes were accurate. One participant preferred not to have his interview tape recorded, citing concerns of government surveillance.

3.2 | Analysis

Participant accounts were analysed based on qualitative content analysis to systematically describe the meaning of qualitative material (Schreier, 2012). With qualitative content analysis, the research questions guide analysis, allowing the researcher to systematically focus on selected aspects of the material. For the current research, three questions guided analysis: (a) With the social and political restrictions that decree law dismissal places on scholars, what motivates them to mobilize?, (b) How do these activities function as an alternative to the institutionalized university?, and (c) What is the role of empowerment in the mobilization process? These questions then became the basis of the coding frame (see Appendix for the full list of questions). After specifying the main categories, subcategories were inductively identified in relation to the main categories. Reliability of analysis was assessed through the standard approach of interrater reliability (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) and produced an AR score of 78% with the original analysis, an acceptable level of reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Main Category 1: What motivates scholars to mobilize?

Participants discussed many reasons for mobilization after their dismissal. This main category included four subcategories: (a) ideals of academic social change, (b) previous practice, (c) showing that they are “still here,” and (d) institutional problems and deprivations.

4.1.1 | Ideals of academic social change

Participants discussed their mobilization in terms of the need to produce and disseminate knowledge and to focus on critical thinking. One participant discussed the importance of creating a space wherein academics can pursue research in their chosen fields:

Therefore, I think it's important to carry out research on issues that are relevant to the general agenda of society...I especially attach importance to the development of young researchers themselves and to the creation of a space for academic co-production in which they can really exist. (P63)

Another participant also reflected on the importance of disseminating knowledge but through the perspective of creating social change: “I see being an academic as a profession interlinked to societal dissent. What we define as the most progressive ground of the society is of course theoretically a ground like academia and the academic is a part of it.” (P47)

4.1.2 | Previous practice

Every participant pointed to some element of previous practice that gave them a framework for mobilization. Though different for each participant, previous practice means, in this case, that participants were either part of a union, collective, or organization before they were dismissed from their academic positions.

I hadn't really been directly part of a praxis shaped toward alternative knowledge production...in which there were many academics... In terms of being part of an organization, I was in the Union of

Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), this was our regular organization but it can't be counted as an organization populated by academics. (P31)

While some of these positions were nonacademic, as the participant above described, they do indicate that these collective practices were something they relied on in structuring their current mobilization.

4.1.3 | Showing they are still “here”

Participants also discussed their decision to mobilize as a kind of reaction to the government's actions. They wanted to show that, even though they were no longer in the university, they were still “here,” still teaching, researching, and functioning as academics:

[Street] Academia was established very quickly; I mean, it was indeed a reflex, it was a reaction to the other side. The Architects Chamber (*Mimarlar Odası*) and Ankara Alumni Association (*Mülkiyeliler Birliği*) instantly opened their doors to everyone against those who said to us “you can't lecture;” the Education and Science Workers' Union (*Eğitim-Sen*) supported us as well. And in this period we said that we have already been doing this in the university in a closed setting, so let's be on the street in a similar way with a method of communication. But another motivation to this was the curfews during the state of emergency: “What do they mean that we can't go into the streets?” No, we can. (P50)

4.1.4 | Institutional problems and deprivations

Participants also discussed systemic issues within academia as their reason for mobilization. In addition to their dismissal, it was the structural and incidental disadvantages they experienced within the university and their desires to change them in the long run that pushed these academics to mobilize. The deprivations and disadvantages discussed by the participants ranged from the neoliberalization of universities, the pressure put on universities by the government, the Higher Education Council (YÖK), and the disappointment of realizing that academic freedom did not exist in the university's daily functions. One participant described the influence the state and the government have over the university institution and stated that he sees the government as seeking an “ideal” mould within which academics should fit in order to work in the university:

Every group or minister that came to power would come up with a draft about YÖK when they arrived...it was a time when I was really thinking a lot about the way these designs were biased, that education was being commoditized, commercialized. After that, especially after 2004–2005, especially after the AKP government [came to power], the commercialization and commodification we always talked about became serious and we became aware of the preparations for serious personnel reform. (P47)

Another participant shared his concern about the concept of academic freedom in the university:

As academics, we have not been able to change academic freedom because we are exposed to this ideological propaganda before we even become scholars, so then when we become academics we can't change right away, and therefore the things that are considered the red line in this country, issues such as different ethnic or religious identities, sexual orientations, and different world views, when we talk about those things as academics I have had a really difficult time. (P36)

Below, we see how the academics took those institutional problems and used them as a template to create an alternative.

4.2 | Main Category 2: An alternative to the institutionalized university

Participants discussed many issues related to how well their collectives function as an alternative to the institutionalized university. They did so through three subcategories: (a) the current functions of the collective (descriptive function), (b) the ideal/prospective functions of the collective (prescriptive function), and (c) the barriers preventing their functioning.

4.2.1 | Descriptive functions

Participants described their current cooperation in a number of ways. First and foremost, participants described the freedom that being away from the university afforded them on multiple fronts, including research and time with students: "With the SAs, we are taking students from institutionalized education and creating an alternative public space...a space that is more equal and promotes freedom." (P48).

Furthermore, participants with previous experience also emphasized their function as "building a network database" in terms of knowing each other and connecting colleagues with each other:

[Karaburun Science Congress⁶] has given us a lot, of course. First and foremost we have a very wide network. We have friends from all the universities. We know who works on what subject. When research is being conducted and someone asks "who can we talk to about this subject," we can help; we have a wonderful database. (P47)

4.2.2 | Prescriptive functions

Although participants described the current state of the collectives in practical terms, referring to a new energy, they also discussed what they wanted the collectives to become:

Indeed we have a chance to coexist with more people, more people who work in diverse fields. So this is not only for us but also for other people, people who aren't signatories [of the peace petition], people who aren't academics, students, the unemployed, however they define themselves. In the end, we are all in this together. A teacher being purged, us being purged, there's a lot of potential for change especially if we think about the leftist group that is being purged. It's done together but they can't be communized, it's not a very easy thing. (P31)

Some participants compared the capacity of their own collectives to meet their needs with other collectives. They spoke about this generally, in the ability of the collectives to remain critical, and function in solidarity with one another, but also in terms of specific comparisons. One participant compared the Izmir SA to the Kocaeli SA (KODA): "Until now it is only KODA among SAs that has acquired legal status. Some others are becoming associations, some are even trying to become cooperatives. They have such an identity. Would we do such a thing? I don't know." (P47)

Some participants wanted to see the collectives' function as a means to change the institutional university:

Unemployed academics can make a living in other ways, but if they can make a living through academic activities, this will not only open an academic space outside of the university, it has the potential to transform the existing university, and it is also very valuable for the people in the university. (P63)

Shortly, participants' focus on prescriptive functions varied from creating public-academic commons and individual academic gains to its potential of deconstructing the university as an institution. Below, participants discussed the reasons they feel the collectives have not been able to achieve their initial goals yet.

4.2.3 | Barriers

Some participants emphasized obstacles that prevent the collective from functioning as they believe they should. First and foremost, the collectives are generally made up of academics who have been dismissed and thus cannot earn a living through their academic endeavours. Accordingly, participants frequently referred to the practical problem of finance and of self-sustenance: "[this is important] in terms of their being able to sustain their own livelihoods and in terms of solidarity and in responding to the country's needs... people who have an alternative perspective are jobless now." (P63)

Additionally, participants discussed the pressure they experience from the government, which prevents their collective from taking off the way they want it to:

When we think of public space, it's not something that's easy to create. They investigate us, they want to send us to prison; the prosecutor has already put the SAs in the indictments. He even sees them as a danger. (P48)

In addition to these more practical problems, participants also described the ongoing structure and the resistant hierarchical mindset of the university institution, which plague the academics themselves: "We left the universities with a heavy burden on our shoulders... It is difficult to break down our hierarchical things, at least at the moment... May be this will come later." (P31)

Furthermore, participants referred to the importance of drawing students: "[the students] skip the SA classes, for example. They skip the classes more often. And rightfully so, because we don't give them grades or homework. They won't receive a diploma from me, so in order to motivate them, we said that we could prepare a book together." (P48). According to this participant, students are so used to a structure that provides external motivation through grading and homework that without that structure, many of them struggle to continue attending classes.

4.3 | Main Category 3: The role of empowerment in the mobilization process

Diverse components of empowerment were deduced from participants' responses to questions about feelings of empowerment directly as well as their discussion of efficacy, solidarity, and feelings of freedom. As such, we see that participants described empowerment based on four subcategories: (a) empowerment as an outcome of collective action, (b) self and collective efficacy, (c) psychosocial support and solidarity, and (d) feeling liberated.

4.3.1 | Empowerment (or lack thereof) as an outcome of collective action

When participants were asked about the ability of the collectives to empower them, answers were mixed. Although some felt being empowered through the collective, others stated that the collective itself did not provide a sense of empowerment. Those who did not feel empowered often referred back to the barriers against functioning:

This is not something providing feelings of empowerment or efficacy. It is not something constantly ongoing... the Aliğa workshop⁷ was like that but then somehow the decisions were not put into action. There are some intervening things, odd things happen as a result of resentments that I don't know and understand. When those intervene, I frankly don't feel efficacious or powerful... (P31)

Another participant described this lack of empowerment in terms of the general political context rather than the collective itself:

But I don't think there is much motivation in this matter from everyone, I mean, everyone is halfway to depression due to the country conditions. If we are going to do anything, we have to be more agile and actually do something, we have to think about how we are going to affect each other, how we are going to get each other on our feet, spiritually. (P50)

4.3.2 | Self and collective efficacy

Participants described their ability to “do something” within the collectives in terms of both individual-level and collective-level changes. Referring to the general meeting of SAs, one participant described her revelation on the collectives' motivation: “It hit me when I realized that something may appear from the [SAs], that a group of people is really motivated to do this. Oh yes, something can be really done, something can be built outside the [the university].” (P31)

Besides increased ability to focus on individual activity, participants also described the importance of individual-level changes rather than larger, societal changes that the collectives may bring about:

Micro-changes... I think there is no need for great expectations. If the academic who is lecturing can feel good for being able to lecture due to the SA, the social change would mean that people who see us there lecturing will think that our teaching-learning dynamics are beyond a faculty membership.... That would be more than enough. (P36)

4.3.3 | Psychosocial support and solidarity

Participants described both support from their communities as well as a new sense of solidarity that they experienced with other dismissed academics. One participant described how, at a time when he felt most alone, support from those around him and the networks in the collectives gave him a sense of worth that he did not expect to have:

In my hard times, I really liked the feeling that people take care of you. The Kurdish issue is taboo; it's highly possible that you are perceived as “terrorist,” so I felt isolated. Afterwards, it was great support for me to get invitations for the organization and establishment of the SAs and to be invited to their seminars. (P51)

Another participant focused on the relationship forged with other dismissed academics: “We have many friends who engage in collectivity or who always support us... [This]brought together people who know or don't know each other and became comrades.” (P47)

4.3.4 | Feeling liberated

Participants described the freedom that comes with being part of a collective, as opposed to working in the university. One participant described the goal of SAs as liberation for the academics who speak up for the voiceless:

...we are trying to be the voice of the voiceless, to provide a little support to those with problems. This is the main goal of the [Solidarity] Academy. Those who try to imprison us in one place, I mean, those who try to narrow the space we can take up... it's about opening up space for us, that's why it's so important. (P36)

Altogether, as scholar activists, our participants' discussions of the reasons, the functions and the benefits of the academic collectives reflect many concepts and dynamics discussed in theories of collective action. We next discuss these and point out unique elements of current scholar activism in Turkey.

5 | DISCUSSION

Contexts and times of escalating oppression may stand as a barometer of the strength and stamina of collective action for social change, including scholar activism for an equal, independent, and free academia. The current research focuses on the recent collective action initiatives of academics in Turkey and aimed to understand the reasons for academics' mobilization and academic collectivity, the functions of this scholar activism, and the role of empowerment in their mobilization process in a repressive context.

In terms of reasons for mobilization, participants discussed the importance of previous practice in their decision to continue their academic work through the collectives. Previous research in collective action (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001) has also pointed to the importance of previous practice as the best indicator of future action. Institutional problems and deprivations were also discussed and were composed mainly of incidental and structural disadvantages as well as social and political deprivations. Participants also mentioned that their collective action was a reaction to being removed from their academic positions. These reactions can also be understood as based in experiences of injustice and reflect politicization and action as both Simon and Klandermans (2001) and van Zomeren et al. (2008, 2012) have previously discussed.

In addition to previous practice and reaction to injustice, academics spoke about the importance of their ideal perspective of academia and academic freedom. Derrida (2002, pp. 204–209) considers “disseminating knowledge to the public” an unreachable academic utopia and yet was discussed as a reason for mobilization by multiple participants. The social identity tradition posits that so long as these ideals are held as central to academic identity, they will influence behaviour and mobilization. This perspective is also in line with work by Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Van Dijk (2009), who differentiate between power-oriented and value-oriented collective action. A value-oriented perspective can, in this case, pave the way for the more socially progressive goal of creating commons of knowledge rather than monopolizing science and knowledge at the institutional level.

In discussing the function of the collectives, participants focused on the way the collectives work in their current form, the way they wanted them to function, and the barriers preventing them from functioning as an alternative to the university. Participants felt the collectives offered them something universities could not—a freer space where they could conduct research they were interested in, without the administrative duties the university asks of them, as well as a network of like-minded academics they could work with.

Despite these positives, participants felt that the collectives could better represent the ideals they described above. Participants wanted to reach more people, including the public at large, in a way the university setting did not traditionally allow. In order to do so, they felt the collectives had to address both concrete and abstract issues that were preventing them from reaching their ideological goals. Participants first and foremost reminded us that if they wanted to give their full attention and energy to the collectives, they would have to be able to make a living doing so. They additionally discussed the normative behaviour of the university setting, including and especially the hierarchical nature of academia. Without ridding themselves of this structure, participants felt that they would not be able to achieve their ideological goals for the collectives.

On an individual level, however, participants felt that the outcomes of the collectives were generally positive. Though participants were ambivalent when asked directly about empowerment, they discussed positive outcomes of individual and collective efficacy, psychosocial support, solidarity with different academics, and a general sense of liberation that they gained from leaving the university. Sense of solidarity and support are in line with previous research of collective action in more collectivistic contexts (van Zomeren, Susilani, & Berend, 2016), where contact with similar others and seeking shelter in social relationships protected against depression and positively influenced group identification in relation to collective action.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research would benefit from a more representative sample of academics at different academic collectives. As the research was shared with personal contacts and continued with a snowball sample, we do not have as many female participants as we would have liked. As well, at the time of data collection some of our potential participants were going through legal proceedings and expressed their lack of time or energy to participate in our study.

Future research would benefit from continued work in contexts of political repression. Bearing in mind the importance of efficacy in traditional collective action research, but the limited space it has in contexts of repression, would similar findings occur in other contexts? Can feelings of liberation and solidarity act as collective efficacy in such contexts? If so, to what degree? Doing so provides more feedback as to how existing models of collective action may function in such contexts. Stürmer and Simon's (2004) model of collective action, for example, takes into consideration costs of collective action, but does not include factors such as material costs, the way that academics in the current research mentioned. Relatedly, it would be important to talk to academics who were dismissed and did not organize. What barriers, if any, prevented mobilization? What could academic collectives do to better reach out to unorganized academics?

Another important point is understanding the goals of collective action. That is, in creating collectives, are these academics working towards large-scale societal-level change, or are they trying to maintain their own livelihoods and identities along with "micro" scale social change? How does the definition of collective action change in such contexts, and what does it mean when the primary need for the continuity of collective action is a maintenance of livelihood, rather than a large-scale change?

Finally, most collective action models highlight the importance of asymmetrical power dynamics, and therefore conceive of mobilization as getting organized and mobilized to take power. However, more contemporary critical social theories underline the importance of transforming power relations *while* taking power, that is, changing the power dynamics once for all, for good (Hardt & Negri, 2017, pp. 63–76). Future research could thus focus on such perceptions of power dynamics in new mobilizations to better account for the role of politicization of identities and motivations to sustain future collectivity.

As we have seen recently through collective action in other contexts, the gradual devaluation of academia has occurred not just in Turkey, but globally. As such, implications for academic mobilization are far-reaching. Other recent work (e.g., van Zomeren & Louis, 2017) have stressed the importance of cultural dynamics in fully understanding how mobilization occurs and how it can continue. The Turkish context has shown us that while empowerment and efficacy are relevant, they are not the central factors in collective engagement. Indeed, Turkey's ongoing political climate have been pointed to not only in the current paper, but in previous work as well, when discussing the ability of activists to maintain collective action (Uluğ & Acar, 2017). It seems clear, therefore, that other factors, such as academic identity and the prescriptive attitudes and behaviours of that identity, play a much more important role than expected.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/05/turkey-academics-trial-signing-petition>.
- ² See Amnesty International's report for an overview of the curfews and their violent consequences: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/12/turkey-curfews-and-crackdown-force-hundreds-of-thousands-of-kurds-from-their-homes/>.
- ³ <https://www.dayanismaakademileri.org/>.
- ⁴ The state of emergency was in place until July 18, 2018, 2 years after it was put in place, though little has effectively changed (<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/19/turkey-lifts-state-of-emergency-but-nothing-much-has-changed-analysts.html>).
- ⁵ See www.hafizakaydi.org/5subat/bilar/hikaye for the history of BİLAR and <http://ozguruniversite.org/> for Free University.
- ⁶ Critical scientific congress with leftist orientations that has been organized every year since 2006 (<http://www.kongrekaraburun.org/>).
- ⁷ The general meeting of SAs in 2017.

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APPENDIX A.

Academic career

Could you tell us about your academic experience?

- How long did you work at the university?
- Can you tell us about your leave/forced leave from the university?

Academic identification

What does being an academic mean to you?

- What does being an academic consist of?
- What are your aims as an academic?

When you think about all of your identities, where would you rank "being an academic"?

Political views

Do you consider yourself close to any particular political ideology? How does your political ideology reflect on your life as an academic?

Solidarity academies

How did you first get involved in the Solidarity Academies?

How would you compare them to your time in the university?

- How do you feel about the environment at the SA compared to in your university? What are the aims of the SA?

University environment

How has the environment in the university changed over the last few years?

Empowerment

When you think about your goals as an academic how does the university compare to the SA as a space where you could reach your goals?

- What does the university provide vs. what does the SA provide for you to reach your goals?

How would you describe your feelings of empowerment and feelings of efficacy in the university? In the SA?

How do you think you might create social change while in the SA?