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Is Going to Psychotherapy A Sign of Weakness? an Examination of the Perception of Psychological Support in Turkey and Around the World

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ABSTRACT: This article examines whether seeking psychotherapy is perceived as a sign of "weakness" in society and aims to reveal the social, cultural, and economic dynamics behind this perception using examples from both Turkey and the world. The analysis examines how stigma surrounding the search for psychological support, gender roles, notions of privacy, religious orientations, and economic barriers affect individuals' help-seeking behaviours. The prevailing reservations about psychological support in Turkey are linked to cultural codes, particularly among men, based on suppressing emotions, the expectation of "self-sufficiency," and the understanding of solidarity within the family. Globally, while various public policies have been developed to combat stigma in developed countries, traditional healing methods are still at the forefront in developing countries. The article also includes current research on the scientific effectiveness of psychotherapy, arguing that seeking support is not a sign of weakness but rather an indicator of resilience and self-awareness. Finally, recommendations are made for combating stigma, such as media campaigns, educational policies, and the expansion of public health services.

KEYWORDS: Psychotherapy, perception of weakness, social stigma, mental health, Turkey, help-seeking behaviour

1. INTRODUCTİON

In the modern world, stress factors faced by individuals, the increasing complexity of social relationships, economic uncertainties, rapid technological changes, and mass traumas such as pandemics have made protecting psychological health more important than ever. However, the need for psychological support, and particularly the behaviour of seeking psychotherapy, has not always been a socially understood and supported attitude. In fact, seeking help has often been equated with meanings such as being unable to cope on one's own, not being strong enough, or losing control; consequently, the behaviour of turning to psychotherapy has been coded as a "sign of weakness." This incorrect but widespread social perception delays individuals' access to mental health services and causes them to avoid seeking the support they need due to fear of stigma (Corrigan, 2004).

This situation is even more striking in Turkey. The collectivist cultural structure, family-oriented value systems, the prioritisation of privacy, and the rigidity of social roles often present the search for psychological support as a "reprehensible situation". An individual seeking psychological help may be labelled as "mentally ill," "weak-willed," or "lacking resilience." Especially for men, going to psychotherapy is considered "unmanly"; suppressing emotional problems is encouraged, and resilience is defined solely by physical or economic criteria (Eskin, 2013).

However, contemporary psychology and psychiatry literature demonstrates that psychotherapy is an effective method not only for individuals with pathologies but also for improving quality of life, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and deepening self-awareness (Wampold, 2015). In this context, this article will address the question "Is going to psychotherapy a sign of weakness?" not merely as an individual judgement but as a social and cultural structural issue; it will analyse how the perception of psychological support is shaped in different socio-cultural contexts.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section will examine in detail the definition and scope of the concept of psychotherapy, as well as what the notion of "weakness" signifies at the psychological, cultural, and social levels.

2.1. What is Psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy is a structured and scientifically based process of assistance conducted by a specialist to address problems arising in an individual's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines psychotherapy as a

professional support process carried out using various techniques and approaches to improve an individual's quality of life, enhance their functioning, and resolve mental health issues (APA, 2023). Psychotherapy can be applied not only in the treatment of clinical disorders but also in many different areas such as personal development, post-traumatic adjustment, relational conflicts, and identity search.

Seeking psychotherapy means accepting the difficulties one is experiencing rather than denying them and taking an active role in finding a solution. Therefore, turning to psychotherapy should be seen as a sign of awareness, courage, and the will to heal, rather than a sign of weakness (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). Unfortunately, however, many misconceptions and myths about psychotherapy still circulate in society at large. Misconceptions such as "only mentally ill people go to psychotherapy," "psychologists just listen," and "therapy is a waste of time and money" can prevent individuals from seeking professional help.At this point, changing societal perceptions of psychotherapy requires not only increasing the level of knowledge but also transforming social norms regarding psychological health. Social acceptance and media representations can play a normalising role in seeking psychological support.

2.2. The Concept of "Weakness"

The concept of "weakness" is a highly relative concept that varies according to cultural and historical contexts. In the context of individual psychology, weakness is often associated with helplessness, loss of control, or emotional fragility; at the societal level, it is more often evaluated in terms of non-conformity to normative expectations, lack of resilience, or stepping outside of societal roles. Particularly in patriarchal systems, weakness is positioned as a trait that conflicts with masculinity, and emotional expression is suppressed (Mahalik et al., 2003).

In this context, seeking psychotherapy is reduced to meanings such as "being in need of help" or "being unable to solve one's own problems," which calls into question the individual's place in the hierarchy of social values. For example, the saying, "A strong person solves their own problems, they don't tell others," is still very common in Turkey. Underlying this saying is both an illusion of individual control and the devaluation of emotional needs. Therefore, individuals seeking psychological support have to struggle not only with their own internal difficulties but also with external social labelling.

The perception of weakness is not limited to judgements from the individual's environment; it can also be internalised within the individual's inner world. Internalised stigma is a powerful factor that directly affects an individual's help-seeking behaviour. Vogel et al. (2006) found that individuals who develop thoughts such as "I am weak," "I am incompetent," and "I cannot cope" significantly reduce their likelihood of starting therapy. At this point, redefining the perception of weakness is of great importance: True strength lies not in suppressing problems but in recognising them and taking steps towards a solution.

3. PERCEPTİONS AND BARRİERS İN TURKEY

Perceptions of psychotherapy are closely linked not only to individual preferences but also to the cultural structure, value system, economic conditions, and accessibility of institutions within the society in question. In Turkey specifically, widespread prejudices regarding psychological support services, fear of stigmatisation, economic barriers, and regional inequalities significantly shape individuals' help-seeking behaviour. This section will examine in detail the social, cultural, and economic factors affecting access to psychotherapy in Turkey.

3.1. Social and Cultural Factors

One of the most fundamental barriers to psychotherapy in Turkey is the labelling of needing psychological support as "shameful" or "abnormal." This is particularly evident in family structures where collective living practices prevail. The need for psychological support is questioned not only by the individual but also by their family and close circle, and is often seen as a source of shame (Yıldız, 2019).

Culturally, it is often frowned upon for individuals to express their feelings openly. Feelings should be suppressed, problems should be solved "within the home" and not shared outside. This understanding leads individuals to perceive seeking psychological support as both unnecessary and a sign of weakness. The question "Am I crazy?", which is still common in Turkey, demonstrates how misguided perceptions of psychotherapy are. Someone seeking psychological support is either seen as mentally ill or labelled as someone who cannot stand on their own two feet. This greatly suppresses the behaviour of seeking help (Topkaya, 2015).

Furthermore, religious and spiritual beliefs are also factors that influence this perception. Some individuals attempt to explain their psychological problems through belief systems such as "fate," "trial," "sin," or "demonic influence" and view professional help as unnecessary or inadequate in this context (Güleç, 2017). Of course, this situation does not apply to all individuals with religious beliefs; however, some religious communities or traditional circles may develop an exclusionary attitude by associating modern psychology with Western values.

Media representations also significantly shape social perceptions. Particularly in television series, films, or news reports, psychologists are presented either as mere listeners or as very marginal figures; therapy is portrayed either as a "luxury" pursuit or

as a "last resort." Such representations cause society to develop unrealistic expectations of therapy or to harbour distrust towards psychotherapy (Demirtaş-Madran, 2020).

3.2. Financial and Institutional Barriers

One of the biggest barriers to accessing psychotherapy in Turkey is the economic inaccessibility of the service. The number of psychologists and psychiatrists working in state hospitals or universities is quite insufficient. Specialists working in these institutions are often forced to see a large number of clients in a short period of time, which negatively affects the quality of the psychotherapy process. In some public institutions, the focus is solely on medication, with no time or resources allocated for psychotherapeutic interventions (Aydın & Gençdoğan, 2017).

In the private sector, the cost of a session can be prohibitively high and difficult to access for individuals living on the minimum wage or working without insurance. Moreover, psychotherapy is not a process that can be completed in a few sessions; it is often a months-long therapeutic relationship that requires regular continuity. Therefore, starting and continuing therapy represents a significant financial burden, particularly for low-income individuals.

Furthermore, the institutional fragmentation in the provision of mental health services in Turkey is noteworthy. Psychological support services are virtually non-existent in primary healthcare settings. Most doctors working in family health centres have limited knowledge about mental health and are unable to provide adequate referral for psychotherapy (Yıldırım & Özcan, 2021). On the other hand, private psychological counselling centres are generally concentrated in large cities; finding a specialist and providing transportation pose serious problems for individuals living in rural areas and small settlements.

This situation has become a public issue affecting not only the individual but also the mental health of the entire community. Mental health is not only an individual but also a social responsibility. In this context, it is crucial that state policies aim to establish a more accessible, affordable, and widespread psychological support system.

3.3. Gender and Regional Differences

In Turkey, the behaviour of seeking psychotherapy also varies within the framework of gender roles. Although women are more willing and open to seeking psychological help than men, the obstacles they face are not insignificant. Particularly in traditional family structures, women seeking psychological support may be perceived as "bringing shame upon the family," "airing dirty laundry in public," or "overstepping their bounds" (Eskin, 2013). A woman's depression or anxiety is often explained with superficial statements such as "hormonal", "exaggerated" or "desire for attention", and the mental health issues women experience are not taken seriously.

For men, the situation is much more complex. They are expected to be socially "strong," "unshakeable," and "in control of their emotions." This makes it difficult for men to express their internal conflicts and prevents them from seeking help. For men, going to psychotherapy can often be perceived as "weakness," "inability to cope," or even "loss of masculinity." This situation is indicative of a serious mental health problem at both the individual and societal levels (Mahalik et al., 2003).

There are also significant regional differences in the behaviour of seeking psychological support. While the rate of seeking therapy is higher in large cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, this rate is quite low in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions due to both cultural stigma and inadequate services. For individuals living in rural areas, psychotherapy is still perceived as an "urban luxury" ; people seeking psychological help in these areas may be labelled as "crazy", "problematic", or "disreputable" (Topkaya, 2015).

All these inequalities highlight the need for mental health services in Turkey to become both more accessible and more equitable. The right to psychological support should not vary according to geography, gender, or income level. Otherwise, mental health ceases to be a social right and becomes a privileged service.

4. OBSERVATİONS WORLDWİDE

Perceptions of psychotherapy are not unique to Turkey. Globally, there are social, cultural, economic, and political factors that influence the behaviour of seeking psychological help. These factors vary according to countries' levels of development, the structure of their health systems, and their social values. This section will compare perceptions of psychotherapy, levels of stigma, and structural barriers in developed countries with those in developing and middle-income countries.

4.1. Developed Countries and Stigma

Access to psychotherapy is more widespread in developed countries than in Turkey, and the level of awareness regarding mental health is higher. Particularly in regions such as Western European countries, North America, and Scandinavia, psychotherapy is viewed both as a tool for personal development and as a protective measure for mental health. For example, in countries such as Canada and Germany, state-supported mental health services are widely available, and individuals can easily benefit from these services (OECD, 2023).

However, even though access is easy in developed countries, the stigma surrounding seeking psychological support has not been completely eliminated. Particularly among men and certain ethnic minorities, the perception that "asking for help is a sign of weakness" is still widespread (Vogel et al., 2007). For example, a study conducted in the United States found that men viewed seeking therapy more negatively than women and that asking for help was seen as "unmanly" behaviour (Mahalik et al., 2003).

In the United Kingdom, the "Talking Therapies" programmes offered under the National Health Service (NHS) aim to provide rapid access, particularly for depression and anxiety disorders. However, access to services remains problematic for some groups. , the rate of seeking psychotherapy is particularly low among immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, and black communities; the main reasons for this are cultural exclusion, experiences of discrimination, and insecurity (Kapadia et al., 2021).

In Scandinavian countries, social stigma has been largely reduced. In countries such as Sweden and Norway, receiving psychological support is considered part of quality of life, and protecting individuals' mental health has become a priority of state policy (OECD, 2023). In these countries, therapy services for all age groups, from children to the elderly, have been expanded and made free or low-cost.

In summary, although the perception of therapy is more positive in developed countries, variables such as gender, ethnic identity and socio-economic status continue to be decisive in seeking help.

4.2. Developing and Middle-Income Countries

In developing and middle-income countries, perceptions of psychotherapy are generally more complex due to limited resources, low mental health literacy, and strong cultural norms. In regions such as Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, mental health issues are often attributed to biological or spiritual causes, leading to the development of a societal attitude that questions the necessity of psychological intervention (WHO, 2022).

For example, in India, common mental health issues such as depression or anxiety are often seen as a sign of social weakness or divine punishment. The family structure is strong, and personal problems are usually attempted to be resolved within the family. Seeking psychotherapy may be perceived as the individual bringing shame upon their family, "not being strong enough" or "excluding their family" (Lauber & Rössler, 2007).

Similarly, seeking psychological help is still limited in Latin American countries. However, access to therapeutic services has begun to increase in recent years thanks to national mental health programmes implemented in some countries, such as Chile, Colombia and Argentina (PAHO, 2021). The example of Argentina is particularly noteworthy: the country has one of the highest numbers of psychotherapists per capita in the world. This, combined with the historical influence of psychoanalysis, has contributed to the formation of a positive image of therapy in society.

In middle-income countries, psychotherapy is often seen as a "rich man's game" or a "white-collar luxury." In countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, access to mental health services is limited to city centres; in rural areas, access to these services is almost impossible (Patel et al., 2018). Furthermore, individuals seeking psychotherapy are often seen as "crazy" or "potentially harmful to society," which increases the fear of stigmatisation.

A similar structure exists in middle-income countries such as Turkey. Therapeutic services are concentrated in large cities; in small towns and rural areas, there is a noticeable lack of both specialists and institutional structures. In addition, public resources allocated to mental health services are generally insufficient in both developing and middle-income countries. According to the World Health Organisation's 2022 report, only 1% of the health budget in low- and middle-income countries is allocated to mental health (WHO, 2022).

In this context, one of the greatest needs in developing countries is policies aimed at raising awareness about mental health, combating social stigma, and expanding therapy services.

5. WEAKNESS OR RESİLİENCE?

Although seeking psychotherapy is sometimes viewed as a sign of "weakness" in society, modern psychology has shown that this perception is unfounded. Seeking therapy should be regarded as an effort to understand oneself, demonstrate the will to heal, and increase psychological resilience (Vogel et al., 2007). This section will examine the impact of psychotherapy on individual empowerment and how societal perceptions are shaped, based on scientific evidence.

5.1. Scientific Findings on the Effectiveness of Psychotherapy

Numerous meta-analyses show that psychotherapy is effective, particularly for disorders such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and OCD (Cuijpers et al., 2016). Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), in particular, strengthens both the individual's mental state and coping skills by changing dysfunctional thought patterns (APA, 2017).

In addition, psychodynamic and interpersonal therapies also contribute to long-term internal transformations (Shedler, 2010). It has been shown that individuals who continue therapy develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and communication skills; these developments also increase psychological resilience (Norcross & Lambert, 2019).

Moreover, therapy benefits not only the individual but also society. Investing in mental health early on increases societal resilience by reducing labour force loss and healthcare expenditures (Chisholm et al., 2016). Therefore, seeking therapy is not a sign of "weakness"; on the contrary, it is an indicator of empowerment at both the personal and societal levels.

5.2. The Psychological Origins of the Perception of Weakness: The Activation Model

Negative judgements about seeking help in society often stem from automatic mental patterns. The activation model suggests that such patterns are triggered in certain situations and guide an individual's behaviour (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

In particular, the perception that "asking for help is a sign of weakness" is intertwined with gender norms. Masculine roles glorify emotional suppression and solving problems alone, while seeking therapy is perceived as behaviour that conflicts with these norms (Mahalik et al., 2003). Such labelling is more pronounced among young people, and the need for social acceptance can suppress help-seeking behaviour (Rickwood et al., 2005).

However, the activation model also suggests that these patterns are changeable. Media, social campaigns, and positive role models can transform societal schemas by emphasising that seeking help is a sign of strength. Indeed, in some countries, celebrities sharing their therapy experiences has significantly contributed to normalising this perception (Gorczynski et al., 2019).

Ultimately, seeking psychotherapy is not merely an individual step but also an action that contributes to changing societal values. The therapeutic process enables individuals to discover their inner resilience and adopt a conscious stance against social stigmas.

6. BARRİER-BREAKİNG POLİCİES AND PRACTİCES

Challenges in accessing psychological support cannot be overcome through individual efforts alone; effective solutions require comprehensive public policies and institutional collaborations. Coordinated efforts by governments, health systems, and civil society actors both reduce stigma and make mental health services more accessible (WHO, 2022). This section will discuss how these barriers are being reduced in the context of various country practices.

6.1. The Transformative Power of Mental Health Policies

Many developed and developing countries have made psychological support more accessible by developing national mental health strategies. For example, Canada's national mental health plan focuses on early intervention and combating stigma (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). The "Time to Change" campaign in the United Kingdom has reduced social prejudices and increased help-seeking behaviour (Evans-Lacko et al., 2014).

In Turkey, however, services are still largely hospital-based, and there are difficulties in accessing them (Ministry of Health, 2022). However, in recent years, psychosocial support units integrated into family health centres and digital application systems have emerged as positive steps in this area.

6.2. Social Initiatives Aimed at Reducing Stigma

Combating social stigma is possible not only through legislation but also through awareness-raising campaigns. The "Headspace" project in Australia has increased the rate of seeking help by making mental health services accessible to young people (Rickwood et al., 2019). Norway's mobile counselling project "Oppsøk" for rural areas has strengthened the perception of seeking help among young people (Helsedirektoratet, 2021).

Although initiatives such as "RUSİHAK" and some university projects in Turkey strive to raise awareness through social media and workshops, these efforts have not yet achieved a widespread and sustainable structure at the national level.

6.3. Innovative Models to Increase Accessibility

Among the models that facilitate access to psychotherapy, online therapy, community-based centres, and stepped care systems stand out. Digital therapies, which became widespread with the pandemic, have gained popularity thanks to anonymity and easy access, and have been included in insurance coverage with state support in some countries (Wind et al., 2020).

The "stepped care" model recommended by the WHO provides phased support according to need, ensuring both the effective use of resources and timely intervention for individuals (WHO, 2019). Although systems similar to this model are implemented in some private institutions and universities in Turkey, a widespread and regulated system has not yet been established at the national level.

7. RECOMMENDATİONS

The issue of social perception and access to psychotherapy cannot be resolved solely through individual awareness; this multi-layered structure can only be transformed through comprehensive strategies encompassing education, policy, media, and the healthcare system. In this context, the topics suggested below serve as guidelines both for Turkey and, more generally, for developing countries with similar structures.

7.1. Initiating Mental Health Education at an Early Age

At the root of social stigma lies the belief, taught from childhood, that "you must be strong" and that "emotional distress is a sign of weakness." Therefore, a comprehensive **mental health education curriculum** covering topics such as emotional awareness, empathy, seeking help, and psychological resilience should be established from primary school onwards. Programmes of this type, implemented in countries such as Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands, enhance not only students' academic achievement but also their mental well-being (Weare & Nind, 2011).

This education should also include teachers and families; thus, the ecosystem surrounding the child should transform into a structure that encourages seeking help.

7.2. Transforming Stereotypes in the Media

In series, films, and news content, psychological disorders or therapy are often associated with "major traumas" or "insanity," making this field seem extraordinary and frightening to society. However, psychotherapy is a support area that can be used not only by individuals with clinical diagnoses but also by anyone who wants to improve their quality of life.

At this point, media policies, public service announcements, and the presence of consulting psychologists in the production processes of series and films should be encouraged. For example, in the UK, mental health representation in some series developed in collaboration with the BBC is reviewed by experts and integrated into the scripts (Pirkis et al., 2006).

In Turkey, the positive representation of mental health content can be ensured through the control mechanisms jointly implemented by RTÜK and the relevant ministries.

7.3. Prioritising Mental Health within the Healthcare System

In Turkey, psychological support is still positioned as a secondary and often postponed health service. However, establishing psychological support units within primary health services and assigning **psychological counsellors, psychologists, and social service specialists** to these units is a fundamental need. This would allow individuals to access therapy within their daily lives without the pressure of having to go to a hospital or psychiatric clinic.

Furthermore, the more effective inclusion of psychotherapy services in the public insurance system (SGK) will increase the accessibility of private services. In countries such as Germany, psychotherapy fees are covered by social security, and individuals can receive help without worrying about the cost (BMA, 2020).

7.4. Removing Gender-Based Barriers

Social norms of masculinity are behind men's reluctance to seek help. Stereotypes such as "men don't cry" and "men must be strong" make it difficult for men to express themselves and seek psychological support (Mahalik et al., 2003).

Therefore, gender-based campaigns should be conducted regarding access to therapy, emphasising that expressing emotions is not a sign of "weakness" but rather a sign of **psychological maturity**. Furthermore, social support can be increased by creating counselling models and group therapies specifically for men.

8. CONCLUSİON

The perception of seeking psychological support as a sign of "weakness" in society is based on a widespread but unquestioned belief system that seriously limits individuals' access to mental health services. In fact, seeking mental health support is an indicator of individual resilience and insight. This study examines how perceptions of psychotherapy are shaped at individual, cultural, and structural levels, particularly in the Turkish context and in comparison with global trends.

Conceptually, the notion of "weakness" must be reinterpreted in the context of psychotherapy. Strength is not only about suppressing problems but also about recognising them, accepting them, and taking steps towards change. In this context, the therapeutic process is a journey of self-discovery and increasing psychological resilience. Seeking psychological support is a scientific and ethical way for individuals to maintain their capacity for adaptation and well-being in the increasingly complex living conditions of the modern age .

In Turkey, many factors such as social and cultural codes, economic inequalities, social gender norms and regional differences ensure the persistence of this perception. Therefore, there is a need not only for individual-based interventions but also for collective interventions that will transform society. Recommendations such as reforms in the education system, restructuring representations of mental health in the media, making public policies inclusive of psychological services, and spreading awareness campaigns will be effective in this transformation process.

In developed countries, it has been observed that stigmatisation has decreased over time, psychotherapy has become normalised, and mental health is accepted as an indispensable part of quality of life. A similar transformation is possible in Turkey; however, this requires social awareness, institutional support, and the widespread adoption of scientifically based practices.

In conclusion, seeking psychotherapy is not a sign of "weakness" but rather the courage to take responsibility for one's own life. Receiving psychological support is an important step not only for individuals to overcome their problems but also to realise their

potential and live a more holistic life. As a society, achieving this understanding will strengthen not only individuals but also public health.

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