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Individuals with mental retardation from the perspective of Turkish people

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This descriptive study examined the attitude of Turkish people towards the mentally retarded. The working group was composed of 329 male and female staff in various places of employment in Eskişehir provincial center, 87 non-working women living in Eskişehir provincial center and 49 non-working women living in Muğla provincial center. Research data were collected with the help of a survey which was developed by the researcher; it is composed of demographic questions and questions that aimed to identify attitudes towards the mentally retarded. During the development of survey questions, it was intended to present the extent of accurate beliefs held by Turkish people about the mentally retarded and their perceptions towards them. Results show that lack of knowledge and negative perceptions about retarded individuals that can be traced back to the historical process related to disability concept are still in effect today for the Turkish society.

Key words: Individuals with mental retardation, disability, social perspective, marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

Turkish Linguistic Society Modern Turkish Dictionary defines the word 'other' as the "the one marginalized in the current culture". The same dictionary defines the word culture as "the entirety of all material and spiritual/moral values generated during the social development process and the tools - the measures of human dominance over natural and social environment- that are used to create these values and to transmit them to future generations". Although material and spiritual/moral values defined as culture have been generated with the existence of each individual in society and their direct or indirect contributions, one segment of society may "marginalize" the other segment and regard them as outsiders to this "culture". Marginalization is the power

that belongs to the dominant group that shapes the laws and practices with their views and their stamina since the dominant group makes decisions about the characteristics of the "marginal" (Ballard, 2013). "I/we" concept is accepted as fundamental in marginalization and clichés and judgments are created about the individuals or groups "that are different from me or us" (Nahya, 2011). Disabled individuals are one of the marginalized groups in the historical process as a result of clichés and judgments about them generated in all societies.

The disabled were first regarded as a "threat" in history then as a "burden" for the society (Burcu, 2006). Babies who were born with disabilities were considered as signs of bad luck or omens that point to the anger of gods and

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therefore were subjected to practices such as abandonment in remote and deserted areas and in rivers/seas or burial (Stiker, 1999). It was believed in Medieval Ages that bodies of the mentally retarded had been inhabited by the devil which could be exorcised with religious rituals. The disabled had been misunderstood, mistreated, subjected to malpractices or left to death until the 16th century (Akçamete, 2010). Disabled individuals have had to struggle against prejudices and protect their right to life in all societies and at all times.

The most recent attitude towards the disabled in the historical process focuses on "pity/mercy". With the contribution of mass media, the disabled are perceived as "misshapen, pitied, unable to produce or generate and in need of protection" (Burcu, 2006). This perception results in accepting the disabled as individuals who lack the ability to make their own choices, who need to live as dependants of protective individuals or institutions and who are not equal to the others. United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) invites the countries to act together against social barriers that impede equal participation of the disabled to social life. This convention accepts the disabled as independent individuals who deserve respect and have a right to live in line with their own choices rather than regarding them as individuals who lack the ability to make decisions and holds the countries responsible from making required arrangements in terms of the rights of the disabled and equal opportunities. Turkey, one of the first countries that signed the convention, continues to make the required adjustments to improve the rights and living conditions of the disabled. However, studies show that disability in the Turkish society is still regarded as helplessness and perceived by feelings of pity (Şenyurt-Akdağ et al., 2011) and that approaches of mercy and protection are valid to a large extent. For instance, 39.4% of 500 individuals who were asked "What do you think about the disabled in the society?" answered that "the disabled are pitiable" (Burcu, 2011). In another study, 24.2% of the participants stated that the term disabled was associated with "individuals who needed help" and 22.9% believed that the disabled were a burden to their families (ÖZİDA, How Society Perceives the Disabilities Project, 2009).

One of the groups among the disabled who are disadvantaged and more marginalized compared to other disabled groups is the mentally retarded individuals (Bigby, 2012). Mental disability which is regarded as more of a social and cultural stigma rather than an objective situation is interpreted as a derogation that shows the individual does not deserve to live (Taylor and Bogdan, 1989). In addition to difficulties they face in accessing services in education, health, transportation and social support, the mentally retarded are subjected to unfavorable circumstances such as discrimination and face unemployment and poverty (Nicholson and Cooper, 2013). Researchers emphasize that the negative conse-

quences the mentally retarded are facing increase and quality of their life decreases proportionally to the extent of mental retardation (Bigby, 2012) and that one of the most important components that define life quality is social participation (Murphy, 2009). It is not possible to state that existence of the rights given to the retarded by the United Nations Convention is meaningful when the retarded cannot find opportunities to use them due to the barriers they face in terms of social participation (Verdugo et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to undertake studies that will support social participation of the mentally retarded to increase their life quality.

One of the factors that impede the social participation of the mentally retarded is the manner they are perceived by the society. Various studies have examined the attitudes towards the mentally retarded in different societies (Morin et al., 2013; Coles and Scior, 2012; Edwardraj et al., 2010). In Turkey, although there are several studies related to attitudes towards disabilities (Burcu, 2011; Şenyurt-Akdağ et al., 2011) or attitudes towards mainstreaming of the mentally retarded (Diken, 1998; Orel et al., 2004; Uysal, 2004), no studies exist about social attitudes towards the mentally retarded.

This study intends to investigate the social attitudes towards mentally retarded individuals who are thought to be facing barriers in terms of social participation. Research findings are hoped to contribute to studies that will support social participation, a crucial component in increasing the life quality of the mentally retarded. With this aim in mind, the study sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) How mentally retarded individuals are perceived in society?
- 2) Are there differences in the perception of mentally retarded individuals based on demographic variables?

METHOD

This study utilized the survey method, one of descriptive research methods. Studies that aim to collect data to define specific characteristics of a group are called survey research (Büyükoztürk et al., 2014).

Working group

Purposeful sampling technique was used in identifying the working group. The majority of adult individuals in Turkish society, working men and women in places of employment in city centers and non-working women who live in city centers, were targeted to collect their views and all individuals who accepted to participate in the study on a voluntary basis and who were accessed within the bounds of the potentials of the study were included in the working group.

Hence, 329 male and female staff or business owners in various places of employment in Eskişehir provincial center, 87 non-working women living in Eskişehir provincial center and 49 non-working women living in Muğla provincial center formed the working group of the study (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants.

		N	%
Gender	Female	231	49.7
	Male	234	50.3
City	Eskişehir	416	89.5
	Muğla	49	10.5
Age	Between 17-30	153	32.9
	Between 31-50	233	50.1
	Between 51-80	79	17
Marital Status	Married	307	66
	Single	158	34
Level of education/School of graduation	Never attended school	6	1.3
	Primary school graduate	89	19.1
	Secondary school graduate	68	14.6
	High school graduate	179	38.5
	Bachelor's degree	116	25
	Master's degree	7	1.5

Data collection tool

A 16-question survey was prepared by the researcher to identify social attitudes towards the mentally retarded. The survey was composed of a section on participants' demographic data and a section including questions to elicit attitudes towards the mentally retarded. Three of the questions were prepared specifically for the participants who worked in or owned a business; therefore these questions were excluded from the survey conducted on non-working females. Survey questions, presented in the findings section, were verbally administered to participants by the eight pollsters trained to conduct the survey and the responses were accurately recorded without any changes and as they were stated in the blanks spaces in the form.

Process

Eight students attending the Teacher Training Program for The Mentally Retarded were trained to collect research data. The training provided by the researcher included information on how to fill the survey form (for instance asking survey questions without changing them and making interpretations, recording the statements of participants as they are without making any changes etc) and information on ethical rules to be followed during research.

The eight pollsters visited the businesses in Eskişehir city center and filled in the surveys with the business owners or staff who accepted to take part in the study. A total of 329 individuals were accessed in this period that continued for ten days. Pollsters visited homes in the city neighborhoods of Eskişehir and filled in surveys with 87 females who accepted to participate in the study. Additionally, 49 surveys were filled with non-working females residing in Muğla City Center.

Data analysis

Following the data collection procedure, surveys were checked to exclude the ones with missing or erroneous data and the remaining 465 surveys were included in data analysis. Analyses were conducted by using descriptive statistical techniques and participant responses were grouped to obtain percentages. Experts' views

were utilized in grouping the responses to comprehend the underlying attitude. Researcher and three experts discussed the responses and generated the groups based on consensus. For instance, expressions such as "help, pity, sadness, gratitude, warning, what a pity and alas" that were thought to represent a pitying approach to the disabled and expressions such as "handicapped, crippled, defective, deficient, losing one's marbles, sculpture in Bakırköy (Rodin's famous thinking man sculpture located in the garden of the mental institution in İstanbul-Bakırköy), retarded, feeble minded and lunatic" that were thought to represent a negative approach to the disabled re-grouped under different headings. Findings section presents the percentages calculated for each response group in tables.

Distribution of responses and participants' demographic characteristics were tabulated in order to determine whether the responses changed according to demographic variables.

FINDINGS

15 questions that were analyzed to interpret the first research question in the study and the percentages of participant responses are provided in Tables 2-11.

The following questions (Table 10) were addressed to the employers having an establishment or having workers serving for his/her establishment.

Participants' demographic characteristics and their responses were tabulated to seek answers to the second research question. Results showed that demographic characteristics did not cause differences in responses and the participants generally provided similar responses. Since similar results were obtained for all questions, only the distribution of the responses for questions 1 and 16 based on gender is presented here (Tables 12 and 13).

Table 12 presents the distribution of gender-based responses participants provided to the question "What is the first word you think of when you hear the term "disabled"? presented in Table 2. Examination of Tables

Table 2. Responses and percentages to the question: “What is the first word you think of when you hear the term disabled?” and “What is the first word you think of when you hear the term mentally retarded?”

“Disabled”	“Mentally retarded”	Response groups
41.3%	58.7%	Handicapped, crippled, defective, deficient, losing one’s marbles, sculpture in Bakırköy, retarded, feeble minded, lunatic
17.6%	9.0%	Obstructed, economic hardships, deprivation, unable to do things on his/her own
16.1%		Wheelchair, lack of limbs, negative appearances
	3.9%	I regard it as normal, I don’t see them as disabled, they are like me, human beings
15.3%	15.3%	Help, pity, sadness, gratitude, warning, what a pity and alas!
4.3%	3.0%	Destiny, will of God, volition of God, life
3.4%	6.5%	No response
2.0%	3.6%	Other

Table 3. Responses and percentages to the question: “In your opinion, what can be the reasons for a person to be mentally retarded?”

%	Response groups
44.30%	It is acquired due to accidents and diseases
43.01%	Inbreeding/Kin marriages
38.50%	Genetics
31.61%	Will of God, destiny
26.02%	Maternal characteristics, mother’s error
15.91%	Doctor error

Table 4. Responses and percentages to the question: “In your opinion, which group(s) below can have mental retardation?”

Groups	Yes	%	No	%	Don’t know	%
Autistics	203	43.7	148	31.8	114	24.5
Individuals with learning difficulty	141	30.3	289	62.2	35	7.5
Individuals with visual impairment	33	7.1	425	91.4	7	1.5
Individuals with hearing impairment	37	8.0	420	90.3	8	1.7
Individuals with Down Syndrome	251	54.0	107	23.0	107	23.0
Orthopedically handicapped individuals	26	5.6	417	89.7	22	4.7
Individuals with language and speech disorders	66	14.2	375	80.6	24	5.2
Individuals with affective and behavioral disorders	162	34.9	268	57.6	35	7.5

Table 5. Responses and percentages to the question: “In your opinion, what are the common characteristics of mentally retarded individuals?”

%	Response groups
34.6%	Abnormal behaviors, instability, uncontrolled behaviors, different behaviors, illogical behaviors, acting without thinking, inappropriate behaviors, not being in one’s right mind
21.7%	Ill-temper, affinity to aggression, aggressiveness, impulsive behaviors, irritability, damages to others, explosive behaviors when angry, argumentative, angry, inability to restrain oneself, self destructive
11.4%	I don’t know, no response
10.3%	Friendly, obedient, naive, angel, bewildered, innocent, sympathetic, affable, humane
8.8%	Responses that are unrelated to the question such as “they have large tongues, difficulty in feeding, undeveloped muscles, problems in toilet, communicating through feelings, deformity”
7.5%	Asocial, sheepish, unhappy, sensitive, timid, sad, emotional, insecure, fearsome,
3.9%	In need of care, cannot take care of any of his/her needs, cannot live by himself/herself, always under someone’s supervision, cannot meet basic needs, in need of love
1.8%	Other

Table 6. Responses and percentages to the questions: a) "in your opinion, can mentally retarded individuals be trained?" b) "If the answer is yes, where can they be trained?" c) "Can mentally retarded be trained in regular primary schools?"

%	Responses for a	%	Responses for b	%	Responses for c
95.7%	Yes	91.2%	Separate educational environments	55.7%	No
		5.2%	General Schools	30.1%	Yes
		3.6%	I don't know	12.0%	Yes but on condition that.....
4.3%	No			2.2%	I don't know

Table 7. Responses and percentages to the question: "What would you think if you learned that a mentally retarded student is attending your child's/sibling's classroom?"

%	Response groups
49.9%	He/she is also a human being, he/she has rights as well
27.3%	It is not right, I would complain the situation to MoNE, I would pity the student in question, the teacher cannot train this child accurately
13.8%	I don't know, I would not get involved ,
6.2%	If the student is not dangerous it is possible so that the others will see the student and be thankful of their won situation; if the student has mild retardation, it is possible; on condition that his/her behaviors are observed; depends on the case, I would research before the event
2.8%	This student may harm the others I would be scared, I would be concerned, I believe the student may be harmful.

Table 8. Responses and percentages to the question: "How should the care and educational costs of mentally retarded students be covered?"

%	Response groups
78.3%	By the government
9.0%	Together with the government and families
7.3%	By the family
4.6%	Benefactors, donations, wealthy businessmen, municipalities, foundations, non-governmental organizations, associations, private companies
0.8%	

Table 9. Responses and percentages to the questions: a) "Can mentally retarded individuals be beneficial to society?" and b) "Can mentally retarded individuals work?"

Response groups	% for a	% for b
Yes	68.4%	60.9%
Yes but on condition that.....	22.2%	24.9%
No	8.8%	13.3%
Don't know	0.6%	0.9%

Table 10. Responses and percentages to the question: a) "Would you have a mentally retarded individual in your workplace as an apprentice/assistant?" b) "Would you provide services (sales, services, counseling etc) to mentally retarded individuals at your work place?" c) "Would you let a mentally retarded individual to sit/spend time at your work place?"

Response groups	% for a	% for b	% for c
Yes	38.0%	85.71%	66.26%
Yes but on condition that.....	17.02%	7.29%	24.32%
No	43.16%	6.38%	9.42%
Don't know	1.82%	0.62%	

12 and 2 together shows that responses provided by 41.3% of all participants such as "handicapped, crippled, defective, deficient, losing one's marbles..." were expressed by the same number (96) of female and male participants and responses provided by 15.3% of all participants such as "help, pity, sadness, gratitude, warning, what a pity and alas!" were expressed by 33 female and 38 male participants, showing a similar

pattern to the previous distribution.

Table 13 presents the gender-based distribution of responses to the question: "Would you let your child/sibling to play with a mentally retarded child?" also presented in Table 11. Examination of both tables together shows "yes" response provided by 68.2% of all

Table 11. Responses and percentages to the question: "Would you let your child/sibling to play with a mentally retarded child?"

%	Response groups
68.2%	Yes
25.6%	Yes but on condition that.....
5.4%	No
0.8%	Don't know

Table 12. Distribution of responses to question 1 based on gender.

Response groups	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
Female	96	38	39	33	11	8	6	231
Male	96	44	36	38	9	8	3	234
Total	192	82	75	71	20	16	9	465
%	41.3%	17.6%	16.1%	15.3%	4.3%	3.4%	2.0%	100%

Table 13. Distribution of responses to question 16 based on gender.

Response groups	1	2	3	4	Total
Female	150	64	14	3	231
Male	167	55	11	1	234
Total	317	119	25	4	465
%	68.2%	25.6%	5.4%	0.8%	100%

participants was expressed by 150 female and 167 male participants and the distribution of female-male responses for other answers was also similar.

DISCUSSION

Abraham Maslow, who stated that feelings of belonging are among the basic human needs, told how growing up as the only Jew child in a neighborhood of non-Jews made him unhappy and feel excluded. The author of this current article also learned the meaning of being "the other" and experienced feelings of exclusion from the careless and disrespectful attitudes of waiters in a European country probably based on appearances of group mates which showed that they were "Easterners and Muslims". According to Williams (2011), exclusion is one of the biggest punishments one can inflict on another human being and the brains of excluded persons feel physical pain. Disabled individuals, especially the mentally retarded, are among the most excluded groups in the society.

Findings of this study which intend to present the way the mentally retarded are perceived in the Turkish society introduce examples of negative attitudes that are believed to be instrumental in paving the way for excluding the mentally retarded. According to the findings, mentally

retarded individuals are confused with individuals with mental illnesses, create feelings of pity in others and regarded as individuals who are having hardships and in constant need of others. It is observed that research participants also regard the mentally retarded as individuals with unstable, illogical and inappropriate behaviors, who have problems in controlling their anger and possess an inclination to aggression. For example, 34.6% of the participants defined the common behavioral characteristics of mentally retarded as "abnormal behaviors, uncontrolled behaviors, illogical behaviors and inappropriate behaviors". In addition to this, although the right to register in general educational institutions in Turkey was given to disabled students by law (statutory decree #573), the majority of participants (91.2%) believed that mentally retarded students should be educated in exclusive environments. Participants gave a negative answer at a quite high percentage (55.7 %) to the question of 'Can they be trained in general education schools?' and most of them said that separate educational environment suitable for mentally handicapped children. Also, statements of some participants (27.3%) to the effect that they would not agree for registering a mentally retarded child in a general education school and they would make a complaint to the Ministry of Education show examples of lack of knowledge and existence of prejudices in the society that shape the attitudes towards

the mentally retarded individuals. Findings support the findings of previous studies that present the fact that - throughout the historical process - feelings of fear and pity towards the disabled and regarding them as burdens to society are still valid for the Turkish society (Burcu, 2011; Şenyurt-Akdağ et al., 2011) and present a picture regarding the attitudes about the mentally retarded. Whether they are men, women, young, old, married, single or educated, did not change their answers to the questions. It is observed that certain responses by participants with different demographic characteristics and generally accepted by society at the same rate. According to the emerging picture there is a consensus in the community, regardless of demographic differences such as marital status and ignorance, suggesting that emerged as the primary factor determining the perspective for people with disabilities.

Marginalization can be regarded as the oppression - blended with prejudices and ignorance- which is practiced on the weak and on minorities by the powerful. It is accepted that cultural and religious beliefs are influential in continuing marginalized behaviors towards the disabled (Edwardraj et al., 2010). Current study also presented similar findings. When the participants were asked what is the cause of 'Mental retardation' most commonly it is said that the diseases and accidents as well as the cause of marriages with relatives in Turkey. Furthermore, when they asked what would happen when you hear 'mental retardation', what comes to your mind? They most commonly say 'Fate' or God-given' (31.61%). The fatalistic approach which is based on the inevitability of experiences may decrease/delay the support that is necessary to provide for the disabled and their families to prevent mental retardation and reduce the negative effects of mental retardation. Edwardraj et al. (2010) stated that caretakers of disabled children are under heavy burdens due to lack of support from society and family members. Especially the mothers of mentally disabled children are left alone by both family members and the other members of the society following the birth of a mentally retarded child. The fact that 31% of the participants responded with "no" or "yes but on condition that..." to the question "would you let your child play with a mentally retarded child?" may be accepted as a sign that families with mentally retarded children are alienated.

Hardships faced by the mentally retarded individuals and their families (Bigby, 2012; Nicholson and Cooper, 2013) increase in intensity and degree due to misconceptions, beliefs and attitudes of society related to these individuals. The fact that other disorder groups not accompanied by mental disability such as learning disorders, affective and behavioral disorders and language and speech disorders are also regarded as mental retardation in high ratios (30.3, 34.9% and 14.2% respectively) when the participants were asked "which of these groups can be mentally retarded?" can be seen as

an indicator of lack of knowledge regarding mental retardation in particular and disabilities in general. Expressions used by the participants not only pointed to lack of knowledge but also presented negative attitudes. For instance, participants reflected attitudes that included fear and hostility towards the mentally retarded when they claimed that in case mentally retarded children are placed in their children's classrooms "they would consider it positive if the mentally retarded students were not dangerous and they would consider it positive so that others would see the mentally retarded and be thankful for their own health". Also, though less frequent participants' (2.8%) used fearful expressions such as "This student may harm the others I would be scared, I would be concerned, I believe the student may be harmful" show that they use as well'. Negative attitudes underlying these responses also highlighted in another study. In that study Coles and Scior (2012) identified mixed or even hostile attitudes underlying participants' positive statements related to the mentally retarded. Negative attitudes are fed through perceptions of worthlessness attributed to mentally retarded individuals and they cause these individuals to face barriers in social life.

Attitudes towards the disabled are crucial in their social participation (Morin et al., 2013). Social participation which plays an important role in determining the life quality of disabled individuals (Murphy, 2009) shapes the attitudes of the individuals in the society towards the disabled. In this study, 43.16% of the employers said that they will not give permission to the individuals with mental retardation working for them, %6 of them said that not to serve individuals with mental retardation, 9% of the employers said they will not allow spending time in their establishments and 24% of them will allow spending time just under specific conditions. These findings show that Turkish society is required to take important steps for participation of the people with mentally disabled to the social life. Answers given showed that individuals with mental retardation have not taken part in business life. And they are unable to participate in the working life which is one of the most important steps in the independent living because of the negative attitudes towards them. Working on facilitating the participation of the disabled into social life and ameliorating their living conditions will be effectively planned by understanding attitudes better. Data obtained from this study point to the existence of misconceptions, fears and marginalization in the Turkish society regarding the perceptions towards the mentally retarded individuals. This result shows the need for presenting the society with accurate information regarding the disabled, especially the mentally retarded individuals. It is believed that effective work can be undertaken to meet this need with the cooperation of policy makers and educators.

Findings of this study are limited to working and non-working male and female participants residing in

Eskişehir and Muğla provinces. It is necessary to take this limitation into consideration while examining the findings. It is believed that new studies related to the attitudes of other segments of society such as children, the youth and retired individuals towards the mentally retarded will provide more detailed and clear ideas in the field.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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