

# A Cultural View on Mental Health through the Fact of Migration

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## Abstract

Culture is a structure that constitutes individual's world of symbols, values and meaning. Emotions, thoughts and behavioral patterns of an individual are shaped within this structure. These patterns shaped by the culture, influence the mental health of an individual both positively and negatively. Globally intensified migration of the recent years has strongly triggered this influence. Cultural elements, on the one hand, pose a risk to mental health, but also on the other hand, they play a significant role in the recovery from a mental illness. What are important to identify are the risk factors of the culture and to incorporate the positive aspects of culture in health care in the recovery process. We think that health services and treatment will be much more effective if each health professional that touches the life of a mentally disordered will provide health care with a cultural perspective. In this article we focus on the fact of migration while investigating and giving an overview on the interaction of culture with health, disease and the process of recovery.

**Keywords:** Culture; Mental disorder; Recovery; Migration; Immigration

## Introduction

Culture refers to the lifestyle of a society [1]. This lifestyle includes many elements such as language, religion, traditions, customs, norms, but also it includes for example the patterns of help-seeking behavior. Determining the codes and boundaries of social life, culture makes it possible to live together for people with different languages, religions, customs and traditions. Especially the intensifying fact of migration in the recent years can be mentioned as an example [2]. Both immigration and migration bring people from different cultural backgrounds together. Geographical distances becoming shorter, coexistence of people from different cultures, disappearing borders bring cultural diversity together [3]. Cultural diversity facilitates the lives of people while at the same time adding certain difficulties onto them [2,4], since culture is a determinant in shaping an individual's emotions, thoughts and behavioral patterns. Each culture has its own patterns. Some emotions, thoughts and behavioral patterns of the individual are accepted, some are tolerated and some are completely rejected by the society he/she belongs to. Behavioral patterns that are rejected by society are often observed in and associated with symptoms of mental disorders [1].

As the symptoms of mental disorder vary from culture to culture, the parameters used to determine mental disorders in a certain culture may not reflect the reality of another society. Therefore, it is essential to evaluate each culture within itself. Expression of the symptoms of a mental disorder varies in each culture. Especially in Eastern societies, individuals somatically express the symptoms of a mental disorder, whereas in Western societies somatization is despised. Eastern societies argue that the reflection of emotions on the body is important to improve the social cohesion of individuals [5]. It is stated that in case of depression as a mental disorder, the symptoms are largely attributed to the body in the Eastern societies, whereas in the Western societies it results largely in feelings of guilt and suicide [6]. In another study in which the relation between mental disorder and culture is examined, it is stated that the Chinese people suppress their emotions more, attribute them to the body and show higher tendencies to depression in comparison to the Western societies [7]. Similarly, differences in eating disorders are observed between Eastern and Western societies. Western societies give importance to physical appearance, body and aesthetics. A thin and aesthetic body is acceptable or preferred in the society. Agüera et al. [8] investigates the Western and non-Western societies in their study on patients with anorexia nervosa. As a result

of the study, body dissatisfaction and somatization rates are found to be higher in Western societies. A Japanese study also shows that rapid changes in society, industrialization, and westernization are associated with eating disorders [9]. Cultural alteration from a traditional society to an individualistic structure of the modern society expresses itself in eating disorders.

In another study on (cultural) expression of mental disorders, Mohammed Alnzawi [10], reports that in Saudi Arabia the socio-cultural structure and social gender inequality effects the delusions of getting harmed or injured in the patients diagnosed with schizophrenia. In a study comparing the delusional contents of patients with schizophrenia in China and Korea, it is found that the Korean patients have more delusions of family relationships arising from the more traditional family structure in Korea [11]. It can be claimed that the social environment, the society and the culture in which the individual is embedded, have impacts on mental disorders, and their symptoms and expressions. When these impacts are considered, it can be foreseen that migrants (and immigrants) constitute a higher risk group. The migrants are vulnerable in two ways: a) because of the culture they have left and lost, and b) because of the new culture they are trying to adapt [12-14]. Since, migration leads to damage to the individual's bond with environment and space he was born into. As a biopsychosocial entity, individual is expected to have harmony with the social environment in order to be healthy. The environment has effects on individual's beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors. Thus, migration, which also means an environmental change, can cause individual to face with stress, crisis, and trauma [15].

The process of adaption to a new culture may cause feelings of loneliness, social isolation, introversion, feelings of inadequacy, helplessness and regret in migrants/immigrants [16]. Besides, mental disorders such as anxiety disorders and depression can be seen in

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people who have been exposed to intensive stress due to migration [13,17,18]. İren Akbıyık et al. [19] in their study examining the effect of migration in Germany on the symptoms of depression in Turks living in Germany, determined that depressive symptoms of migrants increased significantly and noticed differences in somatic symptoms. One of the predictors of mental disorders is culture [20]. The individuals and/or families, who completely leave their roots behind, face economic difficulties. The economic difficulties hinder individuals to meet their basic needs such as food, water and shelter. It is much more difficult for a person in a new culture to find a job. The individual who cannot make a living for his home and his family can isolate him/herself from the social life and from the society in which he/she is already a foreigner [21]. Additionally, migrants/immigrants may not be fluent in the language of the new geography. Language is essential for communication [4,22]. Each culture has its own "unique" language. The language used is an element that determines the emotions, thoughts and cultural identities of individuals. When an individual cannot fully express her/himself, she/he experiences feelings of desperation, hopelessness and inadequacy. This is especially predominant in immigrants [18,23]. Individuals who cannot adapt to the country they immigrate to and who have further psychosocial adaptation problems are often afraid of applying for health care services because of language barriers. Due to the inability in seeking for treatment in both physical and mental disorders, the disease progresses and recovery becomes more difficult.

This is significant not only for adults, but also for migrating children. Children do not have sufficient education since they do not know the language of the area they migrate. Challenges of children regarding language obstacles may cause being stigmatized and excluded by their peers. As stated by İnce [24], most of the immigrant children are more unsuccessful than other children, they are incapable of involving educational processes and leave their schools after a while.

Just as the beliefs and values adopted by individuals affect the symptoms and expressions of mental disorder, they also affect the 'patterns of help-seeking behavior. Values and beliefs positively contribute to the spiritual well-being of an individual. The process of recovery from a mental disorder can be defined as the rehabilitation of functionalities and faculties lost due to the disorder, so that the individual can find his/her own meaning and purpose of life and that she/he can independently continue her/his life [25]. In this context, knowledge and awareness of the cultural elements and background of an individual, such as faith, values, language, religion, customs and traditions will positively contribute to the recovery process.

Methods used in the treatment of mental disorders may vary in each culture. For example, in Central and South Asia, people believe that mental disorders are created by a divine power. For this reason, in addition to Western medicine, they include symbols and rituals that they accept as sacred to the process [26]. In a study comparing the methods used by local people in the treatment of mental disorders in the USA, it is found that non-Latin whites use drug treatment, whereas African-Americans seek for individual counseling services and that Asian-Americans use both treatment methods [27].

Sorsdahi et al. in their study on patients with and without psychotic disorders in Africa, state that psychotic disorders are considered as mental disorders, and hence they are treated with traditional drugs. However, they state that not only traditional herbal medicine, but also substrates with modern medical ingredients are used in these treatments [28].

Dein, in his study [29], examines the relation between schizophrenia

and culture. In India, the family of the individual is included in the treatment, but not in the United States. In addition, they state that the families of individuals in India exhibit less emotional outbursts than the US American families. All this information shows that individuals include cultural elements in different manners in health care for recovery. In the studies investigating the relationship between migration and mental diseases, it was determined that, Moroccan patients living in Belgium had high unemployment rates; there were deteriorations in the household processes of immigrants residing in the Netherlands; Eskimos in Denmark and African-Caribbean in England had higher risk of developing schizophrenia [30-32].

As stated in these studies, even if the disorder is the same, applications of recovery methods differ from culture to culture. This may not pose serious problems for people with a common cultural background, however for migrants and/or immigrants this might be a serious obstacle. A patient from a different culture may not agree with a treatment method that he/she is not familiar with; or the method of treatment may contradict with their cultural values and beliefs. All these issues make a possible treatment more difficult. They may even cause the individual not to receive the necessary health care on time, which would delay a possible recovery.

## Conclusion

Each individual is unique and his/her needs are various. Therefore, health care given to individuals needs to be planned according to the needs of individuals. Not only shall the inclusion of cultural elements in health care planning be considered, but also education of the health care personnel accordingly. It is important to strengthen the awareness of the care givers in cultural elements in the recovery process. It is more than important that particularly mental health care professionals adopt a culturally sensitive perspective: it is a necessity. The cultural infrastructure/background of each intervention and the implementation of cultural care will not only support the patients in feeling valued, but also they will accelerate the recovery by enabling professionals to better understand the patients. Professionals will hence work more efficiently and provide higher quality health care. A mentally healthy individual, even if she/he is a migrant/immigrant, will have more opportunities for self-realization after having recovered from a mental disorder. Feeling valued and esteemed as individuals, they will be able to add their own colors to the society and humanity. Such enriched humanity can leave a better heritage to future generations. Thus, the world will be a more beautiful place worth living.

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