

M. Orhan Öztürk Interview - Highlights*



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Orhan Öztürk has created a “revolution” in Turkish psychiatry. Needless to say, prominent figures were with him during this journey, Leyla Zileli, Doğan Karan and many others, but it was Orhan Bey who became the intellectual and organizational leader. This interview attempts to provide a critical and analytical perspective on Orhan Öztürk as a figure of central importance in the recent history of psychiatry. It aims to interpret and enrich historical knowledge while “placing Orhan Öztürk in history.”

In this interview conducted with Orhan Bey in January 2023, I focused on several topics, which is presented as subsections in the conversation.

CURIOSITY

SK: One of the topics I wanted to focus on is “curiosity.” Silvan Tomkins argued that “curiosity” is one of the motivating basic human emotions. This is something that you proposed before. You have always emphasized the central importance of curiosity. I believe your ideas at that time did not find proper recognition, simply because Turkish is not a common language in scientific community. But recently curiosity has started to find its place within psychoanalysis. This goes parallel with the collapse of deterministic and pre-deterministic theories of human behavior. The subtitle of your book “Autonomous Self, Servant Self”¹ is “The Psychological Roots of ‘Allegiant’ Society”. Allegiance is actually in contrast with the notion of curiosity. Could you explain how you came up with this idea? How did you realize this?

OO: After completing my psychiatry training in the United States in the 1950s, I have traveled to many places for sub-specialization. Among these, the Austen Riggs Center was the ideal place for me.

I was deeply impressed by my first encounter there because you could see how seriously people were taken. Everyone from the “senior staff,” including Robert P. Knight, Rapaport, Brenman Gibson, George Hezel, interviewed me. I think

¹Editor’s Note: The original Turkish title is ‘Özerk Benlik Kul Benlik’ where Kul has multiple meanings including the human beings in the eyes of God in Islam.

the nature of Stockbridge and the location of Austen Riggs Center has also affected me. After this initial impression, I decided to work there and spent a total of four years in two terms. I think these years deeply rooted my curiosity.

That town always reminds me of Thomas Mann’s “The Magic Mountain.” The Magic Mountain, in that novel, is where patients come, and their entire lives are reviewed. It becomes a hospital in its essence, although not explicitly stated. For me, it (*the Austen Riggs experience*) became that way. In that small place, being close to people, having daily interactions with them, and talking about them... Intense human relationships, in other words.

It wasn’t just the patients living on that small campus; it was strong interactions with everyone. I had one-hour individual supervision sessions with the professors I mentioned above every week. When you talk to patients with your supervisors, you end up enveloping your own personality and your issues with what you see, what you present. Many aspects about one’s self are also revealed. This is no secret, and it deepens the intensity.

In such an elite group of clinician-theorists, they accept you as their equal, respect your ideas, and try to convey what they know. At the same time, I had a friendship, a deep human relationship with them.

SK: Yes, they valued you as a person there, and you also valued them and the patients as human beings. So, in a sense, curiosity about everything related to humanity was a natural, fundamental element in your environment. Respectful curiosity, learning with permission.

OO: Yes, that’s right, valuing and respecting people, and an endless interest. When you feel that, you work tirelessly. I worked day and night.

LITERATURE - TEACHING - MEDICINE

SK: Can you tell us about your interest in literature? Contributions from neighboring fields can be quite important

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and enriching in our discipline. For example, Erikson was both a teacher and an artist, and Anna Freud was also an educator. I believe your relationship with literature has contributed to your creativity in this regard.

OO: My interest in literature began during my high school years at Tarsus American College (High School). After graduating from the high school, I took the college admission exam in Istanbul. It was during World War II. I passed the exam. I had two options, either being a teacher or going to Medical School. At that time, the young Turkish Republic was facing significant economic difficulties. There were obligations for students. The government provided the students with dormitories to live in while they studied, and also covered everything from clothing to school expenses. Then after graduation, you were required to serve the government for two years.

There's something important here. My father comes from the first generation of teachers in the Republic. He had also taught a bit during the Ottoman era. He had graduated from Adana Teacher's College. At that time, there were only three teachers in Tarsus, our town. Over time, he became the Headmaster. You establish an identity when your father is such an important figure in the town.

When I passed the entrance exams, I called my father. I said, "I'm enrolling in Faculty of Education to become a teacher". Then my father said, "I'll disown you."! I didn't know what to say, I was shocked with the harshness of his reaction. I tried to understand it for a long time. I think I eventually understood. Yes, he had experienced the pride of being a teacher but at the same time he knew the difficulties in the profession. As an example, even though we did not face any extreme problems, his salary barely sufficed for our daily living.

SK: But it seems like it's a profession that Atatürk and the Republic attached great importance to.

OO: Yes, they did, but there were economic difficulties at the time, and there was a limit to professional advancement. I think, fundamentally, he didn't want me to enter a profession where I couldn't excel in my career. Ultimately, he wanted me to be better than him in my own profession.

While I was in medical school, I had a stronger interest in literature than medicine. I had some close friends, and I knew some of Türkiye's writers and poets personally, and I closely followed the literature. At that time, the Translation Bureau under the Ministry of National Education was active, and I read almost all the books they published. I read the world classics during those years.

SK: You have played a pioneering role in the establishment and development of many important things in Turkey, along with their traditions, rules, and roots. Establishing a school of thought, forming a professional organization, publishing

a journal, and psychiatric books - these are all revolutionary processes that have had quiet but significant effects.

The Turkish Journal of Psychiatry became an established journal in Turkey and gradually became an internationally recognized publication. And it has endured.

As the fundamental textbook in Türkiye, "Ruh Sağlığı ve Hastalıkları" has become the reference textbook in psychiatry. You are heading towards the 18th edition. This process is very parallel to the development of the Turkish Journal of Psychiatry.

I believe your efforts in the integration of psychiatric knowledge, the goal of "integration," require an advanced interpretation. Even in the majority of educated public, the concept of "integration" is not fully understood, it remains somewhat vague.

PSYCHIATRY SCHOOL, DOCTOR, TEACHER

OO: I mentioned something about teaching: The dilemma of choosing between being a doctor or a teacher as a profession. I think I managed to bring together what my father wanted and what I wanted in a somewhat indirect way.

SK: Yes, it seems like you've secretly made a compromise.

OO: In terms of teaching, after deciding to join Hacettepe University, all my energy was focused on establishing a good treatment and educational center. Above all, it was about establishing an educational center. I had a lot of experience in education, and that experience influenced all the work of the Psychiatry department that I pioneered. The philosophy of patient care, the establishment of the inpatient unit, these were all done with careful consideration. I consulted and debated a lot with architects.

Still, education was always in the forefront. There were case presentations to which the entire department participated, the attending physician would regularly provide clinically focused education. After the inpatient rotations were completed in two years, intensive training would continue at outpatient unit. In addition to residents, medical students, nurses, psychologists, and social workers also participated in the training within this framework. My colleagues in the department are still continuing this tradition; the meetings, supervision, and overall an intensive training. I am very proud of this, a longlasting tradition has emerged.

Teaching becomes a passion, a habit. The vast majority of my students who stayed in Türkiye became educators, faculty members. If all my students were gathered together, it would form a large group of teachers, which I find is intriguing. I think this is very important.

BOOK

OO: In the first edition, we published the book as a group of authors. However, we had difficulties continuing with this method. After that, I decided to write the book primarily by myself. The book “Ruh Sağlığı ve Hastalıkları (Psychiatry)” has now become a widely read textbook throughout Türkiye. Until 2008, the book went through four editions. In 2008, thinking that I might not be well-versed in new sources and may not be able to follow the literature as necessary, for future editions, Aylin (Uluşahin) joined me and two of us as the editors of the book, continued publishing it. Different authors contribute to the chapters. We are currently on the 18th edition.

JOURNAL

OO: Just as with teaching, the new generations have also embraced the Turkish Journal of Psychiatry. I initially served as the editor for thirteen years, and then Aylin (Uluşahin) took over as the editor. Aylin also worked in that role for many years and contributed to the Journal’s development. Then Aygün (Ertuğrul) took over. Aygün successfully continued for a long time and passed on her role to Yavuz Ayhan.

The journal has an extensive editorial board. Editorial board meetings have become an educational institution. Doctors from all over Türkiye who contribute to the journal, from the residents to active practitioners, participate to the meetings of the Editorial Board. These young professionals have embraced the journal and continue to maintain it.

SK: I would like to jump into the establishment of the Psychiatric Association of Turkey (PAT). How did you approach that?

PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION

OO: The book “The Organizational Memory of Psychiatry in Turkey (Türkiye’de Psikiyatrinin Örgütsel Belleği)” is very informative about the process of the establishment of the PAT. I believed for many years that there needed to be a psychiatry association that would encompass all of Türkiye, and I tried to explain this on different grounds. We, psychiatrists from all over Türkiye, held endless meetings. Finally, with small steps, we were able to reach the stage of establishment. The number of founders of this association exceeds two hundred, which I believe has never happened in any other professional association in Türkiye. Recently, when the founding board of directors gathered in Ankara for a celebration, nearly two hundred people attended.

I firmly believed that the Association shouldn’t have been monopolized by one person. I tried to emphasize this in the bylaws. “Let the president change, let the board change, let more young people get in”. I resigned after six months, so that the leadership would change. My very long-term and close friend from medical school, Özcan Köknel, took over after me, and he served for two terms before stepping down. This was very important; a tradition has been established so that the Board and the President change in every two terms.

SK: Another important thing I see in what you’ve done is, in my opinion, the principle of leadership summarized by the Latin phrase “Primus inter pares,” which means “first among the equals.” The president is not autocratic but democratic.

OO: The Association and the Journal is alike in that sense as well. The people who sustain the journal, they sustain it of their own accord, through free elections, full democratic elections. The Psychiatric Association of Turkey now continues itself in a much more superior way than its initial establishment; it’s truly something worth considering. I can say that in the establishment of the Association, I consciously and intentionally did many things.

SK: Finally, I would like to underline this: one of the most important lessons that can be drawn from your long and productive professional history, in my opinion, is that you transformed the question of “how to create an integrated identity” from a didactic pedagogical question into one that shows that it can only be learned through creative thinking and action. Leading the way in creating a clinical psychiatry tradition, publishing an internationally acclaimed journal that anyone can contribute to, authoring a reference textbook in the field, and establishing a national professional organization that includes all psychiatrists, are all prominent examples of your way of teaching as well as your leadership “in the creative process, in action.” In fact, doesn’t the most longlasting learning occur through thinking and creating by own?

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**This is an abbreviated version of Sağman Kayatekin’s interview with Orhan Öztürk. You can read the full interview with its rich personal and historical elements, along with Sağman Kayatekin’s comments as an Hacettepe and Austen Riggs alumnus, on the Journal’s website. The author thanks Mr. Celal Öztürk for the recording of the interview and his important contributions.*