



THE MYTH OF NORMAL: ILLNESS, HEALTH, AND HEALING A TOXIC CULTURE

Normal Miti: Hastalık, Sağlık ve Zehirli Bir Kültürün İyileştirilmesi

Şevket AKYILDIZ*

ABSTRACT

We live in a modern world surrounded by technological achievements and medical progress. However, chronic physical disease prevails, as do mental health and addiction problems. How can researchers analyse and better understand this situation? How can society reduce and heal these ailments? It is something that Gabor Mate's *The Myth of Normal: Illness, Health and Healing in A Toxic Culture* (2022) investigates, asking questions about modern society and disease and showing how they are interrelated. His argument is a broad and deep cultural criticism that addresses culture, stress, trauma, health, and unmet developmental needs.

Keywords: culture, healing, society, toxic, trauma.

Öz

Teknolojik ilerlemeler ve tıbbi ilerlemelerle çevrili modern bir dünyada yaşıyoruz. Ancak kronik fiziksel hastalıklar, ruh sağlığı ve bağımlılık sorunları da yaygındır. Araştırmacılar bu durumu nasıl analiz edebilir ve daha iyi anlayabilir? Toplum bu rahatsızlıkları nasıl azaltabilir ve iyileştirebilir? Bu, Gabor Mate'nin *The Myth of Normal: Illness, Health, and Healing In A Toxic Culture* (2022) adlı eserinin incelediği, modern toplum ve hastalık hakkında sorular soran ve bunların nasıl birbirleriyle ilişkili olduğunu gösteren bir konudur. Argümanı, kültür, stres, travma, sağlık ve karşılanmamış gelişimsel ihtiyaçları ele alan geniş ve derin bir kültürel eleştiridir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: kültür, şifa, toplum, toksik, travma.

Mate, Gabor (2022). *The Myth of Normal: Illness, Health, And Healing a Toxic Culture*. Penguin.

We live in a modern world surrounded by technological achievements and medical progress. However, chronic physical disease prevails, as do mental health and addiction problems. How can researchers analyse and better understand this situation? How can society reduce and heal these

* Dr., SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom. E-mail: sevketa.kyildiz1@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-9545-4432.

ailments? Gabor Mate's book *The Myth of Normal: Illness, Health and Healing in A Toxic Culture* (2022) investigates, asking questions about modern society and disease and showing how they are interrelated. His argument is a broad and deep cultural criticism that addresses culture, stress, trauma, health, and unmet developmental needs.

The ancients discussed holistic methods for treating disease. In today's world, Mate argues that "something is amiss in our culture itself, generating...the rash of ailments". He is critical of commonly accepted social and economic cultural values and norms that he labels toxic because they generate chronic stressors, impacting our well-being from birth through to old age. It is argued that toxic culture has increased over several decades. The dilemma has arisen at a societal level because contemporary political leaders and governments have "ideological blind spots" that prevent them from perceiving the link between our health and "our social-emotional lives" (2022: 2). This book is important because Mate makes us challenge complacency. Mate is a popular writer, physician, and public speaker with specialisations in addiction, stress and the development of children. The book is co-written with Gabor's son, Daniel Mate.

In the context of a toxic culture, Mate says chronic mental and physical illness are "to a large extent a function or feature of the way things are and not a glitch; a consequence of how we live, not a mysterious aberration" (2022: 2). In his view, disease is best seen as a process rather than something that appears randomly. Indeed, the mind and body are unified, not separate, as portrayed in the "current medical paradigm" (2022: 8). In this context, health and illness arise from a "web of circumstances, relationships, events and experiences" (2022: 9).

Accordingly, the myth of normal is, in fact, a way of living and thinking that humans have been conditioned to accept and perpetuate. The author explains, "My core intention, accordingly, is to offer a new way of seeing and talking..." about toxic culture and to find a remedy for abnormal living and its health problems (physiologically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually) (2022: 7). The book includes a final chapter about how individuals and society can live a more balanced and holistic existence. The author aims to establish a "healthier paradigm" and a "new vision of normal" (2022: 10).

The book consists of thirty-three chapters divided into five parts. The book includes real-life stories and case studies. The five parts explore the

influences on human health and ill health in terms of causes, connections, and consequences. The analysis starts from the inside of the individual; it then switches to how “our bodies, brains and personalities develop” (2022: 10). The focus then shifts to evaluate the influence of sociocultural and political factors on humans and how they impact our fundamental needs. Part One (“Interconnected Nature”) begins by defining trauma. Chapters Two to Seven investigate emotions, health, the mind-body unity and interpersonal biology; topics analysed include the health impacts of poverty, racism and sexism; the immune system; and interpersonal tensions regarding attachment and authenticity.

Part Two (“The Distortion of Human Development”) reviews, in Chapter Eight, human nature and human needs, while children’s irreducible needs are discussed in Chapter Nine. Chapter Ten is intriguing, involving parents (and grandparents), and considers how our bodies and minds “are products of the larger culture from the start, a life course that begins with conception”, says Mate (2022: 138). The author clarifies that new research supports this claim. Chapters Eleven to Fourteen explain childbirth in a medicalised culture and how current medical policies undermine parenting. The argument then reviews the misguided nature of the Western education system and how contemporary character development in youth separates the individual from the “true” self—preparing students for consumerism and leaving numerous people passively compliant, unable to discover their self or to live authentically.

Part Three (“Rethinking Abnormal: Afflictions as Adaptations”) studies (in Chapter Fifteen) what society thinks about addiction. Mate poses two questions: What benefit is the person deriving from their habit? (2022: 216). Instead of focusing on the addiction, he recommends that we address the underlying issue: Ask not why the addiction, but why the pain? (2022: 220). Chapter Sixteen reappraises how we label “addict” and “normal.” The remaining chapters reassess how we view mental health, highlighting people’s personal histories vis-a-vis genetic predetermination. Topics discussed are depression, ADHD, bipolar illness, and eating disorders.

Part Four (“The Toxicities of Our Culture”) explains Mate’s biopsychosocial paradigm. The themes of this chapter cover stress, capitalism, and its atomised, materialistic culture. Health-related topics address alienation, loneliness, loss of meaning, and dislocation— followed by comments on ultra-processed foods, pharmaceutical companies, and tobacco and alcohol consumption. In addition, outlined are trauma and racism, poverty,

and women's inequality. Finally, it is mentioned that toxic political culture intensifies when traumatised political leaders accept the status quo and implement policies "that entrench traumatizing social conditions" (2022: 345).

Part Five ("Pathways to Wholeness") discusses ways to heal individuals and societies through a wholeness approach, incorporating mind-body unity. Chapters explore Mate's practical and flexible guideposts for individual and societal healing. The core elements are self-compassion, compassion, authenticity, agency, and acceptance. These would be supported by socio-political transformation, activists and advocates. Mate terms his approach "compassionate inquiry"; he provides questions for readers to consider and encourages them to become more sensitive and responsive to their body and mind. Through reforms in social and political policies, the aim is to "move toward a more trauma-aware, health-friendly society" (2022: 482). The book's strength is its accessibility, coherence, and relevance. The authors have successfully collated many interconnected topics and separated them into thematic parts, allowing the reader to grasp what would otherwise be a complex and disparate image of humans, upbringing, society and control, and emotions and disease. The work is recommended for the general reader, students, and scholars.

References

Mate, Gabor (2022). *The Myth of Normal: Illness, Health, And Healing a Toxic Culture*. Penguin.

The following statements are made in the framework of "COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors":

Acknowledgment: Thanks to my history teacher, Mr. Clive Douglas (Ratton School), for his friendliness and encouragement.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship or publication of this article.