



The Sociology of Hope: Resisting Suicide Under the Decree-Law Regime in Turkey

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Abstract

Objectives: Following the attempted coup in Turkey on July 15, 2016, statutory decrees (Kanun Hükmünde Kararnameler – KHK) were enacted, resulting in the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of individuals from their jobs and the loss of their social rights and reputations. These measures, which continue to affect individuals and their families, have led to widespread social exclusion, stigmatization, and economic hardship. In the field of social sciences, such practices are often associated with the concepts of “civil death” and “social death,” referring to the systematic marginalization of individuals from public and social life. The combination of economic deprivation and societal exclusion has caused severe psychological distress and, in many cases, suicidal ideation. This study focuses on individuals affected by the Decree Laws (KHK) who experienced psychological breakdowns and planned suicide but ultimately refrained from carrying it out. The primary aim is to identify and understand the social and psychological factors that prevented these individuals from following through with suicide.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 individuals who had contemplated and planned suicide but did not act on these plans. The data were analyzed using content analysis methodology.

Results: The most prominent factor preventing suicide was the emotional bond and sense of responsibility towards family members, particularly children. Additionally, supportive social environments that fostered a sense of belonging played a crucial role in anchoring individuals to life. Awareness of personal strength, the desire for justice or retribution against those perceived as responsible for the injustice, and the sacred meaning attributed to weapons also emerged as significant deterrents to suicide.

Conclusions: The protective role of family ties and social support mechanisms highlights the importance of familial structures and social integration. The pursuit of justice and the energizing power of the desire for retribution serve as motivational forces that reorient individuals toward life. The transition from psychological collapse to personal empowerment not only supports individual well-being but also contributes to social resilience. These findings underscore the necessity of psychosocial support programs and advocate for the restoration of justice and the rule of law in the public sphere.

Keywords: Decree Law (KHK), Stigma, Social exclusion, Suicide, Social support, Content analysis

Introduction

This study aims to explore the social and psychological factors that prevented individuals dismissed by Turkey's Decree Laws (KHK) from carrying out suicide after experiencing severe psychological collapse. Social injustice and inequality are known to be significant contributors to suicidal ideation (1,2). There is a reciprocal relationship between societal injustice and mental health, where an individual's psychological well-being is closely tied to the presence of justice within a society (3,4). In this context, understanding the devastating impact of the post-2016 Decree Laws in Turkey on affected individuals is of great importance for the social sciences.

During this extraordinary period of political, economic, and social upheaval (5, 6), approximately 300 000 people were dismissed from their jobs, and victims of the Decree Laws were subjected to 153 distinct forms of rights violations. These violations are characterized in social science literature by concepts such as civil death, social exclusion, and political repression. Acts that were not defined as crimes within Turkey's legal framework were

retrospectively criminalized, leading to the imprisonment of thousands. Many lost their lives due to human rights violations in prisons during this period. The psychosocial pressures experienced by KHK victims also led to a notable increase in divorce rates and more than 130 reported suicide cases (7).

This situation bears striking similarities to the Red Scare in post-1949 America, following the Soviet nuclear threat. During the anti-communist witch hunts (8), thousands were blacklisted, unlawfully removed from their positions, and subjected to severe sanctions (9). The Decree-Law regime, unique in Turkey's legal-political history (10,11), possesses unlawful characteristics (12-14) that resemble historical patterns of authoritarian oppression and drive individuals toward suicide. According to Durkheim's theory of suicide (15) and supporting studies (1,2,4,16), the weakening of social bonds, legal uncertainty, social exclusion, and exposure to injustice (1-3,17) are key factors that increase suicide risk.

This research seeks to answer a fundamental question: What are the social and psychological factors that



Key Messages

- The state's legal practices have both life-threatening and life-saving effects on individuals. The state's primary duty is to ensure the survival of its citizens.

prevented KHK victims, who contemplated suicide due to stigma and social exclusion, from going through with it? To answer this question, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 KHK-affected individuals who had planned suicide but ultimately refrained from attempting it.

Although prior studies have examined the social and psychological dimensions of suicidal ideation (18-22) and the factors behind suicide prevention (23,24), there is a notable lack of field research specifically focusing on the suicide tendencies of KHK victims. Given the significance of social injustice and its psychological ramifications in the global scholarly context, this study is expected to offer a valuable contribution to both national and international academic literature. Despite its limitations in participant number, the study serves as a meaningful contribution to the broader structure of social sciences through qualitative inquiry.

Suicidal ideation often emerges from a confluence of risk factors (25,26), including psychological entrapment and a persistent desire to die (27,28). This ideation is fueled by both internal psychological struggles (29,30) and external social pressures (31,32). Even in the absence of an actual attempt, uncontrollable suicidal thoughts (33) are recognized as the greatest predictors of future suicide attempts (34-36). Research has shown that suicidal ideation can be reduced or eliminated through appropriate psychological (39) and social (37,38) support. Family support (41), therapeutic interventions (18,24,42), and positive social environments (38) all play a significant role in helping individuals overcome their suicidal thoughts, each with its own unique influence (40).

Methods

Participants

This study involved in-depth interviews with 11 individuals who had contemplated suicide, decided on a method, but ultimately did not follow through with the act. Of the participants, three were women and eight were men, aged between 21 and 45. One participant had a high school diploma, one was a university student, and nine were university graduates. Six participants were married, four were single, and one was divorced.

In-Depth Interview

The in-depth interview is a conversation between the researcher and the participant that centers around a defined research topic. Through this interaction, the researcher gains access to the participant's lifeworld (43). Especially in cases involving sensitive topics, such interviews may

offer therapeutic value for the participant (44). In-depth interviews consist of questions that may vary in structure, content, and intent (45), and they allow for the formation of concepts, classifications, and typologies based on the systematic comparison of similarities and differences between individuals (43). For this study, a semi-structured interview protocol composed of open-ended questions was designed by a subject matter expert. One participant declined a face-to-face interview and instead provided written responses to the questions. Contrary to common belief, asynchronous or non-recorded interviews can be beneficial, as they help organize the otherwise fragmented nature of conversation (46). It has been explained to the participants the scope of the research and the ethical rules before interviewing.

Inclusion Criteria

- 1- To be a victim of decree law or a relative.
- 2- To have thoughts and plans about suicide.
- 3- To be a relative of a person who attempted suicide (family members, close relatives, close friends, neighbors, etc).

Exclusion Criteria:

The research sample includes individuals with KHK; no other individuals were interviewed, so there are no exclusionary criteria

Content Analysis as Method

Content analysis is a method used to categorize complex and unstructured texts (47), aiming to uncover the textual meaning of data derived from texts, images, symbols, or audio recordings (48). It is one of the most effective methods for making valid inferences from qualitative data in context (49). Content analysis involves the systematic condensation and classification of large amounts of material into parts relevant to the research topic (50). The process consists of four stages: coding the data, identifying themes, organizing the data according to these codes and themes, and interpretation (51,52).

Content Analysis

Among individuals dismissed by decree laws (KHK), the decision to commit suicide emerged during certain critical moments, engulfing their emotional and cognitive worlds. However, some protective factors ultimately dissuaded them from carrying out their decision.

1-Familial Influences

Family is one of the most influential institutions in both suicidal inclination (53) and suicide prevention (41). This finding was confirmed in the present study. Being stigmatized by the state and subsequently excluded by family members can create a profound sense of hopelessness that brings individuals to the brink of emotional collapse. (*You're 24 years old. Your brother says,*

'Don't come.' Your father says, 'Don't come.' Society has already excluded you...) Hopelessness was found to be the primary driver of suicidal ideation.

"If I'm not mistaken, it was the 6th floor. I leaned out from the balcony. You know how they hang laundry lines on the 3rd floor? I saw those ropes. I said to myself, 'If I jump, I might get caught on them, and if I get stuck, I might not die. My legs might break; I could end up paralyzed.' I couldn't do that to my mother. That's the only reason I didn't do it—because she would have to take care of me for the rest of her life." (G-VI)

In this example, familial influence plays a role in both the drive toward and the withdrawal from suicide. Although G-VI had been deeply emotionally wounded by stigma and abandonment (*No matter what, I'll never forgive my brother or my father for that hurt.*), their emotional bond with their mother remained intact. The love they felt for their mother was the reason they chose to stay alive, and life, in turn, did not betray them (*I now see that I didn't do anything wrong in the past because God is now opening doors for me.*). The participant's reconstructed daily life served as a reflection of their perceived innocence.

Children also emerge as one of the most significant factors that prevent suicide and reconnect individuals to life after a suicide attempt (54).

"I kept thinking: Let the train just come and take me so that not even my body would be found. That's how far removed I was from everything. (Even his words were falling apart.) I calculated everything down to the second. I picked the exact corner to jump from, figured out the second to leap so the train wouldn't be able to stop in time. I had made my decision. I was just about to jump... My second daughter was only eleven months old, completely unaware of anything. Her eyes flashed before me. Somehow, I heard her say, 'Don't do it, Daddy! Don't do it!' I don't even know how I turned back. It all happened in a fraction of a second. One foot was on the platform, the other dangling in the void. It only took a small shift in movement. The train's lights flashed; its horn was blaring. Everyone was looking at me, wondering what this lunatic would do. I saw my child's silhouette at the front of the train, saying, 'Don't do it, Daddy!' That was it—I collapsed. I turned around. I don't even remember how I got back up. After that, I told myself: 'Hold on. There will be goodness in the end, God willing. Just hold on.'" (P-VIII)

The participant, who had been receiving psychiatric treatment, can be further analyzed within a psychiatric framework. Ultimately, the presence of children and the love felt for them served as a powerful deterrent to suicide. Furthermore, this influence extended into the post-crisis period, continuing to contribute positively to the participant's well-being:

"Then I told myself, 'Let this hope, this light be what keeps you connected to life. Let them do whatever they want—you try your best. God willing, there will be a good

outcome in the end... My child is five now. I still have things to see." (P-VIII)

Another example on the same theme:

"My children... I thought, 'I can't leave them behind.' I couldn't even imagine holding my kids by the hand and throwing them in front of a car. I couldn't do it." (P-IV)

Traumatic experiences can sometimes reinforce the maternal orientation of women, especially the instinct to protect their children from similar traumas (55). P-IV, who was abandoned by her mother and raised by her grandmother, was driven by a desire to protect her children from suffering as she had. Psychiatric therapy is also a crucial factor that facilitates withdrawal from suicidal ideation (56,57):

"Then I started therapy. It helped tremendously. I managed to get that idea out of my head." (P-IV)

2. Social Environments Empowering the Individual

Stigma and social exclusion have been shown to increase suicidal tendencies (58), while social support and integration have a protective effect against suicide (59). These findings are corroborated in the present study.

"I noticed that the new dorm was very lively; at breakfast, everyone was doing something. They were frying a mix of vegetables in the samovar, preparing olive salad, etc. It was different from the routine, and everyone was trying to make it enjoyable. It felt like we were going to a special dinner at someone's home. Even though it seems simple, it felt very valuable in that environment." (P-I)

The change in P-I's social environment (the new dorm) positively impacted their mental state. The social relationships built within this environment involved intentions and actions that added value to life and individuals.

"In our dorm, there is also a child, and it's so beautiful because it brings vitality to the place. Then, when the weather got warmer, we started playing intense volleyball games. We sing songs together, and one of the friends was the dorm manager; they had already acted in plays and made performances every day. I thought to myself, 'It feels like we've been saved.' My mood was shifting positively." (P-I)

The child, coded as a life source in the dorm, positively impacted the participant's return to life through their presence. However, this situation also highlights the tragedy of the prison conditions in Turkey. Former judge P-I, who was imprisoned by the state as a terrorist, emerged from the profound trauma caused by this injustice with the support of friends who shared the same fate.

"I have always disliked cleaning duties, and I am very repulsed by hair. In a place with so many women, there's a lot of hair. Then one of my friends said, 'You're always preparing defenses for us; don't do the cleaning duty anymore.' These words really relaxed me." (P-I)

3. Reclaiming Self-Esteem

Being dismissed from one's profession due to unlawful political practices has severely damaged individuals' self-esteem. Regaining self-esteem is one of the crucial factors that brings individuals back to life.

"I had books delivered from the outside. Reading a text from 10 years ago in the prison environment... Finding legal loopholes... I read everyone's file, preparing their defense. The girls, having never seen a police station before, were incredibly stressed. We used to conduct mock trials. I would say, 'I'm going to pressure you like your president would; this will not be a legal trial, but a political one.'" (P-I)

This activity, following the denial of knowledge, experience, and being labeled a terrorist overnight, led the social actor to gain strength and ultimately abandon thoughts of suicide.

4. The Desire for Revenge

Revenge is an emotion aimed at causing discomfort to the perceived responsible party. Triggered solely by unjust harm, the feeling of revenge conveys a moral obligation to those seeking it (60).

"Revenge, in one word, that's what it is. Actually, I'm going through turmoil; rarely do my religious feelings slow me down or stop me. Very bad people are living in very good conditions (a teacher who sexually abused students in school is still in office). I have always strived for the good of people, but now I've become bad. Am I the worst person in the world?" (P-VII)

The dominant theme in the participant's statements is injustice, which is associated with rebellion. P-VII, who defines themselves as a 'religious Muslim', experiences a conflict where the desire for revenge surpasses their religious beliefs. While religious beliefs could not prevent suicide, the desire for revenge acted as a deterrent.

5. Realizing Individual Power and Hope

One of the most significant factors that deter individuals under the Decree Laws (KHK) from suicidal thoughts is the awareness of their individual power and hope.

"I have a weapon in my hand, a loaded one. I mean, death is that close to me. I've thought a lot about this. Actually, I don't know what happens after one step. I haven't gone to the station; I haven't handed in the gun yet. The act hasn't occurred; I don't know what happens after that. There's a saying: 'You never know what will happen before the sunrise.' I said to myself, 'I am strong enough to survive this; I can handle these; I can overcome them.'" (P-X)

The moments that brought the social actor to the brink of suicide do not mark the point of exhaustion, as indicated by Camus (61), because hope for life and self-confidence removed the thoughts of suicide (42).

"But there is hope (emphasis) within a person. Everything seems like it will get better one day... That

hope somehow ties you to life. It's not that I care much about being reinstated to my profession... One day, I don't know, it feels like you'll return to your previous life... One day, these difficulties will pass; there is something like that... There is hope, and that hope ties you to life. You say, 'I should see those days.'" (P-III)

P-III's statements support the idea that positive expectations for life reduce the intensity of suicidal thoughts (62). Considering that suicide is an act associated with the moments when hope is exhausted (18), the importance of the expectation of justice in sustaining hope for individuals under the Decree Laws becomes evident.

6. A Sacred Instrument Should Not Be Used in Suicide

The sacred meaning attributed to the weapon—much like that of family—has both a leading and protective effect on the individual with respect to suicide. A weapon is an instrument that carries both positive (63) and negative (64) connotations in different geographical contexts. In Turkish culture, however, the weapon holds a sacred meaning as an essential component of heroism, power, and masculinity (65).

For P-X, losing his weapon meant losing his honor. The relationship between honor, for which life is sacrificed (66), and the weapon, through which honor is symbolized, brought P-X to the brink of suicide.

"It is something given with ceremonies. The weapon is an important symbol in this profession..." (P-X)

On the other hand, the sacred meaning attributed to the weapon protected the participant from suicide.

"The meaning of that symbol, the weapon, holds such a high psychological significance for me. Just thinking about carrying out this act with it gave me chills. I said, 'Son, stop, this shouldn't be done with this...' That is an important symbol, and with that important symbol, suicide is something bad." (P-X)

The use of a sacred instrument (the weapon) to approach a final end (suicide) has been identified as the third factor that prevented P-X from committing suicide. This is a rare effect observed in suicide studies.

Findings

- Family is one of the most influential institutions in both leading individuals to suicide and protecting them from it.
- Individuals who were subjected to social exclusion had given up thoughts of suicide in environments where they had established strong social bonds (e.g., solidarity networks in prison).
- Some individuals who felt wronged by injustice viewed survival and the fight for life as a form of revenge rather than suicide. This feeling has been a motivational source that kept them alive.
- Hope for the future and the possibility of returning to past life experiences have encouraged individuals to survive.

- The belief that objects imbued with sacred meanings, such as weapons, should not be used as tools for suicide has played a role in preventing individuals from taking their lives.

Evaluation

This study, which focused on the social and psychological factors that prevented individuals from committing suicide due to the state's unlawful practices (Decree Laws), yielded results that support and uniquely contribute to the literature. Findings that align with existing literature include the positive effects of life expectations and self-trust (18,62), social support and solidarity (59), the complex impact of family on suicidal behavior (41,53), therapeutic interventions (18,24,42), and the positive effects of supportive social environments (38). An original finding of the research is the recovery of self-esteem through professional contributions, which helped individuals regain their self-respect and return to life after losing it due to the state's stigma. The influence of the sacred meaning attributed to the weapon in either prompting or preventing suicide is another original result of the study. Additionally, the positive effect of justice expectations highlights the importance of the social state's role in ensuring justice.

Conclusions

The research findings demonstrate that individual, familial, and social factors all play an interwoven role in the process of overcoming suicidal ideation. Particularly, children, maternal love, social support mechanisms, and hope for the future are essential elements that keep individuals alive. Furthermore, the quest for justice and the feeling of revenge are among the factors that prevent suicidal thoughts. Social exclusion increases the risk of suicide, but individuals regain strength in supportive social environments. The study found that individuals with suicidal thoughts clung to life more strongly when they had access to social support mechanisms.

Limitations of the Study

In the study, the most important limitation is that the author is a victim of a decree law. The author has received psychological support from time to time to maintain her objectivity.

The prevalence of suicidal thoughts in the group of Decree Law (KHK) victims, with approximately 130 suicides, is significant. Therefore, the main limitation of the study is the relatively low number of participants. The inequality between the number of male and female participants, as well as the fact that individuals with suicidal thoughts were predominantly aged between 21 and 45, limits the scope and diversity of the study's data.

Directions for Future Research

- Studies with equal male and female participants and

a broader age distribution with a larger number of participants will contribute to the field.

- Research focusing on Decree Law victims living abroad and their tendencies toward suicide would also provide valuable insights.

Recommendations

- Mechanisms should be established to respond to individuals' quest for justice, given that the feeling of injustice increases suicidal thoughts.
- Psychological support services for individuals at risk of suicide should be strengthened, and specialized therapeutic interventions should be developed, particularly for stigmatized groups.
- Programs aimed at strengthening the familial bonds of groups exposed to social exclusion, such as Decree Law victims, should be implemented.
- Solidarity groups, social activities, and supportive networks should be established to prevent individuals from feeling isolated.
- Public awareness campaigns should be organized to prevent suicide, especially raising awareness about the psychological difficulties faced by stigmatized individuals.
- Emergency support lines and mobile psychological support units should be created to help individuals cope with sudden suicidal thoughts.
- Support programs and psychotherapy services for prisoners should be enhanced to protect their psychological health.

Conflict of Interests

None declared.

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