An investigation of students' life satisfaction and loneliness level in a sample of Turkish students[1]

Songül TÜMKAYA*
Birsel AYBEK**
Metehan ÇELİK***

Abstract

This study investigated the correlation between the life satisfaction and loneliness levels of students of Faculty of Education with respected to age and gender variables. The participants are students at the Educational Faculty of Çukurova University in Adana/Turkey. The sample consists of 422 students, 223 female and 199 male. Their life satisfaction and loneliness levels were measured by the "UCLA Loneliness Scale" and "Life Satisfaction Scale", also "Personal Information Form" is used to gather personal information. To analyze data, t-test, one-way ANOVA, stepwise regression and correlation statistical techniques are used. The research findings show that the male students' loneliness level is higher than the female students' loneliness level. There is no significant difference found between male and female students' life satisfaction. Beside, the correlation between age and loneliness level shows that, loneliness level is increased with the increase of age. However, there is a negative correlation between life satisfaction and loneliness level. Based on research findings, researchers suggest that the psychological counseling and guidance services of university must be functionalized and improved to increase students' life satisfaction and to decrease loneliness level.

Key words: Life satisfaction; loneliness; gender; age; university.

1. Introduction

Being successful at the university exam –one of the most crucial steps in life in Turkey- is getting more difficult. As it gets difficult, its economical cost is getting higher. Though this is the case, after the students have started their university education, they mostly feel unsatisfied with their expectations about the university life or with the department they attend.

The period of university life is the last phase of the adolescence that has been regarded as a transition from communal and biological perspectives and it is also the period where there are turbulences in one's life (Erkmen, 1989). Being a university student and the university life reveal an atmosphere which is possible to cause anxiety and stress both in our country and in other countries. A university student is an individual who has her/his own development problems. A university student is neither a child nor an adult. He/She is a person who struggles with the conflicts of the transition period from the childhood to the adolescence (Özgüven, 1989).

During the university education, some adaptation failures or other psychological troubles are quite common owing to the emotional and communal characteristics of this period. Most of the young people are negatively influenced by the problems such as acquiring new friends, being away from the family, getting accustomed to the dormitory life and economic difficulties (Özkürkçügil, 1999). Most of the university students do not receive satisfactory protective mental health services. Therefore, they constitute a risky group for the mental disorders. In the long run, these concerns affect students' life satisfaction and cause them to feel alone.

The loneliness is a very frequent problem among the university students who come to the guidance unit. According to the results of a study conducted in the USA in 1992, 30 % of the university students coming to the guidance unit had the complaints about the loneliness and 6 % of them told that they acquired the loneliness at very intensive level. The recent studies have indicated that loneliness can be in different dimensions and in different intensity levels. The intimate loneliness in private relationships includes the miss of talking with the people who share the life with us whereas the social loneliness consists of the environment and the web of the relationships (McWhirter, 1997).

1.1. Loneliness

The loneliness is a complex, difficult and an anxiety-giving situation. According to the related literature, the loneliness is a displeasing and unwanted experience which everybody avoids and which results in anxiety, anger, sorrow and the feeling of being different from others. The loneliness is both a situation and a feeling. All other feelings are influenced by the socio-cultural characteristics of the society one lives in as well as his/her physiological and psychological properties. However, a person's responses towards situations and events change according to the environment one is in. The behaviors which are showed are more cultural. The response that is showed towards the loneliness is also like that (Gün, 2006).

The loneliness can be defined in various ways (Leonard, 1979):

- When a person lives alone, "concrete loneliness",
- The loneliness as a result of being deserted (or being felt deserted),
- The loneliness as one's own preference since he/she decreases his/her relationships with the environment (this is the positive side of the loneliness with the aim of the constructivism and productivity),
- This is the unpleasant and psychological situation coming out of the difference of one's actual social relationship and his/her desired social relationship (Peplau & Perlman, 1984).

The loneliness is defined as a psychologically irritating situation affecting one's position in his/her psychological well-being, emotional and physiological characteristics (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; McWhirter, 1990). Lonely individuals tend to exhibit some negative personal behaviors such as pessimism (Davis, Hanson, Edson & Ziegler, 1992; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999). In addition, the results of the studies have shown a negative relationship between the loneliness and the unhappiness (Booth, Bartlett & Bohnsock, 1992), between the loneliness and the life satisfaction (Riggio, Watring & Throckmorton, 1993). Also, the loneliness has been reported to have a significant effect on depression, hostile attitudes, alcoholism, low-self perception and psychosomatic diseases (McWhirter, 1990). A review of the related literature have pointed out that the loneliness is a feeling that people frequently experience (Rokach & Brock, 1997). The research on men and women have shown that women often feel alone in their special relationships whereas men feel social loneliness because they cannot establish social contacts. The factors which are related to the loneliness

at the cognitive level can be listed as: one's own negative feeling about himself/herself, the increase of the irrational opinions, not being able to control the life, and fatalism (McWhirter, 1997).

Social relationships are very important for the life. One's problems in his/her social life influence his/her life from many aspects. The loneliness is also an emotion affecting one's social life and social relationships qualitatively and quantitatively. As can be understood from the definitions given above, the loneliness can sometimes be a situation that makes a person happy. It can be a conscious preference. A person can live physiologically alone, away from others. Also, it can be as a result of being deserted by the society (Gün, 2006).

1.2. Life Satisfaction

The life satisfaction depends on one's cognitive and subjective evaluation. In other words, the life satisfaction is based on one's own criteria about what the good life is. It is also one's global evaluation of some aspects of the quality of his/her life such as family, school, friend etc according to his/her criteria (Christopher, 1999; Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; Dew & Huebner, 1994).

In order to define the life satisfaction, firstly, it is required to define the satisfaction as for the first time proposed by Neugarten in 1961. The satisfaction means the fulfillment of one's needs, wishes and wants. The life satisfaction is a situation or a result of a comparison between one's own expectations (what she/he wants) and one's actual belongings (what she/he has now). The life satisfaction indicates the actual result of a comparison between one's expectation and the present situation. In general, it includes one's whole life period, and the different dimension of the life. The life satisfaction implies not a specific fulfillment unique for a situation, but a whole fulfillment covering the whole life. It also expresses being or feeling happy such as happiness, optimism etc. (Vara, 1999).

According to Diener et al (1985), in his research on happiness, has concluded that "a person who has the most advantages is the happiest". A happy person is young, healthy, well-educated, in economically good position, out-going, lighthearted, religious, intelligent and has desires. Following Wilson's analysis, a plenty of research has been conducted in the related literature. To illustrate; no relationships have been observed between the health and the happiness and between the age and the happiness. The least but not the least, the studies

have shown that demographic variables can only explain a limited part of the happiness (Allain & Matenga, 1996; Yetim, 1992).

This study aimed to find out (1) whether the loneliness and life satisfaction vary in accordance with gender and age of students; (2) whether there would be a significant relationship between students' loneliness and life satisfaction; (3) which one of the socio-demographic variables is the most effective in predicting the loneliness and life satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participant

The participants are students at the Faculty of Education, Cukurova University, located in the south of Turkey. 422 students volunteered to participate in this study, 223 of whom were female, 199 were male. The mean age was 23.51 (SD=1.85) ranging from 21-28 years.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS): Developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin (1985) and adapted to Turkish by Köker (1991) was used. The SWLS measures global life satisfaction and consists of 5 items of which the values are evaluated according to 7 scores (1= *strongly disagree*, 7= *strongly agree*). According to the results of the reliability study of the scale, the test retest reliability was r=.85 and item total correlations varied between .71 and .80 (Köker, 1991).

2.2.2. University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA): The UCLA - developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson (1978), revised by Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), and adapted to Turkish participants by Demir (1990) was used to measure the loneliness levels of students. The UCLA is a 20-item Likert type scale to measure the general loneliness levels of participants. The reliability coefficient of the UCLA was calculated as .94 by the Retest Method and the Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient of the UCLA was found to be .96. The parallel form validity of the UCLA was tested with the Beck Depression Inventory and the correlation coefficient was found to be .77 (Demir, 1990).

2.2.3. Socio-Demographic Information Questionnaire: It is designed to describe students' socio-demographic information, such as gender, age, socio-economic status, faculty, social support, unemployment anxiety and grade level.

2.3. Procedure

The research was conducted in the autumn semester of the 2006- 2007 academic year. One-Way ANOVA, t-test, stepwise regression analysis, and Pearson correlation coefficients were employed to analyze the data obtained by inventories used in the research. The SPSS 11.5 package was used in the analysis of the data.

3. Results

For the first aim of the study, t-test and One-Way ANOVA analyses were undertaken to determine whether the scores for loneliness and life satisfaction would vary according to students' gender and age. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation and ''t'' values according to loneliness and life satisfaction in relation to students' gender

Measures	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	P
Life Satisfaction	Female	223	20.30	8.83	-1.174	.325
	Male	199	21.32	9.17		
Loneliness	Female	223	33.76	9.62	-3.094	.019
	Male	199	37.00	11.66		

In the analysis of the t-test results, it was seen that only the loneliness scores (t (420)= -3.094, p<.05) of the students changed significantly in relation with their gender. The male students indicated that they were experiencing more loneliness than females, which brought about significant difference between the scores for loneliness, whereas no significant difference was found in the scores for life satisfaction (t (420) = -1.174, p>.05) as shown in Table 1.

The One Way ANOVA analysis regarding the loneliness and life satisfaction according to age are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation and F values according to loneliness and life satisfaction in relation to students' age

Measures	Age	N	Mean	SD	F	P
Life Satisfaction	21-22	135	21.00	8.92		
	23-24	158	20.60	8.64	.053	.948
	25-28	129	20.90	9.55		
Loneliness	21-22	135	33.48	8.71		
	23-24	158	35.51	10.50	3.327	.037
	25-28	129	36.83	12.60		

According to the results of ANOVA analysis, the main influence of the "age" variable was found to be non-significant about the life satisfaction scores $F(2,419) = .053$, $p>.05$ of the students. In terms of loneliness scores, the main influence of the "age" was found to be meaningful $F(2,419) = 3.327$, $p<.05$.

The administration of the LSD test aimed to determine which groups were affected by an age variable. This indicated that students between the ages of "25-28" ($\overline{X}= 36.83$) were experiencing more loneliness than the students between the ages of "21-22" ($\overline{X}= 33.48$).

Concerning the second aim, the Pearson product-moment correlations analysis was used in order to investigate whether there would be a significant relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: The relationship between the loneliness and life satisfaction

Measures	N	Loneliness	Life Satisfaction
Life Satisfaction	422	-,12*	
Loneliness	422		-,12*

*P<.05

As shown in Table 3, there is a considerable negative relationship between the loneliness and life satisfaction. In addition, a significant negative but a weak relationship exists between the loneliness and life satisfaction($r =.-12$, $p<.05$).

As for the third research question, a stepwise regression analysis was performed in order to find out the most predictive variables for the loneliness and life satisfaction. The stepwise regression analysis results related to the predictors of the loneliness indicated that

there were three variables contributing meaningfully to the loneliness. They are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Stepwise regression analysis results in predicting the loneliness

Variables	R	R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate	Increase In R^2	F	Beta	P
Social Support	.149	.02	10.63	.022	9.58**	.145	.003
Gender	.196	.04	10.55	.016	7.10**	.-159	.002
Socio-economic status	.222	.05	10.50	.011	4.72*	.109	.030

*P<.05, **P<.001

These variables account for 05% of the total variance $F(3,419)=4.72$, $p<$ .05. In loneliness of the variables, social support took priority. The other variables were gender and socio-economic status.

The results of stepwise regression analysis according to the life satisfaction are presented in Table 5. It was found that three variables have a considerable contribution to predicting the life satisfaction. The predictor variables of life satisfaction, unemployment anxiety, socio-economic status and grade level accounts for 23% of total variance, $F(3,419)=8.39$, $p<$ .001.

4. Discussion

The findings as a result of this specific research have been evaluated in the light of the studies mentioned above. The analyses have not pointed out a meaningful difference between the life satisfaction and the gender. This conclusion seems to support the result of the previous studies. In our century, both males and females carry equal responsibilities regarding the life. An absence of the difference between the sexes may stem from the fact that they –both- struggle with the similar daily life concerns such as finishing the school, being successful at exams, finding a job, having a good career and establishing good job relationships. Many studies have revealed that stress factors in life influence an individual's psychological well-being, psychological stress and the level of the optimism. In other words, they affect the life satisfaction. An approximately optimist person has been reported to have

a low psychological stress and high psychological well-being. The related research findings have indicated that the life satisfaction has been affected by these stress factors and there has been no meaningful difference in terms of the gender about the life satisfaction (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Chemers et al,. 2001; Scheier & Carver, 1992). Furthermore, it is very difficult to overcome the stressful events in our daily life. As we have many serious responsibilities about our lives, we cannot allocate time for the rest and the entertainment. Therefore, this influences the life satisfaction in a negative manner (Baltaş & Baltaş, 1996). These stressful factors affect both females and male students at an equally negative or positive way (Deniz, 2006).

In addition, the level of loneliness has been focused in this research and a meaningful difference between males and females has been found out in favor of males. This specific finding of the study is consistent with the results found out by Jones, Freeman and Goswick (1981), Wittenberg and Reis (1986), Russell, Peplau and Cutron (1980), Arı and Hamarta (2000) who have claimed that males have higher level of loneliness when they are compared to females. Individuals' psychological developments are influenced by cultural values of the society in which they live. Though university students are individuals who are well-educated and who have a high cognitive awareness, they still carry their own classical gender roles that the Turkish society presupposes for them. Not sharing the emotions or not living the emotions affects the individual's psychology, the psychological well-being and the level of stress, leading to the loneliness. Bennett (2002) has pointed out that depression, anxiety, fear, social isolation and keeping the feelings under control influence one's level of loneliness negatively.

Jones (1981; cited in Wright, Burt & Strongman, 2006) has analyzed university students' loneliness levels and has concluded that students who establish good contacts with their social environments, who share their feelings with the friends around have not experienced the feeling of loneliness and have felt less anxious when compared to their peers who have not had social interactions. As for the gender difference, males feel more lonesome because they carry more responsibilities and they are more influenced by the responsibilities that the society attains them (Stephenson, Pena-Shaff & Quirk, 2006). Enochs and Roland (2006) have emphasized that males keep their feelings under control, they do not get occupied with social activities and they do not cry in comparison with females. Consequently, they have the loneliness problem and they feel depressed more seriously.

In this research, it has also been analyzed whether university students' life satisfaction and the loneliness level have undergone a change, depending on the age variable. The results have not showed a meaningful difference between the university students' life satisfaction and the age. Though their age range differs, their developmental characteristics are similar in terms of the conception of the self, social support systems, social competency, internal locus of control. This may lead to an absence of the meaningful difference in the results. Some researchers have highlighted that variables such as a healthy social support system, optimism, social competency, internal locus of control are influential on one's life satisfaction. They have added that individuals who are equipped with these mentioned characteristics have a high life satisfaction and the ones lacking these properties have a low life satisfaction (Bourland et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2000).

The next finding of the study is the absence of a meaningful difference between university students' loneliness level and age. In other words, as students get older, their loneliness level increases. This is an expected conclusion regarding Turkish university students. Because as they get older -as their graduation approaches, the pressure of their responsibilities related to the life such as being successful in official or private exams, finding a job rise. Therefore, they allocate more time on individual study in order to fulfill these life responsibilities and to reach their aims, resulting in a social isolation. This situation may explain why the older university students have experienced the loneliness more than the others. The research by educational psychologists conducted on anxiety and hopelessness has indicated that individuals start to acquire a different kind of responsibility feeling about being successful in exams from nursery school to university education. This chain of exams affects university students' psychological health, personal development, future-oriented motivation and occupational progress. In the long run, these individuals feel alone and hopeless (Tümkaya, Baybek & Çelik, 2006). Pekrun, Götz, Titz and Perry, (2002) have investigated relations between students' emotions, self-regulated learning and achievement. In this study, taxonomies of different academic emotions and a self-report instrument measuring students' enjoyment, hope, pride, anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness and boredom (Academic Emotions Questionnaire) were developed. Participants included 230 university students. Results showed that academic emotions are significantly related to students' motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources, self-regulation and academic achievement as well as to personality and classroom antecedents. The findings indicate that

affective research in educational psychology should acknowledge emotional diversity in academic settings by addressing the full range of emotions experienced by students at school and university.

Finally, the relationship between the life satisfaction and the loneliness has been focused. A meaningful link in the negative direction has been found out. That is, as the life satisfaction goes up, the level of loneliness goes down. This result is consistent with the related research in the literature. The relevant studies have indicated the life satisfaction is influenced by some variables such as depression, loneliness, anxiety, emotional disorder, being anti-social, low social support. As the life satisfaction rises, the effects of these mentioned factors decrease (Bourland et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2000; Honkalampiet al., 1999; Schultz & Moore, 1984).

Cohen (2002) has pointed a link between the happiness and the life satisfaction. According to him, happy people with high life satisfaction feel more social but less lonely. Moreover, McCullough, Huebner and Laughlin (2000) have stated that the negative life experiences that university students face decrease their life satisfaction. This situation floats university students into hopelessness and loneliness.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analyses did not show a meaningful difference between the life satisfaction and the gender. According to the research findings, loneliness differentiated with respect to the gender of university students. The loneliness levels of male students were significantly higher than the loneliness levels of female students.

In this research, it was analyzed whether university students' life satisfaction and the loneliness level underwent a change, depending on the age variable. The results did not show a meaningful difference between the university students' life satisfaction and the age. The next finding of the study was the absence of a meaningful difference between university students' loneliness level and age.

The relationship between the life satisfaction and the loneliness was focused. A meaningful link in the negative direction was found out. The stepwise regression analysis results related to the predictors of the loneliness indicated that social support, gender and socio-economic status are contributing meaningfully to the loneliness. For the life

satisfaction, unemployment, socio-economic status and grade level were the contributing variables.

Within the directions of the results of this study, it is supposed that the following suggestions would provide the reducing of loneliness levels and increasing the life satisfaction levels of university students:

1- The results have shown that the loneliness levels of boys are more than the loneliness levels of girls. It would be beneficial to give guiding services and psychological consulting services to university students in order to improve their skills of problem solving and getting better relations with each other in their university terms.

2- It is obtained that the loneliness levels of the students are increasing while the students are getting older. In order to prevent this fact it would be better to offer consulting services to reduce the anxiety of students and improve the psychological strength of these students in the early years of the university terms.

3- It is shown that it would be necessary to provide better relations between the students and their families and also their friends in order to affect the student supporting systems in a positive way. In addition, offering student personality services such as part-time working opportunities, scholarships and funds would improve their life satisfaction.

4- In this study it is aimed to obtain the relation between the life satisfaction and loneliness of university students with the help of demographic variables. However, it is obtained that the demographic variables are able to explain just a little part of the loneliness and life satisfaction. That's why it is supposed that it would be beneficial to study on the researches which would discover the psychological causes and predicting life satisfaction and loneliness of university students.

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