

SOCIAL SKILLS, LIFE SATISFACTION, AND LONELINESS IN TURKISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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My aim in this study was to investigate the social skills, life satisfaction, and loneliness levels of a sample of 525 Turkish university students. Participants completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale, Satisfaction with Life Scale, Social Skills Inventory, and a personal information form. Independent samples *t* test, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis were employed for data analysis. The social skills and life satisfaction levels of female students were found to be significantly higher than those of male students. Loneliness levels of male students were found to be significantly higher than those of female students; social skills and life satisfaction were negatively correlated with loneliness; and social skills were positively correlated with life satisfaction. Life satisfaction and social skills negatively predicted university students' loneliness.

Keywords: social skills, life satisfaction, loneliness, gender, university students, Turkey.

The move from high school to university is a major life transition of emerging adulthood, characterized by change and challenge for most incoming students (Ames et al., 2011). Loneliness can be a common phenomenon relating to factors including moving from home, the possible breaking of former social networks, and attempts to develop new social networks. In this transition period, the stressors of starting a new school, living in a new environment, lacking their previous social support systems, and for most of them being away from home and families may cause loneliness in university students (Ames et al., 2011; Bugay, 2007; Demir, 1990; Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006).

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Loneliness

Loneliness has been defined as *the psychological state resulting from a discrepancy between ideal and perceived personal relationships* (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). It is an unpleasant, aversive, subjective, distressing, and painful experience which occurs when a person's network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity (Perlman & Peplau, 1984). Weiss (1973) has suggested that there are two different types of loneliness. In social isolation (alienation), one is dissatisfied and lonely because of the lack of a social network of friends and acquaintances. In emotional isolation (being unattached), one is dissatisfied and lonely because one lacks a single intense relationship. According to Rokach (1989) one of the reasons for the loneliness experienced is relational deficits: social alienation, inadequate social support systems, and troubled relationships.

Lonely people may have irrational beliefs about themselves, others, and situations. These misperceptions may prevent them from sharing feelings with others and making friends (Hoglund & Collison, 1989). Perlman and Peplau (1984) found that the lonely people in their study were less inclined towards self-disclosure, less attractive to their partners, and rated their partner's personality more negatively. Lonely individuals have less developed social skills, find it more difficult to adapt, are afraid of being dismissed, and are unable to develop and maintain satisfactory relationships and social contact (Imamoglu, 2008; Lamm & Stephan, 1987).

Lonely students report problems with making friends, introducing themselves, participating in groups, enjoying parties, and making phone calls to initiate social activities (Horowitz, French, & Anderson, 1982). Their level of loneliness also increases when they feel unsatisfied with their social relationships (Demir, 1990), social skills, and/or social support sources (Hamarta, 2000).

Loneliness becomes more important in adolescence and young adulthood because of the psychosocial crisis (Ericson, 1963) of ego identity and intimacy achievement. As he emphasized, if an intimate relationship is not established, loneliness and isolation are the results.

Social Skills

According to Riggio (1986), social skills are verbal and non-verbal communication skills including expressivity, sensitivity, and control. *Expressivity* refers to *the skill with which one communicates or sends messages to others*. *Sensitivity* refers to *the skill with which one receives and interprets the communicated messages of others*. *Control* refers to *the skill with which one is able to regulate and manage the communication process*.

Social skills enable one to interact with others successfully. According to Bacanlı (1999), social skills comprise initiating, developing, and continuing interpersonal relationships; introducing and expressing oneself to others; conflict resolution; anger control; problem solving; decision making; speaking; and listening. Yüksel (2004) describes social skills as being able to understand the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of the self and of others; the ability to behave appropriately relative to that understanding based on social cues and observable and unobservable cognitive and affective items; and being able to adapt according to the social context.

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction has been identified as *a distinct construct representing a cognitive and global evaluation of the quality of one's life as a whole* (Pavot & Diener, 1993) and can also be defined as *the cognitive component of subjective well-being*. Martikainen (2009) uses it synonymously with happiness and subjective well-being and Perlman and Peplau (1984) have stated that social relations are vital to psychological well-being. Subjective well-being is perceived through filters of personality and of cognitive and emotional judgment; it implies a positive self-appraisal (McDowell, 2010).

The important predictors of university students' life satisfaction are self-esteem, social skills, academic achievement, socioeconomic status, social involvement with political and religious activities, health, race, age, social participation, and culture (Diener & Diener, 1995; Dorahy et al., 2000; Duran-Oguz & Tezer, 2009; Pavot, 2008; Tuzgöl-Dost, 2007).

When social skills are insufficient, an individual may develop low self-confidence, feel shy, unhappy, dissatisfied, and lonely as well as experiencing the inability to join a group and adjust successfully. These results may hinder an adaptive transition to adulthood and jeopardize psychological well-being.

I had three objectives in this study: (a) to compare Turkish university students' social skills, life satisfaction, and loneliness levels according to gender; (b) to examine the relationships among social skills, life satisfaction, and loneliness of the university students; and (c) to determine whether or not the university students' life satisfaction and social skills predict loneliness. The results of this study may be useful in determining how to increase the students' social skills and life satisfaction levels, and to reduce their levels of loneliness.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample of students was randomly selected and all of them participated

voluntarily. Participants were 525 single (unmarried) university students from different universities in İzmir, Turkey. There were 258 females (49%) and 267 males (51%). The mean age of the participants was 21.58 ($SD = 1.85$) years. Participants completed the questionnaire during scheduled class time, with no time limit. The researcher introduced the study and gave the participants information about the study aims prior to administering the questionnaire, which was presented in Turkish. The researcher received ethical approval to conduct this study. The questionnaire contained the instruments listed below.

Instruments

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). This scale was originally developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). It is used to measure global life satisfaction and consists of five items rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Items are summed for a total score, which ranges from 7 to 35, with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction with life. The scale maintains very high reliability and validity, and in this study the internal consistency value was .87 and test-retest correlation was .82. In relation to convergent validity, previous researchers (see e.g., Diener et al., 1985) have also established that the SWLS has moderately strong correlations with other measures of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, ranging from .35 to .82.

The Turkish version of the scale was adapted by Köker (1991) who reported an internal consistency coefficient for the Turkish version of .80, and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .85.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS). This scale, developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson (1978) and later revised by Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), is used to measure general loneliness levels. It is a 20-item Likert-type self-report inventory in which participants indicate on a 4-point scale, how often their feelings coincide with the statement, (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*). Russell et al. (1980) gained a high level of internal consistency (reliability) for the instrument, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .94. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was conducted and compared by Demir (1989), who gained an internal consistency coefficient of .96 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .94. The parallel form validity of the UCLA-LS (Demir, 1989) was tested with the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) and the correlation coefficient was .77.

Social Skills Inventory (SSI). The SSI was developed by Riggio (1986). The SSI is a 90-item Likert-type self-report inventory which consists of six subscales, each with 15 items. It is used to calculate an individual's level of global social skills. Higher scores equate to a higher level of social skills.

Riggio (1986) gained a test-retest reliability coefficient of .94 and a concurrent validity and discriminant validity range of .12 to .47. The Turkish adaptation of

the scale was conducted by Yüksel (1998) who gained an internal consistency coefficient of .92 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .94. The parallel form validity of the SSI was tested using the Self-Monitoring Scale by Bacanlı (1999) and Yüksel (2004) and the correlation coefficient was found to be .63.

Personal Information Form. Participants were asked to record their sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, and academic department.

Data Analysis

In order to identify the mean values of the inventories, descriptive statistics were applied. The differences between the participants' mean scores for life satisfaction, social skills, and loneliness according to participants' gender were analyzed using independent samples *t* tests. The correlations among social skills, loneliness, and life satisfaction levels were analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, and predictors of loneliness levels were analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 13.0 for Windows.

Results

Life Satisfaction, Social Skills, and Loneliness Levels of Participants

The results of the independent samples *t* tests were used to determine the differences between women and men can be seen in Table 1. I found that female students' social skill levels ($t(522) = 2.592, p = .010, d = .23$) and life satisfaction levels ($t(522) = 2.085, p = .038, d = .21$) were higher than those of male students and male students' loneliness levels ($t(522) = 2.334, p = .020, d = .19$) were higher than those of female students.

Table 1. *Life Satisfaction, Social Skills, and Loneliness Scores According to Gender*

Scale	Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Social skills	Girl	258	288.31	26.75	2.592	522	.010*
	Boy	267	282.24	26.91			
Loneliness	Girl	258	36.60	8.48	2.334	522	.020*
	Boy	267	38.42	9.34			
Life satisfaction	Girl	258	21.87	6.24	2.085	522	.038*
	Boy	267	20.76	6.02			

Note. * $p < .05$.

Correlations Among Social Skills, Loneliness, and Life Satisfaction

Pearson product-moments correlation coefficients were calculated to investigate the correlation among the social skills, loneliness, and life satisfaction levels of participants (see Table 2). According to the results, both social skills ($r = -.41$,

$p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($r = -.26, p < .001$) were negatively correlated with loneliness, while social skills were positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r = .15, p < .001$) as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. *Correlations Among Social Skills, Loneliness, and Life Satisfaction*

	1	2	3
1. Social skills	-	-.41**	.15**
2. Loneliness		-	-.26**
3. Life satisfaction			-

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Predictors of Loneliness

Multiple linear regression analysis was performed in order to determine whether or not the university students' life satisfaction and social skills can be used to predict loneliness (see Table 3).

Social skills and life satisfaction were found to be significant predictors of loneliness ($F(2, 522) = 68.851, p = .000$). Social skills ($\beta = -.38$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = -.21$) negatively predicted loneliness and explained 21% of the variance.

Table 3. *Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Results for Social Skills and Life Satisfaction as Predictors of Loneliness*

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	B	Std. error	β		
(Constant)	79.868	3.774		21.163	.000
Social Skills	-.126	.013	-.378	9.593	.000
Life satisfaction	-.304	.057	-.208	5.280	.000

Note. $N = 525, R = .457, R^2 = .209, F(2, 522) = 68.851, p < .001$.

Discussion

The aim in this study was to examine the social skills, life satisfaction, and loneliness levels of Turkish university students. Five major findings emerged from this study.

First, the female students' social skills are significantly higher than those of male students. This result supports the research findings of Deniz, Hamarta, and Ari (2005). According to Wheeler, Reis, and Nezelek (1983) males and females differ greatly in their effectiveness as social partners, with females being generally more socially responsive, empathic, and intimate. Female and male students have different gender characteristics because of cultural influences on their upbringing and socializing processes. Therefore, the fact that females are

better at developing close relationships, in opening about themselves to current friends, and expressing their emotions than are males (Wheeler et al., 1983) may have affected the results of this study.

Social skills are first developed by interactions with the family, and girls' social skills tend to improve more quickly than those of boys (Tümekaya, Aybek, & Çelik, 2008). According to Goleman (1996), while families talk about emotions with their daughters they do not talk about them with their sons and boys are not encouraged to show and talk about their emotions. In line with Goleman's ideas, Turkish males are expected to repress their emotions and avoid self-disclosure in order to be accepted by the society. There are Turkish sayings such as "boys don't cry", "boys don't laugh too much", and "boys don't talk too much". This may be why even though males' social relationship networks are larger than those of females, their level of social skills is lower.

Second, the results in this study show that the life satisfaction levels of female students are higher than those of male students. This result is in line with those gained by researchers such as Deniz and Yılmaz (2004) and Tuzgöl-Dost (2007). However, it contradicts the findings of other researchers, particularly Bugay (2007) and Wang, Yuen, and Slaney (2009), who found that the male students' life satisfaction levels are higher than those of female students'. In other studies, no significant gender differences were found in relation to life satisfaction but culture was found to have a significant impact on life satisfaction (Dorahy et al., 2000; Tümekaya, Aybek, & Çelik, 2008).

My finding that females have higher levels of social skills and life satisfaction than do males may be explained by Kim (2001), who stated that students with lower levels of social skills experience less life satisfaction. In addition, Turkish males have more stressful responsibilities in comparison with females and this may affect their life satisfaction (Deniz et al., 2005).

Third, the loneliness levels of male students were significantly higher than the loneliness levels of female students; a finding supported by previous researchers (see e.g., Demir, 1990; Deniz et al., 2005; Girgin, 2009; Hamarta, 2000; Karaoğlu, Aşaroğlu, & Deniz, 2009; Rokach, 1989; Russell et al., 1980; Schultz & Moore, 1986; Tümekaya et al., 2008; Weiss, 1973; Wheeler et al., 1983). However, this result is not consistent with the results gained by Russell et al. (1980), or Bugay (2007), who found that females are lonelier than males. Further, according to results gained in other studies, there is no significant difference between males' and females' loneliness (Hoglund & Collison, 1989; Lamm & Stephan, 1987).

In this study, it is possible that the lower levels of social skills and life satisfaction experienced by men might be the reason for their higher loneliness levels, as influenced by the cultural features of Turkey. In Turkish culture, boys are considered more privileged, comfortable, and free than girls; and their social network is larger than that of girls (Girgin, 2009; Tümekaya et al., 2008).

However, based on my results in this study, university students find it difficult to develop satisfactory relationships and so experience more loneliness due to the poor quality of their interpersonal relationships.

The fourth relationship was revealed through bivariate analysis: both social skills and life satisfaction were negatively correlated with loneliness, while social skills were positively correlated with life satisfaction. This result is consistent with the results of other studies in which it was found that relational satisfaction and life satisfaction are negatively correlated with loneliness (Bugay, 2007; Tümkaya et al., 2008; Tuzgöl-Dost, 2007). However, other researchers (Segrin, Hanzal, Donnerstein, Taylor, & Domschke, 2007) have found that social skills are positively associated with life satisfaction. The positive association between social skills and psychological well-being can be explained by the fact that people with good social skills appear to appraise their life experiences as being less stressful in contrast to people with poor social skills (Segrin et al., 2007).

In this study, both social skills and life satisfaction were negative predictors of loneliness in university students. Thus, as social skills and life satisfaction increase, loneliness decreases. Consequently, in order to decrease Turkish university students' loneliness levels, it is necessary to develop their social skills and increase their life satisfaction. For this purpose, universities should arrange social activities to enlarge student social support networks. Their loneliness levels can be decreased through group counseling to show them how to develop social skills and effective communication methods, along with offering strategies and skills for coping with loneliness. As Brehm (1985) stated, using cognitive and behavioral strategies are generally positive ways to improve coping. Instead of making inner and permanent references to themselves, university students should give importance to developing positive relationships and friendships. They should also believe that they can improve their networks and relationships by changing their thoughts so that they can decrease their sense of loneliness.. By helping students to be more successful academically and supporting them socially and financially, universities may help increase the life satisfaction of students. These research findings may be beneficial in counseling university students, particularly those coping with feelings of loneliness and low life satisfaction.

My findings in this study make three major contributions to the existing literature. First, the results show that female students' social skills and life satisfaction levels were higher than those of male students and that male students' loneliness levels were higher than those of female students. Second, both social skills and life satisfaction were negatively correlated with loneliness, while social skills were positively correlated with life satisfaction. Third, social skills and life satisfaction are uniquely significant and negative predictors of university students' loneliness.

There are some limitations to the current study. First, the sample was restricted to university students in İzmir, so the results may not be generalizable to all Turkish university students. Further research should be carried out with groups more representative of all the university students in Turkey. Second, the variables of interest in this study were restricted to gender, social skills, life satisfaction, and loneliness. Future researchers could expand our research design to examine different psychosocial variables – such as social support, alcohol use, social environment, and culture – that may cause loneliness.

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