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SOCIAL ANXIETY AS A PREDICTOR OF LONELINESS IN TEACHER CANDIDATES

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Abstract

This study aims to determine how much the social anxiety variable predicts the loneliness levels of teacher candidates. In addition, in this study, it was examined to determine the differentiation status of teacher candidates in loneliness levels according to gender. The study was conducted based on the relational screening model. The study group of the study consisted of 281 (47.7% male (n=134), 52.3% (n=147) female) teacher candidates studying at different universities in Turkey in the 2022-2023 academic year. The average age of the study group is 21.14. UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8), Short Form of the Social Anxiety Scale and Personal Information Form were used as data collection tools in the study. The relationship between teacher candidates' social anxiety levels and loneliness was determined by Pearson correlation analysis. The predictive level of social anxiety and loneliness was tested with simple linear regression analysis. In addition, t-test analysis was applied for independent samples in order to determine whether the loneliness levels of teacher candidates show a significant difference according to their gender. As a result of the research, it was determined that there was a positive and moderately significant relationship between loneliness and social anxiety. It was observed that the social anxiety variable predicted the loneliness variable significantly. The social anxiety variable explained approximately 28% of loneliness. In addition, as a result of this study, it was concluded that there was no significant gender difference in the loneliness levels of teacher candidates.

Keywords: Teacher, Candidate, Loneliness, Social Anxiety

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Öğretmen Adaylarında Yalnızlığın Yordayıcısı Olarak Sosyal Kaygı

Öz

Bu araştırmada amaç, sosyal kaygı değişkeninin öğretmen adaylarının yalnızlık düzeylerini ne kadar yordadığıdır. Ayrıca bu araştırmada öğretmen adaylarının cinsiyete göre yalnızlık düzeylerinde farklılaşma durumlarının belirlenmesi incelenmiştir. Araştırma ilişkisel tarama modelinde dayalı olarak yürütülmüştür. Çalışmanın araştırma grubunu 2022-2023 eğitim-öğretim yılında Türkiye'deki farklı üniversitelerde öğrenim gören 281 (% 47.7'si erkek (n=134), % 52.3'ü (n=147) kadın) öğretmen adayı oluşturmuştur. Araştırma grubunun yaş ortalaması 21.14'tür. Araştırmada veri toplama araçları olarak Ucla Yalnızlık Ölçeği- Kısa Formu (ULS-8), Sosyal Kaygı Ölçeği Kısa Formu ve Kişisel Bilgi Formu kullanılmıştır. Öğretmen adaylarının sosyal kaygı düzeyleri ile yalnızlıkları arasındaki ilişki Pearson korelasyon analizi ile saptanmıştır. Sosyal kaygının, yalnızlığı yordama düzeyi ise basit doğrusal regresyon analizi ile test edilmiştir. Bunun yanında öğretmen adaylarının yalnızlık düzeylerinin cinsiyetlerine göre anlamlı bir farklılaşma gösterip göstermediğini tespit etmek amacıyla bağımsız örneklem için t-testi analizi uygulanmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda yalnızlık ile sosyal kaygı arasında pozitif yönde ve orta düzeyde anlamlı birer ilişkinin olduğu belirlenmiştir. Sosyal kaygı değişkeninin yalnızlık değişkenini anlamlı düzeyde yordadığı görülmüştür. Sosyal kaygı değişkeni yalnızlığın yaklaşık olarak %28'ini açıklamıştır. Ayrıca bu çalışma sonucunda öğretmen adaylarının yalnızlık düzeylerinde cinsiyete göre farkın anlamlı olmadığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğretmen, Aday, Yalnızlık, Sosyal Kaygı

Introduction

It creates great importance for individuals to establish meaningful social bonds so that they can experience change and development (Surkalim et al., 2022). However, some individuals cannot fully establish their social connections, so they feel disconnected from others by feeling emptiness inside. This situation is described as loneliness and draws attention as a subjective negative emotion arising from the perceived deficiencies in one's social relationships (Vedder et al., 2022).

Loneliness is defined as an unwanted or unpleasant experience with feelings such as feeling different from others, anger, sadness, and anxiety. The origin of loneliness, on the other hand, goes back to the time of human existence (Di Tommaso & Spinner, 1997; Jones et al., 1981; Russell et al., 1980). The concept of loneliness is defined as an unpleasant subjective psychological state experienced as a result of

inconsistencies between the current social relationship and the desired social relationship (De Jong-Gierveld, 1998; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). In addition, loneliness is also expressed as a subjective feeling such as being disconnected or distant from other people (Plattner et al., 2022). In this context, loneliness can be expressed as a negative mood caused by the incompatibility or conflict of existing social relations with the social relations that arouse desire in the person. According to Stokes (1985), loneliness is the feeling of distress in one's social interaction and introversion due to the insufficient development of social skills and self-disclosure behavior. For this reason, introverted individuals want to stay away from society. As a matter of fact, they can be restless and worried about being in social situations. Therefore, it is emphasized that loneliness may be related to social anxiety (Stokes, 1985). It is thought that social anxiety can be a significant predictor of loneliness, based on the fact that individuals turn away from interpersonal relationships and become introverted due to incompatibilities and may be worried about social environments.

Although social anxiety, which is thought to be related to loneliness in the context of this study, was defined by Marx and Gelder in 1966, it took its place for the first time in the 3rd edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (APA, 2013). The term was first used by Janet in 1903 (phobias des situations sociales) to describe patients who fear being observed by others while speaking, writing or playing the piano (Dilbaz, 1997). Social anxiety is defined as individuals' avoidance of one or more social situations by being exposed to possible scrutiny and negative evaluations by clearly fearing or worrying about one or more social situations (APA, 2013). People with social anxiety experience fear and avoid the scrutiny of others. In such situations, people are worried, embarrassed, or say or do something that results in humiliation. In this context, anxieties become more pronounced in people, and as a result, people avoid most interpersonal relationships or endure such situations with intense discomfort (Stein & Stein, 2008). Accordingly, people with social anxiety experience trembling hands, sweating, blushing, fear of

doing something that will cause humiliation, and thus avoiding certain social environments (being in a crowd) when they are in public, sitting, standing, speaking etc.) is afraid of taking part (Dilbaz, 1997; Öztürk, 1990). At this point, people with high levels of social anxiety think that they are examined by others and avoid being evaluated negatively (Hofmann et al., 2010; Rapee, 1995). In line with this information, social anxiety can be expressed as the state of being afraid of social environments and avoiding such environments, thinking that they are observed and evaluated by their social environment (Sağar, 2021). When the subject is evaluated in the context of the research, it can be said that the loneliness levels of the teacher candidates who stay away from these environments due to the fear of being evaluated and examined in the social environments they are in may increase. Therefore, it is thought that social anxiety may be a variable associated with loneliness.

Loneliness can be expressed as the uneasiness experienced by individuals due to the conflict or incompatibility of their desired interpersonal relationships with their current social relationships. Accordingly, loneliness can be explained as a negative mood that occurs as a result of the contradiction and incompatibility between the desired social relations and the existing social relations. Loneliness, which can be seen in individuals of all age groups, can cause a loss of function in different areas of daily life and threaten mental health. In this context, it can be said that loneliness, which is important for mental health for all age groups, is also a problem that needs to be studied for teacher candidates. From this point of view, it is thought that determining the variables related to loneliness in teacher candidates will benefit from a better understanding of the loneliness problem and preventive and remedial mental health studies to be carried out at this point. In the literature review about loneliness, it was found that studies examined social anxiety. However, it was thought that these studies were handled on different samples and should be updated with original data. In this case, it is expected that the research will make important and valuable contributions to the field. In this context, it was aimed to examine how much the social anxiety variable predicted the loneliness levels of teacher candidates. In addition, it

is wondered whether there is a difference in the level of loneliness among teacher candidates in terms of gender. Therefore, another aim of this study is whether the loneliness levels of teacher candidates show a significant difference according to gender. The research conducted for this purpose, “Does the variable of social anxiety significantly predict the loneliness levels of teacher candidates?” and “Does the loneliness levels of teacher candidates show a significant difference according to their gender?” sought answers to questions.

1. Method

In this study, the relational research method was used to reveal whether two or more variables affect each other (Karasar, 2016). The dependent variable of the research is loneliness, while the independent variable is social anxiety.

1.1. Study Group

The study group consisted of 281 teacher candidates who were studying at different universities in Turkey in the 2022-2023 academic year in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades of the Faculty of Education. The age of the study group ranged from 18 to 27 and the mean age was 21.14. In addition, 47.7% (n=134) of the study group were male and 52.3% (n=147) were female. The distribution of the study group in terms of gender is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Distribution of the Research Group by Gender

Gender	N	%
Male	134	47.7
Female	147	52.3
Total	281	100

1.2. Data Collection Process

Ethics committee approval was obtained from Afyon Kocatepe University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Date of Decision: 24.02.2023; Meeting: 02; Number of Documents: 166179). After obtaining the necessary permission, the research data were collected via Google Forms online (online) method. The researcher sent the data collection tools prepared

via Google Forms to the teacher candidates via e-mail and invited them to the research. The study was based on the participation of volunteer teacher candidates. In this context, firstly, informed consent was requested from the teacher candidates. During the data collection process, attention was paid to the principle of confidentiality and accordingly, teacher candidates were informed.

1.3. Data Collection Tool

Ucla Loneliness Scale (ULS-8)

This scale was developed by Russell et al. and revised in 1980. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was carried out by Doğan et al. (2011). It consists of 8 items. In the reliability study of the scale, the internal consistency coefficient was calculated as .72 for the entire scale (Doğan et al., 2011). In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha (α) reliability coefficient of the total scores of the scale was .85.

Short Form of the Social Anxiety Scale

The measurement tool (with three sub-dimensions and 18 items), which was originally developed for children by La Greca and Lopez (1998), was revised by La Greca et al. (2015) and prepared for high school students and adults. Nunes et al. (2018) revised this 18-item form of the scale and created a short form consisting of 12 items. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was carried out by Can and Bozgün (2021). It consists of 12 items. In the reliability study of the scale, the internal consistency coefficient was calculated as .90 for the entire scale. The scale is a five-point Likert type (Can & Bozgün, 2021). In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha (α) reliability coefficient of the total scores of the scale was calculated as .89.

Personal Information Form

It was created within the scope of this research in order to obtain information about the gender and age of the teacher candidates in the study group.

1.4. Data analysis

The relationship between teacher candidates' social anxiety levels and loneliness was determined by Pearson correlation analysis. The predictive relationship

of social anxiety levels on loneliness was tested with simple linear regression analysis. In addition, t-test analysis was applied for independent samples in order to determine whether the loneliness levels of teacher candidates show a significant difference according to their gender.

Kurtosis and skewness values were checked to determine whether the data met the normality assumption. It was observed that the skewness and kurtosis values related to the social anxiety level and loneliness scores met the assumption of normality (Kurtosis and skewness values related to social anxiety = -.02 to -.48; loneliness kurtosis and skewness values = .39 to -.62).

2. Findings

In the research findings section, firstly, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation values of the study group's loneliness and social anxiety scores are given. Then, simple correlation analysis coefficients for the variables are presented. Then, the results of simple linear regression analysis for the prediction of loneliness are included. Finally, t-test results for independent samples are presented in order to determine whether loneliness differs statistically according to the gender variable.

The arithmetic mean and standard deviation values of the study group's loneliness and social anxiety scores are given in Table 2.

Table 2: *The Arithmetic Mean and Standard Deviation Values of the Study Group's Loneliness and Social Anxiety Scores*

Variable	N	\bar{X}	SS
Loneliness	281	14.74	4.68
Social Anxiety	281	54.98	16.25

When Table 2 is examined, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation values of the study group were determined as loneliness ($\bar{X} = 14.74$; $SS = 4.68$) and social anxiety ($\bar{X} = 54.98$; $SS = 16.25$). Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the social anxiety scores and levels of the study group and loneliness. The obtained results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: *Relationship Chart Between Social Anxiety and Loneliness*

Variable	Loneliness
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Social Anxiety	.527**
N	281

p<.01

When Table 3 is examined, it was found that there is a positive and moderate relationship as a result of the Pearson correlation analysis performed to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the social anxiety levels of the study group and loneliness ($r = .527, p < .01$). Accordingly, if the level of social anxiety increases, the level of loneliness will also increase. Then, simple linear regression was performed to reveal the predictive power of the social anxiety variable to the level of loneliness. The obtained results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Simple Linear Regression Analysis Results of Social Anxiety Level as a Predictor of Loneliness

Variable	B	Standard Error	β	t	p
Constant	6.408	.840		7.626	.000
Social Anxiety	.152	.015	.527	10.347	.000

$R = .527, R^2 = .277, F_{(1-279)} = 107.053, p < .01$

When Table 4 is examined, social anxiety scores have a positive predictive effect on loneliness ($R = .527, R^2 = .277, F_{(1-279)} = 107.053, p < .01$). The findings show that social anxiety explains about 28% of the variance on loneliness. Therefore, based on this finding, it can be said that as the level of social anxiety increases, the level of loneliness also increases. To determine whether the loneliness levels of the study group differ statistically according to the gender variable, a t-test was applied for independent samples and the results are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Examination of Loneliness Scores by Gender

Variable	Gender	N	\bar{X}	S.s.	t	p
Loneliness	Male	281	14.70	4.55	.131	.896
	Female	281	14.78	4.80		

When Table 5 was examined, it was determined that there was no significant difference in the loneliness levels of the study group according to gender. In line with this finding, it can be said that gender is not a factor affecting the level of loneliness.

3. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

As a result of the study, there was a positive and moderately significant relationship between loneliness and social anxiety. It was observed that the social anxiety variable was a significant predictor of the loneliness variable. The social anxiety variable explained approximately 28% of loneliness. In addition, as a result of this study, it was concluded that there was no significant gender difference in the loneliness levels of teacher candidates.

The teaching profession is a field of study where social skills are at the forefront as well as educational and professional performance. In this context, it is of great importance that teacher candidates can develop socially in addition to their academic and professional skills. Therefore, it is among the behaviors expected from teacher candidates to develop in professional and educational aspects, to make progress in these areas by using the opportunities appropriate for the period they live in, and to integrate with society by using their social skills. On the contrary, they shouldn't distance themselves from society by isolating themselves, to experiencing social anxiety due to being in front of society, being alone, complicating or hindering their mental health and other vital activities, as well as their professional development and productivity. For this reason, it is critical that teacher candidates do not experience problems such as loneliness and social anxiety in order to progress and develop healthily in all aspects (academic, educational, professional and social). It is thought that providing insight into loneliness and social anxiety in teacher candidates and determining the variables associated with these problems are also important in terms of remedial and preventive mental health studies.

In this study, which was carried out on teacher candidates, it was determined that the social anxiety variable predicted loneliness at a significant level and there

was a positive and significant relationship between them. In other words, it can be said that as the social anxiety level of teacher candidates increases, the level of loneliness increases. When the literature is examined, studies that directly address the relationship between loneliness and social anxiety have been found. For example, the finding from this study supports the results of the studies conducted by Lin and Fan (2022); Maes et al. (2019) that there is a positive relationship between loneliness and social anxiety. Similarly, in the study conducted by Johnson et al. (2001), it is consistent with the result that social anxiety and social avoidance feelings are associated with feelings of loneliness. In addition, the result of the research conducted by Lim et al. (2016) that social anxiety is the only predictor of future loneliness is compatible with the result of this study. In another study conducted by Danneel et al. (2019), in which loneliness and social anxiety symptoms were examined in three measurements, one year apart, the result of this study is in line with the conclusion that social anxiety symptoms play a very important role as a potential precursor of loneliness. Moreover, it is consistent with the conclusion that there is a strong relationship between social isolation and social anxiety in the research conducted by Teo et al. (2013) on the meta-analysis of studies examining the relationships between social isolation and social anxiety. When the results of the current study in the literature and the results obtained from this study are evaluated together, it can be stated that loneliness is also high in teacher candidates with high social anxiety levels. In this respect, it can be said that reducing the social anxiety levels of teacher candidates has an important function in reducing their loneliness levels, and studies to be conducted to reduce their social anxiety levels can make a positive contribution to reducing their loneliness levels.

Another result obtained in this study is that there is no significant difference according to gender in the loneliness levels of teacher candidates. In this case, it can be said that gender does not have a significant effect on the level of loneliness. When the literature is examined, this result supports the results of the studies conducted by

Çeçen (2008), and Ekinçi et al. (2015) that the difference in loneliness levels according to gender is not significant. Contrary to this study, studies by Barreto et al. (2021); Victor et al. (2006) found that loneliness is more common in men than women. It is thought that this difference in the results may be due to the characteristics of the study groups. In this context, it can be said that loneliness is a psychological problem that can negatively affect life for both males and females in changing life conditions.

In line with the study, it can be said that the loneliness of teacher candidates with high levels of social anxiety may also be high. Based on this result, it is thought that studies aimed at reducing the social anxiety levels of teacher candidates may help them to be more resistant to loneliness. In addition, this study concluded that there was no significant difference according to gender in the loneliness levels of teacher candidates. This study has some limitations as well as revealing important results that low social anxiety can help reduce loneliness and that there is no difference in the level of loneliness according to gender. These are limitations such as the fact that the study group consisted of only teacher candidates, examining only the social anxiety variable with loneliness, and the study was carried out with quantitative data. In this direction, a similar study can be carried out on different study groups (such as other university students/prospective candidates, adults, adolescents, children, etc.) other than teacher candidates. In the context of this study, only the social anxiety variable was evaluated and other psychological factors that could be related to loneliness were not examined. In future studies, the predictor of different variables on loneliness can be examined. This study is cross-sectional, so it does not present cause-effect relationships between loneliness and social anxiety. In future studies, the cause-effect relationships between loneliness and social anxiety can be examined based on different methods. Although loneliness and social anxiety are investigated in current studies, this study provides important information in terms of examining a special group such as teacher candidates and updating the data. Therefore, in this study, by adhering to the existing findings in the literature, it was tried to reach the

original data on the prediction of loneliness of the social anxiety variable as well as confirm the previous findings on social anxiety studies with loneliness. In this direction, studies on preventing or reducing loneliness among teacher candidates can be included in studies that can reduce their social anxiety levels. Therefore, interventions related to social anxiety can also be tried on loneliness. In addition, group studies, intervention programs, seminar studies and training programs can be carried out to reduce the loneliness levels of teacher candidates.

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