

Research into the Empathic Skills and the Anxiety Level of Adolescents

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Abstract: In this research, it was aimed to determine the empathic skills and the anxiety levels of adolescents and to find out whether gender caused differences in empathic skills and anxiety levels. A total of 388 adolescents attending second-year at high schools participated in the study. A “General Information Form” was used to obtain some information about the adolescents, the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B was used to determine their empathic skills and the “State and Trait Anxiety Inventory” was used to assess their anxiety level. The data were tested analyzed by means of SPSS. The findings were tested by a t-test for independent samples and Pearson Correlation Coefficients. Statistical differences were set at $p < 0.05$. The results revealed that there is a significant differences in the trait anxiety levels of adolescents by gender ($p < 0.05$), however; there is no significant differences among gender and empathic skills and the state anxiety levels of adolescents ($p > 0.05$). Additionally, the research was, also, cited that there is no meaningful correlation among the empathic skills and the state and trait anxiety levels of adolescents.

Key words: Adolescent, empathic skills, anxiety level, psychology and sociology

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is one of the important elements of communication and empathetic communication among the individuals in a family is a desirable situation. The concept of empathy has been studied in many different ways in terms of psychology and sociology. Rogers has conducted some studies on the concept. According to his understanding of empathy, in the foundation of the notion lay one's putting himself or herself in the other's position and viewing the situation from that person's point of view; understanding and sensing the other person's emotions and thoughts correctly and the process of his or her communicating the situation to that person (Dökmen, 1990, 2004). Empathy serves towards bringing people closer and facilitating communication in all human relations in all fractions of daily life. People feel that they are understood and are given importance to them when empathy is established with them. Being understood by other persons and being given importance relieves the individual and makes the person feel good (Geçtan, 1984; Pervin, 1989; Moore, 1990; Baltas and Baltas, 1993; Voltan-Acar, 1994; Gander and Gardiner, 1995; Dökmen, 2004). One of the most important prerequisites of acceptance is empathy. It is important to realise the needs and emotions of other individuals in the group as well as one's own needs and emotions. The individuals capable of empathic thinking can interpret the events in a better way and can comprehend the problems of others more easily. Empathic

thinking is an important factor in solving problems in relations easily. Such peculiarities of individuals will facilitate their acceptance by their social environment. The individuals who can think in an empathetic manner live through fewer troubles in their relations as they are aware of their own feelings and can express their emotions (Yavuzer, 2002; Kalkınç, 2003; Dökmen, 2004).

One of the most common psychological problems of adolescence is anxiety (Eldeleklioğlu, 2006). Anxiety, which is found in human structure and explained as an emotional reaction to environmental and psychological occurrences, is generally defined as a vital power for the existence of human beings, as well as a disturbing and hurtful emotion. Anxiety occurs as a result of conflict and frustration, causing internal stress and discomfort, the reason of which is not known (Özdal, 2003; Babaroğlu, 2004). Anxiety is frequently equated to a response to a fear producing stimuli. Anxiety by stating that fear reactions affect nearly every system of the body: physiological, cognitive, motivational, affective or emotional and behavioral (Ross, 1990). There are two types of anxiety, namely state anxiety and trait anxiety. While state anxiety is defined as the subjective fear that one feels owing to the stressed situation she/he is in, trait anxiety is defined as the liability of an individual to anxiety life. Trait anxiety, on the other hand, exists as a property peculiar to the person and although it is felt more under certain circumstances, it covers the whole life (Öner and LeCommpte, 1985). According to Howard and Medway (2004) it is widely acknowledged that

adolescence is a stressful time for many youth and that these stresses can potentially lead to serious disorders. Rather than sudden and severe trauma, family breakups, or culturally related stresses associated with poverty, the most frequent and prominent stresses faced by adolescents are considered “generic stresses”. These types of stresses result from everyday interactions associated with the adolescent developmental period and include peer and family conflicts, academic problems and school transitions, initiating and maintaining friendships, self-image and puberty concerns and financial and work-related issues. According to Gürsoy and Yıldız (2005) the anxiety that children and adolescents go through differ according to the properties of the age they are in. In the early years, the biggest anxiety of the child is separation from the mother. At the age of 4 and 5, girls have anxiety for winning the father’s love whereas boys do so for their mothers’. In school years, the anxiety is about making friends. In adolescence, on the other hand, the dimension of anxiety is formed around the adolescent herself/himself. The insecurity anxiety caused by identity confusion during this period may be the kind of anxiety encountered most.

During the adolescence period, the adolescent questions himself and the life itself; he starts thinking in an abstract manner, which results in an interest in different subjects; he develops interest in the opposite sex; and thinks about the occupation that he wants to have in the future. When the adolescent experiences all this, he might feel anxious for various subjects and different variables can be influential on his worries. This research aimed to determine whether the variable of gender caused differences in empathic skills and anxiety levels or not and to find out correlation between the empathic skills and the state and trait anxiety levels of adolescents or not.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The universe of the research is composed of adolescents attending the second grade of high schools in center of Ankara. The study was conducted on 388 adolescents. In the research, a “General Information Form” was used to obtain some information about the adolescents and the “State and Trait Anxiety Inventory”, which was developed by Spielger and whose validity and reliability study was carried out by Öner and Le Compte (1985), was used to determine their level of anxiety. The Trait Anxiety Inventory is used to determine the long-term effect of an event. Trait Anxiety Inventory and State Anxiety Inventory has been used. Twenty statements constitute the inventories in the direct way and the

reverse sense and the total points to be obtained from each inventory will vary between 20 and 80. The higher the score is, the higher the level of anxiety is.

The Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B (ESS-Form B), developed by Dökmen (1988), has been used to determine the empathetic skill levels of parents. The Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B is a measuring instrument that has been developed based on the gradual empathy classification and that stresses on the cognitive component of empathy. The scale includes 6 separate psychological problems regarding the daily life. There are twelve reactions for each problem. The subjects are asked to select four of these 12 reactions. The choices of the subject are graded out of the points in the grading key. The sum of these points shows the total points received by the subject. The total points received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B show an individual’s empathetic skill level: The higher the grade is, the higher the level of empathetic skills. One of the twelve reactions submitted under each problem is meaningless and the form of the subject who selects this choice is invalidated. Dökmen has applied the ESS-Form B on sixty freshman students of Ankara University, Faculty of Education and twenty-four psychologists working in different institutions, with the aim of testing its reliability and validity. For reliability, the ESS-Form B has been applied on sixty subjects with an interval of a fortnight and the “r” value has been found to be 0.83; i.e., $r = 0.83$ ($p < 0.001$). In the validity study, it has been anticipated that there is a meaningful difference between the students and the psychologists in favour of the latter ($t = 8.15$, $p < 0.001$). In another validity study, it has been found that there is a relation between the ESS-Form B and Role Playing Test (RPT) at the level of $r = 0.78$ ($p < 0.001$) (Dökmen, 1988, 1990).

t-Test” was used to determine whether gender created any difference at the anxiety levels of adolescents and Pearson Correlation Coefficients was used to determine whether correlation between the empathic skills and the state and trait anxiety levels of adolescents or not (Büyükoztürk, 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aimed at determining the empathic skills and the anxiety levels of adolescents and finding out whether gender caused differences in empathic skills and anxiety levels or not. The results of the analyses were presented in tables and they were discussed by using supporting arguments.

Table 1 shows the results of the t-Test revealed that gender did not cause any significant difference in

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient significance test results related with the points received by preservice teachers of preschool education from the empathic skills scale-form B and state and trait anxiety of gender

Empathic skills scale-b form	State anxiety	Trait anxiety
Pearson correlation	0.040	0.027
P	0.427	0.591
N	388	388

Table 2: Means points, standard deviations and t-test results regarding the points received by preservice teachers of preschool education from the empathic skills scale-form B, state and trait anxiety of gender

	Gender	N	X	SD	df	t	p
Empathic skills scale-b form	Male	175	131.94	15.16	386	0.32	0.744
	Female	213	131.42	16.14			
State anxiety	Male	175	41.78	9.98	386	1.11	0.267
	Female	213	42.95	10.59			
Trait anxiety	Male	175	42.94	7.54	386	5.32	0.000
	Female	213	47.13	7.91			

empathic skills of the adolescents This shows that gender does not lead to any difference in empathic skills of adolescents ($t_{(386)} = 0.32, p > 0.05$). Köksal and Büttin (2006) emphasized in their study those adolescents' scores of empathic skills do not baset on gender. Other studies also report that the empathic skills of males and females do not differ (Alver, 1998; Eisenberg and Mc Wolly, 1993; Köksal, 1997; Köksal, 2000).

The results of the t-Test revealed that gender did not cause any significant difference in the state anxiety levels of the adolescents ($t_{(386)} = 1.11, p > 0.05$). The statistical analysis shows that gender causes a significant difference at the trait anxiety level of adolescents ($t_{(386)} = 5.32, p < 0.01$). When Table 2 is investigated, it can be seen that the trait anxiety level of females is higher than that of males. The reason for the difference might be the influence from different attitudes of parents towards their sons and daughters in raising them. According to Adams (1995) it was reported that most of the problems that adolescents endure stem from interpersonal relations, emotions, maturation and families; and that females experience more problems than males in these areas. Albano and Krain (2005) emphasized in their study that females experience higher levels of anxiety compared to males and hence, they are more prone to anxiety related diseases. Various research stresses that the anxiety level of females is higher than that of males (Gates *et al.*, 1988; Kıratlı, 2001; Abdel-Khalek, 2002; Özdal, 2003; Alansarı, 2006).

As can be seen in Table 1, there is no statistically significant relationship between the empathic skills Scale-Form B and state and trait anxiety of gender ($p > 0.05$). Empathic skills levels of adolescents do not effect their state and trait anxiety level. Loudin, Loukas and Robinson (2003) also reported in their study that

there is not meaningful correlation between the scores of the empathic concern and social anxiety for male and female.

CONCLUSION

In the light of these results, the following can be recommended for further research; Research to determine the relationship between the empathic skills and the anxiety levels of adolescents and properties such as their depression levels and identity concepts can be conducted. The relationship between the empathic skills and the anxiety level of adolescents and the parents' attitudes can be studied. The effects of the factors that have not been dealt with in this study, such as birth order, number of siblings, mather and father education level caused differences on empathic skills and anxiety levels of adolescents can be examined. Experimental activities may be planned in order to develop the empathic skills of adolescents.

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