

Social Support and Optimism as Predictors of Life Satisfaction of College Students

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to investigate the predictive value of optimism, perceived support from family and perceived support from faculty in determining life satisfaction of college students in Turkey. One hundred and thirty three students completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener *et al.*, Journal of Personality Assessment 49(1):71–75, 1985), Perceived Social Support Scale-Revised (Yıldırım, Eğitim Araştırmaları–Eurasian, Journal of Educational Research 17:221–236, 2004), and Life Orientation Test (Scheier and Carver, Health Psychology 4(3):219–247, 1985) and provided demographic information about themselves. Independent samples *t*-test, correlation, and multiple regression analyses were performed for data analysis. Significant relationships were found among the variables, with regression analysis indicating that perceived support from family, perceived faculty support, and optimism were statistically significant predictors of life satisfaction. The implications of these results are discussed and suggestions made for counseling practice and future research.

Keywords Life satisfaction · Social support · Optimism · Turkish college students

Introduction

Subjective well-being (SWB) has become a notable research topic in the field of psychology in the last half century (Zhang 2005). SWB research is based on the assumption that well-being can be identified through assessing individuals' lives (Diener and Suh 1997). SWB can be divided into two broad dimensions (a) an affective component, which is considered in terms of negative/positive distinctions, and (b) a cognitive component, which involves perceived satisfaction with life. Life satisfaction involves an aspect of judgment, whereby individuals evaluate the quality of their lives based on particular criteria (Pavot and Diener 1993).

Life satisfaction has been considered as a central construct of SWB (Diener and Diener 1995), and has become a wide-ranging research field among social scientists (Diener *et al.* 2003).

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Various studies have been conducted to determine the factors related to life satisfaction (Schaefer *et al.* 2007). A review of the literature reveals that self esteem (Chow 2005), collective self esteem, which refers to “feelings and evaluations of the worthiness of a social group” (Zhang 2005, pp. 191–192), depression, anger, positive/negative affect (Pilcher 1998), family structure (Evans and Kelley 2004), happiness (Neto 2001), physical, spiritual, psychological, and social health (Schaefer *et al.* 2007), are regarded as predictors of general life satisfaction.

Most studies on life satisfaction have been conducted within a single country or in regard to a specific group (Selim 2008). Some studies, however, have investigated cross-national differences in life satisfaction (e.g., Diener and Diener 1995; Oishi *et al.* 1999; Selim 2008; Suh *et al.* 2008). Thus, a comprehensive knowledge-base on the demographical, personal, and cultural elements of life satisfaction has developed over time.

College life provides various important opportunities and challenges in regard to the personal development of students. Undergraduate students have to make important decisions that will affect their long-term futures in regard to career, friendships, romantic relationships, and family relations (Stevic and Ward 2008). In making such decisions, students need levels of social support from significant others, such as family members, friends, and faculty. Social support has been extensively researched (Goodwin and Plaza 2000). According to Cohen *et al.* (1985), social support systems typically involve four types of resources (a) tangible support, which refers to instrumental aid that includes providing money, materials and services; (b) appraisal support, which involves advice, feedback and suggestions and, when needed, sharing personal problems; (c) self-esteem support, which refers to positive statements and evaluations about accomplishments; and (d) belonging support, which includes sharing leisure time activities and having someone to spend time with. Cohen and Wills (1985) proposed that being in a sound social network that buffers the effects of psychological stress is beneficial to well-being. The literature provides clear evidence of an association between perceived social support and well-being.

It has been stated that satisfactory interpersonal relationships are important for college students in terms of life quality. In a study by Bailey and Miller (1998), it was proposed that students who were more satisfied with their lives also had more satisfying family relationships. In another study, Edward and Lopez (2006) reported that perceived family support was a significant predictor of life satisfaction. Similarly, Henry (1994) and Chang *et al.* (2003) found that parental support was positively related to satisfaction with life.

In a study conducted with a Turkish sample (Deniz 2006), it was found that there was a significant relationship between seeking social support and life satisfaction. In addition, it has been stated that having satisfying relationships with faculty members is beneficial for college students (Hagedorn *et al.* 2000). For instance, Sax *et al.* (2005) found that perceived support from faculty was related to various positive outcomes, such as emotional well-being. Together, these studies show the importance of social support of various forms in the life satisfaction experience of college students.

A variable that logically would seem to be related to life satisfaction for college students is optimism. When individuals experience difficult life events, it would seem to be more adaptive to have positive expectations rather than negative (Solberg Nes *et al.* 2009). Some persons typically believe that good things will happen to them and hold positive expectations about events and experiences. Conversely, pessimists typically expect negative outcomes rather than positive for any situation (Scheier and Carver 1985; Scheier *et al.* 1994). Optimistic people generally hold a positive bias in regard to the future, whereas pessimists generally hold a negative bias (Czech *et al.* 2002) and a reasonable assumption would be that this difference would relate directly to life satisfaction.

The hypothesis regarding the relationship between life satisfaction and optimism in the current study is based on the well-being literature. In recent years, optimism has received considerable attention in assessing and predicting satisfaction with life (Bailey *et al.* 2007). A literature review revealed that optimism has been directly associated with well-being (Ho *et al.* 2010). For instance, in a college group, Montgomery *et al.* (2003) found significant relationships between optimism and psychological functioning that included goal commitment, and personal, social and academic adjustments to college. In another study, conducted with Turkish college students, Türküm (2005) found optimism to be related to college students' sense of well-being. Therefore, optimism might be expected to have an influence on individuals' well-being because there is likely to be a relationship between stances towards the future and a general appraisal of life (Schweizer *et al.* 1999).

Life satisfaction of Turkish college students has been found to be positively related to a sense of coherence and self esteem (Çeçen 2008; Dilmaç and Ekşi 2008), postmodern values and identity status (Özgüngör 2009), emotional intelligence (Deniz and Yılmaz 2004), and individualism (Yetim 2003), and negatively related to hopelessness (Gençay 2009), loneliness (Bugay 2007; Tuzgöl Dost 2007), and emotional loneliness, which is one of the dimensions of loneliness (Çeçen 2007). Although, as stated, relationships between life satisfaction and other specific variables among college students have been well documented, the potential relationships among life satisfaction, the seemingly important social support networks and the basic stance of optimism seems important to investigate. So far as we know, the relationship among all these variables has not been tested previously with Turkish students. This study aimed at providing a preliminary examination of the role of family support, faculty support, and optimism on life satisfaction. Thus, the current study would be useful to help determine the variables that deserve more attention in predicting satisfaction with life of students.

Rode *et al.* (2005) found significant relationships between life satisfaction and academic performance and, consistent with this, Tuzgöl Dost (2007) found similar associations between satisfaction with life and academic achievement with a Turkish college group. Therefore, having a better understanding of what key variables relate directly to life satisfaction would seem important in regard to assisting students with academic success and personal adjustment. With such an awareness, psychological and educational interventions could be designed to have an impact.

In this regard, this study sought to examine the relationships among optimism, perceived support from family and faculty, and life satisfaction among college students. Based on previous literature cited above, significant correlations between these variables were expected. It was hypothesized that perceived support from family and from faculty, and optimism would be significant predictors of life satisfaction. It was also seen as potentially informative to determine if there was any significant difference in this regard between male and female Turkish college students.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 133 undergraduate students (54 female, 79 male) from Ankara University, Turkey. The mean age of participants was 20.86 years, with a standard deviation of 1.76 years. Forty-four participants (32.4%) were freshman, seven (5.1%) were sophomores, 20 (14.7%) were juniors, and 62 (45.6) were seniors. All respondents were registered in the Faculty

of Educational Sciences and were invited to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. Those who were willing to participate in the study completed the questionnaire packet in class. The packet included a consent form, a demographic information sheet, and the three questionnaires, and took approximately 20 min to complete.

Instruments

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener *et al.* 1985) was utilized to determine students' life satisfaction levels. The SWLS measures general life satisfaction and consists of five items. Sample items include "I am satisfied with the conditions of my life" and "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal". Each item was rated on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The SWLS was adapted to Turkish by Köker (1991) and the Turkish form of the scale showed a test-re-test reliability of $r = .85$. In the present study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was found to be .74.

The Perceived Social Support Scale-Revised (PSSS-R) was developed by Yıldırım (2004) to assess students' perceived social support from family, friends and teachers. The scale has 50 items and consists of three subscales, which are family support (FS), support from friends (SFF), and support from teachers (SFT). Examples of items are "He/She appreciates me when I study harder" and "He/She really trusts me". Participants are asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 3-point scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 3 = strongly agree). Cronbach alpha coefficients for the scale and subscales have been assessed as .93 for the total, .94 for FS, .91 for SFF, and .93 for SFT (Yıldırım 2004). In this study, alpha coefficients were .93 for the total, .93 for family support, .89 for support from friends, and .93 for support from teachers.

The Life Orientation Test (LOT) (Scheier and Carver 1985) was administered to measure students' optimism level. The LOT consists of eight items, plus four filler items that are neutral statements. Sample items include "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best" and "I hardly ever expect things to go my way". Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (ranging from 0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Cronbach alpha and test-re-test reliability coefficients for the original version of the scale were .76 and .79, respectively (Scheier and Carver 1985). The scale has been adapted to Turkish by Aydın and Tezer (1991). Internal consistency ($\alpha = .72$) and test-re-test reliability (.77) of the Turkish version of the scale were reported to be adequate. The coefficient alpha in the current study was .63.

Data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software. First, means and standard deviations for all variables were examined. Second, correlations between life satisfaction and support from family, support from faculty and optimism were assessed. Third, an independent samples *t*-test was run to compare female and male students in terms of life satisfaction scores. Finally, a standard multiple regression analysis was performed to find out the predictive value of social support and optimism in terms of life satisfaction. Perceived support from family, perceived support from faculty, and optimism were considered as predictor variables.

Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations between the outcome variable (life satisfaction) and predictor variables (perceived support from family, perceived support from faculty, and optimism). As shown, life satisfaction had a significant relationship with

Table 1 Means, standard deviations and Pearson correlation coefficients of variables

Scale	r				M	SD
	1	2	3	4		
Life satisfaction	–	.50**	.47**	.31**	24.36	5.51
Family support	.50**	–	.40**	.28**	51.63	7.60
Faculty support	.47**	.40**	–	.24**	35.78	8.13
Optimism	.31**	.28**	.24**	–	19.64	4.40

** $p < .01$

all three predictor variables. Also, perceived support from family scores were correlated with both perceived faculty support and optimism scores.

Table 2 presents the mean scores of life satisfaction in terms of gender. The overall mean life satisfaction score was 24.36 (SD=5.51). Female students' life satisfaction level ($M=26.07$, $SD=5.20$) was higher than male students ($M=23.18$, $SD=5.44$), with the t -test results revealing a significant difference in this regard ($t=3.05$, $df=131$, $p < .01$).

A standard multiple regression was performed between life satisfaction as the dependent variable and perceived support from family, perceived support from faculty, and optimism as independent variables. Table 3 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients (B), the standardized regression coefficients (β), the semipartial correlations (sr^2), R^2 , and adjusted R^2 scores. R for regression was significantly different from zero [$F(3, 129)=23.81$, $p < .001$], with R^2 at .36. An adjusted R^2 value of .34 indicates that a third of the variability in life satisfaction of college students was predicted by family support, faculty support, and optimism.

The semipartial correlations, when squared, indicate the amount by which R^2 would be reduced if an independent variable (IV) was omitted from the equation (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007). The sum for the two significant IVs ($.304^2 + .273^2 = .167$)—family support and faculty support—is the amount of R^2 attributable to unique sources. The difference between R^2 and unique variance ($.356 - .167 = .189$) represents the variance that family support, faculty support, and optimism jointly contribute to R^2 .

The three IVs in combination contributed another .19 in shared variability. Altogether, .36% of the variability in life satisfaction was predicted by these three IVs. The size and direction of the relationships suggest that when students perceive more support from their family and faculty, and have an optimistic stance, their life satisfaction would be higher. However, among these, family support and faculty support are much more important, as indicated by the squared semipartial correlations. As can be seen from Table 3, optimism did not contribute significantly to regression. Apparently, the relationship between optimism and life satisfaction is mediated by the relationships between family support, faculty support, and life satisfaction.

Table 2 Life satisfaction level of participants

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t
LS	Male	79	23.18	5.44	131	3.05*
LS	Female	54	26.07	5.20		

* $p < .01$

Table 3 Results of standard multiple regression analysis

Variable	B	Std. Err. B	B	t	P	sr ² (unique)
Constant	.90	2.92	–	.31	.76	–
Family support	.25	.06	.34	4.31	.001	.09
Faculty support	.20	.05	.30	3.87	.001	.07
Optimism	.17	.09	.14	1.85	.06	.01

$R = .60$, $R^2 = .36$, Adjusted $R^2 = .34$, $F(3, 129) = 23.81$

Discussion

Transition from high school to college life is a significant life event for individuals. Earning a degree is important for both students and families because typically it improves life opportunities. During college years, students may experience considerable life stress because of numerous challenging life events. Therefore, college students' life satisfaction and related factors are worthwhile to investigate.

In this study, it was found that there was a gender difference in terms of life satisfaction. Female students reported more satisfaction with life than male students. This finding is consistent with some previous research (e.g., Deniz and Yılmaz 2004; Gençay 2009; Tuzgöl Dost 2007), although other findings suggest ambiguity in regard to this matter. For example, Bugay (2007) found that male students' life satisfaction level was higher than for female students, and other studies (e.g., Gündoğar *et al.* 2007; Tümkaya *et al.* 2008) have shown no difference between males and females regarding life satisfaction. On the basis of these differing findings, it can be concluded that gender differences on life satisfaction of college students needs further investigation.

The findings in the study revealed the importance of college students' social support networks and optimism level in regard to understanding their levels of satisfaction with life. Results confirmed that perceived social support from family and faculty are particularly important predictors of life satisfaction of college students. In other words, students' levels of life satisfaction increased as the levels of perceived support from family and faculty increased.

These results were essentially as predicted. Findings of this study are consistent with earlier findings in the literature (e.g., Chang *et al.* 2003; Deniz 2006; Edward and Lopez 2006; Henry 1994), which emphasize that social support is associated with higher life satisfaction. Thus, it is possible to affirm that having healthy relationships with family members and faculty in particular affects positively the life satisfaction of students, with optimism being also a relevant, but seemingly lesser, contributor.

College years are an exciting time of life for students. There are many personal challenges and opportunities for personal growth and advancement. Because of its importance, students might need to get assistance regarding family and faculty relationships, and in regard to adopting an optimistic stance. Psycho-educational programs aiming at enhancing students' social support networks and level of optimism might be beneficial for improving students' satisfaction with life. Both individual and group counseling services can be provided for college students in order to enrich their life quality. In addition, counselors working in college counseling/health centers may provide wellness programs to enhance the quality of life, satisfaction with life and holistic development of students. These interventions could also increase our understanding of the usefulness of psycho-educational programs

on life satisfaction. Experimental studies could be designed to test effects of programs on students.

Measuring social support in the study was based on a stance that distinguishes providers of social support, which were in this case family and faculty. Further research may focus on measuring different types of social support, such as tangible, appraisal, self-esteem and belonging support, and different providers, such as romantic partners, close friends and relatives (see Wan *et al.* 1996).

Building strong relationships with family members is important for individuals in Turkish culture. Çeçen (2008) found that a sense of family coherence has a strong correlation with life satisfaction in Turkish university students. Also, Yıldırım (2006) stated that grandparents and other relatives are important social support resources in the Turkish context. The present findings support the relevant literature by showing that social support is associated with life satisfaction. From a practical perspective, family life education services could be made to enrich familial and relational bonding.

In summary, this study makes a contribution to the literature on life satisfaction of college students by determining its relationships in regard to perceived social support and optimism in the Turkish context. The findings generally support the links among life satisfaction, perceived social support and optimism; however, these results must be interpreted with caution because the current study was conducted on a limited number of undergraduate students. Also, some potential response distortions may affect the interpretability of the results because self-report measures were used. Another limitation of the study could be not addressing the causal direction of the relationships. When making causal inferences, care must be taken about the impact of social support on life satisfaction. The relationship between social support and life satisfaction may be reciprocal. Future research should examine causal relationship between these variables with longitudinal designs.

Replicability of these findings should be made before making firm conclusions about these variables. The current study focused on relationships among social support, optimism, and life satisfaction. Future research could also investigate how life satisfaction is associated with other variables, such as academic achievement, romantic relationship satisfaction, hope and self-esteem. Finally, further research is needed to better understand constructs regarding life satisfaction in the Turkish context. However, considered overall it would be important for those involved in assisting college students in their adjustments and functioning to focus attention on social support networks involving family and faculty and the attitudinal stance that students take to their various challenges and opportunities.

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