



Self-esteem as mediator and moderator of the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction in adolescents

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the mediator and moderator effects of global self-esteem on the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction in adolescents were investigated. The participants were 439 students, between age range of 15–18, who were attending four different high schools in Turkey. Data were collected by using the UCLA loneliness scale, Rosenberg self-esteem scale, and the satisfaction with life scale. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that global self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction. However, global self-esteem did not moderate the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction. The results are discussed in terms of the conceptual context.

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1. Introduction

It is important that young generations experience a “happy childhood” period with respect to both their emotional and social development and possession of a “positive power” that they can utilize in their adult years. The term happiness is generally called subjective well-being in the positive psychology literature (Diener, 2000). The concept of subjective well-being, which reflects individuals’ affective and cognitive evaluations of their lives, encompasses an affective domain, which is formed by positive and negative emotions, and a cognitive domain, which is known as life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is defined as general cognitive evaluations of an individual as to whether he or she is content with his or her own life as a whole, or whether he or she is content with such specific areas of life as the family, friends and living environment. Accordingly, individuals with high levels of subjective well-being, have higher life satisfaction and experience positive emotions more than negative ones (Suldo & Huebner, 2006).

As some research indicates, life satisfaction is an important psychological variable in the adolescence period. For example, numerous studies on adolescents have shown that the level of neuroticism (Fogle, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2002), clinical maladjustment, external locus of control (Huebner & Gilman, 2006), and violent behaviors (Valois, Paxton, Zullig, & Huebner, 2006) decreases as life satisfaction increases. According to some studies, adolescents with high life satisfaction establish more positive relationships with their peers and parents (Gilman & Huebner,

2006) and receive more social support from their parents, teachers and friends (Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Adolescents with high life satisfaction reported more positive attitudes toward school and teachers, and higher academic success than adolescents with low satisfaction (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Adolescents with high life satisfaction have higher emotional, social, and academic self-efficacy than those with low life satisfaction (Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Adolescents with high life satisfaction have low levels of anxiety and depression and high levels of self-esteem and hope (Gilman & Huebner, 2006), thus they have fewer experiences of emotional and behavioral problems (Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Therefore, life satisfaction is an important positive indicator of psychological and social development of adolescents and a key concept in adolescent adjustment.

One of the important predictors of life satisfaction in adolescents is loneliness (Chipuer, Bramston, & Pretty, 2003; Neto, 1993). Loneliness is most commonly defined as an unpleasant experience which emerges when an individual perceives deficiency in the quality and quantity of his or her social relationships. In other words, loneliness is the subjective discrepancy between one’s actual and aspired level of social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Although loneliness may be experienced in any period of life, adolescents are more susceptible to loneliness (Brennan, 1982). Rapid changes that occur in adolescence, separation from parents, efforts to form an identity and increasing need for intimacy are reported as developmental factors which contribute to loneliness in adolescents (Brennan, 1982; Mijuskovic, 1986).

High susceptibility to loneliness in adolescents is also due to the changes that start to take place in social relationships. Johnson, Rose, and Russell (1992) have reported that adolescents experience

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more conflict and mutual dissatisfaction in their relationships with their parents and they grow emotionally distant from each other. Changes are also observed in adolescents' relationships with their peers. They establish new relationships and gradually expand their peer group. They interact with the opposite sex more and start dating, and their social relationships become more complex (Kirchler, Palmonari, & Pombeni, 1993). In this period, they need to redefine their important social relationships such as those they have with their family and friends, and find themselves in a position to assume new social roles (Jackson, 1993). Failure to adjust to the change process in social relationships may lead to isolation and loneliness (Johnson et al., 1992). In the adolescence period when group membership and peer relationships become important (Cotterell, 1996); loneliness can be expected to have a negative effect on adolescents' life satisfaction. Some studies (e.g., Chipuer et al., 2003; Neto, 1993; Neto & Barros, 2000) have shown that life satisfaction decreases as loneliness increases in adolescents. Thus, it can be stated that loneliness is an important variable in adolescents' life satisfaction when they are susceptible to experience loneliness and social relationships gain greater importance.

Self-esteem is one of the most examined variables as a predictor of life satisfaction besides demographic characteristics, social relationships, personality, and coping (Zhang & Leung, 2002). According to Diener and Diener (1995), both self-esteem and life satisfaction indicate one's global evaluations, yet the direction of these evaluations is different. Self-esteem reflects an individual's perceptions and evaluations of himself or herself, while life satisfaction involves an individual's evaluation of his or her life as a whole. On the other hand, from the life satisfaction perspective, global self-esteem reflects an individual's judgments of herself or himself and is seen as a component of global life satisfaction, which involves evaluations of different areas of life like the family, school and friends as well as oneself (Huebner, Gilman, & Laughlin, 1999).

In some studies, high self-esteem has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction in both adults (e.g., Chen, Cheung, Bond, & Leung, 2006; Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1994) and adolescents (e.g., Neto, 1993, 2001; Zhang & Leung, 2002). Many studies on adolescents (e.g., Casas et al., 2007; Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Huebner et al., 1999; Neto, 2001; Zhang & Leung, 2002) have shown a positive relationship between life satisfaction and self-esteem. On the other hand, there are studies which have shown that self-esteem has a positive effect as an intervening variable (e.g., Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Yarcheski, Mahon, & Yarcheski, 2001) on the relationship between variables with similar conceptual content such as life satisfaction, general well-being, perceived happiness and some other variables (personality characteristics, social support, etc.). Similarly, a mediator effect of self-esteem on the relationship between loneliness and depression has been observed (Brage & Meredith, 1994). However, no study has been encountered to examine the mediator or moderator effect of self-esteem on the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction. Considering the studies that have shown the relationships of self-esteem with loneliness (e.g., Brage, Meredith, & Woodward, 1993; Mahon, Yarcheski, Yarcheski, Cannella, & Hanks, 2006; McWhirter, Tricia, Besett-Alesch, Horibata, & Gat, 2002; Neto, 2002) and life satisfaction (e.g., Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Zhang & Leung, 2002) in adolescents, it is predicted in this study that self-esteem may play an intervening variable role in the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction.

The aim of this study is to test the role of self-esteem as an intervening variable in the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction in adolescents through two alternative models. In the mediational model, whether self-esteem functions as a mediator between loneliness and global life satisfaction has been examined. In the light of the reciprocal relationships between self-esteem, loneliness and life satisfaction which have been estab-

lished by previous studies, it was predicted in the current study that as loneliness decreases, life satisfaction will increase in adolescents, and that self-esteem will have an indirect role in this increase. A meta-analytical study (Haney & Durlak, 1998) has shown that preventive and treatment programs directed at improving self-concept in children and adolescents lead to positive changes in different adjustment areas. Studies are encountered which show that self-esteem exhibits a moderating function between psychological distress and some psychological variables (e.g., stressors, perceived inequity, perceived sexist events) in both adults and youth (e.g., Kliewer & Sandler, 1992; Longmore & Demaris, 1997; Moradi & Subich, 2004). As mentioned before, self-esteem is strongly related with both loneliness and life satisfaction in adolescents. Self-esteem may not only serve as a mediator between loneliness and life satisfaction, it may also have a "buffer" role (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004) which decreases the negative effect of loneliness on life satisfaction as a moderator. Therefore, in the moderational model of this study, it was predicted that the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction in adolescents with high self-esteem would be smaller compared to adolescents with low self-esteem. In summary, the aim of this study is to examine whether global self-esteem plays a moderating and mediating role in the relationship between loneliness and global life satisfaction in adolescents.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 439 students (202 males and 237 females) from four high schools in Denizli, a mid-sized city in the western part of Turkey. The age range was 15–18 ($M = 16.08$, $SD = 0.88$) and the majority of the participants (97%) ranging from 15 to 17 years old. One hundred ninety-five of the participants attended ninth grade, 101 attended tenth grade and 143 attended eleventh grade. Though information on students' socio-economic levels was not collected, it is estimated that they mainly come from a medium socio-economic level.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. The satisfaction with life scale (SWLS)

The SWLS measures a person's subjective evaluation of his or her life. The SWLS developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) consists of five items. Each item is answered on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The SWLS has good psychometric properties (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The scale was adapted for Turkish adolescents by Köker (1991). Test-retest coefficient for the SWLS-Turkish version was 0.85 and item-total correlations ranged between 0.71 and 0.80 (Köker, 1991). The obtained internal consistency reliability for this measure was 0.78 in the present study. It includes items such as, "I am satisfied with my life" and "In most ways my life is close to my ideal".

2.2.2. UCLA-R loneliness scale

The UCLA-R loneliness scale consists of 20 items, half of which are reverse scored. The participants rated the items on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (often). Scores on the scale range from 20 to 80 with higher scores reflecting greater loneliness (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). The scale was adapted by Demir (1989) into Turkish. UCLA-R loneliness scale-Turkish form showed a very high level alpha (0.96) and test-retest reliability (0.94). For the present study, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82 was

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