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Perceived Stress and Life Satisfaction in College Students: Belonging and Extracurricular Participation as Moderators

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Abstract

This study has two aims. The first was to examine the changes in perceived stress and life satisfaction in terms of college belonging, major belonging, and the participation in extracurricular activities. The second aim was to test the moderating effect of college and major belonging, and extracurricular activities in the relationship between perceived stress and life satisfaction. The participants were 477 undergraduate students at a public university in Turkey. To collect the data, The Perceived Stress Scale, The Satisfaction with Life Scale and a personal information form were used. The results of MANCOVA indicated that the students having a high college and major belonging had low perceived stress and high life satisfaction. In addition, perceived stress and life satisfaction did not change significantly based on whether the students participated in extracurricular activities. However, among the students participating in extracurricular activities, the students who had high college belonging have low perceived stress and more life satisfaction. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis indicated that only college belonging played a moderator role in the relationship between perceived stress and life satisfaction. In conclusion, this study reveals that especially the college belonging is important in terms of stress and life satisfaction in college students.

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1. Introduction

In college years, young adults are responsible for their health, school life and financial situation. Therefore, college years are accepted as one of the most stressful periods since youths need to manage their own lives (Cress & Lampman, 2007). In a study conducted by Pierceall and Keim (2007), 75% of the college students perceive stress at

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a moderate level, and 12% had a high level of stress. Ross, Niebling and Heckert (1999) reports the sources of stress as follows: 38% from intrapersonal stressors (e.g., new responsibilities), 28% from environmental stressors (e.g., change in living environment), 19% from interpersonal stressors (e.g., fight with boyfriends / girlfriends), and 15% from academic stressors (e.g., low grade). As shown by some studies (Chao, 2012; Darling, McWey, Howard & Olmstead, 2007; Otrar, Eksi, Dilmac & Sirin, A 2002; Ross et al., 1999), the following issues can be a source of stress for college students: academic grade anxiety, ambiguity about their future plans, financial problems, family matters, relations with opposite sex, and interpersonal relationships. Specifically, university students can experience stress in roommate conflict, changes in sleeping and eating habits, public speech, and increased course workload (Darling et al., 2007; Ross et al., 1999). The previous researches presented that the stress in college students is related to many negative (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation) (Eisenbarth, 2012; Otrar et al., 2002; Pengilly & Dowd, 2000; Wilbum & Smith, 2005) and positive indicators (e.g., self-esteem, optimism, hardiness) (Eisenbarth, 2012; Extremera, Durán & Rey, 2009; Pengilly & Dowd, 2000; Wilbum & Smith, 2005) of mental health. Therefore, college students frequently experience stress due to the challenging experiences of young adults, and this situation becomes a factor which hampers with their psychological adjustment.

Life satisfaction is one of the positive adjustment indicators which are affected by the stressful lives of college students. Life satisfaction is among three components of subjective well-being, which is the terminological equivalent of happiness. Positive and negative affection consist of pleasant and unpleasant emotions; however, life satisfaction is about cognitive evaluation of individual's lives (Diener & Suh, 1997). As a more stable one than affective components, life satisfaction enables to carry out long-term evaluations regardless of a certain time length (Eid & Diener, 2004). Furthermore, perceived life satisfaction is highly related with a compound index consisting of the indicators of objective quality of lives such as health, financial status, freedom, entertainment and so on (Diener & Suh, 1997). Consequently, perceived life satisfaction is based on perpetual evaluations about individuals' own lives, and it provides important clues on the quality of individuals' lives.

According to a study by Diener (2000) on college students from 17 different countries, happiness and life satisfaction are more important than money for most college students. In another study, it was observed that financial stress did not significantly predict life satisfaction (Chow, 2005). Some studies indicate that life satisfaction increases as loneliness (Cecen, 2007; Tuzgol-Dost, 2007), depression, despair, anxiety (Gundogar, Gul, Uskun, Demirci & Kececi, 2007), anger and frequency of illness (Pilcher, 1998) decrease. Similarly, responsibilities related to the roles of life and romantic relationships, school and family satisfaction increase with the increase in life satisfaction (Bailey & Miller, 1998). Furthermore, life satisfaction is related with optimism (Extremera et al., 2009), academic performance, self-image (Chow, 2005), physical health, social relationships (Chow, 2005; Darling et al., 2007). In sum, life satisfaction is a concept attributed as valuable by college students, and it is highly correlated with both psychological/affective variables and some daily life events. Therefore, it is one of the most important indicators of psychological health.

Belonging is another concept which is related to psychosocial and academic adjustment of college students (Ostrove & Long, 2007). It has also been stated that many positive and negative emotions are related to the sense of belonging. To be accepted, included, or welcomed leads to positive senses such as happiness, pleasure and satisfaction; however, to be refused, excluded, or ignored might result in negative feelings such as anxiety, depression and loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of belonging is under the membership subcategory of four components of sense of community (membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection). In this way, sense of belonging comprises feelings, beliefs and expectations related to being accepted to a group, having a place in the group and being willing to play an active role in this group when needed.

It is suggested that school belonging may be a key concept of positive experiences for college students and school belonging is defined as the connectedness to school or perceived school membership. In addition to the connectedness to school, school belonging includes belonging to other individuals in the same school and perception of fitting into the school (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). The previous research shows that social and academic adjustments (Ostrove & Long, 2007), scholastic competence, friendship quality, social acceptance and self-worth increase, and problem behaviors diminish with the increasing college belonging (school belonging) (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). The college students interacting with their friends and faculty members have a high sense of belonging (Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007). Gundogar et al. (2007) show that life satisfaction is correlated

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