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## An investigation of loneliness and perfectionism in university students

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate loneliness and perfectionism of the university students. The sample set of the research was 535 university students 328 of which were female and 207 were male. T test and Pearson's product moment coefficient technique were used for the statistical analyses of the research. As a result of the study with respect to gender, the concern over mistakes, parental expectations, parental criticism and personal standards scores of the male students were significantly higher than the scores of female students. However the relationship between loneliness and concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental criticism was positively significant, there was a negatively significant relationship between loneliness and organization. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

The loneliness is defined as a psychologically irritating situation affecting one's position in his/her psychological well-being, emotional and physiological characteristics (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; McWhirter, 1990). According to Peplau & Perlman (1982) loneliness is the distressing psychological experience that occurs when there is a discrepancy between one's desired and one's actual social network, either qualitatively (e.g., absence of deeply intimate relationships) or quantitatively (e.g., too few friends). Loneliness is a subjective experience in that it does not necessarily simply isolation, but instead is the result of self-perceived deficiencies in social relationships. The factors which are related to the loneliness at the cognitive level can be listed as: one's own negative feeling about himself/herself, the increase of the irrational opinions, not being able to control the life and fatalism (McWhirter, 1997). It is widely agreed to result from a deficiency in an individual's social relationships. Additionally, loneliness is subjective, and does not reflect the size of one's social network or their number of associates (Peplau and Perlman 1982). People who have excessively high standards for themselves may also have problems with social anxiety that impairs their ability to make friends easily and develop close relationships, so that lead them to loneliness. They may be overly concerned that others also have high standards and are likely to be critical. By avoiding contact with others they never get to learn that others may be less critical than expected. Therefore for people who are anxious in

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social situations, avoidance help to maintain perfectionist beliefs about the self (Antony & Swinson, 2000a). Perfectionism has been defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards and to engage in overly critical self-evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). According to Antony & Swinson (2000b) perfectionism is different from simply having high standards. High standards are often useful because they motivate us to work hard and succeed. In the case of perfectionism, however the standards are so high and so inflexible that they actually interfere with performance by causing a person to over prepare for tasks (for instance, spending hours rehearsing a presentation), procrastinate or be overly critical of his or her performance.

Based on what has been theorized about perfectionism, a multidimensional measure was developed and several hypotheses regarding the nature of perfectionism were tested in four separate studies. The major dimension of this measure was excessive concern over making mistakes. Five other dimensions were identified, including high personal standards, the perception of high parental expectations, the doubting of the quality of one's actions, and a preference for order and organization (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). Hewitt and Flett's (1991a) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) assesses perfectionism as a phenomenon consisting of three dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially-prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism is defined as the tendency for an individual to set and seek high self-standards of performance. Other-oriented perfectionism describes the tendency for an individual to expect that others should or will be perfect in their performance, and socially prescribed perfectionism refers to the tendency for an individual to believe that others expect perfection from him or her (Hewitt & Flett 1991b). Individuals with socially prescribed perfectionism perceive that external sources impose standards upon them. These perfectionist individuals believe they must maintain unrealistic expectations that others have placed on them, and these are necessary for acceptance and approval (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991a, 1991b). Both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism are related to psychological distress in both clinical and non-clinical populations. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism is sometimes associated with fewer symptoms of depression (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein & Mosher, 1995), raising the question of how closely other-oriented perfectionism defines the original construct.

The second predominant multidimensional perfectionism measure is the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) (Frost et al. 1990). Frost et al. define perfectionism as a variable involving excessive self-criticism associated with higher personal standards, concern over meeting social expectations, and excessive focus on organization and neatness, and doubts about the effectiveness of one's actions. There has also been some research that has investigated the relationships between the Frost dimensions of perfectionism, loneliness and also depression. Generally, these studies have been conducted with adolescents and have found that total perfectionism scores on the MPS-Frost, as well as the concern over mistakes and doubts about actions subscales, are associated with depressive symptoms and loneliness (Chang, 2002; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, Neubauer, 1993; Minarik & Ahrens, 1996). According to the results of their study Chang, Sanna, Chang & Bodem (2008) indicated that loneliness was also hypothesized to moderate the link between perfectionism and symptoms. Results indicated that other-oriented perfectionism predicted anxious symptoms, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism predicted both depressive and anxious symptoms. Loneliness was found to add incremental validity to these predictions. Moreover, the perfectionism and loneliness interaction was found to further augment the prediction of depressive and anxious symptoms.

Another description is one that classifies perfectionism as normal (adaptive) perfectionism or neurotic (maladaptive) perfectionism. Hamachek (1978) previously distinguished between normal and neurotic perfectionism. Normal perfectionism involves the setting of realistic and reasonable expectations and goals that are motivated by the need for achievement, which allow individuals to enjoy striving for perfectionism that brings them satisfaction and enhances their self-esteem. On the other hand, neurotic perfectionism involves the tendency to set unrealistically high personal standards in every situation and to be motivated by an intense need to avoid failure. While normal perfectionism, as the positive dimension of perfectionism, can be viewed as highly socially desirable and a component of healthy psychological functioning, neurotic perfectionism, as the negative dimension, is expected to be more closely associated with a variety of psychological symptoms (Blatt, 1995; Flett et al. 1995). Being overly perfectionistic toward oneself can also lead to problems in relationship and friendship, for example complaining excessively whenever you get less than an A on an exam may be insulting to friends who have to struggle to get B or C. They might wonder what you think of them, given that their grades are so much lower than what you expect (Antony & Swinson, 2000a). Perfectionistic persons subjectively experience more frequent and more threatening situations due to perceived standards they feel must be met. Thus, when stressors occur, these individuals react in maladaptive ways due to poor coping skills/strategies (Hewitt, Flett & Endler, 1995). The aim of this study is to investigate if the loneliness and perfectionism mean scores of the university students differ with

respect to the gender variable and the relationship between the loneliness and perfectionism scores of the university students.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

The general search model was adopted for the study. The sample set of the research was taken from faculties of law, literature, education, technical education and vocational education in Selcuk University. The participants for this study were totally 535 students 328 of which are girls and 207 are boys. The age of the participants was between 18-28 ( $\bar{X} = 21,43$  ve  $Ss = 1.88$ ).

#### 1.1.0. Instruments:

1.2.0. University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA): University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA): The UCLA -developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson (1978), revised by Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), and adapted to Turkish participants by Demir (1989) was used to measure the loneliness levels of students. The UCLA is a 20-item Likert type scale to measure the general loneliness levels of participants. The reliability coefficient of the UCLA was calculated as .94 by the Retest Method and the Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient of the UCLA was found to be .96. The parallel form validity of the UCLA was tested with the Beck Depression Inventory and the correlation coefficient was found to be .77 (Demir, 1989).

1.3.0. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS): The FMPS that was originally developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart ve Rosenblate (1990) was used to evaluate the perfectionistic propensities of the individuals. The FMPS is a 35-item instrument designed to measure perfectionism. Each item uses a 5-point Likert-type scale (1- disagree strongly, 5- agree strongly). The FMPS was translated to Turkish, and reliability, and validity studies of the scale were carried out with a Turkish sample of 489 students (Özbay & Tasdemir, 2003). The results of the reliability study showed that the test-retest correlation coefficients ranged between .63 and .87. Özbay & Tasdemir, (2003) reported internal consistency reliabilities for the subscales as Concern Over Mistakes, .77; Personal Standards, .63; Parental Expectations, .71; Parental Criticism, .65; Doubts About Actions, .61; and Organization, .87. Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .80.

### 1.2. Data Analysis

SPSS 16.00 program was used in order to evaluate the data which were collected from scales employed in the research. The Pearson correlation coefficient technique and independent t test were used for the statistical analyses of the research

## 2. Results

Table 1. Investigation of loneliness and perfectionism in university students with respect to gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	p
Loneliness	Female	328	24,2043	4,90750	-1,633	,103
	Male	207	24,4831	4,81789		
Organization	Female	328	21,8384	5,56816	-,645	,519
	Male	206	22,9951	6,34727		
Concern Over Mistakes	Female	328	13,0762	3,65864	-2,213	,027*
	Male	207	13,3285	3,58913		
Doubts About Actions	Female	328	14,5640	4,49623	-,783	,434
	Male	207	15,4010	4,32183		
Parental Expectations	Female	328	7,9695	2,67946	-2,128	,034*
	Male	207	8,5362	2,91421		
Parental Criticism	Female	328	19,8780	3,68115	-2,303	,022*
	Male	207	20,7005	3,65598		
Personal Standards	Female	328	32,9299	8,84688	-2,524	,012*
	Male	207	34,2995	10,33080		

As a result of independent t test, the loneliness mean scores with respect to gender were not found to be significantly different. However, concern over mistakes, parental expectations, parental criticism and personal standards scores of the male students were significantly higher than the scores of female students.

Table 2. The relationship between the loneliness and perfectionism in university students

	Organization	Concern Over Mistakes	Doubts About Actions	Parental Expectations	Parental Criticism	Personal Standards
Loneliness	-,171**	,248**	,285**	,050	,307**	-,051

As seen in Table 2, there is a significant negative relationship between loneliness and organization, and a positive relationship between loneliness and concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental criticism.

### 3. Discussion

According to the results of the study, significant differences were not found in students' loneliness mean scores. In several researches (Hamarta, 2000; Tümkaya, Aybek, & Çelik, 2008; Deniz, Hamarta & Arı, 2005) the loneliness mean scores of male students were found significantly higher than the female students. However the results of some researches (Çeçen, 2008; Öztürk 1997) loneliness scores was found not to be significantly differ with respect to gender which support our findings. Also Rokach and Bacanlı (2001) were found that there is no significant difference between the male and female in Turkey in perceiving loneliness. In the light of these studies, it should be better to make different researches in order to be understood the relationship between gender and loneliness. In addition female students' concern over mistakes, parental expectations, parental criticism and personal standards scores are significantly higher than the male students' scores. This result can be explained by the expectations of the society. Women are expected to be emotive and cooperative, to take care and to give importance to the relationships by the society. It is emphasized for men that they are expected to behave independently, to represent the family and to be competitive (Temel & Aksoy, 2001; Hamarta, 2004). For this reason men can be expected to be more perfectionist than the women according to the social expectations.

Another finding of our research is that there is a significant negative relationship between loneliness and organization and positive relationship between loneliness and concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental criticism and expectations. Weiss categorizes loneliness as emotional and social, and defines that emotional loneliness is related with family, close friends and romantic relationships, social loneliness is related with friendships in social environment (Çeçen, 2008). Loneliness is mostly subjective and related with self judgements (Coşkuner, 1994). Among the reasons of loneliness in adolescence period, relationship with family, teachers, school and social environment have an important place (Aral, Gürsoy & Yıldız Bıçakçı, 2006). It has been found out that there is a close relationship between the level of perfectionism of parents and adolescents among the studies which have been carried out on perfectionism (Vieth & Trull, 1999; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1991). In the light of all these opinions, loneliness is the negative self- perception about one's actual situation and related with family and social relationships and perfectionist students who have high standards for themselves and also for others may have difficulties in social relationships. As a result of these deficiencies in relationships, students may feel themselves alone.

### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

According to the results of the study the loneliness mean scores of the university students was not significantly different with respect to gender. There was no significant difference in doubts about actions and organization subscales of perfectionism with respect to gender variable, however there was significant difference in concern over mistakes, parental expectations, parental criticism and personal standards subscales. In another finding of the research, a negative relationship was found between the loneliness mean scores of university students and organization subscale of perfectionism and positive relationship between loneliness and concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations and parental criticism subscales. To conclude, it can be said that

organizing the counselling and guidance programs considering the perfectionism and loneliness definitions will be very beneficial.

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