

Full Length Research Paper

The relationship between emotional literacy, cognitive flexibility and counseling self-efficacy of senior students in psychology and psychological counseling and guidance

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The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between emotional literacy, cognitive flexibility and counseling self-efficacy among senior students studying in psychology and psychological counseling and guidance departments. Participants of the study were 397 (306 female and 91 male) undergraduate students enrolled in Medipol University, Trakya University, Ankara University, Pamukkale University, İstanbul Commerce University and NuhNaci Yazgan University. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 38 with the mean age of 22.36 (SD 1.67). For data collection, the 34-item Emotional Literacy Scale, 12-item Cognitive Flexibility Scale and 41-item Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale have been used. The results of path analysis yielded that emotional literacy has positively direct correlations with helping skills self-efficacy and session management self-efficacy whereas cognitive flexibility has positively direct correlations with helping skills self-efficacy, session management self-efficacy and counseling challenges self-efficacy. The proposed model of emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility came by accounting for 21% of the variance of the helping skills self-efficacy, 17% of the variance of the session management and 12% of the variance of the counseling challenges self-efficacy in the current study.

Key words: Emotional literacy, cognitive flexibility, counseling self-efficacy, undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Counseling is a collaborative psychological partnership which takes place between a client and counselor in a face-to-face interactive setting for the purposes of helping the client gain a greater understanding and awareness of

themselves in order to lead a more fulfilling life (Tan and Baloğlu, 2006). Its effectiveness depends on various or indeed all factors related to the counsellor, who plays an active role in the process (Cormier and Hackney, 2005).

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These factors include both the level of their theoretical knowledge and educational background (Larson, 1998) as well as experience in therapeutic practices (Büyükgöze-Kavas, 2011), mindfulness (May and O'Donovan, 2007), effective interpersonal communication skills (Anderson et al., 2009), and personality traits (Topolinski and Hertel, 2007). According to Kepçeoğlu (1999), it is essential that a counselor fulfills the role of a professional who possesses the expertise to take responsibility for and manage the counseling session, as well as an openness to ongoing professional development.

A counselors' determination to build upon and extend their professional training and personal and professional development is critical to the effectiveness of their abilities. Relevant research has shown that counselor training programs are important in that they significantly increase the effectiveness of counseling (Brott, 2006; Yager and Tovar-Blank, 2007). Mullen et al. (2015) have emphasized the importance of counselor training for the first counseling session, supervision period, and the identification of self-efficacy beliefs. In this vein, Hill et al. (2008), in particular, have forwarded the idea that counseling training programs increase counselor candidates' self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Self-efficacy is an important concept in regard to counselor's competency (Barnes, 2004; Larson and Daniels, 1998). Larson (1998) asserts that an individual's self-belief and self-acceptance are important factors influencing the effectiveness of the counseling process. Counseling self-efficacy is defined as "an individual's beliefs and judgments about his or her ability to effectively counsel a client in the near future" (Larson et al., 1992). This is largely considered an important criterion used to evaluate the development of counseling skills and an individual's counseling abilities (Larson and Daniels, 1998).

The importance of self-efficacy in the field of counseling is reported by the researches for various variables such as counselor supervision (Lambie and Sias, 2009; Kozina et al., 2010), emotional intelligence (Easton et al., 2008) and counselor personality (Larson et al., 1992). According to Lent et al. (2003), one's level of counseling self-efficacy can be gauged in terms of three competencies: helping skills, session management, and counseling challenges. Helping-skills self-efficacy entails the effective use of counseling skills (assisting discovery, insight, and action). During the *discovery* phase, the counselor helps their client focus on a particular problem and discover their thoughts and feelings about it. During the *insight* phase, they are tasked with helping the client develop new perspectives to their problems and to gain an awareness which enables them to reconsider these problems in a new light. Finally, during the *action* phase, counselors are charged with assisting clients in making positive changes to their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors relating to the problems into which they have

gained insight in the aforementioned phases. Counsellors must go through these stages together with the client by establishing a good therapeutic relationship (Hill and O'Brien, 1999). Session management relates to maintain counseling sessions effectively and smoothly. This requires the counselor to establish a therapeutic alliance with the client and get them actively and emotionally engaged (Skovholt and Ronnestadt, 2003). Clients may intrinsically encounter cases such as suicidal thoughts, abuse, and domestic violence. For many counselors, dealing with these kinds of cases can become overwhelming for obvious reasons. Thus, it is highly important that mental health professionals (counselors/therapists) be supportive of their clients in order help them deal with such states of consciousness and get to the bottom of their most urgent and outstanding underlying causes (Karakurt et al., 2014).

One of the key elements of counseling self-efficacy seems to come in the form of what is referred to as emotional literacy. Emotional literacy is defined as an understanding and awareness of one's own emotions as necessary in order to develop one's own personal capacity and life quality, as well those of others (Steiner, 2003). In a way, being emotionally literate involves the ability to regulate one's own emotions in order to derive satisfaction and pleasure from life. Emotional literacy develops interpersonal relations, reinforces love between human beings, and allows for more fruitful cooperation between individuals (Steiner, 2003). Emotional literacy involves self-awareness and personal skills in dealing with intense emotion and also covers having empathy, authorizing and respecting others, efficient communication and conflict management skills, having a positive and useful approach, building emotional resources (Nemec and Roffey, 2005)

According to Steiner (2003), emotional literacy requires five main skills: awareness of one's own emotions, empathy, knowledge of how to manage emotions, an ability to deal with emotional damage, and the development of emotional interaction. Similarly, Suhaly and Tiah (2005) maintain that emotional literacy entails such skills as empathy, emotional awareness, self-motivation, social skills, and self-regulation. A counselor who possesses these skills is likely to provide a more effective counseling service. Similarly, Corey (2013) claims that being a good counselor involves establishing and maintaining a good therapeutic relationship with the client, choosing the appropriate counseling techniques that best suit the clients' needs, and controlling one's own reactions and responses. Pearson and Wilson (2008) contend that receiving training on expressive art therapy is important for the counselor to better understand and manage their own emotions and increase their emotional self-efficacy.

In addition to emotional literacy, another critical attribute of a counselor, which may help them overcome the difficulties they face during counseling, is cognitive

flexibility. The construct of cognitive flexibility has been well examined. However, there is no consensus within the literature about how to define this construct definitely (Dennis and Vander Wal, 2010). Cognitive flexibility is an important structure of healthy individuals' cognitive processes (Doğan-Laçın and Yalçın, 2019). This enables individuals to understand that there are alternatives, and to be more sensitive to others' emotions (Martin and Rubin, 1995) and change the path of their thoughts according to the alternatives present (Asıcı et al., 2018). Cognitive flexibility is based on awareness of choices and alternative solutions to a given situation, willingness to be flexible under new conditions, and feeling of competence and confidence in these situations (Martin and Anderson, 1998). Dennis and Vander Wal (2010) define cognitive flexibility as the ability to convert one's cognitive system according to the changing environmental factors, produce solutions, and adapt to the new environment. A person with cognitive flexibility is aware of the possible alternatives, can effectively cope up with challenging and unusual situations by his ability to produce alternative approaches, and can easily adapt to a new environment and social life (Altunkol, 2011; Hill, 2008; Ionescu, 2012; Martin and Anderson, 1998; Martin et al., 1998). Several pieces of research have shown that cognitive flexibility interacts with other attributes, such as mindfulness (Moore and Malinowski, 2009), involving in diversifying events (Ritter et al., 2012), problem solving skills (Cañas et al., 2010), and well-being (Koesten et al., 2009).

The counseling process can be stressful for many counselors, especially for the novice, due to reasons related to session management, problems brought by the client, and the difficulties that emerge naturally within the counseling process. Improving counseling students' self-efficacy in relation to counseling skills is a significant developmental goal within counselor training programs (Larson and Daniels, 1998); as counseling process can be devastating, especially emotionally, for some counselor trainees. In order to be able to offer effective counseling services throughout their careers, counselor trainees have to overcome these difficulties. At such times, counseling students' levels of cognitive flexibility and ability to understand the client's emotions are considered instrumental in continuing the counseling process. Lastly, allowing to comprehend the effects of variables on counseling students' skills, this study aimed to analyze the effect of emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility on the self-efficacy of counselor trainees.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study is a correlative-descriptive study that investigates the relationships between emotional literacy, cognitive flexibility, helping skill self-efficacy, session management self-efficacy and counseling challenges self-efficacy levels of senior university students in psychology and psychological counseling and guidance

departments. In the correlative model, emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility were the independent variables while helping skill self-efficacy, session management self-efficacy and counseling challenges self-efficacy were the dependent variables.

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 397 (306 female and 91 male) fourth grade students within the departments of psychology and psychological counseling and guidance of Medipol University, Trakya University, Ankara University, Pamukkale University, Istanbul Commerce University and NuhNaci Yazgan University. The ages of the participants ranged between 20 and 38 and the average age was 22.36 (SD= 1.67). The participants were selected via a purposive sampling method.

Instruments

Emotional literacy scale

This is a 34-item scale developed by Akbağ et al. (2016). The scale consists of five sub-dimensions: emotional awareness, social competence, understanding emotions, emotional self-efficacy, and emotion regulation. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 34, while the highest score possible is 170. The Cronbach α coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.80 while test retest reliability came to 0.89.

Cognitive flexibility scale

This is a 6-point Likert-type scale developed by Martin and Rubin (1995) to determine a person's level of cognitive flexibility. This scale was adapted to Turkish by Altunkol (2011). The scale has 12 items, with the lowest score constituting 12 and the highest coming to 60. The internal consistency Cronbach α coefficient calculated to test the reliability of the Cognitive Flexibility Scale was found to be 0.81 and the test-retest reliability was 0.73 in the adaptation study.

Psychological counseling self-efficacy scale

This was developed by Lent et al. (2003) to measure the levels of psychological counseling self-efficacy of psychological counselor candidates. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Pamukçu and Demir (2013). The scale has three factors along with 41 items. The first factor called "self-efficacy" consists of 15 items and consists of three sub-dimensions, insight, discovery and action skills. The second factor labeled "self-efficacy related to session management", consists of 10 items. "Self-efficacy related to the difficulties in the psychological counseling process" constituting the third factor consists of 16 items. There are two sub-dimensions in this factor: conflicts in relationships and client problems. The responses for each item range from (0) "I don't trust at any" to (9) "I totally trust all". The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is "0" and the highest score is "369". High scores indicate a high level of self-efficacy in counseling. The McDonald's Omega (ω) coefficient of the scale was 0.92 for the self-efficacy subscale; 0.95 for self-efficacy related to session management subscale and 0.95 for the self-efficacy related to the difficulties in the psychological counseling process subscale.

Data analysis

After the data collection process was completed, the data was

Table 1. Intercorrelations between the variables of the study.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Emotional literacy	-				
2. Cognitive flexibility	0.52**	-			
3. Helping skill self-efficacy	0.42**	0.40**	-		
4. Session management self-efficacy	0.36**	0.39**	0.70**	-	
5. Counseling challenges self-efficacy	0.25*	0.35**	0.57**	0.68**	-

Table 2. Model fit indices for the proposed model and criterion values.

Goodness of fit indexes	Model fit indices of the proposed model	Criterion ranges
χ^2 , df	3.26; 1	Non-significant
χ^2 /df	3.26	χ^2 /df < 3
CFI	0.99	CFI > 0.90
TLI	0.97	TLI > 0.90
RMSEA	0.08	0.08 > RMSEA > 0.05

examined and cleared in terms of missing values, outliers and normality using SPSS 20 statistical program (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2006). Following this, the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were performed with the same program. Subsequently, the AMOS 18 statistical program was used to determine the predictive effects of emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility on helping skill self-efficacy, session management self-efficacy and counseling challenges self-efficacy.

Procedure

The data was collected from the students studying in psychology and psychological counseling and guidance departments of various universities in the 2017-2018 Spring Semester. After obtaining permission from the Ethics Committee of Istanbul Medipol University, the data was collected by the researchers in the classroom environment during the times negotiated with the instructor of the class. During the application of the scales, the purpose of the research was explained orally by the researchers. As the scales were applied in five different universities, the completion of applications was lasted for two months.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

In advance of the path analysis, the intercorrelations between the study variables were discovered, as presented in Table 1.

The results of the Pearson moment correlations displayed in Table 1 show that emotional literacy has significantly positive relations with cognitive flexibility ($r=0.52$, $p < 0.01$), helping skill self-efficacy ($r=0.42$, $p < 0.01$), session management self-efficacy ($r=0.36$, $p < 0.01$) and counseling challenges self-efficacy ($r=0.25$, $p < 0.01$). Likewise, cognitive flexibility also shows

significantly positive connections to the dependent variables such as helping skill self-efficacy ($r=0.40$, $p < 0.01$), session management self-efficacy ($r=0.39$, $p < 0.01$) and counseling challenges self-efficacy ($r=0.35$, $p < 0.01$).

Path analysis

The predictive effects of emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility on the dependent variables of helping skill self-efficacy, session management self-efficacy and counseling challenges self-efficacy were tested through a path analysis. Based on the sufficient evidence for the assumption of normality, a Maximum Likelihood Estimation was conducted to test the proposed model (Kline, 2011).

As a first step, the goodness of fit for the proposed model was examined through a number of model fit indices. The model fit values, which emerged together with the criterion cut-offs, are presented in Table 2.

Based on the values given in Table 2, it can be concluded that the normed Chi-square value ($\chi^2(1) = 3.26$, $p = 0.07$) does not satisfy the criterion of being less than 3 but both (CFI=0.99) and Tucker Lewis indexes (TLI=0.97) that are above the expected 0.90 value as well as the RMSEA value of 0.08 that is in the assumed ranges of 0.05 to 0.08 indicate satisfactory results for the goodness of fit requirement of the proposed model to the data (Bentler, 1990; Browne and Cudeck, 1993; Kline, 2011; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004).

In the last phase of the path analysis, the standardized estimates for the proposed relations were detected and depicted in Figure 1. Based on the standardized parameters presented earlier, it can be considered that

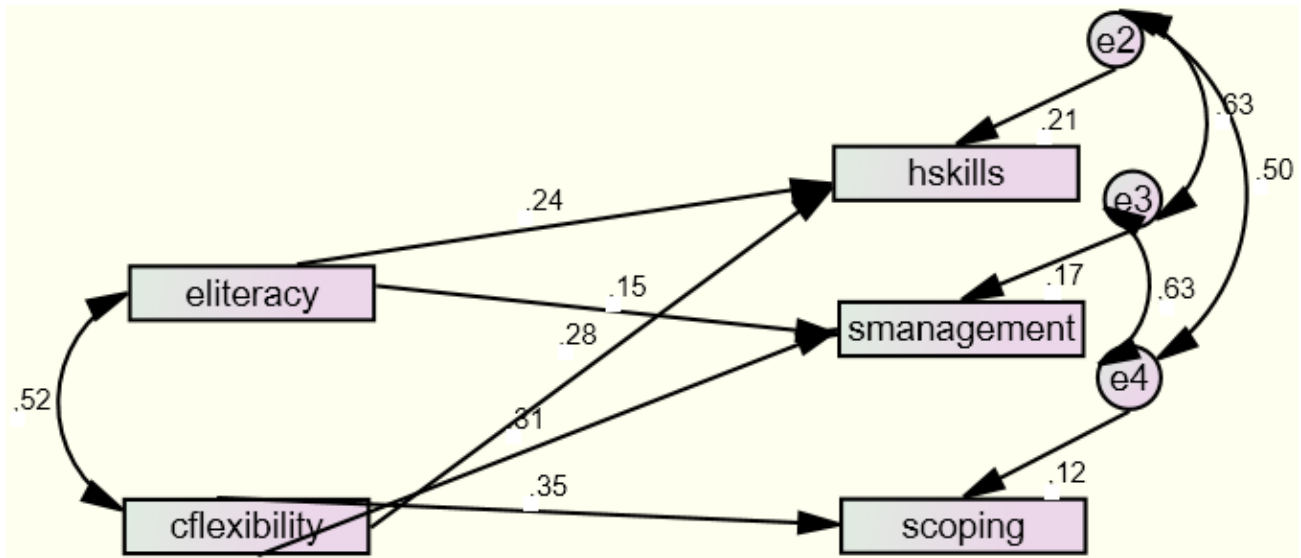


Figure 1. Standardized path coefficients for the proposed model.

emotional literacy has a positively significant effect on helping skill self-efficacy ($\beta=0.24$, $p < 0.001$) and session management self-efficacy ($\beta=0.15$, $p < 0.01$). As well, cognitive flexibility has positively significant effects on helping skill self-efficacy ($\beta=0.28$, $p < 0.001$), session management self-efficacy ($\beta=0.31$, $p < 0.001$) and counseling challenges self-efficacy ($\beta=0.35$, $p < 0.001$). Given the squared multiple correlation coefficient (R^2) value emerged for the dependent variables, it must be concluded that the proposed estimators, namely emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility, explain 21% of the variance of helping skill self-efficacy, 17% of the variance of session management self-efficacy and 12% of the variance of counseling challenges self-efficacy of senior counseling and psychology students in the current study.

DISCUSSION

This study has explored the role of emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility on counseling self-efficacy with particular emphasis on the sub-dimensions of counseling self-efficacy helping skills, session management, and dealing with the challenges in the counseling process. To this end, first the interactions between the variables were tested. The findings showed significant correlations between the variables. Then, a model which has the potential to theoretically explain the counseling self-efficacy was developed and verified statistically.

According to the verified model, the affective dimension of the emotional literacy has a significant effect on the counseling self-efficacy dimensions of helping skills and session management. In other words, emotional literacy is a significant predictor of helping skills and session

management, which are the two major sub-dimensions of counseling self-efficacy. Based on the model presented, it can be concluded that recognition and management of one's own emotions will allow a counselor to understand the other person's emotions and carry out the counseling sessions more effectively, as well as helping the client gain an insight into their own problems.

Another finding confirmed by the model is that cognitive flexibility directly affects the three sub-dimensions of counseling self-efficacy: helping skills, session management, and overcoming the challenges of counseling. Cognitive flexibility, which is a key element in individuals' cognitive processes, is one of the important attributes that a counselor should possess to provide effective counseling services. A counselor with a high level of cognitive flexibility can be considered as one able to tackle with a client's problems by considering various alternatives. Following the verification of the model, it can be concluded that both the cognitive and affective attributes of clients and the interaction of these attributes influence the counseling self-efficacy.

Human beings encounter distressing and challenging situations throughout their lives. Being able to deal with them is crucial for the individual's subjective well-being. Some individuals can be resilient in stressful situations and even turn them into opportunities, while others need psychological support. Getting psychological help enables individuals to cope more effectively with tough experiences and be more resilient, which is facilitated by counselors who are experienced in therapeutic practice and who have considerable self-efficacy.

The findings of this study are in concordance with those of the studies in the related literature (Easton, 2004; Martin et al., 2004; Easton et al., 2008); especially regarding competencies related to describing one's own

emotions, recognizing others' emotions, expressing one's emotions appropriately, helping others gain insight into emotions, and successfully employing emotions in problem solving, as significant predictors of self-efficacy of trainee counselors and professionals in practice. Meyer (2015) claims that, as counseling self-efficacy is important for counselor candidates' ability to use counseling techniques and the counseling supervision they must complete, then this must be considered a vital component of counseling training and the continuation of further professional development. Besides, the findings of the study conducted by Mullen et al. (2015) concur that counseling preparation programs remarkably increase the self-efficacy of counseling students. Likewise, Ivey et al. (2006) mentioned that counselor trainees develop competence by learning and showing skills such as clarifying the client's message through observing and mirroring and reframing feelings. These skills and empathic expressions are meant to help clients to analyze blended feelings related to others and situations.

An analysis of counseling literature (Wei et al., 2015) has shown that psychological flexibility and conscious mindfulness are closely related with counseling self-efficacy. Psychological flexibility, that is, the establishment of a good rapport with the client here and now, helping them gain an insight into situations which will benefit their personal development, and the ability to guide them through the adaptation of these skills into daily life (Hayes et al., 2006). Hayes et al. (1999) suggest that psychological flexibility is likely to improve mental health by decreasing the effect of negative internal events, and by helping individuals to plainly determine and achieve goals that are meaningful to them. Being psychologically flexible calls for consistency in terms of the values adopted by an individual, even in the face of undesirable internal experiences. Therefore, it is considered imperative that trainee counselors gain such flexibility. It has also been confirmed that psychological flexibility relieves a counselor's stress levels and increases their well-being in general (Littrell and Peterson, 2001), which can only contribute to their client's self-efficacy in this regard.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHES

The results of this study have revealed that the higher the individual's emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility levels, the more effectively their ability to maintain the conditions needed for a smooth and effective counseling process, as well as helping them cope with challenges which naturally come about due to the nature of the counseling process. Conducting psycho-educational programs to improve the individuals' emotional literacy and cognitive flexibility may not only contribute to the development of a sound personality, but also help increase counsellors' psychological well-being and

increase the effectiveness of their methods. Thus, an integration of these findings within the curricula of counseling training during undergraduate education is of vital importance to train counseling professionals.

In terms of the content validity of the study, it should be considered that the findings presented are limited to the aforementioned universities. As counseling self-efficacy is important for professional satisfaction and counselor wellness in general, it is recommended that the study be replicated with students of other universities' psychological counseling and guidance departments. Existing studies in the literature related to counseling self-efficacy seem to be the regarded concepts such as psychological flexibility, mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment. The present study is theoretically significant in that, as opposed to other studies, it focuses on the relationship between cognitive flexibility and counseling self-efficacy. Further research should be conducted, which focuses on other influential factors such as emotional intelligence, empathy, application of counseling techniques in order to shed more light on the subject of self-efficacy. The findings of the study are highly significant in the field of psychological counseling and guidance.

Furthermore, researchers may explore the impact of specific interventions aimed to enhance counseling trainees' self-efficacy. Counselor educators and supervisors should pay attention to advance counseling trainees' professional competencies by improving their skills to provide effective counseling to clients. Research on counseling trainees' development is of vital importance for understanding students' both educational and supervisory needs.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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