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An Investigation on University Students' Perception of Stress Levels and Problem-Solving Skills in Terms of Some Demographic Variables

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to determine the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-grade students studying in the Guidance and Psychological Counselling department. It also aims to evaluate whether their perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills are related to their age, gender, and their parents' marital status. The sample of the research is composed of 300 volunteer students studying in the Guidance and Psychological Counselling (GPC) department of a private university. The research model is a relational screening model. For data collection, the "Personal Information Form," "Scale of Perceived Stress Level," and "Problem

Solving Inventory" were used. The collected data were analysed using the SPSS 22.0 program. In the analysis of the data, the correlation coefficient was used. A comparison of the two independent groups was made using the t-test, since the data distribution was normal. The ANOVA test was also used. It was concluded that there is a significant relationship between students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills in the university environment. It was also determined that some variables have an impact on students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills.

Keywords: University student, stress, problem-solving skills

1. INTRODUCTION

While university students face various challenges arising from academic and social life, the stress levels they experience and their problem-solving skills during this process have an important effect on their psychological health and academic success [1]. Stress is a psychological state that arises when an individual's capacity to cope with environmental demands is exceeded, and it is commonly experienced among university students [2]. Factors such as exam periods, academic workload, and personal expectations can, in particular, increase students' stress levels [3]. The literature shows that students who are new to university perceive high levels of stress and, related to this, experience adjustment problems [4]. Problem-solving skills, on the other hand, refer to individuals' ability to cope with the difficulties they encounter. These skills play a critical role in helping students develop strategies for coping with stress and in sustaining their academic success. Problem-solving skills can shape perceived stress levels by influencing the way individuals cope with stressful situations [5]. Demographic variables are important factors that affect individuals' stress experiences and problem-solving skills. Demographic characteristics such as gender, age, grade level, and type of education can affect students' stress levels and problem-solving skills in different ways [6]. Intense stress and adjustment problems can lay the groundwork for symptoms of psychological disorders that may appear later on. In the study conducted by Stallman [7], it was found that 67.4% of university students had sub-threshold symptoms of psychological disorders and 19.2% had symptoms at a diagnosable level, and that this rate was significantly higher than that in the general population. When the data obtained from the participants in the same study were examined, factors such as being a full-time student, being between the ages of 18–34, having financial problems, being female, and being in the first year of university were also found to be associated with stress and psychological disorders. For example, some studies show that female students' stress levels are higher than those of male students [8].

University life is a new and critical period for all individuals. This new period brings with it a number of expectations for individuals. Within the scope of these expectations, when students first enter university, they experience problems in the face of many stress-inducing situations, such as adjusting to the environment, making new friends, and meeting expectations [9]. Relatedly, Bojuwoye [10] stated that university students face many problems that create stress in their lives at certain points, such as adjusting to the new period and the university environment they have entered, making new friends, and meeting academic expectations. Similarly, Hong and Mei [11] described the stress conditions perceived by university students as the living conditions they encounter in the university environment and the academic difficulties they experience. In various studies conducted on the subject [12–15], while the university environment is described as a period in which academic difficulties are experienced, it is clearly evident in this context that being a university student is itself a stress-inducing situation.

As is known, while stress manifests itself as a disturbing condition that individuals encounter in their daily lives, the stress conditions encountered in university life also manifest themselves as conditions that negatively affect individuals' lives. Hancıoğlu [16] stated that the changes brought about by starting university life, and certain situations encountered or expected to be encountered in terms of education, may cause university students to experience stress. In this context, while taking a new step into university life is seen as an important process for university students, it can be said that the university period brings with it many problems that can increase students' stress levels. In addition, individuals may also encounter certain problems while communicating with other individuals in their daily lives. For these reasons, individuals face two important elements: coping with the stress conditions they encounter during the process of university life on the one hand, and being able to use problem-solving skills in the face of problem situations on the other. Relatedly, Nezu and Ronan [17], in their study, stated that university students do not possess effective problem-solving skills in situations in which they are under stress. In this context, it can be emphasized that university students need to use problem-solving skills effectively in the face of stressful conditions in their daily lives.

Today, as stress occupies a central place in individuals' lives, it requires awareness of the problems created by the stress conditions encountered, which prevent individuals from sustaining their lives effectively. Dyson and Renk [18] stated that students who are newly transitioning into the university environment need to be aware of the stress conditions they experience and to use skills for coping with these conditions. Therefore, gaining awareness of the relationship between the stress conditions perceived by university students and the problems arising from these conditions, and helping them become aware of the relationship between the problem-solving skills used in the face of stress conditions and certain variables, is of great importance for research. In this direction, studies [3, 19] that reveal that university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills are related to certain variables have stated that it is important to determine the variables related to university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills.

Within the scope of the research, it is assumed that perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills may be related to certain variables such as whether the parents are married or divorced, gender, and age. In this context, while the rapid economic, social, and technological societal changes experienced are seen to have a considerable effect on individuals' lives, it is also seen that the effects of these factors cause individuals to encounter many stress factors. In addition, while

the stress conditions encountered in daily life have certain effects on families' marital lives, and while it is thought that individuals in certain age groups experience stress and that these stress conditions may cause them to encounter certain problems, it can be said that gender differences may also be an influential variable in individuals' experience of stress. In this context, it is considered important for the research to examine university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills in relation to variables such as age, gender, and whether the parents are married or divorced. In this direction, the aim of the research is to determine the relationships between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students studying in the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling. In addition, it aims to evaluate the participants' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills in terms of age, gender, and whether their parents are married or not.

2. METHOD

Research design. This research is descriptive in nature and was carried out using the relational screening method. Since the research aimed to determine university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills in terms of different variables, the relational screening method within the descriptive screening model was used in this study. Screening models are research models used to describe a situation, whether it occurred in the past or is still ongoing, in the form in which it currently exists [20].

Sample of the research. The sample of this research consists of 300 first-year students from the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC) studying at the Faculty of Education of a private university in the TRNC (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus). The "convenience sampling" method was used in the research. Convenience sampling is one of the most widely used sampling methods in the social sciences. Convenience sampling involves the selection of a sample that is readily accessible and convenient for the researcher [21]. In convenience sampling, researchers select participants who are easy to reach, suitable for the research, and willing to participate voluntarily [22].

Data collection tools. In this research, the "Perceived Stress Scale," "Problem Solving Inventory," and "Personal Information Form" were used as data collection tools. Detailed information about each of these data collection tools is provided below.

The *Perceived Stress Scale* was developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein [23]. The Perceived Stress Scale, consisting of a total of 14 items, was designed to measure the extent to which a person perceives certain situations in their life as stressful. The scale is a 5-point Likert-type scale in which each item ranges from "Never (1)" to "Very Often (5)." Seven of the scale items, which contain positive statements, are reverse-scored. The standardization studies for the use of the scale in Turkey were carried out by Baltaş and colleagues [24]. The total score obtained from the scale indicates the person's stress level. A score between 11–26 indicates a low stress level, 27–41 indicates a moderate stress level, and 42–56 indicates a high stress level [24].

The *Personal Information Form* was prepared by the researcher to determine demographic characteristics of the students, such as age, gender, and whether their parents are married. The purpose of the research is stated at the beginning of the form, and participants are asked not to write their names, with a note explaining that the evaluation will be conducted collectively rather than individually.

The *Problem Solving Inventory* was developed by Heppner and Petersen [25] and adapted into Turkish by Şahin, N., Şahin, H., and Heppner, P. [26]. It is a 35-item self-report scale that measures an individual's self-perception regarding their problem-solving skills. It is scored on a 1–6 Likert-type scale. For each item, individuals are asked how frequently they behave in the way described in the scale item. The response options consist of "I always behave this way," "I mostly behave this way," "I often behave this way," "I occasionally behave this way," "I rarely behave this way," and "I never behave this way." Responses are given scores ranging from 1 to 6. Items 9, 22, and 29 are not scored. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 21, 25, 26, 30, and 34 are reverse items. The lowest possible score on the test is 32, and the highest possible score is 192. As the total score obtained from the scale increases, it is interpreted as indicating that "the individual perceives themselves as inadequate regarding their problem-solving skills."

Data collection and analysis. In order to administer the scales to the students included in the study, the necessary permissions were obtained from the university where the application would take place. The research data were collected through the scales on a day determined by the researcher at the Faculty of Education of a private university. The scales were administered to the participants in groups in a classroom setting. The necessary explanations were given to the participants regarding the points to which they should pay attention while completing the scales.

The obtained data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0. First, whether the data showed a normal distribution was examined. Normality tests were performed on the data, and it was determined that the data showed a normal distribution. The analyses were carried out on the data obtained from 300 participants. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used in the analysis of the data. Since the data were normally distributed, comparisons between two independent groups were performed using the t-test. In addition, the ANOVA test was used.

3. FINDINGS

The findings of the research regarding the examination of first-year university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills in the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC) in terms of certain variables are grouped under the headings below:

1. Is there a significant relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department?
2. Is there a significant relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to age?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to gender?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to whether their parents are married or divorced?

3.1. FINDING 1. FINDINGS REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERCEIVED STRESS LEVELS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE GPC DEPARTMENT

The correlation between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Correlation between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department*

Scales	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
PSS - PSI	-.198	.030

PSS: Perceived Stress Scale; PSI: Problem Solving Inventory

Table 1 shows the correlation between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department. Accordingly, it can be said that there is a negative and low-level relationship between perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills ($r = -.198$, $p < .05$).

3.2. FINDING 2. FINDINGS REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERCEIVED STRESS LEVELS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE GPC DEPARTMENT ACCORDING TO GENDER

The t-test results regarding the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to gender are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *t-Test results regarding the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to gender*

Scales	Gender	N	$\bar{x}$	t	ss	sd	P
PSS	Female	120	49.98	10.88	3.44	117	.000
	Male	130	43.69		2.84		
PSI	Female	120	184.96	-2.45	8.82	117	0.016
	Male	130	187.00		3.05		

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen that the mean scores of first-year university students in the GPC department for perceived stress levels ($t=10.88$, $p<0.05$) and problem-solving skills ($t=-2.45$, $p<0.05$) differ according to gender. Accordingly, it can be said that the gender variable has a significant effect on the relationship between the stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department.

3.3. FINDING 3. FINDINGS REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERCEIVED STRESS LEVELS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE GPC DEPARTMENT ACCORDING TO WHETHER THEIR PARENTS ARE MARRIED OR DIVORCED

The t-test results regarding the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to whether their parents are married or divorced are presented in

Table 3.

Table 3. *t-Test results regarding the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to whether their parents are married or divorced*

Scales	Parents' Marital Status	N	$\bar{x}$	t	Ss	Sd	P
PSS	Married	136	51.41	12.941	1.574	118	.000
	Divorced	84	44.11		16.653	3.217	115.9
PSI	Married	36	187.16	.646	5.634	118	.519
	Divorced	84	186.35		.686	6.542	76.4

When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that university students' mean scores for perceived stress levels ($t=10.88$, $p<0.05$) differ according to whether their parents are married or divorced. Accordingly, it can be said that the variable of whether the parents are married or divorced has a significant effect on the relationship between university students' perceived stress levels and their problem-solving skills.

3.4. FINDING 4. FINDINGS REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERCEIVED STRESS LEVELS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE GPC DEPARTMENT ACCORDING TO AGE

The ANOVA results regarding the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to age are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *ANOVA results regarding the relationship between the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the GPC department according to age*

Scales	Age	Sum of Squares	sd	Mean Square	F	P
PSS	18-20	283.851	2	141.925	8.27	.000
	21-23	2003.741	117	17.126		
	24-26	22287.592	119			
PSI	18-20	382.402	2	191.201	5.204	.007
	21-23	4298.398	117	36.738		
	24-26	4680.800	119			

Looking at the analysis results in Table 4, it is seen that there is a significant difference in the perceived stress scale scores in terms of age ($F(2-117)=8.287$, $p<.05$). As a result of the Scheffe test conducted to determine the source of the difference, it was found that the mean scores of first-year GPC department university students aged 18-20 and 24-26 on the perceived stress scale were higher than the mean scores of first-year GPC department university students aged 21-23. This finding shows that first-year GPC department university students aged 18-20 and 24-26 have higher stress levels.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It was found that there is a negative and low-level relationship between the perceived stress level and problem-solving skills of first-year university students in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC) department. In this context, it can be said that as the stress levels of first-year GPC department university students increase, there is a decrease in their problem-solving skills. This finding appears to show similarities in certain respects with the findings of the research conducted by Eşigül and Önder [27]. Eşigül and Önder [27] stated that there is a negative relationship between university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills and psychological well-being. In other similar studies [14, 28–30], it has been stated that there is a relationship between the stress experienced by university students and their problem-solving skills. In this context, it is seen that this finding is consistent with the research findings. Within the scope of the research, the studies cited in [31–34], which were conducted on high school and university students, reached the conclusion that there is a significant relationship between coping with stress and problem-solving skills.

In the research, it was concluded that gender is a factor affecting the perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills of first-year GPC department university students. In the research, it was found that female students' perceived stress levels were higher than those of male students, while male students' problem-solving skills were found to be more inadequate (lower) than those of female students. It can be said that this finding shows similarities in some respects with the results of the research conducted by Day and Livingstone [35]. In a similar study, Day and Livingstone [35] stated that women are more stressed than men and are in search of emotional support. Similarly, the research conducted by Bayram and Bilgel [36] shows that gender can have an effect on both perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills. The emphasis of the research on gender as an important sociodemographic variable in the emergence of differences in psychological and behavioral characteristics is consistent with this study.

These findings are important not only for the psychological well-being of GPC department students who are being trained within the faculty of education, but also for their role as individuals who will serve as models for students in the school environments where they will work in the future. Indeed, Akpınar [9] revealed that the stress levels of pre-service teachers are affected by various variables, drawing attention to the fact that this should be addressed during the pre-service education process. Similarly, Dağal and Demircan [37] determined that pre-service preschool teachers' problem-solving skills predict their psychological resilience; this finding shows that problem-solving skills need to be developed not only for individual stress management but also as part of the preparation process for the teaching/counseling profession. In this context, the findings of the current research indicate that curricular practices aimed at developing GPC department students' stress-coping and problem-solving skills throughout their undergraduate education (for example, stress management modules integrated into counseling skills courses) should be supported.

In her study titled "Examination of the Relationship Between University Students' Perceived Stress Levels and Stress Coping Styles," Hancıoğlu [16] stated that female students have higher stress levels than male students. It can be said that this finding is consistent with the findings of the studies cited in [3, 38]. These studies stated that there is a relationship between university students' gender and their perceived stress levels. Similarly, Aysan and Özben [39] stated that women's perceived stress levels are higher than men's. It can be said that whether the parents of first-year GPC department university students are married or divorced is a factor affecting their perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills. In the research, it was found that students whose parents are married have higher perceived stress levels than students whose parents are divorced. In contrast to this finding, Durna [40], in a study titled "Examination of University Students' Stress Levels in Terms of Some Variables," stated that having divorced parents may cause individuals to experience stress. It was also stated that individuals whose parents are divorced may encounter various problem situations later in their lives. The studies cited in [41, 42] stated that individuals whose parents are divorced may encounter many negative outcomes and concluded that they experience stress especially when facing certain situations.

In the research, it was concluded that the age variable has an effect on the perceived stress levels of first-year GPC department university students. It was also determined that first-year GPC department university students aged 18–20 and 24–26 have higher perceived stress levels. In contrast to this finding, Ergin, Uzun, and Bozkurt [43] stated that as university students' age increases, they use stress-coping skills more actively. In addition, in the study conducted by Stallman [7], it was found that 67.4% of university students had sub-threshold symptoms of psychological disorders and 19.2% had symptoms at a diagnosable level, and that this rate was significantly higher than that in the general population. When the data obtained from the participants in the same study were examined, factors such as being a full-time student, being between the ages of 18–34, having financial problems, being female, and being in the first year of university were found to be associated with stress and psychological disorders. The data from the present research support the finding of this study.

When all the findings are evaluated, the conclusion reached is that there is a significant relationship between university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills in the university environment. It was also determined that some variables have an effect on university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills. This conclusion is generally consistent with the research findings cited in [44–48]. Likewise, these studies also concluded that there is a significant relationship between university students' perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills, and that some variables have an effect on perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings obtained in the research, the following recommendations can be developed:

Structured training programs and workshops aimed at developing the problem-solving skills of first-year students in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC) department can be organized. In this way, students can cope with stress more effectively, and it may be possible to reduce their perceived stress levels. In addition, providing informative seminars on relaxation exercises, time management, and cognitive restructuring, which are among the stress management techniques, may contribute to students resolving the problems they encounter in both their academic and personal lives in a healthier way.

Considering that gender is an effective factor in perceived stress and problem-solving skills, it is recommended that gender-sensitive psychological counseling and guidance services be developed at universities. Since female and male students' ways of coping with stress and their problem-solving approaches may differ, group work, seminars, or individual counseling services with content appropriate to these differences should be offered. In addition, gender-based needs should be taken into account in psychoeducation programs to be carried out within the university, and intervention plans sensitive to students' individual differences should be created.

Considering that students' family structure (whether their parents are married or divorced) is an effective factor in their perceived stress levels and problem-solving skills, supportive psychological counseling services should be offered especially to students from divorced families. Practices such as individual counseling, group therapies, and psychoeducation programs should be made more widespread in order to recognize the possible emotional difficulties experienced by these

students and to help them overcome these difficulties. In addition, taking into account data on the family structure of students who are new to university, preventive and developmental interventions should be planned for individuals in the risk group.

Considering that the age variable is an effective factor in perceived stress levels, flexible and individualized psychological support services suitable for the needs of students in different age groups should be offered. In particular, orientation programs, stress management workshops, and peer support systems can be developed to facilitate the adjustment process for younger students who are new to university. For students in older age groups, special psychoeducation and guidance services should be planned, taking into account their different life experiences and responsibilities (working life, family, etc.).

Recommendations can be developed for researchers who will work in this field in the future:

Conducting qualitative interviews or mixed-method research to gain a deeper understanding of students' stress experiences and problem-solving processes may bring different perspectives to the field.

In addition to basic demographic variables such as age, gender, or family structure, the effects of variables such as social support, academic achievement, economic status, and digital media use on stress and problem-solving skills can also be investigated in future studies.

Researchers who will work in this field in the future can make comparisons not only among first-year guidance and psychological counseling students but also among second-, third-, and fourth-year guidance and psychological counseling students. In addition, comparative studies conducted with students from different faculties may better reveal the specific circumstances and needs of guidance and psychological counseling students.

In order to examine how students' stress levels and problem-solving skills change over time, longitudinal studies that collect data from the same students over several years can be conducted. In this way, students' developmental processes can be tracked.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the course of preparing this manuscript, the authors employed ChatGPT to improve the linguistic quality and readability of the content. After utilizing this AI tool, the authors conducted comprehensive review and necessary revisions to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and scientific rigor of the manuscript. All authors bear full responsibility for the final content of the published work, including any errors or inconsistencies that may arise.

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