



## INVESTIGATION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' AGGRESSION LEVELS IN TERMS OF EMPATHIC TENDENCY, SELF-COMPASSION AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation between aggression, empathic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassion, and to find out whether empathic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassion significantly predict aggression. The sample of study consists of 526 female and 290 male in total 816 students who are studying different faculties in Selcuk University and students are chosen with random sample method. In the study for the personal information of students 'Personal Information Form', to determine their aggression scores 'Aggression Scale', to specify empathic tendency 'Empathic Tendency Scale', to determine their self-compassion 'Self-compassion Scale' and also to determine their expression of emotions scores "Expression of emotions Scale have been used. Correlation and multiple hierarchical regression analysis were used to analyze data. For statistical analysis of data SPSS 15.00 program was used. According to results of study, university students' empathic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassions explain their aggressive behavior significantly. There is a negative and significant correlation between aggression and empathic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassion. In regression analysis, empathic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassion are significant predictors of aggression.

**Keywords:** aggression, empathic tendency, emotional expression and self-compassion

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## 1. Introduction

The definition of aggression can be provided by emphasizing the action itself, or the intention of the doer of it. When the action itself is emphasized, the definition is “*any kind of behavior that hurts or can hurt others*”. However, this definition doesn't include the intention of the doer, which is a determinant factor. Considering the intention of the doer of an action, aggression is defined as any kind of behavior or act, done with the intention to hurt or damage others (Freedman, Sears and Carlsmith, 1998). According to Rogers, the act of putting oneself in somebody else's shoes, looking at events from their point of view, understanding their feelings and thoughts correctly, feeling these, and transferring that to them is called as “*empathy*” (Cited in: Dökmen, 2005). Self-compassion on the other hand, is defined as behaving oneself caringly and understandingly in case of pain and failure, instead of criticizing, considering the negative experiences as a part of human life, and seeking sensible solutions to problems, instead of making much of them (Cited in: Deniz and Sümer, 2010).

Self-compassion coined by Neff (2003), and based of Buddhist philosophy refers to being open to suffering of oneself, not avoiding or trying to detach from it, producing desire to relieve their own pain, and relieve it with compassion, and most importantly understanding their own pain, inefficacy, and failure without judging as a part of gaining a greater experience (Cited in: Deniz, Kesici and Sümer, 2008). The concept of self-compassion is divided into three main components in order to make it more functional and systematic: (a) kindness, (b) common humanity and, (c) mindfulness.

Individuals, who show kindness to themselves, don't make a harsh judgment and self-criticism towards themselves (Neff, 2003; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjitterat, 2005). Individuals, who show common humanity to themselves, see problems as something that are not particular to themselves, that other people can also have similar problems, and the problems can be means to gain experience, instead of separating and isolating themselves when they problems about themselves (Neff, 2003). Individuals need to adopt a thoughtfulness perspective for a full self-compassion experience. In other words, they should not avoid their feelings that cause them pain, and have an over-determinant attitude; but they should create a “*mental space*” at a certain amount, and experience themselves in the boundaries of common humanity (Neff, 2003).

Mindfulness requires clear thinking about negative feelings when they appear, without trying to change or suppress them, while not avoiding these feeling, and not judging one (Neff, 2003). Individuals, who behave themselves mindfully, realize the problems instead of potently focusing on these problems, when they encounter problems causing pain and suffering. This realization process removes negative judgment, eases self-criticism, and enables self-compassion. When these happen, self-kindness of individuals towards themselves increases (Neff, 2003).

Goleman (1996) defined emotion as a feeling, and thoughts particular to this feeling, psychological and biological states, and a serious of behavioral tendencies. According to Dökmen (2000), emotion refers to what individuals perceive at a certain moment, what they feel, their desires within phenomenal field, and sensational internal

experiences. In the literature in English language on the subject field, the expression of emotions has been made using three concepts as; emotional expression (King and Emmons, 1990), social sharing of emotion (Rime, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech and Philippot, 1998), and emotional self-disclosure (Starr, 1975). The contents of these three concepts named different are the same; all three emphasize the expression of emotions in interpersonal relationships. Researchers of emotion communication mostly focused on non-verbal communication and feelings. This research field draws upon both biology and psychology areas. First researches on emotion communication mostly had a focus on the biological aspect of emotions, still emotion theoreticians agree on that emotion is a psychological construct made up of various elements (Kuzucu, 2006). The purpose of the present research is studying aggression in terms of emphatic tendency, expression of emotions, and self-compassion.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

This is a correlational research study. This type of research determines whether or not the relation between two or more variables without any intervention. Correlational studies are very beneficial to reveal the relations between variables.

### 2.2 Participants

The sample of study consists of 526 female and 290 male in total 816 students who are studying different faculties in Selcuk University/Konya/Turkey. The participants were 816 (526 female and 290 male) who participated in the research voluntarily. The mean age of the participants was 21.73 years (between 17-37 years old) with a standard deviation of 1.96 years.

### 2.3 Data Collection

**A. Aggressiveness Scale (AS):** Aggressiveness Scale was developed by Tuzgöl (1988) to determine individuals' aggressiveness levels. Scale is a five-point Likert scale comprise of 45 items, 30 of which are aggressive and 15 of which are not aggressive. The higher score obtained from the Aggressiveness Scale indicates higher aggression levels.

**B. Self-Compassion Scale:** The Self-compassion Scale, developed by Neff (2003b), was validated and adapted into Turkish by Deniz et al. (2008). In the original scale, which was prepared to measure the properties of self-compassion, the respondents are asked to rate how often they acted about a given situation by using five-point Likert scale with labels ranging from "Almost never=1" to "Almost always=5. Higher scores in the scale indicate higher levels of self-compassion. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient calculated in line with analysis of the scale was found to be .89. In addition, internal reliability coefficient on the scale was found to be .89, and test retest reliability coefficient was calculated to be .83 (Deniz et al., 2008).

**C. Empathic Tendency Scale:** Empathic Tendency Scale is a self-report scale consisting 20 items. Each item is scored between 1-5 according to answers as "absolutely

contrary", "mostly contrary", "hesitant", "mostly convenient" and "absolutely convenient". Some items are reverse coded in calculation of total scores. Possible lowest score is 20 and highest score is 100 points (Dökmen 1988).

**D. Emotional Expression Scale:** Emotional Expression Scale developed by King and Emmons (1990) and adapted to Turkish by Kuzucu (2006). Emotional Expression Scale is composed of 3 dimensions; That is, Expression of positive emotion, Expression of Negative emotion and Expression of Intimacy. Items were scored from 1 through 7. In the scale consisting of 15 items, high scores indicate a high tendency towards expressing emotions.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

SPSS 15.0 was used in order to evaluate the data which were collected from scales employed in the research. The Pearson correlation coefficient technique was used to determine the relationship between aggression with self-compassion, emphatic tendency and expression of emotions. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis was used to search whether self-compassion, emphatic tendency and expression of emotions significantly explain aggression

## 3. Results

**Table 1:** Correlations among aggression, self-compassion, emphatic tendency and expression of emotions

	Self-compassion	Emphatic tendency	Expression of positive emotion	Expression of negative emotion	Expression of intimacy
Aggression r	-.35**	-.41**	-.14*	-.09*	-.30**

\*\*p < .01, \* p < .05

It is understood from Table 1 that, in aggression there was a negative relationship between self-compassion, emphatic tendency, Expression of positive emotion, Expression of Negative emotion and expression of intimacy.

**Table 2:** Multiple hierarchical regression analysis on aggression

		R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$
1	Constant	.12	-.42**
	Self-compassion		
2	Self-compassion	.21	-.25**
	Emphatic tendency		-.61**
	Self-compassion		-.25**
	Emphatic tendency		-.51**
3	Expression of positive emotion	.24	-.22*
	Expression of Negative emotion		.02
	Expression of Intimacy		-.76**

It is seen that the authentic contribution of self-compassion that is initially included in the model developed to account for aggression is significant (R<sup>2</sup>=.12). Also It is seen that

the authentic contribution of self-compassion and emphatic tendency included in the model in the second step is significant ( $R^2=.21$ ) Besides, It is seen that the authentic contribution of self-compassion, emphatic tendency, expression of positive emotion, Expression of Negative emotion and expression of Intimacy included in the model in the second step is significant ( $R^2=.24$ )

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

According to the findings obtained in the present research, there is a negative correlation between emphatic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassion scores, and aggression scores. Additionally, emphatic tendency, expression of emotions and self-compassion explain aggression at a significant level. Findings of the previous researches on the subject field are also in agreement with the findings of the present research. Some researches on the relationship between aggression and emphatic tendency (Solak, 2011; Filiz, 2009) also found negative correlations between emphatic tendency and aggression. Besides, Ümit (2010) found negative significant correlations between aggression and self-awareness; emotional self-regulation; and empathy.

In addition, previous researches on the effects of experimental programs including activities for developing empathy and expressing emotions on decreasing aggression tendency (Sağkal, 2011; Güner, 2007; Genç, 2007; Türnüklü, Kaçmaz, Gürler, et al., 2009) found that those kind of programs indeed decreased aggressive behaviours. These findings are also in agreement with the findings of the present research.

Another finding of the present research is that, there is a negative correlation between self-compassion and aggression. In addition, self-compassion explains aggression at a significant level. The research conducted by Sümer (2008) found that, individuals with high self-compassion levels had low levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Besides, low self-esteem is known to be related with anger and hostility (D'Zurilla, Chang and Sanna, 2003). Moreover, there is a strong relationship between self-compassion and well-being. Research has shown that individuals with low self-compassion have a negative perception of themselves (Neff and McGehee, 2009).

A general evaluation of the findings of the present research suggests that developing emphatic tendency, self-compassion and expression of emotions can help in decreasing aggressive behaviours. In the light of the obtained findings, the following suggestions can be offered:

1. Psycho-educational programs developing individuals' empathic tendency, self-compassion, and expressing emotion skills can be developed in order to prevent aggressive behaviors. Existing studies can be developed with the addition of activities developing these skills. Or, educational programs can be developed to support existing studies.
2. The main limitation of the present research is that, the sample consists of only university students. Further research on the relationships between aggression and empathic tendency, expressing emotions and self-compassion can be conducted on different age groups.

3. Emphasizing the concepts of empathy, expressing emotions, and self-compassion during the processes of individual and group psychological consultation for individuals exhibiting aggressive behaviors may be helpful in solving the problems.
4. Experimental studies can be conducted in order to test whether individuals' empathic tendency, expressing emotions and self-compassion levels can be enhanced through educational programs.

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