



The Effect of Automatic Thoughts on Hopelessness: Role of Self-esteem as a Mediator

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to test a theoretical model concerning the role of self-esteem as a mediator between university students' automatic thoughts and their levels of hopelessness. The participants consisted of 338 students (197 females [58.3%] and 141 males [41.7%]) from various departments at the Celal Bayar University. The research data was obtained by utilizing the Automatic Thoughts Scale, the Beck Hopelessness Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and a personal information form. In this study, the direct and indirect relationship between the university students' self-esteem and automatic thoughts as well as their levels of hopelessness were tested using structural equation modeling. The proposed structural model, based on the measurement models, was confirmed as a result of the analyses. In addition, the findings show that the fit indices of the model generally met the conditions of acceptance value, and that the t-values pertaining to the relationships among all of the variables were meaningful. Accordingly, automatic thoughts and self-esteem significantly predict the onset of hopelessness, whereas self-esteem does not serve as a mediator between automatic thoughts and hopelessness.

Keywords

Automatic Thoughts, Hopelessness, Self-esteem, University Students.

Individuals' automatic thoughts and beliefs have been the subject of focus in numerous cognition approaches (Beck, Freeman, & Davis, 2004), and various studies have shown that cognition has an effect on emotion and behavior (Gladding, 2013; Tursi & Cochran, 2006; White & Freeman, 2000). In general, automatic thoughts are the inner dialogues regarding an individual, his/her world, and the future (Beck, 2001; Beck et al., 2004; Corey, 2008), while hopelessness concerning individuals' cognitive structures (Corey, 2008; Dinçer & Derelioğlu, 2005) reflects negative expectations regarding the future (Abbey, 2006; Beck, 2001, 2005). In addition, hopelessness is a condition associated with self-esteem (Henkel, Bussfeld, Möller, & Hegerl, 2002), and high self-esteem serves

as a buffer (Metalsky, Joiner, Hardin, & Abramson, 1993) that provides protection against the onset of hopelessness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Conversely, low self-esteem is related to negative expectations in the future (Beck et al., 2004), and it has a negative effect on individuals' senses (Elman, 2002).

In the concerned literature, it has been pointed out that an increase in hopelessness can have a negative effect not only on individuals themselves (Durak, 1994) but also on their problem-solving skills, self-esteem, physical health, self-confidence, learned helplessness (Güler, 2005), gender and class level (Oğuztürk, Akça, & Şahin, 2011; Şengül & Güner, 2012), income (Tümekaya, 2005), and productivity

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and success (Şengül & Güner, 2012). Hopelessness can also cause depression (Ceyhan, 2004; Çelikel-Çam & Erkorkmaz, 2008; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2000; Palmeri & Connelly, 2005; Yerlikaya, 2006), cognitive distortions (Beck et al., 2004; Corey, 2008), and in extreme cases, it can also lead to suicide (Heisel, Flett, & Lewitt, 2003; O'Connor et al., 2000; Palmeri & Connelly, 2005; Yerlikaya, 2006). Moreover, various studies have focused on the levels of hopelessness in younger individuals (Erkan, Özbay, Cihangir-Çankaya, & Terzi, 2012; Kazgan, 2006; Özmen, Erbay, Çetinkaya, Taşkın, & Özmen, 2008; Şahin, 2009; Yazıcı, 2003) as well as different variables that affect university students in Turkey (Ağır, 2007; Aras, 2011; Ceyhan, 2004; Çelikel-Çam & Erkorkmaz, 2008; Dereli & Kabataş, 2009; Oğuztürk et al., 2011; Özçelik, Aktaş, & Ocakçı, 2014; Şahin, 2009; Şengül & Güler, 2012; Tekin & Filiz, 2008; Uçaner & Özçelik, 2010; Üngüren & Ehtiyar, 2009).

In the theoretical model of the present study, it is assumed that, based on the direct relationship between self-esteem and hopelessness and automatic thoughts, self-esteem can predict the effect of automatic thoughts on hopelessness. In addition, students' hopelessness can vary depending on the levels of self-esteem. Based on this assumption, the accuracy of the model in this study is tested (using structural equation modeling) in order to determine whether self-esteem serves as a mediator between university students' automatic thoughts and levels of hopelessness. Although the aforementioned studies focused on the direct relationship between hopelessness and the involved variables, the present study begins with the viewpoint in which there may be different tacit and instrumental variables in the relationship between self-esteem and hopelessness and automatic thoughts.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine the role of self-esteem as a mediator between university students' automatic thoughts and their levels of hopelessness.

Method

Research Model

This study, which explores the direct and indirect relationships between university students' automatic thoughts and levels of hopelessness,

includes the characteristics of descriptive research in the screening model. In addition, the theoretical model developed for explaining the role of university students' self-esteem as a mediator between automatic thoughts and hopelessness is tested using structural equation modeling.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 338 students in the Faculty of Science and Letters and the Faculty of Education at Celal Bayar University (197 females (58.3%) and 141 males (41.7%) who were selected with the simple random-sampling method during the spring term of the 2012-2013 academic year.

Data Collection Tools

Beck Hopelessness Scale: This 20-item scale, developed by Aaron Beck and his colleagues (1974), includes factors such as feelings and expectations concerning the future, and the loss of motivation. The validity and reliability study of the scale was first conducted by Seber, Dilbaz, Kaptanoğlu, and Tekin (1993), and its internal consistency coefficient was found to be .86, its item-total correlations were between .07 and .72, and its test-retest reliability coefficient was .74. Conversely, in the adaptation study of the scale subsequently carried out by Durak (1994), its internal consistency coefficient was found to be .85, its item-total correlations were between .31 and .67, and its split-half reliability was .85.

Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale: The adaptation study of this 10-item Self-esteem Scale, developed by Morris Rosenberg, was carried out by Çuhadaroğlu (1986). According to the assessment system within the scale, the subjects receive scores between 0 and 6, with higher scores showing that self-esteem is low and lower scores demonstrating that self-esteem is high. In the study conducted by Çuhadaroğlu (1986), the validity coefficient of the scale was found to be .71 and the reliability coefficient was .75.

Automatic Thoughts Scale: This 30-item, self-reported scale, developed by Steven Hollon and Philip Kendall, utilizes a five-point Likert scale. According to the assessment system, higher scores indicate that the individual's automatic thoughts are evident. The adaptation of this scale in Turkey was carried out by Aydın and Aydın (1990) and Şahin and Şahin (1992). The Cronbach alpha internal

consistency coefficient was found to be .93 and the item-total correlations were between .35 and .69 (Şahin & Şahin, 1992) and .37 ile .85 (Aydın & Aydın, 1990); test-retest reliability $r=.77$ (Aydın & Aydın, 1990).

Analysis of the Data

In the present study, the process of evaluating the relationships between the variables and the established theoretical model was carried out using structural equation modeling. The SPSS 20 and Lisrel programs were used to obtain data in the analysis.

Two basic models, the measurement model and the structural model, were employed for structural equation modeling. It has been shown that a good analysis should begin with the measurement model (Sümer, 2000; Şimşek, 2007) and the goodness-of-fit indices enable a conclusion to be drawn as to whether each model is entirely supported at an acceptable level based on the data (Şimşek, 2007). The reliability of the scales employed in the present study was analyzed with Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's coefficient omega (ω). In regard to the latter, the omega coefficient is a better predictor of actual reliability in this case since it produces sub-value of reliability (Lucke, 2005; Raykov, 2001). Also, the role of as mediator can be tested in different ways. For example, regression of coefficients between variables is compared (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Findings

In the analysis of the measurement model, the decision-making parcel for the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale was created for the purpose of obtaining the best possible hypothesis and decreasing the number of parameters calculated in the model (Bandalos & Finney, 2001; Hagtvet & Nasser, 2004). As a result of the analysis, the chi-square value was found to be meaningful at the level of $\chi^2 = 122.35$, $sd = 28$, $p = .00$. The values of RMSEA = .08, RMR = .35, SRMR = .03, GFI = .96, AGFI = .91, and CFI = .99 were obtained when the goodness-of-fit-indices were examined.

Before testing the structural model in this study, a model of measurement (in which variations included in this structural model are combined) is created and analyzed. The decision-making parcel regarding the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale was made for the purposes of meeting the best

possible variations and decreasing the number of parameters calculated in the model (Bandalos & Finney, 2001; Hagtvet & Nasser, 2004). The scale was divided into two parcels based on the 10 items and a single factor load. In the research, the self-esteem scale was included in the analysis through parceling developed in the measurement model and the structural model. As a result, the chi-square value calculated for the measurement model was found to be meaningful at the level of $\chi^2 = 122.35$, $sd = 28$, and $p = .00$. When the rate of the chi-square value to the degree of freeness was examined, its value of less than 5 ($\chi^2/sd = 4, 36$) indicates the best fit. When the goodness-of-fit indices belonging to the measurement model was examined, the values of RMSEA = .08, RMR = .35, SRMR = .03, GFI = .96, AGFI = .91 and CFI = .99 were obtained. These values show that the measurement model was a good model. At the same time, it was found that all of the factor loads of variations observed over the implicit ones were statistically meaningful when the factor loads, standard faults, and statistical results, which are standardized or non-standardized over each implicit variation of the observed variation were examined.

The relationship between the variations was found to be statistically meaningful when the model (in which the variables of self-esteem and hopelessness were created) was tested ($t = 12.42$, $p < .05$). The chi-square statistic regarding the model was found to be meaningful at the level of $\chi^2 = 107.40$, $sd = 27$, and $p = .00$. When the goodness-of-fit indices belonging to the structural model were examined, the values of RMSEA = .076, RMR = .38, SRMR = .023, GFI = .96, AGFI = .92, and CFI = .99 were obtained. In accordance with these results, self-esteem and automatic thoughts, in total, accounted for 36% of the levels of hopelessness. In addition, the results of the Sobel test suggest that there is no meaningful relationship ($z = 2.54$, $p = .01$) regarding the role of self-esteem as a mediator. Besides, when the regression coefficient between the variables of automatic thoughts and hopelessness are meaningful ($t = 8.48$, $p < .05$), it shows that self-esteem does not serve as a mediator in the model.

Consequently, the recommended structural model was verified and it was found that the relationships between automatic thoughts and self-esteem, and between self-esteem and hopelessness, were statistically meaningful. Furthermore, it was revealed that the fit indices of the basic structural model generally met the conditions of acceptance value and that the t-values belonging to the

relationship between all of the variations were meaningful. Accordingly, automatic thoughts and self-respect predict hopelessness at a meaningful level, whereas self-esteem does not serve as a mediator between the variables of automatic thoughts and hopelessness.

Discussion

This study showed that the automatic thoughts and self-esteem of university students can predict hopelessness at a meaningful level. The results are in accordance with the findings of previous studies regarding the relationship between automatic thoughts and hopelessness (Aras, 2011; Beck, 2005; Corey, 2008; Dinçer & Derelioğlu, 2005; Leahy, 2007; O'Connor et al., 2002). It also shows a parallelism with the results of the research which previous studies that have indicated that there is a positive correlation between variations of hopelessness, such as concern (O'Connor et al., 2002), and depression (Aydın, 1990). This relationship is clearly seen in the cognitive model (Beck, 2001), and it has also been shown that automatic thoughts are generally negative (Franklin, 2005).

According to the other result of study, there is a meaningful relationship between self-esteem and hopelessness, which is in accordance with the findings of previous research (Beck et al., 2004; Çoban & Karaman, 2013; Hawton, Salkovskis, Kirk & Clark, 1989). For example, levels of hopelessness increase when cognitive distortions, such as a negative sense of self, accusing oneself, despair, and viewing life as dangerous, increase (Ağır, 2007). There is also a relationship between hopelessness and depression, poor health conditions, and sub-standard lifestyles (Özmen et al., 2008). Furthermore, it has been determined that persons perceive themselves more negatively and their levels of hopelessness increase when their self-esteem

decreases (Beck et al., 2004; Elman, 2002; Leahy, 2007); and that low self-esteem has a negative effect on an individual's senses (Elman, 2002).

Conversely, other results have shown that self-esteem does not serve as a mediator between automatic thoughts and hopelessness in the model (Ağır, 2007; Kodan, 2013). Accordingly, this relationship does not have any meaningful uniqueness in conformity with low or high self-esteem. When this result is generally evaluated, it can be explained (according to the cognitive approach) that the basic cognitive structure of a person constitutes the foundations of emotion, thoughts, and behaviors. Thus, hopelessness occurs as the result of the expectations and comments of events and because an individual self-evaluates his/her life and future negatively (Beck, 2005). From this perspective, self-esteem does not serve as a mediator and automatic thoughts have a direct effect on hopelessness.

University students must deal with numerous issues and make important decisions regarding their future, in addition to establishing their identity, expanding their social network, and continuing their professional development. Such situations can cause automatic thoughts to increase, which can simultaneously increase their levels of hopelessness and diminish their self-esteem. In this regard, the findings of the present study can help such students with these issues, especially through psychological counseling. However, when the results of previous studies are evaluated as a whole, two different conclusions are found. The first is that automatic thoughts and self-esteem can predict hopelessness, whereas the second is that. Therefore, additional research should be conducted with university students from various departments in order to test the model and increase the generalizability of the findings.

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