

## Dysfunctional Attitudes of University Students

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to assess dysfunctional attitudes of university students using personal variables such as gender; type of educational institute (i.e. which college faculty or school they currently attend, which type of high school they graduated from); perception of parents' attitudes; and socio-economic level. The study was conducted in the academic year of 2009-2010, with a total of 501 students randomly selected from 10 different faculties of Atatürk University in Erzurum Turkey. Data were collected using the "Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, adapted to Turkey by Şahin and Şahin (1992). A "Personal Information Form" was given to the students for collecting data about personal, organizational and social variables. The t test, one-way ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis analysis were used in data analysis. The findings indicated that the dysfunctional attitudes of university students varied significantly according to gender ( $t(499) = -2.623, p = .009$ ), and the faculty they attended ( $F(9, 491) = 4.659, p = .000$ ). Dysfunctional attitudes did not show significant differences in terms of students' perception of their parents' attitudes, socio-economic level and type of high school they graduated from.

**Key Words:** University students, dysfunctional attitudes, attitudes.

### Introduction

Universities serve as an incubator for the development of new theories and ideas, in addition to the function of transmitting existing knowledge and culture to each generation. Universities also play an important role in preparing an individual for the future, both intellectually and socially. In addition to the cognitive acquisitions, the university can be the center for students' personal, social and intellectual activities and development. Universities are sources of ideas and learning that can change opinions and behaviors (Eisen and Kearney, 1995).

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According to the cognitive approach, changing an opinion can have an important role in shaping emotions and behaviors. Therefore, changing a perception is important for the modification of negative behaviors.

On the other hand, according to the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) theory, an individual will acquire the majority of the thought/belief structures that direct his or her life through learning from other people who are important to that individual in some way (Corey, 2001).

Ellis (1962) reported that humans have basic irrationalities that are independent from culture and education. Humans are born with a tendency towards irrationality. In addition, from childhood onwards, individuals learn from those around them. Since children are more dependent on the people around them, they commonly learn through mimicry. When compared to rational attitudes, dysfunctional attitudes prevent the individual from attaining short-term and long-term personal goals. Dysfunctional beliefs, which are mostly used for expressing desires, appear when individuals turn their desires and preferences about themselves and events into compulsory desires-demands (Jones, 1982; Corey, 2001).

Ellis (1962) reported that there are 11 beliefs or irrational thoughts. Some of these are given below:

- One's past history is an all-important determiner of one's present behavior and because something once strongly affected one's life, it should indefinitely have a similar effect in the future.
- Some people are bad and ill-intentioned and therefore they deserve to be accused and punished.
- Happiness depends upon external factors and the individual has a limited ability to control these factors.
- I should be loved and approved by virtually every significant other person in the community.

- I absolutely must be competent, adequate and achieving in all important respects to consider myself valuable.
- There is invariably a right, precise and perfect solution to human problems and it is awful if this perfect solution is not found. (Ellis, 1962; Ellis, 1973; Jones, 1982; Dryden and Ellis, 1988).

Dysfunctional premises and beliefs are generally based in childhood experience and they develop at a later time. These premises are permanent and unchangeable. These premises include assumptions like the following: the individual believes that no matter what one does, he needs other people's approval; to be considered successful; he believes that he should be successful in every field or believes that everything can be controlled in life. The characteristics of dysfunctional attitudes can be listed as follows: a) they are unrealistic, b) rigid, extreme and generalized, c) prevent the individual from showing his real performance, d) cause extreme emotions, e) they remain unchanged with daily experiences (Savaşır, Boyacıoğlu and Kabakçı, 1996)

According to Martin and Anderson (1998) cognitive flexibility is of vital importance for an individual. The values of individuals have a significant role here. Adjusting the values in such a way to facilitate adaptation also facilitates awareness and the individual's ability to adapt to new situations.

In his study, Özgüven (1999) observed that, in crisis situations, the commonality of automatic thoughts and dysfunctional attitudes were significantly higher than in other cases. He suggested that cognitive limitation can be effective in emergence of the crisis situation and therefore cognitive therapy approaches that focus on automatic thoughts and dysfunctional attitudes can be more beneficial in crisis intervention.

Individuals with dysfunctional attitudes were found to be more depressive and anxious (Azizoğlu 1993; Palabıyıköğlu et al. 1995; Tschacher 1996).

The frequency of automatic thoughts and dysfunctional attitudes for individuals in crisis was found to be significantly higher than those in other individuals. Instead of instant,

short-term behaviors, the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale measures thoughts and attitudes that are held for an extended time. As these attitudes are more ingrained and not due to a crisis situation, they can be considered a risk factor for the crisis (Abramson et al., 1978; Peterson and Seligman, 1984).

Gündoğdu, Çelikkaleli and Çapri (2003) conducted studies on students from different faculties and found that the irrational beliefs students in the faculty of education were significantly higher than those in other faculties.

Hamamcı and Duly (2007) conducted a study on university students and found a significant positive relationship between loneliness and “perfectionist attitudes” sub-dimension scores of “Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale”. Hamamcı and Duly (2007) found that social skill education based on cognitive behavior list approach significantly decreased dysfunctional attitudes of university students and that the gains achieved in monitoring the study were permanent. The present study was conducted to determine whether dysfunctional attitudes of the university students varied according to gender, the faculty they are attending, perceived parental attitude, different socio-economic level, perceived school achievement and type of high school graduated from. The study attempts to give information about the cognitive errors and dysfunctional attitudes of university students.

## **Method**

### **Population and Sampling**

The population of the study consisted of students enrolled in Atatürk University, Erzurum, Turkey in the 2009-2010 academic year. The sampling consisted of a total of 501 students enrolled in the faculties of Engineering, Medicine, Sciences, Letters, Education, Agriculture, Communication, Pharmacy, Theology and Vocational High Schools.

### **Data Collection Tools**

“Dysfunctional Attitude Scale” (DAS) developed by Weissman and Beck (1978), and adapted to Turkey by Şahin and Şahin (1992) was used for the collection of data about the

dysfunctional attitudes of the teachers-students. A "Personal Information Form" was used to collect data according to personal, organizational and social variables. Dysfunctional Attitude Scale is a Likert-type scale consisting of 40 items (scored between 1-7 points). The scale aims to determine the frequency of depression-related dysfunctional attitudes of the participants. This scale was developed by Weissman and Beck (1978) and was adapted to Turkish by Şahin and Şahin (1972), who also carried out the validity and reliability studies. In the scale, each respondent receives a score between 1 and 7. Since the items of 2. 6.12.17.24.29.30.35.37.40 are considered to refer to functional attitudes, these items are reversely scored. Score interval is 4-280. High scores received from the scale indicate the frequency of dysfunctional attitudes for the individual.

In the studies carried out on student sampling, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scale varied between .87-.92 and item-total score correlations varied between .20 and .50. Test re-test reliability coefficient of the scale varied between .54 and .84. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was found to be .82 by the researcher.

Criterion related validity study for the tool indicated that the correlation range of the scale with Beck Depression Scale was between .30 and .64.

### **Personal Information Form**

A "Personal Information Form" prepared by the researchers was given to the sampling group obtain information about the dysfunctional attitudes of university students according to gender, faculty they are attending, perceived parental attitude, socio-economic level, perceived school achievement and type of high school graduated from. Data about the personal and social characteristics of university students were gathered from this source.

### **Data Analysis**

The student's t test, one-way ANOVA analysis were used for data analysis.

## Findings

This section includes the findings about the dysfunctional attitudes of university students according to variables such as gender, faculty they are attending, perceived parental attitude, socio-economic level, perceived school achievement and type of high school graduated from.

**Table 1.** Arithmetical mean, standard deviation and t-values for dysfunctional behaviors of university students according to gender.

Gender	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	p
Male	290	178.21	26.72	-2.623	.009
Female	211	184.45	25.64		
Total	501	181.33			

p<.05

It was observed that dysfunctional attitudes of university students varied significantly according to gender, in favor of female students ( $t(499) = -2.623, p < .05$ ).

**Table 2.** Distribution of arithmetical means and standard deviations of dysfunctional behaviors of university students among the faculties.

Faculty	n	$\bar{X}$	SD
Engineering	62	177.38	27.40
Medicine	25	187.56	23.39
Science	82	175.60	23.96
Letters	50	185.56	26.46
Education	52	186.96	24.94
Agriculture	44	176.45	27.27
Communication	41	198.78	25.97
Pharmacy	51	172.76	21.22
Theology	50	183.42	27.63
Vocational Schools	44	172.90	26.96
Total	501	180.84	26.43

**Table 3.** ANOVA test results for dysfunctional behaviors scores of university students according to the faculties.

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean of squares	F	p
Between the groups	27482.929	9	3053.659	4.659	.000
Within the groups	321800.3	491	655.398		
Total	349283.2	500			

There was a significant difference between dysfunctional attitudes according to the faculties [F(9)=4.659, p<0.05].

An LSD test was applied to determine the difference between groups. The following results were obtained and there were difference;

- between engineering faculty and education and communication faculty students in favor of education and communication faculty students.
- between faculty of medicine, faculty of science and faculty of pharmacy and vocational high school in favor of the students of faculty of medicine.
- between faculty of science and medicine, faculty of letters, education and communication against faculty of science.
- between faculty of letters and faculty of communication students in favor of faculty of communication.
- between faculty of letters and faculty of pharmacy students in favor of faculty of letters students.
- between faculty of education, engineering, science, agriculture, pharmacy and vocational high school in favor of faculty of education schools.
- between faculty of education and faculty of communication in favor of faculty of communication students.

- between faculty of agriculture and faculty of education and faculty of communication students in favor of faculty of education and faculty of communication students.
- between faculty of communication and faculty of engineering, science, letters, education, agriculture, pharmacy, theology and vocational high school in favor of faculty of communication students.
- between faculty of pharmacy students and faculty of medicine, letters, education, communication and theology students against faculty of pharmacy students.
- between faculties of theology and communication in favor of faculty of communication students and there was a difference between faculty of theology and pharmacy and vocational high school in favor of theology students.
- between vocational high school and faculty of medicine, letters, education, communication and theology against vocational high school students.

**Table 4.** Distribution of arithmetical means and standard deviations of dysfunctional behaviors of university students according to perception of parents.

Perception of parents	n	$\bar{X}$	SD
Democratic	301	182.15	26.41
Conservationist	135	179.66	25.59.
Authority	65	177.16	28.09
Total	501	180.84	26.43

**Table 5.** ANOVA test results for dysfunctional behaviors scores of university students according to perception of parent attitudes.

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean of squares	F	p
Between groups	1585.742	2	792.871	1.136	.322
Within groups	347697.6	498	698.188		
Total	349283.2	500			



Results indicated that dysfunctional attitudes of university students did not vary significantly according to their perception of parental attitudes ( $F_{(2, 498)} = 1.136, p > 0.05$ ). In other words, this finding indicates that perceived parental attitudes do not change dysfunctional attitudes of university students.

**Table 6.** Arithmetical means and standard deviations of dysfunctional behaviors of university students according to socio-economical levels.

Socio-economical level	n	$\bar{X}$	SD
Low	46	178.23	34.28
Medium	428	181.24	25.81
High	27	178.88	20.98
Total	501	180.84	26.43

**Table 7.** ANOVA test results for dysfunctional behaviors scores of university students according to different socio-economical levels.

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean of squares	F	p
Between groups	483.460	2	241.730	.345	.708
Within groups	348799.8	498	700.401		
Total	349283.2	500			

It was found that dysfunctional attitudes of university students did not vary significantly according to socio-economic level ( $F_{(2, 498)} = .345, p > 0.05$ ). This finding indicates that socio-economic levels are not a factor in the dysfunctional attitudes of university students.

**Table 8.** Distribution of arithmetical means and standard deviations of dysfunctional behaviors of university students according to the types of high-school graduated.

Type of high-school	n	$\bar{X}$	SD
Regular high-school	302	181.50	27.13
Anadolu high-school	108	182.96	22.67
Science high-school	15	176.66	33.48
Occupational high-school	76	176.02	26.92
Total	501	180.84	26.43

**Table 9.** ANOVA test results for dysfunctional behaviors scores of university students according to the type of high-school graduated.

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean of squares	F	p
Between groups	2640.593	3	880.198	1.262	.287
Within groups	346642.6	497	697.470		
Total	349283.2	500			

It was found that dysfunctional attitudes of university students did not vary significantly according to type of high school graduated from ( $F_{(3, 497)} = 1.262, p > 0.05$ ). This finding indicates that type of high school attended is not a factor in the dysfunctional attitudes of university students.

In-service educational activities should be carried out regarding the dysfunctional attitudes of university students and the effects of these attitudes on education. For organizing effective programs, various authorities, Guidance and Research Centers or counseling teachers can be recruited. The studies on the dysfunctional attitudes of university students should be analyzed on the basis of faculties and, within the framework of preventive Psychological Counseling and Guidance Services, early interventions can be made for dysfunctional attitudes.

### Discussion

It was found that dysfunctional attitudes of university students varied significantly according to gender and the faculty they are attending; however, they did not vary significantly according to parental attitude, socio-economic level and type of high school graduated from. Dysfunctional attitudes of university students were found to vary significantly according to gender in favor of females. This finding indicates that dysfunctional attitudes of females were higher than those of males. The fact that female students had higher dysfunctional attitudes than males suggests that the females can be more sensitive and perfectionist. The finding about the gender is consistent with previous

studies. Lichterberg and Johnson (1992) carried out studies on adults and reported that the need for approval, competence and achievement for females was high. Coleman and Ganong (1989) reported that female students had higher levels of a desire to be loved and for approval and dependency scores when compared to those of males. Similarly, Eryüksel'in (1996) reported that the need for parental approval was higher for females than males. In a study conducted with university students, Yurtal (1999) reported that accusatory tendencies of male students were higher than those of females. Bilge, Arslan and Doğan (2000) and Gündoğdu, Çelikkaleli and Çapri (2003) reported that irrational belief scores did not vary according to gender.

That dysfunctional attitudes varied significantly in favor of female students might be associated with the roles attributed to female students by the cultural structure and their emotional characteristics. As indicated by Tümkaya (1996), the females might have more negative stress reactions due to the responsibilities they undertake in their professional and private lives and due to the difficulties they experience in these fields. Furthermore, female "menstrual" periods can be a factor in interpreting events differently than males. The experimental study of Kirkby (1994) supports this view. The results of this study indicated that premenstrual symptoms of females reduced irrational thinking types in cognitive behaviorist therapy program.

There was a significant difference between dysfunctional attitudes according to the faculties. The results indicated the following:

-that there was a difference between engineering faculty and education and communication faculty students in favor of education and communication faculty students.

-There was a difference between faculty of medicine and faculty of science and faculty of pharmacy and vocational high school in favor of the students of faculty of medicine.

-There was a difference between faculty of science and medicine, faculty of letters, education and communication against faculty of science.

-There was a difference between faculty of letters and faculty of communication students in favor of faculty of communication.

-There was a difference between faculty of letters and faculty of pharmacy students in favor of faculty of letters students.

-There was a difference between faculty of education, engineering, science, agriculture, pharmacy and vocational high school in favor of faculty of education schools.

-There was a difference between faculty of education and faculty of communication in favor of faculty of communication students.

-There was a difference between faculty of agriculture and faculty of education and faculty of communication students in favor of faculty of education and faculty of communication students.

-There was a difference between faculty of communication and faculty of engineering, science, letters, education, agriculture, pharmacy, theology and vocational high school in favor of faculty of communication students.

-There was a difference between faculty of pharmacy students and faculty of medicine, letters, education, communication and theology students against faculty of pharmacy students.

-There was a difference between faculties of theology and communication in favor of faculty of communication students and there was a difference between faculty of theology and pharmacy and vocational high school in favor of theology students.

-There was a difference between vocational high school and faculty of medicine, letters, education, communication and theology against vocational high school students.

Arithmetic averages of the findings indicated that the students enrolled in the faculties of communication, medicine, letters, theology had higher dysfunctional attitudes. In other words, university students attending these faculties had higher levels of irrational beliefs or thoughts. Numerous factors may have a role in this finding. The first one is that the

students of faculty of medicine may believe that their idea of being an “ideal doctor”; or the faculty of education students may believe that the idea of being “ideal teacher” is unattainable. The students of other faculties may have similar thoughts. The university students who are attributed with such idealism may have been experiencing more problems.

Various factors such as socio-economic levels of the students, the reasons for attending those faculties and their appropriateness for the profession may affect the attitudes of students in the years to follow. Gündoğdu, Çelikkaleli and Çapri (2003) conducted studies on the students of various faculties and reported that the students enrolled in the faculty of education had the highest irrational belief score averages when compared to the students enrolled in other faculties.

Perceived parental attitudes, type of high school graduated from and socio-economic level (SEL) did not significantly change the dysfunctional attitudes of university students.

The findings of Tümkaya (1996) are consistent with the findings of the present study. Tümkaya (1996) indicated that the teachers from higher SEL (in private schools) were found to have lower levels of somatization, anxiety, hostility and phobic reaction and psychoticism sub-scale scores.

Depending on the SEL of the students and their families, each school has its own problems. The university students share the same problems in the same environment. It can be suggested that building a positive interaction between each other can help university students to overcome negative emotions and thoughts. They may also be protected from potential problems by forming a social support shield within their group.

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