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Emotional intelligence levels and counselling skills of prospective psychological counsellors

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to determine the correlation between emotional intelligence (EI) and counselling skills of Turkish prospective psychological counsellors and to investigate differences in both EI and counselling skills in terms of sex, previous experience of group studies, and class levels. Within a correlational pattern, the sample of the study comprised a total of 349 prospective psychological counsellors; 266 females (76.2%) and 83 (23.8%) males. The data were collected via a Personal Information Form, Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory and Microcounseling Skill Discrimination Scale. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between EI and emotional reflection and general counselling skills; no significant correlation between EI and content reflection.

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KEYWORDS

Emotional intelligence; counselling skills; emotional reflection; content reflection; prospective psychological counsellors

Introduction

Emotional intelligence

Since the last 30 years, emotional intelligence has been a subject that has attracted the attention of researchers. Many researchers have introduced different models to explain emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence was firstly based on the theory of Multiple Intelligences released in 1983 by Gardner (Gardner, 2011). Gardner's internal and social intelligence dimensions helped to conceptualise emotional intelligence. Mayer and Salovey (1993) defined emotional intelligence as the evaluation of their own feelings and other people's feelings by the individual, regulation of these feelings, and use of feelings to direct thoughts and behaviour. Emotional intelligence contains competencies grouped under five dimensions. These dimensions are: (1) the individual's awareness of their own emotions, (2) ability to manage their own emotions, (3) ability to understand the feelings of others (empathy), (4) ability to motivate themselves, and (5) ability to form relationships (social skills) (Goleman, 1995). In view of Bar-On (2006), emotional intelligence, which is a system the personal and social skills, allows an individual to: (i) effectively understand themselves and others, (ii) express their own emotions and thoughts, (iii) initiate and sustain interpersonal relationships, and (iv) meet their desires and needs.

Emotional intelligence studies (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Davis & Humphrey, 2014; Spence, Oades, & Caputi, 2004) assess emotional intelligence with two different structures. Petrides, Pita, and Kokkinaki (2007) stated that trait emotional intelligence included self-reported tendency of the individual's emotions and their self-perceptions, while ability emotional intelligence contained the cognitive skills of the individual's emotions measured by performance tests. Due to the nature of ability emotional intelligence, it does not comply with objective point criteria as it is subjective and as a

result measurement is very complicated (Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000). Trait emotional intelligence, which comprises of subjective perceptions related to the emotional abilities of individuals, can be easily measured with self-report scales and has become a focus of attention for studies in recent years (Petrides, Gomez, & Perez-Gonzalez, 2017).

Becoming aware of emotions and correctly defining them allow the individual to better understand themselves and others. Emotions are an important component affecting and directing thoughts and behaviour (Beck, 2011). An individual, who can define their own emotions, may be able to see their effect on thoughts and the underlying motivation for their behaviour. In this way, they can manage their emotions, express them and display adaptive behaviour in stressful situations. Emotional intelligence includes such personality traits as optimism, secure assertiveness and empathy (Petrides & Furnham, 2000) and their competencies that may be helpful in dealing with emotional problems (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006). Individuals with high emotional intelligence levels not only notice emotions in the tone of other people's voices, gestures, mimics, verbal statements but also use an empathic approach. The individual, who can manage their own emotions and understand those of others, provides more constructive and positive reactions in dealing with emotional problems and social relationships (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Given these terms, emotional intelligence is viewed as an important factor in counselling skills of psychological counsellors.

Emotional intelligence and counselling skills

Individuals apply to psychological counselling services due to experiencing social-emotional problems, not successfully solving problems encountered in interpersonal relationships and a range of insufficient social skills (Egan, 1986). Additionally, Carkhuff (2009) revealed that counsellors' professional and personal development influenced their counselling services' efficacy and success. As a result, psychological counsellors are to develop themselves physically, mentally and social-emotionally to become a model for their clients (Daniels, 1994). In Egan's (1986) point of view, psychological counsellors should have high social intelligence levels and a wide repertoire of social skills. Though there are different approaches to counselling skills, psychological counsellors in all aid areas should have certain basic skills and defined communication types are beneficial to the client. Some of the basic competencies expected from psychological counsellors are understanding, awareness, effective listening, empathic approach, target determination, forming relationships, observation, giving feedback, emotion and content reflection, interpretation, easing adaptation and process monitoring (McLeod & McLeod, 2011). Hill et al. (2008) indicate the importance of emotional reflection and content reflection techniques for counselling skills. Emotional reflection means that the psychological counsellor understands the client's feelings and immediately reflects that emotion to the client. Content reflection involves the psychological counsellor recognising the client's thoughts and re-expressing this content (Meier & Davis, 2010). In this context, the reflection of emotion and content plays a significant role in psychological counsellor education (Daniels, 1994; Ivey & Ivey, 2013).

In view of Corey (2013), an efficient psychological counsellor knows who he is, what he wants from life and what he finds important. The emotional intelligence levels of psychological counsellors will be high if they should respect themselves, review their values and aims, and recognise their strong and weak aspects. Psychological counsellors should not only have such counselling skills as authenticity, honesty and transparency; but also, easily adapt their skills to variation and innovation. Forming effective interpersonal relationships and creating a safe environment are fundamental for the psychological counselling process (Egan, 1986). A psychological counsellor with effective counselling skills should know themselves, understand others and form effective relationships with clients. Further, he ought to develop emotional intelligence to manage their own emotions and those of others, and display adaptive behaviour to direct the client in this manner. Clark (2010) considers the skill of empathy as an indispensable tool in the field of psychological counselling. Other traits (i.e. empathy skills) needed for psychological counsellors are embedded within the emotional intelligence model (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1995).

Aim of the research

Emotional intelligence studies have focused on different variables: coping skills (Thomas, Cassady, & Heller, 2017), work satisfaction (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008), subjective well-being (Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Schutte & Malouff, 2011), depression (Aradilla-Herrero, Tomas-Sabado, & Gomez-Benito, 2014; Hansenne & Bianchi, 2009), problematic internet use (Beranuy, Oberst, Carbonell, & Chamarro, 2009) and loneliness (Zysberg, 2012). Additionally, few studies dealing with emotional via counselling skills are noteworthy (e.g. Easton, Martin, & Wilson, 2008; Kaelber & Schwartz, 2014). This study investigates the role of emotional intelligence in counselling skills. Hence, the present study aims to make a contribution to the related literature by present invaluable information that may guide experts in preparing counselling education programmes.

Emotional intelligence is of interest in psychological counsellors' personal and professional lives. Thus, prospective psychological counsellors' counselling skills and emotional intelligence levels importantly frames the quality of psychological counselling services. The counselling skills used in psychological counselling services require a range of theoretical and practical special training primarily provided by departments of guidance and psychological counselling. The sample of the present study was selected as individuals, who were prospective psychological counsellors from the relevant department continuing their education at different class levels. Because the relationship between emotional intelligence and counselling skills was thought as an important factor in counselling skills, the current study purposed to investigate this relationship. It was assumed that some personal characteristics might affect both levels of emotional intelligence and counselling skills. Since females generally prefer enrolling to the department of guidance and psychological counselling, the current study handled sex variable to explore any sex-related tendency. In addition, given a limited number of the occupational lessons in practice, changes in the class level, if any, were examined. Also, the first two-years of undergraduate guidance and psychological counselling education contain more theoretical lessons, while its last two-years focus on practical lessons. Thereby, class level was considered to possibly be effective. Participation in any previous psycho-educational group studies, which might be effective in learning basic counselling skills and developing emotional intelligence, was discussed in terms of the development of the sample under investigation.

Taking the foregoing assumptions into account, this research aimed to determine the trait emotional intelligence levels and correlation with counselling skills of prospective psychological counsellors and to investigate differences in both emotional intelligence levels and counselling skills in terms of sex, previous experience of group studies, and class levels. In light of these aims, the following hypotheses were tested:

- (1) There is a positive significant correlation between trait emotional intelligence and counselling skills of prospective psychological counsellors.
- (2) The emotional intelligence levels of female prospective psychological counsellors are higher than those of male ones.
- (3) The emotional intelligence levels of those, who had previously participated in any psycho-educational group studies, are higher than nonparticipants to any psycho-educational group studies.
- (4) The emotional intelligence levels of prospective psychological counsellors continuing education in higher level classes are higher than those in lower level classes.
- (5) The counselling skill levels of female prospective psychological counsellors are higher than those of male ones.
- (6) The counselling skill levels of those, who had previously participated in any psycho-educational group studies, are higher than nonparticipants to any psycho-educational group studies.
- (7) The counselling skill levels of prospective psychological counsellors continuing education in higher level classes are higher than those in lower level classes.

Method

Design of the research

This research investigated the prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence levels and counselling skills. The study was designed with a correlational pattern from the quantitative research approach. With the correlational pattern, the correlation between two or more variables can be determined (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Additionally, prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence levels and counselling skills were examined in terms of different demographic variables in order to obtain descriptive findings.

Participants

The sample of the study comprised of a total of 349 university students from different class levels attending the guidance and psychological counselling department of a large state university in north-eastern Turkey. The participants were 266 (76.2%) female and 83 (23.8%) male students. Their ages were ranged from 17 to 28 years and mean age was 20.35 (Sd: 1.43).

Data collection tools

The research used the following data collection tools; the Personal Information Form developed by the researchers, the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (Acar, 2001; Bar-On, 1997) and Microcounseling Skill Discrimination Scale (Lee, Zingle, Patterson, Ivey, & Haase, 1976; Yaka, 2005).

Personal information form

This form developed by the researchers questioned the sex and class level of participants. Additionally, it asked them to declare whether they had been participated in any previous psycho-educational group studies.

Bar-On emotional quotient inventory

This inventory, originally developed by Bar-On (1997), and adapted into Turkish culture by Acar (2001), measures the trait emotional intelligence of an individual. The Turkish form of the inventory contains 88 statements through a 5-point Likert scale from 'I completely agree' (1 point) to 'I definitely disagree' (5 points). It comprises five dimensions of *personal awareness*, *interpersonal relationships*, *stress management*, *adaptation skills* and *general mental state*. A decrease in the inventory scores means to an increase in the emotional intelligence levels of the individual. The Turkish form's Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .92. For this study, this coefficient was calculated to be .94.

Microcounseling skill discrimination scale

This scale, originally developed by Lee et al. (1976) and adapted into Turkish by Yaka (2005), elicits counselling skills proficiency of psychological counsellors. It contains a total of 44 items with 22 *emotional reflection* statements and 22 *content reflection* statements and has two sub-dimensions. Responses on a 7-point Likert scale range from 'Not effective' (1 point) to 'Very effective' (7 points). The more the scale scores increases, the more the ability of the individual to distinguish effective basic counselling skills from ineffective ones increases as well. Its adapted version's Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficients were found to be .73 for the *emotional reflection* sub-dimension, and .76 for the *content reflection* sub-dimension, and .85 for the general scale. In this study, these values were calculated to be .77 for *emotional reflection*, and .78 for *content reflection*, and .86 for the general scale.

Data collection and analysis procedures

The data collection tools were administered to prospective psychological counselors during their regular classes at the division of guidance and psychological counselling. Through a single session, it took about 45 min. Before the administration, they were informed about the purpose of the study. Hence, volunteer students were asked to complete the data collection tools. Within the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory, the 88th item of 'I answered the above statements sincerely' was an item that was not part of the sub-dimensions on the inventory and determined the tendency of the person to answer the tools. 111 prospective psychological counsellors, who did not answer 'I completely agree' to this statement, were excluded from the data due to concerns of an honest and sincere self-assessment. The obtained data were transferred to a computer environment and analysis used the SPSS 18.0 programme. Data analysis used the Pearson Moments Product Correlation Coefficient, *t* test for independent groups, and one way analysis of variance techniques. The lowest significance value was accepted as $p < .05$.

Results

Correlation between emotional intelligence and counselling skills

The results of the correlation analysis, determining any significant correlation between prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence and counselling skills are presented in Table 1.

There was a negative significant correlation between emotional intelligence and emotion reflection ($r = -.13, p < .05$), and between emotional intelligence and general counselling skills ($r = -.13, p < .05$). No significant correlation was found between emotional intelligence and content reflection ($r = -.10, p > .05$). Given these findings, higher levels of prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence levels meant that they were more successful at distinguishing emotional reflection statements and were more proficient in counselling skills.

Emotional intelligence and demographic variables

The results of any differentiation amongst emotional intelligence levels, sex and participation in any previous psycho-educational group studies are displayed in Table 2. Further, the findings of any throughout class level are shown in Table 3.

The results of the independent group *t* test showed no statistically significant difference between their emotional intelligence levels and sex ($t = .975, p > .05$), and between their emotional intelligence levels and previous participation in psycho-educational group studies ($t = -.866, p > .05$).

The results of one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed no significant difference between prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence levels and class level ($F_{(3,345)} = .330, p > .05$).

Table 1. Correlation between emotional intelligence and counselling skills.

Variables	1	2	3	4
(1) Emotional Intelligence	1.00			
(2) Reflecting emotion	-.13**	1.00		
(3) Reflecting content	-.10	.64***	1.00	
(4) Counselling skills	-.13*	.89***	.91***	1.00
Mean	199.89	109.53	105.27	214.81
Sd	34.30	14.60	16.19	27.93

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Differences in emotional intelligence levels based on sex and group studies participation.

		<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>Sd</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Sex	Female	266	200.89	35.02	.975	.330
	Male	83	196.68	31.87		
Group Studies	Participated	80	196.97	31.68	−.866	.387
	Did not participate	269	200.75	35.05		

Table 3. Differences in emotional intelligence levels based on class level.

Factor		<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Class Level	Between groups	1172.32	3	390.77	.330	.804
	Within groups	408295.54	345	1183.46		
	Total	409467.86	348			

Table 4. Differences in counselling skill levels based on sex and group studies participation.

		<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>Sd</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Sex	Female	266	218.30	27.11	4.277	.000*	0.539
	Male	83	203.63	27.77			
Group Studies	Participated	80	200.90	27.58	−5.265	.000*	0.672
	Did not participate	269	218.95	26.72			

p* < .001.Table 5.** Differences in counselling skill levels based on class level.

Factor		<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	Tukey
Class Level	Between groups	64628.58	3	21542.86	35.907	.000*	0.237	1 < 2
	Within groups group	206988.30	345	599.96				1 < 3
	Total	271616.89	348					1 < 4
								2 < 3

**p* < .001.

Counselling skills and demographic variables

The results of any differences amongst counselling skill levels, sex and participation in any previous psycho-educational group studies are displayed in Table 4. The findings of any differentiation throughout class level are shown in Table 5.

As observed in Table 4, there were significant differences between prospective psychological counsellors' counselling skills and sex ($t = 4.277$, $p < .05$), and between prospective psychological counsellors' counselling skills and previous participation in any psycho-educational group studies ($t = -5.265$, $p < .05$). The results revealed that females were more proficient in counselling skills than males. Also, nonparticipants to any psycho-educational group studies had better skills than those who had participated into any psycho-educational group studies.

As seen in Table 5, prospective psychological counsellors' counselling skill levels appeared to differ significantly according to class level ($F_{(3,345)} = 35.907$, $p < .05$). The Tukey post-hoc test indicated that prospective psychological counsellors at the first year of the study (freshman) had worse counselling skills as compared to others. Further, prospective psychological counsellors at the second year of the study (sophomore) had worse counselling skills than those at the third year of the study (junior).

Discussion

In the profession of psychological counselling, personal traits are at least as important as professional competence (Corey, 2013). An efficient psychological counsellor is to have basic counselling skills and be proficient in terms of interventional techniques used. Additionally, psychological counsellors, who

are aware of their own emotions, trust and respect themselves, know their own limits and have an empathic approach to others, will have increased effectiveness of psychological counselling and productivity in life. In our study there was a significant correlation between higher levels of prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence and proficiency of counselling skills. None of earlier studies has reported such a similar result. Shapiro (1998) states that empathy, understanding emotions, adaptation, interpersonal problem solving and respect are personality traits that are important for success. Psychological counsellors with high emotional intelligence levels may be more successful in the counselling environment due to their ability to deal with uncertainty, being open to new things, ability to notice and accept errors, ability to understand others and ability to empathise with other individuals.

The current study indicated that such variables as sex, previous participation in any psycho-educational group studies and class level did not result in any difference on prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence levels. The study group comprised university students attending the guidance and psychological counselling department and tools were administered in the last weeks of the spring semester. Students who choose this department are generally considered to be aware of helping people with social-emotional problems and to make their choice based on personal sensitivity. Additionally, after beginning training they gain self-awareness from occupational lessons and develop their personal traits required for psychological counsellors. Though psychological counselling education may focus on cognitive understanding and counselling skills, interpersonal and personal skills may also develop (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Students who try to develop themselves in professional proficiency, may show academic differences but are open to change due to holding certain expectations about the future. As a result, it can be concluded that emotional intelligence levels did not show any influential differences on demographic variables. The related literature depicts some inconsistent results. For example, some indicate that women have higher emotional intelligence levels (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Erdoğan, 2008; Harrod & Scheer, 2005; İşmen, 2001), whilst some state no difference between sex and emotional intelligence levels (Balci, Yılmaz, Odacı, & Kalkan, 2003; Goleman, 2000). A lack of sex-related difference in this study may result from the characteristics of the sample under investigation. Future studies should equally balance the number of female and male participants.

The current study also handled counselling skills with demographic variables. The fact that female prospective psychological counsellors had better proficiency of counselling skills than male ones, may stem from their abilities to differentiate between effective and ineffective basic counselling skills and/or cultural factors. For example, females in Turkish culture are mostly directed to listen more, understand others, and take social responsibility, while males are generally directed to talk, take action and create change in the social agenda (Dökmen, 2004). Different studies showed that females were more proficient in counselling skills (Constantine, 2000; Gündüz & Çelikkaleli, 2009). Nonparticipants to any previous psycho-educational group studies were found to have higher counselling skill proficiency than those who had participated in group studies. This means that prospective psychological counsellors attending the same education and gaining theoretical/practical professional knowledge will gain a certain level of counselling skills. However, prospective psychological counsellors who had participated in an applied group study and been included in a therapeutic process led by an expert leader may feel insufficient. Comparing themselves with an expert psychological counsellor may lead to hopelessness due to inexperience in translating their knowledge into practice. Gaining professional experience, supervisory support and internships increases the number of psychological counselling applications; in this way individuals gain experience and develop counselling skills (Sharpley & Ridgway, 1993; Tang, Addison, LaSure-Bryant, & Norman, 2004). The fact that an increase in class level enhanced their counselling skills may come from undergraduate education. That is, the more the class level increases the more professional-linked lessons/classes, their intensive content and application studies increase. Their ability to differentiate effective and ineffective basic counselling skills may have increased due to their knowledge and techniques. The fact that prospective psychological counsellors at the fourth year of the study (senior) were more proficient in

counselling skills than those at the first year of the study (freshman), may result from a reduced motivation toward gaining professional knowledge or high-staking nationwide exam (called Public Personnel Selection Examination) in the last year of the study. The majority of prospective psychological counsellors in Turkey have to pass the Public Personnel Selection Examination to be appointed in public schools. Due to economic concerns in this period, prospective psychological counsellors focus on exams and see applied skills as being less important. Additionally, the belief that they will directly begin work after graduation and uncertainty about what they will encounter in professional life may cause them to feel insufficient in counselling skills. Their personal sufficiency of counselling skills may be more positive and at higher levels before having experience on giving counselling or testing their true personal performances. However, having experience within applied lessons at the final year of the study, may have afforded them to evaluate their applied skill levels more realistically and be aware of the needs for more hard-working and experience to develop themselves.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of the current study showed negative significant correlations between emotional intelligence and emotion reflection and between emotional intelligence and general counselling skills. Moreover, no significant correlation was found for content reflection levels. The results showed that having higher levels of emotional intelligence enabled prospective psychological counsellors to be more successful at distinguishing emotional reflection statements as well as more proficient in counselling skills. Additionally, no statistically significant difference was found amongst prospective psychological counsellors' emotional intelligence levels, sex, previous participation in any psycho-educational group work and class level. For counselling skills, female prospective psychological counsellors were more proficient than male ones; nonparticipants to any psycho-educational group studies were more proficient than those who had attended; and those in more advanced classes were more proficient than those in lower ones.

This study has a range of limitations. For example, this research sampled prospective psychological counsellors, collected data from undergraduate students at the department of guidance and psychological counselling; employed an imbalance sex distribution. The aforementioned issues may be viewed as the limitations of methodology. Additionally, because the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of counselling skills form a set of professional skills, these skills cannot be identified with only one scale. Scoring with only cognitive dimension may be assessed as another limitation. Future studies ought to be planned using qualitative or mixed methods to assess the affective and behavioural dimensions.

This study is worthy in that it researched the personal skill of emotional intelligence, necessary for psychological counselling services. In equipping prospective psychological counsellors with professional knowledge and counselling skills, emotional intelligence programmes should be organised to develop their personal awareness, emotional empathy management and communication skills. Hence, at the beginning of their professional career, they may create healthier therapeutic relationships with their clients and be open to any development and change. Also, they will be able to use their counselling skills more efficiently. A balance between theoretical and applied lessons should be generated in guidance and psychological counselling education. An increase in applied lesson hours and providing supervision by expert psychological counsellors may get them to gain self-confidence, experience about the counselling environment and develop their counselling skills. Applied internship opportunities in psychological counselling education may prepare them to grasp what they will encounter after graduation as well as remedying their anxiety and hopelessness. Further studies should be undertaken to go over the correlation between different variables (e.g. counselling skills, personality traits, psychological needs and life satisfaction). Furthermore, the importance of emotional intelligence (as a variable) ought to be researched in other services (i.e. health and security).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Hatice Odaci is Professor of the Guidance and Psychological Counseling at Karadeniz Technical University. Her research interests include psychological counselling training, individual and group counselling supervision, problematic internet use and attachment styles.

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