

## Loneliness and Depression Levels of Students Using a University Counseling Center\*

### Üniversite Psikolojik Danışma Merkezine Başvuran Öğrencilerin Yalnızlık ve Depresyon Düzeyleri

Esra CEYHAN\*\* A. Aykut CEYHAN\*\*\*  
Anadolu University

#### Öz

Araştırma, üniversite psikolojik danışma merkezine başvuran öğrencilerin yalnızlık ve depresyon düzeylerini incelemektedir. Araştırmanın katılımcıları üniversite psikolojik danışma merkezine başvuran 550 öğrenciden oluşmuştur. Araştırma bulguları, psikolojik danışma merkezine başvuran öğrencilerin genel olarak yalnızlık düzeyinin orta düzeyde ve depresyon düzeyi ortalamalarının ise yüksek düzeyde olduğunu işaret etmiştir. Ayrıca, çalışmada erkek öğrencilerin kız öğrencilerden anlamlı bir biçimde daha yüksek yalnızlık ve depresyon düzeyine sahip olduğu bulunmuştur. Sınıf düzeyi açısından ise birinci sınıf öğrencilerin diğer sınıf düzeyi (ikinci, üçüncü ve dördüncü) öğrencilerinin tümünden anlamlı biçimde daha yüksek yalnızlık ve depresyon düzeyine sahip olduğu da ortaya çıkmıştır. Yine, öğrencilerin yalnızlık ve depresyon düzeyleri arasında orta düzeyde önemli bir ilişki olduğu da bulunmuştur.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Depresyon, yalnızlık, psikolojik danışma merkezi, üniversite öğrencisi.

#### Abstract

The present study investigated loneliness and depression levels of university students who use the counseling center. The participants of the study were 550 university students who came to the counseling center of a university. Findings indicated that students who came to the counseling center had an average level of loneliness and that their depression level mean was high in general. In the study, it was also revealed that male students had higher levels of loneliness and depression than female students and that the loneliness and depression levels of the first-grade students were higher than those of others significantly. Moreover, a moderately significant relationship was found between the loneliness and depression levels of students.

*Keywords:* Depression, loneliness, counseling center, university student.

#### Introduction

University counseling services have an important role in higher education. University counseling centers generally serve as a source that helps students cope with their psychosocial and developmental problems (Sharkin, 1997). University students, who are young adults, face both developmental and environmental stressors. Students, especially the freshmen, have to deal with several stressors like being away from hometown, adapting themselves to the university life, living together with others in the dormitory, making effective use of time, managing the budget.

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\*\* Assoc. Prof. Dr. Esra CEYHAN, Anadolu University, Faculty of Education, Division of Guidance and Counseling Psychology, eceyhan@anadolu.edu.tr

\*\*\* Assoc. Prof. Dr. A. Aykut CEYHAN, Anadolu University, Faculty of Education, Division of Guidance and Counseling Psychology, aceyhan@anadolu.edu.tr

Moreover, university students also have to achieve such developmental tasks as establishing new relationships, achieving intimacy and avoiding isolation (Erikson, 1963). All these have the potential to threaten the well-being of students. This situation might lead to the increase in prevalence of psychopathology among students. Especially among the practitioners and managers of university counseling centers, there is a common belief and enough anecdotal evidence, though not empirical, that the severity of students' psychological problems have increased in recent years when compared with the past (Ceyhan et al., 2008; Sharkin, 1997; Sharkin & Coulter, 2005). However, most university students are a risk group for psychopathology although they do not take adequate preventive mental health services (İnanç et al., 2004).

University students come to counseling or medico-social centers due to many different problems. A study examining counseling services in Turkish universities points out that the problems of students who frequently seek help were communication problems, adjustment to university life, romantic relationships, depression, anxiety disorders, test anxiety, study skills, academic failure, low self-esteem, and relation with parents, in order of frequency (Yerin-Güneri, 2006). Similarly, another study indicates that main reasons for seeking help from counseling center were lack of self-confidence, depression and anxiety, procrastination behavior/ not working a regular course/ academic subjects, communication problems, adjustment problems, and so on, in order of application frequency (Ceyhan et al., 2008). Besides, McWhirter (1990) and Michael et. al. (2006) indicated that university students are vulnerable to especially loneliness and depression.

Loneliness exists in all age-groups, yet it is a common problem among university students (Ponzetti, 1990). Loneliness is considered traditionally as a part of more encompassing issues of psychological distress rather than merely as a unique clinical problem (McWhirter, 1990). After loneliness was empirically determined to be a unique construct (Russel, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980; Weeks, Michela, Peplau & Bragg, 1980), it has drawn more attention in the field of counseling psychology and researchers have begun to carry out more studies on loneliness. In order to develop interventions for loneliness, it is necessary to determine the variables related to loneliness and then to define those in the high-risk group. In literature, it is seen that not causal relationships but correlational relationships were found (McWhirter, 1990). The reason is that it is not easy to establish the direction of causation between loneliness and many of the features commonly associated with it due to the existence of reciprocal relationships (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

A variety of negative mood states and destructive behavior patterns are related to loneliness (Jackson, Soderlind & Weiss, 2000). As a result of the studies carried out on loneliness, loneliness is found to be related with psychosocial difficulties (e.g., low self-esteem, low social competence, poorer social interactions), mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal behaviors) and with physical health issues (e.g., poorer immune and cardiovascular functioning, sleep deficiencies). Based on the findings of the studies, a typical lonely person has several characteristics such as negative feelings like desperation, depression, impatient boredom, and self-depreciation; negative attitudes about oneself, other people, and about the causes of events; and passive, self-absorbed and ineffective social behavior (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

In literature, various factors were examined for the purpose of determining loneliness. According to the research findings, there were no differences between the loneliness levels of university students in terms of their grade (Le Roux & Connors, 2001). In addition, the findings that the level of loneliness does not differ with respect to gender (Neto & Barros, 2003; Lamm & Stephan, 1987), but there are still other findings that the loneliness levels of male individuals are higher than that of female individuals (Karahan et.al., 2004; Le Roux & Connors, 2001, Wiseman, Gutfreund & Lurie, 1995). Moreover, relationships were found between loneliness and certain personality factors. A relationship was found between loneliness and neuroticism, and neuroticism was reported to be the predictor of loneliness (Neto & Barros, 2003). Furthermore, studies show that cultural background also plays an important role in loneliness experience (Neto & Barros, 2003; Le Roux & Connors, 2001). Consequently, loneliness, a significant multi-dimensional phenomenon, has significant outcomes for mental health (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

Depression, like loneliness, is an important syndrome that many university students have to cope with during their university lives. Studies demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between loneliness and depression; that both are distinct constructs; that one is not the result of the other; and that both share some common origins (Weeks et al., 1980; Wiseman et al., 1995; Cacioppo, Hughes, Walte, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2006). On the contrary, based on research findings, it can be said that loneliness plays a causative role on the development of depression (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

A number of university students are likely to demonstrate severe symptoms of depression during their university lives (Michael, et. al., 2006); thus depression is commonly seen among university students (Padesky & Hammen, 1981). Supporting this, a study examining the students who come to counseling units of university medico-social center indicate that similarly to general psychiatric outpatient clinic, most of the students took diagnoses of anxiety and depressive disorders, respectively. In literature, studies investigating the role of gender on depression reveal inconsistent findings. For instance, while some researchers reported that female university students had higher levels of depression than male students (Wiseman et al., 1995; Kelly et.al., 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), there are other researchers who found that male university students had higher depression levels (Aydın, 1990; Michael, et.al., 2006). On the other hand, there are still other findings that there is no difference between depression levels of female and male students (Padesky & Hammen, 1981; Ceyhan, Ceyhan & Kurtyılmaz, 2005).

Among the depressed college students, there are clear gender differences in their help-seeking attitudes and reported behaviors, and male students are more reluctant to seek help (Padesky & Hammen, 1981; Chang, 2007a; 2007b). Moreover, a number of studies demonstrate that male students have negative opinions about emotional help-seeking (Michael, et.al., 2006). On the other hand, years spent at university make students' help-seeking attitudes more positive (So, Gilbert & Romero, 2005). In addition to the potential differences in the depression and loneliness levels of university students, there are also differences in terms of their grades. Since especially the first years at university include the transitional years, the psychological difficulties experienced during this period may increase accordingly. Research shows that the level of loneliness is high for students who are in their first years; that their general well-being and adaptation to university life are low (Halamandaris & Power, 1997); and that they experience various adjustment difficulties (Wang & Miao, 2007).

Considering the fact that loneliness and depression have a number of negative implications, it is important that the depression and loneliness levels of university students applying university counseling centers should be determined according to their gender. On the other hand, since students in their first years at university may experience more adjustment difficulties and they are more psychologically vulnerable to psychopathology due to the difficulties they experience, it is important to determine whether there are differences in these difficulties by grade. Furthermore, the present study aims at revealing the relationships between loneliness and depression. The study focusing on the students' grade-levels and gender is expected to present important implications regarding the development of effective intervention strategies for both loneliness and depression. Therefore, it is important to investigate the mental health and especially the loneliness and depression levels of university students.

The present study set out to examine gender and grade-level differences in loneliness and depression in a sample of university students seeking counseling. For this reason, the following research questions were directed:

1. What are the loneliness and depression levels of students seeking counseling?
2. Do the mean scores of the loneliness level of students seeking counseling differ significantly across their gender and grade-level?
3. Do the mean scores of the depression level of students seeking counseling differ significantly across their gender and grade-level?

4. What is the relationship between loneliness and depression levels of the counseling-seeker students? How does this relationship vary significantly in terms of gender and grade-level?

### Method

#### *Subjects*

The participants consisted of 550 volunteer university students seeking counseling at the Center of Counseling and Guidance of the Anadolu University. The data were collected from the students attending various undergraduate programs at the University, in 2005-2006 academic year-spring term and 2006-2007 academic year-both fall and spring terms. The subject group was made up of 356 female students (64.7%), 192 male students (34.9%), and 2 of them (0.4%) were unknown because of no response. Out of the 550 students, 212 subjects were freshmen (38.5%), 115 of them were sophomores (20.9%), 100 of them were juniors (18.2%), 76 were seniors (13.8%), and 47 of them (8.5%) were unknown because of providing no response.

#### *Measures*

*UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS)*: The scale is a self-report scale developed by Russell, Peplau and Cutrona in 1980 in order to measure the overall loneliness feelings of individuals, and the validity and reliability studies of its adapted version were carried out by Demir (1989). The scale is a Likert-type scale consisting of 20 items, 10 of which are positive statements and 10 of which are negative statements. The scale produces a general loneliness score of at least 20 and at most 80. Higher scores mean that individuals experience the feeling of loneliness at a higher degree (Demir, 1989).

*Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)*: The purpose of the scale was not to end up with a diagnosis of depression, but to determine the degree of depression symptoms. The scale comprises four-option items for each of the 21 symptom categories related to depression. Each of the items receives a score between 0 and 3, and the lowest score to be taken from the scale is 0 and the highest 63. Higher scores mean higher level of and the severity of depression. Studies on the structural validity of adaptation of BDI to the Turkish society revealed that the factor construct of the scale was similar to the results of the studies carried out on university students in Western societies (Savaşır & Şahin, 1997).

*The Questionnaire*: The questionnaire was developed for this study to collect participants' certain demographic information about gender and grade-level.

#### *Procedure*

The data of the present study were collected from the students applying the university counseling center for seeking counseling help in the three academic semester periods (in 2005-2006 academic year-spring term and 2006-2007 academic year-both fall and spring terms). The students applying through the receptionist of the Center of Counseling and Guidance of the University first took intake interview with a counselor routinely. At the meeting, they planned and decided the format and time of his/her seeking help together. The students to get counseling at the end of this meeting were asked to fill the booklet of the measures voluntarily. The front sheet of the booklet included a short explanation regarding the main aim of the present study, and students were asked not to write their names on the booklet. After the counseling-seekers finished filling out the booklet, they put the booklet into the closed-box prepared to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the students in the study. A total of 562 students participated in the study. However, 12 students were excluded from the study because they did not respond to the instruments as required.

In the analysis, Pearson's correlation coefficient and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with post hoc test were used. In the study, the significance level was generally taken as 0.05. In addition, if the ANOVA concerning the interaction was significant, then the level of significance

in the follow-up pairwise analyses was determined as .01 to control the Type I error in a variety of ANOVA situations.

## Results

### 1. Loneliness and depression levels of the students applying the university counseling center

Firstly, to identify the loneliness and depression levels of the psychological counselling-seekers, descriptive statistics related to the distribution was applied. The findings display that the mean of the loneliness levels of the counselling-seekers is 45.10, and the standard deviation of the distribution equals to 9.35. The range of the scores obtained from UCLA-LS varied between 25 and 71 (i.e. the range equals to 46). The median of the distribution is 45. The mean score of the loneliness levels of the counseling-seekers on the first quartile is below 37, and that of the loneliness levels of the participants on the third quartile is over 52. The distributional properties of the depression scores for the counseling-seekers also state that the mean of the counseling-seekers' depression levels is 19.81, and the standard deviation of the distribution equals to 8.93. The range of the scores obtained from BDI varied between 0 and 52 (i.e. the range equals to 52). The median of the distribution is 19. The mean score of the depression levels of the university students on the first quartile is below 13, and that of the depression levels of the participants on the third quartile is over 26.

### 2. The findings concerning the interaction effect of gender and grade-level on loneliness

The present study also examined whether the level of loneliness differed across gender and grade-level significantly. For this purpose, initially, descriptive statistics was run. A summary of the descriptive statistics including the means and the standard deviations for each cell is given in Table 1.

Table 1.

*A summary of the descriptive statistics of the levels of loneliness in terms of gender and grade-level*

| Loneliness | Grade Level | Gender   |          |           |          |          |           |          |          |           |
|------------|-------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|
|            |             | Female   |          |           | Male     |          |           | Total    |          |           |
|            |             | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|            | 1.Freshmen  | 127      | 45.57    | 9.58      | 85       | 50.03    | 9.18      | 212      | 47.36    | 9.65      |
|            | 2.Sophomore | 84       | 42.37    | 9.18      | 31       | 48.64    | 8.23      | 115      | 44.06    | 9.33      |
|            | 3.Junior    | 66       | 44.85    | 9.07      | 34       | 42.88    | 7.20      | 100      | 44.18    | 8.49      |
|            | 4.Senior    | 51       | 41.96    | 9.51      | 25       | 43.24    | 9.59      | 76       | 42.38    | 9.49      |
|            | Total       | 328      | 44.05    | 9.45      | 175      | 47.43    | 9.23      | 503      | 45.22    | 9.50      |

To determine if the differences observed between the means in Table 1 were statistically significant, two-way ANOVA [2(female/male)x4(grade-level: freshmen/sophomore/junior/senior)] was conducted. For this purpose, initially, when Levene's test of equality of error variances was run, the population variances of the loneliness were found to be the same for all cells and insignificant ( $F(7,495)=0.52, p=.82$ ). Thus, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the effects of gender and grade-level on loneliness because the assumptions underlying analysis of variance were met. The results indicated both significant main effects for gender [ $F(1,495)=7.18, p=.008$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ] and grade-level [ $F(3,495)=7.36, p=.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ ], and a significant interaction was found between gender and grade-level [ $F(3,495)=3.79, p=.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.02$ ]. Based on these results, the main effect of gender showed that the loneliness levels of male and female students differed significantly from one another. To determine the source of this difference, no further analysis was needed to assess the main effect of the gender because the gender variable included two factors like male and female. As a result, as seen in Table 1, the loneliness level ( $M=47.43$ ) of male students was significantly higher than that of female ( $M=44.05$ ) students.

The purpose of the study was also to determine which grade-level has more depressive level. A follow-up analysis to the main effect for grade-level was conducted with Tukey HSD procedure to control Type I error across the pairwise comparisons. The results of this analysis indicated that the loneliness level of freshmen counseling-seekers ( $M=47.36$ ) was significantly higher than all the other grade-levels, that is the loneliness levels of the sophomore ( $M=44.06$ ), the junior ( $M=44.18$ ) and the senior counseling-seekers ( $M=42.38$ ), [The mean differences between freshmen and sophomore (3.30,  $p=.01$ ), and junior (3.19,  $p=.02$ ), and senior (4.98,  $p=.001$ ) were significant]. However there was no significant difference for the other possible pairwise comparisons among sophomore, junior and senior.

From a two-way ANOVA analyses, it was seen that both the main effects of gender and grade-level, and gender -and- grade-level interaction effects were significant. Generally, if the interaction effect is significant, it is not interpreted as main effects, and it was previously expected to understand why the interaction yields significance. Exploring this interaction is generally conducted through an analysis of simple main effect tests. Instead of this analysis, in order to determine this interaction, initially, the insert variable including these eight cells (gender x grade level) by recoding was created. Following this, an analysis of variance with post-hoc tests was applied to compare the means for eight cells shown in Table 1. For this purpose, when one-way analysis of variance including the means for eight cells given in Table 2 was performed, the result of the analysis was found significant [ $F(7,514)=6.59$ ,  $p=.001$ , Levene statistic (7,514)=.51,  $p=.83$ ]. Then, the pairwise comparisons were conducted, but the significance level was taken as .01 instead of .05 to control for Type I error across all the pairwise comparisons and also not to increase Type II error. The results of the analyses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Results of the post hoc analyses with gender-and-grade level for the counseling seekers' loneliness level.*

| Gender x Grade   | Female Freshmen | Female Sophomore | Female Junior | Female Senior | Male Freshmen | Male Sophomore | Male Junior | Male Senior |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Female Freshmen  | -               | 3.20             | 0.72          | 3.61          | 4.46**        | 3.07           | 2.69        | 1.55        |
| Female Sophomore | -               | -                | 2.48          | 0.41          | 7.67**        | 6.27*          | 0.51        | 1.65        |
| Female Junior    | -               | -                | -             | 2.89          | 5.19**        | 3.79           | 1.97        | 0.83        |
| Female Senior    | -               | -                | -             | -             | 8.07**        | 6.68*          | 0.92        | 2.06        |
| Male Freshmen    | -               | -                | -             | -             | -             | 1.39           | 7.15**      | 6.01**      |
| Male Sophomore   | -               | -                | -             | -             | -             | -              | 5.76        | 4.62        |
| Male Junior      | -               | -                | -             | -             | -             | -              | -           | 1.14        |
| Male Senior      | -               | -                | -             | -             | -             | -              | -           | -           |

As seen in Table 2 and Table 1, the results of the pair comparisons regarding gender -and- grade-level at the significance level of  $p=.01$  showed that the loneliness level of male freshmen counseling seekers ( $M=50.03$ ) was significantly higher than that of female freshmen ( $M=45.57$ ), female sophomores ( $M=42.37$ ), female juniors ( $M=44.85$ ), female seniors ( $M=41.96$ ), male juniors ( $M=42.88$ ) and male seniors ( $M=43.24$ ).

### 3. The findings concerning interaction effect of gender and grade-level on depression

The present study also examined whether the level of depression differs across gender and grade-level significantly. For this purpose, initially, descriptive statistics was run. A summary of the descriptive statistics including the means and the standard deviations for each cell is given in Table 3.

Table 3.

*A summary of the descriptive statistics of the levels of depression in terms of gender and grade-level*

| Depression | Grade Level | Gender |       |      |      |       |       |       |       |      |
|------------|-------------|--------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
|            |             | Female |       |      | Male |       |       | Total |       |      |
|            |             | N      | M     | SD   | N    | M     | SD    | N     | M     | SD   |
| Depression | 1.Freshmen  | 127    | 19.50 | 8.40 | 85   | 24.29 | 10.54 | 212   | 21.42 | 9.58 |
|            | 2.Sophomore | 84     | 18.29 | 9.14 | 31   | 21.06 | 8.21  | 115   | 19.04 | 8.95 |
|            | 3.Junior    | 66     | 19.89 | 7.92 | 34   | 19.24 | 8.01  | 100   | 19.67 | 7.91 |
|            | 4.Senior    | 51     | 17.82 | 9.44 | 25   | 18.72 | 7.83  | 76    | 18.11 | 8.90 |
|            | Total       | 328    | 19.01 | 8.67 | 175  | 21.94 | 9.57  | 503   | 20.03 | 9.09 |

To determine if the differences observed between the means for each cell in Table 3 were statistically significant, two-way ANOVA [2(female/male)x4(grade level: freshmen/sophomore/junior/senior)] was conducted. For this purpose, initially, when Levene’s test of equality of error variances was applied, the population variances of depression were found to be the same for all cells and insignificant ( $F(7, 495)=1.85, p=.08$ ). Thus, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the effects of gender and grade-level on depression because the assumptions underlying analysis of variance were met. The results of ANOVA indicated both significant main effects for gender [ $F(1,495)=4.56, p=.03, \text{partial } \eta^2=.01$ ] and grade-level [ $F(3,495)=3.65, p=.01, \text{partial } \eta^2=.02$ ], but no significant interaction was found between gender and grade-level [ $F(3,495)=2.23, p=.08, \text{partial } \eta^2=.01$ ] in terms of .05 critique level. Based on these results, the main effect of gender showed that the depression levels of male and female students differed significantly from one another. To determine the source of this difference, no further analysis was needed to assess the main effect of gender because the gender variable included two factors like male and female. As a result, as seen in Table 3, the depression level ( $M=21.94$ ) of male students was significantly higher than that of female ( $M=19.01$ ) students.

The purpose of this study was also to determine which grade-level is more depressive. A follow-up analysis of the main effect for grade-level was conducted with Tukey HSD procedure to control Type I error across the pairwise comparisons. The results of this analysis indicated that the depression level of freshmen counseling-seekers ( $M=21.42$ ) was significantly higher than the depression level of senior ( $M=18.11$ ), [The mean differences between freshmen and senior (3.31,  $p=.03$  were significant)]. However there was no significant difference for the other possible pairwise comparisons among freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior.

4. The relationship between loneliness and depression levels of the counseling-seeker students

In this research, it was also aimed to determine the relationship between loneliness and depression for the counseling seekers. For this reason, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient between loneliness and depression scores was computed. In addition, the study also investigated how the relationships between loneliness and depression levels vary in terms of gender and grade-level. Findings related to correlation coefficients are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.

*The Pearson’s correlation coefficients between the counselling seekers’ loneliness and depression levels in general and in terms of gender and grade-level.*

| Relationships between loneliness and depression | General | Gender |      | Grade Level |           |        |        |
|---|---------|--------|------|-------------|-----------|--------|--------|
|   |         | Female | Male | Freshmen    | Sophomore | Junior | Senior |
| n   | 550     | 356    | 192  | 212         | 115       | 100    | 76     |
| r   | .48*    | .49*   | .43* | .45*        | .41*      | .51*   | .59*   |

As seen in table 4, generally there’s a moderately-significant relationship between loneliness

and depression levels. The value of this relationship was rather similar with the values computed for female, male, freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior. In addition, according to the results, higher grade-level means an increase in the relationships between the loneliness and depression levels of female students, while it means a decrease in the relationships between the loneliness and depression levels of male students.

### Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results of the study, it is seen that the students applying the university counselling center had an average level of loneliness ( $M=45.10$ ). Besides the average loneliness level of the students, when the range of the distribution, the percentages and the range of the scores to be obtained from the scale (between 20-80) are taken into consideration, a group of about 25% (who received a score between 52-71) had a high level of loneliness. Therefore, this group of students can be said to have difficulties in establishing close relationships with others, which is their basic developmental task (Erikson, 1963). These students who experience intense loneliness can be stated to constitute a potential risk-group in terms of their well-being because loneliness has significant outcomes for mental health (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Moreover, the present research finding indicating that loneliness is a wide-spread problem among university students is consistent with the results of other studies (Ponzetti, 1990).

When the loneliness levels of the students coming to the university counseling center are examined in terms of their gender and grade-level, it was found that in general, male students had a higher level of loneliness than their female peers and that the first-grade students had a higher level of loneliness than those from other grades. When the gender and grade-levels of the counselling-seekers are taken into consideration together, it is seen that the first-grade male students have a significantly higher level of loneliness than all the female students from all grades, than the third-grade and the fourth-grade male students. Parallel to these findings, loneliness is said to be a unique subjective experience influenced by such variables as one's personality, history and background (Neto & Barros, 2003). Therefore, according to the present findings, first-grade male students who apply to counseling center and newly start their university education can be considered as a risk-group in terms of loneliness.

The present finding that the loneliness level of male students is higher than that of female students is consistent with the findings of other similar studies in literature (Karahan et.al., 2004; Le Roux & Connors, 2001, Wiseman, et., 1995). In addition, the findings contradict with the results of other studies which revealed that the loneliness level of university students do not differ with respect to gender (Neto & Barros, 2003; Lamm & Stephan, 1987) or grade/age (Le Roux & Connors, 2001). This inconsistency may result from the fact that cultural background plays an important role in the experience of loneliness (Neto & Barros, 2003; Le Roux & Connors, 2001) and that loneliness is a multidimensional phenomenon (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

First-grade students experience important changes in their lives when they start their university education. In line with these changes, they face adjustment difficulties and stressful situations that they have to cope with. Such problems cause them to become more vulnerable to various mental health problems. The present research finding points out that first-grade male counseling-seeker are found more risky in terms of loneliness. The basic reason for this could be attributed to the way of bringing up children in Turkish society. The traditional Turkish culture does not always let men share their emotions with others and make them stricter about emotions, while it helps women easily share their problems and emotions with others. Thus, men are likely to experience more loneliness than women (Karahan et.al., 2004). Furthermore, female students could have been better socialized in admitting and expressing their emotions than male students. Male students who were unable to express their emotions are more in contact with their emotions, which makes men more vulnerable to loneliness (Le Roux & Connors, 2001). Based on these findings, first-grade male counseling-seekers could be said to be inefficient in establishing



close relationships with others -which is their basic developmental task- and thus can be said to experience loneliness more. This loneliness might be the basic reason for their application to counseling centers. Similar studies also report that men's loneliness may have an important role in leading them to seek counseling (Wiseman et al., 1995). Therefore, it is important that the staff of university counseling centers should carry out the studies focusing more on the intervention programs for developing communication skills of the first-grades and especially the male students.

In the present study, when the depression level of students applying the university counseling center is examined, it is seen that in general, the average depression levels of the students was 19.81 and ranged between 0 and 52. Moreover, considering the quartiles of the distribution, the depression levels of the 25%, 50% and 75% of the counseling-seekers were 13, 19 and 26, respectively. Depending on this distribution, it is understood that the depression levels of the counseling-seekers were higher than those of the students in general. In a number of studies, it is seen that the average depression level of university students is below 13 and mostly ranges between 6 and 13 (Ceyhan et al., 2005).

The cut-off scores in BDI for determining depression levels change according to the research purposes and to the characteristics of the sample (Hisli, 1988). In the current study on students seeking counseling, the scores received from BDI are categorized according to Bumberry et al. (1978)'s criteria. The scores between 0 and 9 mean 'non-depressed', the scores between 10 and 15 mean "mildly-depressed", the scores between 16 and 23 mean "moderately-depressed" and, the scores 24 and over refer to "severely-depressed." According to this classification, in this research, 12.37 % of the participants (68 students) have no depression. 21.27 % of them (117 students) are mildly-depressed, 33.45 % (184 students) moderately-depressed, and the remaining 32.91 % of them (181 students) have severe symptoms of depression. In some studies, a 'score of 17' has been suggested as the cut-off score for clinical depression (Hisli, 1988). When the distribution is examined in terms of this criterion, most of the participants have clinical depression; that is, 56.18% of the participants (309 students) have clinical and severe depression. These results of the present study point out that a considerable rate of the students applying the university counseling center has clinical symptoms of depression. This supports the findings that the symptoms of depression are commonly seen among university students (Michael et.al., 2006; Padesky & Hammen, 1981), that there is an increase in the severity and number of psychological problems of students applying university counseling centers (Sharkin, 1997; Sharkin & Coulter, 2005), a considerable rate of these students apply to seek help for their depression and anxiety problems (Ceyhan et al., 2008), and the students who apply to medico-social center take diagnoses in any kind of depression and anxiety disorders more frequently (İnanç et al, 2004).

In the study, when the depression levels of the counseling-seekers were examined in terms of their gender and grade-level, it was revealed that in general, male counseling-seekers had a higher level of depression than female counseling-seekers and that first-grade counseling-seekers had a higher level of depression than fourth-grade counseling-seekers. When the counseling-seekers were examined in terms of their gender and grade-level together, no significant interaction was observed. In literature, when the depression levels of university students were investigated in terms of their gender, various findings were obtained. While some researchers found differences in favour of male students (Ayдын, 1990; Michael et.al., 2006) and some in favor of female students (Wiseman et., 1995; Kelly et.al., 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), others reported that there were no significant differences in terms of students' gender (Padesky & Hammen, 1981; Ceyhan et al., 2005). Therefore, the present finding is consistent with the findings of the studies mentioned, while contradicts with those of others. In this study, the reason why the depression levels of male counseling-seekers were higher than those of female counseling-seekers could be the fact that men counseling-seekers are more inefficient in coping with stressful situations; that they experience more difficulties in establishing close relationships; and that they accordingly have fewer sources of social support.

The present study also reveals that first-grade counseling-seekers have more severe depression than fourth-grade counseling-seekers. This finding is supported by other research findings that first-grade students have a higher level of depression; that they have a low level of general well-being and adjustment to university life (Halamandaris & Power, 1997); and that they experience various adjustment problems (Wang & Miao, 2007). Hence, in every period of university life, students face various stressful situations. In addition, since the first years of university life include new experiences, first-grade counseling-seekers come across more difficulties, which could be more threatening for their well-being. Moreover, this finding is consistent with the other loneliness-related findings of the present study.

In the study, a moderately significant relationship was found between the loneliness and depression levels of the counseling-seekers ( $r=.48$ ,  $p<.01$ ). When this level of relationship was compared with respect to gender and grade-level, a similar level of relationship was observed. The difference between the correlation values of female and male students ( $r=.49$  and  $r=.43$ , respectively,  $p<.01$ ) was not found significant ( $z=.85$ ,  $p>.05$ ). Similarly, in the study carried out on Israeli counseling-seekers, it was found that there was a moderate relationship between depression and loneliness ( $r=.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and that the difference between correlations of female and male students was not significant ( $z=1.46$ ,  $p<.05$ ) (Wiseman, et al., 1995). Furthermore, in the present study, it was revealed that the differences between correlations of the first-grade, second-grade, third-grade and fourth-grade counseling-seekers were not significant ( $z=.42$  for first-grade and second-grade,  $z=.64$  for first-grade and third-grade,  $z=1.42$  for first-grade and fourth-grade,  $z=.92$  for second-grade and third-grade,  $z=.25$  for second-grade and fourth-grade and  $z=.74$  for third-grade and fourth-grade,  $p>.05$ ). These findings demonstrate that there is a moderate relationship between loneliness and depression and that this relationship does not differ according to gender and grade-level. These moderate relationships point out that loneliness and depression are in relation with each other, but distinct phenomena among the counseling-seekers applying university counseling centers. (Wiseman et al., 1995). Parallel to these findings, studies report that there is a correlation between loneliness and depression and that both are distinct constructs (Weeks, et al., 1980; Wiseman, et al., 1995; Cacioppo, et.al., 2006). Therefore, if loneliness and depression are considered as two main problematic areas for students applying university counseling centers, it is important to remember that counseling-seekers might have the symptoms of both loneliness and depression together.

Consequently, according to the research findings, loneliness and depression are two main problematic areas for counseling-seekers, and there are gender and grade-level differences for both. The research findings reveal the necessity to take gender and grade-level into consideration in order to make effective interventions against the loneliness and depression problems of students applying university counseling centers. This study has some limitations; firstly, the study was carried out on students who applied the psychological counseling center of only one university. Second, the measures regarding the students' loneliness and depression levels were obtained via a self-report scale based on their perceptions. Therefore, the findings of the present study should be evaluated considering the limitations stated. Future studies will provide more insight in this subject.

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