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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Examination of Relations Between Self-Compassion and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation of Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between self-compassion and difficulties in emotion regulation of special education preservice teachers. In addition, the predictive effect of special education preservice teachers' difficulties in emotion regulation on self-compassion was examined. The study group of the research consists of 392 undergraduate students of the Department of Special Education Teaching, 267 women (68.1%) and 125 men (31.9%), who were reached through convenient sampling. The research group is between the ages of 18 and 41 ($\bar{X} = 23.18$, standard deviation = 4.38). The data of the research were collected face-to-face through scales. Self-Compassion Scale, Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale-Short Form, and Personal Information Form were used as data collection tools. Since the scale scores showed normal distribution, descriptive statistics, *t*-test, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient analysis, and simple linear regression analysis methods were used as parametric tests in the analysis of the data. According to the *t*-test results, the self-compassion scores of the special education preservice teachers do not differ significantly by gender ($t = -.069$, $p > .05$). As a result of the correlation analysis, a highly significant negative correlation was obtained between the self-compassion scores of the special education preservice teachers and their difficulty in emotion regulation scores ($r = -.725$, $p < .05$). When the results of the regression analysis were examined, it was determined that the emotion regulation difficulty scores of the special education preservice teachers significantly predicted their self-compassion scores ($F_{1-190} = 431.937$, $R = .72$, $R^2 = .53$, $p < .01$). The findings obtained in the research were discussed by taking into account.

Keywords: Difficulties in emotion regulation, preservice teachers, self-compassion

Introduction

Teaching is one of the occupational groups that has an important role in raising future generations (Real, 2018). Teachers who are well-trained professionally can create positive learning environments and qualified education and training processes for children (Seferoğlu, 2004). One of the biggest responsibilities in providing educational services belongs to special education teachers who are responsible for the education of individuals with special needs. For this reason, it is important to train qualified special education teachers for the education of individuals with special needs (Özyürek, 2008). In the Special Education Services Regulation published by the Ministry of National Education in 2018, special education is defined as "the education carried out in appropriate environments with specially trained personnel and training programs developed to meet the educational and social needs of individuals who differ significantly from their peers in terms of individual and developmental characteristics and educational qualifications" (MEB, 2018). The education of individuals in need of special education first starts in the family (Diken, 2015). Families work in cooperation with private teachers (Yıldırım, 2022). For this reason, specially trained personnel are needed for the education of individuals whose developmental levels and needs differ from their typically developing peers (Cavkaytar &

Diken, 2005). Personnel who will provide this training are individuals who have graduated from a 4-year special education teaching program in education departments of universities (YÖK, 2020). The psychological well-being of teacher candidates is as important as their knowledge in terms of affecting their relationships with their students in the classroom (Real, 2018). For this reason, it is important for teacher candidates to have psychological well-being. Having high levels of self-compassion has a positive effect on individuals' levels of psychological well-being (Alibekiroğlu et al., 2018).

The concept of self-understanding developed by Neff (2003a) is expressed as the individual's acceptance of negative situations by being understanding and attentive to himself in negative situations and having the thought and power to deal with these situations in a realistic way. Self-compassion means that the individual should not have negative criticism toward himself; on the contrary, the individual should be compassionate toward himself (Neff, 2003b). Individuals with high levels of self-compassion can cope with negative emotions in their lives, so their lives become more sustainable (Deniz et al., 2008). Being kind and understanding toward oneself in the face of a negative experience prevents the individual from criticizing himself harshly. In addition, the individual creates a sense of common humanity by accepting that negative

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situations can be experienced not only by himself but also by other people (Neff, 2016). Self-understanding enables individuals to respond in a balanced way by perceiving events as they are, rather than being pessimistic in the face of negative situations (Germer, 2009). Individuals with high self-compassion see their problems, weaknesses, and flaws in an objective way toward themselves. However, instead of displaying a critical attitude toward themselves, they approach themselves with compassion and understanding (Leary et al., 2007). Self-compassion acts as a buffer against negativities by enabling the individual to use his/her emotions positively against himself/herself in the face of negative experiences (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion is important for individuals to manage their emotions in a positive way. For this reason, it is important for individuals to have emotion regulation skills.

Emotion regulation refers to how the individual experiences and expresses his emotions and the active efforts of the individual to manage their emotions (Gross, 2002; Koole, 2010). Emotion regulation is also defined as the ability of individuals to express their feelings in the face of the situations they live by using appropriate emotion regulation strategies flexibly (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Individuals who can use emotion regulation strategies have the ability to express their emotions correctly by regulating them positively or negatively (Gross & Thompson, 2007).

Emotion regulation difficulties are defined as the inability of the individual to have conscious awareness of his or her emotions, to have difficulty in understanding and accepting their emotions, to have difficulty in controlling their impulses when they feel negative emotions, and to have difficulty in using them in accordance with emotion regulation strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Difficulty in emotion regulation is an important concept that can negatively affect the lives of individuals (Yılmaz & Cenkseven-Önder, 2020). For this reason, it is important to investigate emotion regulation difficulties with various concepts (Gratz & Tull, 2010).

Looking at the literature, there are studies examining the relationship between the concept of self-understanding and irrational belief (Kılıç & Tunç, 2020), psychological rigidity, cognitive flexibility (Deniz & Gündüz, 2021), locus of control (Arabacıoğlu & Bağçeli-Kahraman, 2018), academic self-efficacy (Barutçu-Yıldırım & Demir, 2017), negative and positive emotion (Deniz et al., 2012), and post-traumatic growth (Gökmen & Deniz, 2020). Also, there are studies examining the relationship between the concept of difficulty in emotion regulation and concepts such as self-compassion (Aktaş & Şahin, 2018), emotional intelligence (Akdur & Aslan, 2017), depression, anxiety and stress (Aktepe & Çakmak-Tolan, 2021), attachment (Tok & Güzel, 2021), self-compassion (Yılmaz & Cenkseven-Önder, 2020), and cognitive flexibility (Kaçar-Basaran et al., 2022)

There are studies examining the relationship between the concepts of self-understanding and difficulty in emotion regulation with different variables in the literature. It is important for special education teacher candidates to have self-understanding for their own psychological well-being. Self-understanding can be a starting point in regulating one's own emotions and is expressed as a guide to activate emotion regulation skills (Yılmaz & Cenkseven-Önder, 2020). Due to the importance of self-understanding in emotion regulation difficulties, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship between special education teacher candidates' self-compassion and emotion regulation difficulties. In addition, whether self-compassion differed according to gender was also examined.

Methods

Research Model

Quantitative research method was used in this study. The aim of this study is to determine the existence and degree of the relationship

between two variables. For this reason, the relational survey model was used in this study (Karasar, 2005).

Research Group

The study group consisted of a total of 392 Special Education Teaching Department undergraduate students of which 267 were female (68.1%) and 125 were male (31.9%). Convenient sampling was used. The age range of the research group was between the ages of 18 and 41 ($\bar{X} = 23.18$, standard deviation=4.38). The sociodemographic characteristics of the study group are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection Tools

Self-Compassion Scale: The scale was developed by Neff (2003) to determine the level of self-understanding of individuals. The adaptation study of the scale to Turkish was carried out by Deniz, Kesici, and Sümer (2008). The scale consists of 24 items. There are reverse items in the scale. An increase in the scores obtained on the scale indicates an increase in the self-compassion level of the individual. The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was calculated as .89. Cronbach's alpha for this study was .91.

Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale-Short Form (DDS-16): The scale was developed by Bjureberg et al. (2016). Its adaptation to Turkish culture, validity and reliability study was carried out by Yiğit and Yiğit (2017). The scale consists of 16 items. An increase in the scores obtained from the scale indicates that individuals have more difficulty in emotion regulation. The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was calculated as .92. The Cronbach's alpha for this study was .95.

Personal Information Form: This form was prepared by the researchers in order to determine the demographic information of the participants such as gender, age, grade level, whether they chose the field of study voluntarily, whether they had information about the job opportunities in the field, and whether they had relatives with special needs.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face contact with the participants. Participants were informed about confidentiality and volunteerism principles. Volunteer participants answered the questions on the scales in approximately 20 minutes.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics, independent sample *t*-test, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, and simple linear regression analysis were used to obtain general information about the scales and participants.

Results

In order to examine whether the scale scores showed normal distribution, first of all, outlier extraction was performed. The outlier

Table 1.
Sociodemographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	267	68.1
	Male	125	31.9
Year of study	First year	103	26.3
	Second year	155	39.5
	Third year	95	24.2
	Fourth year	39	9.9
Status of choosing the field of special education voluntarily	Chose the field voluntarily	377	96.2
	Did not chose voluntarily	15	3.8
Have information about special education teaching job opportunities	I have adequate information	330	84.2
	I don't have adequate information	62	15.8
Have a relative with special needs	Yes	198	50.5
	No	194	49.5

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Scale	N	\bar{X}	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Self-Compassion	392	79.96	15.96	-.252	.672	.91
Difficulty in Emotion Regulation	392	44.25	15.78	.305	-.762	.95

SD = standard deviation.

extraction was done by calculating the “Mahalanobis” distance value (Kannan & Manoj, 2015). The data number, which was 399 at the beginning, was determined as 392 after the outlier extraction. After the outlier extraction, the normal distribution characteristics of the scale scores were examined. According to Table 2 Self-Comprehension and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation scale scores are in the range of ± 1.0 and show normal distribution (Hair et al., 2010). The Cronbach’s alpha (α) reliability coefficient was calculated to examine the reliability of the scale scores. Since the Cronbach’s alpha (α) value of Self-Compassion and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation scales is .70 and above, the measurement tools are reliable (Büyükoztürk, 2018).

According to the Table 3 *t*-test results, the self-compassion scores of the special education teacher candidates do not differ significantly by gender ($t = -.069, p > .05$).

According to the Table 4 Pearson correlation analysis results, a high level of negative correlation was obtained between the self-compassion scores of the special education teacher candidates and their difficulty in emotion regulation scores ($r = -.725, p < .01$).

According to the Table 5 results of the simple linear regression analysis, special education teacher candidates’ difficulty in emotion regulation scores significantly predicts their self-compassion scores. Difficulty in emotion regulation scores explains 53% of the total variance in self-compassion scores ($R^2 = .53$).

Discussion

In this study, the self-compassion scores of special education teacher candidates did not differ according to gender. In a study

Table 3.
T-Test Results on the Differences in Preservice Teachers’ Self-Compassion Scores by Gender

	Gender	N	\bar{X}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Self-Compassion	Female	267	79.92	15.85	-.069	.945
	Male	125	80.04	16.26		

SD = standard deviation. * $p < .05$.

Table 4.
Pearson Correlation Results Between Self-Compassion and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scores

	Difficulty in Emotion Regulation
Self-Compassion	-.725**

SD = standard deviation. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 5.
Simple Linear Regression Results for Predicting Self-Compassion Scores

Predicting Variable	Predicting Variable	B	Standard Error	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Self-Compassion	Constant	112.419	1.657		67.827	.000**
	Difficulty in Emotion Regulation	-.733	.035	-.725	-20.785	.000**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, $F_{1-190} = 431.937, R = .72, R^2 = .53$.

conducted by Deniz et al. (2012) with university students, the self-compassion scores differed according to gender and the scores of female students were higher. Yarnell et al. (2015), on the other hand, concluded that the self-compassion scores differed according to gender and the self-compassion scores of men were higher than the self-compassion scores of women. In the studies conducted by Deniz and Gündüz (2021), Neff and Pommier (2013), Neff et al. (2007), and Sadioğlu and Onur-Sezer (2016), self-compassion scores did not differ according to gender. When we look at the literature, there are research findings consistent with and contrary to the findings of this study. The findings regarding the effect of gender on self-compassion seem to be inconsistent.

In this study, a negative relationship was found between the self-compassion scores of special education teacher candidates and their difficulty in emotion regulation scores. In addition, difficulty in emotion regulation scores significantly predicts self-compassion scores. As the self-compassion levels of special education teacher candidates increase, their difficulty in emotion regulation decreases. Aktaş and Şahin (2018), Eichholz et al. (2020), Scoglio et al. (2018), and Barlow et al. (2017) found a negative relationship between individuals’ self-compassion and emotion regulation difficulties. In a study conducted by Finlay-Jonas et al. (2015), the relationships between individuals’ self-compassion and emotion regulation difficulties were examined and it was concluded that individuals who are more understanding toward themselves are clearer about their emotions and can cope with negative emotions more easily.

Emotion regulation is the basis of an individual’s understanding of himself (Neff, 2003a). For this reason, as individuals’ self-compassion levels increase, their emotion regulation difficulties decrease, and their emotion regulation skills increase. When we look at the literature, the studies on emotion regulation difficulties and self-understanding are consistent with the findings of this study. Studies are consistent with the finding that as individuals’ self-compassion levels increase, their emotion regulation difficulties decrease. According to the research findings, self-compassion has a significant effect on emotion regulation difficulties.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, special education teacher candidates who are more understanding toward themselves, in other words, who have high self-compassion, have a higher ability to regulate their emotions, and express their negative emotions correctly. Training to increase the self-understanding of special education teacher candidates will contribute positively to these preservice teachers’ coping with emotion regulation difficulties. Organizing psychoeducational programs to improve the self-understanding skills of special education teacher candidates is recommended. Examining the concepts of self-understanding and difficulties in emotion regulation with different research groups will contribute to scientific research. There are no consistent findings in the literature between self-compassion and gender. For this reason, the relationship between self-compassion and gender in different sample groups should be investigated. The limitations of this study should be evaluated. Limiting the study to special education teacher undergraduate program students limits the generalizability of the results.

This research is limited to the qualities measured by the determined data collection tools.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the ethics committee of Necmettin Erbakan University (Date: October 14, 2022, Number: 2022/359).

Informed Consent: Consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

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