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# Self esteem among college students: a study of satisfaction of basic psychological needs and some variables

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine college students' self esteem according to the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs and some certain variances. The sample of the study consisted of 342 students studying in college. The data was collected through Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory, Basic Psychological Needs Scale and an information form developed by the researcher. When the obtained data was examined, it was found that the satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness needs of the students significantly predicted their self esteem, while the satisfaction of competence need did not predict self esteem. Also, self esteem of the students showed significant difference as to educational level of mother, income level and perceived parent attitudes by them, whereas educational level of father and gender did not have effect on self esteem.

**Keywords:** Self esteem, Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs, College Students

## 1. Introduction

Many psychological movements make their own description about self concept. However, the most detailed definition was made by Carl Rogers, who developed person-centered approach. According to Rogers, the sense of self of an individual includes the individual's thought about oneself, perceptions and opinions. Sense of self summarizes how the individual sees oneself. Rogers believes that to develop positive sense of self, the individual must grow up in an environment of unconditional love. When there is an inconsistency between exhibited behavior and sense of self of the individual, anxiety comes out. Rogers says that if the individual deceives oneself, anxiety level will increase and the sense of self will not be preserved in time. Carl Rogers accentuated on three important points of parent-child relationship for developing self esteem. The first is to reflect acceptance, concern, compassion

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and warmth towards the child. The second is allowance and punishment. The third critical point is the democratic attitudes of parents. The child raised with these three criteria will have higher self esteem (Hall & Linzey, 1957; Morgan, 1990).

Self esteem can be defined as a form of self-acceptance, personal appreciation and subjective respect of one's own (Morganett, 2005). Self esteem is to evaluate the difference between their image of self and ideal self. We understand the self esteem level of the individual by looking at the discrepancy between how the individual perceive oneself and the self they would like to be (Pişkin, 20014). Self esteem represents the individual's feelings such as self acceptance, personal appreciation, overall acceptance of the personality and self-love (Adams and Gullota, 1989). Rosenberg (1965) defines self esteem as negative and positive attitude of the individual to oneself. According to him, self esteem arises in the result of self-evaluation of the individual. The judgment attained as a consequence of self-evaluation is indicative for the level of self esteem. Self esteem is the judgment of worthiness related to the concept of self.

One of the important variables of forming the background of and in the development of self esteem is the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, as it has been a need since the birth of the individual. Self determination theory is one of the most current theories and tries to explain the psychological needs and traits of the individuals. The theory, which has been improving for 40 years and increasing its effect, was founded by Edward L. Deci in 1970's, and elaborated with Richard Ryan by collaborative work. Aiming to explain the factors for the sake of healthy development of individuals and societies, Self Determination Theory shows that there are three basic needs of an individual: *Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness*. These basic needs are necessary to structure the individuals' own social development and state of well-being. According to the theory, in case of meeting the needs, they work effectively and develop healthily; however, if they are prevented, people exhibit unwilling behaviors and negativity signs (Andersen, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985, Kesici et. al. 2003).

According to the theory, autonomy can be defined as when a person take into consideration one's own intrinsic processes, have the ability of acting independently and self approval while deciding. Autonomy is also to exhibit strong-willed behaviors and show self-approval. This need is met by leading and controlling one's own life, and making one's own choices. These people generally approve their behaviors and accept the consequences of one's actions. It was stated that autonomy is considered particularly more important than competence and relatedness (Mithaug et.al., 2003; Ryan, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2002; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Competence is the ability of making necessary regulations and organizations for reaching the person's goal, and having the perception of self confidence for accomplishing them. Personal competence is achievement, the others' success, the person's belief of his own success and his psychological state. Competence is formed by the individual's learning, adaptation and interaction with environment. Insofar as the person has that perception, it is more likely to be successful (Deci ve Ryan, 1985; Carver and Scheier, 1990; Garcia & Pintrich, 2009). The other psychological need of the individual, relatedness is identified as to feel sympathy and satisfactory closeness to the people that are regarded as important by the individual, feel belongingness with one's social environment and perform common satisfactory actions with the people in that environment. Relatedness can be defined as a form of confidence to others' support and guidance. According to Self Determination Theory, the opponent of relatedness is not autonomy. The opponent of relatedness is being independent defined as not to have confidence to others' support or help. A person can be autonomous but dependant to others. If a person considers another person as supportive, then he/she may have confidence to the other's concern and attention (Deci, Ryan, 2008; Kowal and Fortier, 1999). Self determination theory defends that social environment and the individual as a variable should be handled together. Human behaviors should be regarded as an ongoing relationship between social-environmental factors and personal traits (Vallerand, 1997).

The satisfaction of basic psychological needs of people is closely related to the state of psychologically well-being. It was asserted that there is a positive correlation between life satisfaction, which is the cognitive aspect of well-being, perceived as positive by the individual and self esteem (Baumeister et. al., 2003; Ntoumanis, 2009). Ryan and Deci (2000) alleged that dependence and autonomy are the basic needs of people in all cultures. The more socialization mechanisms support these needs, the more well being states of the children increase. The family is the most basic socialization mechanism of the individual. According to psychosocial development theory, mother is the representation of external world and mother is the person meeting the needs of the infant from birth until one and half year. Feeding the baby when he/she is hungry, putting the diaper when it is dirty, meeting the needs regularly, while doing those actions touching her baby, making the baby feel love produce a special relationship between mother and child. This positive relationship between mother and child constructs the base of self-confidence (Erikson, 1984).

Within the framework of theoretical explanations and conducted studies, emphasizing the importance of the family's effect on satisfaction of basic psychological needs, it can be said that there are studies presenting the high self esteem proposes to have positive and good relationship with the parents (Gecas and Schvelbe,1996; Felson and Zielinski, 1989). The most dominant factor of these studies is that parents positively affect their children's affirmative perceptions to them by behaving with love and respect, showing necessary warmth and concern, and meeting the needs of their children.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

The aim of this study is to examine college students' self esteem according to the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and some certain variables (gender, parents' educational level, income, perceived raising children attitude).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample of the survey consists of 342 students in total (125 female and 217 male students) studying at collage in Turkey. All students selected on voluntary basis and randomly.

### 2.2. Measures

To determine the demographic information of the students, 5-item personal information form (gender, parents' educational level, income, perceived parental attitude) was used. The form developed by the researcher. The following measuring instruments were used in data collection:

*2.2.1. The Self Esteem Scale:* Developed by Coopersmith (1986) and adapted by Pişkin (1997) to Turkish, The Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory was used to measure the self esteem of the students. The short form of the scale consisting of 25-item can be answered approximately 8-10 minutes. According to the results of KR-20, reliability coefficient of the short form of the scale was found to be .76 and internal consistency reliability coefficient was found to be .81. Total score of self esteem was obtained by adding the items based on the individual's own perception and associating this perception to personal competence. The scale items are answered as "yes" or "no". Each student are asked to put an X mark on the "yes" column if the item is suitable for the student, if not, put an X mark on the "no" column.

*2.2.2. The Basic Psychological Needs Scale:* The scale was developed by Deci and Ryan (1991) and adapted to Turkish by Cihangir-Çankaya and Bacanlı (2003). The scale is a twenty one-item and seven point Likert-types, and it has three dimensions (autonomy, competence and relatedness). According to the results of reliability analysis of the sub-dimensions and total score of the scale, Cronbach-Alpha coefficients was found to be .82 for autonomy sub-dimension, .80 for competence sub-dimension and .81 for relatedness sub-dimension (İlhan, Özbay, 2010). In the result of retest, the correlation coefficient was found to be .71 for Autonomy, .60 for Competence, .74 for Relatedness and .83 for total Need Satisfaction Scale.

## 3. Findings

The result of the analysis conducted to determine whether or not participants' satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) predict their self esteem were stated in Table 1. Accordingly, it was seen that 7% of the variances were explained by all the basic psychological needs ( $F=8.705$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The examination of Standardized Beta coefficient shows that both autonomy need ( $\beta=.241$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and relatedness need ( $\beta=.121$ ,  $p<.050$ ) significantly and positively predicted self esteem.

**Table 1.** Hierarchical regression analysis for satisfaction of basic psychological needs and self esteem

Predictor	B	S. Error	$\beta$	T	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Autonomy	.577	.135	.241	4.281***			
Competence	-.299	.143	-.092	-1.599	.268	.072	8.705***
Relatedness	.267	.122	-.121	.2185*			

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \* $p < .050$

The result of the analysis conducted to determine whether or not participants' gender differentiates their self esteem were stated in Table 2. According to the results, gender variable significantly differentiated the participants' self esteem ( $p > 0.50$ ).

**Table 2.** Independent sample *t* test for gender and self esteem

	Gender	n	Mean	s.d.	<i>t</i> Test		
					Df	T	P
Self Esteem	Female	125	86.91	6,20	340	-2.273	.076
	Male	217	89.05	7,22			

The result of the analysis conducted to determine whether or not participants' some variables differentiate their self esteem were stated in Table 3. According to the results, it was seen that fathers' educational level did not significantly predict their children's self esteem. However, the increase of mothers' educational level ( $\chi^2=13,516$ ;  $p < .050$ ), the increase of income level ( $\chi^2=9,980$ ;  $p < .050$ ) and perceived parental attitudes as being democratic ( $\chi^2=21,833$ ;  $p < .001$ ) significantly differentiated the participants' self esteem compared to other categories of variables.

**Table 3.** Kruskal wallis-H test for some variables (mothers' educational level, fathers' educational level, level of income perceived parental attitudes) and self esteem

Variables	n	Mean Rank	$\chi^2$	Df	p	
Mothers' educational level	Illiterate	8	79,32	13,516	5	,019*
	Literate	14	162,62			
	Elementary School	132	173,86			
	Secondary School	75	175,77			
	High School	89	174,06			
	University	24	183,00			
	Total	342				
Fathers' educational level	Illiterate	3	124,94	6,598	5	,292
	Literate	9	128,33			
	Elementary School	81	164,39			
	Secondary School	90	163,24			
	High School	124	173,11			
	University	35	199,01			
Total	342					
Income Level	Low	16	118,31	9,980	2	,007*
	Medium	289	169,81			

	High	37	207,69			
	Total	342				
Perceived parental attitudes	Democratic	105	196,52			
	Authoritarian	43	144,65			
	Protective	142	168,86	21,833	4	,000***
	Indulgent	35	178,74			
	Neglecting	17	92,06			
	Total	342				

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \* $p < .050$

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

While examining the findings of the research, it was seen that satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness needs, the basic psychological needs, positively predicted the individual's self esteem. Defined by Self Determination Theory, the satisfaction of these needs positively affects the state of well-being included positive self-perception. (Cihangir & Çankaya, 2009; Garcia & Pintrich, 2009; Özer, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) averred that particularly relatedness and autonomy are the basic needs of people in all cultures and the state of well-being of the children will be enriched by supporting these needs. Autonomy is closely related to positive sense of self and self-confidence in order to maintain the interpersonal relationships in a healthy manner (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). One of the basic statements of the theory is, when compared, autonomy is considered as more important than competence and relatedness by the individuals (Ryan, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2002). The findings of this study showed us that the most predictive need of the individual was autonomy and this result is coherent to the literature.

Another findings of the research showed that the individuals' self esteem did not differentiate considering gender. In other studies, the same findings were stated (Eriş & Ekiz, 2013; Gürşen, Otacıoğlu, 2009; Öztürk, 2006; Özdemir, 2009; Uyanık Balat & Akman, 2004). It can be asserted that some other variables are more effective on developing self esteem than the gender factor. Especially for satisfying the psychological needs, it can be thought that parents' general attitudes are more effective rather than the gender of the child.

It was seen in the research, mothers' educational level of the participants had an effect on the participants' self esteem. According to the results, the more mothers' educational level increases, the more the children's self esteem increases. In parallel, the more fathers' educational level increases, the more the children's self esteem increases, however, this increase was not regarded as significant. In other studies done in the field, the same findings were stated (Dinçer & Öztunç, 2009; Kahriman, 2005; Özkan, 1994; Yılmaz, 2000). The increase of the parents' educational level enables them to be more consciousness about how to raise a child. Educated parents satisfy their children's basic psychological needs with a healthily approach.

The other findings showed that the more the participants' income level increases, the more their self esteem increases. People should have a certain income to feel them comfortable, valuable and competent enough to have an active role in their lives. Therefore, the relationship of income and self esteem can be regarded as an expected outcome. Karadağ et.al. (2008) stated the same findings in their research. In the literature, it was emphasized that having higher income affected self esteem positively (Dinçer & Öztunç, 2009; Özdemir, 2009; Özkan, 1994).

According to the last finding of the research, it was seen that perceived parental attitudes had an effect on the individuals' self esteem. Accordingly, perceiving parents' attitude as democratic increases self esteem. Other negative parental attitudes, particularly neglecting attitude, negatively affect the individual's self esteem. Democratic parents are identified as modest, accepting, encouraging autonomy and not insisting on psychological control. The children of these parents are most likely to be active, socially positive and independent as well as amiable, creative and friendly towards their environment and oneself (Sarı, 2007; McGinn et. al. 2005; Olmuş, 2001). According to Rogers, democratic attitudes such as acceptance within the family, compassion and warmth will affect positively and directly to the child's self esteem in the adulthood period (Hall & Linzey, 1957). It is obvious that raised in such a family environment, the child's self esteem would be high. The other conducted studies presented the same findings (Erikçi, 2005; Gecas and Schvelbe, 1996; Gürşen, Otacıoğlu, 2009; Özdemir, 2009; Turan et. al., 1998). In conclusion, it was seen that this finding is consistent to the findings in similar studies had conducted in the literature.

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