Self Monitoring in Romantic Relationships: Stress and Psychological Symptoms

Romantik İlişkilerde İzlenim Ayarlamacılığı: Stres ve Psikolojik Belirtiler

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether stress and psychological symptoms predict self monitoring scores in romantic relationships at university students. Participants were 280 university students, each involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Demographic Information Form, Brief Symptom Inventory, Stress Symptoms Checklist and Revised Self Monitoring Scale were used for data collection. Multiple regression analysis showed that the level of relationship distress was an important predictor of self monitoring scores. For females, depression and level of relationship distress were significant predictors for self monitoring scores. Anger was significant predictor of self monitoring scores for males. In addition, participants who had high levels of perceived relationship distress had higher self monitoring scores than those who had low levels of perceived relationship distress.

Keywords: Self monitoring, stress symptoms, psychological symptoms, romantic relationships, university students

Öz

Bu araştırmanın amacı, stres ve psikolojik belirtilerin, romantik ilişkisi olan üniversite öğrencilerinde izlenim ayarlamacılığı puanlarını yordayıp yordamadığını incelemektir. Araştırmaya karşıt cinsel romantik ilişkisi olan 280 üniversite öğrencisi katılmıştır. Veri toplama amacıyla Demografik Bilgi Formu, Kısa Semptom Envanteri, Stres Semptomları Kontrol Listesi ve Gözden Geçirilmiş Kendini Ayarlama Ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Çoklu regresyon analizi, ilişkisel sorun düzeyinin, izlenim ayarlamacılığı puanlarının önemli yordayıcısı olduğunu göstermiştir. Kadınlarda, depresyon ve ilişkisel sorun düzeyi, izlenim ayarlamacılığının anlamlı yordayıcılarıdır. Erkeklerde ise öfke, izlenim ayarlamacılığının anlamlı yordayıcısıdır. Ayrıca, yüksek düzeyde ilişkilerini sorunlu algılayan katılımcıların izlenim ayarlamacılığı puanları, ilişkilerini düşük düzeyde sorunlu algılayan katılımcılardan daha yüksektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İzlenim ayarlamacılığı, stres belirtileri, psikolojik belirtiler, romantik ilişkiler, üniversite öğrencileri.

Introduction

It is generally important for people to know how others perceive and evaluate them. Some individuals are more concerned with these perceptions and evaluations than others. In order to explain these individual differences, Snyder (1974) developed the theory of self monitoring. Self monitoring is defined as the motivation and ability to monitor and modify one's expressive behaviors (Snyder 1974). People with high self monitoring personalities are sensitive to the expressions of others in social situations and use these cues as guidelines for managing their own behavior. On the other hand, low self monitors use their personal dispositions, opinions, and attitudes as guides (Snyder & Monson, 1975).

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These different styles of self presentation are accompanied by very different structured social worlds (Snyder, Gangestad, & Simpson, 1983). For example, in romantic relationships, high self monitors are higly influenced by external appearence and are willing to change partners relatively easily if a better alternative becomes available. High self monitors also have been reported to attend more on physical appearance such as their attractiveness or social status in potential dating partners. However, low self monitors have been found to dwell more on inner qualities in a prospective dating partner, such as desirability of their overall personality (Glick, 1985; Snyder, Berscheid, & Glick, 1985).

Furthermore, some studies (e.g Day, Schleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002; Hermann, 2005) showed that gender may influence individuals' self monitoring scores. These researchers stated that males are more likely to modify their behavior than females in interpersonal relationhip contexts. Thus, males were more likely to be high self monitor than females. Howewer, the other studies (Büyükşahin, 2009; Haferkamp, 1994; McMaster, 2001) showed that no significant difference was found between females and males in terms of self monitoring. As seen, there aren't congruent findings with regard to relationship between self monitoring and gender. Thus, gender differences should be examined in different studies.

In terms of romantic relationships, being a high or low self monitor may also effect their relationship commitment. Many studies (Haferkamp, 1991; Norris and Zweigenhaft, 1999; Öner, 2002; Wright, Holloway, & Roloff, 2007) showed that, high self monitors tend to feel less commited, less intimate and less satisfied than low self monitors in current relationships. Thus, low self monitors are less willing to consider alternatives (Snyder et al., 1985; Snyder & Simpson, 1984). Some studies (Haferkamp, 1994; Leone & Hall, 2003) also showed that distressed spouses were likely to be high self monitors compared to nondistressed spouses. In addition, divorcing and terminating the relationship is more frequent among high self monitoring individuals than among low self monitoring individuals (Leone and Hall 2003). Some studies (Hermann, 2005) found that individuals who report more depressive symptoms tend to be more self monitoring than those reporting less depressive symptoms. Similarly, individuals who have higher levels of concentration in terms of public self consciousness are more prone to negative personality traits such as neuroticism than lows are (Vollrath, Torgersen & Alnaes, 1995). Thus, distressed or problematical relationship is expected to be important predictors of self monitoring.

In additon, self monitoring may affect coping behaviour and conflict resolution processes. Haferkamp (1987) found that high self monitoring spouses endorsed more frequent use of denial/avoidant strategies, while low self monitoring spouses use cooperative behaviour more. He also reported that self presentational concerns are prevalent in marital conflicts and may increase the likelihood of uncooperative/avoidant behavior. Huflejt- Lukasik & Czarnota-Bojarska (2006) also found that individuals who have higher levels of auto presentation are more likely to use emotional oriented or avoidance oriented styles of coping with stress. Another study indicated that high self monitors have higher scores on alcoholism and drug use than have low self monitors (Büyükşahin, 2009).

In Turkey, when studies about self monitoring are taken into consideration, self monitoring has been shown to be related with various factors such as occupation and gender (Bacanlı, 1990), friendship relations (Altıntaş, 1991), attribution styles (Koçak, 1998), perceived leadership styles (Özalp- Türetgen, 2006). However, in Turkey, researchers have recently started to examine self monitoring in terms of romantic raltionships. Öner (2002) found that low self monitors were more future time oriented than high self monitors. In other words, low self montoring individuals were more committed to their relationships than high self monitoring individuals. In another study conducted in Turkey (Özdemir, 2006), in which the relationship between self monitoring and romantic relationships were examined, it was revealed that when compared to low self monitors, high self monitors were more sensitive to their own physical appearance and were more eager to participate in social activities with their partners (e.g. dancing, singing with their partners). Another study also showed that (Büyükşahin, 2009) high self monitors were

more likely to use coping strategies such as alchol and drug use, humor coping and external support than low self monitors. Recentl one study conducted with married indiviuals revealed that high self monitoring individuals reported greater number of available alternative partners than did low self monitoring individuals (Akbalık-Doğan and Büyükşahin- Sunal, 2011). As seen, when compared to low self monitoring individuals, high self monitoring individuals have lower satisfaction, future time orientation and commitment in their relationships. Also, high self monitors are more likely to use uncooperative strategies in their relationships. Therefore, high self monitoring individuals should be more likely to display stress and psychological symptoms than low self monitoring individuals in romantic relationships. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the associations between self monitoring and psychological symptoms.

The hypotheses were as follows:

• It is expected that stress and psychological symptoms predict self monitoring scores positively.

• It is also hypothesized that individuals dissatisfied with their romantic relationships would have higher self monitoring scores.

Method

Participants

The participants were 280 undergraduate students (160 female, 120 male) from various courses at Ankara University. All the participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship. The mean age of students was 20.38 years (*SD*= 2.86, range= 18-28). The average duration of the current relationship was 17.34 months (*SD*= 16.76, range= 1-63). The mean number of dating experiences of participants was 2.09 (*SD*= 1.91).

The questionnaires were administered during class hours. Participations were voluntary and participants were given extra bonus grades for completing the questionnaires. Their answers were kept anonymous.

Measures

Demographic Information

Participants were asked questions about their demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, age), number of previous dates and duration of their current relationship. In addition, level of relationship distress was measured on a 7 point Likert type scale ranging from *not at all distress (1) to very distress (7).*

Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI): This 53 item scale is designed to measure various psychological symptoms (Derogatis, 1992). It was adapted for the Turkish culture (Şahin and Durak, 1994) and it was found to have satisfactory reliability and validity. In order to determine the construct validity of BSI, factor analysis was conducted. The BSI was shown to have five factors (anxiety, depression, negative self image, somatisation, and anger/agression) on a student sample. The correlations with Suicide Probability Scale, the Impulsivity scale and the Problem Solving Inventory were .59, .57, and .32 respectively. The Cronbach's alphas for the subscales ranged between .87 and .75.

Stress Symptoms Checklist (SSC): This is a 38 item 4 point Likert-type scale developed by DasGupto (1992) to measure symptoms in stressful life situations. Scores range from 38 to 152. The psychometric properties of the scale have been studied in the Turkish culture, and it has been found to have satisfactory reliability and validity (Hovardaoğlu, 1997). Similar to the original study, factor analysis revealed three factors (cognitive-affective, physiological symptom and pain-complain). The cronbach alpha coefficient was found to be .91.

Revised Self Monitoring Scale (RSMS): This 13 item, 6 Likert- type scale was developed by Lennox and Wolfe (1984) to measure self monitoring. RSMS was designed to assess two aspects of self monitoring: Factor A, ability to modify self presentation- AMSP and Factor B, sensitivity to the expressive behavior of others- SEBO. In current study, total scores of RSMS was used. It was adapted for the Turkish Culture by Özalp Türetgen ve Cesur (2006). The factor analysis revealed two factors as in the orginal scale. It was found to have validity and satisfactory reliability (Cronbach alpha was.80, test-retest reliability coefficient was.74).

Design

Correlations among the variables and mean of each variable for the whole data set were calculated. Multiple regression analysis was used to see wheather the level of relationship distress and stress and psychological symptoms predicted the total Revised Self Monitoring Scale (RSMS). In addition, multiple regression analyses were performed for females and males seperately to examine the predictive values of mentioned variables on total RSMS. Finally, total RSMS were subjected to a 2 (relationship distress: low vs. high) X 2 (Gender: female- male) analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Results

In addition to correlations among variables, mean of each variable for the whole data set were calculated (Table 1). A *t*-test analysis showed that there were significant differences between females and males on cognitive symptoms $t(278)=2.71$, p<.05, physiological symptoms, $t(278)=2.12$, p<.05, pain, $t(277) = 5.39$, p<.05, total stress, $t(278)= 3.89$, p<.05, depression, $t(278) = 2.40$, p<.05, somatisation, $t(278)= 2.72$, p<.05. As can be seen in Table 1, females had higher scores on cognitive symptoms, physiological symptoms, pain, total stress, depression, and somatisation than had males.

The correlation analyses revealed that, "relationship distress", "cognitive symptoms", "pain" and "total stress scores", "depression", "anger/agression" had the highest positive correlations with RSMS (.22, .20, .21, .21,.20, .21 respectively). "Anxiety" and "Negative self image" also correlated significantly with RSMS (.18, .18 repectively).

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations for Variables and Correlations Between Them.

	Females M(SD)	Males M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Distressed relationship (1)	3.47 (1.61)	3.47 (1.73)	---	.18*	.05	.11	.15*	.09	.10	.11	.05	.15*	.22*
Cognitive symptoms (2)	28.87 (7.91)	26.28 (7.93)		---	.61*	.68*	.93*	.70*	.71*	.59*	.68*	.66*	.20*
Physiological symptoms (3)	15.71 (3.98)	14.72 (3.77)			---	.63*	.80*	.41*	.38*	.37*	.49*	.41*	.12*
Pain (4)	14.25 (4.39)	11.70 (3.54)				---	.85*	.49*	.45*	.40*	.58*	.44*	.21*
Total stress (5)	66.05 (15.82)	58.87 (14.53)					---	.65*	.64*	.56*	.68*	.61*	.21*
Anxiety (6)	11.51 (8.71)	9.95 (8.52)						---	.85*	.82*	.72*	.78*	.18*
Depression (7)	14.81 (9.92)	12.00 (9.32)							---	.79*	.64*	.74*	.20*
Negative self image (8)	9.36 (7.87)	8.55 (7.68)								---	.65*	.75*	.18*
Somatisation (9)	6.04 (5.12)	4.41 (4.77)									---	.58*	.09
Anger /agression (10)	7.85 (5.42)	7.25 (5.42)										---	.21*
Total RSMS (11)	40.16 (8.61)	39.88 (8.04)											---

*p<.05

Variables Predicting RSMS

Regression analyses were conducted to determine the predictive values of all the variables regarding total RSMS. For this analyses, stepwise method was used. The dependent variable was total RSMS scores; the independent variables were the levels of relationship distress, psychological symptoms and stress symptoms.

Regression analyses showed that the levels of relationship distress (ß = .20, t= 3.43, p<.05), and pain (ß = .19, t= 3.20, p<.05) were significant predictors of total RSMS, R^2 = .08, $F(2,277)$ =12.39, p<.05. For females, regression analysis showed that the level of relationship distress (ß= .23, t= 2.97, p<.05) and depression (ß = .20, t= 2.63, p<.05) were significant predictors of total RSMS, R^2 = .10, $F(2,157)$ =8.81, p<.05. The same analysis for male participants showed that anger/agression (ß= .27, t= 3.06, p<.05) was the only significant predictor of RSMS, R^2 = .07, $F(1,118)$= 9.38 (Table 2)

Table 2.

Results of regression analyses: predicton of RSMS for all participants and females and males seperately

Variables	B	Beta	R² Change	R²	Adjusted R²	Residual Mean Square (df)	F
All participants							
levels of relationship distress	1.0	.20	.05	.05	.09	66.79 (1-278)	14.05
Pain	.84	.18	.05	.11	.10	64.63 (1-277)	12.39
Females							
level of relationship distress	1.22	.23	.06	.06	.06	70.11 (1-158)	10.32
Depression	.17	.20	.04	.10	.09	67.59 (1-157)	8.81
Males							
anger/agression	.40	.27	.07	.07	.07	60.43 (1-118)	9.38

(For all F values p<.05)

The level of relationship distress, gender and total self monitoring score

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine how gender of participants and perceived level of relationship distress (high vs. low; median= 3) effected the total RSMS scores. There was no significant interaction between gender and the level of relationship distress. The results of this analysis revealed a significant main effect for the perceived level of relationship distress on total RSMS F (1, 276) = 6.02; p<.05, eta² =.02. High distressed participants had higher scores on total RSMS than low distressed participants (Table 3).

Table 3**.**

Results of ANOVA for the main effect of perceived level of relationship distress on RSMS score

	High distressed participant		Low distressed participants				
	M	SD	M	SD	F	df	eta²
Total RSMS score	41.56	6.92	38.88	9.16	6.02	1,276	.02

Discussion

The present study investigated how stress and psychological symptoms are related to self monitoring in currently dating heterosexual Turkish university students. Multiple regression analysis showed that relationship distress was the best predictor of self monitoring.   That is, as the stress in the relationship increases, self monitoring scores also increase. This finding is in the expected direction.

When the regression analyses are conducted separetly for females and males, relationship distress predict self monitoring score significantly in females. Depression scores also predicted total self monitoring score (RSMS) positively in females. However, depression and relationship distress did not predict self monitoring scores for males. These findings may be related to Turkish cultural values. In a gender traditional nation such as Turkey, gender roles in romantic relationships

are clear cut by social norms (Sakallı, 2001). In Turkish culture, females have less freedom than males have in terms of sexuality, dating and marriage (İmamoğlu, 1991; Uğurlu and Glick, 2003). Females are also more likely than males to project that their current romantic relationships will evolve into marriage in the future (Öner, 2002; Sakallı-Uğurlu 2003). This is more so in Turkey compared to Western cultures. Given Turkish cultural values, as the level of both depression and relationship distress increase, females, in an effort to maintain or improve their relationship may be resorting to self monitoring. In males, on the other hand, anger/agression was important predictor for RSMS. More specifically, as anger/agression scores increase, self-monitoring scores too increase in males. Sakallı-Uğurlu (2003) suggests that gender stereotypes in relation to male's dominance still remain strong in Turkey. Thus, when males feel anger or aggression, they may be focusing more on impressing others in order to maintain their control on events and persons.

As can be seen from these findings, both stress symptoms and psychological symptoms predict the total RSMS positively. Predictive values are not very high but significant nevertheless. This finding is consistent with earlier research on self monitoring (Hermann, 2005), where individuals who report more depressive symptoms tend to report more self monitoring too. Thus, stress or psychological symptoms experienced in a relationship may be increasing self-monitoring. In Turkey, it is possile that leaving their own self aside and trying to adapt to situations and conditions of a relationship causes individuals to experience more stress and psychological symptoms like anger in their relationships. Furthermore, the fact that high self-monitoring individuals are scrutunizing themselves more compared to lows, may also be increasing their level of stress. However, this finding is consistent with some and inconsistent with some other findings of studies carried out in Western cultures. Thus, future studies should focus on this issue.

In addition, the results of a 2X2 ANOVA demonstrated that there was significant main effect of the degree of distress in a relationship on self monitoring scores. Participants who were high on relationship distress scored higher on RSMS than did participants who were low. This is consistent with earlier researh investigating the relationship between self monitoring and relationship conflict (Haferkamp, 1994; Leone & Hall, 2003), where high self monitoring individuals were found to have more dissatisfied spouses than lows. Wright and others (2007) also found that self monitoring was negatively related to relational quality. Consequently, this finding showed that perceiving the relationship as distressfull is related to self monitoring scores. Thus, it looks as if by self monitoring more, individuals are trying to compansate for the distress in their relationship by making their interactions with others more pleasant. As a result, one can say that those who rate their relationship as distressfull are likely to be more self monitoring.

In addition, in this study, consistent with literature (Bilecen, 2007; Hovardaoğlu, 1997; Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002) compared with males, females experience cognitive-affective symptoms such as stressfull thoughts, fear, anger and nervoussness more. Similarly, somatisation, pain and depression scores of females were higher than those of males. Some studies (Bilecen, 2007) completed in Turkey previously, showed that females have higher total stress scores than males. A study conducted by Batıgün, Şahin and Uğurtaş (2002) indicates that females experience depression more than males do. It seems that in Turkey, females have a stronger general tendency than males to appraise stressors as threats in their relationships (Bilecen, 2007). Especially in a collectivistic culture like Turkey, maintainig a relationship may be more important for females than it is for males. In addition, consistent with earlier studies conducted on Turkish university students, compared to males, females are more future time oriented (Öner, 2002) and more focused on their romantic relationships (Büyükşahin & Hovardaoğlu, 2007). Thus, females may be more sensitive to the problems in their relationships than males are.

Conclusion

The present study shows how psychological and stress symptoms effect self monitoring

in romantic relationships among Turkish university studens. This study also demonstrates that individuals with distressfull relationships are more likely to be high self monitors. This study also is important as it reveals that individuals who have high self monitoring show more stress symptoms and experience more problems in their relationships. As a consequence, stress and stress related factors can be associated with high self monitoring. Besides, it can be thought that these results might be very useful in clinical psychology practices and for therapists who are working with couples. Hence; the consideration of the fact that the individual taking the therapy might be a high self monitor could be important for the therapy.

There are some limitations in the present study. As noted before, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of some earlier studies and inconsistent with some others. Therefore, more studies should be done on this subject on university students in different cultures. In addition, the participants in current study were Ankara University undergraduate students and from a middle to upper SES. Therefore, results of this study may not be generalized to Turkish society in large. Thus, future research may be done on different socio-economic status and relationship styles (e.g., married or engaged couples) in Turkey.

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