

Social Connectedness and Flourishing: The Mediating Role of Hopelessness

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Abstract In recent years, positive psychology has focused on flourishing; a combination of social and emotional well-being. For flourishing to function optimally, social environments as well as hopeful future expectation are crucial. It can be inferred that social connectedness and hope might be predictor of flourishing in early adulthood. This study aims at investigating the mediating effect of hopelessness on social connectedness and flourishing among university students. The participants were 260 university students (52.7% female, 47.3% male; $M_{age} = 21.8$ yr., $SD = 0.99$) who filled a questionnaire package, consisting the Social Connectedness Scale, the Beck Hopelessness Scale, and the Flourishing Scale. The hypothesis tested the mediation effects of hopelessness between social connectedness and flourishing using structural equation modeling. The results of the analysis revealed the mediating role of hopelessness between social connectedness and flourishing. Findings were discussed in line with relevant literature and conclusions were made.

Keywords Flourishing, Hopelessness, Social Connectedness, Positive Psychology

1. Introduction

Positive psychology studies have contributed to a broad understanding of individuals' well-being [1]. Flourishing, defined as the combination of social, emotional and psychological well-being [2], is a popular concept that has recently been discussed in positive psychology [3, 4, 5, 6]. It is also defined as a state in which a person behaves psychologically and socially well [7]. Therefore, it is a socio-psychological concept influenced by social and psychological factors [8]. Previous studies suggested a positive relationship between social relations, hope, life purposes in one's life and flourishing [9, 3, 10]. In this regard, this study aims to achieve a better understanding of flourishing by studying the impacts of social connectedness and hopelessness on flourishing.

1.1. Flourishing

In the past few decades, researches began to focus on what it means to flourish in life, searching for the presence of positive psychosocial functioning rather than solely the absence of mental illness [11]. Flourishing can be described as being within an optimal range of human functioning associated with wellness, generativity, performance, growth, and resilience [12, 13, 5, 4], conceptual structure of flourishing is composed of positive emotions, emotional stability, vitality, optimism, resilience, self-esteem, engagement, competence, meaning and positive relationships. The definition of flourishing is consistent with the World Health Organization's (WHO) mental health description [14]: "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stressors of life, and work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (p. 12). According to Diener et al. [15], to flourish is to have "meaning and purpose, supportive and rewarding relationships, [to be] engaged and interested [in one's life], contribute[ing] to the well-being of others, competency, self-acceptance, optimism and being respected" (p. 252). People who are flourishing are more likely to be satisfied with their lives, aware of their abilities and eager to achieve, thrive and make a meaningful contribution to society [16, 4, 8]. In short, flourishing includes having social relations as well as positive personal characteristics.

Previous research has found that flourishing is highly related to emotional, psychological, and social well-being [3, 5]. In other studies, flourishing has been found to be positively related to personal development, positive relations with others, life purposes [17], suffering and positive effect [9], mindfulness, positive emotional reactivity [18], self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness [19], competency, relatedness, autonomy and self-acceptance [3]. In contrast, flourishing was found negatively-associated with maladaptive variables such as loneliness [3], depression [20, 21], self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification [19].

Flourishing is seen in relation to one's quality of life as a whole, rather than just positive emotions, the pursuit of

pleasure, or feeling good about one's life [22]. Similarly flourishing is defined as a state in which one functions psychologically and socially well [9, 3, 7]. From a social aspect, flourishing has the features like relatedness, having supportive and rewarding relationships, contributing to the happiness of others, being respected by others [3, 23, 4, 24, 6]. Flourishing individuals have more satisfactory interpersonal relationships in general, and it seems flourishing can enhance the personal resources in different situations [25]. For this reason, social connectedness can be seen as an important concept which has a meaningful influence on flourishing.

1.2. Social Connectedness

Social connectedness is conceptualized as one among the features of an individual self that reveals how a person judges his/her closeness with the social surroundings [26, 27]. It is associated with one's belief of self in relation to others. It is described as how one understands and views his/her closeness with others, the social and outside world [28].

Many studies have found that social connectedness is positively associated with the sense of belonging [29], personal meaning [30], life satisfaction [31], improved health status [32, 33], cognitive functioning [34] and well-being [35]. On the contrary, social connectedness is negatively correlated with depression and suicidal ideation [36], chronic loneliness, lower self-esteem, higher trait anxiety and greater social mistrust [27]. Accordingly, social connectedness is a favorable condition that moves an individual ahead in life.

Social connectedness involves in all aspects of social interaction including family, friends, and the community; and it refers to one's relationship with others in general. Social connectedness was found out to be correlated with trusted relationships with others, safe attachments, social competent, support accessible to an individual through social ties, less number of difficulties in the relationship with others, adopting characteristics of a social groups [37, 38, 39, 40, 41]. People who have a high sense of connectedness feel themselves belonging to a family, friends or a social group and they define themselves as warm and positive [39, 27]. These people also have a high level of self-esteem, self-worth, purpose and meaning in life since they receive social support and social acceptance from a close environment [42]. They have the ability to develop more meaningful relationships [43]. Lack of connection to others indicates absence of social support, weak interaction with the social system, or an awareness of separation from others [43]. Low connected individuals may report absence of meaningful and supportive relationships in their lives and as a result they may experience psychological distress [44, 45, 41]. People who lack a sense of connectedness rarely have a sense of belongingness [27]. Low connected individuals may perceive their environment as pessimistic and cold, and their sense of self as negative [39, 27]. These findings suggest that

low social connectedness leads to more pessimistic thoughts.

1.3. Hopelessness

Hopelessness is a thought process that comprises a pessimistic way of ascribing the future, and one's inability to change what the future brings. It is one's thinking of adverse events and incapability of changing the future [46], and this pessimistic view is considered as part of the cognitive triad, which is a feature of depression [47]. According to Beck [48], hopeless and depressive people attribute irrational thoughts to their experiences without building on an objective and rational base. From their negative experiences, they judge themselves negatively.

Individuals experiencing hopelessness see negative events in their future and are likely to care very little about the things that influence their future, since they do not expect good things to happen [49]. Hopeless people perceive little control over the events in their lives and believe that good things will not happen to them [50] because these individuals are not confident and they are self-deprecating, and are not able to see the ways of overcoming these roadblocks. Their life purposes and their motivation to reach the aim are low when compared to people with high hope [49, 51].

Hopelessness has an inverse influence on well-being by leading an individual to perceive himself and his environment negatively. Recent researches also show that low hopelessness is associated with the sense of flourishing and positive emotions, life satisfaction and subjective well-being [52, 53, 54, 55, 10, 56, 57, 58]. Otherwise, hopelessness is related to depression, suicidal behaviors, lower subjective well-being [59] and higher negative emotions regarding with personal purposes in the life [60, 61, 47, 62, 63, 46, 64].

One's social environment has an important impact on the development of hope and hopelessness. Researches emphasized that hope flourishes in a nurturing environment where psychological needs are met, and supportive parent and friend relationships exist during childhood and adolescent years [65, 66]. They also suggest hopelessness flourishes in an environment where family-peer related interpersonal stress factors exist and adequate support lacks [67]. Social relations and social support cause hope and hopelessness during adolescence and young adult period. A study carried out on university students has shown that lack of support from a friend was related to hopelessness and depression [68]. The individuals who fail to receive positive support from their friends are seized by loneliness and feel hopeless about the others and their futures [27]. It is obvious that social environment has an important impact on one's perception towards herself/himself, others and their future, so it affects psychological well-being.

1.4. Current Study

University life coincides with a time when important developmental changes take place towards the end of

adolescence and beginning of young adulthood. While adolescents try to adapt to a new and stressful life, they strive to fulfill their tasks related to occupation, academy, and personal development. During this period, their psychological and physical well-being, and displaying functions at an optimum level will help them adapt to their new environment and successfully fulfill their developmental tasks more easily. Previous studies showed that flourishing people feel good about them, are successful, regularly experience numerous positive emotions and make more contributions to society [8]. In addition, Peter et al. [69] found that college students who were flourishing had lower rates of depression and anxiety. According to Diener et al. [3], flourishing impacts well-being through assisting and reinforcing relationships, playing its part to the happiness of others and having values for living.

Previous studies carried out with university students revealed significant relationship between flourishing and social support, importance of relationships, life purpose [9], hope and optimism [10]. Kandaris [70] reported the mediating effect of hope between emotion-focused coping and flourishing. Keyes [8] suggested that flourishing includes positive emotions, psychological functioning and social functioning. Furthermore, previous studies revealed that lifelong hopelessness and lack of connectedness are related to other risk factors for suicidal behavior [61, 71, 47]. Thus, the research aimed to study the mediating effect of hopelessness on social connectedness and flourishing. The findings of this study will make a contribution to psychological counselling centers at universities and to the development of social connectedness, hope and flourishing of university students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The research was carried out on a sample of 260 university students (137 females (52.7%), 123 males (47.3%) from an average state university in Turkey. The average age of the respondents was 21.78 years, with a standard deviation of 0.99. Of the participants, 60 (23%) were first-year students, 61 (23%) second-year students, 81 (32%) third-year students, and 58 (22%) fourth-year students. A convenience sample was used for this study. We explained the goals of the study to the students, and informed them that participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants responded to the items in the questionnaire package at their own pace and it took around 15 minutes to cover all the sections.

2.2. Measuring Instruments

Social Connectedness: Social connectedness was measured with the Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) developed by Lee and Robbins [26]. The SCS includes eight

items. The responses to each of these items on a 6-point Likert scale range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Sample items include: "I feel disconnected from the world around me" and "catch myself losing all sense of connectedness with society". Summing across all eight items provides a total score for this scale. The Turkish version of SCS has been translated by Duru [72]. Turkish version has been confirmed as a one-dimensional structure and has proved a good internal reliability. In the present study, Cronbach alpha coefficient was found as .93.

Hopelessness: Hopelessness was measured with the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) developed by Beck, Weissman, Lester and Trexler [73]. The BHS consists of 20 true-false items assessing the three major aspects of hopelessness; feelings about the future, loss of motivation, and expectations. The Turkish version of Beck Hopelessness Scale has been translated by Durak [74]. The Turkish version has proved a good internal reliability. In the present study, Cronbach alpha coefficient was found as .79.

Flourishing: Flourishing was measured with the Flourishing Scale (FS) developed by Diener and colleagues [3]. The FS consists of eight items. Each item was answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items include: "I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me" and "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life". Summing across all eight items provides a total score for this scale. The Turkish version of SCS has been translated by Akin and Fidan [75]. Turkish version confirmed a one-dimensional structure and proved a good internal reliability. In the present study, Cronbach alpha coefficient was found as .89.

2.3. Data Analysis

The researcher tested the mediation effects using structural equation modelling (SEM) conducted with Lisrel 9.1. A two-step procedure suggested by Anderson and Gerbing [76] was adapted to analyze the mediation effect in order to confirm the structural relations of the latent structured model. The measurement model was first tested to assess the extent to which each of the latent variables was represented by its indicators. If the measurement model is accepted, then study the mediational model via the maximum likelihood estimation. The fit indexes used in this study are (1) Chi-square (χ^2), (2) Comparative Fit Index (CFI), (3) Normed Fit Index (NFI), (4) Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR), and (5) Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Chi square difference test ($\Delta\chi^2$) a measure of model fit adjusted for parsimony [77] was used to determine which model was preferred. If the model comparison is significant, then the model with a smaller Chi square value will be preferred [78].

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all the latent variables are presented in Table 1. All correlations are statistically significant. The results revealed that hopelessness was negatively correlated with social connectedness, while positively correlated with flourishing. Furthermore, social connectedness was positively correlated with flourishing.

Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics of the study variables

Variable	1	2	Mean	SD
1. Social connectedness	-		38.63	7.56
2. Hopelessness	-.39**	-	4.27	3.27
3. Flourishing	.31**	.50**	42.46	8.35

** $p < .01$

3.2. Measurement Model

Mediational analysis was conducted in two stages. Firstly, a measurement model was tested. Then, a structural model was used to test possible relationships among social connectedness, hopelessness, and flourishing. The measurement model included three latent factors (social connectedness, hopelessness and flourishing) and 19 observed variables. An initial test of the measurement model revealed a satisfactory fit to the data: χ^2 (149, N = 260) = 294.79, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.98; NFI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.057; RMSEA = 0.061 90%C.I. [0.051, 0.072]. All standardized

factor loadings were significant at $p < .001$ and higher than .57 at least.

3.3. Structural Model

In the first step, the direct path from the predictor (social connectedness) to the dependent (flourishing) in the absence of mediator was significant, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$. Then, the partially mediated model, which contained a mediator (hopelessness) and a direct path from social connectedness to flourishing, was tested. The partially mediational model showed a very good fit to the data: χ^2 (149, N = 260) = 294.79, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.98; NFI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.057; RMSEA = 0.061 90%C.I. [0.051, 0.072]. To find a best model, we tested the fully mediational model. Thus, the path was deleted and the fully mediated model was tested. The fully mediated model showed a satisfactory fit to the data: χ^2 (150, N = 260) = 301.06, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.97; NFI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.065; RMSEA = 0.062 90%C.I. [0.052, 0.072].

The Chi-square difference test between a partially mediated model and a fully mediated model was significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.27$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$), which suggests that a partially mediated model was better. Also, partially mediated model's ECVI and AIC values (1.48 and 382.78, respectively) smaller than fully mediated model's ECVI and AIC values (1.49 and 385.20.78,), and partially mediated model was preferred (Figure 1).

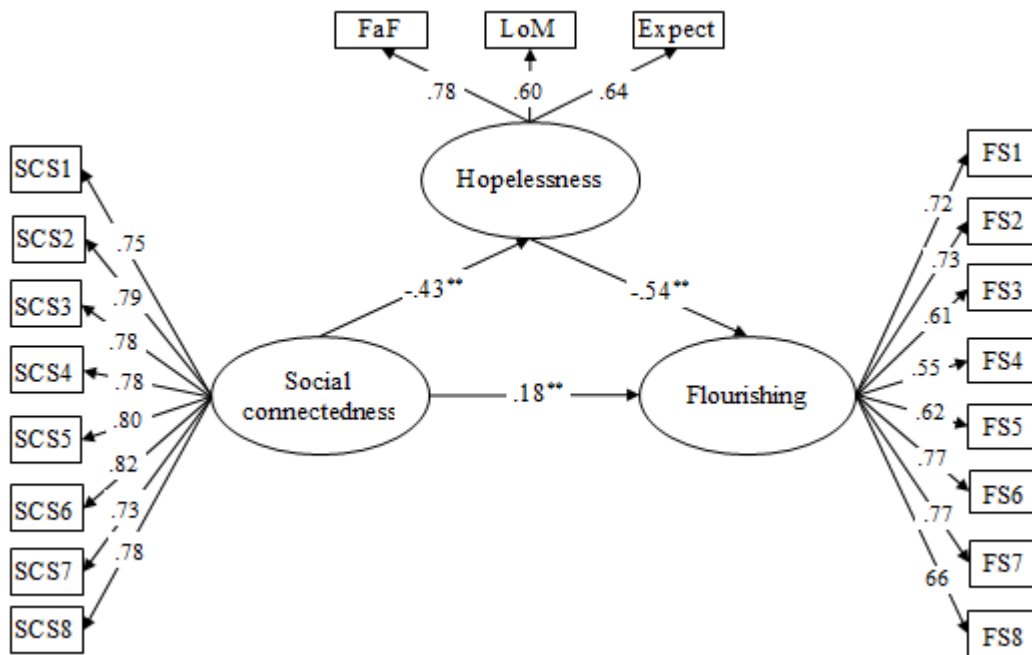


Figure 1. Standardized parameter estimates for the partially mediated structural model. Notes: N = 260; ** $p < .01$; FaF Feelings about the future; LoM Lost of motivation; Expect Expectation; SCS item of the Social Connectedness Scale; FS item of the Flourishing Scale

Overall results indicated that the effect of social connectedness on flourishing was partially mediated by hopelessness. Social connectedness predicts flourishing through the hopelessness. That is to say, the positive relation between social connectedness and flourishing turns into a negative relation through hopelessness mediating variable. In short, a negative relation is seen between social connectedness-hopelessness-flourishing.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to study the mediating role of hopelessness in the relationship between flourishing and social connectedness. In this study, as expected, the results indicated that hopelessness partially mediated the relation between flourishing and social connectedness. Social connectedness predicts flourishing through hopelessness. In other words, individuals with low levels of social connectedness are likely to engage in hopelessness, which results in low flourishing.

This result is consistent indirectly with previous studies. Researchers agree that lack of relationship with others and hopelessness together increases the risk for lifelong suicidal thoughts and behaviors [62, 71, 46]. In addition, some researches express that hopelessness causes low well-being [64], low life satisfaction, depression and suicidal thoughts [59].

Different forms of social disruptions and lack of connectedness is found in research being directed to more hopelessness and despair [79]. Preliminary studies have shown that lack of connectedness pertains to lack of support accessible to an individual through social ties, poor interaction in to a social system, or an awareness of separation from others [43]. As individuals with a low level of social connectedness do not feel belonging to a group, they cannot get support from their environment and cannot share their feelings and thoughts [27]. These people generally live alone, they do not have the chance to receive feedback from their environment, so they do not know themselves and evaluate negatively as they perceive their potential lower than the available. In addition, these people view their surroundings as hostile, threatening, and unfriendly. The negative perception they have about themselves and others affects their perception of future in a negative way [27]. Low social connectedness people do not have life goals and motivation to reach these goals [79, 27], that is why, the individuals without social connectedness live hopelessness.

Hopelessness has been associated with diminished physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual health [80]. In a research carried out with general population, it is put forward that hopelessness becomes determinant of life satisfaction, depression and suicidal thoughts [59]. The research indicated that those who were hopeless had low satisfaction level, depression and suicidal thoughts. Hopelessness is also characterized by persistently negative

feelings and expectations about the future as well as loss of motivation. A sense of hopelessness seems to lead to increasingly negative evaluations of new situations and less effective coping strategies; thus, the perception is that one will not accomplish anything meaningful [81]. They may hardly find new routes and lack the drive to implement pathways and pursue their goals [51].

University students maintain a life away from their families. Therefore, the social and emotional friendships they have are important in terms of their psychological health. During this period, they have to cope with adapting to a new and stressful university life and fulfill occupational, academic, emotional tasks and social development duties. The students who do not have a social bond face difficulty in adapting to the new environment as they do not get any support from their circles in occupational, academic or emotional challenges. The students, who fail to establish a social relation, cannot feel to belong to a group and lack a social connectedness, have low awareness about them and their future plans as they do not get enough social support and approval from their environment. In addition, these students have pessimistic viewpoints as they do not have any friends to tell about themselves and their future plans and to get a feedback. Those students who fail to overcome these difficulties, adapt to university life, and do not have a clear future plan and a life purpose feel themselves unsuccessful and useless. Therefore, these individuals' socially and psychologically well-being - shortly flourishing - goes down.

5. Conclusions

Establishing a sincere relationship and being sociable are among the fundamental developmental tasks in early adulthood. This study, which investigated mediating role of hopelessness between social connected and flourishing, indicated that hopelessness partially mediated the association between flourishing and social connectedness. On the other hand, it can be seen that, social connectedness predicts flourishing through hopelessness. It can be inferred that social connectedness and hopelessness are the significant determinants of the flourishing.

This study has got limitations. In the first place, the participants of the study are university students in Turkey, so it might be difficult to make a generalization regarding the university students from anywhere in the world. Therefore, studies that examine the relationships between social connectedness, hopelessness and flourishing in different cultures and different sample groups may help generalize the results of this study. In the second place, the study intended to develop a model instead of testing it, so findings of the study tend to be more explanatory in nature. Thirdly, as structural equation modeling is used, it is difficult to provide further explanation in the relationship between variables.

Though there are limitations, one can find important contributions from the study. The study results can help university student affairs and counseling centers in that

clients coming with cases of disconnectedness, hopelessness and low flourishing could be better understood. Moreover, it is vital for administration and counseling professionals to look for ways of prevention and intervention to address social disconnectedness, hopelessness and low flourishing in university. For instance, student affairs staff might keep on developing preventive programs, seminars and lectures that can affect social connectedness, hope and flourishing. Due to the fact that hopelessness foretells risk behaviors in youth population [79], the results of the study are believed to have suggestions for intervention programs with this population. In these intervention programs, sub-titles such as goal setting, self-esteem and self-confidence development, realization of success and gaining social skills can be suggested. The students with high level of hopelessness can be guided to individually take psychological assistance. In addition, the students with low social connectedness and high level of hopelessness should be encouraged to voluntarily attend social service activities and efforts of student clubs can be reassigned. Accordingly, the results of the study show that it is important to work on changing the social environment of youths.

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