



# Effectiveness of a Psycho-education Program on Learned Helplessness and Irrational Beliefs\*

Yağmur ULUSOY<sup>a</sup>  
Inonu University

Baki DUY<sup>b</sup>  
Anadolu University

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a psycho-education program aimed at reducing learned helplessness and irrational beliefs of eight-grade elementary students. The study was an experimental study based on the pre-test-post-test model with control and placebo group. A total of 27 participants, 9 group members in each group, participated in the study. Irrational Beliefs Scale and Attribution Style Questionnaire for Children were used to gather data. The psycho-education program based on cognitive behavioral therapy developed by researchers had been carried out with the experimental group for ten weeks, while a group guidance program focusing on problems in adolescence was run with the placebo group for four weeks. No procedure was applied to the control group. Group comparisons were investigated by two-way ANOVA for repeated measures. According to the results of analysis, there were no significant differences among three groups regarding learned helplessness and irrational beliefs scores, while there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group with regard to irrational scores. The results of the study exhibited that the psycho-education program was effective in decreasing irrational beliefs, but not effective in decreasing learned helplessness of the participants.

## Key Words

Learned Helplessness, Irrational Beliefs, Learned Optimism, Psycho-education.

Educational systems aim to support students' development in not only cognitive aspects, but behavioral and emotional aspects. Ones all aspects effect each other in a mutual way. For instance, academic failure may turn out to be a psychological problem leading to low self-efficacy beliefs and some behavioral problems (Clanton Harpine, 2008). Learned helplessness affecting students emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally is one of the causes of academic failure

(Sutherland & Singh, 2004). Learned helplessness as a term was first introduced by M. E. P. Seligman to psychology literature after a series of experiments in which learned helplessness in dogs was induced by shock (Seligman, 1972; Seligman & Maier, 1967). Seligman (1975) identified learned helplessness as a reaction caused by lack of motivation or movement. According to Seligman, learned helplessness is brought about when individuals believe that their reaction have no influence on a happening or event.

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- a** Yağmur ULUSOY, MS., is currently works at the department of Counseling and Guidance at Inonu University as a lecturer and holds a master's degree in Counseling and Guidance. She has also been pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of Counseling and Guidance at Cukurova University. Her research interests include attachment and dependency in close relationships, interpersonal relationships and counseling skills. *Correspondence:* Yağmur ULUSOY, Inonu University, Faculty of Education, Department of Counseling and Guidance, B Blok, Kat 1, 44280 Kampus, Malatya, Turkey. Email: yagmur.ulusoy@inonu.edu.tr Phone: +90 422 377 4489.
- b** Baki DUY, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Counseling and Guidance. Contact: Anadolu University, Faculty of Education, Department of Counseling and Guidance, Eskisehir, Turkey. Email: bakiduy@gmail.com.

He states that learned helplessness causes damage to one by leading one to quit rather than trying hard, to procrastinate things and to experience some emotional problems such as depression or anxiety (cited in Sutherland & Singh, 2004).

In later years, learned helplessness theory of Seligman was revisited and combined with attribution theory of Weiner. Causality (internal/external) and stability (stable/unstable) dimensions of Weiner were added to Seligman's universality (general/specific) term (Canino, 1981). When an unfortunate event happened, individuals who give up easily tend to attribute to constant causes, whereas others who insist tend to attribute to unstable causes. Those who make universal explanations for their failures tend to quit everything when they face a failure in an area, while individuals who provide specific explanations for their failures may feel helpless in a specific area, but keep moving in other areas. Individuals blaming themselves as they fail feel themselves worthless, flawed or unlovable (Seligman, 2007). However, learned helplessness differs from attribution theory in three aspects. First, learned helplessness theory focuses on explanatory tendency rather than an explanation over a failure. Second, Seligman expanded the theory by adding universality dimension to stability and causality dimensions. Lastly, Seligman paid attention to emotional problems and their treatment while Weiner solely focused on success (Seligman, 2007).

Traditional view about academic achievement defined ability and motivation as two decisive dimensions of school success. Yet, there is a third dimension: optimistic expectation ranging from pessimism to optimism about achieving something (Schulman, 1999). Considering the fact that academic success becomes more and more important for today's students, it is important to take into account of possibility of developing pessimistic beliefs after a failure for future events. Numerous studies indicated causal link between attributions and pessimistic beliefs after a real or hypothetical failure situation. Students having a tendency for learned helplessness attribute their failures to internal and stable aspects leading to resign from the task. Therefore, they believe that their parents and teachers will generalize their failure to their personality, be coercive and critical toward them after a specific failure (Kılıç & Oral, 2006). Students failing in consecutive academic tasks tend to be cynical about their intellectual abilities and overcoming future failures (Sutherland & Singh,

2004). It was also reported that learned helplessness tend to be prolonged (Düzgün & Hayalioğlu, 2006; Fincham, Hokoda, & Sanders, 1989).

It is obvious that students are expected to perform well on academic tasks. Bar-Tal (1978) conceptualized causal attributions in success and failure situations as having four dimensions: ability, effort, difficulty of task and luck. Ability and effort are internal dimensions, and difficulty of task and luck are external dimension we use to explain a success or failure. In a study done with elementary school students, it was reported that students tend to attribute success less to internal aspects (Aydemir, 2007). Supporting this finding, Kaya (2005) reported that students with high learned helplessness attributed failure to internal aspects more comparing to those with low level of learned helplessness. Sutherland and Singh (2004) claim that learned helplessness makes considerable contribution to school failure in students who have emotional and behavior problem.

Ellis founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy stated that people tend to attribute their negative feelings to the negative event they encountered. However, he asserted that negative feelings are triggered by the belief system of one rather the event itself. These beliefs resulting in anxiety, depressive or other distressed feelings tend to be irrational, because human beings have a potential to think both rationally and rationally, and mostly irrationally (Ellis, 2005). Thus, emotional or behavioral reactions one display are caused by one's belief system (Ellis, 2000). Supporting Ellis's assertions, Schulman (1999) claims that individuals retrain themselves from taking actions due to their pessimistic beliefs and irrational beliefs or assumptions. It was reported in a study that as learned resourcefulness levels of students increase, they tend to be have more positive beliefs about themselves and world as general (Güloğlu & Aydın, 2007). Supporting this finding, Erdoğan (2006) found that 60% of students experiencing learned helplessness and 10% of those not experiencing it ascribed failure to themselves. When individuals explain a negative event by stable and uncontrollable aspects, they have an expectation that consequences of a similar event in future cannot be changed (Gillham, Shatte, Reivich, & Seligman, 2001). It was, therefore, reported a significant relationship between irrational beliefs and hopelessness (Göller, 2010).

Some individuals may have an irrational optimism involving beliefs about being resilient. They hold

a belief that others are hopeless victims is about being irrationally optimistic rather than having a hope for life. Such irrational optimism may imply that these individuals may utilize irrational strategies when facing an upsetting event to cope with consequences of the event as a result of this irrational optimism (Weinstein, 1980). Schulman (1999) suggests being pessimistic when the sake and risk are high rather than an irrational optimism preventing one from taking realities into account, and being flexible, functional optimism when the sake and risk are low. Flexible optimism may lead to a flexible pessimism while irrational optimism may lead to an irrational pessimism.

As individuals have been trying to adapt to fast changes in the society, strategies or services in psychological help provided have been also varying in parallel to these changes in the society. Besides individual services, group approaches given to people of similar concerns are gaining greater importance. These group approaches may vary. While group counseling deals with more developmental problems, group therapy focuses on specific psychological or psychiatric problems. Psycho-educational or task groups having structured and a focus are mostly used to develop some skills in specific area (Ivey, Pederson, & Ivey, 2001). Groups for children or adolescents tend to be both preventive and intervening. Some groups that focus on behavior modification in violence or substance abuse are intervening in their very nature, whereas other groups concentrated on skill development like social skills are preventive (Brown, 1994).

Psycho-educational groups are educational and focused on skill development. Group leaders should have a fundamental training to conduct such groups with different ages (Brown, 1994). Planning an effective psycho-educational group requires a strong theoretical foundation which demands a considerable amount of time and energy. Thus, success of such groups lies in planning each stage very carefully (Güçray, Çekici, & Çolakkadıoğlu, 2009). Content of psycho-educational groups widely conducted in schools generally tend to have strategies of cognitive-behavior therapy. Goldstein (1982 cited in O'Donohue & Krasner, 1995) states that psychological skills development training is planned, teaches specific behaviors systematically, demands individuals to display behaviors effectively and sufficiently, run in extended period of time and represents contemporary principals and methods of psychology and education.

Regarding the fact that learned helplessness has a negative effect on school failure and self-concept and prolonging of it to advanced years, it becomes important to provide preventive and intervening services to students in schools both individually and in groups by school counselors. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of a psycho-education program designed to cope with learned helplessness through learned optimism on learned helplessness and irrational beliefs.

## Method

### Participants

The participants of the study determined by means of convenience sampling method (Balci, 2007) was comprised of 142 (F= 76, M= 66) 8th grade students attending to a state elementary school. Participation to the study was voluntary. Measures of the study were applied to the participants and the students who scored over the mean on both measures were distributed to one of the groups.

### Measures

**Irrational Beliefs Scale for Adolescents:** Irrational Beliefs Scale for Adolescents was developed by Çivitçi (2006) to assess irrational beliefs of adolescents. The scale was answered on a 5-point Likert type scale and composed of 21 items yielding three subscales; demand for success, demand for comfort and demand for respect. Test-retest reliability coefficients were all satisfying; .84 for demand for success, .75 for demand for comfort and .67 for respect and .82 for the total of it. Internal reliability coefficients were also good enough; .62, .61, .57 and .71 respectively. Çivitçi (2006) also reported significant relationships between subscales of the scale and depression and test anxiety.

**Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire:** The scale was developed by Seligman et al. (1984) and adapted to Turkish by Aydın (1985). It is made up of 48 items each of which includes a hypothetical positive and negative events assessing children's causal explanations in given situation. Children are asked to pick one of two causes of a given event. The two causes contain two of three dimensions of attribution: locus of control, stability and global dimension. The scale is scored by assigning a 1 to each internal, stable, or global response (when that dimension is varied), and a 0 to each external, unstable or specific response. Learned helplessness

score is computed by summing up all points. The higher the score is the higher the learned helplessness level. Test-retest reliability of the test was sufficient: .83.

### Procedure

Having obtained permission from local branch of Ministry of National Education, the instruments of the study were administered to 8th grade students in state elementary school in groups. The authors made interviews with the students who scored above the mean score on both scales about participating to the study and provided information about it. Thirty of them accepted to participate to the study on a voluntary base, and then parental permissions were obtained for each participant. The participants were assigned to one of the groups by matching. While the groups were running, one member of the experimental group left the group. Yet, one member from placebo group and control group did not join in post-test measures. Thus, group process was finalized with 9 participants in each group and analyses were performed with the data obtained from these participants. Psycho-educational groups may have more participants for its educational nature comparing to other group approaches. However, the number of members in each group in the present research was decided to be small, because the group sessions had to be completed in about 40 minutes, and the authors aimed at maximizing the engagement of each participant to the strategies as much as possible. Each group had a member who seems to cope with learned helplessness as a role model (Morganett, 2005). The participants of the experimental group were exposed to didactic, structured and mostly cognitive-behavioral oriented strategies to overcome learned helplessness for 10 sessions, while the participants of the placebo group were given information about the developments in adolescence. The control group received no treatment. When the group sessions were ended, the instruments of the study were administered to the participants once more for post-test measures. No follow up measures were performed due to problem of reaching out the participants.

### Results

To investigate differences among pre-test scores of three groups, One-Way ANOVA was employed. Before employing One-Way ANOVA, statistical tests were performed to decide whether to use

parametric methods. Results indicated that normality values were in acceptable ranges and homogeneity of variance was obtained. ANOVA results demonstrated that participants of three groups did not differ regarding irrational beliefs and attributional styles prior to the group sessions ( $F_{(2,24)} = .21, p > .05$ ).

For the purpose of investigating the effectiveness of the psycho-educational program on irrational beliefs, a mixed between-within subjects of ANOVA for split-plot designs (Spanova) (Palant, 2007) was conducted. Results indicated a significant main effect for time ( $F_{(1,24)} = 15.36, p < .01; \eta^2 = .39$ ), and for interaction effect ( $F_{(2,24)} = 6.62, p < .05; \eta^2 = .36$ ). That is irrational scores of the experimental group decreased significantly at post-test, and the psycho-education program was effective in reducing irrational beliefs. Another mixed between-within subjects of ANOVA was conducted to test the effectiveness of the treatment on attributional styles. Results displayed that there was not any main effect for time ( $F_{(1,24)} = .60, p > .05; \eta^2 = .02$ ), group ( $F_{(2,24)} = .35, p > .05, \eta^2 = .08$ ) and for interaction between time and group ( $F_{(2,24)} = 2.47, p > .05; \eta^2 = .01$ ). That is the psycho-educational program was not effective on changing the attributional styles of the subjects in experimental group.

### Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of a psycho-educational program on lessening irrational beliefs and changing attributional styles of the participants. Analyses indicated that the psycho-educational program was effective in lessening irrational beliefs, but not in changing attributional styles of the participants.

Numerous studies indicated significant relationships among learned helplessness, irrational beliefs and negative feelings. It was reported that children explaining negative events they encounter often by stable and internal causes tend to experience more depressive feelings and school failures than those who don't make same attributions (Nolen-Hoeksema, Seligman, & Girgus, 1986). In their research with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders, Rueger and Malecki (2007) reported positive relationship between learned helplessness and negative attributions of an event and depression, and negative relationship with life orientations. Studies revealing relationship between learned resourcefulness and automatic thoughts (Güloğlu, 2006; Güloğlu & Aydın, 2007), and between irrational beliefs and hopelessness,

and claims of cognitive-behavioral therapy that we begin to develop core beliefs about ourselves, others and the world (Beck, 1995) may imply a relationship between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs. Thus, one purpose of this study was to alleviate learned helplessness through a psycho-educational program. Findings evidence the effectiveness of the program in lessening the use of irrational beliefs. Similar studies support this finding (Çivitçi, 2005; Johnson, 1994; Ortakale, 2008).

Major purpose of the study was to alleviate learned helplessness through increasing functional optimism in the participants, and teaching them how to identify and combat irrational beliefs they have specifically regarding success situations. However, findings did not prove the effectiveness of the program in alleviating learned helplessness. Focus of the psycho-educational program would be responsible for this finding. The program focused on implementing functional optimism and teaching how to identify and combat irrational beliefs rather than directly altering attributional styles. While some studies on lessening learned helplessness in different populations (Avcı, 2009; Kezele, 1985; Kök, 1992) evidenced the effectiveness of psycho-educational programs they employed, others reported opposite findings (Güloğlu, 2006; Houlihan, 1981).

Yalom (2002) claims that groups solely psycho-educational or cognitive-behavior therapy oriented do not provide whole resources of change that may easily found in group therapy. Morganett (2005) also state that post-test measures should be performed as soon as the completion of last session. Other possible explanations for ineffectiveness of the program on alleviating learned helplessness would be limited number of the sessions, limited time of the sessions, and problems faced during conducting the group sessions. Optimism itself may not be enough; it needs to be combined with meaningful purposes and supporting behaviors (Paulson, 2010). It was expected that the participants would display an adaptable optimism out the sessions. Nevertheless, being optimistic or thinking positively solely may change the reality. Being optimistic may not be enough if there is a failure (Peale, 1989). It is possible that the participants could not be able to carry on the learning or changes in the session to real life and to have meaningful purposes for themselves. It is also possible that some uncontrollable negative or coercive events considered more influential than reinforcing events (Saylor, Finch, Cassel, Saylor, & Penberthy, 1984) might have been occurred in their lives that might have hindered the effect of the program.

As it happens in any research, the present study also has some limitations. One of them is the study group. The program was carried out with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Similar studies with different age groups may bring out different findings. Another major limitation of the study was focus of the program. Strategies and techniques of cognitive-behavior therapy were implemented in the sessions. Different strategies and approaches may yield different results. Last limitation is about some problems faced during the implementation of the sessions. They were carried out in state elementary school. The physical conditions of the room where the sessions were held were not good enough. Besides, some unexpected interruptions occurred at some sessions due to the conditions at the school.

The present study aimed at lessening learned helplessness and irrational beliefs through escalating functional optimism and teaching strategies to combat irrational beliefs. A psycho-education program was designed to actualize the purpose. Analysis indicated the effectiveness of the program on lessening use of irrational beliefs, but not on learned helplessness. Various studies evidenced relationship between learned helplessness and emotional, psychological problems and school failure related problems. Thus, it seems paramount to identify students who have a high level of learned helplessness level and to provide both intervening and preventive services be it individual or group to overcome learned helplessness. School counselors working with students in high risk of school failure or drop-out need be aware of including parents and other school personnel.

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