

# The Effects of a Communication and Conflict Resolution Skill Training Program on Sociotropy Levels of University Students

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## **Abstract**

In this study, the effect of a Communication and Conflict Resolution Skill Training Program on sociotropy levels of university students were investigated. The working group was consisted of thirty two voluntary university students. A pre-test and post-test model was used with control group and experimental group, each consisting of sixteen individuals. University students' sociotropy levels were measured by the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale which was adapted to Turkish by Şahin, Ulusoy and Şahin (1993). The data were analyzed with independent samples t-test, paired samples t-test and one-way ANOVA for repeated measures techniques. Data handled in this research had shown that university students who participated in the ten sessions of communication and conflict resolution skill training program had lower levels of sociotropy than the other individuals who had not participated in the training program. There was no significant change on the sociotropy levels of the control group. After three and six months, one-way ANOVA for repeated measures technique was used for the experimental group and it was found that there was no significant relationship between sociotropy levels of post-test scores and follow up scores. The findings had shown that the communication and conflict resolution skill training program had positive effects on the levels of sociotropy among university students.

## **Key Words**

Sociotropy, Communication and Conflict Resolution Skill Training Program, University Student.

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Sociotropy is a personality trait associated with high levels of dependence and excessive need to please others with the need to establish secure and positive interpersonal communication with other people. The person who is having high sociotropic features, is very sensitive for the negative thoughts or behaviors from the individuals they communicate (McBride, Bacchioni, & Bagby, 2005; Krause, Robins, & Lynch, 2000). According to Beck (1983), these people are expecting approval from other people. In other words, sociotropy describes the tendency of needing praise and support from surrounding people (Bagby et al., 2001). According to their communication live styles, persons who are having high sociotropic features present more passive responses to other people and in need of to be loved by other people (Lynch, Robins, & Morse, 2003; Narduzzi, & Jackson, 2002). Low self-respect, loneliness, desperation, and high anxiety accompany the individuals who have high sociotropic features (Connor-Smith, & Compas, 2002). Gazda (1982) reports that individuals with low levels of self-esteem have high levels of anxiety and low levels of self-confidence. Kılıçcı (1988) reveals that self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-confidence are reflecting a positive attitude of the individuals to the self. Patterson (1969) acknowledges that individuals with normal psychological health have enough self-esteem and self-acceptance levels. As a personality disturbance trait, the sociotropic individuals have features like avoidant personality (loneliness, shy, afraid to be evaluated as negative in a community, continuously curious about the view of the others about their selves) (Öztürk, 2002).

Conflict is an inevitable situation in interpersonal relationships (Horataşu, 1997). It is an incompatibility situation which occurs between two or more people about wishes and values (Deutsch, 1994). Carter (2002) classified strategies against conflict as violence, avoidance, cooperation, acceptance, and understanding. Kilmann and Thomas (1977) classified strategies against conflict as competition, negotiation, adaptation, and cooperation. Sociotropic individuals can use withdraw, leave the environment or use consonantal strategies against a conflict. Other strategies like denial, conflict, postponement, or suppression can be used in order to adapt the conflict. Individuals with high levels of autonomy have strong freedom feelings, desire to reach their own goals in life (Bagby et al., 2001). In social life, individuals have to acquire primary communication skills in order to solve communication problems in their daily lives (Nelson-Jones, 1986). The literature related to this

study in Turkey shows that conflict resolution programs used with primary (Çoban, 2002; Taştan, 2004; Zengin, 2008) and secondary school samples (Kuş, 2007; Sünbül, 2008; Uysal, 2006), and university students (Karahan, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Kavalcı, 2001) are effective on conflict resolution skills, anger control, assertiveness, and self-esteem levels of students. On the other hand, Sarı (2005) states that the application of the discussion technique in the lessons has positive effects on conflict resolution skills of primary school students.

### **Problem**

In the current research, the efficacy of a communication and conflict resolution skill training program on the sociotropy features among university students is investigated. For this purpose, these research hypothesis are tested:

1. The Sociotropy Subscale post-test scores of the study group are lower than the control group.
2. The Sociotropy Subscale post-test scores of the study group are lower than their initial pre-test scores.
3. The Sociotropy Subscale post-test scores of the study group show no difference with their three and six month follow-ups.
4. The Sociotropy Subscale post-test scores of the control group have no significant with their pre-test results.

### **Method**

In this study, control group pre-and post-test model is used. Before the communication and conflict resolution skills training program, the Sociotropy Subscale was administered to both groups. Next, the communication and conflict resolution skill training program consisting of ten sessions, one and half hour each, was conducted to the control group at the weekends. Meanwhile, the control group had no program. After the program had been terminated, the Sociotropy Subscale was re-administered to both groups once again. The subscale was re-administered to the students in the study group after three and six months prior to the termination of the program. No follow-up was administered to the control group. Only after then the program was applied to the participants in the control group.

## Research Group

Before the study, it was announced that a ten session Communication and Conflict Resolution Skill Training Program would be conducted. The researcher administered the Sociotropy Subscale Test to 168 students who participated in the research. According to the results of the pre-test, volunteered participants with the highest scores from the subscale were randomly assigned to the study and control groups with sixteen participants in each group. The participants in the control and study group had no psychiatric diagnosis or had never been in any counseling. Independent samples t-test was performed in order to investigate the pre-test results of the participants in order to investigate significant differences. No statistically significant difference was found between two groups.

## Instrument

### The Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale

The scale was developed by Beck, Epstein, Harrison, and Emery (1983). Şahin, Ulusoy and Şahin (1993) adapted it to Turkish. In the reliability study, Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the patient group was .70 and .80 in the autonomy subscale. In the student group, results were .83 and .81 respectively. In the subscale validity study, the correlation between the scores of the non-functional behaviors and sociotropy subscale was calculated as 0.37 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and with the Beck Depression Scale as 0.18 ( $p < 0.001$ ). In structural validity study, it is shown that the sociotropy subscale differs in the normal and patient groups ( $t = 6.82$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The higher scores from the subscale indicate that the individual has high sociotropic personality traits (Cited: Savaşır & Şahin, 1997).

## Treatment

The researcher designed the program with an eclectic approach based on various resources (Breunlin, Bryant-Edwards, & Hetherington, 2002; Cüceloğlu, 1995; Çağdaş, 2002; Dökmen, 1995; Durant, Barkın, & Krowchuk, 2001; Dysinger, 1993; Egan, 1975; Gordon, 1998; Gordon, & Sands, 1998; Hazaleus, & Deffenbacher, 1986; Lane-Garon, 2000; Selçuk, & Güner, 2000; Stevahn, & Johnson, 1997; Whirter, & Voltan-Acar, 2000; Voltan-Acar, 2002). The program, which was conducted with the study group, consisted of ten sessions, each session lastin one and a half hour in every weekend.

The sessions are summarized below;

**1<sup>st</sup> session:** The participants greet each other and the structure and process of the sessions are discussed and a confidentially contract is signed.

**2<sup>nd</sup> session:** To express feelings and thoughts using “I language” in unfair and negative situations.

**3<sup>rd</sup> session:** To exercise active listening skills with making eye contact.

**4<sup>th</sup> session:** To say no to other people’s unpractical suggestions and produce alternatives and offers.

**5<sup>th</sup> session:** Ability to perform empathic confront in the situation an individual is angry or in disagreement.

**6<sup>th</sup> session:** To make counter critics when an individual is criticized. The ability to make critics against a behavior or thought, and defend one’s self against unfair critics.

**7<sup>th</sup> session:** To direct questions to individuals in the situations when it is needed or different opinion, to start an argument, to continue and defend his or her ideas.

**8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> sessions:** To share the former conflicts with the group. To develop constructive and cooperative reactions instead of passive reactions such as withdrawing from the argument, staying quiet and avoiding and discuss the results of these reactions.

**10<sup>th</sup> session:** The discussion of the program process, sharing feelings, and with the Love Bombardment Play (Voltan-Acar, 2002) is used as a program termination exercise.

### Statistical Analyses

In order to test the distribution of the Sociotropy Subscale scores of the control and study groups, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. In order to test the homogeneity of scores, Levene test was used (Ural, & Kılıç, 2005). According to the analyses, the scores of the groups present a normal distribution ( $P=.939$ ;  $p>.05$ ) and their variances are homogenous ( $P=.099$ ;  $p>.05$ ). Because of this reason, in order to analyze the data independent samples t-test, paired samples t-test and one-way ANOVA for repeated measures were used (Büyüköztürk, 2003).

## Results

The study group had lower post-test scores on the Sociotropy Subscale compared to the control group ( $t=4.9$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). The post-test scores of the study group on the Sociotropy Subscale was lower than their pre-test results ( $t=9.08$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). There was no statistically significant difference between the post-test results of the study group with their first and second follow-up scores. There was no statistical significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the control group ( $t=0.621$ ;  $P=0.544$ ;  $p>.05$ ).

## Discussion

In this study, a communication and conflict resolution skill training program was conducted on a group of sociotropic individuals and its program's effect was investigated. In this program, there are several techniques that were used: "to express one-self's feeling using I language", "to reject offers that oneself does not agree or like", "to produce alternatives and offers", "to start and continue a conversation or argument by asking questions", "the ability to perform empathic confront", "asking question while discussion", "to use effective and active listening", "to defend oneself' ideas or thoughts against unfair assaults". At the end of every session, homework is given to the participants in order to utilize these techniques. It can be assumed that these interventions are effective in order to increase the sociotropy levels of the participants. In order to achieve fusion and trust between the participants, the Greeting, Pilot and Trust Walking Plays were used (Voltan-Acar, 2001, 2002).

The results of this study confirm that the participants, who attended the communication and conflict resolution skill training, have lower sociotropy levels compared to their prior scores. The two follow-up test scores (three and six months after the program had been terminated) were not statistically significant from the post-test score of the study group. This confirms that the program has a long lasting effect on the sociotropic levels of the participants by promoting their communication and conflict resolution skills. As the pre-test and post-test results of the control group were not statistically significant, a follow-up is not planned to the control group. The literature on the topic confirms that in different study groups the communication and conflict resolution skill training programs have positive effects on promoting individuals' communication and conflict resolution skills. Afterwards, these programs have ef-

fect on individuals the cooperated conflict resolution skills (Breunlin et al., 2002; Cunningham, 1998; Durant et al., 2001; Dysinger, 1993; Kavalcı, 2001; Lane-Garon, 2000; Sandy, & Boardman, 2000; Stevahn, & Johnson, 1997). The literature related to this study in Turkey shows that conflict resolution programs conducted on primary (Çoban, 2002; Taştan, 2004; Zengin, 2008) or secondary school (Kuş, 2007; Sünbül, 2008; Uysal, 2006), and university students (Karahana, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Kavalcı, 2001) are effective on conflict resolution skills, anger control, assertiveness, and self-esteem levels of the participants. On the other hand, Sarı (2005) stated that the application of the discussion technique in the lessons has positive effects on the conflict resolution skills of primary school students.

Studies on sociotropy support the results of this study as there is a relationship between shyness and sociotropy (Bruch, Rivet, Heimberg, Hunt, & McIntosh, 1999). Shyness can be defined as the individual's uncomfortable feelings about self when he or she is near other persons (Stevens, 1997). Shyness causes avoidance in social communication (Hamer, & Bruch, 1997). A sociotropic individual gives non-functional responses against social relations and social stressors (Connor-Smith, & Compas, 2002). Sociotropic individuals mostly use emotionally based coping strategies against social conflicts and social stressors (Carver, & Scheier, 1994; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1996; Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992; Richter, & Richter, 1991). Also, there is a high correlation between sociotropy and depression with anxiety (Alford, & Gerrity, 2003; Kabakçı, 2001; Kolts, Robinson, & Tracy, 2004; Lynch et al., 2003; Şahin, Ulusoy, & Şahin, 2003). Allen, Horne and Trinder (1996) report high correlations between sociotropic traits and high levels of rejection fear and loneliness. Clark, Steer, Beck and Ross (1995) revealed that there are high correlations between sociotropy and over self-criticisms, dependence, perfectionism, and loneliness. Depression may be triggered in these individuals as lacking of their communication skills, shyness, over self-criticisms, and loneliness (Peplau, & Perlman, 1982). In this point of view, promoting functional communication and conflict resolution skills with these people can break the vicious cycle of shyness and loneliness. This situation can reduce anxiety and predisposition to depression.

In conclusion, the results from this study confirm that the communication and conflict resolution skill training has a positive effect on increasing the sociotropy levels of university students. Personal progress or promotion programs may be useful for students who have higher levels of sociotropy.

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