

Social Intelligence as a Predictor of Loneliness in the Workplace

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Abstract. The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between social intelligence and loneliness of academics in the workplace. This study involves 326 (149 female/177 male) academics employed in various universities in Turkey and North Cyprus. The age average of participants is 39.09 years. In this study, the Loneliness at Work Scale (LAWS) and Tromso Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) have been utilized. The data were analyzed using multiple regression and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient analysis techniques. The findings showed that social information processing, social skills, and social awareness, which are the sub-dimensions of social intelligence, positively explained 26% of social deprivation. Social skills and social awareness positively explained 13% of social companionship. The findings also showed that the social information processing sub-dimension did not meaningfully explain social companionship.

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Researchers commonly agree that loneliness is a “break-down in social interaction and poor quality interpersonal relationships” (Wright, 2007, p.4). Loneliness is a psychological state that stems from individuals’ deficiencies in their social interactions (Wright, Burt, & Strongman, 2006). In a work environment, loneliness does not lie with the number of social relationships individuals may have, but rather lies with the quality and the meaningfulness of these interpersonal relationships. Individuals may feel lonely at work if they experience emotional deprivation and a lack of social companionship (Wright, 2007). Quick, Cooper, Gibbs, Little, and Nelson (2010) argue that healthy interpersonal communication has positive consequences on loneliness because loneliness is the “absence of deep human connection and heartfelt communication” (p.274).

According to Wright, Burt, and Strongman (2006), the feeling of loneliness arises less from lack of social support or working alone than from the quality of interpersonal relationships. The researchers developed a 16-item self-report loneliness scale to measure loneliness in the workplace. The items are related to emotional deprivation and social companionship,

which are two important components of the quality of interpersonal relationships. Deniz, Hamarta, and Ari (2005) investigated the relationship between social skills and loneliness levels of university students with respect to their attachment styles. The authors defined attachment as individuals’ ability to have close relationships with others that help the individuals develop a healthy personality and influence their personal and social development processes. The study showed that attachment styles have a significant effect on loneliness and social skills.

Wright (2005) investigated the relationship between organizational climate, social support and loneliness in the workplace. The study revealed that a negative emotional climate and lack of collegial support affected the experience of loneliness in workers. It has been suggested that “addressing interpersonal problems in the workplace and improving the psychological work environment within an organization may enhance the social and emotional well-being of employees” (p.123). Wright’s (2007) research on the experience of loneliness in organizational settings revealed that factors such as fear, lack of community, and value congruence predicted loneliness in organizations.

Social intelligence also has received a great deal of attention in the recent literature. We know that in an increasingly globalized world, interpersonal communications between people, often of different cultures, have become part of daily life. People need to possess certain social skills and social competence to adjust to the demands of the social situations (Riggio,

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Throckmorton, & DePaola, 1990). People as social beings must be able to build meaningful and healthy relationships with others to avoid emotional stress and physical problems (Doğan, Çetin, & Sungur, 2009). Social intelligence implies one's social competence or ability to deal with others successfully. It is "a necessary prerequisite for being a successful intercultural communicator" (Wawra, 2009, p.164). Social intelligence is also the ability to relate to others and to have perceptions about others' beliefs, thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Individuals should be intelligent enough to build the capacity to understand the psychology of others and to have empathy toward them (Quenza, 2006). Social intelligence is one of Gardner's multiple intelligence categories and consists of the skills for understanding and interacting with people, getting along with them and getting them to cooperate (Albrecht, 2004).

Goleman (2006) identified two categories of social intelligence: social awareness and social facility. Social awareness implies individuals' ability to sense and perceive important social cues about others' thoughts and emotions and to understand complex social situations. Social facility implies individuals' ability to deal with others (cited in Heggstad, 2008). Liff (2003) argues that self-awareness, regulation of emotions, goal-setting, and empathy are related to the capacity to form and maintain relationships. Social awareness and empathy also help individuals sense the inner state of another person to understand what the other person feels and thinks (Goleman, 2006, cited in Wawra, 2009). It can be argued that all of these components represent social intelligence, which helps individuals construct successful interpersonal relationships.

Kosmitzki and John (1993) examined two studies on the components of social intelligence. The two studies suggested that the most significant components of social intelligence are the ability to understand others, know social rules (cognitive aspects), deal with people and adapt to social environments (behavioral aspects). Riggio et al. (1990), in their correlational analysis of social skills and self-esteem, found that social skills were positively correlated with self-esteem and negatively correlated with social anxiety and loneliness.

Communication skills, interpersonal skills and people skills are significant attributes for effective performance not only in social environments but also in the workplace. Namely, in order to behave skillfully in various social situations such as talking to one's boss, attending meetings, making presentations in front of a group of people, sharing experiences with others, or interviewing for a job, one needs to have a set of social skills (Albrecht, 2006).

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between the social intelligence of academics with loneliness in the workplace. Through their profession, academics influence other segments of society. Therefore, it is important that they do not suffer from any psychological problems or face impossibility in their workplace if they want to be productive. For the above reasons, the researchers decided to conduct this study with academics.

The researchers of this study did not come across any research studies on the direct relationship between social intelligence and loneliness in the workplace. However, based on the above literature, it is logical to suggest that there are positive correlations between social intelligence and the ability to build effective communications with others that will possibly prevent one from experiencing loneliness in a particular setting.

Method

Participants

In total, 326 academics recruited from state and private universities in Turkey and North Cyprus participated in this study. The data collection instruments were sent to 5,767 academicians via mail. However, only 326 of them responded. Of the 326 participants, 149 were female (45.7%), and 177 were male (54.3%). The age range of the participants is 23 to 66 years. The average age is 39.09 years ($SD = 9.38$). Of the participants, 66 (20.2%) were teaching assistants, 88 (27.0%) were instructors, 87 (26.70%) were assistant professors, 32 (9.8%) were associate professors and 53 (16.3%) were professors. Regarding the number of years worked in academia, 85 (26.1%) of the participants worked 0–5 years, 49 (15.0%) worked 5–10 years, 120 (36.8%) worked 10–20 years, and 72 (22.1%) worked 20 years or more.

Data Collection Instruments

Loneliness in the Workplace Scale (LAWS): LAWS, which was developed by Wright et al. (2006) is a 16-item self-report tool. Items are scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The scale has two sub-dimensions: emotional deprivation and social companionship. The emotional deprivation sub-dimension contains 9 items and measures the emotional quality of the relationships between academics in the workplace (sample item: "I feel satisfied with the relationships I have at work"). The social companionship sub-dimension contains 7 items and evaluates the quantity of the relationships between academics (sample item: "There is no one at work I can share personal thoughts with if I want to"). Wright et al. (2006) reported the internal consistency of the emotional deprivation sub-dimension as .93 and .87

for the social companionship sub-dimension. In their study conducted with 220 participants in 4–7 week intervals, they reported the test-retest consistency coefficient as .87 for both factors.

The adaptation of the scale into Turkish was carried out by Doğan et al. (2009). The psychometric qualities of the scale were examined with the help of the data obtained from 436 employees. A 5-point Likert-type scale for answers was used in the Turkish version of the scale. The following Cronbach's alpha coefficients were obtained: .90 (for the total scale), .87 (emotional deprivation sub-dimension) and .83 (social companionship sub-dimension). The scores obtained from the application of the scale to 54 employees in three-week intervals was .82, .78, and .80 for the test-retest score, the emotional deprivation sub-dimension, and the social companionship sub-dimension, respectively. The confirmatory factor analysis carried out with the Turkish sample also found a two-factor structure. The goodness-of-fit indexes obtained for the two-factor model were $\chi^2 = 182.56$, $s = 436$, $p = .01$, RMSEA = 0.047, NFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, RFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.95 and AGFI = 0.93. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated as .92 for the LAWS, .90 for the emotional deprivation factor and .85 for the social companionship factor.

Tromso Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS): The Tromso Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) was developed by Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl (2001) and adapted into Turkish by Doğan and Çetin (2009). TSIS is a 7-point Likert-type scale that has 21 items and three sub-dimensions. Four different scores—a social information processing score, a social skills score, a social awareness score and a total score—can be obtained from the scale.

Social Information Processing: This sub-dimension of the scale, which is concerned with human relations, measures skills such as understanding verbal and non-verbal messages, establishing empathy and deciphering the hidden messages in the language of people (sample item: "I can often understand what others are trying to accomplish without the need for them to say anything"). *Social Skills:* This sub-dimension measures communication skills such as effective listening, assertive behavior, and initiating, continuing and ending a relationship (sample item: "I am good at entering new situations and meeting people for the first time"). *Social Awareness:* This sub-dimension measures the effective behaviors of people in an appropriate environment, place and time (sample item: "I often hurt others without realizing it"). Each sub-dimension contains 7 items. A 5-point Likert-type scale for answers was used in the Turkish version of the scale.

Doğan et al. (2009) examined the factor structure of the scale through factor analysis. The confirmatory

factor analysis revealed the goodness-of-fit index as RMSEA = 0.057, NFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, RFI = 0.91, GFI = 0.92 and AGFI = 0.91.

The internal consistency coefficients of the subscales for social information processing, social skills and social awareness were found to be .77, .84 and .67 respectively. The test-retest reliability coefficient, which was obtained from the application of the test to 101 university students, was found to be .80. The correlations between the sub-dimensions of the TSIS were found in scores ranging from .32 to .45. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was calculated as .84 for the TSIS, .81 for the social information processing factor, .79 for the social skills factor and .77 for the social awareness factor.

Demographic Information Form: Participants were asked a total of six questions (three open-ended and three closed-ended questions). On the demographic information form, participants were asked to answer questions related to their gender, age, academic title, number of years worked, and the university and department in which they work.

Procedure

In this study, in addition to the data collection instruments, a demographic information form was also used. Initially, 5,767 academics, who are employed at the universities of Turkey and North Cyprus, were reached via mail. The necessary information about the study and the data collection instruments was sent to the e-mail addresses of the academics. The volunteers participated in the study. The application of the instruments lasted approximately 10–15 minutes. The data were analyzed through the SPSS 15.0 program.

Data Analysis

With respect to the aim of the study, a Pearson product momentum correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between social intelligence and loneliness in the workplace. Then, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine to what extent the sub-dimensions of social intelligence predicted loneliness in the workplace. Descriptive statistics was also used for the concerned variables in the research.

Results

Mean and standard deviation scores of the variables were calculated and are presented in Table 1.

The findings related to correlations between loneliness in the workplace and its sub-dimensions, and social intelligence and its sub-dimensions, are shown in Table 2. No correlation was found between the emotional deprivation sub-dimension and the social information processing sub-dimension.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	\bar{X}	<i>SD</i>
Emotional deprivation	20.30	7.53
Social companionship	13.71	5.05
Social information processing	29.69	4.32
Social skills	23.03	3.86
Social awareness	26.42	4.22

n = 326.

Multiple regression analysis results related to the prediction of emotional deprivation are presented in Table 3. Regarding the findings, it can be observed that the sub-dimensions of social intelligence were meaningful predictors of loneliness in the workplace, $R = .505$, $R^2 = .255$, $p < .001$. When the relationships of the variables with emotional deprivation were evaluated one by one, the following order of importance was obtained: social awareness, $\beta = -.44$; $p < .001$, social skills, $\beta = -.19$; $p < .001$, and social information processing, $\beta = .13$; $p < .015$. These findings showed that the related variables explained 26% of the emotional deprivation at work variance.

Multiple regression analysis results related to the prediction of social companionship at work are presented in Table 4. When the findings were analyzed, it was observed that the sub-dimensions of social intelligence were meaningful predictors of social companionship at work, $R = .36$, $R^2 = .13$, $F = 16, 08$, $p < .001$. When the relationships of the variables with social companionship were evaluated one by one, it was seen that the variables of social skills, $\beta = -.22$; $p < .001$ and social awareness, $\beta = -.16$; $p < .005$ were meaningful predictors of social companionship. The sub-dimension of social information processing was not a meaningful predictor of social companionship. These findings show that the related variables explain 13% of the social companionship in the workplace variance.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine the correlation between the social intelligence of academics and

loneliness in the workplace. The researchers aimed to find out whether or not social information processing, social skills and social awareness, which are the sub-dimensions of social intelligence, predicted emotional deprivation and social companionship, which are the sub-dimensions of loneliness at work. The results showed meaningful correlations between the predictive variables of social skills, social awareness, social information processing and emotional deprivation. It was found that the variables of social skills, social awareness and social information processing significantly predicted emotional deprivation. At the second stage, correlations between the variables of social information processing, social awareness, social skills and social companionship at work were examined. It was found that the dimensions of social skills and social awareness significantly predicted social companionship at work. However, it was also found that social information processing did not significantly predict social companionship at work. The data obtained were discussed in light of the literature.

From the literature, it can be noted that loneliness is interpreted as a negative state. It is defined in relation to negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness and stress. The relevant studies emphasized the positive relationship between loneliness and psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Wiseman & Guttfreund, 1995). Failure in human relationships is one of the most important reasons for loneliness. The studies showed that people, who had communication problems with others, suffered from loneliness more often. Brennan (1982) found that lonely people saw themselves as socially inept. Jones, Freeman, and Goswick (1981) found that lonely people paid less attention to their partners in dyadic conversations, changed the topic more often, and asked fewer questions about their partners than did non-lonely people, suggesting a lack of interpersonal sensitivity and a tendency to conduct unfocused conversations.

Social intelligence is conceptually defined as understanding fellow human beings and behaving appropriately toward them (Thorndike, 1920). It was also found that people, whose social intelligence level is high, can have easier and more fulfilling relationships with others (Doğan & Çetin, 2009). People with these traits can also

Table 2. Correlation between loneliness at work and social intelligence

	Social Information Processing	Social Skills	Social Awareness
Emotional deprivation	-.04	-.28**	-.47**
Social companionship	-.22**	-.31**	-.25**

n = 326, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis related to the prediction of emotional deprivation at work

	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Social information processing	.22	.09	.13	2.44	.015 *
Social skills	-.37	.11	-.19	3.50	.001**
Social awareness	-.78	.09	-.44	8.55	.000**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis results related to the prediction of social companionship at work

	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Social information processing	-.12	.07	-.09	1.75	.082
Social skills	-.29	.08	-.22	3.77	.000**
Social awareness	-.19	.07	-.16	2.84	.005*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

easily give support to those with lower levels of social intelligence. Sufficient social support can help the lonely individuals get rid of their sense of loneliness.

Social intelligence has multiple dimensions. The findings of the study can be interpreted in terms of the sub-dimensions of social intelligence. Social awareness, which is a sub-dimension of social intelligence, implies proper behaviors in social environments. People who have high social awareness are successful at acting appropriately in social environments, and reacting and responding to the behaviors they confront. In other words, people with social awareness know what to say, how to behave and how to influence others (Silvera et al., 2001). For this reason, social awareness is considered to be an important variable for predicting loneliness in the workplace. Social awareness is a key element for behaving in compliance with the organizational climate of the workplace.

This study showed that social awareness negatively and significantly predicted loneliness in the workplace. In other words, high social awareness has a decreasing influence on the loneliness of academics in the workplace. Social skills, which are one of the sub-dimensions of social intelligence, are related to the performance of social intelligence. Social skills consist of individuals' abilities to act appropriately in human relationships. People with high social skills can adapt to social environments and can easily make friends (Silvera et al., 2001). Effective listening and initiating and maintaining relationships with new people are important dimensions of social skills.

Social information processing, which is one of the sub-dimensions of social intelligence, involves individuals' skills in understanding the emotions, thoughts,

expectations and body language of others (Silvera et al., 2001). In this study, it was hypothesized that social information processing would predict loneliness at work. The findings showed that social information processing positively and significantly predicted emotional deprivation at work, but social information processing did not significantly predict social companionship at work.

Finally, it can be said that social intelligence is an important predictor of academics' loneliness at the workplace. Therefore, seminars can be offered to help employees improve their social intelligence and communication skills.

There are limitations of this study. This study was conducted with academics. It would be more informative to include participants from other professions. Future studies should take this issue into consideration. Further, the impact of loneliness on the performance, motivation and job satisfaction of employees should be studied. In these studies, the influence of the mediating role of the variables, such as social and emotional intelligence, should also be examined.

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