




Ümmet, D.& Korban, İ. (2023). Predictive role of cognitive distortions and motivation regulation on math anxiety among Turkish high school students. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 10(2). 764-777.


Received : 03.10.2022
Revised version received : 16.01.2023
Accepted : 20.01.2023

PREDICTIVE ROLE OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND MOTIVATION REGULATION ON MATH ANXIETY AMONG TURKISH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

(Research article)

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine mathematics anxiety in high school students according to cognitive distortions and motivation regulation variables related to academic anxiety. The sample of the study consists of a total of 436 students (283 girls and 153 boys) studying at different high schools in Turkey in the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades. Mathematics Anxiety Scale (MAS), Cognitive Distortions Scale Related to Academic Achievement (CDS-AA) and Motivation Regulation Scale-Short Form (MRS-SF) were used to collect the data of the research. According to the findings obtained; a significant negative correlation was found between high school students' math anxiety and motivation regulation skills. In addition, it was determined that there were positive significant relationships between students' math anxiety and both the total scores of cognitive distortions related to academic achievement and the sub-dimension scores of catastrophizing, perfectionism, self-value, and outer attribution. According to the results of the regression analysis, it was determined that motivation regulation and cognitive distortions scores were a significant predictor of students' math anxiety. The findings were discussed with other studies in the field and some suggestions were made.

Keywords: Math anxiety; motivation regulation; cognitive distortions; high school students

1. Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most common used words in these days and is associated with three of the following six symptoms: restlessness, being easily fatigued, difficult concentrating, irritability, muscle tension and sleep disturbance (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). In this research, we shall investigate the predictive role of math anxiety, which is one of the types of anxiety, on students' cognitive distortions and motivational regulations. Math anxiety is one of the most prevalence topics in school and everyday life that can affect individuals' academic performance and career throughout their lives and, is defined as a general fear or tension to math and math-related situations and associated with negative reactions to math (Ashcraft 2002; Campbell 2005; Legg & Locker, 2009). According to the Harper & Daane (1998), Factors causing the main math anxiety centered on word problems, right answers, timed tests, confidence level and fear of making mistakes.

Basic numerical skills are important for achievement in school and everyday life and, are compulsory in many countries' education systems. However, many people experience anxiety when dealing with numerical information, and those with high levels of math anxiety underperform in math relative to those with low math-anxious counterparts and, they tend to avoid math and math related situations (Ashcraft 2002; Lyons & Beilock 2012; Maloney &

Beilock 2012). Similarly, low performance in math is related to negative attitudes toward math and consequently, math anxiety (Núñez-Peña, Suárez-Pellicioni & Bono, 2013). Individuals with avoidance tendency and high math anxiety have less math competence and success compared those with low math anxiety and when they become less anxious and more confident about their abilities to do math, their standardized test scores will improve (Ashcraft, 2002; Furner & Berman, 2003). There are several components that can trigger individuals' math anxiety throughout their lives. Teachers can have a significant impact on students' math anxiety and numerical performance – particularly female students might be affected from their female teachers and, it is therefore suggested that teachers should recognize their own math anxiety and seek new strategies for those with math anxiety (Beilock, Gunderson, Ramirez & Levine, 2010; Geist, 2010; Harper & Daane, 1998; Martinez, 1987). According to Demir & Durmaz (2018), math teachers have limited knowledge about reasons and definition of math anxiety and consequently, they confuse the math anxiety with fear. Parents are also one of the components of students' math anxiety. A study showed that when the parents were more math anxious; their children may learn significantly less math over the school year and have more math anxiety (Maloney, Ramirez, Gunderson, Levine, & Beilock, 2015). In addition to low academic performance, math anxiety also may affect students' social life (Krinzinger, Kaufmann, & Willmes, 2009). According to National Scarpello (2007), reports that approximately 75 percent of Americans stop studying math and, they tend to take minimum number of required math courses due to their confidence in math, which limits their career options.

The educational and personal aspects of math anxiety have been satisfactorily investigated and are well known. However, cognitive consequences have been discussed recently (Campbell, 2005). Ashcraft and Faust (1994) defined math anxiety as mental disorder, horror, helplessness and tension that occurs when it is necessary to solve mathematical problems and manipulate figures and numbers. This definition is important because it shows that math anxiety includes both emotional and cognitive structures. As it is seen in all psychological cases and dysfunctional behaviors, math anxiety is also regarded along with the cognitive distortions that affect individuals' confidence levels and coping skills. Studies in this field have revealed that cognitive distortions constitute an essential component of youth psychopathology and are classified as either overgeneralization or pseudo-discrimination (Barriga, Gibbs, Landau, Liau, Stinson, 2000; Dawes, 1964). Moreover, cognitive distortions significantly predict adolescents' academic performances to a high degree (64%), and that are critical for this age group in terms of their social acceptance at school (Usen, Eneh & Udom, 2016; Mcgrath, 2002). On the other hand, findings have shown that academic domain irrational beliefs (cognitive distortions) mediate the relationship between academic achievement and test anxiety, and students with higher levels of irrational beliefs have higher level of test anxiety which is increasing along with the irrational beliefs and intrusive images (Boyacioglu & Kucuk, 2011; Putwain, Connors, & Symes, 2010).

Overall, math anxiety is not only related to individuals' academic performance, career and confidence levels, but is it also acting an important role of the ones' motivational regulation strategies that may affect ones' academic achievement directly or indirectly. There are several studies concerning effects of the motivational regulation strategies on language learning, GPA, affective/cognitive well-being and consequently academic achievement (Grunschel, Schwinger, Steinmayr & Fries, 2016; Li, 2017; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2012; Schwinger, Spinath & Steinmayr 2012). It is understood that motivation regulation is a concept related to mathematics anxiety. Motivation regulation can be expressed as the sustainability of motivation or the awareness of motivation and the willpower of the individual to maintain it. Whether students are motivated or not affects their educational life. In this context, the high



level of motivation ensures success in the lessons in the education life and the next school provides a positive situation and continuity in the education life of the student, while the low motivation provides a negative situation and interruption in the education life of the student, which leads to not being successful in the lessons and leaving the school (Beaudoin, 2006; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). A study showed that motivation and anxiety are concepts that interact to facilitate self-regulation over the course of developing expertise in a domain, such as math (Shores & Shannon, 2007). On the other hand, findings underlined those definite relationships between test anxiety and students' motivation regulation strategies were found (Bembenutty, Karabenick, Lin & McKeachie, 1998). Teachers and other significant adults sometimes model that math is difficult and something to fear, while at the same time claiming that mathematical skills are very important for one's future success (Hébert & Furner, 1997). It is thought that examining cognitive distortions and motivational regulation as predictors of math anxiety in high school students will provide important information to school counselors, teachers and parents.

Therefore, this study seeks the answers of the following questions:

- i. Are there relationships between high school students' math anxiety and motivational regulation and cognitive distortions?
- ii. To what extent the motivation regulation and cognitive distortions predict high school students' math anxiety?

2. Method

1.1. Research Method

This research is a correlational survey model prepared to examine the mathematics anxiety of high school students in the context of cognitive distortions and motivation regulation variables towards academic success. The Correlational survey model is defined as a research model that aims to determine the existence and degree of changes between two or more variables. In correlational studies, on the other hand, it aims to explain the relationship between the variables without any intervention in the study process (Babbie, 2010; Karasar, 2016).

1.2. Participants

The sample of the study consists of 436 students (283 girls and 153 boys) studying at various high schools in the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades. The number of students studying in private school is 104, and the public school is 332. The sample was determined by the convenient sampling method. Convenient sampling method is the selection of the sample from units, which are easily accessible and applicable, due to the limitations in terms of time, money, and labor. (Büyükoztürk, 2012).

1.3. Data Collection Tools

1.3.1. Mathematics Anxiety Scale (MAS)

The original form of the scale was developed by Bai vd. (2009), and its Turkish adaptation was made by Akçakın, Cebesoy and İnel (2015). According to the explanatory and confirmatory factor analyzes, it was seen that the scale was compatible with the original form. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found to be .91. The item-total test correlations calculated for the item validity and homogeneity of the scale are ranged from .46 to .77. Based on these findings, it was concluded that (MAS) is a valid and reliable scale that can be used to measure the mathematics anxiety of university students. High scores on the total

score scale indicate high math anxiety. The Cronbach Alpha value for this study was calculated as $\alpha=.891$.

1.3.2. Cognitive Distortions Scale Related to Academic Achievement (CDS-AA)

The scale was developed by Kaya (2018) to measure the cognitive distortions of high school students regarding academic achievement. The form with 52 items was created in the development process of the scale based on interviews with students, literature and expert opinions. Explanatory factor analysis (EFA) was first applied on the obtained form. In light of the EFA and expert opinions, 27 items were removed from the tool and a form with 25 items, which explain %50.87 of the total variance, were obtained. To examine the coherence of the model of the four-factor structure, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed with a different study group and the results obtained ($\chi^2/df= 2.29$; RMSEA= .08; CFI= .95; NNFI= .95; SRMR= .08) showed that the coherence of the model-data of the scale was at a good level. The Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient (.89), test-retest reliability (.89) and structural reliability (.94) were calculated as a result of the reliability analyzes of the scale. The scale consists of 25 items and various sub-dimensions such as catastrophizing, self-worth, attribution, and perfectionism. The findings showed that it is a valid and reliable measurement tool in evaluating high school students' cognitive distortions related to academic achievement. Cronbach Alpha value for this study was calculated as $\alpha=.917$.

1.3.3. Motivation Regulation Scale-Short Form (MRS-SF)

The Turkish adaptation of the Motivation Regulation Scale (MRS-K), developed by Kim, Brady, and Wolters (2018), was carried out by Sariçam and Erdemir (2019). Statistically, high level of correlation was found between the Turkish Form and the English Form in the linguistic equivalence study. KMO sample coherence coefficient was calculated as .92, and Bartlett sphericity test score was calculated as $\chi^2 = 2885.51$ ($p < .001$, $df = 66$). As a result of the explanatory factor analysis, it was observed that 12 items were under 2 factors with eigenvalues higher than 1, and item factor loading values were between .55 and .81. In the confirmatory factor analysis, which was applied consistently with the original form for the construct validity of the scale, it was determined that the goodness of coherence values of the 12 items and 2 sub-dimension model were at a good level. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient was calculated as $\alpha=.92$. The corrected item-total correlation coefficients of the scale ranged from .61 to .74. High scores on the total score scale indicate high motivational regulation skills. Cronbach Alpha value for this study was calculated as $\alpha=.874$.

1.3. Procedure

Participation in this research is on the voluntary basis; the purpose and method of this research were explained to all participants, and the research was conducted by following the confidentiality principle. Ethics committee approval was also obtained for the study (from a Marmara University dated 14.08.2020 and numbered 2000310356). The data were analyzed with SPSS 21. The relationships between math anxiety scores and cognitive distortions for academic achievement and motivation regulation skills were examined using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis, while the predictive mathematics anxiety of cognitive distortions for academic success and motivation regulation scores were examined using Hierarchical Regression Analysis.

2. Result

In this section, the findings regarding the statistical analyzes obtained as a result of the analysis of the research data are given in tables.

Table 1. *Correlation Analysis Results between Participants' Math Anxiety, Motivation Regulation and Cognitive Distortions Scores*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Math Anxiety	1	-,213**	,194**	,176**	,191**	,149**	,177**
2. Motivation Regulation		1	,008	,082	-,022	-,072	,018
3. Total CDS-AA			1	,861**	,928**	,854**	,941**
4. Catastrophizing				1	,644**	,744**	,686**
5. Attribution					1	,684**	,988**
6. Self-worth						1	,683**
7. Perfectionism							1
Mean (\bar{X})	43,33	39,38	90,76	25,21	23,95	14,09	27,50
Standard Deviation (SD)	12,51	9,95	25,95	7,86	7,19	6,07	7,78

* $p < .050$

Table 1; there is a significant negative correlation between math anxiety scores and motivation regulation ($r = -.213$; $p < .050$). According to this finding, as students' motivation regulation skills increase, their math anxiety decreases. According to the table; there was a positive correlation between students' math anxiety scores and total cognitive distortion scores ($r = .194$; $p < .050$), and sub-dimensions such as catastrophizing ($r = .176$; $p < .050$), external attribution ($r = .191$; $p < .050$), self-worth ($r = .149$; $p < .050$) and perfectionism ($r = .177$; $p < .050$) scores were also found to be positively significantly correlated. According to these findings, as students' cognitive distortion and sub-dimension scores increase, their math anxiety scores also increase.

Table 1. *Regression Analysis for Motivation Regulation and Cognitive Distortions as Predictors of Math Anxiety*

Predictive Variable	Math Anxiety				
	R^2	R^2 change	β	t	F
Step 1					
Motivation Regulation	,045	,043	-,213*	-4,531	20,527*
Motivation Regulation			-,215*	-4,497	
Catastrophizing			,233*	2,883	
Step 2					
Attribution	,098	,095	,670*	2,010	6,357*
Self-worth			-,114	-1,472	
Perfectionism			-,564	-1,640	

* $p < .050$

As a result of the regression analysis, it was seen that motivation regulation scores significantly predicted high school students' math anxiety scores. ($F = 20,527$, $p < .050$). As a result of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis, it was seen that sub-dimension scores of cognitive distortions towards academic achievement and motivation regulation scores predicted mathematics anxiety scores at a statistically significant level ($F = 6,357$, $p > .050$). When the model was examined, it was seen that motivation regulation scores were a significant predictor of students' math anxiety and that scores explained 4% of the total variance. In the

second step, when sub-dimension scores of cognitive distortions scale was included in the regression equation, catastrophizing and attribution dimensions were found to be significant predictors. However, perfectionism and self-worth scores were not found to be significant predictors. When cognitive distortion scores were included in the equation, the variance explanation value increased to approximately 10%. In other words, motivation regulation and cognitive distortion scores were found to be similarly significant predictors of students' math anxiety scores.

2. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, it was aimed to examine mathematics anxiety in high school students according to cognitive distortions and motivation regulation variables. For this purpose, initially, the relationship between variables were examined. A significant negative correlation was found between students' math anxiety scores and their motivation regulations. According to this finding, as students' motivation regulation skills increase, their math anxiety decreases. As a result of the regression analysis, it was seen that motivation regulation scores significantly predicted high school students' math anxiety scores. Motivation is a student's willingness to put in the effort necessary to learn a subject (Avcı, 2020). Motivation, as a concept that determines a student's insistence on learning a lesson or his/her indifference towards the lesson, appears as the key concept of education. Mathematics is a lesson that many students perceive as a difficult and incomprehensible lesson in schools. For this reason, studies that improve self-regulation skills and increase motivation are needed in order to be able to change these perceptions of students in math lessons (Clearly & Chen, 2009; Peker & Mirasyedioğlu, 2003; Pintrich, 1999). Many studies examining the background of students' math anxiety show that motivation is one of the factors that shape students' negative perceptions about the lesson (Berkant & Gençoğlu, 2015; Savaş et al., 2010; Tatar & Dikici, 2008). From this point of view, it is clear that motivational regulation skills are essential in overcoming students' anxiety about the mathematics lesson. Kuzu & Çalışkan (2018) reported that while there is a negative relationship between math anxiety and intrinsic motivation, there is not a significant relationship found between extrinsic motivation and math anxiety. Motivation regulation is a concept closely related to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the type of motivation in which the sense of learning and achievement develop in natural environments and behaviors are done not for reward but for happiness. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Other studies (Kesici & Aşılıoğlu, 2017; Külünk Akyurt, 2019; Yıldırım, 2011) report that as students' math motivation increases, their math anxiety decreases. These studies also show the relationship between math anxiety and motivation. All these explanations and other research results support the results obtained from this study.

Another finding of the study is that there are positive significant relationships between students' math anxiety scores and total CDS-AA and sub-dimensions (catastrophizing, external attribution, self-worth and perfectionism) scores. According to these findings, as students' cognitive distortion total and sub-dimension scores increase, their math anxiety scores also increase. The results of the Regression Analysis showed that the sub-dimensions of the cognitive distortions scale, catastrophizing and attribution, were significant predictors. Cognitive distortion can be expressed as a person's often erroneous way of thinking and perceiving a particular situation. A very large proportions of people accept these thought-forms as they are without testing their authenticity and obtaining sufficient proof of their correctness (Beck, 2006; Dryden, David and Ellis, 2010; Ellis, 1976). Considering the nature of cognitive distortions, it can be considered a situation that is expected to be a concept closely related to math anxiety. Studies on anxiety often draw attention to the cognitive component of anxiety.

The person who feels anxiety identifies cognitive processes as inadequacy, catastrophizing, and externalizing the source of the problem in order to be able to eliminate the threat. When cognitive structures have negative content, anxiety increases, while if thoughts are positive, such as thinking about competence, anxiety decreases (Cemen, 1987; Kazelskis ve Kazelskis, 1999; Schwarzer, 1997). Students may be going through similar processes when they experience anxiety in the face of a stimulus related to mathematics. Cognitive distortions are the processes that involve internal conversations used while reaching irrational, negative inferences and evaluations, and the cognitive, emotional and behavioral problems associated with it (Bonner & Rich, 1998; Fair, 1986). When students with math anxiety encounter a relevant stimulus, they start to talk to themselves such as "I can't do it", "I look stupid", "if I can't do it, it would be very bad." It is clear that there is a significant relationship between these cognitive structures and anxiety (Baloğlu, 1999; Esen-Aygün, 2022; Mitchell & George, 2022). There are also effects of families on the increase in students' math anxiety. Some parents emphasize that mathematics is quite difficult for their children and also say that success is directly related to mathematics (Fraser & Honeyford, 2000). The student who is exposed to this also develops catastrophic and perfectionist thoughts about mathematics and this is one of the reasons for mathematics anxiety. Senol and et al. (2015) reported a similar finding in their research on the causes of math anxiety. Studies show that there is a relationship between childhood and adolescence psychological problems and cognitive distortions. Many unhealthy behaviors such as anxiety, test anxiety, eating disorders, and suicidal tendencies are accompanied by typical cognitive distortions such as perfectionism, exaggeration and personalization (Clack & Beck, 1999; Jager- Hyman et al, 2014). Research findings revealing the relationship between cognitive distortions and problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking skills, which have undeniable importance in individuals' education and working lives, draw attention to the negative effects of cognitive distortions (Nezu & Nezu, 2001; Limón, 2001). Negative mental explanations of the individual and thoughts of inadequacy reduce academic achievement. Anxiety that students may experience in lessons such as mathematics and foreign language can be given as an example to this situation (Bedel, 2015; Köksal et al, 2014 Tobias and Weissbrod (1980) define math anxiety as a state of despair and mental disorganization. Ayan (2014) and Şahin (2009) stated that mathematics anxiety is a multi-faceted anxiety and defined it as a situation that includes people's irrational fears about mathematics lessons and prevents them from learning mathematics. On the other hand, Ma and Xu (2004) defined Mathematics anxiety as an uncomfortable feeling that occurs when students have to do a math-related homework or task. They explained the basic components of this feeling as behavioral symbols such as sadness, mental disorder, helplessness, disappointment, tension, fear, dislike and anxiety. These explanations about the dynamics of math anxiety shed light on the relationship between math anxiety and cognitive distortions. As a result, it is seen that all these explanations and other research findings are similar to the results obtained from this study.

As a result of the hierarchical regression analysis, it was seen that motivation regulation and cognitive distortion's sub-dimension scores towards academic achievement predicted mathematics anxiety scores at a statistically significant level. Motivation regulation and cognitive distortion scores were found to be similarly significant predictors of students' math anxiety scores. It can be said that the findings obtained from this study are important findings in understanding mathematics anxiety. Based on these findings, various studies can be suggested to the students with the math anxiety regarding both motivation regulation skills and cognitive distortions. Teachers can organize studies for students to regulate their motivation with in-class activities. Individual or group counseling practices will be effective in dealing with cognitive distortions. Finally, other studies, qualitative and mixed-type research methods, can be conducted to understand other components of math anxiety

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