



The mediating role of interpersonal communication in the relationship between gratitude and altruism levels of teacher candidates

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Abstract

The study explored the relationship between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels and the mediating role of interpersonal communication in this relationship. In the study, correlational survey design, a quantitative research design, was employed. The study group was made up of 376 teacher candidates (53% female and 47% male) at Erzurum Atatürk University Faculty of Education. The data were collected via Personal Information Form developed by the researcher, Gratitude Scale, developed by Başerler Berber (2021), Altruism Scale, developed by Ümmet, Ekşi, and Otar (2013), and Obstacles in Interpersonal Communication Scale, Developed by Başerler, Başerler, and Demirkaya (2016). The data were analyzed using the SPSS-21 package program. In the study, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated in order to determine the relationships between variables, and simple and multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the prediction status. The study findings put forth positive significant relationships between the variables. In addition, interpersonal communications were found to partially play a mediating role in the relationship between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels.

Keywords: Gratitude, altruism, interpersonal communication, teacher candidate

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1. Introduction

Since interpersonal communication is the most used type of communication in daily life, it has a very important place for people. People can convey their needs, wishes, ideas, and feelings to other people through interpersonal communication. This allows people to both express themselves and understand others. Also communication is important to be mastered by personal because they are related to the development of one's creativity. Decision-making is what enables you to turn a jumble of ideas into coherent communication (Kurniawan, Budiyono, Sajidan, Siswandari, 2021)

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When interpersonal communication is healthy, the relationships are sure to be deep, meaningful, and satisfying for people. On the other hand, when interpersonal communication is unhealthy (this creates communication obstacles), a source of distress may arise, starting with the feeling of not being understood or unwanted loneliness, which can lead to much deeper problems (Yıldız & Duy, 2013). It is useful to pay attention to the quality of interpersonal communication in order to avoid such problems and to eliminate communication obstacles, especially in educational environments as the quality of interpersonal communication plays a role in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and students and parents.

Developing interpersonal communication by addressing it one-dimensionally may cause the field to be incomplete. Thus, it is more appropriate to carry out studies aimed at improving interpersonal communication multidimensionally. For this, it is necessary to address the concepts that are considered to be related to interpersonal communication together. It is believed that addressing positive virtues such as gratitude and altruism among these concepts will shed a light on interpersonal communication multidimensionally since people who have a grateful and altruistic disposition seem to be quite successful in maintaining their relationships with other people (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In order to understand this relationship, first of all, it is necessary to touch on the concepts of gratitude and altruism.

Gratitude, from the Latin word “*gratia*”, is a feeling encompassing some forms of grace and kindness (Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). Literature defined gratitude as a condition or a disposition (Chen & Kee, 2008; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Watkins et al., 2003). Gratitude as a state is conceptualized as a feeling of appreciation for life and is considered a complex, high-level emotion as it requires cognitive development (Emmons & Shelton 2002). Gratitude as a disposition, on the other hand, is considered as a virtue or trait and differs in terms of intensity, frequency, and extent (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2008).

Gratitude springs when a person acknowledges that they got a positive result from another person who puts in the effort and brings cost to themselves. It is argued that gratitude protects people from destructive impulses such as jealousy and greed (Klein, 1957). In addition, gratitude practices (such as gratitude therapy) were recommended as a treatment for excessive materialism and accompanying negative emotions such as envy, resentment, disappointment, and bitterness (Clapp, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Gratitude has many benefits for adults. As a matter of fact, people with high levels of gratitude cope better with tragic events such as terminal illnesses, form social, romantic or marital relationships in a healthier way, and do not experience interpersonal conflicts (Bono, Emmons, & Mccullough, 2012; Childre & Cryer, 2000).

Gratitude is the motivation source of altruism, which aims to benefit another person (Yavuzer, 2017). Introduced by the French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte, altruism is a behavior that aims to benefit another person. It is a helping behavior that aims to alleviate the distress of another person without expecting any benefit. Altruistic help is intentional and not forced. It is genuine concern for the well-being of another person. When someone helps another one for altruistic reasons, no benefit is expected from the other person being helped (Gurnani & Gaur, 2019). Therefore, it is one of the positive social behaviors where people solely act to help each other. Exhibiting itself as a behavior without taking into account one's own safety and self-interest, it is about wanting to help others even when it is necessary to pay a price (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2012; Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2012). In summary, altruism is a behavior that is beneficial to at least one other person, is performed voluntarily, and is not motivated by the expectation of receiving an immediate reward (Leeds, 1963). As can be seen, both gratitude and altruism play an important role in the formation of positive social behaviors.

The limited number of studies examining the relationship between gratitude and altruism, which are a global assessment of one's quality of life, put forth a relationship between gratitude and altruism (Başerler, 2018, Karns, Moore, & Mayr, 2017). Furthermore, there are studies showing that expressing and experiencing gratitude provides inner peace and plays a role in the development of satisfactory interpersonal relationships (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough et al., 2002). Although there are studies on the relationship between these concepts in the literature, the inadequacy and scarcity of studies supporting them with numerical data led to the birth of this study. In line with these needs, this study aimed to examine the relationship between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels and the mediating role of interpersonal communication in this relationship. For this aim, answers to the following sub-problems were sought within the study:

1. Is there a significant relationship between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels, and their interpersonal communication?
2. Is the mediating role of interpersonal communication between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels significant?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

Employing a correlational survey design, one of the quantitative research designs, this study examined the relationships between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels and their interpersonal communication. Survey research is a type of non-

experimental research model in which investigators ask questions about peoples' beliefs, opinions, and behavior (Ary et al., 2014).

In the light of the above-mentioned theoretical information and previous studies, the hypothetical model of the study is presented in “Figure 1”.

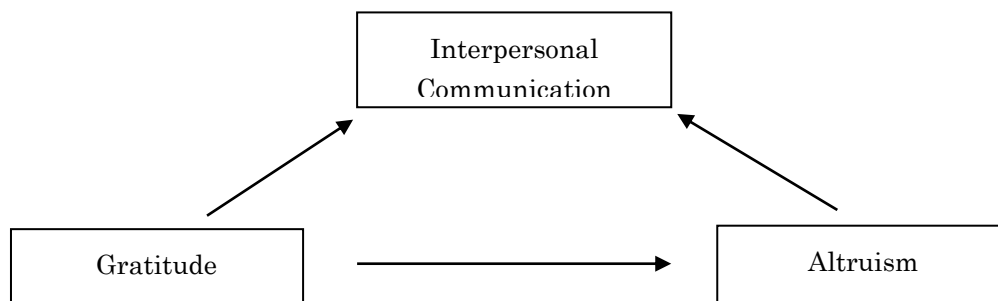


Figure 1. Study Model

2.2. Study Group

The study group was made up of 376 teacher candidates studying at Erzurum Atatürk University's Faculty of Education in the 2020-2021 academic year. They were majoring in Physical Education and Sports (n=38, 10,1%), Computer and Instructional Technologies Education (n=40, 10,6%), Educational Sciences (n=42, 11,2%), Fine Arts Education (n=36, 9,6%), Mathematics and Science Education (n=44, 11,7%), Special Education (n=26, 6,9%), Elementary Education (n=40, 10,6%), Turkish and Social Studies Education (n=60, 16%), and Foreign Languages Education (n=50, 13,3%). The mean age of the study group is 21. 53% (n=200) of the participants were female and 47% (n=176) male. Furthermore, 24% (n=90) of the participants were first year students, 26% (n=98) were second year students, 30% (n= 113) were third year students, and 20% (n=75) were fourth year students.

The main reason for forming the study group from the teacher candidates was that one of the areas gratitude, altruism, and interpersonal communication is seen the most is educational environments because individuals start to learn from a young age in educational environments, and can improve their basic knowledge and skills in these environments. For this, first of all, teacher candidates should have these skills. This is the reason why teacher candidates were included in the study.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

The study data were collected using three different scales. In addition, a short section was added to the data collection form to collect participants' demographic information.

Personal Information Form: The “Personal Information Form” was developed by the researcher and included teacher candidates’ demographic information, such as their gender, age, major and the grade.

Gratitude Scale: Developed by Başer Berber (2021), the Gratitude Scale consists of 23 items and 5 sub-dimensions, namely gratitude as concrete expression, gratitude as mindfulness, gratitude as a messenger of gratitude, gratitude as a verbal expression, and gratitude as a good feeling. The main purpose of the scale is to measure the gratitude levels of individuals. The scale has items like “I will help anyone who does kindness to me as much as I can.”, “Being grateful is important for me.”, and “I say ‘this is because of you’ to those who helped me. The scale is a five-point Likert type scale (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Frequently, Always). Since there are reverse items (items 8, 19, and 21) in the scale, scoring is done by taking the reverse items into account. The scale items explain 52.9% of the total variance. The Cronbach’s alpha value of the total scale is .82. The Cronbach’s alpha values of the sub-dimensions vary between .70 and .79 (Başer Berber, 2021).

Altruism Scale: Developed by Ümme, Ekşi, and Otar (2013), the Altruism Scale has 38 items and seven sub-dimensions, namely participation in voluntary activities, financial assistance, assistance in traumatic situations, assistance to elderly/patients, assistance based on physical strength, assistance in the educational process. The main purpose of the scale is to measure the altruistic behaviors of individuals. The scale has items like “I give financial aid to people with financial difficulty.”, “I share my excess belongings with people in need”, “I help my relatives who are moving”, and “I try to console people who have lost a loved one.”. The scale is a five-point Likert type scale (strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, completely agree). Since there are no reverse items in the scale, the high score from the scale indicates high altruism. Scale items explain 51.82% of the total variance. The Cronbach’s alpha value of the total scale is .81 (Ümme, Ekşi, & Otrar, 2013).

Obstacles in Interpersonal Communication Scale: Developed by Başer, Başer, and Demirkaya (2016), the Obstacles in Interpersonal Communication Scale has 30 items and five sub-dimensions, namely Linguistic-Behavioral, Personal, Affective, Perceptual and Psychological. The main purpose of the scale is to measure individuals’ interpersonal communication obstacle levels. The scale has items like, “I focus on a certain part of the speech instead of the whole speech.”, “I avoid eye contact while speaking.”, “I usually keep my arms folded while speaking.”, and “In an environment with people I don’t know, the appearance of the person I will communicate with is important to me.”. The scale is a five 5-point Likert type scale (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Frequently, Always). Since there are no reverse items in the scale, the high score from the scale indicates low interpersonal communication, and a low score indicates high interpersonal communication. Scale items explain 57.568% of the total variance. The Cronbach’s alpha

value of the total scale is .946. The Cronbach's alpha values of the sub-dimensions vary from .931 to .657 (Başerer, Başerer & Demirkaya, 2016). Achieving healthy communication is possible by eliminating the communication obstacles. This scale was chosen for the present study for this reason.

2.4. Data Analysis

SPSS-21 package program was used in the study. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated in the analysis of the relationship between the variables. Simple and multiple regression analyses were performed to determine independent variables' predictive levels of the dependent variables.

3. Results

3.1. Means and Correlation Analysis of the Variables

In this section, first, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the relationships between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels, and their interpersonal communication. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Findings regarding the relationships between the variables

Variables	Interpersonal Communication	Gratitude	Altruism
Interpersonal Communication	1		
Gratitude	,862**	1	
Altruism	,814**	,821**	1

*** $p < 0,001$

The Pearson product-moment correlation analysis conducted to determine whether there was a significant relationship between teacher candidates' interpersonal communication scores and their gratitude and altruism scores revealed a positive and significant relationship between candidates' interpersonal communication and their gratitude levels ($r = .862$; $p < .01$) and a positive and significant relationship between candidates' interpersonal communication and altruism levels ($r = .814$; $p < .01$). Accordingly, it can be stated that if teacher candidates' interpersonal communication increases, their gratitude and altruism levels will also increase.

3.2. Regression Analysis

In order to find the answer to the second study sub-problem of "Is the mediating role of interpersonal communication between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels significant?", various regression analyzes were performed in line with the four-stage

approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (Derin, 2017). Simple and multiple regression analysis results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Findings regarding the mediating effect of interpersonal communication

Steps	Regression Coefficients			Model Statistics
	B	S.H	β	
First Step	,235	,052	,326**	R ² =,087
Independent Variable: Gratitude				F(1,182)=21,893
Dependent Variable: Altruism				p<0,01
Second Step	,426	,043	,632**	R ² =,542
Independent Variable: Gratitude k				F(1,182)=21,893
Dependent Variable: Interpersonal Communication				p<0,01
Third Step	,379	,080	,421**	R ² =,088
Independent Variable: Interpersonal Communication				F(1,182)=21,893
Dependent Variable: Altruism				p<0,01
Fourth Step	,156	,058	,178*	R ² =,126
Independent Variable: Gratitude				F(2,205)=14,233
Independent Variable: Interpersonal Communication	,214	,144	,154*	p<0,01
Dependent Variable: Altruism				

** $p < ,01$; * $p < ,05$

The regression analysis results in Table 2 shows that gratitude had a positive and significant effect on altruism ($\beta=0.326$, $p<0.01$) in the first step, gratitude also had a positive and significant effect on interpersonal communication ($\beta=0.632$, $p < 0.01$) in the second step, and interpersonal communication had a positive and significant effect on altruism ($\beta=0.421$, $p<0.01$) in the third step. Finally, in the fourth step, interpersonal communication had a positive and significant effect on altruism ($\beta=0.154$, $p<0.05$), and gratitude had a positive and significant effect on altruism ($\beta=0.178$, $p<0.05$). Furthermore, when interpersonal communication (mediating variable) is added to the model, the effect of gratitude (independent variable) on altruism (dependent variable) dropped down from $\beta=0.326$ ($p<0.01$) to $\beta=0.178$ ($p<0.05$), but the effect did not lose its statistical significance. These findings indicate that interpersonal communication had a partial mediating role in the relationship between gratitude and altruism. More specifically, the results confirmed that gratitude increased the level of altruism and partially led to interpersonal communication. The result of the Sobel test showed that the partial mediation effect was found to be statistically significant ($z=4.356$, $p<0.01$).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between teacher candidates' gratitude and altruism levels and the mediating role of interpersonal communication in

this relationship. The study group was made up of a total of 376 teacher candidates studying at Erzurum Atatürk University's Faculty of Education. In the study, Gratitude Scale was used to determine teacher candidates' gratitude levels, the Altruism Scale to determine their altruism levels, and the Obstacles in Interpersonal Communication Scale to determine their interpersonal communication levels. Pearson product-moment correlation and simple and multiple regression analysis were performed to clarify the relationship pattern and predictive ability. The results revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between the study variables and that teacher candidates' interpersonal communication was partially a mediator in the relationship between their gratitude and altruism. This means that interpersonal communication obstacles were partially eliminated. Accordingly, it was concluded in the study that gratitude and altruism levels were partially effective in ensuring interpersonal communication and eliminating interpersonal communication obstacles. It can be stated that gratitude and altruism are not the main factors affecting interpersonal communication and eliminating interpersonal communication obstacles even if their levels are high. However, the concepts of gratitude and altruism have an important place in strengthening interpersonal communication. In addition, the study concluded that gratitude and altruism were significantly related. The significant positive correlation between gratitude and altruism confirmed the results of the studies conducted by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002), Khadim and Shahid (2017), and Başerler (2018) that stated that those with higher gratitude levels also have higher altruism levels.

In light of the study findings, the following recommendations can be made for both the study results and future research:

In order to eliminate obstacles in interpersonal communication and to strengthen this relationship, studies on improving the gratitude and altruism levels can be increased. For this, it may be more appropriate to start with educational institutions. In this sense, first of all, teachers can be included in simultaneous support structures that focus on practices to increase gratitude and altruism. Teachers may not be successful in such practices in their particular contexts in one go. For this reason, teachers may be given the opportunity to be part of practices as many times as possible until the desired result is reached. In this way, the gratitude and altruism levels of the students who were taught by teachers whose gratitude and altruism levels increase can also increase. This can also contribute to the development of interpersonal communication and can lead to the creation of a healthier society.

Considering the positive social behaviors that will be formed by gratitude and altruism, it can be useful to examine the effects of these two concepts not only on interpersonal communication but also on other positive social behaviors. Any study to be done on this will contribute to the continuous improvement of the meaning of gratitude and altruism, contributing to their inclusion in every educational environment. In

addition, this study can be carried out with a different study group in the future to determine at what age group gratitude, altruism, and interpersonal communication begin to be associated with each other.

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