

## Fairness in the Learning Environment and Satisfaction with Life: A Study of Turkish University Students of Sports Sciences

Idris Yilmaz

*Karadeniz Technical University, School of Physical Education and Sports,  
Trabzon, 61300, Turkey*  
*Telephone: +90 (462) 24810 83, Fax: +90 (462) 2811072, E-mail: idrisyilmaz@ktu.edu.tr*

**KEYWORDS** Fair Learning Environment. Higher Education. Life Satisfaction. Sports Sciences Education

**ABSTRACT** The present study aims to examine university-level sports sciences students' fairness perceptions with regard to their learning environment, as well as their satisfaction with life in terms of certain variables, and to identify the relationship between these variables. The participants were 1042 students (430 female, 612 male) studying in the Schools of Physical Education and Sports at 9 different universities. Turkish versions of the "Fair Learning Environment Questionnaire" and "Satisfaction with Life Scale" were used as data gathering tools. In the data analysis phase, a t-test, one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation were employed. The results revealed that the students perceived the learning environments as partially fair, and their satisfaction with life was at moderate level. It was also noticed that female students' fairness perceptions towards the learning environment were significantly lower than male students; however, there was no significant difference in their satisfaction with life. A significant difference was found in fairness perceptions and satisfaction with life based on the year of study. Overall, there was a significant positive correlation between the students' fairness perceptions toward their learning environment and their satisfaction with life.

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of fairness is often emphasized in religious, political and juridical texts that aim to shape society. The reason for this emphasis is that the concept of fairness affects the behaviors of individuals in a society or in a group; and it is also affected by these behaviors. In addition, as human rights are to be ensured in organizational, as well as social life, organizational fairness also becomes an obligation. Consequently, what societal fairness means for a society can be said to have the same meaning in terms of organizational fairness (Beugre 2002). In the past, organizational fairness has typically been described as evaluation of employees based on their performance (Adams 1965; Crosby 1976; Folger 1986); however, various researchers have also stressed the importance of the methods used (Leventhal 1980) and personal interactions (Mikula et al. 1990) in determining organizational fairness. In general terms, organizational fairness can be defined as relating to outcome, process and interaction (Rogelberg 2007), or as describing and defining the role of fairness in an organization (Greenberg 1990). These approaches have been conceptualized according to three different dimensions in the literature (Greenberg 1990; Titrek 2009): (a) *distributive fairness*, (b) *procedural fairness* and (c) *interactional fairness*.

Although, organizational fairness is not new to the literature in management science, the issue has been under-investigated in the field of education (Hoy and Tarter 2004). As Schunk (1990) points out, numerous factors in the learning environment may affect students' behaviors, attitudes and expectations; and therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors that may increase or decrease students' motivation. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of studies conducted to identify students' perceptions of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness in various learning environments (Chory-Assad 2002, 2007; Chory-Assad and Paulsel 2004a, 2004b; Paulsel and Chory-Assad 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Paulsel 2005; Paulsel et al. 2005; Lizzio et al. 2007; Ozer and Demirtas 2010; Tomul et al. 2012; Caglar 2013). The results of these studies have widely been consistent with those carried out in management contexts.

Colquitt et al. (2001), in their study examining the research conducted over a 25-year span, determined that there was a relationship between individuals' satisfaction with their jobs; organizational commitment; evaluation of authority; organizational citizenship; recession behaviors such as shirking and absence; negative behaviors such as stealing or damaging office equipment; performance; and employees' perceptions of fairness. In line with these findings, the re-

sults of studies on fairness in the learning environment have informed that perception of fairness may have both positive and negative effects on students' behaviors and on the context. As an evidence, undesirable behaviors such as objecting to the teacher, passiveness, anti-social resistance (Horan et al. 2010), aggression toward the teacher (Chory-Assad 2002), seeking revenge on the teacher, be fooling the teacher (Chory-Assad et al. 2004a) and estrangement from the school (Caglar 2013) have been reported as a result of reduced fairness perception. Besides, several studies have revealed a positive relationship between students' fairness perceptions, their commitment to their department (Chory-Assad 2002; Lizzio et al. 2007), and academic achievement (Lee 2007). All of these findings illustrate the importance of students' fairness perceptions on the effectiveness of teaching activities.

Further, it has been proposed that individuals' levels of subjective well-being are closely related to the welfare of their surrounding society, available health services and educational opportunities (Wagner 2006). Research involving the relationship between educational opportunities and services and satisfaction with life underscores the notion that when satisfaction related to academic experiences increases, satisfaction with life increases, as well. In light of this understanding, improving students' satisfaction with life may be regarded as one of the most important objectives of education (Chow 2005).

As with other age groups, satisfaction with life is an important issue for university students, and in recent years, the factors affecting university students' happiness and well-being have been a significant area of inquiry. Studies concerning well-being have considered subjective well-being, or the general evaluation of individuals with regard to their satisfaction with life and positive and negative affect, as a key concept. In this respect, positive affect refers to positive feelings such as happiness, trust and contentedness; while negative affect denotes negative feelings such as fear, anger, sadness, guilt and hate (Diener et al. 1999). Subjective well-being is high if positive affect is superior to negative affect and an individual's judgment regarding the quality of his or her life is positive. Positive feelings and cognitive judgment about satisfaction can be related to many aspects of

life, and all of these are reflected in general satisfaction with life (Tuzgol-Dost 2010). The satisfaction dimension of subjective well-being is conceived as individuals' cognitive evaluation of life quality based on personally-defined criteria (Diener 1984).

Numerous studies have related satisfaction with life to variables such as perceived attitudes towards parents (Young et al. 1995; Shek 1999), ethical characteristics (Moller 1996), age, stress, physical health, educational opportunities (Yetim 2003; Chow 2005), personal characteristics (Doodman et al. 2012), cultural characteristics and values systems (Dorahy et al. 2000; Rask et al. 2002). Number of friends, expectations from the future, discriminative behaviors (Sam 2001), socio-economic level, grade point average, satisfaction with academic achievement and academic stress (Chow 2005, 2007; Gundogar et al. 2007) are also indicated, demonstrating that this concept has a multi-factor structure containing many social, economic and individual variables. In addition, only a few researches have been carried out on the effect of students' fairness perceptions in the learning environment on this multi-factor structure.

To address the gap in the current understanding of this issue, the present study aims to examine university-level sports sciences students' fairness perceptions in the learning environment, their levels of satisfaction based on gender, year of study and department, and the effect of fairness perceptions on their satisfaction with life. By revealing students' perceptions regarding the fairness of their learning experiences, it may be possible to evaluate their learning environment. The findings of the study may be beneficial for university administrators and faculty members concerned with developing students' satisfaction with life, their fairness perceptions, and their awareness of citizenship based on fairness.

## METHODS

A survey model was used in the study as a suitable means to describe a situation as it was in the past or as it now exists (Karasar 2006).

### Participants

The total number of participants was 1042 students (430 female and 612 male), studying at the school of physical education and sports at 9

different universities (Ahi Evran, Ataturk, Gaziantep, Gazi, Istanbul, Kafkas, Black Sea Technical, Kirikkale and Mugla Sitki Kocman Universities). The average age of the participants was  $22.8 \pm 2.3$ . Their grade point average was  $2.31 \pm .67$ . Out of the participants, 39.6 percent ( $n=413$ ) were studying physical education; 32.7 percent ( $n=341$ ) were studying coaching education; and 27.6 percent ( $n=288$ ) were enrolled in sports management programs. Prior to administration of the surveys, the purpose of the study was explained to the students. They were advised that the participation was voluntary, and their consent was obtained for using the survey data.

### Instruments

#### *Fair Learning Environment Questionnaire*

**FLEQ:** The original form of the Fair Learning Environment Questionnaire was developed by Lizzio et al. (2007). Its Turkish adaptation was developed by Ozer and Demirtas (2010) in a study with university students. The Turkish version of the FLEQ consisted of 15 5-point Likert items (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree) and two sub-dimensions. The first dimension, *respectful partnership*, was related to the quality of relationships between students, faculty members and administrators. This dimension includes 9 items that describe consistent and fair practices, the participation of students and staff in administration, and a caring educational setting. The second dimension, *systemic fairness*, included items related to problem solving processes and the transparency and adequacy of these procedures. This dimension consisted of 6 items concerning functioning of the system, such as ease of access to information and guidance in their faculty; the existence of effective and well-defined problem-solving procedures; and support for complaints and the negative feedback process. In the adaptation study conducted by Ozer and Demirtas (2010), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.87; with 0.81 for the respectful cooperation sub-dimension and 0.76 for the systemic fairness sub-dimension. In the analysis conducted for the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire questionnaire was 0.87, with 0.86 for respectful cooperation and 0.70 for systemic fairness.

**Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS):** This scale, developed by Diener et al. as a means to

measure satisfaction with life, comprises a 5-point scale ranging from *totally disagree* to *totally agree*. The scores for each item ranged from 1-7, and the total score ranged from 5-35. An increase in scores from this scale shows a higher level of satisfaction with life. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Koker (1991) and Yetim (1993). Koker (1991) determined the test-retest reliability coefficient, administered over a three-week time interval, as 0.85. In addition, Yetim (1991) reported the adjusted split-half value as 0.75, the Kuder Richardson-20 value as 0.78, and the internal reliability coefficient as 0.79. For the present study, the internal reliability coefficient of the scale was calculated at 0.85.

**Personal Information Form:** The data regarding the independent variables of the study were obtained through a personal information form prepared by the researcher. This form was used to collect information regarding the participants' gender, age, department, year of study and academic grade point average.

### Procedure

An application was made for permission to administer the data collection instruments at the schools of physical education and sports at the universities of interest in the study. Following the application process, the researchers met with the faculty members and provided them with information about the study. The study was conducted during the spring term of the 2011-2012 academic years. The instruments were administered under the supervision of the researcher at Ahi Evran, Kirikkale, Gazi and Black Sea Technical Universities. The scales were mailed to Ataturk, Mugla Sitki Kocman, Kafkas, Gaziantep and Istanbul Universities, where the instruments were administered by faculty members and mailed back to the researcher.

### Data Analysis

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine whether the distribution of the measurements related to dependent variables was normal; all of the distributions were found to be normal. Thus, an independent-samples t-test was employed to evaluate the differences in scale scores based on gender, and a one-way ANOVA was used to identify the differences based on year of study and department. The

group differences in ANOVA were examined using an LSD test. To identify the relationships between variables, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used.

**RESULTS**

The distribution of the participants based on gender, year of study and department, their scores from the data-gathering instruments, and the statistical differences between groups are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, the female students' scores in the fair learning environment questionnaire ( $p<0.01$ ), the respectful cooperation sub-dimension ( $p<0.01$ ) and the systemic fairness sub-dimension ( $p<0.05$ ) were significantly lower than the male students'. Fur-

ther, the third-year students' scores on the fair learning environment questionnaire and respectful cooperation sub-dimension were significantly higher than those of the first year students ( $p<0.05$ ). While there was no difference in satisfaction with life scale scores based on gender and department ( $p>0.05$ ), the fourth year students' scores were significantly higher than those of third year students ( $p<0.05$ ).

The relationships between the participants' fairness perceptions in the learning environment, levels of satisfaction with life, gender, age, year of study, department and academic grade point averages are summarized in Table 2. As presented in Table 2, there was a significant correlation between satisfaction with life and academic grade point average ( $r=.133$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), the fair

**Table 1: The participants' fairness perceptions in the learning environment and satisfaction with life based on gender, year of study and department, and descriptive statistics of sub-groups based on these measures**

Particular	n	%	Respectful partnership	Systemic fairness	FLEQ total	Life satisfaction	
			Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	
Gender	Female	430	41.3	24.63± 7.43	17.19± 4.63	41.82± 11.09	21.72± 7.80
	Male	612	58.7	26.59± 7.81	17.92± 4.77	44.51± 11.45	21.97± 6.86
				0.000**	0.014*	0.000**	0.591
Grade	1 <sup>th</sup>	183	17.6	27.01± 7.21	17.78± 4.81	44.79± 11.10	22.22± 7.05
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	269	25.8	25.83± 7.45	18.03± 4.41	43.86± 10.87	22.19± 6.87
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	286	27.4	24.81± 7.84	17.03± 4.80	41.85± 11.54	20.77± 7.77
	4 <sup>th</sup>	304	29.2	25.91± 8.01	17.70± 4.84	43.62± 11.71	22.38± 7.16
					0.026*	0.079	0.035*
	LSD			1-3		1-3	3-4
Department	PE	413	39.6	25.81± 8.00	17.55± 4.69	43.37± 11.68	22.14± 7.50
	TE	341	32.7	25.11± 7.86	17.49± 4.79	42.60± 11.53	21.17± 7.43
	SM	288	27.6	26.53± 7.02	17.86± 4.71	44.39± 10.70	22.30± 6.65
					0.071	0.579	0.145
Total		1042	100.0	25.61±7.62	17.55±4.70	43.16±11.27	21.84±7.33

Notes: \* $p<0.05$ ; \*\* $p<0.01$ ;  $p^t$  Independent samples t-test;  $p^a$  One-way ANOVA; PE= Physical education departments; TE= Trainer education departments; SM= Sports management departments

**Table 2: Examining the relationships among variables**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender								
2 Age	.134**							
3 Year of study	-.032	.371**						
4 Department	.075*	-.037	.223**					
5 Grade point average	-.006	-.071*	.001	.096**				
6 Respectful partnership	.125**	.006	-.049	.031	.063*			
7 Systemic fairness	.076*	.026	-.027	.024	.037	.654**		
8 FLEQ total	.117**	.015	-.045	.031	.058	.949**	.859**	
9 Life satisfaction	.017	-.010	-.008	.002	.133**	.234**	.199**	.241**

\*  $p<0.05$ ; \*\*  $p<0.01$

learning environment scale ( $r=.241$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) and its sub dimension respectful cooperation ( $r=.234$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) and systemic fairness scores ( $r=.199$ ;  $p<0.01$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The present study aims to examine university level sports sciences students' fairness perceptions with regard to the learning environment and satisfaction with life in terms of certain variables including identifying the effect of fairness perceptions on the learning environment and students' satisfaction with life. The results reveal that the students evaluated their learning environment as partially fair. This finding is thought-provoking for institutions involved in the training of physical education teachers, coaches and sports managers. The extent to which individuals who exhibit low fairness perceptions during their education can be fair in their professional lives is a matter inviting separate debate. Further, Ozer and Demirtas (2008), and Caglar (2013) reported that Turkish teacher candidates' fairness perceptions in the learning environment were at a low level. Similarly, Tomul et al. (2012), in a study conducted with Turkish university students, contended that instructors were unfair in the distribution of resources and in their relationships. Although it is desirable for university students to perceive the learning environment as fair, the research findings show that this is not the case.

In terms of the gender variable, it was found that the scores on the fair learning environment questionnaire differed significantly in terms of both the sub-dimensions of respectful cooperation and systemic fairness and the full questionnaire. The findings revealed that the female students perceived the learning environment as less fair than the male students, based on both the sub-dimensions of respectful cooperation and systemic fairness and the full questionnaire. This finding may be related to the socio-cultural structure of Turkey, where men are placed on a higher positions than that of women and have more efficacy and greater advantages in many areas of life (OECD 2007). This gender difference between men and women may change the expectations of social roles, and thus differentiate individuals' affective skills and attitudes. To counter this issue, it may be argued that faculty members and administrators should maintain a balanced

attitude, avoiding statements, examples, questions and practices that could negatively affect female students' fairness perceptions in the learning environment and cause gender discrimination. In addition, further studies examining the sources of this difference are needed.

With respect to the students' fairness perceptions based on the year of study, there was a significant difference in the respectful cooperation sub-dimension and the entire fair learning environment scale in favor of third-year students when compared to first-year students. This could be due to the first-year students' lack of familiarity with the school environment and the faculty members. As for the department variable, the students' fairness perceptions in the learning environment did not significantly differ. The higher education institutions in the area of sports sciences in Turkey generally comprise three departments (physical education teaching, coach training and sports management). Students from different departments may have similar fairness perceptions due to the common courses; the fact that the same faculty members teach these courses in all three departments; the fact that the same procedures (course evaluation, attendance, student disciplinary regulations, student services, etc.) are followed; and that final decisions are made by the school administrators, not by the departments.

The students' mean scores in terms of satisfaction with life were found to be near the bottom of the moderate level, in line with the existing studies on university students' satisfaction with life in Turkey (Yetim 2003; Cenkseven 2004; Avsaroglu 2005; Gundogaret al. 2007; Tuzgol-Dost 2010). As satisfaction with life is affected to a large extent by cultural characteristics and the cultural values system (Rask et al. 2002; Dorahy et al. 2000) in a given context, the margin of error should be taken into account when comparing the findings of the study to those conducted in different countries with respect to university students' satisfaction with life. However, the common findings of these studies reveal that individuals living in developed north-eastern Europe, Anglo-American countries and Australia have a higher level of satisfaction with life than those living in countries in middle-eastern Europe, Asia and Africa (Dorahy et al. 2000; Oishi and Diener 2003; Wardle et al. 2004).

In the current study, no significant difference was found between female and male students' scores in terms of satisfaction with life.

Existing studies relating to gender and satisfaction with life have provided conflicting results. While numerous researchers have found that satisfaction with life differed based on gender (Diener et al. 2003; Cenkseven and Akbas 2007; Ye et al. 2012), others have found no significant relationship (Hampton and Marshall 2000; Chow 2005; Gundogar et al. 2007; Tuzgol-Dost 2010). It is understood that demographic variables explain a small variance in satisfaction with life measurements (Diener et al. 2003). Accordingly, it can be concluded that the gender variable was not a factor affecting satisfaction with life within the current study.

Further, the results of the present study revealed that fourth-year students' satisfaction with life was significantly higher than that of third-year students. The reason for this may be that senior students have more concrete aims, look forward to starting their working life, have a positive outlook towards their professional future and are optimistic about the future. Similarly, Rask et al. (2002), in their study on subjective well-being, found that perceiving a school as necessary, meaningful, and beneficial for a good job and a successful future increased satisfaction with life.

Within the current study, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between students' personal characteristics (gender, age), year of study and department, academic achievement (grade point average), fairness perceptions in the learning environment and satisfaction with life. The results demonstrated that grade point average and fairness perceptions were related to their satisfaction with life. Further, the relationship between fairness in the learning environment with its sub-dimensions and satisfaction with life was weak, but statistically significant. However, these findings may be seen as important in terms of revealing the relationship between measuring fairness in an educational setting and satisfaction with life. Here, it should be considered that satisfaction with life is a criterion covering many social, economic, cultural and individual factors. Chow (2005) reported that when satisfaction with grade point average and academic experiences increases, satisfaction with life also increases. Gundogar et al. (2007) likewise identified a significant positive relationship between educational satisfaction, relationships with faculty members, contentedness scores and satisfaction with life.

As a result, it can be argued that in the formation of satisfaction with academic experiences and education, the effects of students' perceptions and experiences with respect to respectful cooperation in the learning environment (fairness in interpersonal treatment, participation in organizational process, being evaluated based on open and objective criteria, rules and procedure being fair and consistent) and systemic fairness (adequacy and transparency of the problem solving process and procedures) should be considered. In this regard, based on a student loyalty model, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) propose that students' trust in institutional staff (such as carrying out lessons and planned activities on time and conducting measurements and tests objectively) is an important construct in forming students' loyalty to the institution.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the present study revealed that the students perceived the learning environment as partially fair and rated their satisfaction with life at a moderate level. It was also found that female students' fairness perceptions regarding the learning environment were significantly lower than male students; however, their satisfaction with life did not differ significantly. Furthermore fairness perceptions and satisfaction with life showed a significant difference based on the year of study. Finally, it is concluded that there is a relationship between the students' fairness perceptions in the learning environment and their satisfaction with life.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The future welfare of a nation depends on its students' well-being. Further, considering that individuals' fairness perceptions may have positive or negative effects on their behavior, it is important for higher education institutions to create an environment that is supportive of fairness perceptions and increases levels of satisfaction with life. To address this issue, some practices to improve students' perceptions of the fairness of the learning environment could include the following: the types of measurements for reducing bias in evaluating student performance and accountability may be generalized; student representation and consultancy may be improved to increase student participation in

school administration; and events may be organized to increase student-faculty member interaction. Such events could surely provide opportunities for students to openly express their expectations from faculty members. In addition, the higher education system should develop economic, social and cultural policies in order to improve the position of disadvantaged student groups formed by the existing social structure.

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