

Emotion-Focused Communication Training on the Assertiveness Levels of Counselor Candidates: A Mixed Design Study

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the effect of Emotion-Focused Communication Training (EFCT) developed by the researcher was examined on the assertiveness levels of counselor candidates. The study has a mixed design because it includes both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. In the quantitative dimension of the study, a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group was used. The experimental group of the study consisted of 12 (7 female, 5 male) counselor candidates studying at Dokuz Eylül University, Buca Faculty of Education, Psychological Counseling and Guidance undergraduate program; the control group consisted of 12 (8 female, 4 male) counselor candidates studying in the same department and not included in the experimental group. The Voltan Acar Assertiveness Scale was used to measure the assertiveness levels of counselor candidates. In addition, a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher was used to identify views of the counselor candidates on the training. The quantitative data of the study were analyzed using the SPSS program. The Shapiro-Wilks test was applied to determine whether the data had a normal distribution, and the t-test was used in intergroup comparisons after it was understood that the data were suitable for parametric test conditions. The qualitative data of the study were analyzed using the content analysis technique. Because of the study, it was found that EFCT led to a significant increase in the levels of assertiveness of counselor candidates. In the study, the counselor candidates' opinions about the effects of the EFCT were that the training contributed positively to their communication skills, awareness of communication, and assertiveness levels.

Keywords:

Assertiveness, communication skills, psychoeducational groups, counselor candidates

INTRODUCTION

Communication is defined as the process of producing, transferring, and interpreting information (Dökmen, 1998). Communication is also a human process that enables us to make the world meaningful and share this meaning with others (Mutlu, 2004). An individual is a human being that is constantly redefined through their relationships with the people around them. The quality of individuals' relationships determines their quality of life (Cüceloğlu, 2004). At this point, it is important to have socially acceptable behavior patterns that enables interaction with other people. These behaviors are communication skills that are considered indispensable in life. The fact that communication skills facilitate interaction with other people increases their importance in an interpersonal context. It is essential for every individual to have skills that can cause other people to have positive reactions and prevent negative reactions (Erözkan, 2005). According to studies, interpersonal connections serve as protective support networks for mental health (Yüksel Şahin, 1997). From the time of birth, humans are in contact with their environment. Therefore, communication skills have become a tool that people should know and develop. Communication skills can also be summarized as sensitivity to verbal and nonverbal messages, active listening, and effective reactions (Gibson & Mitchell, 2008). A number of studies have been conducted recently on communication skills, which is a very important subject (Claramita et al., 2020; Fallahi et al., 2020; Bijen, 2020; Cho et al., 2020; Kaplan Serin et al., 2020; Küçükkaragöz & Karakoyun, 2020; Mendi et al., 2020; Nurani et al., 2020; Uygun & Arıbaş, 2020; Yavuz & Güzel, 2020; Yıldırım et al., 2020).

In every society, there may be individuals with insufficient communication skills. Some people tend to be extremely aggressive, whereas others tend to be extremely passive. Aggressive communication is a form of communication in which a person bullies, threatens, or acts rudely by ignoring the feelings and thoughts of others. In aggressive communication, mutual respect and trust are sacrificed depending on the superiority of a party. In passive communication, which is characterized by passiveness and avoidance of conflict, people avoid expressing their own thoughts and allow their rights to be violated by another person. In passive-

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aggressive communication, which is a style formed by sarcasm and covert aggression, respect in relationships is damaged most of the time, and relationships suffer accordingly (Walshe, 2014). It is thought that the reason why people are passive and aggressive is that they do not know where and how to communicate (Ersanlı & Balcı, 1998). Assertiveness is defined as a socially acceptable form of expression of individual rights, emotions, and ideas (Wolpe, 1966). In other words, it is a communication skill that can be defined as expressing one's thoughts, rights, or feelings in a respectful, open, direct, honest, and calm manner (Lin et al., 2004; Unal, 2012; Unal et al., 2012). That is, being able to defend our rights when they are violated (Alberti & Emmons, 1976; Phelps & Austin, 1997). However, it is a form of relationship that occurs without despising or ignoring the other person's rights while defending our own (Alberti & Emmons, 2002). Assertiveness leads to a positive attitude toward oneself and others. The individual feels self-confident, primarily. They are honest and open to themselves and others. In this way, self-esteem and respect for others also increase (Townend, 1991).

Assertiveness, which forms the basis of social development and plays an important role in interpersonal communication, is one of the basic social skills that affect human relations (Deniz, 1997). For this reason, it is considered very beneficial for individuals to acquire assertive behaviors, adapt to rapid social changes, and establish healthy human relations. At this point, a person with assertive behaviors can express themselves clearly, communicate effectively with others, and adapt more easily to the society in which they live.

According to studies, assertiveness is one of the most crucial elements of communication skills; assertive people are more successful in social situations and have better communication abilities (Lin et al., 2004; Voltan Acar et al., 2008). Assertive behavior is associated with many variables. It has been shown that assertiveness and self-esteem go hand in hand, and students who are low in self-esteem are more likely to communicate passively or aggressively (Darjan et al., 2020). Assertive individuals can express themselves directly. Consequently, while the person's self-esteem increases, the sense of anxiety decreases. Individuals who gain more respect as they display assertive behaviors are more successful in reaching their goals in life; they understand themselves better, and they can communicate better with other people (Alberti & Emmons, 2002). An assertive communication style can increase personal power, self-esteem, and self-confidence (Nirmali & Suni, 2016).

Researches evaluating the correlation between the level of assertiveness and depression showed that a decrease in assertiveness leads to an increase in the level of depression (Rezayat & Nayeri, 2014), and as the level of assertiveness increases, anxiety level decreases (Kaya & Karaca, 2018). Besides, the research showed that there is a negative correlation between the degree of assertiveness and the severity of mental health issues. In other words, as the level of assertiveness increases, the positive perceptions of the person increase and the level of experiencing mental problems decreases (Tataker, 2003). Individuals with low levels of assertiveness lack skills in interpersonal relations (Matsushima & Shiomi, 2001). It has been concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between the level of assertiveness and problem-solving skills, and assertive employees solve their problems better (Yıldız & Gökalp, 2020). Additionally, there is a strong correlation between assertiveness and psychological health (Abdelaziz et al., 2020). However, it has been determined that as the level of automatic thoughts becomes negative, assertiveness decreases (Seki Öz & Ayhan, 2020). It has been stated that assertiveness is also a negative predictor of separation and restraint anxieties and rejection expectations, and there is a significant positive relationship between psychological empowerment and assertiveness (Azizi et al., 2020). Considering all of these results, it can be said that individuals make significant contributions to their personality development and have positive effects on their relationships by adopting an assertive communication style and removing passiveness (Parmaksız & Kılıçarslan, 2020).

Assertive communication in business environments encourages mutual respect and win-win situations (Walshe, 2014). As a result, healthy communication between individuals is based on people's ability to convey their feelings, thoughts, interests, and wishes directly and sincerely. The exhibition of assertive behaviors is associated with many positive variables and is of great importance in the acquisition of effective communication skills.

It has been highlighted that having advanced communication skills is important in all professions that require interactions with people (Egan, 1994). The research was conducted with counselor candidates who were trained in the field of psychological counseling, which is an important helping profession. Professionals working in the helping area are considered the only individuals who can provide the service needed by society (Akboy & İkiş, 2007). In addition to the theoretical knowledge that a counselor has in the process of helping the counselee, his or her personality is also an effective therapeutic power (Gibson & Mitchell, 2008). Many

personal characteristics and skill levels are also important when learning about the counseling profession. These are the skills that counselors will need both in daily life and while performing their profession. Beginners in the helping profession struggle with the ability to be assertive both in their daily lives and in their helping roles. The lack of communication skills of the counselor may reduce his or her interest in the counselee, as it will lead to the need to address one's own personal problems. For this reason, some counselors are not yet ready for the roles in which they help others. The counselor can learn to be strong in some skills with education and in the counseling process that help develop their counsees as well. The more the counselor's skill level develops, the more these skills are displayed in their own lives and in situations where they help the counselee (Nelson Jones, 2013). Therefore, it is considered extremely important that the assertive communication style, which is understood to be associated with many positive variables, be acquired by counselors, who play an important role in both interpersonal relations with counselors and imparting these skills to counselors. Based on this information, this study aimed to present suggestions in line with the findings obtained by examining the effect of EFCT on the assertive levels of counselor candidates.

METHOD

Research Design

A mixed model was used to conduct the research. The mixed method combines quantitative and qualitative research approaches to enable researchers to make in-depth interpretations and inferences (Hanson et al., 2005). In this study, sequential explanatory design, one of the mixed method types, was preferred. In this design, qualitative data are gathered following the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Typically, quantitative data are prioritized. Quantitative data are usually supplemented by qualitative data. Data analysis is interrelated and is usually combined in the data interpretation and discussion sections (Baki & Gökçek, 2012). In the quantitative dimension of the study, a quasi-experimental design with a pretest– posttest control group was used. In the quasi-experimental design with a pretest– posttest control group, there is an experimental group exposed to the independent variable and an additional group unaffected by the independent variable. To verify the hypotheses, the scores of both groups that change from pretest to posttest are compared to determine if there is a significant difference (Büyüköztürk et al., 2012). In this study, the qualitative data obtained to evaluate the participants' perceptions of the program were interpreted with content analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005).

Study Group

The EFCT was conducted with 12 counselor candidates (7 female, 5 male) studying in the Psychological Counseling and Guidance undergraduate program at Dokuz Eylül University, Buca Faculty of Education, in 2023. The control group consisted of 12 counselor candidates (8 females and 4 males). A purposeful sampling method was used to select participants. The criterion sampling technique, which is a purposive sampling method, was used in sample selection. In purposive sampling, situations that are thought to contain rich information are examined in depth (Patton, 1987). At this point, the first criterion in sample selection is that the counselor candidates continue their university education in the Psychological Counseling and Guidance undergraduate program. The second criterion is students' volunteering to participate in the training. The third criterion is that they have taken the "Group Counseling Course" in order to ensure a high level of adaptation and usefulness in participation in group work. To accomplish this, counselor candidates studying in the fourth year were preferred. The EFCT helped participants gain various social skills by helping them to improve their ability to recognize and manage their own emotions and the emotions of others. The demographic characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Counselor Candidates' Demographic Characteristics

Participants	Age	Grade	Gender
Counselor Candidate1	22	4	Male
Counselor Candidate2	22	4	Female
Counselor Candidate3	21	4	Male
Counselor Candidate4	21	4	Female
Counselor Candidate5	23	4	Male
Counselor Candidate6	21	4	Male
Counselor Candidate7	21	4	Female
Counselor Candidate8	22	4	Female
Counselor Candidate9	21	4	Female
Counselor Candidate10	21	4	Male
Counselor Candidate11	20	4	Female
Counselor Candidate12	21	4	Female

Development of Emotion-Focused Communication Training

EFCT was developed by the researcher. It was aimed at helping individuals recognize and manage their own emotions and those of others. Emotion is viewed as the cornerstone of the self and a major factor in self-organization in an emotion-focused approach. People not only experience emotion but also constantly try to make sense of it. Self-organization and explanation of one's own emotional experience are considered the source of personal meaning, and the integration of reason and emotion is essential for successful adaptation (Greenberg, 2004). It is a psychoeducational program that aims to gain social skills that will enable effective communication with other individuals and assertive behaviors through the correct identification, expression, and regulation of emotions. Psychoeducational groups are preventive and educational (Brown, 1998). Psychoeducational groups are formed to provide individuals with knowledge or skills on a personal, social, educational, or professional subject, to prevent them from experiencing mental problems, or to enable them to cope with such problems (Fawzy & Fawzy, 1998). EFCT was developed based on the literature (Greenberg, 2004; Heid et al., 2022; Karakaş, 2011; Korkut, 2005; Smead Morganett, 2005; Watson & Geenberg, 2017). The training was restructured on the basis of the opinion of one more academician in the field of psychological counseling and guidance. After the restructuring, three test sessions were conducted with 10 counselor candidates, and the program was finalized according to the feedback.

Emotion-Focused Communication Training

The following topics were addressed in the content of the psychoeducational program, which consisted of a total of 12 sessions: (1) recognition and awareness of emotions, (2) expression of negative emotions, (3) relationship between emotions, thoughts, and behavior, (4) emotion regulation, (5) definition and types of communication, (6) role of emotions in communication, (7) importance of non-verbal communication in the expression of emotions, (8) defining and comparing aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive, and assertive behaviors in communication, (9) recognizing communication barriers, (10) understanding the differences between "I language" and "you language" and using "I language" in communication, (11) recognizing unrealistic thoughts and the emotions they cause in the communication process, (12) learning empathic assertive reactions and transferring this knowledge to daily life. Techniques based on different approaches (role playing, structured exercises, homework assignments, etc.) were used in the psychoeducational program.

Implementation of Emotion-Focused Communication Training

The equivalence of the groups was examined by applying a pre-test to the volunteer counselors in the experimental and control groups after the counselor candidates had been informed of the research before the training. After it was decided that the groups were equivalent, the experimental study was initiated. EFCT was conducted with 12 counselor candidates (7 females and 5 males) studying at the Dokuz Eylül University Buca Faculty of Education Psychological Counseling and Guidance Undergraduate Program in 2023. It took around an hour and a half to complete each session. In each session, feedback was received from the counselor candidates regarding the study.

Data Collection Tools

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques were used together at the time of data collection.

Voltan Acar Assertiveness Scale

The inventory developed to measure assertiveness consists of 28 items. Out of 28 items in the scale; 17 of them are for the passiveness dimension and 11 for the assertiveness dimension. The scale is a 6-point Likert-type scale. The reactions range from "It does not describe me at all" to "It describes me very well." The Voltan Acar Assertiveness Scale's confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the sub-dimensions' validated internal consistency reliability values were 0.83 for passiveness and 0.78 for assertiveness. The overall test reliability coefficient was 0.87. The scale's test-retest reliability (28 items) was calculated as 0.89 (Voltan Acar & Öğretmen, 2007).

Semistructured Interview Form

This form consists of three open-ended questions developed by the researcher for the qualitative dimension of the study. Open-ended inquiries were preferred because they allow for varied subject analysis options (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The literature on the research subjects was used while preparing the questions. The questions in the form are listed below:

1. What were the effects of EFCT for you?
2. What are your thoughts on EFCT process?

3. What are your suggestions for EFCT?

Data Analysis

In this study, two types of data analysis, quantitative and qualitative, were used.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The assertiveness pre- and post-test scores of students were evaluated using the SPSS 23 package program. Before starting the analysis, the Shapiro–Wilks test, which is suitable for group sizes less than 50 (Büyüköztürk, 2012), was applied to determine whether the data obtained were suitable for a normal distribution. According to the data type, in paired comparisons between different groups and within the same group, the "t-test for independent groups and the t-test for dependent groups" from parametric test methods were applied. The difference between the experimental and control groups according to the relevant variables was tested at the $p < .05$ significance level.

Qualitative Data Analysis

In this study, data were obtained using a semi-structured interview technique. This technique, which is commonly employed in qualitative research, gives interview subjects the chance to express themselves and gives the researcher a deep understanding of people's opinions, worlds of meaning, experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the situations they are in through their own expressions (McCracken, 1988). Qualitative data were collected through interviews and explained using the content analysis technique (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The data were collected through interviews, and approximately 30 minutes were given to them for this purpose. The collected data were recorded and examined. To ensure coding reliability, the data were coded by another expert other than the researcher, and the percentages of agreement were calculated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to the calculation results, the total agreement percentage for the three questions was 82%. For coding reliability, the average score should be at least 70% (Arastaman et al., 2018). At this point, it was seen that the reliability level of the coding process was sufficient. The real names of the interviewees were not used in the table explanations to comply with ethical principles. The counselor candidates interviewed were coded from C1 to C12.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings obtained in this research are given below.

Table 2. Comparison of the Assertiveness Pre-Test Results of the Experimental and Control Groups

	Groups	N	\bar{X}	Ss	Sd	T	p
Assertiveness	Experimental	12	112.83	21.99	22	-1.33	.116
	Control	12	122.50	12.17			

The results of the "t-test for independent groups," which was conducted to compare the average scores of the experimental and control groups' assertiveness pretests, are presented in Table 2. As seen in Table 2, no statistically significant difference was found between the groups according to the assertiveness pre-test average scores of the experimental and control groups [$t_{(22)} = -1.33, p > .05$]. According to these findings, it is possible to say that before the training, the levels of assertiveness of counselor candidates in the experimental and control groups were not differentiated significantly.

The results of the "t-test for dependent groups," which was conducted to compare the average scores of the experimental group's assertiveness pre-test and post-test, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of the Assertiveness Pre-Test and Post-Test Results of the Experimental Group

	Measures	N	\bar{X}	Ss	Sd	T	p
Assertiveness	Pre-Test	12	112.83	21.99	11	-4.25	.000
	Post-Test	12	120.83	18.43			

* $p < .05$

As seen in Table 3, a statistically significant difference was found between the average scores of assertiveness pre-test and post-test in the experimental group [$t_{(11)} = -4.25, p < .05$]. These findings showed that

there was a development in favor of the post-test between the pre-test and post-test measures for assertiveness average scores of the counselor candidates in the experimental group.

The results of the "t-test for dependent groups", which was conducted to compare the average scores of the control group's assertiveness pre-test and post-test, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of the Assertiveness Pre-Test and Post-Test Results of the Control Group

	Measures	N	\bar{X}	Ss	Sd	T	p
Assertiveness	Pre-Test	12	112.83	21.99	11	-4.25	.300
	Post-Test	12	120.83	18.43			

*p<.05

As seen in Table 4, no statistically significant difference was found between the average scores of assertiveness pre-test and post-test of the control group [$t_{(11)} = -4.25, p >.05$]. This finding showed that there was no statistically significant change in the average scores of the students in the control group, in which no procedure was applied.

Qualitative Findings

The quantitative findings obtained in this research are given below.

Effects of EFCT

When the data in this main theme were examined, the effect of the EFCT on counselor candidates was examined in three categories: assertiveness, communication skills, and awareness. The opinions of the counselor candidates on how they were affected by the training after the EFCT are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Effects of EFCT

Themes (Categories)	Codes	N	%
Assertiveness	Increased level of assertiveness (C1,C4,C5,C6,C8,C9,C11,C12)	8	67
	Increased self-confidence (C1,C10,C2,C12)	4	33
	Reduction in passive behavior (C2,C10,C12)	3	25
	Reduction in aggressive behavior (C4,C6)	2	17
	Ability to refuse a request (C2,C12)	2	17
	Complimenting and accepting compliments (C2,C10)	2	17
Communication Skills	Communication skills (C1,C5,C8,C9,C11,C12)	6	50
	Self-expression skills (C4,C8,C9)	3	25
	Decreased social anxiety (C2,C10,C12)	3	25
	Development of friendship relationships (C12)	1	8
Awareness	Recognizing the importance of the I language in communication (C3,C7)	2	17
	Recognizing the role of body language in communication (C1,C10)	2	17

When the assertiveness category was analyzed, it was observed that 67% of the participants expressed the view of an increase in assertiveness level. Other opinions were, respectively, 33% increased self-confidence, 25% reduction in passive behavior, 17% reduction in aggressive behavior, 17% ability to refuse a request, and 17% complimenting and accepting compliments. Some exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C1): "The most important effect of this training was to increase my level of assertiveness."

(C10): "I was a very passive person before the training. After the training, my passive behaviors decreased."

(C12): "I had problems saying no. Now I can refuse a request."

When the communication skills category was analyzed, it was seen that 50% of the participants stated that their communication skills increased. The other opinions are as follows: 25% self-expression skills, 25% decrease in social anxiety, and 8% development in friendship relations. Some of the exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C8): "I feel that I can express myself more easily now."

(C2): "I used to be very anxious in social settings. After the training, my anxiety decreased a little more."

(C12): "I am a shy person and do not have many friends. Now, there has been a positive change in my relationships."

When the awareness category was analyzed, it was observed that of the participants, 17% recognized the importance of language in communication and 17% recognized the role of body language in communication. Some exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C7): *"I discovered the importance of language in communication, which I did not know before."*

(C10): *"Body language is crucial in the messages we give. I learned this."*

EFCT Process

When the data in this main theme were examined, the views of counselor candidates on the EFCT process were examined in two categories: positive and negative. The views of counselor candidates on the EFCT process are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. EFCT Process

Themes (Categories)	Codes	N	%
Positive	Productive (C1,C2,C4,C5,C6,C8,C9,C10,C11,C12)	10	83
	Pleasant (C1,C2,C4,C5,C6,C8,C9,C10,C11,C12)	10	83
Negative	Difficulty focusing on group members (C3,C7,C4)	3	25
	Inability to exhibit assertive behavior (C10,C12)	2	17
	Inability to empathize with group members (C4)	1	8

When the positive category is examined, it is seen that 83% of the counselor candidates stated that it was productive, and 83% of the participants stated that it was pleasant. Some exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C5): *"It was a very productive training for me."*

(C4): *"I was satisfied with the study; it was enjoyable for me."*

(C8): *"I benefited a lot from the training program and gained efficiency."*

When the negative category was examined, 25% of the counselor candidates had difficulty focusing on the group members, 17% could not display assertive behaviors, and 8% could not empathize with the group members. Some exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C4): *"There were times when I had difficulty empathizing with other members in the group."*

(C7): *"At times in group work, I could not focus on what the members were saying."*

(C10): *"I could not exhibit sociable behavior as much as I wanted in the psychoeducational group."*

Suggestions for EFCT

When the data in this main theme were examined, counselor candidates' suggestions regarding EFCT were analyzed in two categories: positive and negative. The opinions of the counselor candidates regarding their suggestions for EFCT are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Suggestions for EFCT

Themes (Categories)	Codes	N	%
Positive	Well structured (C1,C2,C4,C5,C6,C8,C9,C10,C11,C12)	10	83
	Skill-building (C5,C7,C9,C10,C12)	5	42
Negative	Can be realized with fewer group members (C3)	1	8
	Can be longer (C9)	1	8

When the positive category is examined, 83% of the counselor candidates stated that the EFCT was well structured, and 42% stated that it was skill-building. Some exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C5): *"The training had very useful sessions. The sessions that followed each other were coherent."*

(C9): *"I gained many skills thanks to this training. It was a skill-building work."*

(C8): *"Thanks to the training, both my communication skills and my ability to express myself improved."*

When the negative category was analyzed, 8% of the counselor candidates stated that EFCT could be performed with fewer group members, and 8% stated that it could take longer. Some exact citations of counselor candidates' views are presented below.

(C3): *"If there were fewer members, I could focus on group members more easily."*

(C9): *"It was a study in which I gained useful skills for me. But I think I could have gained more if it had lasted longer."*

DISCUSSION

According to the findings of the research, EFCT had a positive effect on the assertiveness levels of the counselor candidates in the experimental group. In many studies examining the effects of assertiveness training in the literature, it is stated that the training given to different age groups has a positive effect on the assertiveness levels and communication skills of the subjects (Adana, 2004; Adana et al., 2010; Çeçen Eroğul & Zengel, 2009; Demirelli & Barut, 2020; Deniz, 1997; Gündoğdu, 2012; Gültekin et al., 2018; Karahan, 2008; Karakaş, 2011; Keser, 2013; Lin et al., 2004; Nakamura et al., 2017; Seçer et al., 2014; Üstün & Küçük, 2020; Warland et al., 2014; Yatağan, 2005; Yılmaz, 2005).

When the counselor candidates' views on the effect of the EFCT were examined, it was seen that their assertiveness levels increased and their passive and aggressive behaviors decreased. These views supported the findings, which showed that the experimental group of counselor candidates showed an improvement in their average assertiveness levels. In addition, many counselor candidates stated that their communication skills improved, whereas others stated that their self-confidence increased. In another study, it was determined that communication skills training increased self-confidence (Vatankhah et al., 2013). Individuals with high self-confidence are expected to be able to make their own decisions, to know consciously what they do, and to defend their decisions (Özcan, 2006). From this point of view, it is thought that there is a positive correlation between communication skills and self-confidence. It is thought that depending on the development of the counselor candidates' communication skills after the training, experiencing positive changes in human relations is also effective in increasing their self-confidence.

The counselor candidates stated that their abilities to express themselves improved and their social anxiety levels decreased after the training. Individuals who are particularly passive about expressing themselves experience anxiety. Passive individuals deny their right to express themselves and are hesitant to express their emotions. These people often feel offended and anxious because they allow others to make decisions on their behalf (Alberti & Emmons, 2002). In addition, the expectation of social competence in passive individuals is also uncertain; therefore, the individual experiences anxiety because of the expectation that negative evaluation will be done in the relationships one has established (Cowden, 2002). In contrast, assertive individuals express themselves in honest, open, and appropriate ways. Studies show that individuals who succeed in expressing themselves have less social anxiety because of an increase in their self-esteem and can communicate more easily with other people (Alberti & Emmons, 2002). It is thought that the self-expression skills of the experimental subjects may have improved as their passive behaviors decreased while their assertive behaviors increased. Similarly, in a study conducted with pre-service teachers who had participated in assertiveness training, a significant increase was found in assertiveness and self-concept scores (Yeşilyaprak & Kısaç, 1999). It can be seen that assertive behavior is a factor that increases the self-esteem of individuals. Therefore, it is expected that the social anxiety experienced by an individual whose confidence level increases in self-expression decreases. Similarly, many studies have shown that assertiveness and communication skills training improve the communication skills of individuals and reduce their anxiety levels (Gökçearslan Çiftçi & Altınova, 2017; Lee et al., 2013; Niussha et al., 2012). Another counselor candidate stated that her friendships had improved. It was expected that the friendships of an individual who developed communication skills would also develop positively.

Other opinions on the effects of the training were "recognizing the importance of I language in communication" and "recognizing the role of body language in communication". Considering the goals to be achieved in the psychoeducational program, the views expressed overlap with the targeted outcomes. In other words, counselor candidates believe that they can express their emotions and have gained many skills targeted in the psychoeducational program. It is thought that the reasons for this situation may stem from the fact that the participants actively participated in the studies during the implementation phase because of their volunteering and that the group sessions were structured in a way that overlapped with the objectives.

While most counselor candidates stated that they were satisfied with the process during the group sessions, when we look at the opinions on the suggestions regarding the process, almost all participants were satisfied with the process. From this viewpoint, it can be said that the EFCT achieved its objective and that the participants were satisfied because they benefited from the training.

This study has several limitations. The research results are limited to counselor candidates who participated in the psychoeducational program. Research findings are limited to the results of analysis of data

collection tools. The members of the experimental group who participated in the EFCT were previously acquainted with each other because they were studying in the same undergraduate program. This situation may have created limitations in the expression of emotions and sharing of experiences in the group process. The researcher effect caused by the fact that the developed psychoeducational program was implemented by the person who developed it is also among the limitations of this study.

SUGGESTIONS

Considering the research findings, it is advised that in-service training courses be organized by the Directorates of National Education on communication skills, which are thought to be professionally beneficial for counselors, and that psychoeducational groups be established in Psychological Counseling and Guidance Centers in universities to provide counselor candidates with social skills. Considering that the personality traits of counselors are also important in the counseling process, it is recommended that emotion-focused training activities be included in counselor education. In addition, early academic endeavors may help children develop social qualities such as assertiveness, which have positive contributions to human relations and can prevent future problems in interpersonal relationships, and can be a useful gain for preventive guidance. Therefore, it is recommended that school counselors provide communication skills training to students within the scope of preventive guidance in primary and secondary schools.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval

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Research and Publication Ethics Statement

Hereby, I as the author consciously assure that for the manuscript "Emotion-Focused Communication Training on Assertiveness Levels of Counselor Candidates: A Mixed Design Study" the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the author's own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.

- The paper reflects the author's own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

The study has a single author

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