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Intolerance of Uncertainty in Young Researchers: A Qualitative Study*

Genç Araştırmacılar da Belirsizliğ e Tahammülsüzlük: Nitel Bir Çalışma

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Abstract: Many young researchers—particularly those in the early stages of their academic careers—struggle to cope with uncertainty, a persistent and often overlooked challenge in academic life. However, the subjective experiences of intolerance of uncertainty among young researchers, as well as the underlying mechanisms, have not been sufficiently explored. Personal accounts and beliefs regarding uncertainties encountered in academia may help reinforce, reshape, or generate new perspectives. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen young researchers working at various universities, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. As a result of the analysis, four main themes were identified: encountered uncertainties, consequences of intolerance of uncertainty, coping with uncertainty, and suggestions for reducing uncertainty. The findings provide insights into how young researchers construct meaning around uncertainty and how intolerance of uncertainty shapes their professional development. This study contributes to a contextual understanding of intolerance of uncertainty in academia and emphasizes the importance of institutional and psychological support in fostering resilience among young researchers.

Keywords: Young researchers, Academic life, Intolerance of uncertainty, Qualitative research

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Öz: Birçok genç araştırmacı — özellikle akademik kariyerlerinin erken aşamalarında olanlar — akademik yaşamın sürekli ve çoğunlukla göz ardı edilen bir zorluğu olan belirsizlikle başa çıkmakta zorlanmaktadır. Ancak genç araştırmacılar arasında, belirsizliğ e tahammülsüzlüğe dair öznel deneyimler ve bu durumun altında yatan mekanizmalar yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Akademide karşılaşılan belirsizliklere ilişkin kişisel anlatımlar ve inançlar, mevcut bakış açılarını destekleyebilir; yeniden şekillendirebilir veya yeni perspektiflerin ortaya çıkmasına katkıda bulunabilir. Bu çalışmada, çeşitli üniversitelerde görev yapan on beş araştırmacı ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş ve elde edilen veriler tematik analiz yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Analizler sonucunda dört ana tema belirlenmiştir: karşılaşılan belirsizlikler, belirsizliğ e tahammülsüzlüğün sonuçları, belirsizlikle baş etme yöntemleri ve belirsizliği azaltmaya yönelik öneriler. Bulgular, genç araştırmacıların belirsizlikle ilgili nasıl anlamlar inşa ettiklerine ve belirsizliğ e tahammülsüzlüğün mesleki gelişimlerini nasıl şekillendirdiğine dair önemli içgörüler sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, akademide belirsizliğ e tahammülsüzlüğün bağlamsal bir anlayışına katkı sağlamakta ve genç araştırmacıların dayanıklılığını desteklemek için kurumsal ve psikolojik desteğin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Genç araştırmacılar, Akademik yaşam, Belirsizliğ e tahammülsüzlük, Nitel araştırma

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1. INTRODUCTION

Scientists are individuals who aim to contribute to the advancement of humanity through scientific endeavors. While researchers—particularly those working at universities—make significant contributions to society, they may also encounter physical and psychological challenges on a personal level. In recent years, mental health issues have been increasingly observed among researchers (OECD, 2021). Some studies have compared researchers with other professional groups in terms of psychological problems and have found that researchers are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, depression, and mood disorders (Chirikov et al., 2020; Miloyan et al., 2016; Panger et al., 2014). Factors negatively affecting researchers' mental health include heavy workloads, uncertainty arising from project-based contracts (Whittle & Rampton, 2020), inadequate funding, excessive working hours, and career-related uncertainties (Levecque et al., 2017; Olsthoorn et al., 2020).

In particular, in recent years, the mental health of young researchers—especially PhD students—has been the subject of numerous studies (e.g., Berry et al., 2021; Berry et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2019; Kismihók et al., 2022; Waight & Giardonobe, 2018). These studies emphasize that prolonged and intensive work, frequent travel due to studying in different cities, reduced time for personal and family life, and most notably, uncertainty regarding professional futures may contribute to psychological difficulties in PhD students. Woolston (2020) also reported findings supporting that PhD students experience psychological distress more frequently than the general population. Some studies have indicated that the psychological problems faced by young researchers during their doctoral education may even lead them to consider discontinuing their studies (Mantai & Dowling, 2015; Mattijssen et al., 2021).

One of the key concepts that may affect the mental well-being of young researchers is intolerance of uncertainty. Uncertainty refers to the inability to predict the outcome of an event or behavior—in other words, the absence of clarity about the future (Sarı & Dağ, 2009). Intolerance of uncertainty is defined as the tendency to respond negatively—emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally—to uncertain events or situations (Buhr & Dugas, 2002). Research in the literature indicates that intolerance of uncertainty is a contributing factor in the development of pathological worry (Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Starcevic & Berle, 2006). Moreover, it is also closely linked to other mental health conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (Holaway, Heimberg & Coles, 2006), depression (Bottesi et al., 2019), psychological distress (Sun, 2024), and stress (Nekic, 2023). Therefore, a high level of intolerance of uncertainty is likely to negatively impact overall well-being (Khodarahimi et al., 2021; Satıcı et al., 2022).

Among the major uncertainties faced by young researchers, career-related issues are particularly significant. The uncertainty experienced by PhD students regarding their future employment prospects can cause anxiety and adversely affect their well-being (Levecque et al., 2017). Contract-based researchers or those who do not feel a sense of belonging to their institutions tend to experience greater levels of career-related anxiety (Olsthoorn et al., 2020). Other studies also underline the difficulties caused by the lack of job security among young researchers (Satinsky et al., 2021). Similar career-related uncertainties and anxieties can be observed among young researchers in Türkiye. In Türkiye, academics work under the regulations of Law No. 2547 on Higher Education. According to this law, some research assistants are employed under Article 50(d), while others are appointed under Article 33(a). The former indicates a temporary position that terminates upon completion of the doctoral program. The latter refers to a position that continues after the doctoral degree, but on a contractual basis until appointment to an associate professorship (Higher Education Law, 1981). Both contract types may hinder researchers' focus on their careers and contribute to increased anxiety (Çolak, 2015; Korkut & Yalçınkaya, 1999). In light of these considerations, it is plausible to suggest that intolerance of uncertainty may play a role in shaping the mental well-being of young researchers.

The good news is that some efforts are being made to improve researchers' mental health. The Council of the European Union has begun to develop policies aimed at addressing the psychological problems of

researchers (Council of the European Union, 2021). These policies promote mental health monitoring, preventive measures, and initiatives to support well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also published reports advocating for the protection of researchers' physical and psychological health (WHO, 2010). Furthermore, to enhance researchers' psychological well-being, the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) was established as an initiative of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST). This group consists of over 200 researchers from 34 countries, and the second author of this study is a member of the COST ReMO team. This study aligns with the objectives of the COST ReMO initiative.

This research focuses on intolerance of uncertainty as a critical factor influencing the mental health of young researchers. In the early stages of academic careers, young researchers must cope with various uncertainties. Factors such as financial insecurity, unpredictable academic futures, and publication pressure may increase their levels of intolerance of uncertainty (Gaete Sepúlveda et al., 2025; Levecque et al., 2017). However, the effects of these processes on the mental health of young researchers have not been sufficiently investigated. Although there is an extensive body of quantitative research on intolerance of uncertainty, qualitative studies exploring this construct—particularly among early-career researchers—remain limited. Existing qualitative studies have largely focused on intolerance of uncertainty in clinical populations (Parlar-Yazıcı et al., 2021; Quinlan et al., 2021; Stephens et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). In contrast, this study offers a novel perspective by examining how intolerance of uncertainty manifests in academic contexts through the lived experiences of young researchers. Therefore, this study aims to address a significant gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of young researchers with intolerance of uncertainty. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of academic support mechanisms and to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by young researchers. In line with the aim of this study, the following research question was posed:

- 1- What are the experiences of young researchers regarding intolerance of uncertainty?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study employed a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is used to investigate phenomena that exist but are not well understood in depth (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In this design, the aim is to reveal individuals' experiences and perceptions regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). In phenomenological research, interviews are the primary method of data collection (Büyüköztürk et al., 2021). Since these studies typically involve in-depth and repeated interviews, it is ideal to keep the sample size limited (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

2.2. Research sample

The sample of the study consisted of 15 young researchers (8 male, 7 female) who are pursuing their doctoral studies while working at public and private universities in Türkiye. The inclusion criteria were as follows: willingness to share their experiences, being under the age of 35, currently enrolled in a doctoral program, and working as a research assistant or lecturer. The exclusion criteria were: unwillingness to participate, being over the age of 35, not pursuing a doctoral degree, and not being employed as a research assistant or lecturer. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. The researchers reached out to young researchers in their professional networks who met the inclusion criteria. Individual interviews were conducted with those who volunteered to participate, and in this way, the current study sample was formed.

The mean age of participants was 29.67 years (SD = 2.41; range = 25–35). Of the participants, 11 were research assistants and 4 were lecturers. Seven participants were at the dissertation stage of their PhD program, five were in the coursework stage, and three were at the qualification stage. In terms of faculties, four participants were from the Faculty of Health Sciences, three from the Faculty of Science and Letters,

two from the Faculty of Civil Engineering, two from the Faculty of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, and one each from the Faculty of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Architecture, and Education. Participants had between 1 and 9 years of academic work experience. Ten participants were single, while five were married; two of the married participants had one child each.

2.3. Data collection tools and procedure

The data of this study were collected through a semi-structured interview form. The researchers developed the form by reviewing relevant literature and discussing among themselves. This form included general information about the study, several questions to gather personal information about participants, and twelve questions regarding their experiences of intolerance of uncertainty. Participants were informed that their personal information would be kept confidential. The interviews were conducted via the Zoom online platform. Each interview was conducted one-on-one between the first author and an individual participant, resulting in a total of 15 online interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were video-recorded. The interviews were guided by the semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. The data were transcribed verbatim from video recordings by the first author and prepared for analysis. Once the data had been analyzed by the researchers, the recordings were deleted.

At the beginning of each interview, the researchers introduced themselves briefly and provided information about the study, explaining that it aimed to explore young researchers' experiences of intolerance of uncertainty. Following this, participants were asked demographic questions including age, university, department, marital status, number of children, employment status, and the stage of their doctoral program. After collecting personal information, the interview proceeded to the section on experiences of intolerance of uncertainty. Participants were asked twelve open-ended questions such as: "What types of uncertainty do you encounter in your professional life as a researcher?", "How do the uncertainties you face affect your academic career?", and "What strategies do you use to cope with the uncertainties you experience?" The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility in questioning, meaning that the specific questions posed could vary depending on the participant. Therefore, in addition to the core questions, alternative or follow-up questions were asked when appropriate.

2.4. Data analysis

To systematically explore participants' experiences with uncertainty, a reflexive thematic analysis approach was employed. This method involves identifying meaningful units (i.e., codes) within participants' narratives and recognizing patterns among these codes to develop broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013). The analysis followed the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interviews were transcribed verbatim. To become fully familiar with the content, the researchers read through the transcripts multiple times. Initial codes were generated inductively and iteratively for each transcript. Coding was conducted in a cyclical manner to allow continuous refinement. The codes were compared across participants to identify shared or divergent experiences. These codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and named according to their meanings. The researchers coded the data independently and later compared their results. Only the codes and themes agreed upon by both researchers were included in the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). A high level of agreement between coders was considered an indicator of reliability (Kirilenko & Stepchenkova, 2016). To ensure that the themes were grounded in participants' actual experiences, direct quotes from the interviews were included (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

2.5. Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Reflexivity is a central component of qualitative research and requires researchers to actively reflect on how their own backgrounds, positions, and assumptions may influence different stages of the research process, including its design, data collection, and interpretation (Willig, 2013). In this study, based on prior literature, the researchers were aware that early-career academics might experience difficulties coping with uncertainty. The first author, who conducted the interviews, is also a member of this population and thus

holds an “insider” position (Greene, 2014). This insider status presents both potential advantages and challenges. On one hand, it may enhance the depth and authenticity of the findings by facilitating rapport and deeper understanding of participants’ experiences. On the other hand, it raises concerns about subjectivity and potential bias. However, following Saidin (2016), this positionality is considered not as a methodological limitation but as a valuable interpretive asset. Additionally, the second author of the study is affiliated with the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO), an initiative focused on researcher well-being. To ensure objectivity, the interviews were conducted by the first author under the supervision of the second author, and regular discussions were held to maintain analytical distance and methodological rigor.

The validity and reliability of the qualitative findings obtained in this study were based on the four criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). For credibility, interview data were read repeatedly to ensure extended interaction with the data. Two researchers coded the data independently, and high levels of intercoder agreement were found. For transferability, participant characteristics, the research context, and the data collection process were described in detail, and direct quotes were included to allow readers to adapt the results to their own context. For dependability, an audit trail was created by thoroughly documenting the entire research process, from the preparation of the interview guide to data analysis and the development of themes. Finally, confirmation was ensured through the researcher’s diary and regular researcher meetings, ensuring that the findings were based on participant narratives and free from researcher bias.

2.6. Ethical approval

The study protocol has been approved by Yıldız Technical University’s Scientific Research and Ethics Committee (Report Number: 20240402840, Date: 01.04.2024). The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its following updates.

3. RESULTS

Individual interviews conducted with young researchers were analyzed using thematic analysis, and findings were obtained based on their views on intolerance of uncertainty. As a result of the thematic analysis, themes emerged from groups of codes. After brainstorming and in-depth reflection, the authors agreed on four main themes and nine sub-themes. The four main themes are: encountered uncertainties, consequences of intolerance of uncertainty, coping with uncertainty, and suggestions for reducing uncertainty. The main themes, sub-themes, codes, and the frequency of the codes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code
Encountered uncertainties	Uncertainties in work life	Being employed under Article 50/d (11)
		Sudden and urgent work assignments (9)
		Ambiguity in job description (6)
		Impacts of structural changes within the institution (4)
Consequences of intolerance of uncertainty	Uncertainties in doctoral life	Concerns about meeting publication and project requirements (7)
		Concerns about passing doctoral courses and qualifying exams (3)
	Emotional consequences	Stress (11)
		Anger (6)
		Anxiety (6)

Table 1. Continued*Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code
Consequences of intolerance of uncertainty	Behavioral consequences	Sleep problems (10) Headache (5) Nausea (4) Eating problems (4) Relational difficulties (3)
	Academic consequences	Reduced academic motivation and decreased work performance (12) Having to work overtime to meet deadlines (9) Considering or deciding to resign (4) Disruption of academic plans (3) Disruptions in doctoral studies caused by work-related uncertainties (2)
Coping resources for uncertainty	Internal resources	Making alternative plans (6) Engaging in hobbies (6) Exercising (5)
	External resources	Asking someone knowledgeable for guidance on tasks (4) Talking to close ones about concerns (3)
Recommendations for reducing uncertainty	Recommendations for young researchers	Everyone should fulfill their responsibilities (2)
	Recommendations for faculty member	A structured plan should be established to define who is responsible for which tasks (11) Training sessions should be organized on how to cope with uncertainties (4)

3.1. Theme 1: Encountered uncertainties

When examining the encountered uncertainties, two sub-themes were identified: uncertainties in work life and uncertainties in doctoral life. Uncertainties in work life included being employed under Article 50-d, sudden and urgent work assignments, ambiguity in job descriptions, and impacts of structural changes within the institution. Uncertainties in doctoral life included concerns about meeting publication or project requirements, and passing doctoral courses or qualifying exams. The codes related to this main theme showed that young researchers experience uncertainties in both their professional and doctoral lives.

3.1.1. Uncertainties in work life

Some sample statements regarding uncertainties in work life are presented below:

"A few years ago, when I was employed under Article 50-d, I experienced many uncertainties. But now, being under Article 33-a, I feel more comfortable." (P13)

"Due to the change in appointment type, I have become more tolerant of uncertainty compared to the past, because I no longer worry about losing my job." (P14)

As seen in these examples, research assistants reported experiencing uncertainties while under Article 50-d status, but most of these uncertainties disappeared once they transitioned to Article 33-a status. The uncertainty stemming from Article 50-d is due to the fact that the contract ends upon completion of the PhD (Higher Education Law, 1981). This employment type may cause anxiety by creating uncertainty about the future (Çolak, 2015; Korkut & Yalçınkaya, 1999).

“Everything is uncertain in my professional life. Even if I plan my day, things can change suddenly. There might be an unexpected meeting, an urgent task, or my professor might ask me to substitute for their lecture, notifying me just five minutes before.” (P6)

“I get very angry when unexpected tasks arise. Usually, we are given very little time and expected to complete the task immediately.” (P1)

According to these statements, sudden and urgent tasks in professional life may lead to uncertainty. Because tasks arise unexpectedly and are expected to be completed urgently, participants’ plans are often disrupted. The short notice and urgency also cause frustration.

“I experience a lot of uncertainty at work. Our job descriptions are unclear, and as research assistants, we cannot clearly define our roles. We often have to perform tasks unrelated to our positions. For example, I’m expected to attend meetings or give lectures on behalf of my professors when they are unavailable, review documents for associate professorship applications, or handle errands. I feel like a personal assistant.” (P15)

“My spouse is a research assistant, so I know what they go through. Their tasks constantly change, and administrative work leaves them with no time for academic work. As lecturers, we have more flexibility.” (P9)

“When I was a research assistant, I was given all kinds of non-academic tasks and expected to complete them. Now that I’m a lecturer, I’m much happier.” (P7)

Based on the example statements above, it appears that young researchers—particularly research assistants—experience various uncertainties due to the lack of clearly defined job descriptions. They are exposed to uncertainty because responsibilities are not clearly distributed, and they are often unable to anticipate what tasks they will be assigned. Additionally, they are frequently burdened with heavy workloads, as they are required to perform tasks that should be handled by faculty members or take on administrative duties that fall outside their academic responsibilities. Statements such as *“It is unclear who will do what, and we don’t know when tasks will be assigned to us” (P1)*, *“I have to do many tasks that are not my responsibility, such as secretarial work” (P3)*, and *“Suddenly, an administrative task may be assigned; sometimes we end up doing things that should be done by faculty members” (P11)* support these observations regarding the challenges faced by research assistants.

“I work as a research assistant at a private university. The rector and deans are frequently replaced. With each change in personnel, rules also change. For example, I used to be granted academic leave, but now they’ve said I won’t be allowed time off for my dissertation. Our faculty members also change frequently, so the course schedule has to be constantly updated. There are also uncertainties about salaries. In short, the less professionalism there is, the more uncertainties arise.” (P3)

As seen in the above example, universities with less institutional professionalism tend to have more uncertainties. Changes in management and faculty members bring along shifts in responsibilities and rules, which can lead to uncertainty.

3.1.2. Uncertainties in doctoral life

Just as young researchers face numerous uncertainties in their professional lives, they also encounter various forms of uncertainty during their doctoral studies. Below are experiences related to the uncertainties that young researchers face in their doctoral journeys.

In some departments, graduation from a doctoral program requires meeting publication and project conditions, and students cannot graduate without fulfilling these requirements. For example, P11 stated, *“The processes of publishing and completing projects are very uncertain. I submit an article to a journal, but it’s unclear whether I’ll receive a response in five months, one year, or even four years.”* Based on this statement, the publication and project processes can be perceived as difficult and unpredictable. Doctoral students who

are close to completing their dissertations but whose articles have not yet been published or whose projects have not been accepted may face significant uncertainty and experience intense stress. P10 described this situation as *“the primary problem of doctoral students”*.

Moreover, delays in the data collection process can prolong the dissertation or article writing process, and thus extend the publication timeline. As P2 expressed, *“I allocated two months for data collection, but due to work-related issues, this period was extended. Therefore, I’m experiencing uncertainty about whether I can complete my academic work within the planned time.”* When academic plans are disrupted, publication processes may also be delayed, and the prospect of graduation becomes increasingly uncertain.

“I think a lot about the future. I want my future to be secure, and I constantly make plans. I wonder if I will pass my doctoral courses. Will my qualifying exam be postponed because of the courses? Will I be able to meet the publication and project requirements?” (P4)

Among the most critical phases of the doctoral process are the coursework period and the qualifying exam. In the example above, the participant expressed concerns not only about fulfilling the publication and project requirements, but also about passing doctoral courses and the qualifying exam. Another participant similarly noted, *“I feel stressed about whether I will be able to pass the qualifying exam”* (P12).

3.2. Theme 2: Consequences of intolerance of uncertainty

When examining the consequences experienced by young researchers with low tolerance for uncertainty, this main theme is observed to consist of three subthemes: emotional consequences, behavioral consequences, and academic consequences. Emotional consequences include stress, anger, and anxiety. Behavioral consequences consist of sleep problems, headache, nausea, eating problems, and relational difficulties. Academic consequences involve reduced academic motivation and decreased work performance, having to work overtime to meet deadlines, considering or deciding to resign, disruption of academic plans, and disruptions in doctoral studies caused by work-related uncertainty. An analysis of the codes related to this theme indicates that uncertainties experienced in the academic lives of young researchers can lead to negative outcomes, particularly for those with low tolerance for uncertainty.

3.2.1. Emotional consequences

Young researchers who have low tolerance for uncertainty have been observed to experience emotional symptoms such as stress, anger, and anxiety in response to uncertainty. For instance, P1 reported feeling *“anger, anxiety, and stress”* due to uncertainties, especially when having to complete tasks that should have been handled by others. P15 stated, *“I usually imagine negative scenarios. These can cause me intense stress and anxiety”* indicating that negative thinking can lead to negative emotional outcomes. P3 mentioned that when faced with consecutive uncertainties, they tended to think negatively and consequently experienced *“intense stress”*. P6 expressed that disruptions in their plans due to uncertainty caused feelings of *“intense anger”*. Similarly, P4 noted feeling *“stressed”* before exams due to uncertainty about whether they would pass their courses.

3.2.2. Behavioral consequences

Young researchers reported experiencing sleep problems as a result of the uncertainty they face. P4 stated, *“My sleep pattern is disrupted; I have trouble falling asleep, and the quality of my sleep deteriorates.”* Similarly, P9 noted, *“I have sleep problems; I can’t fall asleep, and even if I do, I can’t get up.”* In addition to sleep issues, they also reported physical symptoms such as headaches and nausea. P2 shared, *“I start overthinking, and it gives me a severe headache.”* P7 expressed, *“I think too much, and as a result, I often get migraines.”* P6 stated, *“I make plans, but when I can’t implement them, I constantly feel nauseous.”* Participants also reported eating problems due to uncertainty. P4 noted, *“I want to forget by sleeping or eating.”* P3 said, *“I either eat too much or lose my appetite completely.”*

Young researchers further expressed that the uncertainty they experience affects their ability to concentrate, both in their professional and personal lives. P4 stated, *"Due to stress, I can't complete the tasks I'm supposed to do at that moment. I keep thinking and can't concentrate."* P9 added, *"I experience a lack of attention and have difficulty focusing."* P12 noted, *"Until the uncertainty is resolved and the result becomes clear, I can't focus on anything else. I experience serious concentration problems."* These statements suggest that ongoing mental preoccupation caused by uncertainty can lead to significant difficulties in maintaining focus.

In addition to individual struggles, young researchers reported relational problems stemming from uncertainty. P2 stated, *"I sometimes reflect my tension onto my spouse."* P9 said, *"I think I've hurt my family a bit."* These examples indicate that their inability to manage the anxiety and stress caused by uncertainty may lead to relational difficulties, particularly with close family members.

3.2.3. Academic consequences

In addition to emotional and behavioral difficulties, young researchers also experience academic challenges due to the uncertainty they face. One of the primary consequences is that uncertainty reduces academic motivation and negatively affects work performance. P3 stated, *"I lose the enthusiasm to work and produce."* P14 added, *"Uncertainty frightens me. If I could focus my energy on working, I would be a better employee and researcher."* According to these statements, uncertainty may lead to a decline in academic motivation, which in turn impairs overall performance.

"I have to work after hours to meet deadlines. This disrupts my whole life — my family relationships, sleep quality, eating habits... I can't keep the promises I make to friends, and I can't join social events." (P6)

"I sometimes can't enjoy what I do. I can't separate my work and private life. Our job has no fixed working hours; I even work at night." (P4)

"When I return home after work, an unexpected task can be assigned at any moment. Since I can't foresee this, I often have to complete the task immediately. There have been many times I had to work at home or outside working hours." (P15)

"It can cause my personal plans to be disrupted. I become stressed. It forces me to sacrifice my personal time. I don't even have time for my hobbies. I feel like I'm missing out on life." (P12)

These statements indicate that having to work outside of regular hours can negatively affect the daily lives of young researchers. It may prevent them from devoting time to themselves, their families, or friends, leading to difficulty maintaining work-life balance and a sense of missing out on life.

"When I was working as a research assistant, my intolerance of uncertainty was quite severe because I was exposed to constant uncertainty. For example, I would suddenly be assigned an unplanned workload or asked to do something without knowing how, and no one would help. Because of all this, I resigned from the research assistant position and became a lecturer. Now I feel much more comfortable. My responsibilities are clear, and most importantly, I'm not given tasks beyond my defined duties." (P2)

As this example illustrates, some young researchers choose to resign from their research assistant roles due to the uncertainty they experience and continue their academic careers in more stable positions, such as lecturer roles. Others who have not yet resigned are actively considering doing so and follow job openings at other universities. As P5 stated, *"My friends and I follow the job postings at other universities."* These findings indicate that research assistants are particularly exposed to high levels of uncertainty, which can, in some cases, lead them to consider resignation.

"I face sudden workloads, which can interfere with the schedule I've set for my own research." (P14)

"I'm a planner. I want to know exactly when I'll do each task. I have no tolerance for uncertainty." (P1)

"I make plans, but when other tasks come up, my plans fall apart." (P2)

"Uncertainty causes a lot of tension for me. If I could know in advance what tasks I need to do, I could plan accordingly—but that's not possible." (P3)

According to these statements, the uncertainties young researchers face may disrupt the academic plans they have developed for themselves.

"I can't find time to work on my doctoral dissertation because of departmental tasks." (P6)

"I was almost expelled from my master's program. I always prioritized work and couldn't dedicate the same energy to my education." (P15)

These examples show that the responsibilities assigned to them can hinder their own educational progress.

3.3. Theme 3: Coping with uncertainty

An analysis of young researchers' coping resources reveals two subthemes under this main theme: internal resources and external resources. Internal resources include making alternative plans, engaging in hobbies, and exercising. External resources involve Asking someone knowledgeable for guidance on tasks, and talking to close ones about concerns.

3.3.1. Internal resources

Some young researchers reported coping with uncertainty by creating alternative plans. For example, P5 stated, *"I try to think of alternative plans so I don't have to depend on a single option."* P4 explained, *"Unexpected things can come up at the last minute, so I try to complete my tasks in advance by planning ahead."*

Others mentioned using hobbies as a way to relieve stress. P12 said, *"I usually can't find time for hobbies because work takes up too much time. I watch films and TV series, preferably comedies to help me relax."* P10 shared, *"I try to relieve stress by cooking."* P15 added, *"I make Turkish coffee."* P9 stated, *"I play football once a week. I also play computer games."*

These statements suggest that young researchers use hobbies to cope with the anxiety, stress, and anger triggered by uncertainty. In addition, sports were mentioned as another internal coping strategy. P11 said, *"I release my stress through exercise. I work out almost every day."* P10 noted, *"I can get tense when dealing with uncertainty, but I feel lighter after walking. I prefer taking long walks."* These accounts indicate that engaging in physical activity helps participants alleviate the tension caused by uncertainty.

3.3.2. External resources

Some young researchers experience uncertainty due to not knowing how to perform specific tasks. As a result, they cope by seeking guidance from others who are more experienced. Over time, they also report becoming more familiar with their tasks and experiencing less uncertainty. P3 stated, *"When there's something I don't know how to do, I ask someone who does."* Similarly, P1 shared, *"If I'm unsure how to do something, I ask my professors and try to learn from them."*

Participants also cope with uncertainty by spending time with loved ones and sharing their concerns. P3 mentioned talking to their mother, while P5 noted meeting with friends to distance themselves from work-related stress. P15 emphasized the importance of peer support: *"My biggest advantage is the atmosphere among colleagues. They are my strongest source of support at work."*

3.4. Theme 4: Recommendations for reducing uncertainty

The final theme of the study focuses on recommendations to reduce uncertainty. This main theme consists of two sub-themes: recommendations for young researchers and recommendations for faculty members. Recommendations for young researchers include: Everyone should fulfill their responsibilities. Recommendations for faculty members include: A structured plan should be established to define who is responsible for which tasks, and training sessions should be organized on how to cope with uncertainties.

An analysis of the codes under this theme reveals that the majority of suggestions were directed toward faculty members.

3.4.1. Recommendations for young researchers

P9 stated, “As research assistants, we sometimes have to complete tasks that others neglect. Everyone should fulfill their own responsibilities.” This comment highlights that when young researchers fail to carry out their responsibilities, it may create uncertainty for others. Therefore, participants emphasized that everyone should perform their duties to avoid placing an unintended burden on others.

3.4.2. Recommendations for faculty members

As discussed earlier, the greatest uncertainties faced by young researchers stem from unclear job descriptions and the possibility of sudden and urgent assignments. To minimize these uncertainties, participants expressed a desire for their tasks to be planned systematically. P12 suggested, “Tasks should be assigned in advance and scheduled over time.” Similarly, P1 stated, “There should be a structured work plan and job description for research assistants.” Participants believe that if their tasks are systematically planned, much of the uncertainty can be eliminated. As such, young researchers want to clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, they stated that tasks assigned to them should be directly related to their academic responsibilities. They emphasized that faculty members should avoid involving research assistants in personal or non-academic tasks. Moreover, as noted by P7—“Training can be organized on how to cope with intolerance of uncertainty”—offering such training programs may be beneficial for young researchers.

4. DISCUSSION

Interviews with young researchers revealed that all participants exhibited low levels of tolerance for uncertainty. It is believed that the uncertainties they experienced, the symptoms they encountered during such periods, and the resources they used to cope with uncertainty contributed to this low tolerance. These findings are consistent with previous literature suggesting that young researchers often experience psychological distress due to a range of uncertainty-related factors, such as precarious contracts, publication pressure, and institutional ambiguity (Levecque et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2021; Kismihók et al., 2022). Valuable findings were obtained around these main themes, which are also consistent with the existing literature. Previous studies have shown that intolerance of uncertainty is not exclusive to researchers. For example, it has also been observed among medical students (Stephens et al., 2021), psychologists (Quinlan et al., 2021), individuals with anxiety (Parlar-Yazıcı et al., 2025), and certain patient populations (Yang et al., 2021). However, the type and intensity of uncertainty may differ across fields; early-career researchers may face prolonged career ambiguity and institutional instability that uniquely impact their psychological well-being. While this study did not conduct direct cross-field comparisons, given the faculty distribution of participants (engineering, health sciences, arts and sciences, and education), the literature suggests that these fields may differ in terms of workload and uncertainty types (e.g., Levecque et al., 2017). Previous research has emphasized that project and publication pressures in engineering and science, and clinical practice and project conditions in health sciences, can increase the experience of uncertainty. Therefore, conducting more systematic cross-field comparisons in future studies will be important for the generalizability of the findings.

Participants' responses indicate that they most frequently experience uncertainty in their professional lives. These uncertainties include being employed under Article 50/d, the ambiguity of job descriptions, the occurrence of sudden and urgent tasks, and the impacts of structural changes within institutions. As mentioned in the introduction, research assistants in Turkey are employed under either Article 50/d or Article 33/a of the Higher Education Law. The findings show that those working under Article 50/d experience significantly more uncertainty, leading to increased stress and concerns about the future. In

contrast, those who transition to Article 33/a positions report feeling more secure and able to focus better on their academic work. It is clear that Article 50/d is associated with a higher degree of uncertainty. Therefore, the possibility of job loss after completing a doctorate can negatively impact the well-being of individuals. Considering that many young researchers wish to continue their careers in academia (Korkut et al., 1999), addressing this issue is particularly important. Another study also supports this finding, showing that the main concern for research assistants employed under Article 33/a is the heavy administrative workload, while for those under Article 50/d, the greatest concern is the lack of job security (Anıl et al., 2015).

Research assistants were found to face greater uncertainty than lecturers. Some participants had started their careers as research assistants and later transitioned to lecturer positions. The primary reason for this transition was that lecturer roles have clearly defined responsibilities, and lecturers are not typically assigned tasks outside of their roles. They do not face sudden or urgent assignments, which contributes to reduced uncertainty. Participants who made this transition reported feeling mentally more at ease. Some research assistants also expressed that they frequently considered resigning due to the uncertainties they faced. Similar findings have been reported in previous research. In a study involving 117 research assistants, 76% indicated that frequently dealing with non-academic tasks assigned by faculty members and the lack of clear job descriptions negatively affected their career development (Bakioğlu & Yaman, 2004). Another study found that half of the participating research assistants had to conduct lectures on behalf of faculty members, and 90% of them did not receive compensation for it. Although teaching is not officially included in the job description of research assistants, being required to teach on behalf of faculty members appears to be a common occurrence. Some research assistants also reported being assigned secretarial duties by their departments or faculties (Korkut et al., 1999). Thus, being obligated to perform tasks outside their job descriptions and the lack of role clarity significantly contribute to the experience of uncertainty.

It was observed that experienced young researchers were more tolerant of uncertainty compared to those with less experience. For example, P6 stated, *"I was more intolerant of uncertainty in the early years of my research assistantship. But now I'm starting to get used to it."* P12 noted, *"Over time, we learn how to cope with uncertainty."* P13 added, *"When I first started, I faced much more uncertainty. But now, it has started to decrease."* These statements suggest that over time, individuals may become more accustomed to uncertainty, possibly due to increased experience. Therefore, young researchers at the beginning of their careers may be more vulnerable to intolerance of uncertainty. A previous study supports this view, reporting that 80% of young researchers considered the early years of their profession to be the most important learning period (Bakioğlu & Yaman, 2004).

It is well established that workplace experiences significantly affect employees' mental health (Khalid & Syed, 2024). In addition, the doctoral process itself can have adverse psychological effects on researchers (Berry et al., 2021; Berry et al., 2023; Hazell et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2022). Doctoral students are at greater risk of experiencing mental health problems compared to the general population (Hazell et al., 2020). Therefore, examining intolerance of uncertainty—alongside other factors such as future anxiety, psychological resilience, and work-life balance—is valuable in addressing the current gap in the literature on the mental well-being of young researchers (Satıcı et al., 2023; Satıcı et al., 2025).

4.1. Limitation

The sample consisted of a relatively small number of young researchers. In qualitative research, it is often not feasible to include a sample that fully represents the broader population in terms of size and diversity. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Additionally, this study did not include young researchers who are currently pursuing a master's degree. Future research could involve larger and more diverse sample groups. This study focused specifically on the concept of intolerance of uncertainty as one

of the factors affecting the well-being of young researchers. Future studies may explore other concepts that influence the well-being of young researchers.

4.2. Implication

The findings of this study indicate that young researchers may exhibit low tolerance for uncertainty and face considerable difficulties in coping with uncertain situations in academic life. Participants also expressed a desire for support mechanisms, particularly in the form of structured training sessions. In light of this, institutions can consider developing and implementing training programs aimed at enhancing young researchers' ability to manage uncertainty. Such programs could include stress management, resilience-building, planning under uncertainty, and problem-solving strategies tailored to the specific challenges encountered in early academic careers. Indeed, within the scope of the project to which this study is affiliated, an eight-session group psychological counseling program was implemented to support young researchers in developing skills to cope with uncertainty (for detailed session content, see: Genç Araştırmacı, 2025). In addition, supervisors and faculty members can play a key role by offering clearer guidance and communication regarding expectations, responsibilities, and task planning. These institutional and interpersonal efforts may help reduce uncertainty, improve well-being, and support the professional development of young researchers.

4.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored the experiences of young researchers regarding their tolerance for uncertainty and identified several factors contributing to their perceived difficulties. The findings revealed that many young researchers struggle with ambiguous job definitions, sudden task assignments, and a lack of job security—particularly those employed under temporary contracts. These uncertainties can negatively impact their academic motivation, mental well-being, and career trajectories. The study also found that young researchers use a variety of internal and external coping strategies, and that experience over time may increase their tolerance for uncertainty. However, those in the early stages of their careers remain particularly vulnerable.

This study contributes to the limited body of literature on intolerance of uncertainty in academia by providing insights into the subjective experiences of young researchers. Future research could build on these findings by including larger and more diverse samples, and by exploring additional psychological and organizational factors that influence the well-being and professional development of young researchers.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

1. GİRİŞ

Bilim insanları insanlığın ilerlemesine katkı sağlamayı amaçlarken özellikle üniversitelerde görev yapan araştırmacılar yoğun iş yükü, proje bazlı sözleşmelerden doğan belirsizlikler, yetersiz finansman, uzun çalışma saatleri ve kariyer güvencesizliği gibi nedenlerle ciddi psikolojik zorluklar yaşayabilmektedir (OECD, 2021; Levecque vd., 2017). Son yıllarda doktora öğrencilerinin stres, kaygı ve depresyon gibi sorunları diğer meslek gruplarına göre daha fazla yaşadıkları ve hatta bazı durumlarda eğitimlerini yarıda bırakmayı düşündükleri rapor edilmiştir (Berry vd., 2021; Woolston, 2020; Mattijssen vd., 2021). Bu bağlamda öne çıkan kavramlardan biri belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlük olup, bireylerin belirsiz durumlara duygusal, bilişsel ve davranışsal düzeyde olumsuz tepkiler verme eğilimi olarak tanımlanmaktadır (Buhr & Dugas, 2002). Alanyazında belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlüğün kaygı, depresyon, obsesif-kompulsif bozukluk ve stresle yakından ilişkili olduğu gösterilmiştir (Holaway vd., 2006; Bottesi vd., 2019). Türkiye bağlamında ise 2547 sayılı Yükseköğretim Kanunu'nun 33/a ve 50/d maddeleri kapsamında istihdam edilen araştırma görevlilerinin iş güvencesizliği, belirsizlik kaynaklı kaygıyı artırmaktadır (Çolak, 2015). Avrupa Birliği, WHO ve ReMO girişimi gibi oluşumların araştırmacıların ruh sağlığını desteklemeye yönelik politikalar geliştirmesi bu sorunun önemini göstermektedir. Ancak genç araştırmacıların belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlük deneyimlerini inceleyen nitel çalışmalar sınırlıdır. Bu nedenle bu araştırma, genç araştırmacıların yaşadıkları belirsizlik deneyimlerini derinlemesine incelemeyi ve şu soruya yanıt aramayı amaçlamaktadır: Genç araştırmacıların belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlük deneyimleri nelerdir?

2. YÖNTEM

Bu çalışmada, genç araştırmacıların belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlük deneyimlerini anlamak amacıyla fenomenolojik desen kullanılmıştır. Bu yaklaşım, bireylerin deneyimlerini ve algılarını derinlemesine incelemeyi hedeflemektedir (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018; Creswell, 2017). Çalışmanın örneklemini, kolayda örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen 15 genç araştırmacı (8 erkek, 7 kadın; yaş aralığı 25–35; Ort.=29,67, SS=2,41) oluşturmuştur. Katılımcıların 11'i araştırma görevlisi, 4'ü öğretim görevlisi olup, farklı fakültelerde görev yapmakta ve 1–9 yıl arasında akademik deneyime sahiptir. Veriler, araştırmacılar tarafından hazırlanan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu ile toplanmış, görüşmeler Zoom üzerinden birebir çevrim içi ortamda gerçekleştirilmiştir. Her görüşme 15–30 dakika sürmüştür, katılımcıların izniyle kaydedilmiş ve sözel olarak çözümlenmiştir. Görüşmelerde, mesleki yaşamda karşılaşılan belirsizlikler, bu belirsizliklerin etkileri ve baş etme stratejilerine ilişkin sorular yöneltilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler, refleksif tematik analiz ile değerlendirilmiştir (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Araştırmacılar verileri tekrar tekrar okuyarak tümevarımsal kodlama yapmış, kodlar karşılaştırılarak temalar oluşturulmuş ve yalnızca uzlaşılan temalar bulgulara dâhil edilmiştir. Kodlayıcılar arası yüksek uyum güvenilirlik göstergesi kabul edilmiş; ayrıca katılımcıların gerçek deneyimlerini yansıtmak amacıyla doğrudan alıntılara yer verilmiştir.

3. BULGULAR, TARTIŞMA VE SONUÇ

Analizler sonucunda dört ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) Karşılaşılan belirsizlikler, (2) Belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlüğün sonuçları, (3) Başa çıkma yolları ve (4) Belirsizliğin azaltılmasına yönelik öneriler. İlk tema olan “karşılaşılan belirsizlikler” kapsamında, iş yaşamında görev tanımlarındaki belirsizlikler, ani ve acil iş yükleri, kurumsal değişikliklerden kaynaklanan sorunlar ve 50/d statüsünden doğan güvencesizlik öne çıkmıştır. Doktora yaşamında ise yayın ve proje süreçlerinin öngörülemezliği, yeterlik sınavları ve derslerdeki başarısızlık kaygısı en kritik belirsizlikler olarak belirlenmiştir. İkinci tema olan “sonuçlar” başlığı altında, belirsizliğe düşük tahammülün duygusal (stres, kaygı, öfke), davranışsal (uyku sorunları, yeme problemleri, fiziksel rahatsızlıklar, aile içi gerilimler) ve akademik (motivasyon kaybı, performans düşüklüğü, planların bozulması, işten ayrılmayı düşünme) boyutlarda olumsuz etkiler yarattığı görülmüştür. Üçüncü tema olan “başa çıkma yolları” incelendiğinde, katılımcıların içsel (alternatif plan yapma, hobilere yönelme, spor yapma) ve dışsal (deneyimli kişilerden destek alma, aile ve arkadaşlarla

paylaşma, meslektaş dayanışması) kaynaklar kullandıkları belirlenmiştir. Son tema olan “öneriler” de ise genç araştırmacılar, görev tanımlarının netleştirilmesi, görevlerin önceden planlanması, herkesin sorumluluklarını yerine getirmesi ve belirsizlikle başa çıkma konusunda eğitimler düzenlenmesi gerektiğini vurgulamıştır.

Elde edilen bulgular, genç araştırmacıların iş ve doktora yaşamlarında yoğun belirsizliklerle karşı karşıya olduklarını ve bu durumun ruh sağlıklarını olumsuz etkilediğini göstermektedir. Özellikle 50/d statüsünde çalışan araştırma görevlilerinin daha fazla belirsizlik yaşadığı ve bu nedenle geleceğe dair kaygılarının arttığı görülmektedir. Buna karşın, 33/a statüsüne geçen katılımcıların daha güvende hissettikleri ve akademik çalışmalarına daha rahat odaklanabildikleri ifade edilmiştir. Bulgular, araştırma görevlilerinin öğretim üyelerinin yerine ders vermek veya idari işler yürütmek gibi görevlerle meşgul olmalarının rol belirsizliğini artırarak motivasyon kaybına yol açtığını da ortaya koymaktadır. Literatürdeki benzer çalışmalar da bu sonuçları desteklemektedir (Bakioğlu & Yaman, 2004; Korkut vd., 1999). Bunun yanı sıra, daha deneyimli araştırmacıların zamanla belirsizliklere karşı daha toleranslı hale geldikleri, bu durumun da deneyimle kazanılan uyum becerileriyle ilişkili olabileceği görülmektedir. Dolayısıyla, mesleğin ilk yıllarında genç araştırmacıların belirsizliklere daha kırılgan olduğu ve bu dönemde psikolojik destek mekanizmalarının önemli bir rol oynayabileceği söylenebilir.

Bu araştırma, genç araştırmacıların belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlük deneyimlerini inceleyerek alanyazındaki önemli bir boşluğu doldurmuştur. Bulgular, görev tanımlarındaki belirsizliklerin, ani görevlerin ve güvencesiz çalışma koşullarının akademik motivasyonu ve ruh sağlığını olumsuz etkilediğini göstermiştir. Ayrıca, içsel ve dışsal başa çıkma stratejilerinin bu süreçte önemli işlevler gördüğü ancak erken kariyer döneminde genç araştırmacıların daha kırılgan oldukları anlaşılmıştır. Çalışma, genç araştırmacıların ruh sağlığını destekleyecek kurumsal politikaların geliştirilmesi gerektiğine işaret etmektedir. İlerleyen araştırmaların, daha geniş ve çeşitli örneklemelerle farklı fakülte ve disiplinlerdeki belirsizlik deneyimlerini karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemesi önerilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, belirsizliğe tahammülsüzlüğün genç araştırmacıların akademik ve kişisel yaşamları üzerindeki etkilerini anlamak hem akademik kurumların sağlıklı işleyişi hem de bireysel iyi oluşun desteklenmesi açısından kritik bir öneme sahiptir.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

In this study, all rules stated to be followed within the scope of the “Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive” were followed. None of the actions specified under the title of “Actions Violating Scientific Research and Publication Ethics,” which is the second part of the directive, have not been carried out.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

Ethical committee: Yıldız Technical University’s Scientific Research and Ethics Committee

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CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCHERS

Each author contributed equally to the study.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest exists for this manuscript for any of the authors.