

**Extended Abstract**

## Investigating Drug-Using University Students’ Existential Problems\*

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### Abstract

In examining the literature, many studies have revealed substance abuse to be explainable on an existential basis. However, when examining the Turkish literature, a limited amount of research is found to have focused on the relationship between drug use and existential psychological concepts. This study aims to contribute to the literature by examining university students’ substance abuse in the context of existential problems. For this purpose, qualitative interviews have been conducted with 12 university students (eight males and four females). The study began with one substance-using university student and reached the other participants using the snowball sampling method. Data have been collected through two separate interviews with the participants. The participants were asked to evaluate themselves in the first interview in the scope of existentialism. In the second interview, the findings from the first meeting and the issue of existentialism were discussed with the participants. Afterwards, the participants were asked questions about the relationship between their substance-use behaviors and their existence. A 25-question, semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher has been used to collect the necessary data. The data obtained in the study has been analyzed using NVIVO 10, a qualitative data-analysis program. According to the research findings, substance-using university students have difficulty making meaning from their lives, cannot balance freedom and responsibility, have isolated loneliness instead of constructive and productive loneliness, and have neurotic anxiety. When generally evaluating the research findings, the assumptions of existentialism appear to be explanatory in regard to substance abuse.

### Keywords

Substance abuse • Drug use • Existential psychotherapy • University students

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Substance abuse has become increasingly widespread, especially among young people, and this affects them negatively (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2014; Evcin, 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003). Many studies have been conducted on substance abuse in Turkey. However, these studies have mostly focused on variables such as extent of use (Kurupınar & Erdaamar, 2014), socio-economic factors (Karatay & Kubilay, 2004), sociodemographic characteristics (Bulut et al., 2006; Yüncü Aydın, Coşkunol, Altıntoprak, & Bayram 2006), and attitudes towards substance dependence (Altıntaş et al., 2004). Moreover, studies on the psychosocial factors of substance abuse have mainly examined the relationship between substance abuse and various psychological variables such as suicide (Demirci, 2016), hopelessness (Olçay, 2016), and self-esteem (Aydın, 2015). However, no studies are found in Turkey on substance abuse or dependence based on psychotherapy theories, to the best of the authors' knowledge. In addition, studies abroad (Carroll, 1998; Chen, 2006; Sherman & Fischer, 2002) also are limited in number on this subject. This study aims to close the gap in the literature. In this context, using the predictions of existential psychotherapies has been attempted in explaining substance abuse. The reason for choosing existential psychotherapy as a theoretical base is because a relationship exists in the literature between substance dependence and topics such as purpose, meaning, freedom, and spirituality (Chen, 2006; Gursu, 2018; Sherman & Fischer, 2002).

### **Method**

This study examines the reasons for substance abuse among university students within the scope of existential psychotherapy. For this purpose, the qualitative research technique (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013) has been used as descriptive research method.

### **Research Group**

The snowball sampling method has been used in this study. In line with the aim of the research, the first participant was contacted and then led the researcher to the other participants. During the data collection process, in-depth interviews took place with 12 university students (eight males and four females).

### **Data Collection Tool**

The study data has been collected using the semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher. The form has also been reviewed by four experts with PhDs in the field of guidance and psychological counseling.

### **Data Collection Process**

Data have been collected through two separate interviews with the participants. They were asked to evaluate themselves in the scope of existentialism in the first interview. In the second interview, the findings from the first one and the issue of existentialism were discussed with the participants. Afterwards, the participants were asked questions about the relationship between their substance-use behaviors and existence. The research data was collected through the interview method, and creating a suitable interaction environment where the participants could feel comfortable and express their opinions sincerely was attempted. To prevent data loss, a voice recorder was used during the interviews with the participants' approval. However, six participants did not want a voice recording, so notes were taken for the interviews with these participants. Participants were not asked any details about their identity in order to make them feel safe. Each participant used their own nickname in all stages of the study. Furthermore, with the aim of avoiding any drawbacks that the audio recorder may cause, the participants were informed that they could listen to the audio recordings at the end of the interview and, if they wanted, delete some or all of the recordings. The interviews lasted a half hour on average.

### **Reliability Validity**

Different methods have been used together for reliability and validity in the research. Firstly, four experts provided their opinions about the items and themes on the research interview form. All experts have doctorates in guidance and psychological counseling. Particular attention has been paid to the interviewer not affecting the respondents while answering questions during the interview. In addition, the participant confirmation method has been used after coding the research data. In this method, participants are asked whether the findings of the study accurately reflect their own beliefs. Interviewing did not start until establishing the participants' prolonged engagement and trust.

### **Data Analysis**

First the voice recordings have been transcribed and notes taken for possible sub-themes. Next the data have been coded using the qualitative data analysis program, NVIVO 10. Participants' self-expressions, conceptualizations of existential psychotherapy, and expressions discovered by the researcher have been used as codes. At a later stage, the researcher examined the suitability of the codes and possible sub-themes and asked experts on these issues their opinions. Once the coding process has been completed and the codes and sub-themes finalized, the last stage is conducted to define and interpret the findings.

## Findings

### Awareness

**Defining themselves.** Although the vast majority of participants found stating their personal information easy, their attempts at existential definitions were seen to be difficult ( $n = 8$ ). Regarding substance use, participants said it “strengthens their perceptions” ( $n = 6$ ), “helps them socialize” ( $n = 2$ ), “reorders their existential balance” ( $n = 2$ ), and “helps their self-acceptance” ( $n = 2$ ).

**Defining their world.** All participants were seen to describe the world as bad. Only one participant described the world as bad in the broad sense while also expressing that good things exist in the world. While defining the world through substance use, participants said it “makes perceiving the world easier” ( $n = 6$ ), “has both good and bad effects” ( $n = 5$ ), and “makes me peaceful” ( $n = 1$ ).

### Freedom and Responsibility

**Freedom.** According to the responses, all participants attached importance to freedom. They also expressed freedom as the basic element of life and stated trying to be free. On the relationship between perceptions of freedom and substance use with their definitions of freedom, half the participants stated that substance use liberates themselves while the other half stated that their perception of freedom was not related to substance use.

**Responsibility.** The participants seem unable to balance responsibility and freedom. Participants stated that they generally do not take responsibility for their lives ( $n = 9$ ). However, they stated being responsible for their substance use ( $n = 8$ ).

**Loneliness.** Participants generally expressed their freedom to result in loneliness ( $n = 9$ ). This loneliness is perceived as a gradual isolation from society. On the relationship between substance use and loneliness, almost all participants stated that substance use to be the reason they can cope with loneliness ( $n = 11$ ).

### Meaning

**Anxiety.** In general, the participants have been observed to be anxious ( $n = 8$ ). However, the participants stated not having any existential anxiety ( $n = 7$ ).

**Satisfaction sources.** A large majority of the participants stated not having any spiritual sources ( $n = 9$ ) and substance use to be a source of spiritual satisfaction for themselves ( $n = 9$ ).

**Life purpose.** Participants generally stated having no goals in life ( $n = 9$ ). One participant expressed internal goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000) while the other two participants expressed external goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### Discussion and Conclusion

After generally evaluating the findings, existential psychotherapy can be stated as a functional model when working with substance users and addicts. Supporting substance users and addicts in creating meaning, taking responsibility for their lives, and identifying their own existence would be beneficial for those working in this field. However, this study has certain limitations as it was conducted with a limited number of participants due to the difficulty in reaching people that could constitute the sample. More participants can be reached in future studies. Furthermore, the research has been conducted on university students. According to the researcher's observations, the overall profile of the participating university students shows them to have quite high skill levels for expression and culture. Therefore, paying attention to this issue is necessary when evaluating the research findings. Finally, empirical research designs can be constructed in future studies to examine the effects of existential psychotherapy on substance dependence and its effects on users. In this way, a healthier cause-and-effect relationship can be established.

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