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Investigating the Variable of Spiritual Inclination's Moderating Effect between Teachers' Perceived Stress Levels and Common Anxieties

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine in the context of the structural equation model the moderating effect of spiritual orientation on the relationship between the situation of common anxiety and the levels of perceived stress in individuals who teach at different types of schools. Similarly, addressing teachers' perceived stress levels, common anxieties, and spiritual orientations in the context of various demographic variables is an aim of the present study. The research universe included teachers working at various school levels in the 2018-2019 school year in the Anatolian side of the Province of Istanbul. The research sample consisted of 268 teachers from different school levels. Data were obtained using scales for perceived stress, common anxiety, and spiritual orientation and a form on demographic information. In line with the aims of this research, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis and path analysis were used. As a result of the analysis, it was concluded that the variables of stress and anxiety were in a negative and significant relationship with the variable of spiritual orientation ($r_1=-.305$; $r_2=-.227$; $p<.001$). As a result of the path analysis, spiritual orientation was seen to have a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived stress and common anxiety. The research has been discussed and finalized in light of the literature. Click or tap here to enter text.

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Keywords:

Perceived stress, common anxiety, spiritual orientation, moderator effect.introduction

1. Introduction

Teaching is a crucial profession on the points of both responsibilities and the expectations of the family, society, and nation. Teachers, who have an important function in raising generations, are likely to be stressed from time to time and experience anxiety as a result of this stress. Examining the effects of spirituality on minimizing this situation and addressing them in the context of study care quite important. In this respect, this study examines the relationship between the stress levels and anxieties that teachers perceive.

1.1. Stress

Stress is an important situation that undoubtedly affects human life negatively. Having this situation be extreme can cause other discomforts to appear in individuals. However, not all stress can be said to be harmful. In fact, Selye (1976) stated that stress could consist of two states: the first of these is beneficial and the second is harmful. According to him, harmful stress causes serious problems to appear in a person as a result of oppression, while beneficial stress contributes to providing an individual with harmony.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined stress as environmental demands in person-environment interaction that jeopardize the individual's harmony and forcing or exceeding available resources. This word comes originally from the Latin word *estricitia*. Back then, it was known to be used more in the sense of trouble or curse (Baltaş

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& Baltaş, 1998, p. 298). Ellison (1990) addressed stress as a biochemical response given in the face of threats. Stress is a force capable of leading to depression and troubles in a person as a result of various problems (Başaran, 1992). According to Ajala (2013), problems, such as stress and burnout, can be solved with spirituality and contribute to the well-being of employees

Stress is a condition that individuals encounter in all areas of life. Organisms can show resistance at a certain rate against this situation and can absorb it. In some cases, however, individuals do not confront the stress and are forced to face the negative consequences this situation brings. Burger (2006) emphasized that various negative outcomes emerge as a result of the intense pressure of stress. Faulkner (2010) stated that permanent problems can occur if an individual is exposed to long-term stress. Therefore, reducing the sources of stress as much as possible and eliminating the situations that cause stress have great importance in terms of individual psychological health. This is because being able to completely eliminate permanent problems or being able to reduce their effects requires serious effort and time. In fact, Eren (2000) emphasized in the study he did that stress causes serious physiological disorders, such as high blood pressure, shortness of breath, upset stomach, nerve pain, sleep disorders, fatigue, and extreme sensitivity. However, it is expected that teachers, who are constantly in contact with students, parents, and administrators, experience various stress situations. Kyriacou (2001) stated that due to the difficulties of the teaching profession and situations, such as anger, anxiety, stress, and depression, may arise. Hartney (2008) stated that the reason for this is the differences in students' motivation and learning levels. Kim et al. (2020) on the basis of the stress experienced by teachers; expressed as low wages, problems with parents, impossibilities in regions with low socioeconomic levels, and crowded classes. Therefore, it is seen as a result of research that the teaching profession contains various stress situations.

1.2. Spirituality

Humans, who arise from different situations with respect to their physiological, psychological, and spiritual structure, are as peaceful as much as they can face these different situations. Therefore, addressing the human only through physiological needs is insufficient and erroneous. In fact, people have spiritual needs alongside physiological needs. Spirituality is a general expression of these needs. The concept of spirituality has been kept away from the field of psychology for a long time through the impact of modernity because the emergence of psychology as a science began in Europe and America. That is why the domination over psychology has been mostly Western-sourced. At the time when psychology emerged as a science, materialism was known to have a significant effect (Schultz & Schultz, 2001, p. 81). Similarly, behaviorism also gave no value to mental and spiritual processes and saw no need to deal with these phenomena (Haque, 2001). In time, people began to be accepted not as a machine or robot but on the contrary as having various feelings and thoughts. The emergence of schools that gave importance to cognitive processes was effective in this (Pinker, 2003). Concepts that had been ignored since before this period began to be studied and slowly found their own place within the literature on psychology. Spirituality, one of these concepts, has gained particular importance recently. Studies done particularly in this field have been printed and published by reputable magazines and journals. In fact, performed studies show a positive relationship to exist between spirituality and psychological well-being (Pargament, 1997). The concept of spirituality has generally been used in the historical process in the same sense as the concept of religion (Shafranske & Sperry, 2007). However, the equal meaningfulness between spirituality and religion has been differentiated recently. This is because while spirituality is expressed as the experiences a person has individually, religion has been defined as following teachings that are more accepted.

1.3. Anxiety

A situation of thinking internal, apprehensive, troubling, concerning, or bad things will happen without a clear cause is called anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2009). Emotions of this type, rather than being temporary, are ongoing responses in the face of more prolonged and spontaneous dangers. Although mild symptoms appear, various states of panic and advanced levels of concern can also be seen. Öztürk and Uluşahin (2011) stated that in the case of anxiety, situations could also be seen, such as accelerated heart rate, stomach aches, tightness in the muscles, and emotional feelings of fear. At the same time, exaggerated perceptions of danger and unrealistic beliefs are also seen on the issue of what bad things can happen. One of the most-seen disorders in some societies is anxiety. In a study done by Kessler et al. (2010), the lifetime incidence of anxiety disorders

was found to be 29%. This case shows how high anxiety is in some societies. Öztürk and Uluşahin (2011) stated in their study that anxiety usually starts at an early age, with 10-25 years old being the riskiest period. Similarly, Sareen et al. (2011) found in the study they conducted that people with low income and women have higher rates of anxiety. Anxiety is a condition that can be seen in every person. Therefore, teachers who have executive positions in the education and training process are also likely to bear various concerns. That teachers can become stressed is a known fact, especially while preparing classes or reviewing students' learning outcomes. In cases of prolonged stress are the situations where anxiety occurs. Consequently, spirituality is considered to have a high-level reducing effect on the cases of anxiety experienced by teachers who conduct educational and teaching activities experience in a stressful environment.

1.4. Present Study

This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining the moderator effect of the spiritual orientation variable on the relationship between perceived stress and general anxiety of individuals teaching at different levels. In general, various studies have been conducted on teachers' stress and anxiety (Bayramoğlu et al. 2020; Göçen, 2019; Keoh, 2002; Kırimoğlu et al. 2011; Nart & Batur, 2014). Although various studies have been conducted to determine teachers' stress and anxiety levels, to our knowledge, there is no study examining the moderator effect of spiritual orientation on the relationship between teachers' perceived stress and general anxiety. Therefore, it can be said that this study is the first study on this subject. Thus, it is tested whether spiritual orientation has an effect on reducing the stress that occurs in teachers from turning into anxiety. The effects of the spiritual orientation variable on stress and anxiety are examined. There are two assumptions in this study. First, perceived stress negatively affects general anxiety. Second, spiritual orientation reduces the negative association between perceived stress and general anxiety. The second assumption is the main aim of this study. Figure 1 shows the main hypothesis of this research.

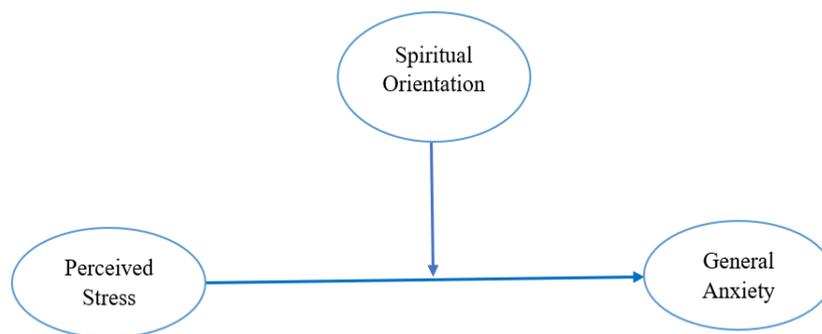


Figure 1. The Hypothetical Model Related to The Goal of The Research.

2. Method

2.1. Research Model

This research investigated the relationships the various variables had with each other with the relational screening model to speculate about the goal for testing the direct and indirect effects among these variables. To achieve this goal, a structural equation model (SEM) was used.

2.2. Study Group

Because reaching the general universe in this research was troublesome, the working universe of the study was used. In this direction, the working universe of the research included teachers employed in various schools on the Anatolian side of the province of Istanbul in the spring semester of the 2018-2019 school year. While determining the sample size of the present research, the sample size was calculated as $n = 360$ with a sampling error of $\pm 5\%$ at a 95% confidence interval for the non-homogenous structure of the universe (Salant & Dillman, 1994). To be able to increase the representative percentage of the sample, a sufficient number of samples was determined as 300 people by considering possible data losses. The sample group of the research was formed of teachers selected at random using the proportional convenience sampling method from the schools that formed the universe of this study. This study, in which 287 people participated, continued after eliminating the scales that had been inadequately filled in using the answers from 268 teachers in total, 172

women (64.2%) and 96 men (35.8%). Of these teachers, 13 (4.9%) are employed in kindergartens, 100 (37.3%) in primary schools, 92 (34.3%) in middle schools, and 63 (23.5%) in high schools.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

2.3.1. The Perceived Stress Scale. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983). The Turkish adaptation was performed by Eskin, Harlak, Demirkıran, and Dereboy (2013). The PSS, which consists of 14 items, has been designed for the purpose of determining what kind of stress people perceive from situations in their life. The scale is a 5-point Likert type, and participants can receive scores for each item ranging from "Never" (0 points) to "Very often" (4 points). Seven of the items (Items 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, & 13) are reverse scored. Fourteen items are found on the long form (PSS-14), and 4 or 10 items are found on the short forms (PSS-4 and PSS-10). While the PSS-14 scores range from 0-56, PSS-10 scores range from 0-40, and PSS-4 scores range from 0-16. The higher the score a person obtains shows that person to have higher levels of stress.

2.3.2. Spiritual Orientation Scale. This was developed by Kasapoğlu (2015) for the purpose of evaluating individuals' spiritual orientation. As a result of the performed validity and reliability studies, a scale consisting of 16 items and one dimension has been obtained. The scale has been prepared as a 7-point Likert type where 1 = I completely disagree and 7 = I completely agree. The scale has no reverse-scored items. The lowest obtainable score on the scale is 16 and the highest is 112. The overall score indicates the degree of spiritual orientation. The result has been reached showing the single-factor, 16-item model that emerged as a result of the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to have an adequate level of compliance. The fit indexes were examined as a result of the confirmatory factor analysis, and the chi-square value has been found to be significant ($\chi^2 = 239.718$, $SD = 100$, $p = .000$). Additionally, the fit indexes are acceptable ($\chi^2 / SD = 2.39$ is less than 3, $RMSEA = 0.06$, $RMR = 0.05$, $GFI = 0.93$, $AGFI = 0.90$, $CFI = 0.95$, $IFI = 0.95$, $NFI = 0.92$) and have emerged with good fit. The scale has been determined to form from one factor that explains 47.50% of the total variance, and the fit indices of the model represented by one dimension are suitable. The scale's reliability study was tested using Cronbach's alpha and test-retest reliability coefficients. The alpha coefficient has been found as .87 and the test-retest reliability coefficient as $r = .84$ (Kasapoğlu, 2015).

2.3.3. Generalized Anxiety Disorder Test-7 (GAD-7). GAD-7 is a short test from Spitzer et al. (2006) that measures general anxiety disorder by considering the DSM-IV-TR criteria. The scale is a measuring tool developed as a 4-point Likert type formed of seven items that asks people about the situations they experienced in the last two weeks. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Konkan et al. (2013). The score obtainable for each item ranges from "Never" (0 points) to "Almost every day" (3 points). The scale's breakpoints have been identified as light (5 points), moderate (10 points), and serious (15 points). Investigating the GAD-diagnosis of participants with a total score of 10 or higher is believed necessary. When selecting the total score threshold as 10, the sensitivity for GAD diagnosis was 89% and the specificity to be 82%.

2.4. Data Analysis

To make the necessary analyses with the data obtained within the scope of this research, the data must meet some assumptions. The most important of these is whether the data can provide normality values. Within the scope of this research, data were collected from 287 teachers. However, 19 data were not included in the analysis due to the incomplete filling of some data and the systematic incorrect filling of some data. Outliers were also included in these extracted data. Before proceeding to the analyses, normality tests were performed for the variables. According to the results of the normality tests, it was concluded that the data were normally distributed and the analysis was started. The results regarding this are shown in Table 1 in the findings section. This study aimed to analyze examine the positive moderator effect of spiritual orientation on the relationship between stress and anxiety of teachers working in different branches. The scales collected data after the necessary permissions had been obtained from the owners. In analyzing the data, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was used first with the help of the package program SPSS 22.0, then later the package program AMOS 20.0 was used for testing the structural equation model. Path analysis is a collection of statistical techniques that allow the possibility for testing the causal and one-way relationship sequences that are predicted in relation to the variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2015).

3. Findings

The prerequisite analyses were performed concerning the reliability of this study before moving on to the main analyses that form the basic hypothesis of this research. In this context, the average scores of the participants appearing in this research obtained from the scales that were used, the standard deviations, Cronbach’s alpha values, skewness, kurtosis values and Kolmogorov Smirnov results are shown in Table 1. When examining the Cronbach’s alpha values for the reliability of the scales used in this research as seen in Table 1, the obtained results show the scales and their sub-dimensions to possess sufficient reliability values (Büyüköztürk, 2015). Likewise, these results confirm the assumption that the data are normally distributed.

Table 1. The Mean, Standard Deviation, and Cronbach Alpha Values from the Scores the Sample Obtained from the Scales

Variables	N	X	SD	Cronbach’s Alpha	Kolmogorov Smirnov	Skewness	Kurtosis
1.Perceived Stress	268	36.33	9.274	.787	.050	-.347	-.043
2.Spiritual Orientation	268	83.31	20.795	.982	.053	.678	.997
3.General Anxiety	268	13.46	4.454	.904	.125	.760	-.272

Pearson moment-product correlation was performed for the purpose of determining the intensity and direction of the relationships among the variables that took place within the scope of the research, and the analysis results are presented in Table 2. Various conditions must be met to be able to test the moderating effect, which is the main purpose of this study. Cohen and Cohen (1983) described these conditions as follows: A moderating effect is expected to either strengthen or weaken the relationship of the variable or variables with the dependent and independent variables. The correlation values in Table 2 have been interpreted in consideration of the preconditions.

Table 2. The Correlation for the Study’s Variables

Variables	Perceived Stress	Spirituality	General Anxiety
Perceived Stress	1	-0.305*	.589*
Spiritual Orientation	-0.305*	1	-0.227*
General Anxiety	.589*	-0.227*	1

* $p < .001$

The correlation values must be appropriate to be able to perform analyses on the moderating effect of the variable of spiritual orientation on the relationship of perceived stress and generalized stress, which is the main purpose of the study. When looking at the relationship among the variables of perceived stress, spirituality, and generalized anxiety, all the variables are seen in the table to have a significant relationship. Similarly, spiritual orientation, which is considered the moderating variable, is also seen to have a significant relationship with the other two variables as a result of the analyses. Therefore, the process will continue with analyzing the moderating effect of spirituality, which is considered the moderating variable. In the context of these data, the model passed to the testing phase. The findings related to the model are presented in Figure 2.

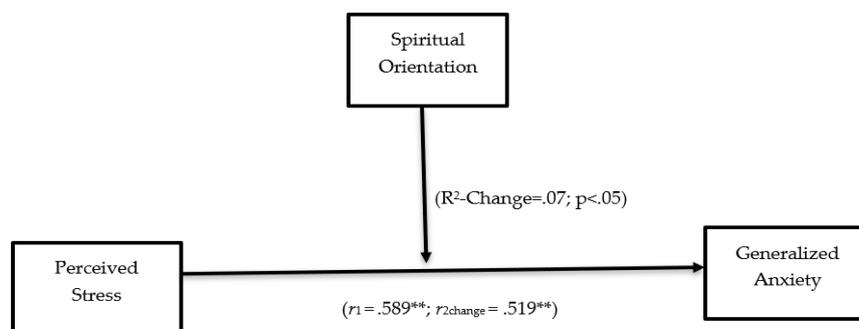


Figure 2. Analyzing The Moderating Effect of The Variable of Spiritual Orientation an The Relationship Between Perceived Stress and Generalized Anxiety

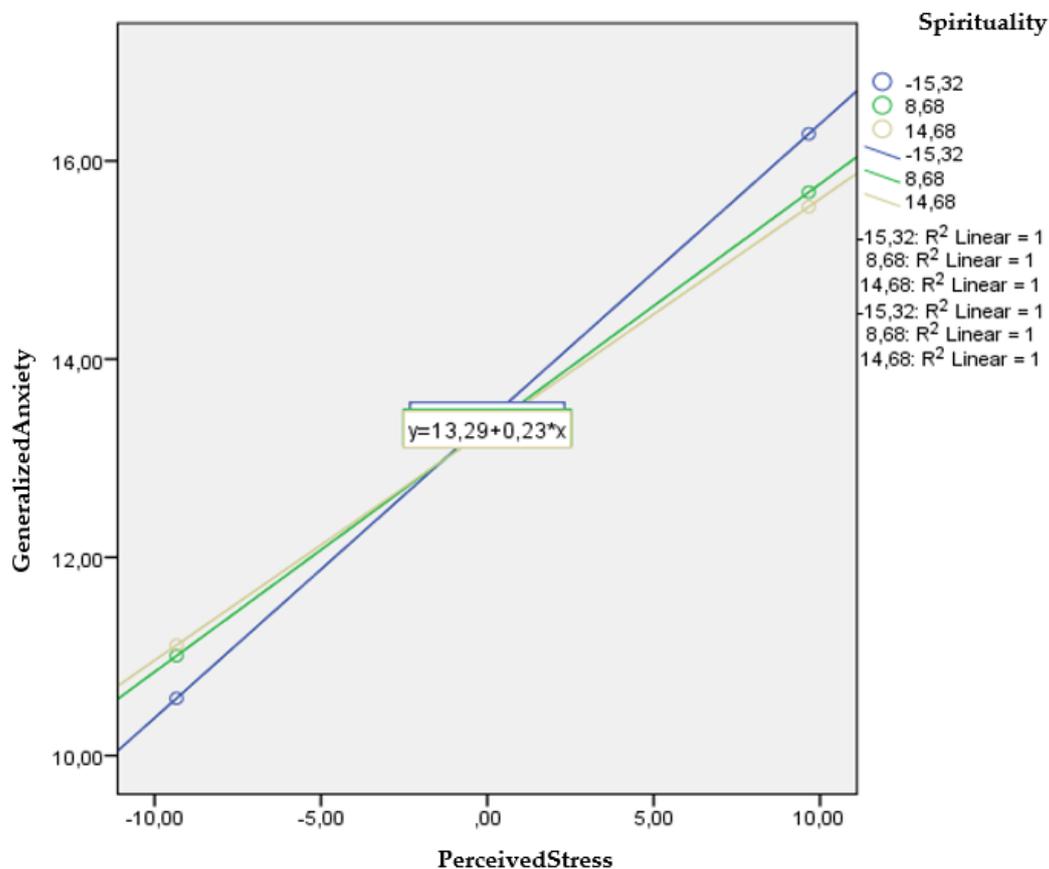
As a result of the analyses performed for the purpose of examining the variable of spiritual orientation's moderating effect on the relationship between perceived stress and generalized anxiety, the relationship between stress and anxiety was found as $r_1 = .589$ when the variable of spiritual orientation was not added together. This case meant the variable of perceived stress predicted generalized anxiety at the rate of 34.7%. When the variable of spiritual orientation was added as the moderator to the relationship between these two variables, perceived stress and generalized anxiety were seen to significantly reduce ($r_2 = .519, p < .05$). However, the total amount of perceived stress and spirituality were found to account for generalized anxiety was 36.6%. According to the results obtained from these analyses, spiritual orientation significantly reduced the relationship between the stress levels teachers perceived and their generalized anxiety. The results regarding the model are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Moderator Effect Analysis Results

		Coeff.	SE	t	P
Constant	i_V	74.26	9.78	7.19	.000
Perceived Stress (X)	b_1	.59	.19	5.53	.000
General Anxiety (W)	b_2	2.94	.54	4,96	,000
Perceived Stress \times Spiritual Orientation (XW)	b_3	,10	,07	3,57	,009

Model : $R^2 = 36.6$, MSE = 74.88, F (33. 93), $p < .05$

When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that the moderator effect of the spiritual orientation variable is significant in the relationship between perceived stress and general anxiety ($p < .05$). According to this result, spiritual orientation reduces teachers' perceived stress levels and significantly prevents the formation of general anxiety. The findings regarding this result are presented in Figure 3.



1Blue line = Low-level spirituality; 2Green line = Medium-level spirituality; 3Yellow line = High-level spirituality

Figure 3. Graph Regarding The Moderating Effect of The Variable of Spiritual Orientation on The Relationship Between Perceived Stress and Generalized Anxiety.

When examining Figure 3, the relationship between teachers' perceived stress levels and generalized anxieties is seen to be directly proportional at a high level (blue line). When testing the moderating effect of spirituality, a reduction is again understood from the figure in the relationship between perceived stress and generalized anxiety states (yellow line). If said another way, spiritual orientation decreases the intensity of the relationship between perceived stress levels and anxiety.

4. Discussion

The research findings are discussed in this section. In examining the literature, although studies are seen to have addressed the relationship between perceived stress levels and generalized anxiety, to our knowledge, no study is reached where the moderating effect of the variable of spiritual orientation on the relationship between these two variables was examined in the context of a sample of teachers. Therefore, this research is considered to be an original case to fill this gap. The results related to this research have been supported and discussed through existing studies that have been conducted over the variables.

This research has examined the moderating effect of the variable of spiritual orientation on the relationship between teachers' perceived stress and generalized anxieties. Before proceeding with the analyses, whether or not the obtained data were appropriate for such a study was looking at, and the result emerged that the data were appropriate for this research. Each scale's internal consistency value was examined, and this coefficient was had a value at the acceptable level for all scales (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$; Büyüköztürk, 2015).

Discussions began related to the moderating effect of spiritual orientation, which forms the main purpose of this study. In analyzing the correlation values among the variables used in the scope of this research, a positive and significant relationship ($r = .589$; $p < .001$) has been found between perceived stress and generalized anxiety, a negative and significant relationship ($r = -0.305$; $p < .001$) between perceived stress and spiritual orientation, and a negative and significant relationship ($r = -0.227$; $p < .001$) between generalized anxiety and spiritual orientation. According to these results, generalized anxiety also increases with increases in perceived stress. Spirituality decreases with increases in perceived stress. Spirituality decreases with increases in generalized anxiety. When examining the literature, studies are seen to have investigated the relationships that exist among these variables together. Sariçam, Şahin and Soyuçok (2015) in their study arrived at a result similar to our study on the relationship between stress and anxiety ($r = .57$). McLaughlin and Hatzenbuehler (2009) arrived at the result in their study that stress increases anxiety. According to the results obtained from various studies (Robinson & Alloy, 2008; Watkins, 2008), ruminating (thinking repeatedly) on the effects that stressful events have on anxiety is shown to have significant effects. Similarly, stress cases that occur in life are also known to increase anxiety. Watkins (2008) stated the effects of focusing on repetitive thoughts to be under the reasons that stress causes anxiety. Therefore, the ruminations that form as a result of stress can become a trigger for psychological disorders, such as anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Reiss, 1991). Brown (1993) stated that an intense relationship exists between stressful situations and anxiety. Meanwhile, research results are seen related to health where stressful situations are also the cause for long-term anxiety (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Therefore, stress is conclusively the trigger or instigator of anxiety and similar disorders.

One of the other important purposes of this study is examining whether or not the variable of spiritual orientation has a moderating effect in reducing the intensity of the relationship between perceived stress and generalized anxiety. As a result of the analyses, spiritual orientation is seen to significantly decrease the inter-relationships. Again obtained as a result of the analyses, spirituality has a negative relationship with stress and anxiety. The research on examining the effects of religion/spirituality on mental health can be said to have increased in recent times. König et al. (2001) stated that religious/spiritual states have a positive effect on mental health problems. Similar discoveries can be seen in the study of Batson et al. (1993). Again, some studies have reached the result that the rate of depression and anxiety is lower in people who are more religious or spiritual (König et al., 1998). Likewise, the result has arrived at that religiousness, and spirituality have an inverse relationship with anxiety and depression disorders (Braam et al. 2001). Sperry (2003) stated that an ongoing search exists for therapies that will address clients' concerns. Miller and Thoresen (2003) stated spirituality to have good aspects toward psychological problems and even physical problems.

5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting the results obtained from this study. First of all, since this study is quantitative, it does not allow us to make causal inferences about the results of the relationships between the variables. Thus, it would be useful to conduct qualitative studies in which the research results are questioned with justification. Second, the data from this study are limited to teachers working in public schools only. For this reason, it would be beneficial to conduct similar studies with teachers working in the private sector. Third, in this study, we examined the moderating effect of spiritual orientation on the relationship between perceived stress and general anxiety. However, this study can be designed to include different variables. This quantitative study shows the positive effects of spiritual orientation in general. Conducting qualitative studies examining the causes of these will carry the results of this study to a different dimension. Also, the main purpose of the research examined the moderating effect of the variable of spiritual orientation on the relationship between perceived stress and generalized anxiety, and spiritual orientation's moderating effect on reducing the relationship between stress and anxiety has been obtained as a result of the analyses. This result shows spiritual orientation to be effective at reducing stress and anxiety. Therefore, the following recommendations can be presented to researchers regarding the results of this study:

- This research has been conducted with examining the moderating effect of spiritual orientation on the relationship between stress and anxiety. Performing studies in which different variables are also tested would enrich the literature on this topic.
- This research has been performed with teachers. More comprehensive studies that will be performed with different segments of society are considered able to provide useful information.
- Doing psychological training with spiritually-oriented content would be beneficial for seeing in more detail the effect spiritual orientation has on stress and anxiety.
- Qualitative research can be performed that investigates the causes underlying how spirituality reduces stress and anxiety.

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