Randomized controlled trial of online empathy focused intercultural communication program for Turkish local society to increase their social acceptance towards refugees

Asst. Prof. Arzu ÇALIŞKAN SARI, Ph.D., Çankırı Karatekin University

Prof. Özden YALÇINKAYA ALKAR, Ph.D., Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University

Abstract

The current study investigated the effectiveness of an online-based, empathy-focused intervention program that is developed for Turkish local society to increase their positive attitudes towards refugees. The sample of the four-week intervention program consisted of 52 participants that were randomly assigned to experimental (n=26) and control groups (n=26). Participants completed the Attitudes towards Syrians Scale in both groups before and after the intervention program. In the control group, no implementation was provided, only the individuals filled the pre-test and post-test questionnaires within the same periods as the experimental group. Participants in the experimental group also filled a sentence completion activity at the end of the program. The results of the study showed that Empathy Focused Intercultural Communication Program for Turkish Local Society showed a positive promissory approach for increasing positive attitudes towards Syrian refugees, increasing emphatic and altruistic approach. Lastly, these results, limitations, and suggestions for future research were discussed and the possible implications were shared.

Introduction

After the Syrian civil war that started in 2011, millions of people had to migrate both within and out of the country. The conflict in Syria has resulted in the internal displacement of more than six million people and the long-term mass displacement of more than fve million people abroad (IOM, 2020). Turkey is one of the countries hosting the largest Syrian refugee population in the world (Çavlin, 2021). More than 3.7 million Syrian refugees live in Turkey and the government of the Republic of Turkey has granted temporary protection status to Syrians (Presidency of Migration Management, 2021). Hosting such a large number of refugees brings about some important social problems, especially in establishing harmonious relationships between the local community and refugee. The current migration situation and social tension in Turkey make it necessary to develop and implement some intervention programs to reduce the negative attitudes, intergroup anxiety, and prejudices of the local community towards refugees, especially towards Syrians, and to strengthen them in the context of intercultural communication. In international literature, it is seen that school-based curriculum programs are applied mostly to student samples in the context of multicultural life, breaking prejudices against refugees and preventing racism (Mansfeld & Kehoe, 1994; Vrij et al., 2003; Walker & Crogan, 1998). Besides school-based curriculum programs, anti-racist intervention programs are also widely used. According to literature, anti-racist intervention programs have been more beneficial and effective for children and young people than implementing a multicultural curriculum in reducing intergroup prejudices, as they include in-group discussions, activities such as role-playing, and allow them to rethink existing thoughts and attitudes (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Dei, 1996; McGregor, 1993; Spencer, 1998). The present study **aims to change** the attitudes of Turkish local society members in a positive way towards all migrant groups, especially Syrian groups with the help of the intervention program. Individuals participating in this program understand what culture is and learn the features of culture and gain awareness regarding cultural differences. They also comprehend the importance of empathy in intercultural communication with the help of role-playing, gaining deep knowledge of ethnocentrism, prejudice, discrimination, and learning about types of discrimination.

Materials

A demographic form, A Scale for Attitudes towards Syrians Living in Turkey, the expectation from the program, sentence completion activity on attitudes towards Syrians, and related empathy can be considered as the data collection forms.
A Scale for Attitudes towards Syrians Living in Turkey:
This scale was developed to assess the attitudes of Turkish local people towards Syrians (Çalışkan-Sarı & YalçınkayaAlkar, 2018). The scale consists of 25 items and it is Likert type.
Short Answer Form Related to Expectations for Training Program:
Before starting the training program, the participants in the intervention group were asked questions that they could give an open-ended answer about what they expect from the program and what they hope to learn.
Sentence Completion Activity Form:
The participants in the experimental group completed the sentences prepared by the researcher in the form of short answers according to their opinions at the end of the intervention program.

Methodology

Research Pattern: The quantitative research method was used in this study. When the research is analyzed in terms of revealing the effects of independent variables (participation in the intervention program) on the dependent variables (attitude towards Syrians); it is an experimental model. This model was carried out by using a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test comparison groups.
Recruitment Adult local community members over the age of 18 were reached through an announcement about the program on online platforms. In this context, 52 people in total stated that they would like to participate in the program and register by sending an e-mail to the researcher. A WhatsApp group consisting of these people was formed and randomly divided into two groups as experimental and control groups. In this context, 26 people were assigned to the experimental group and 26 people to the control group.
Procedure: In the experimental group, an online intervention program called "Empathy Focused Intercultural Communication Program for Turkish Local Community to Increase Their Social Acceptance towards Migrants" was conducted for 4 weeks and progressed to one hour each week. In the control group, no implementation was made, only the individuals filled the pre-test and post-test questionnaires within the same periods as the experimental group

Results

Impact of the Empathy Based Intervention Program
For the experimental group, the observations for pretest had an average of 78.81 (SD =24.37, Min=41.00, Max=125.00). The observations for post-test had an average of 94.23 (SD=22.93, Min=28.00, Max=123.00). The observations for follow up had an average of 95.85 (SD=20.85, Min=48.00, Max=123.00) for the experimental group. For the control group, the observations for pre-test had an average of 69.71 (SD=22.10, Min=32.00, Max=117.00). The observations for post-test had an average of 66.57 (SD=22.85, Min=32.00, Max=115.00

Mixed Design ANOVA Results
A mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) with one within-subjects factor and one between-subjects factor was conducted to determine whether significant differences exist between pre-test and post-test scores of the levels of grouping.
The main effect for the group was significant, $F_{(1, 45)}=8.44$, p=0.006, indicating that there were significant differences in pre-test and post-test between the levels of grouping. The experimental group's total pre-test and posttest scores are significantly higher than the total pre-test and post-test scores of the control group. The main effect for the within-subjects factor was significant, $F_{(1, 45)}=6.20$, p=0.017, indicating there were significant differences between the values of pre-test and post-test. The total post-test scores of the experiment group for positive attitudes towards Syrians were higher than the pre-test scores of the experiment group. However, the total post-test scores of the control group were lower than the total pre-test scores. The interaction effect between the within-subjects factor and group (Condition x Time) was significant, $F_{(1, 45)} = 14.17$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the relationship between pre-test and post-test differed significantly between the levels of grouping. In other words, attitudes towards Syrian refugees changed between the pre-test and post-test in the intervention condition but did not change between pre-test and posttest in the control condition.
The current intervention program not only led to an increase in people's positive attitudes but also an overall increase in participants' empathy levels and altruistic behavior towards Syrians. This result is reached through the sentence completion task applied at the end of the program. The general subject of the sentence completion task is about the increase in their empathy levels.

Conclusion

To conclude, despite the limitations of the current intervention program, it has had a positive impact on attitudes towards refugees in a limited time and has led to positive changes in local people's empathy and intercultural communication. In the countries like Turkey where the ratios of migrants are high, it is essential to implement intervention programs for the local community members that will strengthen empathy and intercultural communication. In most countries, such programs have been implemented in secondary and high schools. However, it is necessary to increase the number of programs aimed at reducing prejudices towards migrant groups in the adult sample, as well.

Recommendations

In the present study, no intervention was implemented in the control group and the group was considered as a waiting group. Only pre-test and post-test were performed for the control group. However, in future studies, two types of control groups can be used. One of them will be the waiting group and no program will be implemented, while the other control group can be trained on any subject independent from empathy, prejudice, and discrimination themes. Comparing these three groups in terms of attitudes towards migrants can provide stronger data.
In addition, it was not possible to conduct this intervention study face-to-face during the Covid-19 outbreak, where there was a complete obstruction from time to time and schools were mostly closed in Turkey. After the Coronavirus outbreak, this program can also be applied face to face. In this way, some negative effects of online programs like possible problems with the internet or technology use can be reduced and more interaction with the participants can be achieved.. In future studies, the comparison of the effects of both online and face-to-face programs for changing attitudes towards refugees will make a great contribution to the literature. In this way, the effect of methodological differences in attitude change will also be recognized.

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