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# THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN CUSTOMER ORIENTATION ON THE ROAD TO CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

MÜŞTERİ MEMNUNİYETİNE GİDEN YOLDA DUYGUSAL ZEKÂNIN  
MÜŞTERİ ODAKLILIK ÜZERİNDEKİ ROLÜ

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## **Abstract**

In today's increasing competition, it has become more critical for businesses to retain their customers and increase their loyalty. Therefore, the business should carry out its activities in a customer-centred manner. To be successful in this customer-oriented approach, employees must do their job with this perspective. It is seen that employees in the customer-oriented approach need emotional intelligence (EI) and cognitive intelligence to show superior performance. In this context, the study aims to determine the effect of emotional intelligence on employees' customer orientation. While emotional intelligence was measured with a four-dimensional scale, customer orientation was measured using a one-dimensional scale. The data were obtained from 241 employees working in a call centre by questionnaire method. According to the results, it was seen that except for the self-emotional appraisal [SEA] dimension, the other three dimensions of emotional intelligence (others' emotional appraisal [OEA], regulation of emotion [ROE], and, use of emotion [UOE]) have a significant and positive effect on customer orientation.

**Key Words:** Emotional intelligence, WLEIS, customer orientation, call center employees.

## **Özet**

Günümüzde gittikçe artan rekabette işletmelerin müşterilerini elde tutması ve sadakatlerini artırması daha önemli hale gelmiştir. Bunun için işletmenin faaliyetlerini müşteri merkezli gerçekleştirmesi gerekmektedir. Müşteri odaklı bu yaklaşımda başarılı olabilmek için çalışanların bu bakış açısı ile görevlerini yapmaları gerekir. Müşteri odaklı yaklaşımda çalışanların üstün performans gösterebilmeleri için bilişsel zekâ kadar duygusal zekâyâ da ihtiyaçları olduğu

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görülmektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışma, duygusal zekanın çalışanlar üzerinde müşteri odaklılık üzerindeki etkisini belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Duygusal zekâ dört boyutlu bir ölçekle ölçülürken; müşteri odaklılık tek boyutlu bir ölçek kullanılarak ölçülmüştür. Veriler, bir çağrı merkezinde çalışan 241 çalışandan anket yöntemi ile elde edilmiştir. Elde edilen sonuçlara göre, duygusal zekanın kendi duygularını değerlendirme [KDD] boyutu dışında diğer üç boyutunun (başkalarının duygularını değerlendirme [BDD], duyguların düzenlenmesi [DD] ve duyguların kullanımı [DK]) müşteri yönlülük üzerinde anlamlı ve pozitif bir etkisi olduğu görülmüştür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Duygusal zekâ, WLEIS, müşteri odaklılık, çağrı merkezi çalışanları.

## INTRODUCTION

Increasing competition with the globalizing market, shortening of product life cycles, more sophisticated customers are some tendencies that require advanced technologies in a competitive environment. The ability to communicate more frequently and efficiently with current and potential customers, suppliers, and partners is essential in today's business conditions (Prabhaker, Sheehan, & Coppett, 1997, p. 222). Today, customer-focused companies; have gone beyond the concept of marketing, which prioritizes the consumer's needs, and have become organizations that aim to build a unique bridge with each customer instead of a general relationship with the consumers (Naktiyok & Timuroğlu, 2008, p. 174).

Today, competition transforms customer relations into a project on its own. Businesses that do not pay attention to the wishes and needs of their customers and stay away from their customers under intense competition conditions fail. Businesses have to make significant changes in traditional customer relations to maintain their market share, resist competition or gain a competitive advantage. For this reason, businesses should implement customer relations management, which constantly monitors the customer, increases his satisfaction, and makes him a loyal customer, connects him to the company, and turns him into a business partner (Baydaş, 2015, p. 404).

Employees (call centre operators) in call centres that emerged in this context are the main link between the business and the customer. Organizations that care about customer satisfaction and continuity need the services of call centres. For call centres, ensuring customer satisfaction is essential for efficiency and sustainability (Çil & Baysal, 2020, p. 175). Considering that call centres are essential for customer relationship management (Feinberg, et al., 2000, p. 132), it is crucial to have customer-oriented employees providing customer satisfaction.

Customer orientation is characterized by the behaviour that assists the customer make the purchasing decision and the help that best meets long-term needs (Poujol & Tanner, 2010, p. 33). Customer-oriented employees can better anticipate the current and future needs of the customers. Many personal characteristics of the employee affect being customer-oriented. The emotional intelligence (EI) of employees is thought to be one of these characteristics. Because the emotions which employees use in their interactions with customers shape their perceptions about the quality of service and performance outcomes of employees (Kearney, et al., 2017, p. 185).

Some researchers define the concept of EI differently. A common definition of EI is the ability to be aware of one's own emotions, recognize the feelings of the people around them, and manage and use them in their favour by arranging them effectively. This skill allows people to use all the emotions they experience to increase their happiness in life, develop themselves, and establish positive relationships with other people and their environment (Eren, 2010, p. 348).

This study was designed to test the assumption that EI affects employees' customer orientation. In the study, firstly, the EI concept was mentioned, then the customer orientation concept was evaluated together with customer satisfaction. A literature

search was conducted, and studies dealing with the relationship between EI and customer satisfaction and customer orientation were examined. Afterwards, the hypotheses formed based on the conceptual framework were tested with the data obtained from the call centre personnel who had a direct connection with the customer. Finally, the findings are interpreted in the conclusion section.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Emotional Intelligence**

In outlining his theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner (1983) identified two forms of personal intelligence: intrapersonal intelligence, which is the ability to access one's own emotional life, and interpersonal intelligence, which is the ability to read others' moods, intentions, and desires.

Gardner (1983) considered personal intelligence as biologically based information processing capacities, one inward, the other outward - but intertwined. In psychoanalysis, these abilities are often referred to as emotional self-awareness and empathy. These basic abilities of personal intelligence are at the centre of the EI structure defined initially by Salovey and Mayer (1990) (Taylor, Parker, & Bagby, 1999, p. 340).

Reuven Bar-On (1988) was the first to assess emotional intelligence in terms of a measure of well-being. He used the concept of emotional quotient in his doctoral thesis before it was called emotional intelligence and gained popularity and before Salovey and Mayer (1990) published the first model of EI (Goleman, 2001, p. 17).

EI was first encountered as a concept in the studies of Mayer, DiPaolo and Salovey (1990) and Salovey and Mayer (1990). They defined EI "as a subset of social intelligence that includes the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions and feelings, distinguish between them, and use this information to guide one's thoughts and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, s. 189). The hierarchical EI model, which they developed and later modified in Salovey and Mayer (1990), assumed that EI was an umbrella concept consisting of three different components: the evaluation and expression of emotions, the regulation of emotions, and the use of emotional information in thinking and action (Petrides & Furnham, 2000, p. 313). Similarly, Goleman (1995) stated that Salovey and Mayer's definition addresses EI in five main areas (Goleman, 1995, p. 43):

- Knowing emotions: Self-awareness—recognizing an emotion as it is—is the foundation of EI.
- Managing emotions: Handling emotions appropriately is a skill based on self-awareness.
- Motivating oneself: Regulating feelings for a purpose is crucial for attention, self-motivation and proficiency, and creativity.
- Recognizing emotions in others. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is a fundamental human skill.
- Dealing with relationships. The art of relationship is, highly, the ability to manage emotions in others.

According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), people with EI (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 201):

- Aware of his feelings and those of others.
- Open to positive and negative aspects of inner experience and can recognize them.
- Such awareness will often allow for effective regulation of effect in oneself and others, thereby contributing to well-being.
- Therefore, the emotionally intelligent person usually enjoys being around and makes others feel better.

It is expected that all these features will have an impact on the working life as well as in the personal life. Conflicting views have been presented from past to present about the

place of emotions in working life. While it was thought that the employee should not mix his emotions with his work while doing his job, today, it has emerged that this is not possible due to human nature and that emotions can allow employees to do their jobs better. It is thought that emotional intelligence can reveal differences in many areas such as decision making, leadership, strategic and technical breakthroughs, collaboration, communication, teamwork, creativity and innovation, and customer loyalty in business life (Cooper & Sawaf, 2010, p. x).

### **Customer Satisfaction and Customer Orientation**

In the evolutionary marketing process, the increasing and differentiating competitive environment from the production phase to modern marketing has made it challenging to raise awareness and persuade the customers. The necessity of developing new understanding and strategies for the survival and sustainability of the enterprises has emerged (Bozkurt & Çolakoğlu, 2020, s. 3995).

In the most general sense, satisfaction is the customer's reaction to how pleasant or unpleasant the satisfaction level is (Oliver, 2010, p. 23). Satisfaction is a concept with different antecedents and outcomes at different levels. Customer satisfaction can be addressed in terms of the individual, customer community or society. Each perspective will have different bases and consequences. The service provider's ability to meet customers' expectations regarding different aspects of service quality is the factor that determines the customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction level (Keiningham, et. al., 2006, p. 274).

Customer orientation (CO), a factor in achieving customer satisfaction, can be defined as a "set of beliefs that make customers' needs and satisfaction a priority for an organization" (Smirnova, Rebiazina, & Frösén, 2018, p. 457). In other words, customer orientation is an employee's disposition or tendency to meet customer needs on the job (Brown, et. al., 2002, p. 111). Of course, all units of the organization should be customer-oriented. It requires an organization to identify the needs of its target market and adapt itself to meet those needs better than its competitors. The business seeks to create customer satisfaction as the key to realizing its purpose (Saxe & Weitz, 1982, pp. 343-344). However, units/employees directly related to the customer have a more significant role in ensuring customer satisfaction. Focusing on the customer requires identifying the customer's needs, demands, and expectations exactly, even before the customer, and presenting them as a product or service. For this purpose, there should be an exchange of information between the customer and the business before, during and after the sale (Bilge, 2010, p. 81). Call centre employees undertake a vital part of this task as they are directly related to the customer.

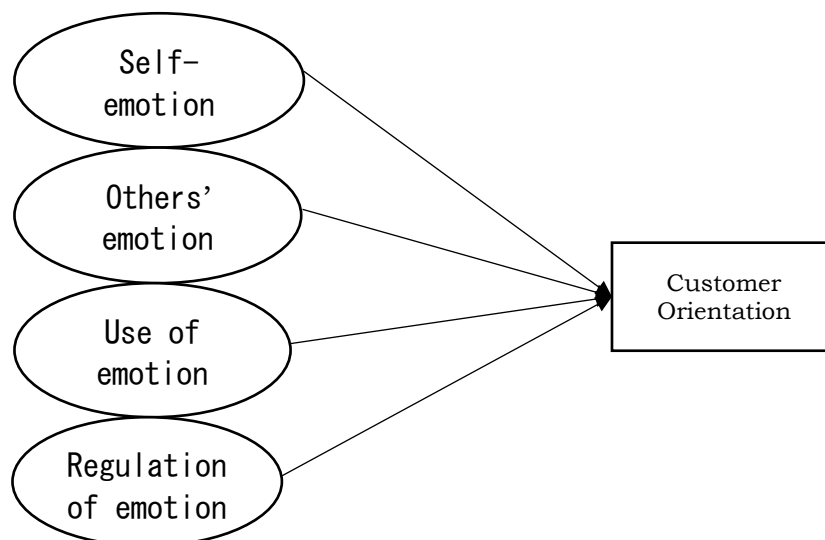
Many factors can affect the employee's customer orientation. One of these factors is the employee's EI level, which affects the ability to understand and direct the customer and control their own emotions. Many studies (Kernbach & Schutte, 2005) (Singh & Singhal, 2015) (Suharto & Satriawan, 2019) are proving that the emotional intelligence of the employee affects customer satisfaction.

In terms of customer orientation, some studies conclude that employees' emotional intelligence affects their ability to be customer-oriented. In their study, Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker (2004) concluded that a salesperson's EI significantly affected employees' CO. According to Pettijohn, Rozell, & Newman (2010), the emotional intelligence levels of sales personnel were proportional to their CO. Lim (2017) found that customer orientation level was significantly related to EI. In their study, Kim & Lee (2016) revealed that the emotional intelligence from the individual characteristics was one of the factors related to CO. Similarly, Varinli, Yaraş, & Başalp (2009b) and Santos, Dornelles, & Crispim (2020) found a positive and strong correlation between total EI and customer orientation of salespeople. In this context, the hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H<sub>1</sub>: Employees' EI will be significantly and positively related to employees' CO.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a survey method to obtain data from the respondents via questionnaires. The questionnaires were prepared online for ease of answering and data collection. Data were collected over a 30-day period in 2021. The data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS programs within the structural equation model framework (SEM). The research model established for the purpose of the study is as follows:



**Figure 1.** The Research Model

The hypotheses of the study are in line with the determined research model as follows:

H<sub>1a</sub>: *Self-emotion Appraisal (SEA)* will be significantly and positively related to employees' CO.

H<sub>1b</sub>: *Others' emotion appraisal (OEA)* will be significantly and positively related to employees' CO.

H<sub>1c</sub>: *Use of emotion (UOE)* will be significantly and positively related to employees' CO.

H<sub>1d</sub>: *Regulation of emotion (ROE)* will be significantly and positively related to employees' CO.

### Sample

The research universe consists of the personnel of a call centre operating in Ordu/Turkey. Call centre employees were chosen because they are the connection point between the business and the customers. Call centre employees try to provide service by suppressing their true feelings and thoughts because their conversations are recorded. Regardless of whether the customer they serve is reactive or not, they are responsible for both regulating their own emotions appropriately and trying to control customers' emotions. From this point of view, call centre employees can be shown among the professions where emotional intelligence skills are needed, and emotional labour is used intensively (Şentürk & Karakiş, 2020, p. 2957). The research was carried out in a universe of 349 people with online survey management. An online survey form was delivered to all personnel in the business. After one month, data was obtained from 241 personnel. The sample size with a 95% confidence interval and 0.05 margin of error is sufficient for a population of 349, with a sample size of 241.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

|               |        | F   | %    |                          |                  | F   | %    |
|---------------|--------|-----|------|--------------------------|------------------|-----|------|
| <b>Gender</b> | Male   | 82  | 34   | <b>Marital Status</b>    | Married          | 86  | 35,7 |
|               | Female | 159 | 66   |                          | Single           | 155 | 64,3 |
| <b>Age</b>    | 18-24  | 73  | 30,3 | <b>Experience in the</b> | Less than 1 year | 85  | 35,2 |

|                        |                                |     |      |                                   |                   |    |      |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|----|------|
|                        | 25-29                          | 97  | 40,2 | <b>Business</b>                   | 1-5 years         | 88 | 36,5 |
|                        | 30-34                          | 43  | 17,8 |                                   | More than 5 years | 68 | 28,3 |
|                        | 35 and more                    | 28  | 11,6 | <b>Experience in the industry</b> | Less than 1 year  | 78 | 32,4 |
| <b>Education Level</b> | High School                    | 75  | 31,1 |                                   | 1-5 years         | 91 | 37,7 |
|                        | Associate Degree               | 102 | 42,3 |                                   | More than 5 years | 72 | 29,9 |
|                        | Undergraduate and Postgraduate | 66  | 27,3 |                                   |                   |    |      |
|                        |                                |     |      |                                   |                   |    |      |

According to Table 1, it was determined that 66% of the employees were women, and 64.3% were single. It is seen that 88.3% of the employees are 35 years old and under in terms of age range. These results show that there is a female young and dynamic workforce in the call centre industry.

### Measures

The questionnaire was designed to consist of two parts. In the first part of the questionnaire, there were open-ended and closed-ended questions to determine the personal characteristics of the employees like gender, age, education level, marital status, working time in the business and the industry. In the second part of the questionnaire, emotional intelligence and customer orientation scales were prepared using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Employees' EI was measured utilizing the Wong and Law EI Scale (WLEIS) (Wong & Law, 2002). It is a 16-item scale consisting of four parts: self-emotions appraisal (SEA), others emotions appraisal (OEA), use of emotions (UOE) and regulations of emotions (ROE).

The validity of the EI scale in the study was ensured by using the structural equation model and confirmatory factor analysis. As a result of the primary level confirmatory factor analysis, it was determined that the scale showed a distribution in accordance with its original form. Validity analysis results are following:

**Table 2.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results of WLEIS

|       | $\chi^2/df$ | RMSEA | NFI  | CFI  | GFI  |
|-------|-------------|-------|------|------|------|
| WLEIS | 2.781**     | ,076  | ,905 | ,959 | ,897 |

\*\* $p < 0,001$

As a result of the confirmatory factor analysis, it was seen that the model's goodness of fit index (GFI) values had acceptable fit values. The chi-square to df ratio is 2.781. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.076. Normed Fit Index is 0.905. The comparative Fit Index is 0.959 and Goodness-of-fit Index is 0.897. The factor loads of the scale expressions ranged from 0.54 to 0.92. The Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficients of the scale dimensions are 0.877 for the SEA, 0.865 for the OEA, 0.804 for the UOE and 0.863 for the ROE.

To measure the customer orientation levels of the employees in the research, the Customer Orientation Scale was used, which was developed by Varinli et al. (2009a) based on the studies of Brown et al. (2002) and Harris et al. (2005). The scale consists of a single factor and a total of nine items. As a result of the primary level confirmatory factor analysis performed to reveal the structural validity of the scale, it was determined that the scale showed a distribution suitable for its single-factor structure. The GFI index values of the model are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** CFA Results of Customer Orientation Scale

|     | $\chi^2/df$ | RMSEA | NFI  | CFI  | GFI  |
|-----|-------------|-------|------|------|------|
| COS | 3.564**     | ,072  | ,914 | ,951 | ,959 |

\*\* $p < 0,001$

According to the findings obtained from Table 3, it is seen that the model has acceptable fit values. The chi-square to df ratio is 3.564. The RMSEA is 0.072. NFI is 0.914. CFI is 0.951, and GFI is 0.959. The factor load weights of the scale expressions are between 0.63 and 0.83. The Cronbach alpha of the scale is found to be 0.916. This result reveals that the scale has a high-reliability level.

### RESULTS

In the study, firstly, the relationship between the research variables was examined by correlation analysis. The obtained results are presented in Table 4.

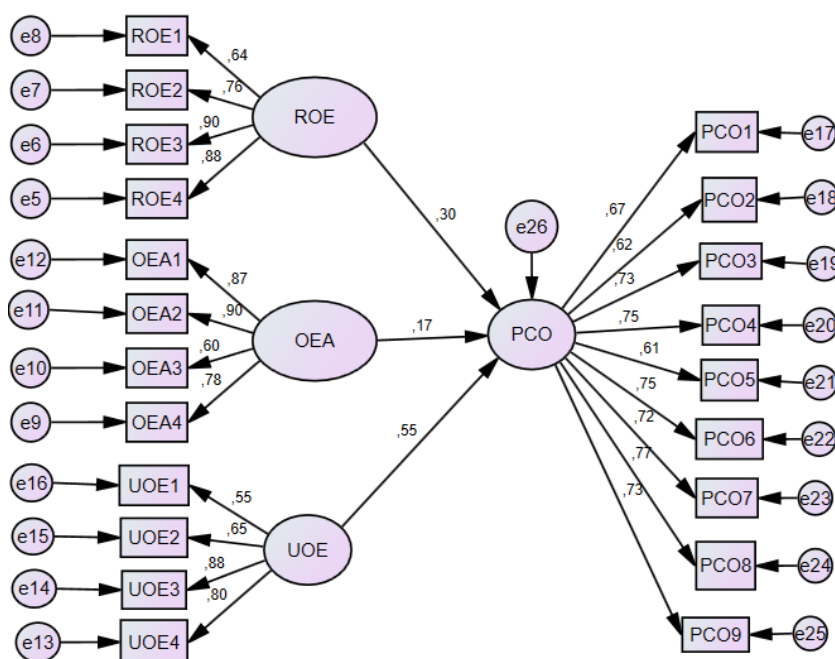
**Table 4.** Correlation Analysis of Research Variables

|     | SEA    | ROE    | OEA    | UOE    | CO |
|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|----|
| SEA | 1      |        |        |        |    |
| ROE | ,471** | 1      |        |        |    |
| OEA | ,494** | ,488   | 1      |        |    |
| UOE | ,555** | ,576** | ,490** | 1      |    |
| CO  | ,508** | ,531** | ,495** | ,608** | 1  |

\*\*p<0,01

According to Table 4, it has been revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between the correlation coefficient values at p<0.01 significance level (R: ,495 and R: ,608) between customer orientation and all dimensions of EI.

As seen in the model presented in Figure 2, the relationship between EI dimensions and customer orientation was tested with the structural equation model path analysis. All dimensions in the model were designed as the observed variable in the research. As a result of the statistical analysis, it was determined that the effect of the SEA dimension on customer orientation (p:0.079) was statistically insignificant. After this stage, the path in which a significant relationship could not be detected was removed from the structural equation model. The final model of the study is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Final Model of the Study

As a result of the analyzes, it was determined that the GFI values of the research model had acceptable fit values at the p<0.001 significance level (x<sup>2</sup>/df: 2748; RMSEA: 0.73;

NFI: 0.935; CFI: 0.969; GFI: 0.897). The findings regarding the path tested in the research model are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Regression Weight of the Path of the Research Model

| Tested Path |   |    | Standardized Regression Weight | (p)    |
|-------------|---|----|--------------------------------|--------|
| SEA         | → | CO | ,112                           | 0,079* |
| ROE         | → | CO | ,299                           | 0,001  |
| OEA         | → | CO | ,174                           | 0,010  |
| UOE         | → | CO | ,546                           | 0,001  |

\* It was excluded from the research model.

According to Table 5, all the ways created to determine the effect of ROE, OEA and UOE emotional intelligence dimensions on customer orientation are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  significance level. But the dimension of SEA is not significantly related to employees' CO. When standardized regression weights are evaluated, it is determined that the ROE dimension has a positive effect on CO at the level of (.299). This effect is 0.174 for the OEA dimension and 0.546 for the UOE dimension. While  $H_{1a}$  of the research hypotheses is not supported for these results,  $H_{1b}$ ,  $H_{1c}$  and  $H_{1d}$  are supported.

## CONCLUSION

Call centres are designed as a tool for customer relationship management (CRM) to help and guide customers (Chicu, et. al., 2016, p. 21). These businesses were initially seen only as service points where customers convey their complaints and where general problems are resolved, are now a unit where companies can carry out many applications to communicate with their customers (Çil & Baysal, 2020, p. 176). Additionally, the call centre may facilitate the closeness and communication of users with the company, accelerate the demonstration of new products and services to customers, and allow users to communicate with the company without the time and location restrictions; on the other hand, it may keep the company away from its customers and make it difficult to understand the actual demand and potential intentions properly (Wang, Bai, & Yue, 2011, p. 288). At this point, the call centre operator has been playing a crucial role.

The customer orientation of these employees will make a difference in providing customer satisfaction. CO is a set of beliefs that prioritizes customer interests and does not exclude the interests of all other stakeholders to develop a long-term profitable business (Deshpandé, Farley, & Webster, 1993, p. 27). When CO is considered an individual feature, it can be argued that the personal characteristics of employees are an influential factor in it. Emotional intelligence is one of these personal traits. Emotions are warning systems that alert people to what is going on around them. It is a complicated state of the human mind that includes physiological changes on the one hand and psychological changes on the other (Singh, 2006, p. 30). Besides, EI enables the person to understand and express his/her own and others' emotions correctly while allowing them to regulate their emotions to improve their lives (Mayer, DiPaolo, & Salovey, 1990, p. 772). The marketing literature has largely ignored the function of emotional intelligence to benefit both the individual and those with whom he/she interacts, such as customers (Kidwell, et. al., 2011, p. 78). However, customers' lifestyles, tastes, and wishes are constantly changing, and there is a need for employees with high emotional intelligence who have the skills to meet their expectations (Doğan & Demiral, 2007, p. 209).

In this study, the relationship between the EI of call centre employees and their CO was examined. According to the results, the relationship between the three dimensions of EI and CO was significant and positive. Only the self-emotion appraisal (SEA) dimension of



EI was not significantly related to CO. In fact, at the beginning of the study, it was assumed that all emotional intelligence dimensions would affect customer orientation.

However, it can be thought that this dimension may not affect the customer orientation much since it is mainly related to the ability of the individual to understand their deep feelings and express these feelings naturally. Unlike SEA, the second dimension, OEA, is about people's ability to perceive and understand people's emotions, which is highly related to understanding customer needs. The dimension of ROE is related to the ability of people to regulate their emotions, which will enable them to get rid of psychological distress more quickly and enable employees to cope with the problems and stresses arising from interaction with customers more efficiently. As the last dimension, UOE is related to the ability of individuals to use their emotions to constructive activities and personal performance; it will affect their performance in providing customer satisfaction.

The results of the research provide various recommendations for businesses. Compared to emotional intelligence, it is possible to say that EQ has a structure that can be developed more quickly than IQ (Mumcu & Günay, 2016, p. 78). For this reason, it can be suggested that businesses trying to increase the customer orientation of employees should take activities to improve the EI level of individuals.

The study was carried out with the data obtained from the call centre employees who act as a bridge between the business and the customers. Although the company is one of the leading companies in the country, the most important limitation of the research is the inability to collect data from all company employees. The generalizability of the results needs to carry out other studies in other sectors where employees who have a direct relationship with the customer are employed.

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