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EFFECTS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS: MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY AMONG PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study aimed to study the effect of emotional intelligence on the mental distress of university students in Pakistan, keeping in mind the mediating role of psychological vulnerability. In this study, a quantitative research approach was selected to investigate the relationships between emotional intelligence, psychological vulnerability, and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan. The research team collected data from a diverse group of 430 university students across various institutions in Pakistan through a research questionnaire. After data collection, the information was entered into SPSS for analysis, utilizing statistical techniques such as t-tests, ANOVA, and mediation analysis via the PROCESS macro. This comprehensive methodology facilitated the testing of a theoretical model, examining relationships between variables within the study. AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan were excluded as we had no access to these areas. Emotional Intelligence was measured using the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale mental distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale and psychological vulnerability was measured using the Psychological Vulnerability Scale. Mediation analysis revealed that the effect of emotional intelligence on psychological distress was enhanced by the presence of psychological vulnerability. This study clarifies the distress and its impact on emotional intelligence.

Keywords. Emotional intelligence, mental distress, psychological vulnerability, mediation, Pakistan.

Introduction

In today's world, we understand that relationships are important for human beings to survive. Relationships are important not only in providing support but also in maintaining mental health. Healthy minds are as important as physical health in every life stage (Karim, 2009). A crucial life stage is young adulthood, specifically university life. In this stage a lot of events are ongoing and people experience a lot of stress (Southam, 2014). University students are a high-risk population due to stress and educational, career, relationships, and other pressures. This might impact the way they think, feel, and behave. It might impact the way they interpret their own emotions or those of others. So, we can say these stressors might affect the emotional intelligence of the students. Extreme pressures might impact the emotional functioning of the students which can increase distress as a result (Adams et al., 2006). Thus, emotional intelligence can impact the psychological distress in university students. Emotional intelligence is regularly researched in literature (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004). It is reported that emotional intelligence is a changeable factor and can be increased or decreased over time by the circumstances (Bradberry & Greaves, 2005); therefore, it can be said that stressful events may increase or decrease emotional intelligence. Previous research also shows that emotional intelligence through factors includes overcoming stress (Deniz, Tras, & Avdogan, 2009; Gocet, 2006) and anxiety and stress (Berrocal et al., 2006). Thus, by controlling the negative factors, we can increase emotional intelligence.

Problem Statement

Drawing on psychological distress theory which states that the process of stress consists of stress sources, like stressful events, indirect resources like social support absence, and stress outpouring. According to this theory, our development throughout life is

caused by how we cope and adapt to the stressors of life. So, the better we can cope the better we will be able to be stable emotionally. Moreover, the stress vulnerability model also explains various factors that can make us more vulnerable, and stress is one of them; it means the more stressed a person is, the more vulnerable they will be.

Significance of the Study

The study is significantly important for individuals who may later be trapped into psychological illness due to their inability to cope with stressors effectively. Moreover, the stress vulnerability model also explains various factors that can make us more vulnerable, and stress is one of them; it means the more stressed a person is, the more vulnerable they will be (Landa & López-Zafra, 2012).

Research Objectives

- i. To examine the mediating role of psychological vulnerability on the relationship of emotional intelligence and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan.

Research Questions

- i. Does psychological vulnerability mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress?

Hypothesis

H1: Psychological vulnerability will mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress.

Limitation

The current study only included university students so study on other students should also be conducted so to see the differences amongst the distresses of students at various levels. AJK and Gilgit Baltistan should be included in further studies. Other variables should also be included. Various software other than SPSS should also be used to see the differences in the results of different software.

Literature Review

Emotional intelligence plays a very important role in building a healthy mindset that reduces the person's vulnerability to the different stressors of life (Campos et al., 2014). High emotional intelligence significantly contributes to less stress (Wang, 2006). Psychological vulnerability is a response to being human and every individual is confounded with a degree of vulnerability which may lead to psychological problems in cases of experiencing stressful conditions (Zubin & Spring, 1977).

Psychological Vulnerability

Psychological vulnerability in psychology is defined as "the quality of being emotionally exposed to possible fear or certain things", so in simple words, we can say that psychological vulnerability is how much a person is exposed or open to fears. It can also be defined as being susceptible to any harm (Pearlin, 1989). This harm can be in the form of distress, so psychological distress and vulnerability are related to each other. It is safe to assume that vulnerability increases psychological distress (Conte, 2005).

Psychological Distress

Psychological Distress can be defined as "a set of painful mental or physical symptoms that are associated with normal fluctuations of mood" (Marcussen, 2006). Its pervasive influence on individuals' lives necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its causes, manifestations, and implications (Mewton et al., 2016). Assessing and quantifying psychological distress plays a pivotal role in identifying those at risk and facilitating targeted interventions and support systems. Beyond its immediate impact on emotional states, psychological distress often exerts far-reaching consequences, affecting physical health, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life (Balakrishnan & Saklofske, 2015).

Method

The present study was quantitative. This study design was Model Testing. First direct relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological vulnerability was studied, and after that mediation between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological distress was explained as to how psychological vulnerability mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress.

Table:1 Research Strategy

Limits	Written in English Language only
Databases	Google Scholar, Science Direct, Foundation University Journal of Psychology
Search Keywords	Emotional intelligence, psychological distress, psychological vulnerability, mediation, Pakistan, university students
Total Articles Found	77
Fully Read Articles	24

Table: 2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Data relevant to the study objectives was collected. The time frame was 6 months. Therefore, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were mentioned.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Participants who consented, verbally and in writing, to participate were given the questionnaires	Participants not willing to engage were not deceived by the study
University students from all disciplines were included	Students enrolled in diplomas and certification courses were excluded
Both qualitative and quantitative studies were used	Articles not directly focusing on emotional distress or psychological

	vulnerability were excluded
Only articles in the English language were filtered	Articles in any language except English were excluded
Only valid sources were selected	Rejected or unpublished articles were excluded

Research Methodology

The study was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB), and the research questionnaire booklet was finalized after the permission of the authors. The booklet consisted of a demographic sheet, consent form, and selected instruments. We took permission from the heads of various departments from selected universities; once they gave their permission, the questionnaires were distributed to the students of that department. Once data collection was complete, data was entered into SPSS and analyzed, using t-test, ANOVA, and mediation analysis via PROCESS macro.

Following measures were used to for the current study:

Personal and Demographic Sheet

A demographic sheet was attached to obtain the basic demographic information like age, gender, ethnicity, department, etc.

Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10, Salovey, P., & Mayer, 1990)

The brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10) was proposed by Salovey & Mayor in 1990. It is a short version of the emotional intelligence scale. It was used to measure emotional intelligence. The scale has 10 items and a 5-point Likert scale where 1 strongly disagrees while 5 is strongly agree. The answers are self-reported. The reliability was reported as .83 by Howell and Miller-Graff (2014) and .84 by Rizzo (2013). Higher scores show higher emotional intelligence and vice versa.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10, Kessler & Mroczek, 1992)

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K-10 was developed by Kessler and Mroczek in 1992. It's a recent scale of psychological distress (Kessler & Mroczek, 2002). It is the most widely used scale to assess psychological distress. This scale was used to measure psychological distress. It is one dimensional has 10 items and is a 5-point Likert scale where 1 strongly disagrees while 5 strongly agree. The answers are self-reported, and Cronbach's alpha is .92. Higher scores on this scale indicate high psychological distress and vice versa. This scale asks questions about distress during the thirty days.

Psychological Vulnerability Scale (PVS-6, Sinclair & Wellston, 1999)

The psychological Vulnerability Scale (PVS) was developed by Sinclair & Wellston in 1999. It is a 6-item scale used to measure vulnerability. It has 6 items where 1 strongly disagree while 5 is strongly agree. It's a self-report measure and its reliability ranges between .71 to .86. High scores on this scale will indicate higher vulnerability and vice versa.

Sample

The sample for this study was collected from the capitals of the four provinces of Pakistan, and Islamabad. Proportional sampling was used. 430 participants (university students of Pakistan, n= 430) were selected from different provinces. The age group was (19 years and above). University students were approached. University students from both government and private universities were approached.

Table: 3 Demographic Characteristic of Sample (N=430)

Most of the participants were female, from nuclear families, and were enrolled in semesters 1- 4 as shown in Table 1. Most of them were from social sciences department

Variables	N	F	%
Gender	430	---	---
Male	---	213	49.5
Female	---	217	50.2
Age	430	---	---
19	---	14	3.2
20	---	38	8.8
21	---	83	19.3
22	---	151	35.1
23	---	81	18.8
24	---	44	10.2
25	---	19	4.4
Province	430	---	---
KPK	---	100	23.1
Sindh	---	100	23.1
Punjab	---	80	18.5
Balochistan	---	50	11.6
Islamabad	---	100	23.1
Semester	430	---	---
1-4	---	256	57.8
5-8	---	176	42.2
Family System	430	---	---
Nuclear	---	220	50.9
Joint	---	210	48.8
Department	430	---	---
Social Sciences	---	131	30.5
Arts	---	91	21.2
Law	---	74	17.1
Business Sciences	---	75	17.4
Media	---	59	13.7

Ethical Concerns

The study was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was taken from all participants, in the form of a consent form attached to the research protocol. The purpose of the study was explained in the consent form and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research was given to the participants. Only those participants who consented, verbally and in writing, to participate were given the questionnaires. No coercion or deception was used by any of the researchers. The data was kept confidential and only the authors had access to the data.

Results and Discussion

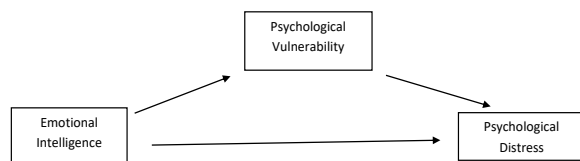


Figure 1

Fig 1: It indicates the model pathway that emotional intelligence leads to psychological vulnerability that then leads to psychological distress.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation among study Scales (N=430)

	1	2	3
1. E.I	--	-.186**	-.191**
2. PD	-.186**	--	.127**
3. PVS	-.191**	.127**	--

Note. ** = $p < .01$; EI = Emotional Intelligence, PD = Psychological Distress, PVS = Psychological Vulnerability Scale

Table 5: Mediating role of Psychological Vulnerability between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress among Pakistani University Students

Total Effect				Direct Effect				Indirect Effect				95%	CI
β	S.E	T	p	β	S.E	t	p	B	S.E	LL	UL		
.211	.094	2.24	.02	.395	.055	7.10	.00	-.032	.012	.025	.396		

Note. β = co-efficient, CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit of 95%, p = significance level

The above table shows that there exists a negative correlation between emotional intelligence, psychological distress, and psychological vulnerability. It means if emotional intelligence increases, psychological distress, and vulnerability decrease in return. Results show that psychological vulnerability significantly mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. The value of the relation between the indirect variable and mediator was 0.012 and the direct relationship was .00 and the total effect between them was 0.2, so by the results we concluded that mediation exists. It shows that psychological vulnerability mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. In this study, the researchers studied the mediating role of psychological vulnerability in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among Pakistani university students. The model testing showed that emotional intelligence decreases if psychological distresses and psychological vulnerability are higher. The results of model testing confirmed that the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress is affected by the presence of psychological vulnerability. It means if a student has higher emotional intelligence, he will be more likely to be less vulnerable psychologically and will have less psychological distress. So, we can say that emotional intelligence and psychological distress have an inverse relationship and the relationship is influenced more in the presence of psychological vulnerability, thus it proves to be a good mediator.

Conclusion

We can conclude by saying that distress can decrease the emotional intelligence of the people that is a very important part or type of intelligence (being a social animal a human being must have emotional intelligence so to understand, perceive and manage the emotions of self and others) that in return can make us more vulnerable towards psychological issues. Higher awareness is needed regarding the reduction of vulnerability and psychological distress to enhance emotional intelligence.

Recommendations:

Future research endeavors should also investigate preventive measures and early interventions to identify students at risk of developing high psychological vulnerability and distress, enabling timely support and guidance. Gender and demographic differences in the relationships between emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and distress should be examined to tailor interventions to specific groups more effectively. Additionally, exploring the potential of technology and digital interventions to promote emotional intelligence and mental well-being among university students, given their prevalence in this demographic, is a promising avenue for research. Lastly, interdisciplinary collaboration between psychology, education, and related fields is encouraged to comprehensively address the multifaceted nature of emotional intelligence and psychological distress in the university setting. These suggestions collectively contribute to advancing our understanding and improving the well-being of university students.

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