Effect of Emotional Intelligence on Psychological Distress: Moderating Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences amongst the University Students of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article gives a detail information on the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress keeping in mind the moderating role of adverse childhood experiences. The respondents were the university students of Pakistan from various universities across the four provinces. A sample size was 430. Validated scales were used for this study and permission was taken from the authors. The outcomes proved that relationship between the emotional intelligence and psychological distress is strengthened by the adverse childhood experiences. This study will help the university policy makers to improve the mental health policies of the students. It will also help to identify the increase of psychological distress due to the early childhood experiences.

Keywords: *Psychological Distress, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Emotional Intelligence*

INTRODUCTION

Man is a social animal, which means as a specie, human needs relationship to survive. In today's world we understand that relationships are important for the human beings to survive. Nowadays relationships are important not only providing the support but also maintaining a balanced mental health. Healthy minds are as important as the physical health in every life stage. An important and crucial life stage is young adulthood (specifically the university life). In this stage a lot of events are ongoing and people do experience in a lot of aspects. University students are a high risk population towards stress and pressures due to extreme educational, career and other pressures. This might impact the way they thinks, feel and behave. It might impact the way they interpret the emotions of their selves or others. So we can say these stressors might affect the Emotional Intelligence of the students. Extreme pressures might affect the emotional functioning of the students that can be a cause of increase distress in return. So we can say that Emotional Intelligence might impact the psychological distress of the university students in some way.

In the day to day life individuals have the notion to acknowledge and manage their emotions that leads to their inter-personal relationship. If the notion to manage and acknowledge emotions is disturbed so it might impacts the relationships of the human being. Disturbed relations or unstable relationship are a

major cause of stress. So we can say there can be association between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress. Emotional intelligence plays a very important role in building healthy mindset that reduces the person's vulnerability towards the different stressors of life. High Emotional Intelligence significantly contributes to less stress (Wang, 2006).

The mental health of an individual is as important as his physical health. It effects the individuals handling of stress and the vulnerability of individual towards psychological issues (Karren, 2019). If the mental health of the individual is not good for a long time so it might leads to the distress condition. So we can somehow link the emotional intelligence and psychological distress.

Life is full of experiences and we experience a lot throughout the life. It has been seen that some experiences are good while other are bad, but every type of experience have its own impact on the human being. Early life experiences have more impact on people then the experiences in later life, as the experiences in the early lives molds the personality of the people. Adverse Childhood experiences have a lot of impacts on the life of individuals in their later lives. According to Maxfield and Widom (1996) experiencing childhood abuse predicts arrests and violent behaviors in early adulthood. Also Ludico and DiClemente (1994) state that experiences of adverse childhood experiences are the predictors of many stressors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Intelligence

Some of the definitions explaining various aspects of Emotional Intelligence are given.
It is define as "The size of awareness to control and express ones emotions, to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and sensitively." Daniel Goleman described it as "An individual's ability to manage his feelings so that those feelings are expressed appropriately and effectively."
Salovey and Mayer express emotional intelligence as "A subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitors self-emotions and the emotions of others, to differentiate between them and to use them to guide one's own thinking and actions."

Emotional intelligence is the capacity to perceive, control and evaluate the emotions of one self and others. EI, a set of skills which to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one's life (Salovey & Mayor, 1990). So we can say that emotional intelligence is the person's ability to understand his emotions and the emotions of others and to use them in the daily life.

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is the discomfort that interfere with our daily life activities. These are also the unwanted or troublesome feelings or emotions which effect out degree of functioning. This kind of distress can bring negative views or perspectives of the environment. It is the state of emotional agony that is correlated with the demands of stressors that are hard to cope with in the everyday life. So it is basically the difficulty in daily life issues that stresses us emotionally, so it's important to study that how much the Emotional Intelligence can affect the Psychological distress. Another concept of psychological distress: it refers to a concept that maladaptive psychological functioning are due to stressful life events (Abelofe et al.2000). In the current research PD is defined as "The emotional sufferings that are related to the daily life stressors and are difficult to cope.
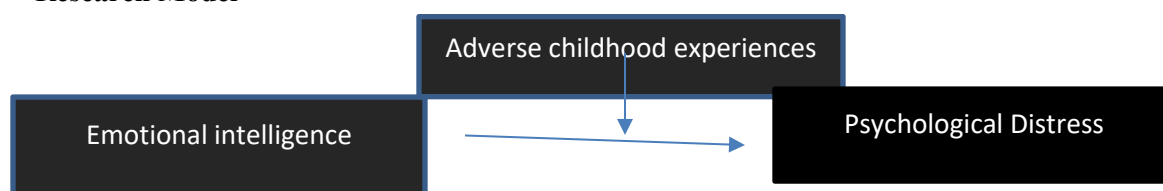
Adverse Childhood Experiences

In the presented study ACE, is defined as "traumatic events that occurs in childhood (Kendra, 2021)." Traumatic experiences in the start of life, including mistreat, seeing domestic violence and seeing someone using substance abuse, have long lasting adverse impacts on physical and mental health (Chapman, Whitfield, Felitti, Dube, Edwards, & Anda, 2004; Danese & McEwen, 2012; Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Felitti et al., 1998).

Hypothesis

(H1): Emotional Intelligence will decrease the Psychological distress of the university students of Pakistan.

(H2): Adverse Childhood Experiences will strengthen the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress among the university students of Pakistan.

Research Model

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This was a quantitative designed study that studied the correlation between the variables and moderating effect of adverse childhood experiences. Proportional sampling was used.

Participants
Proportional sampling was used. It is to divide population into subpopulations and randomly then selection is done from the subpopulations. The whole population (Pakistan) was divided into the subpopulations (4 provinces and capital) and randomly the students were selected then from both private and government universities.

AJK and Gilgit Baltistan were excluded, as we were unable to access both of them

Category	Value
Gender	Male: 49.5%, Female: 50.2%
Age	19 years: 3.2%
	20 years: 8.8%
	21 years: 19.3%
	22 years: 35.1%
	23 years: 18.8%
	24 years: 10.2%
	25 years: 4.4%
Province	KPK: 23.1%
	Sindh: 23.1%
	Punjab: 18.5%
	Baluchistan: 11.6%
	Islamabad: 23.1%

Family System	Nuclear System: 50.9%
	Joint: 48.8%

Data Collection Instrument
Our study included three instruments and a demographic sheet. The instruments included,

Personal and Demographic Sheet. A demographic sheet was attached to obtain the basic demographics information like age, gender, ethnicity, department etc.

Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10, Salovey, P., & Mayer, 1990). Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10) was proposed by Salovey and Mayor in 1990. It is a short version of Emotional Intelligence scales. It was used to measure the Emotional Intelligence. The scale has 10 items and a 5 point Likert scale where 1 is strongly disagree while 5 is strongly agree. The answers are self-reported. The reliability was reported .83 by Howell and Miller-Graff (2014) and .84 by Rizzo (2013). Higher scores shows 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 scales of psychological distress (Kessler & Mroczek, 2002). It is one dimensional and has 10 items and is a 5 point Likert scale where 1 is strongly disagree while 5 is strongly agree. The answers are self-reported and its Cronbach's alpha is .92 (.Higher scores on this scale indicates high psychological distress and vice versa.

Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE-10, Felitte, 1998). Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire ACE-10 developed by Felitte in 1998 was used to measure the adverse experiences faced during childhood. It has 10 items where we can mark yes or no. Yes is scored as 1, No is scored as 0. It's a self-report inventory and its reliability is .88. The score ranges from 0-10. The higher the scores the higher will be the chances of childhood adverse experiences.

Data Collection Procedure
A structured questionnaire was distributed amongst the students of various universities including the private and government institutes after the permission by their HoD. The list of the universities were taken from the HEC website. Informed consent and confidentiality was explained. Total 430 respondents were a part of this study.

Data Analysis
The data was analyzed by SPSS version 25. The demographic was summarized using descriptive statistics which were means, standard deviations, frequency. Process macro was used for the moderation purposes.

Ethical Consideration
The research was conducted after the approval of internal research board (IRB). Informed consent was signed by all the participants and confidentiality was not breeched. The safety of the participants was the first priority.

RESULTS
Demographic Characteristic of Sample (N=430)

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

Table 1 shows the demographics characteristics of the sample, including gender, age, province, family system, semester and department. The data revealed predominance of female participants.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Reliability Estimates of Study Variables (N=430)

Variables	*k*	α	M	SD	Range		Skewness	Kurtosis
					Potential	Actual		
EI	10	.83	42.40	4.73	10-50	20-50	-1.26	2.81
PDS	10	.75	38.27	5.71	10-50	20-50	-.116	-.121
ACE	10	.75	4.73	2.88	0-10	0-18	.122	.147

Note. k = Number of Items; EI = Emotional Intelligence Scale; PDS = Psychological Distress Scale; ACEQ = Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire; SD = Standard Deviation; M = Mean

Table 2, explains the information about psychometric properties. Mean, standard deviation, range, skewness, kurtosis and Cronbach Alpha reliability estimates of study variables among University Students of Pakistan. Cronbach alpha reliability of scales were from .75 to .83 that is acceptable as per criteria of George and Mallery (2010). The alpha reliability of scale EI was .83, PDS was .75, ACE was .75. Distribution of data was checked with the descriptive statistics. Table shows that data was normally distributed. The value of skewness is.122 to -.116 and kurtosis ranges from 2.81 to -.121.

Skewness and kurtosis value should be between -2 to +2 then we can say they are statistically acceptable (George & Mallery, 2010).

Table 3: Correlation Matrix for key Varables (N=430)

Pearson Correlation among study Scales (N=430)

	1	*2*	*3*
1. E.I	--	- .186**	-.164**
2. PD		--	-
		--	.
3. ACE			--

**p≤.01

Note: EI= Emotional Intelligence, PD= Psychological Distress Scale, ACE= Adverse Childhood Experiences

Table 3 described that Emotional Intelligence negatively correlated with the Psychological Distress (r = -.186**, p≤.05), it means that increase in Emotional Intelligence will decrease the level of Psychological Distress. Moreover Emotional Intelligence negatively correlates with the Adverse Childhood Experiences (r = -.164**, p≤.05) it means increase in Adverse Childhood Experiences decreases the Emotional Intelligence.

So we can say those with more adverse childhood experiences have less emotional intelligence.

DISCUSSION

The research aimed to examine the relationship of Emotional intelligence on Psychological Distress. It also wanted to see the moderating effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences. This research showed negative relation between the Emotional intelligence and Psychological distress it means increase in one decreases the other. According to the existing literature, Emotional Intelligence effects the Psychological Distress of the university students (Kong, Zhao &You, 2012; Mata & Molero, 2020). So this study aimed to check the relationship between the two variables in Pakistani University Students.

According to the first hypothesis, Emotional Intelligence will decrease the Psychological Distress of the university students of Pakistan. Results indicated significantly negative relationship (r= -1.86**, p≤.01) between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress (see table 3). According to a study Emotional Intelligence affects Psychological Distress (Mata & Molero, 2020). Another study also showed a lot of studies on Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress, among university student (Kong, Zhao & You, 2012).

The second hypothesis states that Adverse Childhood Experiences will strengthen the relationship of Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress. The results also shows (r= -1.64**, p≤.01) that Adverse childhood experiences strengthen the relationship between Emotional intelligence and Psychological Distress. Previous studies also show that Adverse Childhood Experiences increases the distress in later life (Gore, Asselstine, & Colten, 1992).

IMPLICATIONS

As university students are high risk populations (Cheung, Tam et al., 2020) so this study will create awareness among university students regarding Psychological distress and will be helpful in their betterment and maintenance of stress.

It will also let know the people about Adverse Childhood Experiences and their effects on the later life so an awareness regarded childhood experience and their importance in the later life will be created. It will also give elementary knowledge to the researchers who want to work the same topics. This study will also be important telling people that EI is as important as the other intelligences.

STUDY LIMITATION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Azad Jammu Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan were not included in the research due to the time constraints and as they were nor reachable. Only students of universities were included as this research focused on university students. So the students of colleges and schools should also be included in the researches. Due to time restrains a few of demographics were included like age, gender etc, the other demographics should also be included and more extensive study should be conducted.

CONCLUSION

Overall this study concluded that Emotional intelligence effects the Psychological distress in negative direction it means increase in Emotional intelligence will decrease or reduce the level of Psychological Distress. The study also revealed that Adverse Childhood Experiences strengthen the relation between EI and PD.

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