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Emotional Intelligence and Its Association with Stress Coping Strategies among Secondary School Students in Multan District

Dr. Shahid Raza

Assistant Professor, University of Education, Multan Campus, Punjab, Pakistan

Correspondence: shahid.raza@ue.edu.pk

Dr. Sumera Kulsoom

Lecturer, University of Education, Multan Campus, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: sumera.kulsoom@ue.edu.pk

Dr. Shamim Ullah

Assistant Professor, Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: shamimullah.ier@pu.edu.pk

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Abstract

This study explored the link between emotional intelligence and strategies for coping with stress in 365 high school students in the Multan district of Pakistan. The framework for the study was based on the theory of emotional intelligence. The results on the emotional intelligence of the students were heartening, as it appeared that on the whole, the students were quite emotionally intelligent. But even more impressive was that the students, again on the whole, worked quite effectively with Problem-Solving Coping and Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies, which are types of coping that research has shown to be quite adaptive. And so what we found is that, indeed, there is a significant relationship, which is a positive relationship, with emotional intelligence and adaptive coping strategies.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Stress Management, Motivation, Empathy, Problem Solving.



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1. Introduction

The idea of emotional intelligence and the strategies associated with it for managing psychological stress are of the utmost importance because they substantially influence a person's development and success. Salovey and Sluyter (1997) brought this association to light, noting that EI allows individuals to understand their feelings and emotions and thus directs their behavior. In essence, this is what emotional intelligence is; a person's capacity to control the kinds of negative emotions that can really set one back and to foster the kinds of good, positive, friendly, and confident emotions that help one go forward and succeed (Javaid et al., 2024).

Numerous challenges are faced by low emotional intelligence individuals when it comes to coping with stress-related problems (Rafiq et al., 2024). Various studies lend support to this fact by indicating a robust association among EI and stress (Solih et al., 2024). Health problems of a physical and mental nature often arise from poorly managed stress. When these happen, we might as well be planning a party for our minds and bodies; headaches, muscle tension, and back pain; digestive issues; sleep problems; fatigue; hypertension; skin problems; and more (Bykova et al., 2024). It's a pretty miserable existence to live under the thumb of unmanaged stress, but it's living in our physical and mental bodies that makes humans quite malleable to the negative impact of stress.

Numerous difficulties confront low-emotional-intelligence individuals when they attempt to deal with problems that are related to stress. This point of view is validated by several studies that indicate a strong relationship between stress and emotional intelligence (Sharma & Kumar, 2016). If a person with low emotional intelligence has an abundance of stress, the next part of the chain is that the individual has a physical and/or mental health issue that has drawn them into the problem of stress (Rafiq, Afzal & Kamran, 2022). When the health of an individual is poor, he is much more susceptible to succumbing to the problematic parts of stress that reduce his health even further. Once he is in that vicious cycle, it is extremely hard to work his way back out (Akerjordet & Severinsson, 2007).

Adopting effective coping mechanisms to manage stress often leads to the development of positive behavioral trends that are helpful in delivering high-quality performance under pressure. That is the case because, when placed under intense, prolonged pressure, individuals tend to revert to previously learned behaviors, often using or abusing those behaviors because illicit or harmful substances are readily available (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020). What provides a bit of hope in the otherwise grim picture that the above studies paint is that the next few paragraphs will discuss research indicating that most students are not entirely devoid of positive coping mechanisms. Indeed, they have some range, some spectrum. And within that range, a few students exhibit impressive, even excellent, forms of stress management (Kulkarni et al., 2016; Sharma & Kumar, 2016).

Research by (Bar-On, 2010) demonstrated through research that an individual's emotional intelligence has a great effect on almost the same space, but it significantly influences the realm of positive social interactions. According to Fteiha and Awwad (2020) when we look at the world of emotional competence, several factors can go into playing a role in how well a person positively interacts under distressful circumstances. Akerjordet and Severinsson (2007) mentioned that there tends to be the obvious target of one's emotions and intelligence, but what about empathy, self-monitoring, or maybe the intensity and the duration of the distress being experienced by individuals (Brink, 2009).

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Fteiha and Awwad (2020) classify coping mechanisms for stress as adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive mechanisms help people manage stress and the situations that cause it most effectively. They minimize harm and, in some situations, may even turn a stressor into a positive challenge. Maladaptive mechanisms do not help and may even make things worse. When people use them, they have a much harder time thriving in their environment (Rafiq, Afzal & Kamran, 2022). Some might think of these as "not good" or "unhealthy" may even lead to poorer health, lower productivity, and less personal and professional fulfillment.

2. Research Questions

The research questions that were framed include the following.

1. What is the emotional intelligence level of students in secondary schools?
2. What is the level of coping with psychological stress in methods of secondary school students?
3. Does a relationship exist between how emotionally intelligent one is and how well one copes with stress?
4. Is there a substantial distinction in the emotional intelligence of students as per gender, specialization and marital status?

3. Theoretical framework

An individual's ability to manage stress is associated with emotional intelligence. The many students who face and try to cope with a threefold set of problems will undoubtedly remember the first two areas from previous conversations; obstacles that students encounter when they are trying to set and achieve their personal goals and performance demands. Obstacles that students encounter when they are trying to achieve a much sought-after personal and social balance. And a third area that is much less often mentioned; individuals encountering problems in their interactions with the environment around them. A series of problems that are a constant source of stress for so many people.

Accomplishing this requires an adjustment of external factors, such as energy level, goals, and aspirations. Epstein (1998) proposed that children with high EI would tend to be healthier, happier, and more flexible than children with low EI. He argued that the determining qualities of EI would favor the type of academic performance parents' desire. Indeed, Daus and Ashkanasy (2003)

observed that the opposite might also be true; not having enough EI might lead to the types of conditions that make young people more prone to violence or suicide, to "undesirable" academic performance. Acknowledging the capacities of a person, above all their self-awareness, self-control, and drive, is vital when it comes to the influence they exert and the way they direct their lives. Freudenthaler and Neubauer (2005) contend that inasmuch as we deal with difficult situations, we express a constellation of our most vital and frequently undisclosed abilities. They suggest that acts of coping may be fundamentally acts of self-disclosure. They also vitalize a very traditional psychological idea that stress isn't inherently negative and that negative stress can often bring out the worst in our coping mechanisms. When we act under extreme duress, we're just not at our best.

4. Methodology

A cross-sectional methodology was employed in this research. That study population. The sample of study was 265 drawn from that population. The population of the study was the secondary school students at Multan district. Both science and arts students were included based on the criteria for the current selection. Students were selected based on stratified sampling technique.

5. Instrumentation

This investigation tapped a scale of Emotional Intelligence (EI) drawn from the theory of EI by Goleman for assessing the EI levels of the study's participants. Determining the emotional intelligence of the study sample involved several steps; the researchers identified five dimensions of emotional intelligence. For each dimension, they wrote multiple items to elicit responses appropriate for a judgment about the intelligence level of the individual being evaluated. In total, the authors wrote 34 items distributed across the dimensions as follows; self-awareness, self-regulation (6 items), motivation (6 items), empathy (8 items), and social skills (7 items).

The validity of the instrument was ensured through content and construct validity. Both assessments construct and content validity were used for collection of data. We translated questionnaire from English to Urdu. In this way our sample easily understood the items mentioned in the questionnaire. The understanding and readability was improved. After that we requested the research experts in educational psychology. Total eight experts were contacted. A criteria was developed for construct validity. They were requested to assess items for clarity and relevance. They were also requested to check whether items are relevant with the research questions of the study. Majority of the experts were of the view that overall the questionnaire measured which it was supposed to be measure. They gave feedback. As per their suggestions some of the items were improved. In this way the intended meanings of those items were preserved. About more than 80% of the experts were agreed that overall the questionnaire was highly relevant and it was measuring the EI along with its dimensions.

To assess the construct validity of the emotional intelligence scale, a preliminary test was conducted. This involved administering the scale to a separate group of 50 randomly selected individuals who met the inclusion criteria. The results showed the correlation coefficients between individual items and their respective domains. These coefficients ranged from 0.482 to 0.810 for each item of the emotional intelligence scale and its corresponding dimension. The scale's reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, an internal consistency measure, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.80.

The reliability coefficients for each area were as follows:

Self-awareness (0.72)

Self-regulation (0.78)

Motivation (0.77)

Empathy (0.83)

Social skills (0.85).

To figure out the reliability coefficient using a retest method, a group of 60 students not included in the main study sample was chosen. The scale was given two times with a 4-week interval between applications. The stability of the scale was then figured by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient between the two applications. The resulting dependability coefficients for the areas were: self-awareness (0.71), self-regulation (0.79), motivation (0.80), empathy (0.85), and social skills (0.86).

6. Stress Coping Style Inventory

The Stress Coping Style Inventory was adapted for the Multan district environment, comprising 26 items categorized into four dimensions (Liu & Wang, 2023).

- The Active Problem Coping strategy encompassed 6 components and focused on addressing stress by identifying its fundamental cause, investigating the primary source of tension, adopting a serene and positive mindset through continuous strategizing, and, when necessary, seeking assistance from external resources like educators or peers.
- Active Emotional Coping included 4 items.

This aspect focused on the various approaches employed to cope with stress. These approaches encompassed fostering positive thoughts and self-encouragement, achieving emotional equilibrium through distraction techniques, altering one's emotional state, utilizing external support to enhance emotional regulation, and exploring methods to alleviate tension.

- Passive Problem coping

This approach described a coping mechanism in which people exhibited emotional detachment, Optimistic thinking to circumvent problems, detachment and self-regulation behaviors as ways to evade dealing with issues.

The Passive Emotional Coping scale comprised 5 items and reflects an individual's negative response when confronted with stress. This coping style involves emotional distress, including suppressed feelings, self-reproach or attributing blame to nature and others, and a lack of E-regulation, such as increased touchiness.

Six experts in the subject of educational psychology were requested to evaluate the passive emotional copying scale. They were requested to verify the content mentioned in the scale. The grammar, coherence, sequence, the translation of items and last but not the least the alignment of items with the research questions. They were also requested to check the wording. More than 80% experts were satisfied with the scale. Some of them pointed out some changes. Those changes were incorporated. Finally, the final scale was administered to 50 students as a pilot study. These 50 participants were not part of actual sample. As per their results the validity and reliability of scale was again ensured.

7. Ethical consideration

The Institutional Review Board granted approval for the research. Prior to their involvement in the study sample, participants provided informed consent. Researchers elucidated the study's purpose and objectives to the subjects. Participants were informed of their right to discontinue their involvement at any point during the research process. The researchers ensured strict confidentiality of participant information, storing data in a password-protected directory.

8. Results

Table 1 showed five dimensions of emotional intelligence. Self- Awareness (SA), Self-Regulation (SR), Motivation (M), Empathy €, Social Skills (SS). The values of these domains were computed through Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD).

Table: 1

No.	Domains	M	SD	Level	Mark
1	SA	4.14	0.49	4	High
2	SR	4.11	0.59	5	High
3	M	4.41	0.50	1	High
4	E	4.36	0.50	2	High
5	SS	4.25	0.58	3	High
6	Emotional Intelligence as a whole	4.26	0.41		High

The level of emotional intelligence was calculated and is displayed in Table 1. The mean value was highest for “motivation,” M=4.41. The smallest mean was recorded for “self-regulation,” with M=4.11. The overall mean value for the emotional intelligence scale seems to indicate that, while our participants were not necessarily lacking in emotional intelligence, the measures would suggest the potential for improvement in the area that corresponds to the ability to manage one’s emotions. Mean values and standard deviations are also shown for the “methods of coping with stress” scale.

Table: 2

No.	Domains	M	SD	Level	Mark
1	AEC	3.88	0.53	2	High
2	PEC	2.56	0.84	4	Medium
3	APC	3.99	0.58	1	High
4	PPC	2.97	0.65	3	Medium
5	Methods	3.31	0.39		Medium

AFC= Active emotional copying PEC= Passive emotional copying APC= Active Problem Copying PPC= Passive Problem Copying.

Table 2 showed the domains of scale. There were four domains. Active emotional copying (AEC), Passive emotional copying (PEC), Active Problem Copying (PPC), and Passive Problem Copying

(PPC). The mean and standard deviations for each domain was calculated. The highest means $M=3.94$. This mean was the domain of methods of coping with stress "active problem coping." The mean for active emotional coping (AEC) was 3.88. The mean for passive emotional coping was 2.56. The mean for passive emotional coping was $M=2.51$. This was the lowest mean. The overall mean for "style of coping with stress" was $M=3.31$, an undetermined degree between medium and low. Correlation coefficients between emotional intelligence and style of coping with stress were computed for the participants.

9. Discussion

This study shows that most students demonstrate a high level of emotional intelligence. The group of students studied was not always initially stable or exhibiting emotional maturity, but they seemed to develop both awareness and maturity. The educational institutions deem quite valuable, which is emotional intelligence, after they progressed beyond a certain developmental threshold. Educational institutions today are more interested than ever in trying to figure out which of their students have a naturally high level of emotional intelligence. But how do they do it? Well, mostly through curricular activities that are associated with various forms of wide-ranging methodologies (Kamran, Afzal, Khan & Rafiq, 2022). Once again, though, emotional intelligence seems to be part of a puzzle that students are trying to solve Noorbakhsh et al. (2010).

An inverse relationship was found between emotional intelligence and two kinds of passive emotional coping and problem coping. This result is consistent with the study of Albeshir and Alsaeed (2015), who suggested that when individuals have a high level of emotional intelligence, they are more likely to use positive coping methods. Moreover, our results were aligned with the studies conducted by Moradi et al. (2011) and Noorbakhsh et al. (2010), which found that emotional intelligence is positively correlated with the use of effective coping skills. When facing a psychological stress situation, a university student may employ any number of coping methods. However, the current study found no statistically significant differences in the coping methods used or in the level of emotional intelligence possessed when participants were divided by gender or marital status. In other words, the methods used and the effectiveness of those methods might be equally spread across genders and marriage statuses.

According to Thawabieh and Qaisy (2012), unfamiliar and unrehearsed teaching methods, as well as partnerships requiring more of the direct engagement of the student, necessitate a more active and participatory form of learning and lead to greater academic stress. These authors also posit that this stress is a bridge—paved with not-so-great coping mechanisms—to a number of well-documented adverse personal outcomes. They consider not coping well with academic stress to be a serious problem for reading university students and one that, if not addressed, could impair the personal development of the students involved and their potential to practice good citizenship in the future.

The current inquiry is crucial as it identifies the current conditions of the students in regard to their emotional intelligence and stress levels. In the quest to propose some valuable conditions, certain limitations were heeded in the study. The first of these limitations is the relatively small size of the sample. This reduces the randomization that one would desire in a sample from a larger group for generalizing the results to that larger population. The second limitation pertains to the fact that we studied students from only three different fields, which raises the question of whether or not students in other departments would have different levels of emotional intelligence and stress that could affect the same kinds of results we obtained. A further limitation is the failure of our instrument to capture potentially important differences in students' moods and motivations that

also affect their answering of our self-administered questionnaire. Lastly, we asked students to imagine a hypothetical situation.

10. Conclusion

Stress and emotional intelligence are well-established fields. Because of their long history, there is an abundance of research connecting emotional intelligence to stress. Within that research, we have found knowledge that connects styles of coping to the not-so-universally-known relationship between stress and emotional intelligence. Still, there is little said in previous research about the significance of coping styles. That is why our present study focused on the already well-researched field of emotional intelligence under stress and worked to unveil the not-so-clear relationship we have with coping styles when we are stressed-out university students. We found no major differences across groups we created with the variables of gender and marital status but struck gold when we worked our way through the constructs of education and specialization. On top of that, we also found what we were looking for: a meaningful relationship between styles of coping and emotional intelligence.

This research has concentrated on how the academic and social environments of students have changed. It has been recommended that university educators become more aware of the emotional intelligence concept, the coping styles students have for dealing with stress, and the dimensions of these constructs. This knowledge could enhance the kinds of support and guidance they give to students, especially when the students are under pressure. Different types of educational programs and awareness initiatives could serve to strengthen social ties among university students and also serve to introduce them to the fundamentals of emotional intelligence and the importance of this skill set in life.

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