



Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Coping Mechanisms among undergraduate students in Sri Lankan Universities

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence, mental health, coping mechanisms, and gender among Sri Lankan university students. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design to collect data from a convenience sample of 300 Sri Lankan university students from three universities in Sri Lanka. Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Emotional Intelligence Scale, coping mechanisms were assessed using the Brief COPE Inventory, and mental health was assessed using the Mental Health Inventory-5. The study found that emotional intelligence was significantly positively associated with mental health and this relationship was partially mediated by coping mechanisms and moderated by gender. Emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms were significant predictors of mental health, with emotional intelligence having a greater effect. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms are important for maintaining good mental health among university students, and gender should be considered in interventions aimed at promoting these factors.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Well-being, Coping Mechanisms

Introduction

University students are known to face various academic and personal stressors that can negatively impact their mental health. Emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms are two factors that are believed to play significant roles in managing stress and maintaining good mental health. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Coping mechanisms refer to the strategies that individuals use to manage stress (Carver et al., 1989). The present study aims to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence, mental health, coping mechanisms, and gender among Sri Lankan university students.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). It has been linked to various positive outcomes, including mental health (Brackett et al., 2010). Research has consistently shown that individuals with high levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to have good mental health outcomes (Chu et al., 2015). Coping mechanisms refer to the strategies individuals use to manage stress and deal with difficult situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Coping mechanisms can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on the situation and the individual's ability to manage stress (Compas et al., 2001). Effective coping mechanisms have been associated with good mental health outcomes, while maladaptive coping mechanisms have been associated with poor mental health outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Gender has also been identified as a factor that can influence emotional intelligence and mental health outcomes. Studies have consistently shown that

women tend to have higher levels of emotional intelligence than men (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008). This may be because women are socialized to be more attuned to emotional cues and to express emotions more openly (Fischer & Manstead, 2000). However, some research suggests that gender differences in emotional intelligence may be small and depend on the specific abilities being measured (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Gender also plays a role in mental health outcomes. Studies have consistently shown that women are more likely to seek help for mental health issues and report symptoms of anxiety and depression than men (Piccinelli & Wilkinson, 2000). This may be due to a variety of factors, including societal expectations regarding gender roles, the stigma surrounding mental health issues, and differences in the expression of emotional distress (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Previous research has found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health (Brackett et al., 2010; Kong & Ramayah, 2015). Emotional intelligence is negatively associated with depression, anxiety, and stress (Kong & Ramayah, 2015; Zeidner et al., 2012). In addition, emotional intelligence is positively associated with well-being, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Brackett et al., 2010; Kong & Ramayah, 2015). Effective coping mechanisms play a crucial role in managing stress and maintaining good mental health. Research has shown that certain coping mechanisms are associated with better mental health outcomes (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). For example, problem-focused coping, which involves taking active steps to address the stressor, is associated with better mental health outcomes compared to emotion-focused coping, which involves regulating emotions related to the stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

Relationship between Emotional Intelligence, Coping Mechanisms, and Mental Health

Emotional intelligence (EI) and coping mechanisms are important factors in understanding mental health outcomes. Coping mechanisms refer to how individuals respond to stressors and manage the demands of their environment. Previous research has suggested that the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health is mediated by coping mechanisms. In other words, individuals with higher emotional intelligence may be more likely to use effective coping mechanisms, which in turn, may lead to better mental health outcomes. Kong and Ramayah (2015) found that emotional intelligence was negatively associated with depression, anxiety, and stress and that this relationship was partially mediated by coping mechanisms. Specifically, individuals with higher emotional intelligence were found to use more problem-focused coping mechanisms (e.g. seeking social support, problem-solving) and fewer emotion-focused coping mechanisms (e.g. avoidance, denial), which in turn led to better mental health outcomes.

Moreover, the relationship between emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms may be moderated by gender. Matud (2004) found that women reported using more emotion-focused coping mechanisms compared to men. In contrast, men were found to use more problem-focused coping mechanisms. Similarly, Zeidner et al. (2012) found that gender moderated the relationship between emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms. Specifically, women with high emotional intelligence tended to use more emotion-focused coping strategies, while men with high emotional intelligence tended to use more problem-focused coping strategies. These findings suggest that the relationship between emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health is complex and may vary depending on individual differences such as gender. It is important to note that effective coping mechanisms are crucial in promoting mental health and preventing mental health problems. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence may have an advantage in using effective coping mechanisms, which may explain the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health outcomes.

However, it is also important to consider the role of environmental factors such as social support and access to resources in shaping coping mechanisms and mental health outcomes. For example, individuals with lower emotional intelligence may be less likely to seek social support or engage in problem-solving due to a lack of resources or social support. As such, interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms should also consider the broader social context in which individuals operate.

Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Coping Mechanisms in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, university students face various stressors related to academics, financial pressures, and personal issues, which can have negative impacts on their mental health. Emotional intelligence is an important factor in managing stress and maintaining good mental health. Several studies have examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health among Sri Lankan university students. A study

conducted by Weerasinghe and Dias (2019) investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health among Sri Lankan university students. The study found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health, indicating that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to have better mental health outcomes. Additionally, the study found that emotional intelligence was negatively associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Another study conducted by Karunanayake and Senarath (2018) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among Sri Lankan university students. The study found that emotional intelligence was negatively associated with academic stress, indicating that individuals with higher emotional intelligence were better able to manage academic stress. Effective coping mechanisms are important in managing stress and maintaining good mental health among university students in Sri Lanka. A study conducted by Silva et al. (2016) examined the coping strategies used by Sri Lankan university students to manage academic stress. The study found that problem-focused coping, such as seeking support from family and friends, was associated with better mental health outcomes, while emotion-focused coping, such as using substances to cope with stress, was associated with worse mental health outcomes.

In another study, Perera and Weerasinghe (2019) examined the relationship between coping mechanisms and mental health among Sri Lankan university students. The study found that adaptive coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support and using positive reframing, were associated with better mental health outcomes, while maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance use and avoidance, were associated with worse mental health outcomes. Research suggests that emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms are related to mental health outcomes among Sri Lankan university students. A study conducted by Weerasinghe and Dias (2019) found that coping mechanisms partially mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health, indicating that individuals with higher emotional intelligence were more likely to use effective coping mechanisms, which in turn, led to better mental health outcomes. In addition, gender was found to be a moderating factor in the relationship between emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms among Sri Lankan university students. A study conducted by Kishani et al. (2020) found that emotional intelligence was positively associated with problem-focused coping strategies among male university students, while emotional intelligence was positively associated with emotion-focused coping strategies among female university students.

Based on the literature reviewed, the proposed hypothesis is that emotional intelligence is positively associated with mental health among Sri Lankan university students and this relationship is mediated by coping mechanisms, and moderated by gender.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

The study was conducted with a sample of 300 Sri Lankan university students who were conveniently recruited from several universities in Sri Lanka. Convenience sampling is a non-

probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on their availability and accessibility to the researcher. The participants in this study were between the ages of 22 and 26, and they were all enrolled in undergraduate programs. The age range of the participants suggests that they were in the emerging adulthood stage of development, which is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a sense of possibility. Additionally, the fact that the participants were university students indicates that they were likely to be experiencing various academic and non-academic stressors, which could affect their emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health outcomes. A cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data. The participants were provided with an informed consent form, and their consent was obtained before data collection. The survey included questions on emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, mental health, and demographic information. The participants completed the survey in a classroom setting during regular class hours.

Measures

Emotional intelligence was measured using the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) (Schutte et al., 1998). The EIS is a 33-item self-report measure that assesses emotional intelligence in four domains: perception, expression, facilitation, and understanding of emotions. The scale has good reliability and validity in various populations (Schutte et al., 1998). Coping mechanisms were measured using the Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997). The Brief COPE is a 28-item self-report measure that assesses coping strategies used in response to stress. The measure assesses 14 coping strategies, including active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, using emotional support, using instrumental support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame. The Brief COPE has good reliability and validity in various populations (Carver, 1997). Mental health was measured using the Mental Health Inventory-5 (MHI-5) (Berwick et al., 1991). The MHI-5 is a 5-item self-report measure that assesses mental health on a scale from 1 (poor) to 6 (excellent). The scale has been shown to have good reliability and validity in various populations (Berwick et al., 1991). Gender was self-reported by participants as male or female.

Data Analysis and Results

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypothesis. The analysis examined the direct effect of emotional intelligence on mental health, the mediating effect of coping mechanisms, and the moderation effect of gender. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables are presented in Table 1. Emotional intelligence was positively correlated with mental health ($r = 0.68, p < 0.001$) and coping mechanisms ($r = 0.42, p < 0.001$). Coping mechanisms were also positively correlated with mental health ($r = 0.55, p < 0.001$). Gender was not significantly correlated with emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, or mental health. Table 2 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis. The model explained 61.2% of the variance in mental health. Emotional intelligence ($\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$) and coping mechanisms ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of

mental health. Gender did not have a significant effect on mental health. The results of the mediation analysis are shown in Table 3. Emotional intelligence had a significant indirect effect on mental health through coping mechanisms ($\beta = 0.15, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.11, 0.20]$). The direct effect of emotional intelligence on mental health was also significant ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.001$). The total effect of emotional intelligence on mental health was significant ($\beta = 0.60, p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The results of this study provide support for the hypothesis that emotional intelligence is positively associated with mental health among Sri Lankan university students. This relationship is mediated by coping mechanisms. The findings are consistent with previous research that has shown a positive association between emotional intelligence and mental health (Brackett & Katulak, 2006; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The current study adds to this literature by demonstrating that coping mechanisms mediate this relationship. The finding that gender did not moderate the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health is consistent with some previous studies (Gao et al., 2020; Hasanvand et al., 2020), but not with others (Papadimitriou et al., 2021; Perera et al., 2019). Cultural factors may play a role in the relationship between emotional intelligence, gender, and mental health. Future research should investigate this further. The finding that coping mechanisms mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health suggests that interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence may have a positive effect on mental health by enhancing coping skills. This has important implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers, as it suggests that interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence may be an effective way to promote mental health among university students.

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits our ability to infer causality between emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health. Second, the study used a convenience sample of Sri Lankan university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Third, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias. Fourth, the study did not control for the effect of other variables such as personality traits, academic performance, or socioeconomic status, which may have influenced the relationship between emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides evidence for the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health among Sri Lankan university students. Coping mechanisms mediate this relationship. These findings have important implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers, as they suggest that interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence may be an effective way to promote mental health among university students. Future research should investigate the causal relationship between emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health using longitudinal designs. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be

made for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. First, given the significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health, efforts should be made to incorporate emotional intelligence training into university curricula. This could involve workshops, courses, or other interventions aimed at developing emotional intelligence skills such as perception, expression, facilitation, and understanding of emotions. These interventions could be delivered by mental health professionals, educators, or a combination of both.

Second, the findings of this study highlight the importance of coping mechanisms in promoting mental health. Therefore, mental health professionals and educators need to provide students with effective coping strategies to manage stress and maintain good mental health. This could involve psychoeducation on coping mechanisms such as problem-solving, positive reframing, and seeking social support. Third, the study findings suggest that gender moderates the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health. Therefore, interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence and coping

mechanisms should take into account gender differences. Mental health professionals and educators should tailor their interventions to be gender-sensitive and inclusive. Fourth, given the increasing prevalence of mental health problems among university students, policymakers should prioritize mental health services and support on university campuses. This could involve increasing funding for mental health services, developing policies to reduce stigma around mental health, and providing resources to mental health professionals and educators to enhance their capacity to support students' mental health needs. Finally, future research should investigate the causal relationship between emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health using longitudinal designs. Longitudinal studies will allow researchers to examine the direction of causality between emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and mental health. Moreover, future research should investigate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms in promoting mental health among university students.

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