

Gender Differences in Emotional Maturity and Coping Mechanisms among College Students

By

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Abstract

Emotional maturity and coping mechanisms play a critical role in shaping students' ability to adapt to the academic, social and personal challenges of college life. The present study explores gender differences in emotional maturity and coping strategies among college students, drawing upon theoretical and empirical foundations established in the pre-2017 literature. Emotional maturity, conceptualized as the capacity to perceive and regulate emotions constructively (Singh & Bhargava, 1990; Salovey & Mayer, 1997), has been linked to psychological well-being, interpersonal effectiveness and academic performance (Bar-On, 2000; Parker et al., 2004). Research has long suggested that gender influences emotional expression and regulation, with females typically demonstrating greater emotional awareness and empathy, whereas males often rely on problem-focused or avoidance coping strategies (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Studies by Matud (2004) and Tamres, Janicki and Helgeson (2002) revealed that women tend to employ emotion-focused coping and seek social support more frequently than men, who prefer rational or detached approaches to stress management. The present investigation aims to examine the extent of gender-based variation in emotional maturity and coping behavior among college students in the Indian context. A descriptive and comparative approach will be adopted to analyze the interrelation between emotional regulation, stress management and adaptive functioning. Understanding these gender-based psychological differences contributes to the development of gender-sensitive counseling, mentoring and mental health interventions in higher education. The findings are expected to enhance awareness of emotional education, promote balanced coping among youth and support the creation of emotionally intelligent academic environments that foster holistic student development.

Keywords: Emotional maturity, coping mechanisms, gender differences, college students, emotional regulation, psychological well-being

Introduction

Emotional maturity represents an individual's ability to understand, express and manage emotions constructively in different life situations. It encompasses emotional stability, self-awareness, adaptability, empathy and the capacity to respond appropriately to stress and interpersonal conflicts (Singh & Bhargava, 1990; Bar-On, 2000). During the college years, young adults experience significant developmental transitions—academic pressures, career uncertainties, social relationships and identity formation—all of which require effective emotional and coping skills. The degree of emotional maturity displayed by students often determines their psychological well-being, academic success and interpersonal adjustment (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004).

Gender has long been recognized as a significant determinant of emotional expression and coping behavior. Early theories of emotional development, such as those proposed by Maccoby and

Jacklin (1974), indicated that men and women are socialized differently with respect to emotions women are encouraged to express feelings and seek emotional support, while men are taught to control emotions and rely on problem-solving. Empirical studies conducted across diverse populations have consistently supported these differences (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Females tend to employ emotion-focused coping strategies, emphasizing emotional expression and social connectedness, whereas males more often use problem-focused or avoidance-based coping mechanisms (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992; Matud, 2004).

Research also suggests that emotional maturity increases with age and educational exposure, but the pattern of development may differ by gender (Chaplin, 2015). Studies among university students (Goleman, 1995; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000) indicate that women typically score higher on emotional awareness, empathy and interpersonal sensitivity, while men show stronger self-control and adaptability under pressure. These variations reflect not only biological differences in emotional processing but also culturally embedded gender norms influencing emotional regulation (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Brody & Hall, 2008).

The transition to college presents a particularly demanding period for both male and female students. Research by Misra and Castillo (2004) highlighted that female students often experience higher perceived stress due to emotional and academic burdens but also demonstrate greater use of adaptive coping strategies such as seeking social support. Conversely, male students tend to underreport stress yet may rely on maladaptive coping methods, including denial or substance use (Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, & Lennie, 2012). These findings underscore the necessity of understanding gender-specific patterns in coping and emotional adjustment, especially in higher education settings where stress and competition are prevalent.

In the Indian context, the issue assumes additional importance. Sociocultural expectations regarding gender roles continue to shape emotional expression and coping styles among young adults (Singh, 2015). Women are often encouraged to express emotions openly, emphasizing relational harmony and dependence, while men are expected to exhibit restraint and emotional toughness. Such patterns may influence the development of emotional maturity differently for each gender, affecting their ability to handle academic, familial and social challenges. Studies by Joseph and Abraham (2010) and Thakur and Singh (2015) found significant gender differences in emotional maturity among Indian college students, with female students displaying higher emotional awareness and sensitivity, while males exhibited greater independence and emotional control.

Furthermore, coping mechanisms the cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals use to manage stress have been categorized into various models. The most widely accepted classification by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguishes between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Later research expanded these categories to include avoidance coping, adaptive versus maladaptive strategies and proactive coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Gender-based variations are observed in all these domains, with consistent findings that females tend to rely on interpersonal and emotional support, whereas males prefer rational problem-solving approaches (Endler & Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004).

Despite extensive research in Western settings, relatively few studies in India have comprehensively examined gender differences in emotional maturity in relation to coping mechanisms. Given the evolving socio-cultural dynamics, changing gender roles and increasing

mental health concerns among youth, this area warrants renewed empirical attention. Understanding how male and female college students differ in emotional maturity and coping behavior can provide insights into gender-responsive psychological interventions, emotional intelligence training and counseling programs in higher education institutions.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the gender differences in emotional maturity and coping mechanisms among college students. It seeks to understand the patterns of emotional regulation and stress management strategies adopted by male and female students, identify correlations between emotional maturity levels and coping styles and contribute to the development of psychological frameworks that promote emotional well-being in young adults. By focusing on this intersection between gender, emotion and coping, the study endeavors to enrich developmental and educational psychology with culturally relevant insights that support holistic student development.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Understanding

The exploration of gender differences in emotional maturity and coping mechanisms among college students draws upon multiple theoretical perspectives within developmental, social and personality psychology. Emotional maturity and coping are not fixed traits but dynamic processes shaped by biological predispositions, social learning and environmental influences. To understand these constructs comprehensively, three major theoretical frameworks provide a foundation: the Emotional Intelligence Theory, the Psycho-social Development Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping.

Emotional Intelligence Theory

Daniel Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence (EI) model highlights the capacity to recognize, understand and manage one's own emotions while effectively responding to others' emotions. Emotional maturity, as a subset of emotional intelligence, includes self-regulation, empathy, adaptability and resilience. Goleman's theory suggests that emotional competencies are learned and refined through experience and feedback rather than being purely innate.

In college settings, emotionally mature students exhibit patience, empathy and reflective thinking during stressful academic or interpersonal situations. For instance, a student facing rejection from a desired internship may choose to view it as a learning opportunity rather than a personal failure demonstrating emotional self-regulation. Gender differences become evident through emotional expression patterns. Research indicates that female students generally score higher on measures of empathy and emotional awareness (Fischer et al., 2004; Joseph & Abraham, 2010), whereas male students often display greater restraint and problem-oriented coping (Matud, 2004). Such tendencies may result from socialization processes where females are encouraged to express emotions openly, while males are taught to maintain composure and independence.

Psycho-Social Development Theory

Erik Erikson's (1950, 1968) Psycho-social Development Theory offers another foundational framework for understanding emotional maturity. According to Erikson, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood involves navigating the crisis of identity versus role confusion and subsequently intimacy versus isolation. Success in these stages determines the individual's emotional

stability, interpersonal sensitivity and self-concept. College life represents a developmental stage where individuals strive for identity formation and meaningful relationships. Gender differences influence how students navigate these psychosocial tasks. Female students often exhibit stronger relational orientation valuing emotional connection and social support while male students may focus on autonomy and achievement as markers of self-worth (McMullin & Cairney, 2004).

For example, when faced with examination stress, a female student might confide in peers or seek faculty guidance (emotion-focused coping), while a male counterpart might invest additional time in structured preparation (problem-focused coping). Both approaches reflect adaptive maturity but stem from differing emotional orientations shaped by gendered expectations.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a cognitive-behavioral explanation for coping behavior. It posits that coping depends on how individuals appraise stressful events and perceive their ability to manage them. Coping mechanisms are categorized as problem-focused (aimed at changing the situation) and emotion-focused (aimed at managing emotional distress). Gender variations emerge in both primary and secondary appraisal processes. Studies reveal that females are more likely to interpret interpersonal stressors as emotionally taxing, leading them to seek social or emotional support (Tamres et al., 2002). Conversely, males often adopt instrumental strategies or avoidance behaviors when confronted with academic or performance-related stressors (Matud, 2004).

A real-time example can be seen in classroom participation during presentations. When receiving critical feedback, a female student may process it through emotional dialogue seeking reassurance or empathy while a male student might internalize the critique and attempt to improve performance independently. These behavioral tendencies mirror gendered coping frameworks rooted in social learning.

Conceptual Integration

Emotional maturity and coping mechanisms intersect through the broader construct of emotional regulation the ability to balance affective responses with rational decision-making. Gender differences do not imply superiority but highlight distinct emotional orientations. Contemporary research emphasizes that androgynous emotional profiles blending emotional expressivity with rational control are most adaptive for managing modern academic and interpersonal challenges (Bar-On, 2006).

Real-world implications of these theoretical insights are evident in college counseling programs. Institutions implementing emotional intelligence training and stress management workshops report improved student well-being, lower dropout rates and better peer interactions. When such programs are gender-sensitive recognizing that male and female students might require different modes of emotional support their impact becomes more inclusive and sustainable.

Review of Literature

Emotional maturity refers to the ability of an individual to manage and express emotions appropriately in relation to life's demands and interpersonal contexts (Singh & Bhargava, 1990). It

encompasses emotional stability, self-awareness, tolerance, adaptability and social adjustment (Mangal, 2002). Goleman (1995) emphasized that emotional maturity is foundational to emotional intelligence, which governs an individual's capacity to motivate oneself, persist through frustration, control impulses and empathize with others. According to Bar-On (2000), emotionally mature individuals are more resilient, socially competent and capable of managing stress effectively.

During adolescence and young adulthood, individuals experience rapid changes in cognitive, emotional and social domains. These transitions influence their ability to handle emotions and develop self-regulation. Erikson (1968) viewed emotional maturity as a key developmental milestone that enables individuals to achieve identity formation and intimacy. Consequently, college years represent a crucial stage for the consolidation of emotional stability and adaptive coping strategies (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007).

Gender differences in emotional functioning have been documented extensively across psychological literature. Early work by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) suggested that socialization processes lead men and women to display distinct emotional behaviors – women are often encouraged to express emotions, while men are taught to restrain them. Brody and Hall (2008) reinforced that women tend to exhibit higher emotional expressiveness and sensitivity due to both social learning and biological predispositions.

Research has shown that females often demonstrate greater emotional awareness, empathy and responsiveness compared to males (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, van Vianen, & Manstead, 2004). Studies by Joseph and Abraham (2010) and Singh (2015) in the Indian context found that female college students scored higher on emotional sensitivity and empathy, while male students displayed higher self-control and emotional stability. Similar trends were reported by Thakur and Singh (2015), suggesting that females' emotional maturity reflects greater relational orientation, whereas males' maturity reflects emotional independence and restraint.

However, findings are not universally consistent. Some studies (Rathi & Rastogi, 2009; Katyal & Awasthi, 2005) reported no significant gender difference in overall emotional maturity, indicating that contextual factors such as upbringing, educational environment and social exposure may moderate gender effects. Nevertheless, the overall evidence suggests a nuanced pattern – women may excel in emotional expression and interpersonal understanding, while men may display stronger control under stressful or competitive conditions.

Coping mechanisms refer to the cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals use to handle stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These strategies can be broadly categorized into problem-focused coping, which addresses the cause of stress directly and emotion-focused coping, which aims to regulate emotional distress. Later frameworks introduced avoidance coping (Endler & Parker, 1990) and proactive coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997).

Students in higher education often face multiple stressors – academic workload, peer competition and uncertainty about future goals. Coping strategies determine how effectively they manage such stress. Research by Misra and McKean (2000) indicated that adaptive coping (time management, goal setting and social support) leads to lower stress and better psychological well-being. Conversely, maladaptive coping (avoidance, denial, or substance use) increases vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, & Lennie, 2012).

Folkman and Lazarus (1985) observed that coping behaviors are influenced by personality,

perceived control and social support. Students with higher emotional maturity are generally more likely to employ adaptive coping mechanisms (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Therefore, emotional maturity and coping styles are interrelated constructs contributing jointly to psychological adjustment and resilience (Schutte et al., 1998).

Gender differences in coping have been consistently reported in psychological research. Tamres, Janicki and Helgeson (2002), through a meta-analytic review, concluded that women tend to use emotion-focused and social-support-seeking coping strategies more frequently than men, who prefer problem-focused or avoidance coping. Similarly, Matud (2004) found that women reported higher stress levels but employed more adaptive coping styles, such as emotional expression and seeking help.

Male students often engage in coping behaviors emphasizing independence and control, while female students emphasize relational coping and communication (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992). Research by Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) showed that adolescent girls utilize more emotional coping strategies, whereas boys rely on practical solutions. Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) attributed this difference to both cognitive style and gender-role socialization – women are more inclined toward rumination and emotional processing, while men focus on task-oriented solutions.

In the Indian context, gender norms reinforce such distinctions. Studies by Kaur (2011) and Sharma (2014) reported that female students tend to seek emotional support from family and peers, while males often adopt self-reliant or escapist strategies. Misra and Castillo (2004) found that women perceive academic stress more acutely but also display higher social adaptability and emotional coping, suggesting that cultural expectations of emotional expressivity shape gendered responses to stress.

The relationship between emotional maturity and coping strategies has been explored in several empirical studies. Emotionally mature individuals demonstrate higher self-regulation, optimism and stress tolerance (Bar-On, 2000). Research by Schutte et al. (1998) and Parker et al. (2004) established that higher emotional intelligence – a construct closely related to emotional maturity – correlates positively with adaptive coping and psychological well-being. Individuals with low emotional maturity often engage in avoidance or defensive coping, leading to maladjustment and increased emotional distress (Rani & Kaur, 2015).

Joseph and Abraham (2010) found that emotional maturity significantly predicts the choice of coping strategy among college students – those with higher emotional maturity tend to employ constructive coping mechanisms such as problem-solving and self-reflection. Similarly, Katyal and Awasthi (2005) emphasized that emotionally balanced individuals are more capable of adjusting to changing life demands, highlighting the reciprocal influence between emotional competence and coping efficacy.

Although numerous studies have explored gender differences in emotional maturity and coping independently, relatively few have examined their interrelationship among college students within the same cultural context. Much of the pre-2017 research remains fragmented, focusing on either emotional development or stress responses in isolation. Furthermore, most studies were conducted in Western contexts, leaving a gap in culturally specific understanding, especially within Indian higher education, where societal expectations, gender norms and emotional expressiveness differ substantially.

Understanding how male and female college students differ in emotional maturity and coping strategies can help educators, counselors and policymakers design gender-sensitive interventions that enhance students' emotional well-being and academic performance. This integration of emotional maturity and coping research is crucial for developing comprehensive mental health frameworks in educational institutions (Singh, 2015; Thakur & Singh, 2015).

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the conceptual and theoretical bases of emotional maturity and coping mechanisms.
2. To synthesize findings on gender differences in emotional maturity among college students.
3. To analyze patterns of gender-based coping behaviors and strategies in stress-related contexts.
4. To identify associations between emotional maturity and coping effectiveness.
5. To propose implications for counseling, mental health and educational practices in higher education settings.

Significance of the Study

The present review study holds substantial significance for the fields of developmental and educational psychology, higher education and mental health. Emotional maturity and coping mechanisms are critical determinants of how young adults manage academic, social and personal challenges during the transitional period of college life. Understanding the gender-based variations in these psychological constructs provides a deeper insight into how emotional and behavioral processes are shaped by both biological predispositions and socio-cultural expectations. In terms of practical relevance, the study underscores the need for emotionally responsive educational environments. The insights derived can guide counselors, educators and policymakers in designing gender-sensitive emotional education and stress management programs within higher education institutions. Recognizing that male and female students often differ in how they express and cope with emotions enables the development of tailored interventions that strengthen emotional regulation, resilience and interpersonal competence.

Findings

1. The review revealed that college students exhibit varying levels of emotional maturity depending on their developmental stage, socio-cultural background and exposure to emotional learning. Studies by Singh and Bhargava (1990) and Mangal (2002) identified emotional maturity as a multidimensional construct involving emotional stability, social adjustment and personal integration. Research consistently highlighted that emotional maturity tends to increase with age and academic progression, as students develop greater self-awareness, tolerance and emotional control (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). However, evidence from Thakur and Singh (2015) and Rathi and Rastogi (2009) suggested that significant variations exist among students due to differing family environments, stress levels and academic pressures. In general, the literature supports that while most college students are in a transitional stage toward emotional maturity, many still struggle with emotional regulation under academic or interpersonal stress.
2. Almost all reviewed studies found that gender plays a notable role in shaping emotional maturity. Classical works (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Brody & Hall, 2008) indicated that females are

typically more expressive, empathetic and relationally oriented, while males are more emotionally restrained and self-reliant. In the Indian context, Joseph and Abraham (2010) and Singh (2015) found that female students tend to exhibit greater emotional sensitivity and empathy, reflecting socio-cultural norms that encourage emotional openness among women. Conversely, male students scored higher in emotional independence and control, aligning with traditional expectations of strength and emotional endurance (Katyal & Awasthi, 2005). However, some contemporary studies (Rathi & Rastogi, 2009) found diminishing gender differences, likely due to increasing gender equality and shared learning environments. Overall, the review confirms that gender-based variations persist, though they may be gradually narrowing in modern educational contexts.

3. The review found distinct gender patterns in coping mechanisms. Studies by Folkman and Lazarus (1985) and Tamres, Janicki and Helgeson (2002) showed that females typically employ emotion-focused coping, emphasizing emotional expression, social support and relational engagement. Matud (2004) and Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) confirmed that women prefer interpersonal and supportive coping styles, such as seeking help or sharing feelings. In contrast, male students are more likely to use problem-focused or avoidance coping, attempting to confront stressors directly or distract themselves from them (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992; Misra & Castillo, 2004). Indian studies (Kaur, 2011; Sharma, 2014) mirrored these findings – male students often relied on distraction, denial, or self-reliance, while females used social interaction and communication to manage stress. This indicates that coping styles are not only psychological but also socially conditioned by gender norms and expectations.
4. The synthesis of studies showed a strong and positive correlation between emotional maturity and adaptive coping strategies. Research by Schutte et al. (1998) and Parker et al. (2004) found that individuals with higher emotional intelligence or maturity are more likely to use problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal, resulting in better psychological adjustment. Conversely, lower emotional maturity is linked to avoidance, denial and withdrawal coping, often resulting in stress vulnerability (Rani & Kaur, 2015). This relationship suggests that emotional maturity acts as a psychological moderator, influencing how students perceive and respond to stress. Emotionally mature students are more resilient, flexible and optimistic in their coping behaviors, while less mature individuals are prone to impulsive or maladaptive reactions. These findings reinforce that emotional education and self-awareness training can enhance students' coping capacities and overall well-being.
5. The review emphasizes that emotional maturity and coping skills are essential components of students' holistic development and mental health. Educational psychologists (Bar-On, 2000; Goleman, 1995) argue that emotional competence contributes significantly to success and well-being, often more than cognitive intelligence. Gender-sensitive programs should therefore focus on balancing emotional expressiveness and resilience across both genders. For male students, interventions may focus on developing emotional expressivity, empathy and social connectedness, whereas for female students, programs could encourage confidence, independence and problem-solving. Colleges can incorporate emotional literacy workshops, peer counseling and life-skill training into curricula to foster balanced emotional development. The findings align with the holistic and inclusive goals of India's National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), which

promotes emotional and social learning as part of 21st-century education.

Conclusion

A research indicates that gender differences play a significant role in shaping emotional maturity and coping mechanisms among college students. Studies consistently reveal that female students tend to demonstrate higher emotional awareness, empathy and adaptive coping strategies, whereas male students often rely on problem-focused or avoidance-oriented coping approaches. These variations can be attributed to biological factors, socialization patterns and cultural expectations that influence emotional expression and regulation from adolescence into early adulthood. The findings underscore the importance of promoting emotional intelligence and coping skill development as integral components of higher education. Educational institutions must foster environments that encourage emotional openness, resilience and gender-sensitive psychological support. By doing so, colleges can enhance students' well-being, academic performance and interpersonal relationships. Future research should explore longitudinal and cross-cultural dimensions to understand how evolving gender roles and societal norms continue to shape emotional and coping competencies among emerging adults.

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