

AN INVESTIGATION OF INTERACTION AMONG FAMILY FUNCTIONING, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND WELL-BEING IN STUDENTS

Sameera Shafiq^{a*}, & Rimsha Tasadat^b

^aPhD and Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan. Email: sameerashafiq@yahoo.com

^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Gujrat, Gujrat Pakistan. Email: rimshatasadaq32@gmail.com

*Correspondence to: Sameera Shafiq, PhD and Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan. Email: sameerashafiq@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Research evidence shows there are a number of factors that impact student well-being, including family dynamics, emotional intelligence and psychological distress. The present empirical study has investigated the relationship between family function, emotional intelligence, and psychological distress on well-being of university students. A quantitative cross sectional correlational design was utilized. Data were collected from 500 students aged 18–25 years via purposive sampling technique from University of Gujrat, Gujrat. Well- established instruments, including the McMaster Family Functioning Scale, Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10), and The Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) were used. The results were analysed in AMOS-27 version. Path analysis of structure equation model indicated that family function has partially mediated between wellbeing and psychological distress. Similarly, mood regulation showed complete mediation between wellbeing and emotional distress whereas appraisal of emotions, social skills, and utilization of emotions partially mediated between wellbeing and psychological distress. Conclusively, supportive family environment and utilization of emotions are positively associated with psychological distress whereas mood regulation, appraisal of emotions, and social skills are negatively associated with the wellbeing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Student well-being has emerged as a prominent focus of scholarly interest in educational psychology due to accumulating evidence that it is related to academic performance, emotional resilience and so forth. Well-being is broadly defined as a state of positive functioning, which encompasses emotional balance, life satisfaction and the ability to effectively manage stress (Malinauskas, & Pozeriene, 2020). Recent research has shown that students with high well-being achieve more academically and have better social relations and fewer psychological problems including anxiety or depression (Barton & Jones, 2024). Given increasing stress within academic environments and the impact that this has on students, especially in higher education where there is an emphasis on performance pressures (Malinauskas, & Pozeriene, 2020), it is imperative to assess factors that promote well-being in students both academically and mentally. The student psychological health is basically determined by family functioning. Family functioning, such as social support, communication and adaptive functioning were significantly associated

with students' coping strategies to academic contexts and peer pressures. Research shows how students with high levels of family cohesion and emotional support feel less distress and more well-being than their counterparts from dysfunctional families (Moreno et al. 2024). Hence, the family is fundamental for emotional security and stability, as they can intervene to prevent negative psychological effects during adolescence and young adulthood (Gao, Wang, Yan, Luo, & Tang, 2025).

Another area gaining prominence in relation to student well-being is emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence (EI) encompasses the ability to recognise, understand, regulate and utilise emotions effectively, and has been associated with improved mental health, better social relationships – even significant life events such as suicide attempts or self-harm (Latif et al., 2024). Prior studies reveal that students with high levels of emotional intelligence tend to have better sense of adapting and feeling comfortable about academic challenges and personal stress meaning their psychological well-being remains more intact. Moreover, it helps one regulate emotions during stressful situations leading to lower psychological distress and better mental health (Zayed, Alshammari, & Suleiman, 2026). Psychological distress, consisting of anxiety, depression and chronic stress symptoms, negatively affects student well-being. Low academic performance, decreased life quality, and mental health concerns are related to high levels of psychological distress. Stress is notably exacerbated by academic pressure, life transitions (such as entering university or facing exams) hereinafter. Distress is recognized as a main factor influencing students' ability to function in both their academic and social environments; detracting from emotional stability, and thus relatively frequent in empirical studies concerned with student well-being. Family functioning and emotional intelligence may operate interactively to contribute to student well-being or psychological distress. Student wellbeing is a recognized contributor to academic performance (Zhao et al., 2024).

Strong family support systems can lead to higher levels of emotional intelligence which may be necessary to act as buffers against psychological distress in students. This indicates that a good family environment together with high emotional intelligence may help students cope the stress more adaptively and mitigate distress in well-being. Therefore, examining the interplay of these influences is crucial to developing interventions targeting student mental health and well-being. Family function is a major influence on student well-being. Family relationships, such as characterized by support, open communication and emotional closeness have been shown to be relevant for emotional and psychological health (Moreno et al., 2024). A substantial body of research guidelines affirms that children raised by families perceived to have good emotional support systems usually demonstrate greater resilience and mental health compared to their peers living under dysfunctional family circumstances, which place them to develop stress, anxiety and depression (Shek, 2021). Since family function is critical to adolescents' emotional and social competence, it befits researchers to investigate how such dynamics impact the well-being of students. Despite the fact that previous research conducted on family function does not take into account their interaction with other variables, such as emotional intelligence and psychological distress, there is a need to know whether family function has an effect on well-being (Peña-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015).

Emotional intelligence (EI) is another key factor influencing the well-being of students: a set of skills that enable you to manage your own emotions and recognize, understand, and influence the feelings of others. Emotional intelligence is a solution to how students deal with stress, approach others and manage academic & social challenges they encounter (Goleman, 1995). Many studies showed that high subjection to EI leads to better regulating emotions, more co-relating with people around them, lesser stress and anxiety (Salovey & Meyer, 1990) In addition, emotional intelligence has been associated with better academic outcomes and psychological resilience. Higher levels of emotional intelligence (EI) help students cope with academic and social challenges, as such EI is a key contributor to student wellness (Zeidner et al. However, the relationships between emotional intelligence, family functioning and psychological distress have yet to be investigated in a single model. Psychological distress as measured by anxiety, depression and stress is a more significant predictor of well-being. There is, however, a substantial body of evidence to suggest that psychological distress has an adverse effect on academic performance and emotional well-being (Cummings & Capron, 2014). Academic pressures, social isolation, and family problems contribute to devastating instances of helplessness, low self-esteem, and emotional fatigue (Kessler et al., 2003). In addition, psychological distress has also been strongly associated with negative physical health conditions as it is well documented that chronic stress can precipitate physical illness manifesting as fatigue, headaches and sleep problems (McEwen, 2006). Most students encounter distress, especially from exams or other periods of high academic stakes; therefore, a

better understanding of how distress, emotional intelligence and family function interact is important to help promote student well-being. Understanding this relationship may help determine how to best support students with challenges both in and out of the classroom.

There are increasing studies on family function and emotional intelligence but very few have examined the effect of psychological distress alongside these factors, creating a void in the literature. Although the effects of these variables on student well-being have been investigated in isolation, their combined effects have not. Family function affects emotional intelligence so students should cope with psychological distress. A better grasp of such complex interactions between psychological and emotional stressors will be necessary for designing holistic interventions that not only target academic stress but also the broader psychological needs of students (Yıldırım, & Arslan, 2022). Consequently, this research aims to investigate the cumulative influence of these factors on student wellbeing offering novel information on how family dynamics, emotional intelligence and psychological distress impact students' global mental health. The rationale behind the study is that more and more institutions are beginning to acknowledge student well-being as a central dimension of academic success, emotional development and mental health. More attention has been focused on the student well-being, not only academic outcome but also for emotional stability, life satisfaction, social relationship and mental health (Keyes, 2009). Understanding how well-being is determined will be crucial for designing interventions fit to help students as the academic pressure, social pressures and family-related stressors escalate. Exploring this is important, as family function differentiates those students at risk and lowers their mean level of emotional intelligence (Szcześniak, & Tułeczka, 2020) by subject to psychological distress. This study is grounded in the pressing need to break down silos and create a comprehensive response to student wellbeing. Therefore, knowledge on family functioning, emotional clarity and distress help educators and people in mental health provision to understand the larger context of how these variables work together as students navigate through their very complex lives today. The goal of this research is to specify the determinants of resilience and its role in well-being, with a view on practice and policy that will ensure students not only succeed academically but also flourish in mental health.

Objectives

1. To examine whether Family Function mediates between wellbeing and psychological distress among university students.
2. To examine whether the dimensions of Emotional Intelligence mediate between wellbeing and Psychological Distress among university students.

Hypotheses

1. Family function will mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress among university students.
2. Dimensions of emotional intelligence will mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress among university students

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student wellbeing is an important research topic in the fields of education and psychology, since its strong links with academic achievement, personal development and quality life. Students' wellbeing is defined as positive emotional states (pleasant, contentment), positive functioning, and satisfaction with life not merely the absence of mental health problems. Higher levels of wellbeing provide the opportunity for students to connect more positively with their studies and social environment, resilience in the face of many academic and personal challenges (Diener, 2000). Numerous studies have found that family environments are directly related to student's level of wellbeing; a supportive family environment leads to higher levels of student wellbeing. Students can really benefit from the emotional support and understanding for encouragement that family members provide, resulting in positive emotions, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. On the other hand, unfavourable family functioning (characterized by high level of conflict and low level of social support) has been associated with emotional problems and lower levels of wellbeing among students (Shek, 2002).

Family function is also a significant protective factor in times of academic and developmental stress. Supportive families' help student cope with academic pressures, life transitions and adjust to new typical problems that amplify emotional distress. Resilience is also promoted through family communication and problem-solving skills, which contribute to maintaining psychological wellbeing against external stressors (Yap et al., 2014). Moreover, the aforementioned research suggests dysfunctional family environment may contribute to psychological issues that may affect student wellbeing. Students exposed to chronic family conflicts and emotional neglect, or harsh and inconsistent parenting tend to have higher stress levels, suffer from anxiety, as well as express depressive symptoms. These adjacent emotional implications have been negative as they impede with the students' academic dedication and global wellbeing (Repetti et al., 2002). Family function is a fundamental precursor of emotional and psychological ability, such as emotional intelligence. Students also get opportunities to learn how to regulate their emotions and express empathy as they are raised in family environments that support emotional expression, communication, and effective problem-solving. On the other hand, dysfunctional family interactions might inhibit emotional development and result in lower levels of emotional intelligence and increased susceptibility to problems related to emotions (Morris et al., 2007).

III. METHOD

The current study employed a quantitative cross-sectional correlational research design. This study consisted of a cross-sectional design because the data were collected in just one moment via standardized questionnaires. Because it intended to quantitatively measure the relationship of Family function, Emotional intelligence, Psychological distress and student's wellbeing a quantitative design was used. It explored family function and emotional intelligence as mediators between psychological distress and student wellbeing.

Participants

A field survey method was adopted for data collection from students of the University of Gujrat. Participants were recruited from the list of staff in different departments across the university. This resulted in a final sample of 500 students. Of these 200 were male, and the rest 300 female students. Participants' age range was from 18 to 25 years. In the present study, it used a purposive sampling method. This was appropriate due to participants being recruited on a voluntary basis. All students available at the time of data collection and who agreed to answer a questionnaire were included in the study. These subjects comprised students at various semesters, students with diverse family systems, married people and unmarried individuals from different socioeconomic statuses.

Measures

The participants were provided an information sheet and the patients signed an informed consent form before data collection. The participants were told that they had been invited to take part in research regarding family function and psychological well-being. They had been told that their involvement was entirely voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The respondents were promised this assistant would be used only for educational purposes. Participants indicated their informed consent to participate in the study by completing the questionnaire. The Participants were collected on the basis of a demographic information sheet. These included appropriate age, gender, semester, marital status and family system and socioeconomic status. The gender was defined as male and female. Marital status was either single or married. Family system the family was divided into nuclear family and joint family system. In addition, socioeconomic status was divided into low, middle and high. This information was used to give a description of the participants' backgrounds. [1] Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10): K-10 scale contains 10 items which measure participant's level of psychological distress during the past 4 weeks. The scale assessed symptoms including tiredness, nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depression, sadness, effort fullness and worthlessness. Participants rated each item on 5-levels Likert Scale. 1 was none of the time, 2 a little of the time, 3 some of the time, 4 most of the time and 5 all of the time. The cumulative of the scale is reached by summing responses on all 10 items. The lowest work software that can achieve is 10 and the highest 50. Higher score shows Greater levels of psychological distress. Lower score shows Less amounts of psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002).

[II] McMaster Family Functioning Scale: In the questionnaire, family function was measured by Family Functioning Scale. It consisted of 12 items that pertain to the general functioning of the family. It focuses on family support, cooperation, consistency, accommodation to each other's needs and expectations, interpersonal openness and social interaction for problem solving, peace of mind in stressful situations. The Family Function Scale used in this study is the General Functioning Subscale of McMaster Family Assessment device. The response options were on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = not at all like my family, 2 = a little like my family, 3 = sometimes like my family, 4 = usually like my family and 5 = almost always like my family. Higher score signifies a better functioning family, conversely poor family handling obtains lower scores (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983). **[III] Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale, SEIS:** SEIS is 33 items long. It is an assessment of student capability to understand, express, regulate and manage emotions. It also measures emotional awareness and optimism, empathy, self-motivation, social skills, nonverbal comprehension, as well as problem-solving with emotions. The measured responses for each item using a 5-item Likert scale. Responses were scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For all items, the total score is considered (after reverse scoring the negative ones). Thus, items with the numbers 5, 28 and 33 are negative items. The ideal range of the Emotional Intelligence Scale is that 33 is the least value while 165 is the maximum score. A high score means something and a low score means something else about emotional intelligence (Schutte et al., 1998). The Emotional Intelligence Scale consists of four subscales: Mood regulation, Appraisal of emotion, Social skills, and utilization of emotion (Petrides, & Furnham, 2000). **[IV] The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS):** In the present study, student well-being was our outcome variable. It refers to positive psychological functioning: social, emotional and general well-being, life satisfaction, academic adjustment and mental health. The objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between family function, emotional intelligence and psychological distress towards student well-being. It was hypothesized that improved family functioning and emotional intelligence would be positively associated with student well-being, while psychological distress would be negatively associated with student well-being. (Tennant et al., 2007).

Procedure

Approval was sought from appropriate forum before data collection procedure from the students of University of Gujrat. Participants were based in various departments of the university. They were clearly told the purpose of the study. They were told that the study was for academic research purpose and their participation was voluntary in nature. The questionnaires were administered to subjects following informed consent. Students were directed to carefully read each item and respond honestly. Participants were informed that there is no right or wrong answers and all their responses will be anonymized. The researcher was on call throughout the data collection period to clarify any confusion surrounding the questionnaire. Questionnaires were collected from the participants upon completion. Questionnaires were validated and incomplete responses were omitted from the final data analysis. Participants were acknowledged for their time and cooperation. The entire research project was conducted in adherence to ethical principles prior to data collection; participants were made aware of study goals. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any phase with no negative consequences. Participants were assured of confidentiality. The final report did not contain any personally identifiable information. The data were used for academic and research purposes only. Respondents were also guaranteed that no individual will be identified, and their answers would be reported in the aggregate only. Data collection procedures were carried out respectfully with the participants. It was voluntary for them to take part in the subject study. They started with a study that did not include any physical harm or serious psychological risk, all my data were secure and used only for the purpose of the current research. The data obtained was entered into IBM SPSS-27 version and AMOS-27 version to perform statistical analysis. First, the frequencies and percentages were analyzed concomitant to demographic characteristics of participants. Using reliability analysis, internal consistency of the scales was examined. Structure equation model in AMOS-27 was constructed for path analysis to investigate the mediating role of family functioning and aspects of emotional intelligence between wellbeing and psychological distress.

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The total sample consisted of 500 participants. Regarding age, most of the participants were between 18 to 20 years, 236 participants, 47.2%, followed by 21 to 22 years, 183 participants, 36.6%, and 23 to 25 years, 81 participants, 16.2%. This shows that the majority of the

participants were young adults between 18 and 22 years of age. In terms of gender, females were greater in number than males. There were 300 female participants, 60.0%, and 200 male participants, 40.0%. This indicates that the sample had more female students as compared to male students. With regard to education, most of the participants belonged to 6th to 8th semester, 265 participants, 53.0%, followed by 2nd semester, 128 participants, 25.6%, and 3rd to 4th semester, 107 participants, 21.4%. This shows that more than half of the participants were from senior semesters. Regarding family system, most of the participants belonged to nuclear families, 343 participants, 68.6%, whereas 157 participants, 31.4%, belonged to combined family systems. This indicates that the nuclear family system was more common in the sample. In terms of socioeconomic status, the majority of participants belonged to the middle class, 426 participants, 85.2%, followed by lower class, 58 participants, 11.2%, and high class, 16 participants, 3.2%. This shows that most of the participants came from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table I: Demographic Variable Information (n=500)

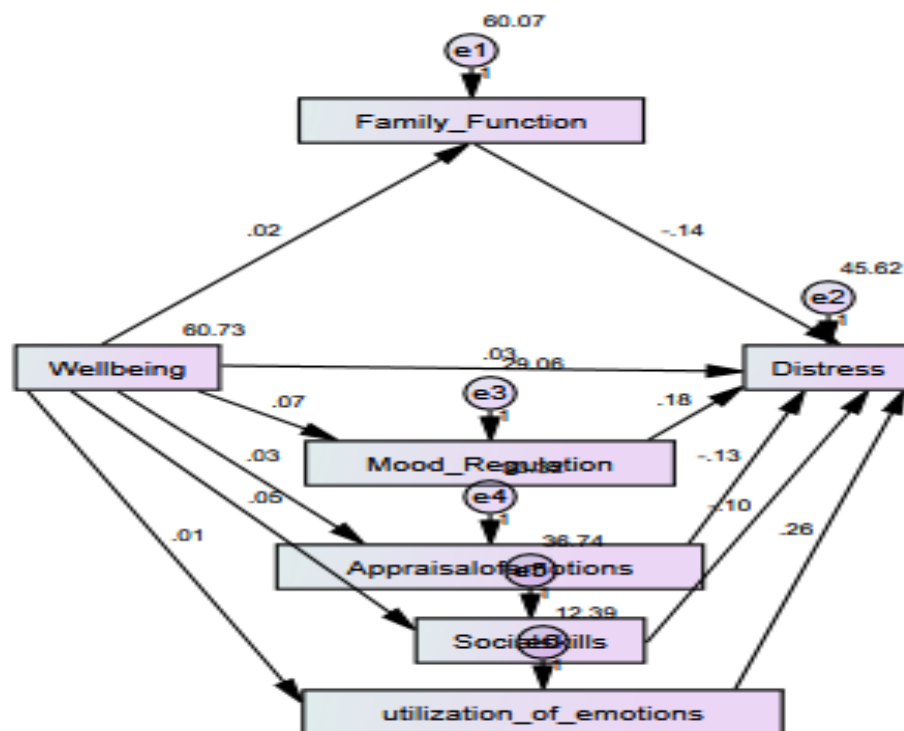
Demographic variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18-20 years	236	47.2
21-22 years	183	36.6
23-25 years	81	16.2
Gender		
Males	200	40.0
Females	300	60.0
Education		
2 nd Semester	128	25.6
4 th semester	107	21.4
6 th -8 th semester	265	53.0
Family system		
Combined	157	31.4
Nuclear	343	68.6
Socio Economic Status		
High class (<50,000 PKR)	16	3.2
Middle class (<40,000 PKR)	426	85.2
Lower class (<30,000 PKR)	58	11.6

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients of the study variables including Family Function, Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Distress, and Student Well Being. Family Function showed a mean score of 33.46 (SD = 7.76), with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .838, indicating good internal consistency. Emotional Intelligence had a mean score of 104.75 (SD = 16.83) and demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .853$). Psychological Distress showed a mean score of 33.59 (SD = 6.97), with an acceptable reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .761$). Student Well-Being had a mean score of 47.00 (SD = 7.80), with good internal consistency ($\alpha = .852$). Overall, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .761 to .853, indicating that all study instruments possessed acceptable to good reliability and were appropriate for further statistical analyses.

Table II: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis of Study Variables (N=500)

Variables	M	SD	Range	Cronbach's α
Family Function	33.46	7.759	12-48	.838
Emotional Intelligence	104.75	16.83	43-157	.853
Psychological Distress	33.59	33.59	10-50	.761
Well-Being	47.00	7.801	26-64	.852

In figure 1, the results of the path analysis in structure equation model showed a non-significant direct association of the wellbeing is found with family functioning ($\beta = .02$, $p = .71$) and psychological distress ($\beta = .03$, $p = .49$) among the students. However, family functioning partially mediated the association between wellbeing and psychological distress ($\beta = -.14$, $p < 0.001$) among students. Therefore, it is interpretable that a sound family functioning buffers the psychological distress and reduces its impact among the youth.

Figure I: Structure Equation Model with Path Analysis for Family Function and Emotional Intelligence as Mediators between wellbeing and psychological distress

In direct path analysis, wellbeing showed non-significant association with appraisal of emotions ($\beta = .03$, $p = .34$), social skills ($\beta = .05$, $p = .14$), and utilization of emotions ($\beta = .01$, $p = .46$). Wellbeing was significantly associated with mood regulation ($\beta = .07$, $p < 0.05$) directly. Hence, mood regulation domain of emotional intelligence completely mediates between wellbeing and psychological distress ($\beta = .18$, $p < 0.01$). However, appraisal of emotions ($\beta = -.13$, $p < 0.05$), social skills ($\beta = -.10$, $p < 0.05$), and utilization of emotions ($\beta = .26$, $p < 0.01$) partially mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress. The students having greater appraisal of emotions and good social skills suffer with lower psychological distress. However, if they utilize these emotions negatively or overwhelmingly, it gives rise to distressing feelings in them.

V. DISCUSSION

The current research focuses on family function, emotional intelligence, psychological distress, and well-being, particularly among university students. It also focused on whether family functioning and emotional intelligence

dimensions could mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress. The first hypothesis stated that family function will mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress among university students. The results of the path analysis in structure equation model showed that family functioning partially mediated the association between wellbeing and psychological distress ($\beta = -.14$, $p < 0.001$) among students. Hence, first hypothesis of the study was confirmed. This result is consistent with the findings of Sutherland, Thompson, Flynn, and Hastings (2025). They found partial mediating effect of family functioning on 324 mothers' psychological distressed condition. Moreover, it is evident that cohesion and flexibility serve as good indicators of family functioning that in turn lowers the psychological distress in the mentally ill patients (Tramonti et al., 2020). Family function and psychological distress showed a significant negative relationship, suggesting family functions to provide emotional support to lower the level of psychological distress among students.

The second hypothesis of the study stated dimensions of emotional intelligence will mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress among university students. The results of the structure equation model showed that mood regulation domain of emotional intelligence completely mediates between wellbeing and psychological distress ($\beta = .18$, $p < 0.01$). However, appraisal of emotions ($\beta = -.13$, $p < 0.05$), social skills ($\beta = -.10$, $p < 0.05$), and utilization of emotions ($\beta = .26$, $p < 0.01$) partially mediate between wellbeing and psychological distress. The students having greater appraisal of emotions and good social skills suffer with lower psychological distress. However, if they utilize these emotions negatively or overwhelmingly, it gives rise to distressing feelings in them. On the basis of the results of the present study, the second hypothesis was confirmed. This result is consistent with the findings of the previous research conducted by Zhang, Zhao, Xing, Chen, Tian, & Tang, (2016). They explored the significant mediating role of emotional intelligence with the psychological distress in 467 nursing University students. Similarly, Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, and Larcan (2015) reported trait emotional intelligence to serve both as a full and partial mediator in internalizing and externalizing behavior problems respectively among 260 adolescents. Likewise, Dev, and Rahman (2016) found emotional intelligence as the mediator for distress among 266 university students. All aspects of emotional intelligence were found to serve as mediators for the psychological distress among individuals. Emotional regulation significantly mediated with the psychological distress in 204 students with mean age 22 years (Ray-Yol, & Altan-Atalay, 2022). Appraisal of emotions and thinking mediated psychological distress in 3002 military personnel (McCuaig Edge, & Ivey, 2012). Good social skills mediated negatively with the psychological distress in 179 young adults (Segrin, & Rynes, 2009). Lynch, Robins, Morse, and Krause (2001) studied utilization of emotion via avoiding or inhibiting to be positively mediating with the psychological distress in clinical and non-clinical sample.

Limitations and Suggestions

The results of the current study are interesting; there are some limitations to note. The study was conducted using a cross sectional research design, and the limitation is that it does not allow the determination of causal relationships between the study variables. Second, the students of University of Gujrat were selected through purposive sampling technique and the sample was small. Third, all variables were assessed by self-report questionnaires, possibly subject to social desirability and response bias. Lastly, all the study's key variables were concentrated on family functioning, emotional intelligence and Psychological distress, with other important variables such as academic stress, peer support, resilience, personality traits, and socioeconomic status omitted. Longitudinal research designs should be used in future studies to gain greater insight into the relationships between family functions, emotional intelligence and psychological outcomes to provide more evidence on long-term impacts on children and students' psychological adjustment. The researchers should involve participants from various universities, provinces and increase the representativeness of their samples using probability sampling. Comparative studies between the students of public and private schools' private universities also may teach the more general concept of family functioning, emotional intelligence and psychological distress in various educational contexts. Further studies are needed to explore other psychological and social factors including academic stress, resilience, self-esteem, coping strategies, peer support, social support, personality traits, socioeconomic status. The addition of these variables may give a better and deeper knowledge of the psychological factors affecting the attitudes of students' adjustment and mental health issues.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study, the mediating relationships of family function and emotional intelligence was examined between wellbeing and the psychological distress among university students. Family functioning, appraisal of emotions, social skills, and utilization of emotions partially mediated between wellbeing and distress whereas mood regulation fully mediated between wellbeing and distress. Overall, the results highlight the significance of a sense of healthy family relationships and positive emotional competencies (appraisals and interactions) in supporting students' psychological well-being adjustment and minimizing psychological distress.

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