# Relationship between Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being among Indian College Students

Surbhi Singhal[1], Dr. Nidhi Prakash[*2]

#*Department of Psychology, University of Delhi*
[1]surbhisinghal1006@gmail.com
[2]nidhiprakash12@gmail.com

*Abstract*— **The present study attempted to determine the level of self-esteem and psychological well-being among Indian college students and examine the gender differences associated with these variables. The study further assessed the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being and investigated whether self-esteem is a significant predictor of psychological well-being. Data were collected from 122 Indian college students living in Delhi-NCR region belonging to age group of 18-28 years using purposive sampling technique. Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES) and Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI) were used for measuring self-esteem and psychological well-being respectively. IBM SPSS ver. 20 was used for statistical analysis. The findings revealed that the college students reported moderate level of self-esteem and psychological distress. A significant positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being was determined. No significant differences were found in self-esteem and psychological well-being level of college students based on gender which suggests a significant change in Urban India providing equal opportunities and resources to male and female college students. Further, regression analysis showed that self-esteem significantly predicted psychological well-being. Psychological distress among college students can be dealt by providing counseling in college premises regarding mental health problems and other difficulties experienced by students in their routine lives. Given that the self-esteem is a significant determinant of psychological well-being, healthy self-esteem development is crucial for enhancing positive mental health outcomes among college students.**

*Keywords*— **college students, gender, Indian, psychological well-being, psychological distress, self-esteem**

## I. INTRODUCTION

While the quest for happiness and satisfaction is nearly universal, the way to this bliss and shapes of accomplished joy can differ broadly across individuals and circumstances. With a view to encourage people to lead a happy and fulfilling life, the field of positive psychology has invigorated a developing enthusiasm to study psychological well-being and various aspects attached to it. College students are future of the nation. College period is a significant part of a student's life as it is a transforming phase for students where they are presented to the different psychological and social difficulties (Arnett, 2000) of early adulthood and learn to take responsibilities regarding their ways of living. In changing times of modernity, college students are facing even more complex problems than earlier times (Chao, 2012) thus leading to more psychological disturbances in their routine lives (Garcia, Garcia, Castillio & Queralt, 2011). Some persistent stressors that young college students experience include their higher aspirations, parental expectations, peer pressure, transforming social relations, and struggle for a healthy self-identity formation, experimenting with novel ideas and interacting with new people. Other remarkable issues pertaining to daily life hassles (Sim, 2000) incorporate ineffective time management, changing family dynamics, disappointment from one's own performance, sense of loneliness and worthlessness, excessive worrying about future and unclear thought processes (Kumaraswamy, 2013). In view of the present challenges in this dynamically changing world, it is critically important to study the psychological well-being among college students.

Furthermore, self-esteem plays a vital role in an individual's overall healthy personality development (Orth & Robins, 2014). Self-esteem is one of the most important factors related to psychological well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and is significantly identified with various aspects of well-being or adjustment. Therefore, healthy self-esteem is required to cope with the psychological distress which may arise during this challenging phase. Hence, it becomes essential to promote the psychological health of the Indian youth to enhance their productivity and formation of positive attitudes in leading a more fulfilling life. Thus, the present research will contribute to the comprehensive understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among college students, and gender differences associated with these psychological variables. Further, it is important to measure the predictive value of self-esteem in determining the psychological well-being among college students so that the self-esteem, if significant, can be considered for enhancing the well-being level of the Indian college students.

In view of the above, the present paper discusses the meaning of psychological well-being and self-esteem, related empirical studies on the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being, and the gender differences associated with these

variables. The succeeding section describes the methodology used in this research, followed by the results and discussions. Lastly, directions for future research and implications of the study are delineated.

A. *Psychological Well-being*

Ryff (1989) defined psychological well-being as the optimal psychological functioning and experience, comprising of six dimensions: self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others and purpose in life. Deci & Ryan (2008) conceptualised psychological well-being using two perspectives: hedonic i.e. an aggregation of positive affective states such as happiness and eudemonic i.e. functioning with optimal effectiveness in personal and social life. Psychological well-being affects an individual's emotional and psychological processes, enhances his/her mental health as it incorporates principles that can improve his/her physiological, informative, individual, professional and family health, and by establishing positive social bonds (Asli Azad, Shariat, Farhadi & Shahidi, 2018).

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional concept comprising of attitudes towards one's life. Health is a significant component of psychological well-being and psychological well-being has a considerable impact on the general health of an individual (Ryff, 2014). The subjective well-being can be understood in terms of the positive and negative interpersonal affective states (Grossi & Compare, 2014). It does not expect individuals to focus solely on positive emotions and avoiding negative feelings as painful emotions, for instance, disappointment, sadness, anxiety and anger are also a natural part of one's life. However, he/she should be able to deal with negative feelings and emotions effectively to maintain sustainable well-being. When a negative emotion last for a longer time, psychological well-being is compromised causing emotional and affective distress, further interfering with an individual's capacity to work in everyday's life (Huppert, 2009). Greater psychological well-being leads to enhanced physical and mental health, formation of better social relationships and enables him/her to live a happy and balanced life.

B. *Self-esteem*

Self-esteem constitutes an essential component of healthy personality development of an adult, which is accomplished in a specific social and cultural setup, further having implications for individuals' lives (Orth & Robins, 2014). Self-esteem refers to the self-evaluations of an individual in the form of positive and negative views as valuable (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is conceptualised as the perceptions that an individual makes about oneself which are generally viewed as positive or negative (Ciccarelli and White, 2015). Mruk (2006) views self-esteem as a psychic concept by the virtue of which an individual develops competence to deal with obstacles that he/she experiences throughout life. Furthermore, Sociological Model of Self-esteem (Cooley's, 1902) states that the societal factors play an important role in determining the self-esteem of an individual indicating that the young students may evaluate themselves positively if they are valued by the society in general. Coopersmith (1967) indicated that the development of self-esteem is influenced by the attention an individual gets from others, the level of acknowledgement and respect he/she feels.

As per Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the evaluation of self depends on the social identities formed by being a part of the group. Those individuals who perceive their social groups positively report higher self-esteem than those individuals who perceive their social groups in a negative way. High self-esteem contributes to enhanced happiness, and makes an individual significantly more effective and confident while interacting with external environment. On the other hand, individuals possessing low self-esteem levels are more sensitive to other's perceptions about them which lower their confidence levels during external interactions leading to greater feelings of pessimism influencing their social activities and causing more stress (Meszaros & De Wals, 2011).

C. *Relationship between Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being*

Diener (1984) determined three major components of well-being namely life satisfaction, positive and negative affective states. While studying the profiles of happy people, he identified four personality traits- self-esteem, extraversion, optimism and self-control (Myers & Diener, 1995). Therefore, self-esteem is one such relevant aspect that influences the psychological well-being of an individual. According to self-affirmation theory, higher self-esteem acts as a buffer against stressful experiences and failures (Steele, 1988). Self-esteem is a significant antecedent for happiness and is positively associated with feelings of happiness (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener & Diener, 1995; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 2006). Positive perspective regarding own self advances happiness and mental health of an individual (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Diener (1984) mentioned that high self-esteem significantly predicts subjective well-being of an individual. The Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) posits that fulfilment of basic psychological needs namely autonomy, competence and relatedness contribute significantly towards positive outcomes in life and thwarting of these needs hamper the human functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It mentions that the environment has a considerable impact on human lives; hence humans' well-being depends on their environment for satisfaction of these psychological needs for adapting effectively to the dynamic changes and enhanced functioning of life. Diener et al. (2010) further determined that various important aspects of human functioning such as healthy relationships, self-competence and meaningfulness in life are related to psychological well-being. People with high self-esteem show more positive feelings such as satisfaction and optimism while lesser anxiety, depression, stress and negative mood (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt & Schimel, 2004). Self-esteem and life satisfaction are found to be positively related among university students indicating the

importance of higher self-esteem in enhancing satisfaction with one's life (Patel, Tiwari, Singh & Lindinger-Sternart, 2018) and psychological health, well-being and positive functioning in adolescents (Orth, Robins & Widaman, 2011).

D. *Gender Differences associated with Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being*

Research on gender differences associated with self-esteem among students has shown contradictory findings. Some studies indicated that male students possess high self-esteem than female students (Moksnes & Espnes, 2012; Moksnes, Moljord, Espnes, & Byrne, 2010) while other studies reported no significant gender differences associated with self-esteem (Patel et al., 2018; Coelho, Marchante, and Jimerson, 2016; Işiklar, 2012; Erol & Orth, 2011; Tam, Lee, Har & Pook (2011). Akter (2015) reported that females possess higher level of psychological well-being than males. On the contrary, other studies have reported higher psychological distress among females than males (Boudreault-Bouchard, Dion, Hains, Vandermeerschen, Laberge & Perron, 2013; Botticello, 2009). Contrary to this, most studies showed no significant differences in psychological well-being among male and female college students (Stamp, Crust, Swann, Perry, Clough & Marchant, 2015; Kotar, 2013; Gill, 2007; Jose & Thomas, 2005).

## II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among college students. The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To examine whether self-esteem is a significant predictor of psychological well-being
2. To compute the gender differences associated with self-esteem and psychological well-being among college students

## III. HYPOTHESIS

In consistence with the theoretical framework, following hypotheses were formulated for the study:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant positive relationship between Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being.

Hypothesis 2: Self-esteem is a significant predictor of Psychological Well-being.

Hypothesis 3: There will be significant gender differences in Self-esteem level among college students.

Hypothesis 4: There will be significant gender differences in Psychological well-being level among college students.

## IV. MATERIALS AND METHODS

It is a quantitative study based on non-experimental research design. The present study is descriptive, correlational and comparative in nature.

A. *Participants*

The participants were 122 college students, 54 males and 68 females, of age group 18-28 years from Delhi-NCR region in India. Purposive sampling method was used for selection of these college students.

B. *Instruments*

A self-formulated questionnaire was employed to collect demographic details of the participants such as age, gender, educational qualification, residence and employment status. The global self-esteem levels were measured using Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES) developed by Rosenberg (1965). For psychological well-being, Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI) developed by Dupuy (1990) was used. It assesses psychological and general well-being in 6 domains i.e. positive well-being, self-control, anxiety, depressed mood, vitality and general health.

C. *Procedure*

The questionnaires were sent to the participants using Email services and personal messages through phone. The purpose of the study was mentioned in the forms and informed consent was obtained prior to the study. The participants were assured that their responses will remain confidential and their information will be used strictly for academic purposes only. SPSS ver.20 was used for statistical analysis and hypotheses testing. Pearson's Correlation method was used to study the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being. Independent Sample t-test was used to compute the gender differences based on self-esteem and psychological well-being levels among college students. Further, regression Analysis was used to find whether self-esteem is a significant predictor of psychological well-being.

## V. RESULTS

The demographic data given by 122 college students showed that 68 (56%) were *females* and 54 (44%) were *males*. The mean age of the students was 22.6 years. 35 (28.69%) were *undergraduates*, 38 (31.15%) were *graduates* and 49 (40.16%) were *post-graduate students*. 69 (57%) students were *unemployed* and 53 (43%) students were *employed* i.e. doing part-time, paid internships and earning income from other sources.

On *self-esteem and psychological well-being*, mean scores on *self-esteem* (M=29.25, SD= 4.72) were found to be of 'moderate' level. The mean scores on *overall psychological well-being* (M=66.75, SD=17.61) showed that students reported 'moderate' level of *psychological distress*. (Refer to Table-1 and Table-2)

**Table-1 Descriptive Statistics of Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being among Indian College Students showing Means, Standard Deviations (SD), Skewness, Standard Error of Skewness (SES), Kurtosis and Standard Error of Kurtosis (SEK)**

| Variables | N | Mean | SD | Skewness | SES | Kurtosis | SEK | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-esteem | 122 | 29.25 | 4.72 | -.27 | 0.22 | 0.46 | 0.44 | 15 | 40 |
| Overall Psychological Well-being | 122 | 66.75 | 17.61 | -.31 | 0.22 | 1.18 | 0.44 | 11 | 110 |
| Positive Well-being | 122 | 11.07 | 3.49 | -.32 | 0.22 | -0.17 | 0.44 | 2 | 20 |
| Self-control | 122 | 9.55 | 2.95 | -.64 | 0.22 | 0.90 | 0.44 | 0 | 15 |
| Anxiety | 122 | 14.39 | 5.18 | -.18 | 0.22 | 0.30 | 0.44 | 0 | 25 |
| Depressed mood | 122 | 9.77 | 3.33 | -.77 | 0.22 | 0.22 | 0.44 | 0 | 15 |
| Vitality | 122 | 12.25 | 3.21 | -.05 | 0.22 | 0.22 | 0.44 | 4 | 20 |
| General Health | 122 | 9.71 | 2.87 | -.96 | 0.22 | 1.65 | 0.44 | 0 | 15 |

**Table-2 Key showing the interpretation of scores on Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being**

| Variables | Level of Variables | Scores Range |
|---|---|---|
| **Self-esteem** | High | 35-40 |
|  | Moderate | 26-34 |
|  | Low | 10-25 |
| **Psychological Well-being** | Positive Psychological Well-being | ≥96 and 110 |
|  | No Distress | ≥73 and ≤95 |
|  | Moderate Distress | ≥60 and ≤72 |
|  | Severe Distress | <60 |

Inter-correlation matrix revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between *self-esteem* and *overall psychological well-being* (r=.53, p<.01) and all of its subscales [*positive well-being* (r=.47, p<.01), *self-control* (r=.46, p<.01), *anxiety* (r=.46, p<.01), *depressed mood* (r=.45, p<.01), *vitality* (r=.44, p<.01) and *general health* (r=.40, p<.01)] and therefore hypothesis 1 was not rejected. (Refer to Table-3)

**Table-3 Relationship between Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being using Bivariate Correlation Coefficients ®**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Self-esteem | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2 Overall Psychological Well-being | .53** | 1 | | | | | | |
| 3 Positive Well-being | .47** | .82** | 1 | | | | | |
| 4 Self-control | .46** | .83** | .65** | 1 | | | | |
| 5 Anxiety | .46** | .90** | .63** | .69** | 1 | | | |
| 6 Depressed mood | .45** | .85** | .59** | .65** | .76** | 1 | | |
| 7 Vitality | .44** | .84** | .74** | .66** | .66** | .62** | 1 | |
| 8 General Health | .40** | .74** | .49** | .55** | .60** | .59** | .55** | 1 |

To predict *overall psychological well-being based on self-esteem* [β =.534, t (120) =6.919, p<.01], a significant regression equation was found [F (1, 121) =47.866, p<.01], with $R^2$ of .285. Furthermore, *self-esteem* predicted *positive well-being* (22.2%, p<.01), *self-control* (21.0%, p<.01), *anxiety* (20.7%, p<.01) and *depressed mood* (20.4%, p<.01) better than *vitality* (19.3%, p<.01) and *general health* (15.6%, p<.01) which implies that the *self-esteem* was a significant predictor of *psychological well-being* and all of its subscales, and therefore hypothesis 2 was not rejected. (Refer to Table-4)

**Table-4 Summary of Regression Analysis of Self-esteem as a predictor of Psychological Well-being and all of its subscales**

| Dependent Variables | R | $R^2$ | Adj.$R^2$ | F | B | t | Sig. (p-value) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Psychological Well-being | .534 | .285 | .279 | 47.866 | .534 | 6.919 | .000** |
| Positive Well-being | .472 | .222 | .216 | 34.325 | .472 | 5.859 | .000** |
| Self-control | .458 | .210 | .203 | 31.841 | .458 | 5.643 | .000** |
| Anxiety | .455 | .207 | .200 | 31.269 | .455 | 5.592 | .000** |
| Depressed mood | .452 | .204 | .198 | 30.794 | .452 | 5.549 | .000** |
| Vitality | .439 | .193 | .186 | 28.728 | .439 | 5.360 | .000** |
| General Health | .395 | .156 | .149 | 22.138 | .395 | 4.705 | .000** |

**p<.01

On *Gender differences*, no statistically significant differences in means were found on *self-esteem* (t=-0.80, p=.426), hence hypothesis 3 was rejected. Also, results showed no significant mean differences on *overall psychological well-being* (t=-0.79, p=.429) or any of its subscales [*positive well-being* (t=-0.79, p=.429), *self-control* (t=-1.07, p=.286), *anxiety* (t=-1.08, p=.281), *depressed mood* (t=0.19, p=.844), *vitality* (t=0.09, p=.923) and *general health* (r=-1.63, p=.106)] between male and female students. Thus, male and female students did not differ significantly on *self-esteem* and *psychological well-being* and therefore hypothesis 4 was rejected. (Refer to Table-5)

**Table-5 Means, Standard Deviations (SD), Standard Error Means (SEM) and t-values showing differences in scores between Gender on Self-esteem and Psychological Well-being**

| | Males (N=54) | | | Females (N=68) | | | T | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variables | Mean | SD | SEM | Mean | SD | SEM | | |
| Self-esteem | 29.63 | 4.55 | 0.62 | 28.94 | 4.86 | 0.59 | -0.80 | .426 |
| Psychological Well-being | 68.17 | 19.43 | 2.64 | 65.62 | 16.08 | 1.95 | -0.79 | .429 |
| Positive Well-being | 11.22 | 3.79 | 0.52 | 10.94 | 3.26 | 0.40 | -.0.44 | .661 |
| Self-control | 9.87 | 3.27 | 0.44 | 9.29 | 2.67 | 0.32 | -1.07 | .286 |
| Anxiety | 14.96 | 5.60 | 0.76 | 13.94 | 4.82 | 0.59 | -1.08 | .281 |
| Depressed mood | 9.70 | 3.54 | 0.48 | 9.821 | 3.18 | 0.39 | 0.19 | .844 |
| Vitality | 12.22 | 3.40 | 0.46 | 12.28 | 3.08 | 0.37 | 0.09 | .923 |
| General Health | 10.19 | 2.82 | 0.38 | 9.34 | 2.87 | 0.35 | -1.63 | .106 |

## VI. DISCUSSION

The present study sought to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among Indian college students, further examining gender differences associated with these variables. The college students reported a 'moderate' level of self-esteem implying that they possessed positive attitudes about their self and positive perceptions regarding their overall self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). The students feel adequately competent that is they perceive themselves as capable of carrying out various essential activities in their personal and professional lives, and value themselves based on other's positive appraisals regarding their abilities and personality traits. However, the students reported a 'moderate' level of psychological distress in the present study implying that young students face various stressors in college life due to which their psychological well-being is compromised. This can be attributed to the subjective interpretation of their changing life experiences and persistent challenges such as the beginning of their college life, transitory phase from childhood to adulthood (Burris, Brechting, Carlson, Salsman, 2009), routine life hassles such as financial stress (Lange & Byrd, 1998), worries regarding educational requirements (Sim, 2000), academic pressure such as scoring high scholastic grades (Kumaraswamy, 2013), a sudden realization of responsibilities for one's lifestyle habits (Colic Baric, Satalic & Lukesic, 2003), and increased competitiveness with peers due to social comparison processes to be extremely stressful by young students. Ineffective time management skills may create an imbalance in the personal and professional lives of young students such as their inability to complete assignments, projects and preparation for regular class tests due to family responsibilities, extracurricular activities, and part-time job requirements (Kumaraswamy, 2013; Abiddin & Ismail, 2011) thus lowering psychological well-being level of the college students. Furthermore, despite having an appropriate level of self-esteem, students reported psychological distress at a moderate level which could be explained by the possibility that the global self-esteem is generally assessed on domains such as physical appearance, academic/professional outcomes, or social

approval (Harter, 1999). It is possible that the students evaluate their self-worth as per attaining certain standards, their desire to be valued by others and their recent experiences of success or failure. This contingent self-esteem lowers students' ability to handle negative life experiences appropriately, making them more reactive to routine life events and situations (Paradise & Kernis, 2002) thus causing psychological distress to them. Hence, the vulnerable feelings of immediate self-worth are responsive to life changes; challenging life circumstances, daily life hassles, social comparison processes, and inefficient management skills to cope with fast-paced lives act as contributory factors in elevating the psychological distress among college students.

Furthermore, the results showed that there existed a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and overall psychological well-being and all of its subscales implying that self-esteem was positively related with overall psychological well-being and its dimensions of positive well-being, self-control, vitality and general health, consistent with the previous findings by Patel et al. (2018), Orth et al. (2011) and Neff & McGeehee (2010) which depicts that the individuals who feel positive about themselves generally possess good feelings about their existence, and also face and conquer their problems confidently. Moreover, self-esteem was found to be a significant predictor of psychological well-being implying that higher self-esteem is a powerful factor in determining the psychological well-being as consistent with the previous findings of Poudel, Gurung & Khanal (2020), Azad et al. (2018), Arumugam, Jayachander & Joshi (2013), Neff & McGeehee (2010) and Ayyash-Abdo and Alamuddin (2007) as people who have higher self-esteem usually report greater life satisfaction, positive emotional states (Pyszczynski et al., 2004), meaningfulness and vitality (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). The present findings can be explained in view of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) which states that an individual is intrinsically motivated to satisfy three fundamental psychological needs namely, autonomy, relatedness and competence, and high self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2004) results when there is an appropriate balance between these basic psychological nutrients of life, further enhancing the psychological well-being level of an individual. Therefore, the substantial gratification of the psychological needs of college students in terms of their perceived capabilities to perform routine activities, autonomy to learn novel things, explore interests and opportunities in educational life, and a sense of belongingness with others explain the positive relationship between their self-esteem and psychological well-being levels among college students. Additionally, Sociometer Theory (Leary and Baumeister, 2000; Leary and Downs, 1995) which posits that the self-esteem of an individual is a manifestation of his/her social belongingness and degree of his/her relational value further explains the positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being. As social bonds are more salient in collectivistic cultures, young adults greatly emphasize on their interpersonal attachments and familial relationships. Hence, higher self-esteem significantly predicts higher psychological well-being and this may be due to self-esteem being a potential indicator of a student's relational value. However, self-esteem was also found to be positively associated with anxiety and depressed mood subscales of psychological well-being which can be attributed to the unrealistically high expectations from oneself in academic performance or as such in life leading to frustration, anxiety, and depressed mood among young students (Emler, 2001). In a collectivistic nation like India, others' perceptions regarding one's potential and quality of interpersonal relationships (Priya & Muralidaran, 2014) are perceived to be more significant thus, high parental expectations (Sim, 2000) and lack of meaningfulness in social relationships despite a sense of social inclusion may cause feelings of anxiety and depressed mood among college students. Besides, the long-term orientation towards achieving one's goals prevents students to perceive their achievements in totality unless they get approval from others causing anxiety (Hofstede, 1983). Thus, the fulfilment of students' psychological needs and degree of relational value significantly contributes towards the positive relationship between self-esteem and overall psychological well-being while the collectivism, high self and parental expectations and lack of meaningful social relationships explains the positive association of self-esteem with anxiety and depressed mood among college students.

The present study also examined the gender differences based on self-esteem and psychological well-being among Indian college students. The results showed that there existed no significant differences between male and female college students on self-esteem measure implying that male and female students reported similar levels of self-esteem, consistent with the previous findings from many research studies by Poudel et al. (2020), Patel et al. (2018), Malinauskas & Dumciene (2016), Coelho, Marchante & Jimerson (2016) and Tam et al. (2011). This can be attributed to the changes in gender stereotypes as the societal expectations concerning the social roles of males and females have transformed since the mid-20th century (Eagly, Natar, Miller, Kaufmann & Sczesny, 2019). Traditional gender role-beliefs may be considered irrelevant especially in modern and civilized societies as males and females can carry out similar tasks as per new role demands of today's times. In urban India, unlike previous times, there are lesser restrictions on females like staying inside their homes, performing household chores, and taking care of other family members. Nowadays, Indian society is encouraging young females to step out of their homes and providing equal opportunities to young female and male students to accomplish their goals and become successful in their lives. Young females receive greater support from their families which motivates them to avail themselves of higher education and flourish their intellectual capabilities (Jain & Dixit, 2014). Furthermore, higher academic achievements foster the entry of young females into superior jobs and prestigious occupations similar to males (Cortes & Pan, 2018) thus contributing to the healthy self-esteem levels of young female students. Thus, greater gender equality, educational gains, increased economic independence, and social appraisals contribute to the insignificant gender differences in self-esteem among Indian college students.

Lastly, the current findings revealed that there existed no significant gender differences in psychological well-being among college students implying that male and female students had a similar level of psychological well-being, consistent with the previous findings by Waghmare (2016), Stamp et al. (2015) and Kotar (2013). The present findings can be justified as per the Basic Psychological Need Theory which posits that the individuals' perceptions regarding the fulfilment of their physical and psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000) determine their subjective well-being level. Therefore, the non-significant differences in psychological well-being level among college students can be explained by the similarities in individual and cultural factors (King, Reno & Novo, 2014) such as belonging to same age groups, equal access to informational and instrumental resources, opportunities and powers that enable male and female students to satisfy their personal and psychological needs. In addition, the equal availability of social and emotional resources such as social support, parental expectations and emotional expressiveness among males and female students, especially in urban India may also contribute towards the insignificant gender variations in their psychological well-being level. Furthermore, Gender Similarities Hypothesis which states that men and women are similar on most psychological constructs (Hyde, 2005) also support the current findings implying that males and females are not biologically predisposed to experience different level of psychological well-being. Other probable reason for the present findings could be explained by the social comparison processes as males and females engage themselves in in-group (same gender) social comparisons rather than out-group (opposite gender) social comparisons (Batz & Tay, 2018) making male and female students compare their life situations, circumstances and challenges with same-gender group thus contributing towards non-significant gender differences in psychological well-being. Thus, the personal and psychological need fulfilment, shifting standards of society, greater social equity, and in-group social comparisons among male and female students act as contributing factors in determining the insignificant differences in psychological well-being among male and female college students.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Overall, students' self-esteem assessment demonstrated a moderate level of self-esteem among college students which suggests the importance of personal, cultural and societal factors in determining the students' positive perceptions about themselves in terms of their competence and self-worth. Immediate vulnerable feelings of self-worth, challenging life experiences and routine life hassles such as academic requirements, unmet expectations from oneself, parents and peers contribute to the moderate level of psychological distress among college students. Psychological conditions such as anxiety and depressed mood can be dealt with by appointing counsellors in college premises to assist young students in coping effectively with their daily life issues. The positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among college students suggests that the fulfilment of personal and psychological needs, social belongingness and respect in society bring positive outcomes for college students. Additionally, self-esteem plays a significant role in determining psychological well-being indicating that the development of healthy self-esteem is an essential ingredient in promoting overall mental health and well-being among college students. Non-significant gender differences in self-esteem and psychological well-being among college students further reveal positive transformation in urban India where traditional gender role-beliefs are no more relevant to these psychological variables as greater gender equality prevails in terms of personal, social and professional resources and opportunities in modern Indian societies.

The present study assessed only global self-esteem level of the college students using explicit measures; further studies can measure both implicit and explicit self-esteem to assess its impact on psychological well-being among Indian college students. Separate components of self-esteem such as personal, collective and relational self-esteem can be assessed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the overall self-concept among college students. Further, the future studies can consider other important aspects such as academic stress, social competence and perceived social support to explore the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among college students.

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# Women Empowerment: Perspective vs. Reality

Sanghmitra Choudhary[#1], Dr. Nidhi Prakash[*2]

*Department of Psychology, University of Delhi*
[1]chaudharysanghmitra@gmail.com
[2]nidhiprakash12@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

**Women empowerment is one of the most talked-about concepts in recent times. It refers to the process of women gaining mastery over their life (Rappaport, 1984), involving positive changes to their psychological constructs such as collective efficacy, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a proactive attitude (Lord, 1991). The concept gained importance more recently because, despite the right to resources, information, and freedom, women are consistently kept away from those. Women passively experience sexual abuse, violence, insult, and physical and moral humiliation, which lead to several psychological problems and compromised well-being in them. Literature reveals that empowerment plays a significant role in the psychological well-being of women in general and rural women in particular. However, the notion of empowerment may be differently understood by women depending on their cultural, social background, life-stagethatcan have implications on the behaviour expressions of their empowerment. The present study aims to understand the notion of empowerment from the perspective of women living in rural areas, and discussed their status in their families and society as perceived by them. To meet the research objective a qualitative study was designed and convenience sampling method was used for sample selection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on eight women who were born, brought up, and reside in the rural area of Uttar Pradesh, India. The women interviewed were between the age group of 30 to 50 years, married, unemployed, and belonged to either joint or nuclear family. Research findings indicated that all participating women felt empowered in their minds while their actions were much decided by considerations of acceptance and approval of theirfamily members, society, and culture. The fear of backlash from their families and losing respect in society prevented them from standing up for themselves and the community.**

**Keywords: Empowerment, Women, Rural, Challenges, Autonomy, Equality**

## INTRODUCTION

Empowerment refers to gaining mastery over one's life (Rappaport, 1984). It is 'a process of inculcating positive changes in one's internal beliefs'(Lord, 1991) and is 'considered to be more relevant to those who are "powerless" since it allows them gaining control over their own lives, power (not over others), and achieving goals and ends' (Kabeer, 1999; Kishor& Gupta, 2004). It is a 'latent phenomenon' that is not directly observable but its aggregate results or effects may be visible, despite the fact that it's internal dynamism is challenging to examine (Mahmud, Shah & Becker, 2012).

Empowerment of women has remained one of the most talked-about concepts in recent times. It gained momentum more recently because, despite the right to resources, information, and freedom, women are consistently kept away from those (Acharya, Bell, Simkhada, Teijlingen&Regmi, 2010; Sharma, 2001). Women constitute nearly half (48.43 percent) of the population of India (Indian Population Census, 2011). But they continue to suffer from inequality in various aspects of daily life such as access to education, job opportunities, autonomy, and economic resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2015; Jejeebhoy&Sathar, 2001; Lucas, Brown, & Markus, 1991). A large proportion of women are needy, dependent, and uneducated and many of them passively experience sexual abuse, violence, and physical and moral humiliation which lead to various psychological problems,ill-health and compromised well-being in them (Senarath&Gunawardena, 2009).

One reason for the pervading inequality between the men and women gender in India lies in the traditional culture and role-division which demandwomen to be in the caregiving-nurturing role by looking after the physical and psychological needs of the family members, doingall the household chores such as cleaning, cooking, washing, rearing children, and complying to what the men of the family says, often without questioning. The women perform multiple tasks but are still considered to be 'non-working' womenand 'housewives'. This cultural idea of being a 'good' wife haunts a woman to such an extent that they willingly accept the inappropriate behavior such as verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, of the men.Furthermore, they prefer obedience and compliance over rational arguments over ill-doings of men and other members of family as they are highly dependent on them and fear backlash. Women are not supposed to express their ideas freely in company of other men and are restricted from visiting the markets and relatives without seeking permission from their family members, particularly in rural areas of India.The restriction of movement is one of the contributing factors for unemployment among rural women which

makes them further highly dependent on the other family members.While taking care of others, ignoring one's own physical and psychological health, are an accepted social norm for women.

*Socio-demographic variables affecting empowerment*

The process of empowerment is shaped by several factors that includeculture, social background, life-stage, age, education, marital status, employment, and the place of residence.Increasing age and women's empowerment is directly proportional. Older women have relatively more control over their lives as compared to younger ones (Darkwah, 2010; Ahmad & Sultan, 2004; Elizabeth & Thomas, 2001; Presser, &Sen, 2000). Women's education is also found to be directly proportional to their empowerment (Rahman, Hoque, &Makinoda, 2011; Furuta&Salway, 2006; Sridevi, 2005; Kishor& Gupta, 2004; Ahmad & Sultan, 2004; Kishor, 2000). Married women are more engaged in decision making autonomy as compared to lone - unmarried, widow, separated and divorcee women - women (Biswas& Mukhopadhyay,2018). Paid employment too has a positive and significant impact on empowering women (Chaudhary&Nausheen, 2009; Parveen, 2005; Heaton, Huntsman,& Flake, 2005; Lopez-Claros &Zahidi, 2005). Urban women are more empowered as compared to rural women (Akram, 2017; Acharaya et al., 2010; Furuta&Salway, 2006; Yesudian, 2004; Ahmad & Sultan, 2004). Literature reveals that lesser attention has been given to women in rural areas as compared to those in urban areas. Also, urban women have better access to health care facilities as compared to rural women (Acharya et al., 2010; Mumtaz&Salway, 2009; Kermode,Herrman, Arole, Premkumar& Patel, 2007).

Thus, from the above studies it can be concluded that empowerment is confined to older, educated and employed women from urban settings only. A significant section of women lives in rural areas with lack of education, health care, and employment opportunities, which makes the process of empowerment of women in rural India more difficult.

In view of the above, the present research aims to understand the empowerment from the perspective of womenresiding in rural India who are married and unemployedas they are engaged in decision making process in routine.The paper also attempts to throw light onwomen's status in their families, as perceived by them.

*Women and Empowerment*

The process of empowerment has been studied by various researchers from psychological, social, economic and legal perspectives with self-esteem, decision-making autonomy, relationship with others, freedom of movement, and awareness about their legal rights and duties, as the relevant dimensions. These dimensions are significant for the rural women as they have been reported to have an impact on the process of empowerment (Varghese, 2011; Acharaya et al., 2010; SethuramanLansdown& Sullivan, 2006; Roy &Niranjan, 2004; Jejeebhoy, 2002;Malhotra, Schuler, &Boender, 2002).

Self-esteem refers to "a favourable or unfavourable attitude toward the self" (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem appears to facilitate the empowerment process because it is associated with an individual's sense of value and worth (Blascovich&Tomaka, 1991). Paid employment gives women a sense of recognition and increased self-esteem. Thus, they feel more empowered and in a better social position (Kabeer&Ayesha, 2014; Kabeer, 2011;Kabeer, Assaad, Darkwah, Mahmud, Sholkamy, Tasneem, Tsikata, &Sulaiman, 2013; Gibbon, 2000).

Decision-making autonomy **refers** to the degree to which someone is "self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulate behavior from within; and evaluate self by personal standards" (Ryff, 1989). Decision-making autonomy and empowerment are positively related. However, research indicates that women have limited access to household resources and the least say in making their own and significant household decisions (Acharya et al., 2010; Kermode et al., 2007; Sethuraman et al., 2006; Malhotra, Schuler &Boender, 2002; Jejeebhoy, 2002).

Relationship with others stands for the degree to which someone "has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; is capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; and understands the give and take of human relationships" (Ryff, 1989). A woman is found to enjoyhigher empowerment if her husband has cordial relations with her and gives her freedom of expression (Akram, 2018;Tijani, Sarafat, Yano, 2007). Women's participation in a self-help group is considered as an ideal means of encouraging empowerment as women receive emotional and social support from each other (Laverack, 2006; Chesler, 1991; Gibbon, 2000).

Freedom of movement is another standard indicator in empirical research at the individual/ household level, especially in South Asian countries where women's presence in public places is limited (Acharya et al., 2010; Sethuraman et al., 2006; Roy

&Niranjan, 2004; Jejeebhoy, 2000). Under certain circumstances, freedom of movement could be seen as an empowerment resource, an enabling factor, for women's employment and other opportunities.

Awareness about legal rights and duties is another relevant dimension in Empowerment. Every person has rights and duties. Knowing about one's rights and duties and exercising them appropriately is an essential responsibility in promoting development and well-being of the community. Awareness about one's rights and duties and its application are found to have positive and significant impact on women (Rowland-Serdar& Schwartz-Shea, 1991; Bisnath, 2001; Taylor & Rupp, 1993; Collins, 2000;Musokotwane&Siwata,, 2001). However, women suffer from cultural barriers for exercising their rights and therefore, only awareness has a limited effect on women empowerment (Blumberg, 2005;Tijani,Sarafat& Yano, 2007).

## METHODS

### Sampling

This study was conducted on women living in the rural area of Uttar Pradesh, India. The technique used for sample collection was convenience sampling. The sample consisted of eight adult women from the age range of 30 years to 50 years. The sample towards the upper age range was less qualified as compared to the sample belonging to the younger age range because of varied educational opportunities available to them(Sheikh, 2017).The minimum educational qualification was the eighth standard, the highest was Post graduation. Married women were selected as participants because they are more involved in the decision making process as compared to lone - unmarried, widow, separated, and divorced women and decision- making has identified as key factor in the process of empowerment (Biswas&Mukhopadhyay,2018; Acharya et al., 2010; Kermode et al., 2007; Sethuraman et al., 2006). All the selected participants were homemakers, and finances of the family were borne by male members.

### Research design

A qualitative research design was undertaken for the study.Based on the review of literature, the dimensions of empowerment studied were -*decision-making autonomy, access to economic resources, education, and self-development*. In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview scheduleconstructed on these dimensions. The method of translation of the interview schedule from Englishto Hindi and back-translating into English was used to ensure the validity of the questions asked. All questions were open-ended in nature.

The technique used to analyze data was thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed around the pre-decided themes based on the review of the literature mentioned above: *decision-making autonomy, access to economic resources, education, and self-development.*However, no significant result was reported on *access to economic resources, education, and self-development.*In addition to the pre-decided themes, the following themes emerged from the data - *the concept of empowerment, challenges faced by women, and equality*. The main objective of the coding was to explore patterns of how respondents perceived their status in their families.

The aim and ethical aspects of the study were clarified to the participants. Verbal consent was soughtfor their participation and publication of research findings. Complete confidentiality was assured to them. The interviews were conducted at their home, in the absence of other family members, to ensure complete comfort of the participants and facilitate openness. The average time for an interview was 60 minutes.

## RESULTS

The data reflected *decision-making autonomy, the concept of empowerment, challenges faced by women, and equality* as significant themes. The perspectives and experiences of the participants were similar on the *decision-making autonomy,the concept of empowerment, and challenges faced by women*. However, different views were reported on *equality*. The themes areanalysed as follows:

### Decision-making autonomy

The participants were not allowed to make important decisions concerning their families or their own. However, they had the authority to make decisions on daily household purchases because women are responsible for taking care of cooking for and cleaning the house. Important decisions such as purchase or sale of an asset, or marriage of the child, were taken by the male member, while female members could express their opinions on the matter. None of the participants were allowed to go out of their houses to visit friends or relatives.

   "*I have to take care of the whole family. Whatever I demand, he brings it. If he ever forgets to bring the daily household things, he asks me to remind him. I don't have enough knowledge regarding the property; my husband knows it better. Whatever he tells me, if I find it right, then I also gives a few suggestions.*"

*"According to men, it does not look good for women to go to the local market. We are allowed to visit the city market, but not the village market. I ponder over it occasionally but cannot find an answer."*

*The concept of empowerment*

The participants had absolutely no idea what the term 'empowerment' meant. It was translated into Hindi as 'shashaktikaran'. Four participants had heard the term on radio and TV but did not know what it meant. The other four participants had never even heard the term in any language before.

*"Yes, I might have heard it on the radio or TV, but don't know its meaning."*

*"No, never heard this word before."*

*Challenges faced by women*

Participants said that they received the most prominent challenges from their own families and society. Men in the family consider women as submissive. The participants agreed that they had experienced some kind of bias in their lives. Some examples of the struggles faced by women were loss of identity, financial dependence, obstacles in their studies, compromises in health care facilities, restriction on going out of their houses, etc. They also accepted that with time the situation has changed, and families are making efforts for their daughters to have better lives.

*"Earlier, we were liable to be at men's feet. We were not allowed to go out of our houses without permission. We were not supposed to choose our life partner as it was detrimental to the reputation of the family. Every woman has the right to live and meet her desires."*

*"A woman is dependent upon man under several circumstances, particularly in terms of money. As a woman, I feel like I was born to obey the male members of my family. In this process, I feel to have lost my own identity."*

*Equality*

The participants agreed to the statement that men and women should be equal in various aspects of life. Women have struggled to gain equality. Women should enjoy equal opportunities in education and employment as men. They should be taught and raised to become independent. Women should work outside homes as it is challenging to earn enough money by only one member for the whole family. Women should be allowed to express their opinion on any decision concerning them or the family members. They should have equal respect as men in the family and society. One participant mentioned that women should conform with men because if they start taking their own decisions, it will interrupt the equilibrium in the family as the head of the family should only be a male member. Participants agreed to the need for equality, but they do not enjoy equality at their respective homes.

*"In my opinion, both of them should be completely equal, and there is no question in this. Men and women were born in this society with equal rights and duties; hence they should participate together in the minor and major decisions of their families."*

*"Women should get to live well, should not have financial problems. If the husband is 20 years, the wife should be 19 years, not 21. If the woman starts controlling the house, then it will interrupt the balance of family as a woman is not capable enough to manage the household decisions as compared to men."*

## DISCUSSION

The significant themes of this qualitative study on women from rural Uttar Pradesh are the following: *decision-making autonomy*, *the concept of empowerment, challenges faced by women, and equality.*

It was found that major household decisions were taken by the male members of the family. Women had limited decision-making autonomy regarding household decisions, employment, income, sexuality, or physical mobility. They need to seek permission before making any decision. The women were not allowed to visit their friends or the local markets as it would be considered a matter of shame if they roam around in the market.

The data also revealedthat participants face a lot of challenges in their daily lives. The challenges such as restriction on education and employment, and compromises in health were majorly coming from the families, more than society. The literature supports the importance of education for women in the process of empowerment. However, the findings of the study

reveal no significant impact of education on the process of empowerment. The status of women was similar in the families independent of their education.

One participant shed light on the importance of *identity* and how she lost her identity after marriage. Women are considered to have born to take care of the family. Participants' life revolved around their families and they did not feel the need to think about themselves. The question arises as to who would take care of the women if and when such a requirement arises.

The participants understand the significance of equality and desire to enjoy it also.But due to societal and familial norms they do not enjoy it. It was found that women have limited or partial access to the economic resources of the family. Women were not fully aware of all the sources of income in their families.

Only three participants were aware of their legal rights and duties. However, they said they would not take legal action against their family members even if such a situation arose.

## CONCLUSION

The societal and cultural factors play a crucial role in facilitating as well as impeding the process of empowerment. The women were empowered in their minds while their actions were controlled by their families and society. The fear of backlash from their families and respect from the society prevents the women from standing for herself and the community.

Women in rural areas are highly dependent on the male members of their families for financial support.Government and some NGOs try to reach out to women in remote areas to lift them from a state of dependency to a state of independence. But majority of women have not availed of, nor enjoyed the benefit of, the aids introduced by the government as they are unaware of such programmes and if they are aware they are restricted to go out of their houses and hence are not able to take advantage of them. One particular recommendation is that the perspective of male members should be sought as it will help-in understanding the empowerment in depth. Other psychological dimensions such as meaning of life, identity, and self-efficacy should also be explored keeping unemployed women in to consideration.

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