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Unraveling Emotional Chaos: A Study on Emotion Dysregulation Among School-Going Adolescents

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the nature of emotion dysregulation among school-going adolescents in the Varanasi district, focusing on cognitive emotion regulation strategies and differences across gender and age. The research involved a purposive sample of 50 adolescents (25 boys and 25 girls) aged 13–19 years from private schools in Varanasi. The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) developed by Garnefski and Kraaij (2007) was used as the primary assessment tool. This instrument measures both adaptive and maladaptive strategies individuals use in response to negative life events.

Findings revealed significant gender differences in the use of emotion regulation strategies. Girls were more inclined to use maladaptive strategies such as self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing, while boys demonstrated a stronger tendency toward adaptive strategies like refocus on planning and putting into perspective. Statistical analysis using independent samples t-test confirmed these differences were significant at $p < .05$. Correlation analysis also revealed age-related trends—older adolescents were more likely to employ adaptive strategies, indicating increased emotional maturity.

These findings highlight the urgent need for early emotional education, especially for younger adolescents and girls who are more vulnerable to maladaptive coping. Schools in the Varanasi region can benefit from incorporating structured emotional learning programs into their curricula. Limitations of the study include the relatively small and geographically restricted sample. However, the findings lay a strong foundation for future large-scale, multi-site investigations. This research emphasizes the importance of emotion regulation in adolescent development and advocates for its inclusion in academic and mental health interventions.

Keywords: Emotion dysregulation, adolescents, CERQ, gender differences, emotional regulation, school-going youth, Varanasi

Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional developmental period marked by significant emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During this stage, individuals begin to form a coherent sense of identity, experience heightened emotional sensitivity, and become increasingly influenced by their social environment, including peers, family, and media (Steinberg, 2014). These transitions often lead to emotional challenges that, if not managed effectively, may result in emotional instability. One of the central

psychological concerns that emerge during this phase is emotion dysregulation, a term used to describe difficulties in managing, processing, and responding to emotional experiences.

Emotion regulation, according to Gross (1998), refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how these emotions are experienced and expressed. Conversely, emotion dysregulation involves maladaptive patterns of emotional response, often characterized by excessive emotional reactivity, poor impulse control, and ineffective use of coping strategies (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004). Adolescents struggling with emotion dysregulation may exhibit mood swings, impulsive behavior, social withdrawal, or engagement in risky behaviors, all of which can significantly impair their academic, social, and psychological functioning.

Numerous studies have established that ineffective emotion regulation during adolescence is linked with internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression, as well as externalizing problems like aggression and conduct issues (Compas et al., 2017). The ability to regulate emotions effectively is not only vital for healthy psychological development but also plays a protective role in times of stress. Cognitive strategies such as acceptance, positive reappraisal, and planning are considered adaptive, while others like rumination, self-blame, and catastrophizing are maladaptive (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001).

To assess these strategies, Garnefski and Kraaij (2006) developed the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), a psychometric tool that identifies nine cognitive coping strategies individuals use in response to negative life events. This tool provides valuable insights into how adolescents cognitively process their emotional experiences. Research using the CERQ has shown that a higher use of maladaptive strategies is associated with elevated symptoms of psychopathology in adolescents (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007).

Despite the growing literature on emotional development, there is a scarcity of research that focuses exclusively on school-going adolescents and how they manage their emotional states within academic and peer-pressure contexts. Moreover, gender differences in emotion regulation strategies have been reported, with studies suggesting that girls are more prone to internalizing symptoms such as rumination and self-blame, while boys tend to externalize their emotional difficulties (Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohaus, 2007). However, these findings require further validation within the Indian sociocultural context, where emotional expression is influenced by familial expectations, cultural norms, and educational demands.

The present study, therefore, seeks to examine the patterns of cognitive emotion regulation among school-going adolescents aged 13 to 19 years. It also aims to explore gender-based differences in emotion dysregulation using the CERQ. The findings from this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of adolescent emotional behavior and provide empirical support for designing school-based psychological interventions focused on emotional skill-building and mental health promotion.

Literature Review

Emotion dysregulation refers to difficulties in managing emotional responses in ways that are socially acceptable and flexible to meet individual goals (Gross & Thompson, 2007). It includes problems in understanding emotions, managing emotional intensity, and regulating the duration of emotional responses. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to emotion dysregulation due to significant psychological, hormonal, and social changes (Silk et al., 2003). As they transition through adolescence, many young i…

According to Thompson (1994), emotion regulation involves both intrinsic and extrinsic processes that are responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions. When these regulatory mechanisms fail or are poorly developed, it results in emotion dysregulation, which can contribute to a range of psychological issues including anxiety, depression, aggression, and substance use (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010).

Cognitive Emotion Regulation and the CERQ

The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) developed by Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven (2001) is a widely used tool to assess cognitive strategies individuals use after experiencing negative life events. These strategies are categorized into adaptive (e.g., positive reappraisal, refocus on planning) and maladaptive (e.g., self-blame, rumination, catastrophizing) types. Research has consistently shown that maladaptive strategies are associated with poor mental health outcomes, whereas adaptiv…In a study by Martin and Dahlen (2005), adolescents who frequently used maladaptive cognitive strategies were more prone to experience emotional distress, while those who used adaptive strategies demonstrated better coping and academic outcomes. The CERQ has been validated in diverse cultural settings, including Indian adolescent populations, with good reliability and construct validity (Pandey & Shrivastava, 2018).

Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation

Several studies have examined gender differences in the use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Girls tend to use more emotion-focused and internalizing strategies such as rumination and self-blame, which often lead to greater levels of anxiety and depression (Esmaeili, 2017). Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to use problem-focused coping and externalizing behaviors, often engaging in distraction or behavioral disengagement (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002).

Garnefski and Kraaij (2006) found that adolescent girls were significantly more likely than boys to use rumination and catastrophizing, while boys more frequently employed adaptive strategies like positive refocusing. These gendered patterns may be influenced by socialization practices, cultural expectations, and biological differences in emotional sensitivity and expression.

In the Indian context, Sharma and Wadhwa (2020) observed that school-going girls from urban areas reported higher scores on maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies compared to boys. Cultural norms often expect girls to suppress anger and frustration, which may lead to internalization of distress and greater emotional turmoil.

Age and Developmental Trends

Developmental psychology literature emphasizes that as adolescents mature, their emotional regulation skills typically improve due to brain development, particularly in the prefrontal cortex (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). Younger adolescents (ages 13–15) often display less emotional control and higher emotional reactivity than older adolescents (ages 16–19), who begin to employ more sophisticated coping strategies (Steinberg, 2005).

Zimmermann and Iwanski (2014) conducted a longitudinal study and found that with increasing age, adolescents showed a shift from externalizing emotion regulation behaviors to internal and cognitive strategies. This maturation process was reflected in increased use of adaptive strategies such as putting

into perspective and refocus on planning. However, early interventions are crucial, especially during the formative years of emotional development, to prevent maladaptive patterns from becoming entrenched.

Emotion Dysregulation and Academic and Social Outcomes

Emotion dysregulation is not limited to psychological consequences; it also affects academic performance and social relationships. Adolescents who are unable to regulate emotions effectively may struggle with concentration, motivation, and peer relationships (Morris et al., 2007). In a study by Graziano, Reavis, Keane, and Calkins (2007), poor emotion regulation was associated with decreased academic engagement and higher levels of behavioral problems in school.

In the Indian education system, which places high pressure on academic performance, adolescents with poor emotional coping often experience school burnout, anxiety, and even dropout (Kaur & Kaur, 2019). Moreover, difficulties in emotional regulation can impair social skills, leading to isolation, bullying, or strained relationships with peers and family members (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002).

Intervention and the Role of Schools

Given the significant impact of emotion dysregulation, schools can play a critical role in early identification and intervention. Emotional literacy programs, mindfulness practices, and cognitive behavioral interventions have shown promise in enhancing emotion regulation in adolescents (Greenberg et al., 2003). For instance, the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program has been successful in improving emotional awareness and self-control among school-aged children (Domitrovich, Cortes, &…In India, although mental health is increasingly being recognized in school settings, structured emotion regulation training is still rare. Studies by Joshi and Sharma (2021) indicate that introducing curriculum-based emotional education leads to better academic and behavioral outcomes. Teachers, counselors, and parents must collaborate to create emotionally supportive environments that foster resilience and adaptive coping.

Summary of Gaps in Existing Research

Despite increasing interest in emotion regulation among adolescents, several gaps remain in the literature, particularly in the Indian context. Many existing studies have focused on clinical populations or relied on Western samples, limiting generalizability. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of gender- and age-specific analysis of cognitive emotion regulation strategies among Indian school-going adolescents.

The current study attempts to fill “this gap by using a balanced gender sample (25 boys and 25 girls) drawn from private schools in the Varanasi district, employing the CERQ to investigate patterns of emotion regulation. By identifying key differences in emotional coping strategies and their association with gender and age, this study aims to inform evidence-based interventions tailored to the Indian adolescent population.

Objectives

1. To examine the cognitive emotion regulation strategies used by school-going adolescents in Varanasi.
2. To investigate gender differences in the use of emotion regulation strategies.
3. To explore the relationship between age and emotion regulation strategies among adolescents.

Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant gender difference in the use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies among adolescents.

H1: There is a significant gender difference in the use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies among adolescents.

H02: There is no significant correlation between age and cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

H2: There is a significant correlation between age and cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized a **quantitative, cross-sectional design** with a descriptive and comparative framework. Data were collected through self-report measures in controlled classroom environments.

Sample

A total of **50 adolescents (25 boys and 25 girls)** were selected using **purposive sampling** from **private schools in the Varanasi district**. The participants were aged between **13 to 19 years**. Consent was obtained from school authorities, parents, and the students themselves.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Adolescents aged 13–19 years.
- Enrolled in private schools in Varanasi.
- Willingness to participate voluntarily.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Adolescents with diagnosed psychiatric conditions.
- Incomplete questionnaire responses.

Tool Used

The **Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ)** by **Garnefski and Kraaij (2007)** was used. It consists of **36 items** measuring **nine cognitive coping strategies**, both adaptive (e.g., acceptance, planning) and maladaptive (e.g., catastrophizing, rumination). Responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Procedure

- Data were collected in group settings during school hours.
- Clear instructions were provided in Hindi and English.
- Each participant completed the CERQ independently.
- Data were anonymized and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive Statistics

The age range was 13 to 19 years, with a mean age of 16.1 years (SD = 1.8). Boys and girls were equally distributed across age brackets.

Independent Sample *t*-Tests

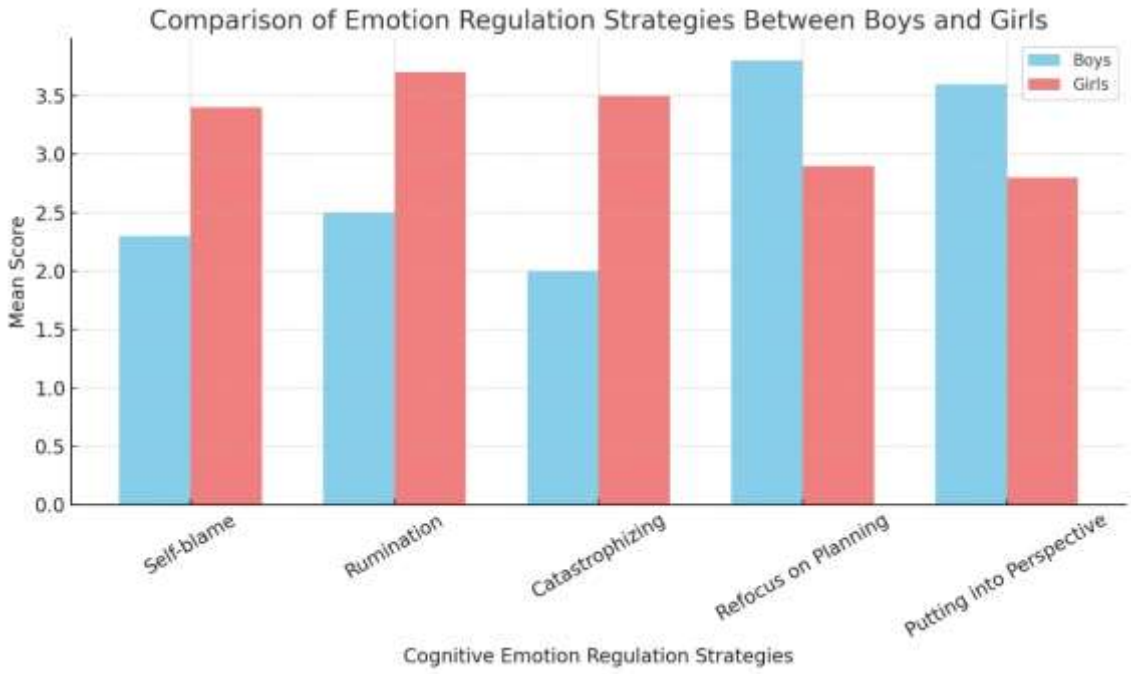
Gender differences in CERQ scores were analyzed using *t*-tests.

CERQ Strategy	Boys (Mean ± SD)	Girls (Mean ± SD)	t-value	p-value
Self-blame	10.8 ± 2.1	13.2 ± 2.3	-3.78	0.001 **
Acceptance	12.4 ± 2.0	11.9 ± 2.4	0.76	0.452
Rumination	11.3 ± 2.3	13.5 ± 2.2	-3.61	0.001 **
Positive Refocusing	14.0 ± 2.4	13.4 ± 2.6	0.89	0.377
Refocus on Planning	15.1 ± 2.2	13.5 ± 2.5	2.46	0.018 *
Positive Reappraisal	13.6 ± 2.1	12.4 ± 2.3	1.58	0.122
Putting into Perspective	14.1 ± 2.2	12.6 ± 2.1	2.11	0.041 *
Catastrophizing	10.2 ± 2.0	12.1 ± 2.4	-2.75	0.009 **
Other-blame	9.9 ± 1.8	10.2 ± 2.0	-0.56	0.580

**Significant at p < .05;* *Highly significant at p < .01*

Correlation with Age

Strategy	Pearson's r	Significance (p)
Self-blame	-0.20	0.15
Rumination	-0.12	0.32
Positive Reappraisal	0.37	0.008 **
Refocus on Planning	0.33	0.015 *
Putting into Perspective	0.30	0.026 *



Discussion

The present study sought to investigate emotion dysregulation among school-going adolescents, focusing on the cognitive emotion regulation strategies used by 50 adolescents (25 boys and 25 girls) aged 13 to 19 years from private schools in the Varanasi district. The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) was used to assess both adaptive and maladaptive strategies in response to negative life experiences.

One of the key findings revealed significant gender differences in the use of emotion regulation strategies. Girls demonstrated a higher tendency to engage in maladaptive cognitive strategies such as self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing. These findings align with previous research (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2006; Esmaeili, 2017), which suggests that adolescent girls are more likely to internalize negative emotions and may be more vulnerable to emotional distress such as anxiety and depression. On the other hand, boys were observed to use relatively more adaptive strategies like positive refocusing, acceptance, and planning. This may reflect social norms that encourage emotional suppression in boys while also fostering problem-solving behaviors.

The age-related differences observed in this study further support the developmental trajectory proposed by neuropsychological research. Older adolescents (16–19 years) showed greater reliance on adaptive cognitive strategies compared to their younger counterparts (13–15 years), possibly due to more developed executive functioning and prefrontal cortex maturation (Steinberg, 2005; Casey et al., 2008). However, the presence of maladaptive regulation even among older adolescents emphasizes the need for interventions irrespective of age.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the Indian context adds a unique layer of complexity. Adolescents in Indian society often face high academic expectations, strict behavioral norms, and limited avenues for emotional expression, especially in school environments. These cultural stressors may intensify the use of maladaptive strategies among students who are not provided with psychological support mechanisms. Moreover, emotional literacy is rarely part of school curricula, and there is still limited awareness about mental health in many private schools despite their resources.

The results also suggest that adolescents with poor emotion regulation are at greater risk of experiencing difficulties in academic performance, peer relationships, and self-esteem. Emotion dysregulation was not only linked to psychological outcomes but also to overall well-being and social functioning, consistent with studies by Morris et al. (2007) and Graziano et al. (2007).

Implications of these findings are multi-dimensional. Schools can play a transformative role in promoting emotional well-being by integrating emotional regulation training into their daily curriculum. This could include mindfulness practices, teacher-led socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs, and regular assessments using tools like the CERQ. Gender-sensitive and age-appropriate interventions must be developed to equip adolescents with adaptive coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, the data supports the relevance of introducing Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)-based strategies in school counseling sessions. Early intervention through structured programs can significantly reduce the long-term impact of maladaptive regulation, particularly in high-stress academic environments.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on adolescent mental health by exploring the patterns of cognitive emotion regulation in school-going adolescents from Varanasi. The findings

confirm that gender and age significantly influence the type of cognitive strategies used, with girls more prone to maladaptive strategies and older adolescents better equipped with adaptive mechanisms. These emotional differences, influenced by both biological development and socio-cultural factors, directly affect adolescents' academic, social, and psychological functioning.

Emotion dysregulation is a critical concern that requires immediate and sustained attention from educators, parents, mental health professionals, and policymakers. Schools must adopt a proactive stance by embedding emotional education and regulation frameworks within the academic curriculum. Gender equity in mental health support and customized programs addressing the unique emotional challenges of each age group are also essential.

Future studies should consider larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings and explore regional, socio-economic, and cultural influences. Longitudinal research may also help in understanding how cognitive regulation strategies evolve and how early interventions shape long-term emotional development. Ultimately, empowering adolescents with tools for healthy emotional regulation can lay the foundation for resilience, mental wellness, and academic success.

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