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Through the Gender Lens: Exploring Perceived Stress among Tribal College Students in Kashmir

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Abstract:
A sound mind plays a significant role in shaping the behaviour, affective and cognitive functioning of an individual. Mind when is under pressure not only affects psychological wellbeing but also influences physical, environmental, emotional and social functioning. Although stress has been a commonly discussed concern in contemporary society, it at times remains an overlooked area when it comes to marginalized population.
The current study aims to explore the perceived stress among tribal college going students using a comparative research design. Initially 148 tribal students participated in the study through the administration of Cohen's perceived stress scale. Later on, the data from 136 tribal students out of 148 were found suitable for final analysis and were processed using MS Excel and SPSS software.
Male tribal undergraduate students experienced high stress than their female counterparts. Psycho-social interventions at large are required to boost the psychological functioning of marginalized students particularly tribal ones pursuing higher education.

Keywords: Stress; tribal students; gender; college education

Introduction:

Stress is perceptual in nature and is cognitively experienced or interpreted through primary and secondary appraisals **(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)**. If perceived positively, it helps to take safe life decisions and appropriate actions, and if perceived negatively may lead to burn out, exhaustion and even death **(Selye, 1936).** To meet various challenges of life, individuals differ in how they cope even when faced with similar situations. These differences arise from the coping strategies they adopt which may be task-oriented, emotion-oriented or avoidance-oriented **(Endler & Parker, 1990)**. Each time a challenging situation mobilizes human energy, channelizes its resources and seeks for social support (tangible, emotional or informational one). With adequate coping abilities, an individual can be the master of situation wherein adaptation is enhanced and successful outcomes are strengthened.
Moderate level of stress is beneficial in terms of awareness, motivation, concentration, adjustment, productivity and mobilizes an individual toward eustress level **(Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).** However, when stress takes away the overall health and body functioning, it leads to distress **(McEwen, 1998).**

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Distress is a state of mind wherein exhaustion, burnout, relationship clashes, arrested personality and reduced functioning is prevalent. In this manner, stress works like electricity, too much of which damages electric appliances and too low stress makes an individual lethargic, reduces motivation and productivity **(Selye, 1976).** The impact of stress depends largely on its intensity, duration, management and coping abilities.
Stress has become an integral part of modern life, particularly among college students who are required to cope with academic demands, social pressures and future uncertainties. Among college students, factors such as gender, academic pressure, social expectations, residence and family system have been intensively studied in relation to perceived stress and such factors have been found to influence their emotional, cognitive and behavioral functions **(Mbiriri, 2022; Khadem, 2019; Anbumalar, Dorathy, Jaswanti, Priya & Reniangelin, 2017; Matud, 2004,)**. Studies consistently demonstrate that chronic stress undermines academic achievement, diminishes psychological resilience and heightens anxiety and depression **(Cheng, Kazemi, Baker & Weiss, 2024**).
Tribal students frequently face extra stressors stemming from socioeconomic hardships, cultural shifts, marginalization and scarce mental health support. These obstacles can profoundly shape stress perception and coping behaviour among tribal groups, especially in higher education contexts **(Misra & McKean, 2000)**.
Although awareness of student mental health has increased, empirical studies examining gender differences in perceived stress among tribal college students in the Kashmir Valley remain scarce to none. The current study investigates perceived stress levels among male and female tribal college students and assesses potential gender disparities. Identifying these differences is vital for developing gender-sensitive mental health initiatives and bolstering support systems for tribal youth in higher education.

Subjects and Methods

The current work is a first attempt of its kind to work with a marginalized population, majority of whom had a nomadic lifestyle. Primarily the current study tailors a non-experimental comparative design focusing more on tribal college students aged 18-24 years pursuing undergraduate courses at Government Degree College Tangdhar Karnah (Kashmir, India). Data collection employed convenience sampling, resulting in 136 valid responses out of 146 total submissions. Socio-demographic details such as gender, age, academic stream and family type were bagged via information blank. Perceived stress levels were assessed using Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), which comprises 10 items rated from 'never' (0) to 'very often' (4). The scale includes 4 positively worded and 6 negatively worded items, yielding total scores from 0 to 40. Scores of 0-13 indicate low stress, 14-26 moderate stress and 27-40 high stress.
Questionnaires were administered to respondents personally known to the researcher, with the study's purpose clearly explained and informed consent obtained from all participants. Data collection occurred through dual modes: 62.50% via online Google Forms and the remainder through face-to-face administration. Responses were screened to verify inclusion/exclusion criteria, processed in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS version 20. Strict confidentiality protocols were upheld throughout data collection and analysis. Mean, standard deviation, percentage, normality test and U-test were estimated.

Results

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (N=136). Out of 136 respondents, 41.91% of male students and 58.09% of female students have given the full responses. Concerning the academic stream, 54.41% of students were enrolled for B.A. course, 22.80% of students were pursuing B.Sc. Medical course, 12.50% of students were having B.Sc. Non Medical course and 10.29% of students opted B.Com course for their undergraduate programme. Regarding their permanent residence, rural students make up 83.09% of total responses, semi urban students make up 16.91% of total responses and not a single urban student has been found in the study. Out of the total sample, 54.41% of students currently live in a nuclear family and 45.59% of students are in joint family system.

Table 1:
Basic Profile of Participants

Socio-demographic details	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	57	41.91%
Female	79	58.09%
Academic Stream		
B.A. (Course Code 01)	74	54.41%
B.Sc. Medical (Couse Code	31	22.80%
02)	17	12.50%
B.Sc. Non Medical (Couse	14	10.29%
Code 03)		
B.Com (Course Code 04)		
Residence		
Rural	113	83.09%
Semi Urban	23	16.91%
Urban	-	-
Family type		
Nuclear	74	54.41%
Joint	62	45.59%

To examine whether perceived stress scores follow a normal distribution, Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality was estimated and the results obtained thereupon are given in table 2: The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the distribution of perceived stress scores significantly deviated from normality ($p < 0.05$). Since the assumption of normality was violated, therefore, instead of statistics like t-test or ANOVA, non-parametric statistical procedure like Mann-Whitney U test has been considered appropriate and used to find out the influence of gender on perceived stress of tribal college students. This approach is consistent with statistical recommendations for psychological research involving non-normally distributed data **(Field, 2018).**

Table 2:
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality

Variable	Statistic	df	Sig.
Perceived Stress	0.082	136	0.021
($p < 0.05$)			

The Mann–Whitney U test in table 3 revealed a statistically significant difference in perceived stress between male and female tribal college students (U=1092.5, W=4252.5, $p < 0.001$). Male students (Mean Rank=88.83) reported significantly higher perceived stress than female students (Mean Rank=53.83). This indicates that gender plays a significant role in influencing perceived stress among tribal college students of the Kashmir Valley.

Table 3:
Mean Rank and Mann-Whitney U Test Statistics

Dependent variable	Group	N	Mean Rank	U Value	Wilcoxon W	Z	p-value	Result
Perceived Stress	Male	57	88.83	1092.50	4252.5	5.11	< 0.001	Significant
	Female	79	53.83					
	Total	136						

Discussion:
The present study explored perceived stress among tribal college students of the Kashmir Valley with a specific focus on gender differences indicating higher female participation in the study. The findings revealed that perceived stress levels significantly differ between male and female tribal students with males experiencing higher levels of stress. The current finding is supported by **Mbiriri (2022),** and **Khadem (2019).** However, **Matud (2004) and Anbumalar, Dorathy, Jaswanti, Priya & Reniangelin (2017)** reported higher levels of chronic and daily stressors among women, as well as distinct patterns of coping. The findings highlighted the urgent need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions, stress management programs and counseling services within higher education institutions, particularly in tribal regions to foster resistant personalities and hardiness traits among tribal students. Creating supportive academic environments and strengthening psychosocial resources can contribute significantly to improving students' mental health and academic adjustment.

Conclusion:
Tribal community pursuing higher education has perceived significant differences on stress with respect to gender. Female with moderate and male tribal college students with high levels of perceived stress have raised serious concerns for higher educational authorities. Overall, the current study contributes to the limited empirical literature on stress among tribal college students and provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers and mental health professionals working toward inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices.

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