

The Study of Relationship between Self-esteem and Psychological Distress among Migrants

Vandana Maurya^{1*}, Priyanka Kumari²

ABSTRACT

The relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants is a critical area of study within the field of psychology. Migration often refers to a series of challenging life transitions, including cultural assimilation, language acquisition, and social integration. These challenging transitions can significantly impact an individual's self-esteem, which in turn influences their psychological well-being. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress. The sample of the present study consisted of approximately 200 randomly selected participants who belonged to Bihar but were working in other states. The participants completed Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12, Goldberg & Williams, 1988). The data of the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and Standard deviation) and correlational analysis. Findings indicated a moderate negative correlation between self-esteem and psychological distress among the migrants. The study highlights how boosting self-esteem can help improve the mental health of migrants.

Keywords: *Migrants, self-esteem, psychological distress, well-being and social integration*

The relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants is complex and multifaceted. Migration involves significant life changes, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, and social integration challenges (Rosenberg, 1965). These factors can impact an individual's self-esteem and overall psychological well-being (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Research indicates that migrants often face discrimination, social isolation, and economic hardship, which further affect their mental health (Goldberg & Williams, 1988). Understanding this relationship is crucial for developing interventions to support migrants' psychological well-being and promote their self-esteem (Ryff et al., 2007; Spector, 1985).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem, defined as a global, stable, and affectively loaded index of individual's attitude or evaluation of the self, is arguably one of the most studied constructs in psychology (Donnellan et al., 2011). Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value (Ali & Malik, 2014; Parthi & Rohilla, 2017). A more broadly used definition is

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology College of Commerce, Arts & Science, Patliputra University, Patna

²Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Patliputra University, Patna

*Corresponding Author

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a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is a subjective evaluation of self-meaning, identity, image and concept, and cumulatively these reflect an individual's cognitive, behavioral and affective domains (Bailey, 2003). It plays a crucial role in mental health, influencing how people perceive themselves and their abilities.

Psychological distress

Psychological distress is a general term used to describe the state of impaired psychological health which consists of a combination of symptoms extending from depression and anxiety to personality traits, functional disabilities and behavioural problems (Aline, Alain & Beaulieu-Prévost, 2012; Mirowsky, & Ross, 2014). It is characterized by the coexistence of symptoms of depression and anxiety, which can be seen as an imbalance between one's self and their ideal self, gradually eroding an individual's self-esteem (Arvidsdotter, Marklund, Kylen, Taft & Ekman, 2015). Various forms of psychological distress, as defined by differing diagnoses and measures, are highly comorbid, share similar symptoms, and may be linked to the same underlying dysregulation pathways (Kalin, 2020).

Migration

Migration that deals with the moving of people from one particular geographical area to another has long been under investigation in relation to its impact on mental health of the migrating people (Odegaard, 1932; Bhugra, 2004; Pope, Ionescu-Pioggia & Yurgelun -Todd, 1983; Grove, Clayton, Endicott, Hirschfeld, Andreasen & Klerman, 1986). Research has explored various aspects, including the psychological challenges faced by migrants as they adapt to new environments, the stressors associated with cultural integration (Vidya & Krishna, 2024), and the potential mental health risks arising from the migration process (World Health Organization, 2021).

Understanding this relationship is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems for migrants. By addressing factors that influence self-esteem, such as social support, community integration, and access to mental health services, it is possible to mitigate the psychological distress experienced by migrants and promote their overall well-being.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The finding of the previous researches shows that self-esteem is negatively associated with distress and low self-esteem significantly predicts psychological distress while negatively impacting mental health and potentially leading to depression through both interpersonal and introspective pathways (Xia, 2022). Multiple studies indicate a strong negative correlation between psychological distress and self-esteem (Liu, Yang & Zou, 2021; Radeef & Faisal, 2019). This suggests that individuals with lower self-esteem are more likely to experience higher levels of psychological distress. Similarly, Arias, Cha and Becerra (2020) found that psychological distress was significantly associated with low self-esteem. Furthermore, stressful experiences have been shown to correlate with psychological problems, with self-esteem playing a mediating role in this relationship. Higher self-esteem can buffer against the negative effects of stress (Moor, Hutteman, Korrelboom, & Laceulle, 2018). Additionally, U and Ali (2018) found in their regression analysis that self-esteem had a significant negative correlation with psychological distress, even when accounting for depression, anxiety, and stress. Mohammadzadeh et al. (2017) found in their study that significant number of participants were found high on depression, anxiety and stress scale and significant number of participants showed low self-esteem. Peteet et al. (2015) found in their study that higher impostorism among migrants predict higher distress and lower self-

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esteem. Together, these findings suggest these studies showing that self-esteem plays a crucial role in protecting against psychological distress. In other words, improving self-esteem can help to reduce the negative impact of psychological distress and can boost mental health.

Researchers often treated migrants as a homogeneous group, failing to account for the diverse experiences of different migrant subgroups (e.g., economic migrants, refugees, internal migrants). Studies should focus on specific subgroups to provide a more nuanced understanding of how self-esteem and psychological distress interact within these populations (Desie et al., 2024). Taking this rationale in account this study aimed to examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants specially from various areas from Bihar who migrated internally.

Objective of the study

Examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants.

Hypothesis

Higher self-esteem would be negatively related to psychological distress of migrants.

METHODS

Design

The study employed a correlational design to examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress. This approach will help to explore the variables and their interconnections.

Participants

Respondents of this study comprised a sample of 200 working professionals (male= 80.5% and female=19.5%), particularly belonging from Bihar and residing mainly at the cities like Delhi and neighboring areas (Delhi=21%, Noida=37.5%, Gurgaon= 25.5% and Ghaziabad= 16%) due to their jobs (i.e. engineers=63% and bankers=37%). The age of participants ranged from 25 years to 55 years (25-35 years = 78%, 35-45=14%, 45-55=8%), 69% were married while unmarried=31%, 36.5% participants earning salary above 1,00,000, 39.5% were earning 50,000 to 1,00,000, while 24% were earning below 50,000. Concerning their educational level 88.5% participants were graduate, while 41.5% were post graduate. 42% participants were having organizational tenure of more than 5 years while 19% of the participants having less than a year and 39% participants were having organizational tenure of 5 years.

Procedure

The researcher individually reached out to the participants. Additionally, the higher authorities at their workplace were contacted to ensure an adequate number of participants. The participants were provided with a brief overview of the study and sample questionnaires. They were informed that their participation is voluntary and their anonymity would be maintained. The data was gathered using a structured questionnaire. Informed consent forms were distributed and collected after the survey was completed by the participants. The questionnaire included measures of self-esteem and psychological distress. It also collected demographic information such as age, gender, marital status, job designation, educational qualifications, and organizational tenure of the participants.

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Measures

Self- Esteem

Self- esteem was measured by Rosenberg Self- Esteem Scale (1965). It is a self-report measure that pertains to self- worth and self- acceptance. It is a 10 item four- point rating scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The internal consistency of this scale is found .77.

Psychological Distress

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), developed by Goldberg & Williams (1988) was used to assess psychological distress. It is one of the most popular and widely used screening instruments for recognition and measurement of psychological distress. It consists of 12 items, each one assessing the severity of a mental problem over the past few weeks using a 4-point Likert-type scale (from 0 to 3). The score total score can ranges from 0 to 36. The positive items are from 0 (always) to 3 (never) and the negative ones from 3 (always) to 0 (never). High scores indicate worse psychological health. Cronbach Alpha for GHQ- 12 is found 0.90.

RESULTS

In the first step of the analysis, mean and standard deviations were computed to find out the difference between self-esteem and psychological distress. Further, correlation coefficients have been computed to examine the relationship between these variables. Results in terms of mean and standard deviations for self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants are presented in table-1.

Table 1: Showing descriptive statistics (Mean and S.D.) for self- esteem and psychological distress

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Self- esteem	27.0550	2.34510	200
Psychological distress	11.2600	2.14134	200

The descriptive analysis revealed that mean score of self- esteem is **27.06** (S.D. = 2.35) and for psychological distress it is **11.26** (S.D. = 2.14), based on a sample size of 200 participants for each variable. The results regarding the association of self- esteem and psychological distress are summarized in table-2.

Table 2: Showing correlations among self- esteem and psychological distress

		Self- esteem	Psychological distress
Self- esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	-.521**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< .001
	N	200	200
Psychological distress	Pearson Correlation	-.521**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	
	N	200	200

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress. The results indicated a **moderate negative correlation** between the two variables, $r = -0.521$, $p < 0.01$, suggesting that as self- esteem increases, psychological distress decreases.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to explore the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants. To achieve this statistical analysis was conducted using means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients. The descriptive statistics presented in Table- 1 revealed that the mean score of self-esteem among migrants ($M = 27.0550$, $S.D. = 2.34510$) was higher than the mean score of psychological distress ($M = 11.2600$, $S.D. = 2.14134$). This suggests that on average, migrants in this sample reported higher levels of self-esteem compared to psychological distress. However, the results of the correlational analysis, summarized in Table- 2, indicated a **moderate negative correlation** between the two variables ($r = -0.521$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that as self-esteem increases level of psychological distress decreases. This relationship was statistically significant. This finding supported the initial hypothesis of the study that higher self-esteem leads to negative correlation with psychological distress.

The overall pattern of correlation revealed a moderate but still statistically significant negative relationship ($r = -0.521$, $p < 0.01$) between self-esteem and psychological distress. Previous studies also supported these findings (Xia, 2022; Liu, Yang & Zou, 2021; Radeef & Faisal, 2019), which indicates that higher self-esteem is linked to reduced levels of psychological distress. These earlier studies consistently demonstrated that enhanced self-esteem contributes to lower psychological distress levels, providing a solid foundation for the present findings. By specifically addressing the migrant population, the study extends existing literature and underscores the relevance of self-esteem as a protective factor against psychological distress in this demographic. This emphasis contributes valuable insights, particularly given the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by migrants in adjusting to new environments.

The findings of this study can be interpreted through several psychological frameworks. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that fulfilling basic needs like autonomy and competence enhances self-esteem, which in turn helps reduce psychological distress. Similarly, Cognitive-Behavioral Theory (Beck, 1967) highlights how higher self-esteem fosters positive thought patterns and emotional responses, mitigating distress. The Stress-Buffering Hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985) adds that self-esteem acts as a protective factor, reducing the perceived impact of stress on psychological well-being. Additionally, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) underscores the role of secure early relationships in fostering self-esteem, which can shield migrants from psychological distress. Finally, Resilience Theory (Garmezy, 1971) emphasizes self-esteem as a critical protective factor that enhances resilience, enabling individuals to navigate adversity with less distress. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how self-esteem operates as a buffer against psychological distress in the migrant population.

Limitations

This study may not fully represent all migrant population. Migrants from different regions or with varied backgrounds and experiences might show different results. The data was collected using self-reported questionnaires, which could be influenced by people giving answers they think are expected or forgetting details. The study also didn't consider how cultural differences might affect self-esteem and psychological distress, so the findings may not apply to all cultural groups. Even though factors like depression, anxiety, and stress were taken into account, other factors like income, how long migrants have been in the new location, or support from friends and family were not included but could have an effect. The

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study focuses on a specific population, and the results may not fully apply to non-migrant populations or those in different contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among migrants. The results revealed a moderate and statistically significant negative correlation indicating that higher self-esteem is associated with lower psychological distress. On average, migrants in this sample reported higher levels of self-esteem compared to psychological distress, emphasizing the protective role of self-esteem in mitigating mental health challenges. These findings support earlier research and add new insights by focusing on migrants, who often face challenges like adjusting to new cultures and feeling socially isolated. The study highlights how boosting self-esteem can help improve the psychological well-being of migrants, offering useful ideas for future support programs. While this study has some limitations, like focusing on one group and being unable to show cause-and-effect relationships, it still provides valuable knowledge and ideas for helping migrant populations stay mentally healthy.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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