

Research Paper

A Study of Learned Helplessness and Irrational Beliefs among Boys and Girls College Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the levels of learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students, with a focus on gender-based differences and the correlation between the two variables. Drawing upon Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness and Ellis's (1962) Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy framework, the research aims to understand how these psychological constructs influence students' emotional and academic functioning. A sample of 100 college students (50 males and 50 females) aged 18 to 24 from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, was selected using a non-probability random sampling method. The Learned Helplessness Scale (Srivastava & Patro, 2006) and the Personal Belief Inventory (Hartman, 1968) were used as primary assessment tools. The data were analyzed using t-tests and Pearson product-moment correlation. The findings revealed that female students scored significantly higher than males on both learned helplessness and irrational beliefs. Furthermore, a significant negative correlation was observed between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs. These findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive psychological interventions and suggest that cognitive restructuring and resilience-building programs may help mitigate the impact of these maladaptive patterns on students' well-being and academic success.

Keywords: *Learned Helplessness, Irrational Beliefs, Gender Differences, College Students, Emotional Well-Being*

The college years are crucial in an individual's psychological and emotional development. As young adults transition from adolescence to adulthood, they often encounter academic, social, and personal challenges that can significantly affect their cognitive frameworks and emotional resilience. Among these psychological variables, two constructs that have garnered considerable attention are learned helplessness and irrational beliefs. Learned helplessness, a concept introduced by Seligman (1975), refers to the condition in which individuals feel powerless to change their circumstances after repeated exposure to uncontrollable events. This phenomenon has been linked to depression, anxiety, academic underachievement, and poor self-esteem, making it a critical focus of educational and clinical psychology.

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On the other hand, irrational beliefs, as theorized by Ellis (1962) in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), are rigid, illogical, and maladaptive thoughts that individuals hold about themselves, others, and the world. These beliefs are often associated with heightened emotional distress and behavioral dysfunctions. In the context of college students, irrational beliefs may manifest as perfectionism, fear of failure, catastrophizing academic performance, or the need for constant approval from peers and authority figures. Such beliefs can compound the effects of stress and increase vulnerability to learned helplessness, especially when students repeatedly encounter academic failures or interpersonal rejection.

The exploration of learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among boys and girls college students is of particular significance due to the growing emphasis on gender-sensitive psychological research. Empirical studies suggest that boys and girls may differ in their emotional coping styles, cognitive processing, and susceptibility to learned helplessness and irrational thinking (Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Turner & Barker, 2003). For instance, societal expectations often promote emotional expressiveness in girls while encouraging boys to display emotional restraint, which may impact the way they internalize or externalize failure and setbacks. These gender-specific psychological mechanisms may influence the development and manifestation of learned helplessness and irrational beliefs.

Academic institutions are increasingly recognizing the importance of mental health and emotional well-being as essential components of student success. Addressing irrational beliefs and the development of helplessness can not only enhance students' academic performance but also promote resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional stability. By investigating the relationship between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights into the cognitive-emotional patterns that may underlie academic and psychological challenges faced by this population.

In sum, this research aims to assess gender differences in learned helplessness and irrational beliefs, understand their interrelationship, and explore how these variables influence the psychological well-being of college students. Such an understanding may inform intervention strategies, counseling practices, and educational policies designed to foster adaptive belief systems and reduce feelings of helplessness in academic settings.

Yagmur Ulusoy and Baki Duy's (2013) study, "Effectiveness of a Psycho-education Program on Learned Helplessness and Irrational Beliefs," aimed to evaluate the impact of a psycho-education program on reducing learned helplessness and irrational beliefs in eighth-grade students. This experimental study employed a pre-test-post-test model with control and placebo groups. A total of 27 students participated, divided into three groups with 9 members each. The researchers collected data from the Irrational Beliefs Scale and the Attribution Style Questionnaire for Children. The experimental group underwent a ten-week psycho-education program based on cognitive behavioural therapy, while the placebo group participated in a four-week group guidance program addressing adolescent issues. The control group received no intervention. Data analysis involved a two-way ANOVA for repeated measures. The results indicated no significant differences between the three groups regarding learned helplessness and scores for irrational beliefs. However, there was a significant reduction in irrational belief scores in the experimental group from the pre-test to the post-test. Thus, the psycho-education program effectively decreased irrational beliefs but did not significantly impact learned helplessness.

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Several research studies have demonstrated notable connections between learned helplessness, irrational beliefs, and negative emotions. According to reports, children who frequently attribute negative events to stable and internal causes tend to experience more feelings of depression and academic struggles compared to those who do not make the same attributions (Nolen Hoeksema, Seligman, & Girgus, 1986).

Objective of the study:

- To investigate the learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students.
- To examine the correlation between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students.

Hypotheses:

- There will be no significant difference between male and female college students on learned helplessness.
- There will be no significant difference between male and female college students regarding irrational beliefs.
- No significant correlation will be found between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students.

Samples:

For the current research project, a carefully selected sample of 100 senior college students was drawn from College, Kolhapur, located in Maharashtra. This sample was evenly split, comprising 50 male and 50 female college students. The age range of the selected students was between 18 to 24 years, with the average age being 20.23 years and a standard deviation of 3.14 years. The sampling method employed for this study was non-probability random sampling, ensuring a diverse representation of the senior college student population.

Variable:

- **Independents Variables:**
Gender
 - 1) Male
 - 2) Female
- **Dependent Variables**
 - 1) Learned helplessness
 - 2) Irrational beliefs

Research Tools

- **Learned Helplessness Scale:** The LH (LH) scale was used to measure the subject's LH. The LH scale was originally developed by Seligman (1970). Srivastava and Patro (2006) adapted and translated the scale into Hindi. Originally, the scale consisted of 48 items, which measured both learned optimism and LH. To assess LH, the scale was limited to 24 items. The LH was measured on the basis of the respondents' attributions of bad events, which are indicators of LH. The scale's reliability was determined by calculating split-half reliability on a sample of 500 managers. The split-half reliability coefficient was found to be 0.39. The validity of the scale is yet to be determined.

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- Personal Belief Inventory (PBI):** The Personal Beliefs Inventory (PBI) is a self-administered, objectively scored diagnostic tool designed to assess irrational thinking, developed by Hartman in 1968. The inventory comprises 60 items, each presented as a straightforward declarative sentence representing a common irrational belief. The highest possible score is 300, indicating a high level of irrational thinking, while the lowest possible score is 0, indicating minimal irrational thinking. Higher scores reflect a greater degree of irrational beliefs.

Statistical Analysis:

“t” value and Product Moment Correlation (Pearson r) Statistics is used for the present study.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table No-1 Mean Std. Deviation and t value of learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among Boys and Girls college students.

Factors	Boys Students		Girls Students		df	t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Learned Helplessness	24.68	3.96	29.87	4.09	98	6.44**
Irrational Beliefs	178.18	4.11	184.95	4.37	98	7.97**

*Significant at 0.01** = 2.62, 0.05* = 1.98*

The independent samples t-test was conducted to compare levels of learned helplessness between boys and girls college students. Results revealed a significant difference between the two groups, $t(98) = 6.44$, $p < .01$, indicating that girls ($M = 29.87$, $SD = 4.09$) reported significantly higher levels of learned helplessness than boys ($M = 24.68$, $SD = 3.96$). The calculated t -value exceeds the critical value for significance at the 0.01 level ($t = 2.62$), affirming that the difference is not due to chance. These findings align with prior research suggesting that female students may be more prone to experiencing academic stress and emotional vulnerability, potentially contributing to learned helplessness when exposed to repeated failure or lack of control in academic settings (Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Alloy et al., 1990).

A similar t-test was conducted to examine differences in irrational beliefs between boys and girls. The results indicated a significant difference, $t(98) = 7.97$, $p < .01$, with girls ($M = 184.95$, $SD = 4.37$) exhibiting higher levels of irrational beliefs compared to boys ($M = 178.18$, $SD = 4.11$). This statistically significant result highlights the cognitive distortions that may be more prevalent among female students, potentially shaped by sociocultural norms emphasizing perfectionism, emotional sensitivity, or interpersonal approval (Ellis, 1962; David et al., 2005). These irrational beliefs may further intensify emotional distress and reinforce patterns of helplessness in challenging academic and social contexts.

The consistent gender-based disparities observed across both psychological constructs underscore the need for gender-responsive mental health interventions in academic environments. The stronger presence of irrational beliefs and learned helplessness in female students could increase their susceptibility to anxiety and depression, ultimately impairing academic performance and personal growth (Garber & Flynn, 2001). These results reinforce the theoretical perspective that maladaptive cognition and attributional style significantly

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influence students' psychological outcomes (Beck, 1976). Interventions focusing on cognitive restructuring, stress management, and resilience-building can be particularly beneficial in mitigating the impact of these negative cognitive patterns. Hence, educational institutions must consider gender as a moderating factor in psychological support systems to enhance student well-being.

Table No-2 Product Moment Correlation (Pearson r) between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students

	Learned Helplessness	Irrational Beliefs
Learned Helplessness	1	- 0.81**
Irrational Beliefs	-0.81**	1

Significant 0.05*=0.10, 0.01** = 0.14

The table shows the product-moment correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students.

The correlation coefficient, denoted by "r" is -0.81 for both men and women. A negative correlation coefficient indicates an inverse relationship between two variables. In this case, a higher score on learned helplessness is associated with a lower score on irrational beliefs, and vice versa. The p-value is statistically significant at 0.05 level.

A higher score on learned helplessness is unexpectedly associated with a lower score on irrational beliefs. Learned helplessness is characterized by a pervasive sense of powerlessness and resignation, often resulting from repeated experiences of uncontrollability and failure. Individuals entrenched in learned helplessness may accept their limitations and stop harboring unrealistic expectations. On the other hand, irrational beliefs involve distorted thinking patterns and unrealistic expectations. While someone deeply entrenched in irrational beliefs may continue to struggle with misguided persistence, a person experiencing learned helplessness has often given up such futile efforts, exhibiting fewer irrational beliefs. Therefore, the inverse relationship emerges because learned helplessness reflects a cessation of the irrational struggle, resulting in a lower prevalence of irrational cognitive patterns.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Female college students had significantly higher learned helplessness than male college students.
2. Female college students had significantly higher irrational beliefs than male college students.
3. A negative correlation was found between learned helplessness and irrational beliefs among male and female college students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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