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Assessing Social and Emotional Competencies of Undergraduates: A Cross-Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to assess social-emotional competencies among Indian and Ethiopian undergraduates. A total of 400 (200 each) participants, with an equal number of 100 male and female were selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure from Punjabi University (India), and Wollega University and Ambo University (Ethiopia). The participants were tested with the Social Skills Inventory (SSI: Riggio & Carney, 2003), which consists of two super-dimensions, i.e. emotional competence and social competence each having three sub-dimensions: emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, and social expressivity, social sensitivity and social control respectively. Obtained data were subjected to t-statistics. Significant mean differences in social-emotional competence were observed between the Indian and Ethiopian young adults;male and female samples of the two countries. The Indian sample was greater in Social-emotional competence than the Ethiopian sample. Similarly, male and female participants from the Indian sample were greater in social-emotional skills than that of the Ethiopian sample, except for emotional sensitivity with the female participants, where the mean difference was non-significant. Further explorations are recommended to consolidate or refute the result of the present study.

1. Introduction

Young adulthood comes up with opportunities to take new responsibilities in social and professional arenas. People at this stage of life need to establish and maintain positive relationships, solve challenging situations in life and adapt to the fast-changing world. Most present-day emerging adults pursue tertiary education and training to broaden their employment opportunities and enjoy an improved quality of life. It has also been justified that the *emerging adults* need to pass a long time in schools to qualify for the demands of their community; as the global economy transforms from industrialized to an information-based economy, which requires adequate skills and competencies (Wood et al., 2018). Social-emotional skills play an important role in making adjustments with this state of affairs and also influence many important life outcomes. Social competence, social-emotional competence, social skills, and social-emotional skills have been used interchangeably, representing the ability to convey one's social and emotional messages, effectively receive that of others and exercise emotional and social regulation. Riggio and Carney (2003) equate social competence with social intelligence, the ability to engage in adaptive and positive social interactions (Riggio & Carney, 2003). Based on Riggio and Carney's conceptualizations, social-emotional skills could be understood as the manifestation of social-emotional competence, implying that a competent individual is skilled in receiving, decoding, and accurately interpreting emotional and social information from both the self and others, and is skilled in sending and regulating emotional and social information appropriate to the interpersonal and situational circumstances. Individuals with such skills are found as resourceful, able to work well with others and take personal and collective responsibility (Jones, Greenberg & Crowley, 2015). These characteristics are the hallmark of a well-functioning society as well as determine the future success of the person. Therefore, the study is aimed at assessing social and emotional competencies among Indian and Ethiopian undergraduates. In addition, the

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trust of the study is to assess if cross-cultural variation exists in social-emotional competencies among young adults belonging to India and Ethiopia by forwarding the following objectives. The study further aimed at testing Riggio and Carney's (2003) basic social-emotional competencies on the data to be collected from both India and Ethiopia.

2. Objectives

- To assess social-emotional competencies among Indian and Ethiopian undergraduates.
- To investigate if gender difference exists in terms of social-emotional competencies among undergraduates from the two countries.

3. Review of Literature

It has been consistently argued that social-emotional skills are paramount at any stage of development. The development and maintenance of social-emotional competence attributed to different factors are seemingly bound to culture. A cross-cultural analysis shows that social-emotional competence was investigated for a long time and showed some degree of consistency across cultures during the formative years. For instance, a multinational analysis involving preschoolers from eight countries (i.e. Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States) revealed that social competence is relatively stable across age and countries and gender differences were also observed (LaFreniere et al., 2002). Evidence regarding cross-cultural analysis of social-emotional competence is limited to the formative years of human development.

Evidence shows that social-emotional competence seems consistent across cultures during the formative years; studies revealed increased cross-cultural variation with increasing age (LaFreniere et al., 2002; Chen et al., 2015). The way each culture presents itself to its members is likely to differ across cultures, because of the differential demands from each culture. In addition, the social environment within a broad culture plays a part in the development and maintenance of social-emotional skills. Different theoretical explanations have justified the role of the social environment in the development of social-emotional competencies. For example, Erikson stated that social-emotional competence is developed out of the individuals continuing interaction with the social environment, with the ultimate goal of attaining ego strength or becoming a psychologically healthy individual (Ma, 2012). Vygotsky in his Socio-cultural theory of development also emphasized the role of the social environment in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) through scaffolding (Blunden & Schmolze, 2004). Vygotsky claimed that children's cognitive enterprises are similar to that of mature adults, and they develop social-emotional skills and related competencies through imitation.

Ecological system's theory of Bronfenbrenner observed the development of social-emotional competence vis-a-vis the relative ecological systems in which the child develops. Within the microsystem, social competence develops out of the bidirectional influences between the child, family, neighborhood, and school that heavily impact the foundation of social development (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Throughout the individual's developmental trajectories, the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem come into play their respective roles on the individual's subsequent social development (Krishnan, 2010). Healthy neighborhood; communication and collaboration among families and schools; sound economic, social, and cultural practices and policies, and macro-level political and economic stability have been reportedly supporting the development of social-emotional competencies. Albert Bandura is well-known for the notion of triadic reciprocal determinism between the individual (self), behavior and environment. Bandura also proposed three types of influence on social-emotional competence: the behaviors that children and adolescents observe within their home or culture; cognitive variables such as students' expectations of success, and social factors such as classroom and school climate (Huitt & Dawson, 2011).

Literature reveals that the two countries share some common attributes; for instance, they are found within the broader developing economy of the world, with some specific differences. Analysis was made to compare the two countries using Geert Hofstede's five-dimensional model of cultural orientation (Tamas, 2007; DeMooij & Hofstede, 2010), which ranks the world countries in terms of power distance index, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, and long term orientation index. Power distance concerns the

level of equality in wealth and power; high scores indicate inequality in access to power and wealth, and India (77) is greater than Ethiopia (64) in this regard. Individualism-collectivism refers to the degree of the bond between individuals in a particular culture; high scores on individualism indicate loose ties between individuals in the society; everyone is expected to look after themselves and their immediate family. Collectivism is the opposite of individualism; referring to the society where there are strong ties between individuals. Based on this measure, Indian society with an intermediate score (48) represents both collectivistic and individualist traits and Ethiopia (27) is considered as a collectivistic society. Masculinity-femininity index focuses on the degree to which masculine values like competitiveness and the acquisition of wealth are valued over feminine values like relationship building and the quality of life. India and Ethiopia scored 56 and 41 respectively. Uncertainty avoidance index focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity with society. A high uncertainty avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls to reduce the amount of uncertainty. A low uncertainty avoidance ranking indicates that the country has less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and has more tolerance for diversity of opinions. Accordingly, Ethiopia (52) is greater than India (40) on the specific culture variable. Long-term orientation focuses on the degree to which the society embraces, or does not embrace, long-term devotion to traditional values. A high long-term orientation score shows that the country values long-term commitments and tradition, with long-term rewards predicted as a result of today's efforts. India (65) is greater in long-term orientation than Ethiopia (25). Following the bipolar dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede's, model of cultural orientation Indian culture is inclinedtowards collectivism (Jha & Singh, 2011). Indian people are characterized as status-conscious, power and prestige-oriented, emotional and personalized in relationships (Sinha, 1990). These characteristics hold more importance than individualistic traits. At the same time, many researchers characterize Indians as both collectivist and individualists (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994; Verma, 2001). Ethiopia, on the other hand, is a collectivist society that prioritizes relationships, group obligations and interpersonal harmony (Baar & Vissenberg, 2019). Collectivism and emotional intelligence have been proven to be positively associated in studies because in collectivist cultures, people learn to control and limit their emotions to maintain harmonious relationships (Bhullar, Schutte & Malouff, 2012; Gunkel, Schlagel & Engle, 2014); whereas individualistic cultures promote self-expression because they do not anticipate others to understand their minds in interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Bhullar et al., (2012) argue that collectivistic orientation encourages individuals to understand others' emotions and behave appropriately in social settings. Keeping in view the previous studies on cultural characteristics and their association with emotional intelligence, the present study was intended to assess the social skills during emerging adulthood. Apart from the above-mentioned cultural variables, no study has been attempted to investigate the cross-cultural differences in social-emotional skills of young people between the two countries. Hence, the present study is aimed to lay a foundation for future research in the area. As far as the knowledge of the researchers extends, social-emotional competency has not been assessed by considering representatives from India and Ethiopia. As a result, this research is critical in paving the way for future investigations from various perspectives. Accordingly, the hypothesized comparison in social-emotional competency between the two countries is mainly based on Girt Hofstede's comparison of cultural orientation and Riggio and Carney's background study on the universality in social-emotional competencies and the apparent gender differences.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the review of literature, the following hypotheses were formulated.

H_1: Indian students would be higher on social-emotional competencies as compared to Ethiopian students.

H_2: Male undergraduates from India would be higher on social-emotional competencies than male undergraduates from Ethiopia.

H_3: Female undergraduates from India would be higher on social-emotional competencies than male undergraduates from Ethiopia.

5. Method

Participants

A total of 400 participants were randomly selected for the study. A total of 200 participants were included from Punjabi University, Patiala, India, and 200 were from two Ethiopian Public Universities: Wollega University and Ambo University. To increase the representativeness of the participants, the study first checked the homogeneity of the participants for the general population of the two countries. This was done by first analyzing the demographic composition of the students from their respective universities. Eventually, academic units and departments were clustered out and the representative sample was selected using the lottery method. Equal number of participants with respect to gender, 100 each for both countries, were selected through multi-stage sampling procedures. The age ranges between 18 and 26 years for the Indian sample, with a mean and standard deviation of 20.87 and 1.76 respectively. The age for the Ethiopian sample ranges between 18 and 27 years, with a mean value of 21.46 and a standard deviation of 1.70.

Measure

Social Skills Inventory (Riggio and Carney, 2003) was used together with one demographic item requiring participants to indicate their gender. Social Skills Inventory included 90 items with scale anchors ranging between 1 (Not at all like me) and 5 (Exactly like me). Both the composite scores of the inventory and its six additive sub-scales, i.e. Emotional Sensitivity, Emotional Expressivity, Emotional Control, and Social Sensitivity, Social Expressivity, and Social Control, with each scale constituting 15 items were included in the study. It is a self-administered inventory; in which participants were clearly instructed to fill it themselves. The original study reported Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the six scales ranging between 0.64 and 0.89; whereas, in the current study, the internal consistency of measures was in the range of 0.63 to 0.74.

Procedure

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to recruit participants from the selected colleges and universities. Using the already existing strata of academic units and departments, and the simple random sampling procedure was used to select the students from each of the departments. Prior consent was taken from the concerning authorities of the colleges and departments to approach the students for the selection of the sample. Before administration of the measure, a rapport was built with the participants and they were provided with the appropriate conditions to respond to the questionnaires. The data collection for both samples was conducted in a group setting. The Ethiopian participants were tested as follows:

Participants from each department were tested as one group; with sample size ranging between 18 to 30 students as the number of students of each department differs. The participants were ensured that the information would be kept confidential and only used for research purposes. Then the questionnaire/test booklet containing a total of 91 items (i.e. one item for demographic information and 90 items for social skills were distributed among the participants.

To proceed with each session, instructions were given as follows: "Dear students, the data collection aims to seek information about your gender and social-emotional skills. After filling your sex, proceed to the next part that contains 90 items with a scale ranging between 1 and 5; i.e. 1 stands for "not at all like me", 2 for "a little like me", 3 for "like me", 4 for "very much like me", and 5 for "exactly like me". You fill your sex by putting a tick (√) mark in the box in front of the choices for gender. After you fill your sex, go to the Social Skills Inventory, and try to carefully fill your responses under the choice that you think clearly describes you. You are thankfully allowed to give the filled test back after you complete".

Similarly, the participants from Indian universities were selected and tested in the following manner. Before the administration of the measure, a rapport was built with the participants and they were provided with the appropriate conditions to respond to the questionnaire. Each group consisted of 30-40 participants. The questionnaire was administered by providing the following instruction: "Now, here is a questionnaire with one item asking for your gender and 90 items asking for social-emotional skills which include the skills you use in your daily life. Read the statements carefully, and answer them honestly. There is no time limit but try to complete it as early as possible". The questionnaires were scored as per the guidelines provided in the manual and the obtained scores were subjected to statistical analysis using the latest SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software.

6. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess if there was a significant mean difference in social-emotional competencies between undergraduates from Indian and Ethiopian public universities. Accordingly, data concerning the participants' gender and their social-emotional competencies were collected and subjected to an independent sample t-test (see Tables 1, 2 & 3). The tables show independent samples t-test statistics comparing the overall sample of the two countries, males and females from the two countries respectively.

Table 1 shows that there is a significant mean difference in social-emotional competencies between India (M = 278.03, SD = 22.93) and Ethiopia (M = 254.21, SD = 21.55); t (398) = 10.58, p = 0.000. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference: (95% CI = -13.60 to 27.34) was larger (eta squared = .219). On average, social-emotional competence was greater for the Indian sample than for the Ethiopian sample. Similarly, significant mean differences are observed between the two groups for emotional competence and social competence, implying that the Indian sample is greater in emotional competence and social competence than the Ethiopian sample (Table 1). In addition, similar findings were observed for the six dimensions of social-emotional competence, emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control. On average, the Indian sample is greater in emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control than the Ethiopian sample (see Table 1). The result supported the hypothesis, i.e. "*Indian students would be higher on social-emotional competencies as compared to Ethiopian students.*"

Table 1: Means, SDs and t-values for social-emotional competence and its dimensions bycountry, N = 400 (India = 200, Ethiopia = 200).

Variables	Country	Means	SD	t-values	Sig. (2-tailed)	eta-squared
Social-emotional Competence	India	278.03	22.93	10.585	.000	0.219
	Ethiopia	254.21	21.55			
Emotional Expressivity	India	44.94	5.90	34.84	.000	0.751
	Ethiopia	24.73	5.67			
Emotional Sensitivity	India	47.07	7.69	4.60	.000	0.005
	Ethiopia	43.31	8.60			
Emotional Control	India	44.82	6.90	38.27	.000	0.785
	Ethiopia	21.49	5.18			
Emotional Competence	India	136.83	12.44	47.87	.000	0.852
	Ethiopia	89.36	6.22			
Social Expressivity	India	46.20	7.95	8.04	.000	0.139
	Ethiopia	39.88	7.71			
Social Sensitivity	India	47.12	7.93	13.33	.000	0.307
	Ethiopia	36.53	7.93			
Social Control	India	47.88	8.35	20.77	.000	0.125
	Ethiopia	31.46	7.39			
Social Competence	India	141.20	13.95	26.75	.000	0.683
	Ethiopia	108.22	10.17			

[*] *P <. 0.001, et-squared is the measure of effect size (0.01 = small effect, 0.06 = moderate effect, 0.14 = large effect; Pallant, 2011).*

Table 2 shows that there is significant mean difference in social-emotional competencies between the Indian male sample (M = 280.98, SD = 19.69) and the Ethiopia male sample (M = 253.84, SD = 20.18); t (198) = 9.55, p = 0.000. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference: (95% CI

= 21.54 to 32.75) was larger (eta squared = .315). On average, the social-emotional skill was greater for the Indian male sample than the Ethiopian male sample. In the same vein, significant mean differences were observed between the two groups for emotional competence and social competence dimensions of social-emotional skills, implying that the Indian male sample is greater in emotional competence and social competence than the Ethiopian male sample. In addition, a similar finding was observed for the six dimensions, i.e. the Indian male sample is greater in emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control than the Ethiopian male sample (Table 2). The results supported the hypothesis, i.e. "*Male undergraduates from India and Ethiopia would be higher on Social-emotional Competence than male graduates from Ethiopia."*

Table 2: Means, SDs and t-values for social-emotional competence and its dimensions of male undergraduates, N = 200 (India = 100, Ethiopia = 100).

Variables	Country	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-values	Sig. (2-tailed)	eta-squared
Social-emotional competence	India	280.98	19.69	9.55	.000	0.315
	Ethiopia	253.84	20.18			
Emotional Expressivity	India	45.45	5.72	25.09	.000	0.761
	Ethiopia	25.65	5.43			
Emotional Sensitivity	India	47.60	7.56	5.14	.000	0.118
	Ethiopia	41.86	8.15			
Emotional Control	India	45.17	6.41	28.30	.000	0.802
	Ethiopia	22.51	4.79			
Emotional Competence	India	138.22	12.10	35.51	.000	0.864
	Ethiopia	89.85	6.00			
Social Expressivity	India	47.16	6.68	7.06	.000	0.201
	Ethiopia	40.26	7.09			
Social Sensitivity	India	47.40	7.04	11.75	.000	0.411
	Ethiopia	35.38	7.38			
Social Control	India	48.20	6.66	15.69	.000	0.554
	Ethiopia	32.92	7.08			
Social Competence	India	142.76	11.10	22.49	.000	0.719
	Ethiopia	108.82	10.07			

** P <. 0.001, et-squared is the measure of effect size (0.01 = small effect, 0.06 = moderate effect, 0.14 = large effect; Pallant, 2011)*

Table 3 shows that there is significant mean difference in social-emotional competencies between Indian female sample (M = 275.07, SD = 25.53) and the Ethiopian female sample (M = 254.60, SD = 22.96); t (198) = 5.87, p = 0.000. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference: (95% CI = 13.00 to 27.34) was larger (eta squared = .148). On average, the social-emotional skill was greater for the Indian sample than for the Ethiopian sample. Similarly, significant mean differences were observed between the two groups for emotional competence and social competence, implying that the Indian sample is greater in emotional competence and social competence than the Ethiopian sample (Table 1). The significant mean difference was observed in emotional expressivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control. This indicates that female participants from India were greater on the six dimensions of social-emotional competence. The mean difference for emotional sensitivity was non-significant, implying that female undergraduates from India and Ethiopia do not differ significantly in emotional sensitivity. The result supported the hypothesis, i.e. "*Female undergraduates from India wouldbe higher on Social-emotional Competence of female undergraduates from Ethiopia",* except for emotional sensitivity.

Apart from providing support to the hypotheses, the findings of the present study are consistent with the previous cross-cultural studies involving samples from both developed and under developed as well as from different cultural orientations (LaFreniere et al., 2002; Chen et al., 2015). The Indian sample exceeded in social-emotional competence, which might be attributed to cultural differences in both the Hoftsede's cultural orientation (Tamas, 2007; DeMooij & Hofstede, 2010) and specific child-rearing practices as proposed by the different theories in developmental psychology. For instance, the fact that India is relatively greater in individualism and long-term orientation might have influenced the child-rearing practices in the particular country to have a comparatively better social-emotional competence than the Ethiopian sample. In addition, Vygotsky's social-cultural developmental theory (Blunden & Schmolze, 2004) and Bronfenbrener's ecological system's theory (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017) might have implicated the cultural differences in child-rearing practices between the two countries.

Specifically, the result reveals that the Indian sample is greater than the Ethiopian sample on emotional competence and social competence, and their sub-dimensions, except for emotional sensitivity in which the two samples did not differ significantly. The findings can be discussed within the framework of the contextual – developmental perspective which acknowledges the association of cultural values with social functioning (Chen & French, 2008). Different cultures value social initiative and self-control as the two main dimensions of socio-emotional functioning differently. Indian culture promotes interdependence and cooperation. It is pertinent to note that parents in the family are the primary agent who transfers the cultural values to their wards. Researchers argue that cultural values and beliefs directly manifest in child-rearing practices and parental attitudes. The above-mentioned broad and specific socio-cultural variations might have played a role in placing differences between the two samples. On the other hand, emotional sensitivity seems to have universality across cross-cultural contexts; however, further exploration is needed to validate or refute the particular result.

The findings of this study have significant implications for researchers, teachers, parents, and policymakers. In past studies, it is shown that parents and teachers play a significant role in the promotion of social skills through advice, coaching, and modeling (Ladd, 2005; Lollis, Ross & Tate, 1992; Tomlin, 2007). So guidance and counseling programs can be organized for Ethiopian parents for making them aware of their role in preparing their wards to act competently in the globalized world. In addition to this, using more systematically planned and implemented social-emotional learning programs during early childhood can benefit in fostering the social competencies of young adults. Despite the significant findings, the present research has some limitations also. Firstly, due to regional differences in countries, it is difficult to conclude that the sample from both countries was representative of Ethiopian and Indian cultures. According to Matsumoto & Juang (2008), sampling equivalence has been found as the major problem in cross-cultural research. Secondly, the present study used a limited sample size to compare the two countries; had it been a large-scale nationally representative sample, the results might have been different. Nonetheless, the study would be a valuable reference to initiate further cross-cultural exploration across the world and further test the observed difference between the two countries. Further research should be conducted using large-scalenationally representative samples from culturally diverse nations to develop a theoretical and conceptual model that can be used for interventions with particular competence.

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