Maladaptive Perfectionism and Psychological Distress: The Mediating Role of Trait Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

The study aimed to reveal levels of psychological distress and maladaptive perfectionism at the students of secondary stages in Kuwait schools, and to determine the relationship between those two factors under the effect of trait emotional intelligence. The study sample was composed of (255) students from six schools located in different areas in Kuwait city. A self- administered questionnaire was used as the study instrument for collecting data. It was found that both psychological distress and maladaptive perfectionism were found at medium level, whereas trait emotional intelligence was found at the high level, Moreover it was found that trait emotional intelligence as a mediator affects the psychological distress- maladaptive perfectionism relationship.

Keywords: maladaptive perfectionism, psychological distress, trait emotional intelligence

1. Introduction

The schools education environment is considered as a fertile environment for the variety of students' behavior, individuals' culture, and education practices, a reason that makes students exposed to psychological problems. Maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress manifested in anxiety and depression, are considered one of these psychological dilemma that need to be treated carefully. Mostly, secondary school students are exposed to these psychological problems, because of the pressures created by their schools' management or families 'insistence as individuals who are now looking for the future seriously. Although some studies have been conducted on psychological issues, those two critical topics, Maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress, still need more support to be searched; because they play a major role in the individuals' behavior especially at the early school stages. Definitely, there are rare studies focused in this subject in Kuwait, and nearly no study has been conducted on the current study topic. Therefore, this study provides a new value to the Kuwait library by introducing this critical subject.

Generally, Psychological Distress is a manifold problem that may be associated with individuals in many types and in many work places. Therefore, by understanding psychological distress and maladaptive perfectionism relationship, managers may get new knowledge for how to handle psychological problems at their workers; They may take care of its occurrence, and know how to process it when it occurs. Moreover, few studies of psychological distress and maladaptive Perfectionism were conducted in the East, especially in Kuwait, arising a request about to what extent these findings can be applied in this region. Hence, by applying the current study suggested model, the study expands the MP-PD relationship model validity.

1.1 Research Problem & Objectives

The accelerated work routines and continuous education practices create tumultuous psychological issues at individuals. Such these psychological issues may be noticed at the secondary school students more than other community categories in Kuwait, and therefore found suffer from many psychological problems. Thus, it is such a necessary for huge efforts to be devoted for searching causes of their psychological distress, connecting some causes to others, and suggesting new solutions that may overcome this problem. The psychological literature suggested the important role of trait emotional intelligence to reduce the effect of psychological distress .Therefore, the current study problem can be manifested in tow main questions:

1)   What are the levels of trait emotional intelligence, psychological distress ,and maladaptive perfectionism at the secondary school students in Kuwait ?

2)   Is *trait emotional intelligence mediating psychological distress-maladaptive perfectionism relationship?*

2. Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

2.1 Maladaptive Perfectionism (MP)

Perfectionism is described as a serious and widespread problem emerging from several physical and psychological disorders (neurosis, personality disorders, psychosomatic disorders). Numerous psychological and mental personality development disorders are caused from perfectionism (Flett et al., 2002; Shafran & Mansell, 2001). However, many researchers (James et al., 2015; Khodarahimi, 2010) have agreed perfectionism includes two types, which are (adaptive) and (maladaptive) perfectionism; Adaptive perfectionism confirms high personality standards which serve as encouragement and motivation for the person; in this case, failures are allowed, because they work as support to the person to achieve the high standards, and do not cause inner turmoil, whereas Maladaptive perfectionism confirms hard attempts for higher standards and critical self-evaluation of performance.

Maladaptive perfectionism usually implies self-criticism and concerns about accomplishing unrealistically high standards. Maladaptive perfectionism has been proven by many studies to have closed- association with neuroticism (Campbell & Paula, 2002). Therefore, it is related to several psychological issues (e.g: anxiety, disorders, and depression) (Flett et al., 2002) which may affect the person behavior negatively, because it increases anxiety and bad mood.

There is ongoing literature emphasizing the association of maladaptive perfectionism with psychological distress symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Rice et al., 2015). Based on Pirbaglou et al. study (2013), the previous university literature has determined the prevalence rates for maladaptive perfectionism as (25) percent in between universities' students. These students set unachievable goals and expectations that lead them to get failure that downgrades their academic abilities (James et al., 2015).

Blankstein and Lumley (2008) investigated the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress. The study sample consisted of (205) students (61 males and 144 females) who were involved in an introductory psychological course. The study correlation analysis determined a significant relationship between the psychological distress sub-dimensions. Also, the hierarchical regression analysis emphasized that maladaptive perfectionism significantly predicts students' anxiety and depression, accounting 35% of variance for men, and 25% for women. Mead and Hicks (2010) tested the relationship of depression and stress with maladaptive perfectionism. The study sample consisted of (215) students in Australian university, (56) male and (159) female. The study analysis results found a significant and direct correlation of MP with depression,

Therefore, based on this literature, the following hypothesis can be built:

H1: MP significantly predicts PD at the secondary stages' students in Kuwait schools.

2.2 Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI)

2.2.1 Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Salovey and Mayer (1990) suggested the first model of (EI) which consisted of three basic parts: regulation of emotions, appraisal and expression of emotion, and use of emotional information for thinking or acting. Later, they refined the model, and a good theoretical and empirical literature was devoted for arguing the conceptualization of EI (Petrides and Furnham, 2003).

Emotional intelligence is one of research areas that have got a considerable attention at the psychological scholars (Goleman, 1995). For instance, Luminet et al. (2007) demonstrated that EI relates to work stress, Suliman and Al-Shaikh (2006) stated that EI relates to conflict and innovation. There is a cumulative literature that EI is related to psychological distress. This attention had given emotional intelligence popularity to the level that researchers of organizational behavior examined its applicability in the organizations for purpose of increasing the workers' performance.

Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to control his/her and others' emotions, identify the various emotions, and exhibit the appropriate thinking and behavior. Such a person having emotional intelligence could be aware of his and others' emotions when a difficult situation occurs, therefore he/she may comprehend the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and accordingly exhibit the appropriate behavior (Mayer, 2008).

2.2.2 Ability Emotional Intelligence (AEI) and Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI)

The extensive literature of EI models and measures have resulted in two main approaches for conceptualizing

and measuring Emotional Intelligence: "Ability Emotional Intelligence (AEI) and Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI)". AEI refers to the potential of processing information included in an individual's emotions to identify meanings of emotion and their relations to each other for purpose of using them as fundamental thoughts or taking decisions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Tests' performance is used for measuring this type of EI including incorrect or correct answers (Mayer, 2003). Whereas, TEI refers to aggregation of an individual's perceptions and dispositions relating to individual's ability to utilize and process the loaded information (Petrides & Furnham, 2003, p. 426). In contrast to ability AEI, TEI is measured via self-reports.

Petrides & Furnham (2001) confirmed a positive correlation between TEI and positive coping, and negative correlation between TEI and blame and anger, social withdrawal, and passive acceptance/ distraction. Therefore, For teachers to be effective, they have to deeply understand their students' emotional and mental state, and for that, they have to use considerable knowledge that can fit them. However, still now, the studies that tested the extent to which trait emotional intelligence predicts psychological distress are still unsatisfied.

Therefore, based on this literature, the following hypothesis can be developed:

H2: Trait Emotional Intelligence significantly predicts psychological distress at the secondary stages' students in Kuwait schools.

2.3 Psychological Distress (PD)

According to Wilkinson & Walford (1998), two main health factors affect the behavior of an individual : Psychological well-being which is represented in good health situations (such as life satisfaction) and self-distress which is represented in negative health states like anxiety and depression. Some psychologists looked for psychological distress from positive view; for example, Ridner (2004) stated that psychological distress must not be viewed as context of distress, strain , or stress, rather it should be viewed as a distinct concept. She mentioned that there is a difference between distress , stress, strain, and psychological distress, and expressed psychological distress as a case of discomfort an individual feels as a response to demand permanently or temporally.

2.3.1 EI and Psychological Distress

Recently, trait emotional intelligence has been argued whether it affects the MP and PD relationship, and an extensive research has been done interpreting the relationship between those two factors. TEI abilities contribute well to physical and psychological health (Salovey et al., 2000; Tsaousis & Nikolaou, 2005). Persons with EI usually have good psychological and physical health, because they have ability to adapt their selves with the challenges of their life, and therefore manage their emotions towards these challenges properly. Generally, many empirical studies have proved significant negative relationship between TEI and PD as well as between TEI and PD sub-dimensions (Bauld & Brown, 2009; Besharat, 2007).

Therefore, based on this literature, the following hypothesis can be developed:

H3: TEI significantly intermediates the relationship between MP and PD at the secondary stages' students in Kuwait schools.

3. Method

3.1 The Study Sample and Data Collection

The study population consisted of (723) secondary school students from six schools in Kuwait, three secondary schools for each gender, distributed in different areas. For the confidence level of (95%), and error level of (5%), the study sample was composed of (251). Thus, (287) questionnaires have been distributed randomly to the study sample. Of total, (255) with a percent of (88.8%) were eligible for the analysis, and the others have been excluded for different reasons. However, the properly filled and selected questionnaires exceeded the targeted sample required, and therefore were logically determined to achieve the study objectives. Table (1) shows the descriptive analysis of the participants, in which the majority of the study sample was composed of males with percent (52%), and second stage students with percent of (39%).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the sample

Characteristic		frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	132	52
	Female	123	48
Total		255	100
Stage	First stage	75	30
	Second stage	100	39
	Third stage	80	31
Total		255	100

3.2 Measurements

3.2.1 The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (F-MPS, Frost et al., 1990)

The study used F-MPS scale proposed by Frost et al. (1990) for perfectionism, which is composed of six sub-scales including Concerns Over Mistakes, Parental Expectations, Doubts About Action, Personal Standards, Organization, and Parental Criticism. These sub-scales are measured by thirty-five items designed by Frost et al., (1990). The following sub-scales:, Personal Standards, Doubts About Action, and Concerns Over Mistakes were used in the current study with (15) items to measure the total score of maladaptive perfectionism (Stoeber & Hotham, 2013), and A self-administered instrument built on a 5-point scale has been used for soliciting data from the participants.

3.2.2 The Questionnaire of TEI, Short (Mikolajczak et al., 2007)

TEI Questionnaire is a self- administrated instrument composed of (30) questions measuring an individual's capacity for emotional awareness and control. The current study used the five-point Likert scale for this questionnaire with (20) items for measuring Trait Emotional Intelligence (Laborde et al., 2016).

3.2.3 The common PD measurement scale (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale- 21(DASS-21)

This scale was proposed by Lovibond & Lovibond, (1995). It was used for measuring PD of the study sample by joining three sub-scales of general PD: (anxiety, depression, and stress). The DASS-21 was selected because of its adequate validity and reliability (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The current study used five -point Likert scale for The DASS-21 scale.

3.3 Testing Validity and Reliability

The study used Cronbach's Alpha for testing internal consistency between the items for each construct, as well as the composite consistency between the constructs (Table. 2). The cut- off level of alpha (0.6) is considered as accepted level for measuring the consistency (Nunnally, 1978). For all items, Cronbach's Alpha test was (0.87), and exceeded the cut- off level (0.60) for each construct, which means the instrument of the study had good reliability. Eigenvalue of rotated factors was used to test the study validity, in case the Eigenvalue for the construct was found less than (1.0), the construct should be dropped. Table (2) shows that the Eigenvalue for all constructs were more than (1.0), and therefore all of them were selected.

Table 2. Reliability & Validity of the study dimensions

Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha	Eigenvalue of Rotated Factors
MP	0.816	2.2 4
TEI	0.806	2.19
PD	0.864	1.97

3.4 Testing Multi-Collinearity and Normality

The sample size (255) is large, therefore the central limit can be implemented. Therefore, there is not a normality problem. Statistically, if there is high correlation between independent variables, the research model may be invalid. Hence, some variables need to be deleted or adapted. Tolerance, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) were used for testing multicollinearity; when the tolerance test is found to be not (< 0.1) and VIF value (≤ 10), it can be said that there is not multicollinearity.

Table 3 shows that the values of tolerance test were ($> 0. 1$), and those of VIF were between (1 and 10.0), which

means that there is not multicollinearity.

Table 3. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) and Tolerance of the variables

Dimension	Tolerance	VIF
Maladaptive Perfectionism	0.710	1.409
Trait Emotional Intelligence	0.637	1.56

4. Analysis

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

First, the study used Independent-samples test to determine if there are significant differences among the students' responses about maladaptive perfectionism, and psychological distress due to the gender. Table 4 shows a significant difference in the students' responses about psychological distress due to the gender (t = 0.705, p = 0.019), and for the benefit of female group, whereas there is not significant difference between the students' responses about maladaptive perfectionism.

Table 4. Independent samples- test results

Dimension	Gender	Mean	SD	t- test	Sig.
MP	Male	3.46	0.724	0.846	0.399
	Female	3.44	0.747		
PD	Male	3.37	0.832	0.705	0.019
	Female	3.41	0.625		

Second, the study used One way ANOVA to test whether there is significant difference in the students' response in MP and PD due to secondary stage. Table (5) shows that there is not significant difference in MP and PD due to the secondary stage (*F =1.86, p = 0.*120), (*F =1.59, p = 0.180*) , respectively.

Table 5. One-Way ANOVA test results

Dimension	School stage	Mean	SD	F- Calculated	Sig.
MP	First stage	3.4 4	0.747		
	Second stage	3.4 5	0.666	1.86	0.120
	Third stage	3.4 6	0.791		
PD	First stage	3.3 7	0.614		
	Second stage	3.38	0.815	1.59	0.18
	Third stage	3.4 2	0.751		

Third, the relationship between each one of model's variables was tested whether it is significant, Table 6 shows significant correlations between the three variables: MP, TEI, and PD (p < 0.05), Also, by dividing the participants' responses into three categories by (1.33) interval ((5-1)/3), It can be noticed that the two variables: MP and PD are found at the medium level, whereas TEI is found at the high level.

Table 6. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of MP, TEI, and PD (N = 255)

Variable	1	2	3	Mean	SD
MP	1			3.45	0.826
TEI	-0.417**	1		3.87	0.663
PD	0.458**	- 0.554**	1	3.39	0.874

4.2 Mediation Analysis

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for implementing the mediation analysis through two main steps:

First, A prediction model was applied for testing the direct path from (maladaptive perfectionism) to the outcome

(psychological distress), excluding Trait emotional intelligence as a mediator variable (Figure 1). Table (7) below shows the confirmation of acceptable fit of the model for the direct path between MP and PD. The model estimation showed a significant path from MP to PD ($\beta = 0.56, p < .01$).

Table 7. The model- fit Test of the direct path

	Chi^2	df	GFI	CFI	RAMSEA	Sig
PD	9.589	4	0.943	0.929	0.077	0.00
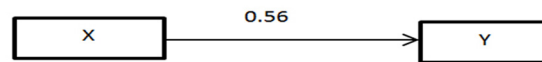
Figure 1. Direct path (X: Maladaptive Perfectionism, Y: Psychological Distress)

Second, maladaptive perfectionism (as a predictor) was related indirectly to psychological distress (as outcome) through trait emotional intelligence (as mediator) (Figure 2). Table 8 shows acceptable model fit.

Table 8. The model- fit Test of the indirect path.

	Chi^2	df	GFI	CFI	RAMSEA	Sig
PD	9.45	4	0.92	0.93	0.076	0.00

Table 9 shows that the direct impact of MP on TEI was significant ($\beta = -0.47; p < 0.01$). Also, the direct effect of TEI on PD was significant ($\beta = -.0.34; p < 0.01$). The result indicates that TEI affects significantly PD..

Table 9. Direct & Indirect Coefficients

	Estimates				
	Direct effect coefficients	Critical Ratio	Sig.	Indirect effect coefficients	Sig
MP → TEI	- 0.47	8.133	0.000	- 0.484	0.0018
TEI → PD	- 0.34	7.669	0.000		

On the other hand, the indirect effect of MP on PD was found to be significant ($\beta = -0.484, p < 0.01$). According to these results, because the direct and indirect effect of MP on PD is significant, therefore TEI is considered partial mediator between MP (predictor) and PD (outcome), where it reduces the negative effect of MP and thus reduces the PD level.
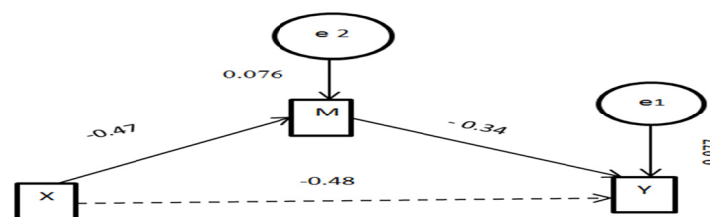

Figure 2. Indirect path (X: MP, M:TEI, Y: PD)

5. Discussion

The current study aimed at identifying the levels of, psychological distress, trait emotional intelligence, and maladaptive perfectionism at the secondary stages' students in Kuwait schools, in addition to investigating the relationship between these three variables. According to the current study results, the levels of psychological distress and maladaptive perfectionism were found at medium level, but trait emotional intelligence was found at the high level, also there is a positive significant relationship between the two factors; psychological distress and maladaptive perfectionism, which means that increase in each one causes increase in the other, while there is a significant negative relationship between TEI and each one of the other factors; maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress, which leads for using this factor as a mediator of MP – PD relationship.

The results of the first model confirmed the model fit, and maladaptive perfectionism has been tested whether it predicts psychological distress. The results have shown that maladaptive perfectionism positively predicts psychological distress with ($\beta = 0.56$; $p < .01$). This result is consistent with the results of some studies (Blankstein, & Lumley, 2008; Mayer, 2008) that confirmed the positive predictability of maladaptive perfectionism to psychological distress. This result explains that students of Kuwait schools who are suffering from psychological distress mostly have maladaptive perfectionism that makes them feel in critical self-evaluation of performance because of high standards and, which in turn causes neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and disorders. This inevitable effect of maladaptive perfectionism entails from the directorates of education in Kuwait to elicit seriously alternative solutions for relieving and overcoming the causes of this psychological phenomenon at their students, especially the secondary students to get rid of the psychological distress symptoms.

By testing the model two, which included full mediation path between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress through trait emotional intelligence, the results showed that MP had a significant and negative predictability to trait emotional intelligence ($\beta = -0.47$; $p < 0.01$) , and trait emotional intelligence had a significant negative predictability to psychological distress ($\beta = -0.34$; $p < 0.01$). This result indicates that with the increase of maladaptive perfectionism at the secondary stage students in Kuwait, trait emotional intelligence at them will decrease . On the other hand, by the increase of trait emotional intelligence, psychological distress will decrease.

Model three, partial mediation of trait emotional intelligence, showed that MP indirectly predicts PD ($\beta = -0.484$, $p < 0.0018$). This indicates that TEI affects negatively MP- PD relationship, which means secondary stage students who have a high level of trait emotional intelligence, they will have low level of maladaptive perfectionism, and thus have low levels of psychological distress symptoms. This result is consistent with (James et al., 2015) study.

6. Limitations and Implications of the Study

The study was conducted in schools' students environment in Kuwait, definitely, on secondary- stage students which are, mostly, having some characteristics in this age making them exposed to the psychological problems more than other community sections. Thus, for psychological distress, rather than emotional intelligence, other factors may play a significant role in reducing psychological distress problems. Second, the scale of social desirability was not given consideration leading some participants overstating perfectionism. Thirdly, giving some referable explanations of the study terms may have let participants to bias their responses.

Finally, The current study has been interested in identifying, and explaining the role of some psychological factors such as trait emotional intelligence in minimizing or eliminating the effects of negative psychological phenomena (e.g.: psychological distress), a way that gives managers and decision makers in the work places , education directorates in this study, a support how to handle the psychological problems at their students.

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