Emotional Regulation Difficulties Among University Students

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Abstract

This research aims to identify the emotional regulation difficulties among university students. The sample comprised 400 students from the University of Baghdad's morning studies program, including 156 males and 244 females, from both scientific and humanities disciplines for the academic year 2023-2024. The sample was selected using a stratified random sampling method. To achieve the research objectives, the researcher adopted the study of Gratz & Roemer (2004) and their scale based on the aforementioned theory. The final version of the Emotional Regulation Difficulties Scale consisted of 36 items. Utilizing statistical methods such as the t-test for one and two independent samples, Pearson's correlation coefficient, the Z-test, Cronbach's alpha, and the SPSS statistical package, the following results were obtained. The university students in the sample, both male and female, exhibited moderate levels of emotional regulation difficulties based on gender (male - female) and discipline (scientific - humanities).

Keywords: *Difficulties, Emotional Regulation, University Students.*

INTRODUCTION

First: The Research Problem

A student who lacks self-awareness is incapable of making conscious decisions and suffers from low self-confidence. It is unlikely that such an individual will be attuned to the emotions and feelings of their peers. A lack of self-awareness can lead to significant social problems and life dilemmas. We cannot expect our students to empathize with their peers if they are not at least somewhat aware of their own emotions and feelings (al-Qar'an, 2017: 38). The university phase is a critical growth stage for some students, coinciding with late adolescence, which can generate high tensions, increased risky behaviors, and emotional psychological disorders. They face various pressures, whether psychological, social, financial, or academic. This stage is characterized by an inability to modulate emotions and control them in provocative situations, known as emotional regulation difficulties. Poor emotional regulation can contribute to a negative self-image and the onset of psychological disorders. These emotions are marked by intensity, fluctuation, contradiction, and a lack of control and expression. The student may react explosively to criticism, deprivation of privileges, or interference in personal matters. These emotions closely resemble those of a child, differing primarily in the nature of the triggers (Bardeen & Orcutt, 2012: 385).

Dweck (1996) posits that the majority of students experience frustration or failure in their goals at some stage, often relying on their courage and negative feelings (Dweck, 1996: 98). According to Goleman (1998), most of these problems result from the misinterpretation of emotions and feelings, whether those of the individuals involved or society or nations (Goleman, 1998: 298). Individuals who cannot manage their emotions are described as emotionally weak or emotionally stagnant, as emotions impart a distinctive character to the personality and directly influence physiological, social, and ethical aspects, thereby impacting human life (al-Farmawi & Hassan, 2009: 19). Emotional balance, reflecting flexibility, enables the university student to confront all challenging and novel situations (al-Mukhtar & Abdul-Karim, 2017: 199).

Emotional regulation difficulties arise when the demands of the situation to regulate a student's emotions exceed their capabilities, creating a gap between the student's goals and responses and their manner of expressing emotions (Atta Allah, 2019: 4). Emotional regulation difficulties can have severe consequences for mental health and well-being. Some scholars, such as Houffman et al. (2012), suggest that the core of mood

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and anxiety disorders is the dysfunction and difficulty in emotional regulation (Houffman et al., 2012: 409). Consistent with this view, research by Roemer et al. (2009) indicates that emotional regulation difficulties are associated with generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety symptoms, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and panic attacks. Furthermore, difficulty in emotional regulation is linked to threat-related attention bias, indicating that individuals with emotional regulation difficulties "exhibit deficits in attention control in the presence of perceived threats" (Bardeen et al., 2017: 407).

The findings of various studies, such as those by Bardeen et al. (2013) and Cho & Hong (2013), suggest that individuals with emotional regulation difficulties experience more behavioral problems compared to those without such difficulties (Bardeen et al., 2013: 188; Cho & Hong, 2013: 192). Emotional regulation difficulties are also associated with numerous psychological disorders, such as depressive symptoms, borderline personality disorder, social anxiety, and addiction (McDermott, Tull, Gratz et al., & Lejuez, 2009: 592).

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Emotional regulation difficulties among university students.

The research sample is distributed by gender and specialization.

Total	Gender		Faculties	Specialization
	Male / female			
126	56	/ 70	Engineering	Scientific
126	57	/ 69	Pharmacy	
252	113	/ 139	Total	
74	22	/ 52	Ibn Rushd College of Education	Humanities
74	22	/ 52	Languages	
148	44	/ 104	Total	
400	157	/ 243	Grand Total	

Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale (ERDS)

Upon reviewing numerous previous studies and relevant literature related to the current research topic, including the study by Gratiz and Roemer (2004), the researcher adopted their scale to measure emotional regulation difficulties. The scale was translated and employed in the present study. Gratiz and Roemer defined it as the inability to manage emotions correctly and effectively. These difficulties encompass a range of issues in perceiving, understanding, expressing emotions, and controlling related behaviors and reactions. The scale consists of 36 items distributed across six dimensions: (1) Non-acceptance of emotional responses, (2) Difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, (3) Impulse control difficulties, (4) Lack of emotional awareness, (5) Limited access to emotion regulation strategies, (6) Lack of emotional clarity.

Statistical Analysis of Items:

Psychometric experts concur that the discriminative power of items and their validity coefficients are among the most crucial characteristics that must be verified in psychological measures (Al-Masry, 1999, p. 92). To measure these two properties, the researcher conducted a statistical analysis of the scale items as follows:

1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for Scale Validity: The validity of the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale was assessed using CFA via the Amos 24 program, based on a sample of 400 students. The six dimensions of the scale—Non-acceptance of emotional responses, Difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, Impulse control difficulties, Lack of emotional awareness, Limited access to emotion regulation strategies, Lack of emotional clarity—were hypothesized to load on a single latent factor, namely, Emotion Regulation Difficulties.

Discrimination Power of Items:

The discrimination power of an item indicates its ability to differentiate between various levels of the trait being measured among examinees (Allam, 2001, p. 211). An item with high discriminative power is one where the correct response rate among individuals with a high level of the trait is significantly higher than that among individuals with a low level of the trait (Murad and Suleiman, 2002, p. 218). After administering the scale to the sample of 400 students and correcting the response forms, to

calculate the items' discrimination power, the scores of the sample individuals were ranked from highest to lowest. The two extreme groups, comprising 27% of each group, were identified, resulting in 108 students in the high group and 108 in the low group.

The researcher employed the t-test for independent samples to determine the significance of differences between the means of the two groups on each item of the scale. The computed t-value represented the item's discrimination power (Edwards, 1957, pp. 153-154). It was found that all items were statistically significant discriminators, as their computed t-values exceeded the tabular t-value of 1.96 at a degree of freedom of 214 and a significance level of 0.05. Table 12 illustrates the results of the item discrimination power calculations.

Table 12 Discrimination Coefficients for the Items of the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale

Significance Level (0.05)	Computed t-value	Low Group SD	Low Group Mean	High Group SD	High Group Mean	No
significant	10.918	0,510	1.102	1.769	3.009	1
significant	9.821	1,239	2.417	0.915	3.852	2
significant	8.571	1,297	3.333	0.690	4.528	3
significant	10.223	0,913	2.370	1.116	3.769	4
significant	8.296	1,372	2.074	1.455	3.648	5
significant	6.177	1,343	1.907	1.677	3.167	6
significant	12.533	0,896	1.963	1.396	3.935	7
significant	18.456	1,300	1.972	0.977	4.593	8
significant	8.297	1,256	2.528	1.352	3.722	9
significant	6.778	1,307	1.972	1.399	3.204	10
significant	12.228	1,186	2.065	0.852	3.759	11
significant	13.009	0,981	1.806	1.165	3.685	12
significant	7.846	1,411	2.093	1.508	3.630	13
significant	5.181	1,174	2.926	1.061	3.704	14
significant	9.799	0,847	2.259	0.771	3.324	15
significant	9.044	0,844.	1.417	1.406	2.824	16
significant	9.780	0,699	1.157	1.805	2.954	17
significant	13.611	1,188	1.639	1.155	3.778	18
significant	11.828	1,268	2.333	0.908	3,083	19
significant	9.064	1,000	3.167	0.818	4.278	20
significant	6.869	1,103	3.407	0.874	4.324	21
significant	10.148	1,053	1.889	1.301	3.500	22
significant	6.383	1,534	2.241	1.404	3.500	23
significant	4.077	1,590	3.574	1.152	4.333	24
significant	6.229	1,089	4.139	0.555	4.861	25
significant	8.351	1,011	1.926	1.241	3.194	26
significant	9.073	0,757	2.685	0.9110	3.704	27
significant	7.167	1,577	2.083	1.638	3.630	28
significant	7.103	0,891	1.519	1.501	2.694	29
significant	10.040	1,046	1.481	1.415	3.157	30
significant	9.920	1,488	3.046	0.698	4.593	31
significant	10.308	1,080	2.139	0.922	3.528	32
significant	8.338	0,648	3.306	0.327	3.880	33
significant	9.246	0,844	1.750	1.289	3.102	34
significant	6.968	1,622	3.056	0,971	4.306	35
significant	8.706	0,844	1.417	1.557	2.880	36

Internal Consistency (Item Validity): The item validity was calculated as follows:

Relationship Between Item Scores and Total Score:

The researcher used Pearson's correlation coefficient to calculate the relationship between the scores of each item and the total score, given that the item scores were classified as continuous and graded. A sample of 400 students was utilized for item validity in the current research. All correlation coefficients showed statistical significance at the 0.05 significance level. The correlation coefficients with the total score were higher than the tabular value of 0.098 at a degree of freedom of 398 and a significance level of 0.05. Table 13 illustrates this.

Table 13

Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Each Item Score and the Total Score of the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale

Table 4:

Pearson Correlation Coefficient	Item No	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	Item No.	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	Item No.
0.359	25	0.409	13	0.472	1
0.393	26	0.338	14	0.473	2
0.478	27	0.497	15	0.468	3
0.362	28	0.472	16	0.488	4
0.355	29	0.432	17	0.392	5
0.475	30	0.549	18	0.309	6
0.469	31	0.558	19	0.549	7
0.516	32	0.468	20	0.603	8
0.412	33	0.370	21	0.354	9
0.448	34	0.487	22	0.325	10
0.352	35	0.340	23	0.542	11
0.401	36	0.226	24	0.572	12

Hypothesis Testing

Psychometric Properties of the Scale:

The scale must exhibit both validity and reliability to be deemed appropriate for use. Validity and reliability are critical aspects of measurement. Among the psychometric properties to be verified in scale items are their discriminative power and validity coefficients (Al-Zebari, 1997, p. 75). Selecting items with suitable psychometric properties is essential for constructing a scale with robust psychometric attributes. Therefore, it is necessary to verify the psychometric properties of the items to select appropriate items and adjust or exclude inappropriate ones.

The researcher verified these properties as follows:

First: Validity of the Scale:

Validity is a crucial attribute in constructing psychological scales. A valid scale accurately fulfills the purpose for which it was designed and achieves specific objectives (Allam, 2000, p. 281). Two indicators of validity were examined in the current scale: face validity and construct validity. Below is an explanation of how each indicator was verified:

Face Validity:

The researcher verified the face validity of the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale when experts in educational and psychological sciences agreed on the suitability of the items in measuring emotional regulation difficulties.

Construct Validity:

Construct validity refers to the psychological traits that a test or scale is designed to reflect or measure. It represents a psychological attribute or characteristic that cannot be directly observed but is inferred from related behaviors (Milhem, 2002, p. 269). The researcher verified construct validity through four indicators:

Discrimination by identifying differences between extreme groups.

Relationship between item scores and the total score.

Second: Reliability of the Scale

Reliability implies that a measurement tool yields consistent and stable estimates when the measurement process is repeated. Random and systematic errors are of concern in interpreting scores; systematic measurement errors

do not result in measurement inconsistency but still cause test or scale inaccuracy, reducing practical utility (Crocker & Algina, 2009, p. 148). Random errors arise from factors related to the test, such as unclear items or ambiguous instructions, environmental conditions, and the characteristics of the tested individuals (Allam, 2000, p. 131).

Interpretation and Discussion of Results:

• Assessing the level of emotional regulation difficulties among university students in the sample based on gender and specialization variables.

To achieve this goal, the researcher applied the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale to a sample of 400 students. The results indicated that the mean score for this sample on the scale was 107.667, with a standard deviation of 20.436. To determine the significance of the difference between the mean score and the hypothetical mean of 108, the researcher used the one-sample t-test, finding the difference statistically insignificant at the 0.05 level. The calculated t-value was 0.325, smaller than the tabular t-value of 1.96 with a degree of freedom of 399. Table illustrates this

Table Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-value for the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale

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INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

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Table Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-value for the Emotion Regulation Difficulties Scale

Significance (0.05)	"t-value"	"hypothetical mean"	"standard deviation"	"arithmetic mean"	"number"	"variable"			
	Tabular/"calculated"								
"not significant"	1,96 / 0,325	108	20,436	107,66	400	"Emotional regulation difficulties"			

To ascertain the level of emotional regulation difficulties, the researcher established a criterion by summing (the hypothesized mean + the standard deviation) and (the hypothesized mean – the standard deviation), thus defining the criterion as detailed in the table.19

High level	Moderate level	Low level	Variable
128.436 or above	128,436-87,564	Less than 87.564	Difficulties in Emotional Regulation

Criterion for Assessing the Level of Difficulties in Emotional Regulation

Upon comparing the mean with the aforementioned criterion, it was determined that the level of difficulties in emotional regulation was average, as it fell within the range for the average level.

The researcher subsequently conducted an additional analysis to investigate the difficulties in emotional regulation according to the variables of gender and specialization, as follows:

According to Gender (Male - Female)

The researcher collected responses from males and females separately using the Emotional Regulation Difficulties Scale. To identify the differences between the mean scores and the hypothetical mean, the researcher employed a one-sample t-test. It was found that the difference was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, as the computed t-values were less than the critical t-value of 1.96, with degrees of freedom (156, 242). This indicates that both male and female participants in the study exhibit average levels of emotional regulation difficulties, as illustrated in Table 20 and Figure 10

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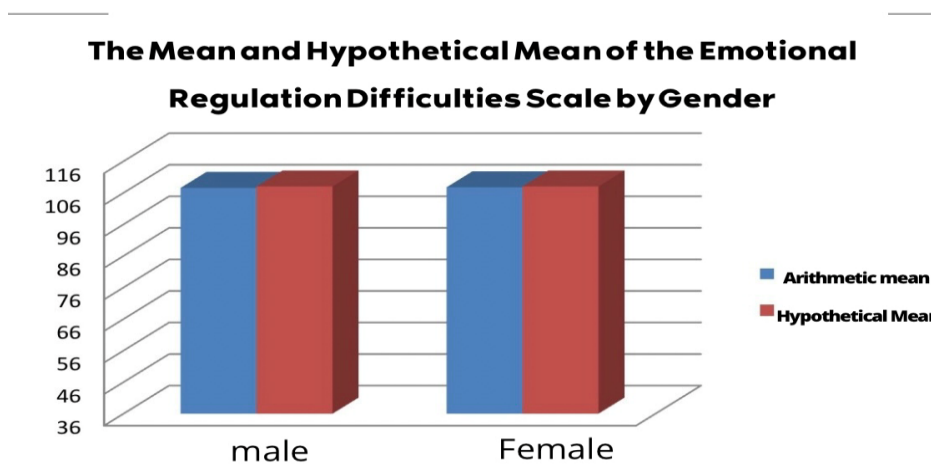| Significance Level (0.05)	"t-value"	"hypothetical mean"	"standard deviation"	"arithmetic mean"	"number"	Gender
	Tabular/ "calculated"					
not significant	**1,96/ 0,270**	108	20,443	107,560	157	Males
not significant	**1,96/0,200**	108	20,474	107,737	243	Females

Figure (10) Mean and Hypothetical Mean of the Emotional Regulation Difficulties Scale by Gender

### B. By Academic Specialization (Scientific - Humanities):

The researcher collected responses from students in scientific and humanities disciplines separately on the Emotional Regulation Difficulties Scale. To identify differences between the mean scores and the hypothetical mean, the researcher used a one-sample t-test. It was found that the difference was not statistically significant

at the 0.05 level, as the calculated t-values were smaller than the tabled t-value of 1.96, with degrees of freedom (251, 147). This indicates that the sample from both specializations exhibits moderate emotional regulation difficulties, as illustrated in Table (21) and Figure (11).

Table (21)
Mean, Standard Deviation, and T-Value of Emotional Regulation Difficulties by Specialization

Significance Level (0.05)	"t-value"	"hypothetical mean"	"standard deviation"	"arithmetic mean"	number	Specialization
	tabular /calculated					
not significant	1,96/0,451	108	20,806	107,209	252	Scientific
not significant	1,96/0.065	108	19,855	108,106	148	Humanitarian
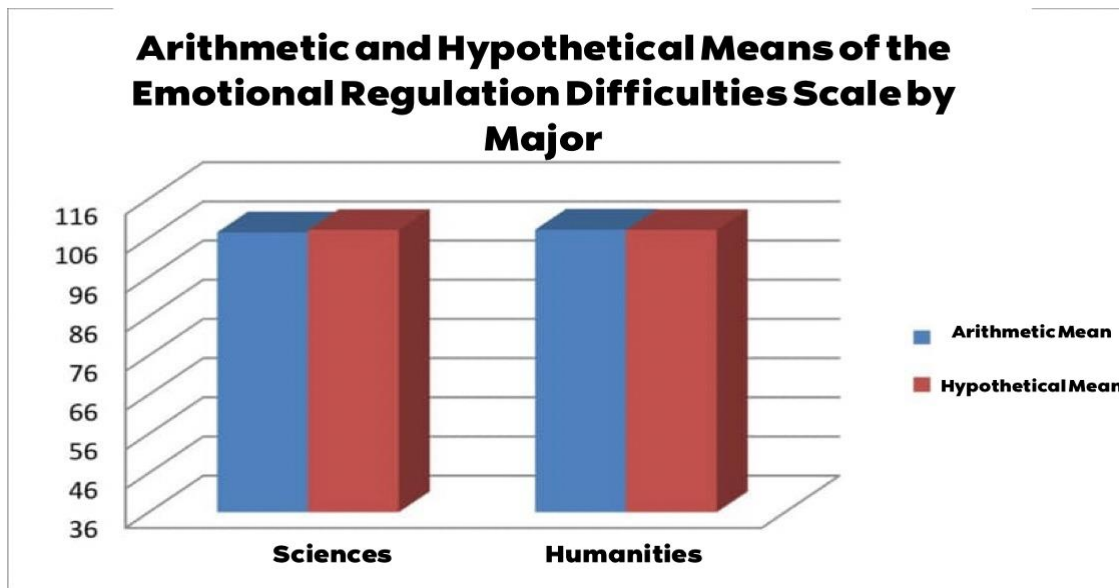
The mean and theoretical value of the Emotional Regulation Difficulties Scale by specialization.

After comparing the mean with the aforementioned standard, it can be concluded that the level of emotional regulation difficulties is medium, as it falls within the medium level criterion.

Interpretation of the Second Objective

The result aligns with Gratz and Roemer's (2004) theory, which emphasizes that emotional regulation involves awareness and understanding of emotions, accepting them, controlling impulsive behaviors, and acting according to desired goals when experiencing negative emotions. It also includes the flexible use of appropriate emotional regulation strategies to modify emotional responses and achieve personal goals and situational demands.

This result is consistent with studies by Atta Allah (2019), Mohamed (2020), and Mohammadi et al. (2020), but diverges from studies by Basyuni (2022) and Ser Tipas et al. (2020). The researcher considers this outcome logical and realistic, as students facing difficulties in emotional regulation may struggle to express their emotions correctly and handle negative feelings appropriately. This can negatively impact their academic performance and social relationships. Therefore, the researcher suggests that these students need additional support and guidance to enhance their emotional management skills effectively. They can be seen as opportunities for personal development and growth, provided they receive proper guidance and support to overcome their emotional regulation difficulties. With adequate support and guidance, students can improve their emotional management abilities more efficiently, enhancing their academic performance and building positive relationships with others.

CONCLUSIONS:

The study reveals that university students experience moderate emotional regulation difficulties. Emotional regulation is crucial in university life as it helps manage stress and psychological pressure resulting from academic and daily life demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the researcher recommends the following:

Universities should focus their efforts on providing psychological support services, such as counseling and academic guidance, for students facing difficulties in this area to enhance their mental capabilities and resilience in coping with academic pressures.

Universities can organize educational events to provide comprehensive information on improving mental readiness and equipping students with strategies and tools necessary for handling emotional and psychological challenges during their academic journey.

Universities should enhance communication and collaboration among students by organizing various social and academic events that foster a sense of belonging and mutual support.

Academic institutions should provide modern technology and educational resources to help students develop their mental skills and enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Official institutions and universities should promote mental and physical health culture by providing necessary information and support to students, in collaboration with government bodies and non-governmental organizations, to enhance mental readiness and emotional regulation through awareness programs and diverse services that contribute to improving their mental and emotional health.

Fourth: Suggestions:

To complement the current research and further develop it, the researcher proposes the following:

Conduct a study examining the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and problem-solving skills among university students.

Conduct a study exploring the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and self-confidence among university students.

Conduct a study investigating the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and self-motivation among university students.

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