

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG REFUGEES IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>This study examined emotional intelligence and psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria. The study specifically determined emotional intelligence significantly influenced psychological distress and whether psychological distress differed between male and female refugees. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The study population comprised 6,536 Cameroonian refugees residing at Ikyogen Refugee Settlement, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. Using Yamane's formula, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined, while convenient sampling was used for participant selection. Data were collected using the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). Multiple linear regression was used to test the influence of emotional intelligence on psychological distress, while an independent-samples t-test was used to examine gender differences. The findings showed that emotional intelligence did not significantly influence psychological distress among refugees, $R = .125$, $R^2 = .016$, $F(5, 378) = 1.202$, $p > .05$, accounting for only 1.6% of the variance. However, utilization of emotions made a significant negative contribution to psychological distress. Furthermore, no significant gender difference in psychological distress was found, $t(382) = -1.401$, $p > .05$. The study concludes that emotional intelligence and gender alone may not adequately explain psychological distress among refugees. Contextual factors associated with displacement may play a more important role. The study recommends comprehensive psychosocial interventions that address the broader social and environmental challenges experienced by refugees.</i> Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Distress.
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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited. Citation: Veronica Y. Genda; Elvis O. Ihaji; Anyalewe A. Ajonye. (2026). Emotional intelligence and psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(9), 158-164.	

Background to the Study

Psychological distress refers to a state of psychological suffering associated with symptoms such as stress, anxiety, depression, worry, and difficulties in everyday functioning. It represents a broad range of psychological symptoms that may occur when individuals are unable to adequately cope with demanding or threatening circumstances (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002; Horwitz, 2007). Refugees may be particularly vulnerable to psychological distress because forced displacement often exposes them to circumstances that can exceed their capacity to cope effectively. Refugees frequently experience the loss of homes, communities, occupations, family relationships, and familiar environments. They may also encounter poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, discrimination, insecurity, and limited access to essential services. These

circumstances may increase psychological distress and contribute to symptoms of anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties, persistent worry, fatigue, and impaired daily functioning (Walther et al., 2020; Nickerson et al., 2021). Exposure to violence, torture, life-threatening situations, injuries, and the death or disappearance of loved ones may further increase refugees' vulnerability to psychological distress.

The global refugee situation demonstrates the magnitude of this concern. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024), approximately 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2024. Research has reported substantial levels of psychological distress among displaced populations, including symptoms associated with depression, anxiety,

and post-traumatic stress (Blackmore et al., 2020). Africa also hosts a substantial refugee population, with displaced persons experiencing considerable mental health challenges (Andsaleh et al., 2024).

Nigeria hosts refugees from neighbouring countries, including Cameroon. The conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon has resulted in the displacement of thousands of individuals into neighbouring countries, including Nigeria. Cameroon refugees in Benue State may consequently experience circumstances capable of increasing psychological distress. Exposure to displacement, violence, loss, uncertainty, and adjustment to a new environment may place considerable psychological demands on refugees (Dolezal et al., 2022). One psychological characteristic that may be relevant to psychological distress is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Individuals with higher emotional intelligence may be better able to recognise and regulate their psychological responses to stressful circumstances. These abilities may be particularly important for refugees facing prolonged and demanding experiences.

Despite these findings, limited research has specifically examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria. Therefore, this study seeks to examine emotional intelligence and psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Psychological distress is a significant concern among refugees because forced displacement may expose individuals to experiences that challenge psychological functioning. Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria may experience displacement, loss of familiar environments, disrupted relationships, insecurity, and uncertainty, which may increase vulnerability to psychological distress. Such distress may manifest through anxiety, persistent worry, sleep difficulties, cognitive difficulties, fatigue, and impaired daily functioning (Walther et al., 2020; Nickerson et al., 2021). Refugees exposed to traumatic experiences may therefore be particularly vulnerable to psychological difficulties (Blackmore et al., 2020).

Emotional intelligence is a psychological variable that could be important to the experience of psychological distress. This involves the capacity of a person to recognise, interpret, utilise correctly, and control emotional emotions in oneself and others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). People with high emotional intelligence may be better able to control emotional responses in stressful or demanding

situations, whereas deficits in emotional awareness and regulation could make one more vulnerable to psychological suffering. Previous research has demonstrated relationships between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, for example, Edara (2021) observed an association between emotional intelligence and psychological distress, and Moeller et al. (2020) found links between emotional intelligence and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. However, there is scanty data on the relationship between Cameroonian refugees living in Benue State, Nigeria. So, this study explored the association between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress among Refugees in Benue State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the influence of emotional intelligence on Psychological Distress among refugees in Benue States- Nigeria
2. Determine the differences in psychological distress between male and female refugees in Benue State - Nigeria.

Hypotheses

The study is denoted with the following hypotheses

1. There will be a significant influence of emotional intelligence on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State Nigeria.
2. There will be significant gender differences in psychological distress among refugees in Benue State Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is a condition of mental pains associated with stressors and demands in everyday life that are difficult to deal with (Jha and Lokesh, 2021). It encompasses negative mental health states like anxiety and depression evident in self-depreciation irritability, and social disengagement, which is in response to specific stressors or demand, resulting in either permanent or temporal harm (Ridner, 2004).

Psychological distress is passive and transient, it is associated with distinct stressors with symptoms of sleeplessness, headache, constipation, disturbance in sleep and eating pattern, diarrhea, chronic pain, frequent

emotional upset, tiredness, forgetfulness, and memory problems, loss of interest in sex, typically, symptoms become reduced when stressors are removed or survivors become adaptive to stressors (Horwitz, 2004).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional competence as a learned capability) emphasised that emotional intelligence is witnessed when a person shows the competencies that embodies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skill at appropriate times and ways, and in sufficient frequency to be effective in situations (Goleman, 1998, Boyatzis, Goleman and HayIMCBers, 1999). Thus, emotional intelligence consists of five elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills, according to Golman (1995).

Hence, Emotional intelligence can be conveniently defined as the ability to recognise one's own emotions and the emotions of others and to differentiate and label each emotion accurately, this also includes the application of emotional information to direct ones' thoughts and behaviour, as well as the behaviour of others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Thus, Emotional Intelligence can be defined as the ability of individuals to recognise their emotional states which are regarded significant indications of healthy or sick mental functioning (Downey et al, 2008).

Theoretical Review: Diathesis-Stress Theory

The present study is anchored on the Diathesis-Stress Theory, proposed by Paul Meehl in 1962. The theory explains psychological difficulties as resulting from the interaction between an individual's pre-existing vulnerability (diathesis) and stressful life experiences. According to the theory, psychological distress may occur when environmental stress exceeds an individual's capacity to cope, particularly when underlying vulnerabilities are present (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). The diathesis may involve biological, psychological, cognitive, or personality-related characteristics that influence how an individual responds to stressful circumstances. In the context of the present study, emotional intelligence represents an important psychological characteristic that may influence how refugees respond to stressful experiences associated with displacement. Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Refugees with higher emotional intelligence may be better able to recognise their emotional reactions to stressful experiences and regulate these reactions effectively. Consequently, they may be less vulnerable to psychological distress.

Conversely, refugees with lower emotional intelligence may experience greater difficulty understanding and

regulating their emotional responses to stressful circumstances. Such difficulties may increase vulnerability to psychological distress when individuals encounter prolonged or intense stress. This perspective is consistent with findings that emotional intelligence is associated with psychological distress and related psychological outcomes (Edara, 2021; Moeller et al., 2020). The Diathesis-Stress Theory is therefore relevant to this study because refugee experiences can constitute significant sources of stress, while emotional intelligence may influence individual responses to these experiences.

The Diathesis-Stress Theory is relevant to the present study because refugees experience multiple stressors associated with forced displacement, including violence, loss, insecurity, disrupted relationships, economic hardship, and uncertainty about the future. These stressors may increase vulnerability to psychological distress. The theory proposes that individual differences influence how people respond to stressful experiences. In this study, emotional intelligence represents a psychological characteristic that may influence refugees' responses to displacement-related stress. Refugees with higher emotional intelligence may be better able to perceive, understand, utilize, and regulate their emotions, thereby managing stressful experiences more effectively. Conversely, lower emotional intelligence may increase vulnerability to psychological distress. The theory also supports examining gender differences, as male and female refugees may experience and respond to displacement-related stress differently. Thus, the theory provides a framework for examining emotional intelligence and gender as factors potentially associated with psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria.

Methods

Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to obtain data from a sample of refugees at Ikyogen Refugee Settlement, Kwande LGA, Benue State, during the 2024/2025 session.

Population

The study was conducted among Cameroonian refugees residing in the Ikyogen Refugee Settlement, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. Ikyogen is located approximately 35 km east of Adikpo. In 2019, the Benue State Government, through the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), allocated part of the former Ikyogen Cattle Ranch for the settlement of Cameroonian refugees, including some relocated from Anyake. The settlement comprises 12 communities. The study population comprised 6,536 Cameroonian refugees,

based on SEMA and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) records (2024).

Sampling Technique

A convenient sampling technique was adopted and used in this study for the selection of respondents for this study from Ikyogen refugees' settlement.

Sample Size Determination

Sample size was determined using Yamena (1967) formula for sample selection,

hence:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2),$$

Where:

n = Sample size

N = Total population size

e = Significance level of precision = 0.05

N = Total population

Total Population of refugees at Ikyogen = 6536

$$n = 6536 / (1 + 6536 (0.05)^2)$$

$$n = 6536 / (1 + 6536 (0.0025))$$

$$n = 6536 / (1 + 16.34)$$

$$n = 6536 / (17.34)$$

$$n = 6536 / 17.34$$

$$n = 6536 / 17$$

$$n = 384$$

Sample size of refugee respondent used for the study = 384

Instruments

Data were collected using two instruments: the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). These instrument were contain in three sections (section A-C) Section A collected demographic data.

Section B consisted of the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10) developed by Davies, Lane, Devonport and Scott (2010) as a shorter version of the 33-item Emotional Intelligence Scale published by Schutte et al. (1998) based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) model of emotional intelligence. The BEIS-10 is a self-report scale with 10 items and five dimensions: Appraisal of Own Emotions, Appraisal of Others' Emotions, Regulation of Own Emotions, Regulation of Others' Emotions, and Utilisation of Emotions. Responses were

graded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. The scale has exhibited acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported between .74 and .91 for the overall scale; confirmatory factor studies provide evidence for a five-factor structure (Davies et al., 2010; Balakrishnan & Saklofske, 2015). The total score is the sum of all 10 elements and spans from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating better self-perceived emotional intelligence. Each subscale includes two items and the score ranges from 2 to 10: Appraisal of Own Emotions (items 1–2), Appraisal of Others' Emotions (items 3–4), Regulation of Own Emotions (items 5–6), Regulation of Others' Emotions (items 7–8), and Utilisation of Emotions (items 9–10). Scores at or below the 5th percentile are considered low, 6th–24th percentile below average, 25th–75th percentile average, 76th–94th percentile above average, and 95th percentile and above strong emotional intelligence.

Section C included the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) by Kessler and Mroczek. The 10-item scale assesses non-specific psychological distress, typically related to anxiety and depressive symptoms, experienced in the past four weeks. Responses are scored on a scale of 1 = None of the time to 5 = All the time. All things are rated immediately and tallied to a total score of 10-50. Higher ratings reflect higher psychological anguish. Scores of 10-15 are considered low or minimal distress, 16-21 moderate distress, 22-29 high distress, and 30-50 very high discomfort. The K10 shows strong internal consistency and construct validity and a clear unidimensional structure when used to assess non-specific psychological discomfort.

Data Analysis

Data collected was analyzed using inferential statistics. Inferential statistics used for the test of hypotheses one were tested using multiple regression analysis, due to the fact that the independent variable is dimensional, on the other hand hypothesis two was tested using an independent t-test.

Results

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One: This hypothesis stated that, there will be a significant influence of emotional intelligence on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State. The hypothesis was tested using Multiple Linear Regression and result is presented in Table 1

Table 1: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Showing Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Psychological Distress among Refugees in Benue State.

DV	Predictors	R	R ²	df	F	P	β	t	p
Psychological Distress	Constant	.125	.016	5,378	1.202	.308		34.549	.308
	ApprOwnEmo						.018	.292	.771
	ApprOthersEmo						-.597	7.999	.000
	RegOwnEmo						-.433	-4.282	.000
	RegOthersEmo								
	UtiOfEmo								

Result of Multiple Linear Regression in Table 1 show that, emotional intelligence had no significant influence on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State [$R=.125$, $R^2=.016$, $F(5,378)=1.202$, $p>.05$]. This suggests that, emotional intelligence has no significant influence on psychological distress among the refugees. The finding also revealed that, emotional intelligence explained 1.6% of the variance observed in psychological distress among the refugees. This indicates that, emotional intelligence can mitigate 1.6% of psychological distress among refugees in Benue State. Based on this finding, hypothesis three was not confirmed.

Findings on the independent contributions of the dimensions of emotional intelligence to psychological

distress indicates that, only utilization of emotions made a significant negative contribution ($\beta=-.119$, $t=-2.065$, $p<.05$), while appraisal of own emotions ($\beta=-.018$, $t=.292$, $p>.05$), appraisal of others emotions ($\beta=.070$, $t=1.289$, $p>.05$), regulation of own emotions ($\beta=.029$, $t=.496$, $p>.05$), and regulation of others emotions ($\beta=-.010$, $t=-.191$, $p>.05$) made no significant contribution to psychological distress among the refugees.

Hypothesis Two: This hypothesis stated that, there will be a significant gender difference in psychological distress among refugees in Benue State. The hypothesis was tested using Independent Samples t-test and result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Independent Samples t-test showing Gender Difference in Psychological Distress among Refugees in Benue State

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Male	137	37.503	2.538	382	-1.401	.244
Female	247	37.862	2.326			

Result of Independent Samples t-test in Table 2 showed that, there was no significant gender difference in psychological distress among refugees in Benue State [$t(382)=-1.401$, $p>.05$]. The result is insignificant because there was no significant difference between the Mean scores of males ($M=37.503$) and that of females ($M=37.862$). This suggests that, being male or female is not linked to psychological distress among refugees in Benue State. Based on this result, hypothesis five was not confirmed.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding showed that emotional intelligence did not significantly influence psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, with emotional intelligence explaining only 1.6% of the variance in psychological distress, $R=.125$, $R^2=.016$, $F(5,378)=1.202$, $p>.05$. However, utilization of emotions made a significant negative contribution to psychological distress ($\beta=-.119$, $p<.05$), while appraisal of own emotions, appraisal of

others' emotions, regulation of own emotions, and regulation of others' emotions did not make significant contributions. This finding does not agree with Zhang et al. (2016), who found that emotional intelligence was negatively associated with psychological distress and buffered the effects of negative life events among Chinese nursing students. It also differs from Campbell and Ntobedzi (2007), who reported that higher emotional intelligence was associated with adaptive coping strategies and lower psychological distress. Similarly, Zhylin et al. (2024) found that individuals with lower emotional intelligence were more likely to experience psychological trauma and rely on less adaptive coping strategies. Karim (2009) also reported a relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress, particularly through negative affect. The present finding may, however, be understood in the context of the refugees' experiences. The significant contribution of utilization of emotions suggests that the ability to use emotions constructively in thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making may help reduce

psychological distress. Nevertheless, the overall non-significant influence indicates that emotional intelligence alone may not be sufficient to substantially account for psychological distress among the refugees. This finding is partly consistent with Uzodinma, et al. (2024), who found that emotional intelligence did not significantly predict religious coping among Nigerian IDPs. The finding also suggests that the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress may differ according to population and context.

The second finding revealed that there was no significant gender difference in psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, $t(382) = -1.401, p > .05$. Although females recorded a slightly higher mean psychological distress score ($M = 37.862$) than males ($M = 37.503$), the difference was not statistically significant. This finding does not agree with Khamis (2025), Matud, Bethencourt, and Ibanez (2024), Jaralla and Baxter (2019), and Al-Krenawi and Bell (2023), who reported higher psychological distress among female refugees or women generally. It also differs from Vromas and Sagar (2020), who reported substantial psychological distress among refugee women at risk after resettlement. However, the present finding is understandable because both male and female refugees in the current setting may be exposed to similar displacement-related circumstances, which could result in comparable levels of psychological distress. Thus, the present study suggests that gender alone may not sufficiently explain differences in psychological distress among refugees in Benue State.

Conclusion

The study concludes that emotional intelligence did not significantly influence psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, explaining only 1.6% of its variance. However, utilization of emotions significantly reduced psychological distress. There was also no significant gender difference in psychological distress, although females recorded a slightly higher mean score than males. Overall, psychological distress among refugees may be more strongly associated with displacement-related factors such as insecurity, loss, economic hardship, and uncertainty than with emotional intelligence or gender. Therefore, interventions should focus on broader psychosocial and environmental support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government agencies, humanitarian organisations, and relevant stakeholders should provide accessible psychological counselling and psychosocial support services at Ikyogen Refugee

Settlement to help refugees manage distress associated with displacement, loss, uncertainty, and adjustment.

2. Since no significant gender difference was found in psychological distress, psychological support programmes should be accessible to both male and female refugees. However, service providers should remain sensitive to gender-specific experiences and individual needs rather than assuming that distress is determined by gender.
3. Humanitarian agencies and government authorities should address factors that may contribute to psychological distress, including inadequate housing, unemployment, food insecurity, limited healthcare, insecurity, and social isolation. Improving refugees' living conditions may contribute to better psychological wellbeing.
4. Mental health professionals and humanitarian workers should conduct periodic screening for psychological distress among refugees and establish appropriate referral systems for individuals experiencing severe or persistent symptoms. Early identification and intervention may prevent psychological difficulties from becoming more severe.

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