

BETWEEN STRESS AND STRENGTH: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING CONTRIBUTORS AMONG MILITARY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN PAKISTAN

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KEYWORDS

Wellbeing, Law enforcement Officers, Resilience, Coping, Emotional Intelligence

CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Aziz, T., & Naz, I. (2026). Between stress and strength: a thematic analysis of psychological wellbeing contributors among military and law enforcement officers in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(3), 204-213.

ABSTRACT

Wellbeing of military and law enforcement officers is fundamental for combat effectiveness, operational objectivity, and career longevity, particularly in the circumstances of Pakistan, where there are hostile neighboring countries, cross-border terrorism, and internal political instability. The purpose and research question in this research was to explore psychological contributors of wellbeing in military and law enforcement officers in Pakistan. This research was qualitative in nature, and data were collected via semi-structured interviews till data saturation from a sample of $N = 30$ military, police, rangers and prison department officers serving in Pakistan approached via snowball and convenient purposive sampling. Data were analyzed through a thematic analysis approach using NVIVO 11, and under psychological contributors, three themes emerged: "Resilience: an adaptive and ongoing process emerging through exposure," "Emotional intelligence: a maintenance mechanism for relationships," and "coping: a multi-layered phenomenon for managing emotional overload". Military and law enforcement officers often carry very imperative responsibility of internal and external security of country at times of peace and war. Their ability to withstand resiliently against detriments, an efficacious ability to manage and understand emotional patterns of men under command, and a capability to cope against the institutional and generalized obstacles not only upheld their wellbeing, but also minimized the chances of developing the psychological ailments.

I. INTRODUCTION

Significance of Wellbeing among Military and Law Enforcement Officers

The wellbeing of military and law enforcement officers is particularly crucial in light of Pakistan's security situation, geographic context, and socioeconomic challenges (Khan, 2023). In a high-stress environment, these officers combat cross-border threats, terrorism, organized crime, and insurgencies (Sohail & Ahmad, 2021). The continuous threat of militancy calls for exceptional focus, emotional stability, and the ability to act swiftly under pressure, especially in regions like Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and border areas (Baloch, 2024). Geographic challenges, such as deployments in hostile environments like the icy heights of Siachen, the rocky terrain of the tribal areas, and areas that are vulnerable to earthquakes or flooding, further strain their physical and mental well-being (Ein et al., 2024). Such demanding assignments often lead to social isolation in addition to increasing the risk of mental health issues

like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD (Alizadehet al., 2023). Another layer of complexity is introduced by Pakistan's socioeconomic situation (Abbas, Xu, & Sun, 2022). Limited resources and budgetary constraints often lead to inadequate rehabilitation programs, poor mental health support, and inadequate healthcare facilities for officers and their families (Burdett et al., 2021). Furthermore, financial compensation is often inadequate, particularly for law enforcement officers, which exacerbates the stress (Masudi & Mustafa, 2023). Social pressure, long deployments that keep them away from their families, and a lack of public recognition for their sacrifices all contribute to these challenges (Moradi et al., 2021). Despite these obstacles, the officers are dedicated to maintaining national security. Taking care of their well-being is vital not only for their personal health but also for maintaining morale, operational efficacy, and the stability as well as security of Pakistan overall (Abbas, 2016).

Consequently, the wellbeing of military personnel, particularly law enforcement officers, is a key factor in operational effectiveness, career longevity, and personal fulfillment (Baebenroth, 2023). These individuals operate in high-stress environments that call for psychological toughness, social adaptability, and organizational support (Flood & Kegaan, 2022; Jackman et al., 2020; Janssens et al., 2021; Taylor, 2022). Recognizing the significance of psychological factors this study has intended to look which psychological factors foster well-being of law enforcement officers in Pakistan. Various psychological researchers have focused on identification of distressing factors and a few however have managed to target wellbeing studies in military, paramilitary and law enforcement personnel inculcating several psychological, social and organizational factors. Researches have proved that psychological factors such as resilience is linked with lower stress perception, lower mental distress, job satisfaction and better performance and wellbeing (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021; Sefidan et al., 2021). Adekanmbi et al., (2022) found that resilience and risk taking propensity were significant contributors of psychological wellbeing in Nigerian Police Sample. Likewise, emotional intelligence and psychological wellbeing are interlinked (Akinga et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2025). Awan (2023) reported maladaptive emotional regulation was negatively linked with psychological wellbeing. Adaptive emotional regulation was positively linked with psychological wellbeing in military personnel similarly Approach oriented coping is linked with psychological wellbeing (Negi & Javed, 2022; Ryu et al., 2020; Sohail & Ahmad, 2021) coping is also linked with psychological adjustment (Fakorede et al., 2025).

Aim and Research Question

Despite the profound impact of these psychological factors on military and law enforcement officers' wellbeing, this area remains largely underexplored in existing research, particularly within the Pakistani context (Batool & Virk, 2022). The dominant focus of scholarly and policy-oriented studies has been on operational effectiveness, counterterrorism strategies, and crime control mechanisms, with limited attention paid to the wellbeing of the personnel executing these responsibilities (Yi & Afzani, 2025). Furthermore, the entrenched institutional culture within law enforcement agencies often discourages open discourse on mental health and wellbeing, perpetuating a lack of empirical inquiry into these critical areas (Khan, 2023). This study aims to bridge this research gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the psychological determinants of wellbeing among military and law enforcement officers in Pakistan. The findings will offer valuable insights for policymakers, institutional leadership, and mental health practitioners, enabling the development of targeted interventions to enhance officers' internal strengths that ultimately increase operational effectiveness and wellbeing of the officers.

II. METHOD

Research Design

This existing study was intended to answer research queries that resides within paradigm of qualitative research. Qualitative research methodology allows participants the liberty to explicate their thoughts and retort to problems in their own perspective and words (Barker et al., 2005) and captures the opinion of particular groups (Carroll & Rothe, 2010). Qualitative research methodology has been reckoned useful in ascertaining various responses that might result from a person's experience (Alderfer & Sood, 2016) and is linked with the approach in which individuals make sense of their experiences and world (Willig, 2019). Additionally, qualitative research complement the spirit of counselling psychology where individuals' subjectivity is the main concern (Frost, 2021).

Participants

The participants of this study were $N = 30$ law enforcement officers (Age 26 to 42) from military, police, rangers and prison departments from Pakistan ($M_{age} = 33$ years, $SD = 7.14$). The prescribed number of participants is deliberated as a decent sample size while adopting thematic analysis and data collection was continued till data saturation (Braun & Clark, 2022). Participants were contacted through official channels of their departmental headquarters. However, data were collected as per their convenience through face to face interviews or through WhatsApp calling after obtaining written informed consent. Snowballing sampling strategy was used to bring in interest in the research and later a purposive sampling was espoused to ensure variety in participants' demographics. Table 1 illustrates the vital demographic features of sample.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 30)

Characteristics	n	%	Characteristics	n	%
Gender			Regions		
Male	23	76.66	Punjab	15	50
Female	7	23.33	Sindh	4	13.33
Employment Department			KP and Baluchistan	7	23.34
Armed Forces	12	40	Federal Area	4	13.33
Police	7	23.33	Education		
Rangers	4	13.33	Bachelors	14	46.67
Prison Dep	7	23.33	Graduation	12	40
Service Experience			Post Graduate	4	13.33
10 to 20 Years	17	56.66	Religion		
More than 20 Years	13	43.33	Islam	26	86.66
			Any Other	4	13.33
			Age M (SD)	33 (7.14)	

Procedure

Approval of the research was acquired from Departmental Research Review Committee (DRRC), and Advance Studies and Research Board (ASRB) of University of Gujrat. This research was conducted in compliance with ethical standards and code of conduct of APA and institutional research board. Ethical authorization was obtained from respective departmental headquarters and permission to collect data was ascertained from director department of psychology, University of Gujrat. Participants were contacted through official channels of their departmental headquarters, prior data collection written informed consent was taken from all participants. The data were collected between February 2025 to September 2025 hence perspectives before and after India-Pakistan conflict of May 25 were included. An interview protocol for semi-structured was prepared and was analyzed and reviewed by associate research member with probes; (e.g., "What is wellbeing according to you and how you can understand it when the word wellbeing is flashed before you?", "What are major domains that contribute most important portion in wellbeing?", "What individual/ psychological factors maintain your wellbeing under odds and evens?"); was used to sightsee the participant's familiarity with wellbeing and its maintenance. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into verbatim which were duly reviewed by participants and research members. Interviews were conducted using the Urdu and English languages and vacillated from 40 to 65 minutes long. The initial data analysis was conducted in English language and a table of summary table carrying initial themes was created.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted through NVIVO-11 which was used for coding and data organization of transcripts of qualitative data. Thematic analysis was carried out as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2019), as best fitting method when exploring an under-researched area, or if the views of participants that are not known in research process. Braun and Clark (2023) demarcated six interactive steps of thematic analysis that involve data familiarization, initial coding, Codes sorting, refining themes and sub themes, naming themes and finally writing the analysis. Therefore, the first author read transcripts of interviews and prepared the initial coding. Semantic approach was employed for initial coding, which engrossed on the explicit text meanings. By employing this approach,

comments by participants were utilized as a base for identification of initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These initial themes were later clustered together to form major themes based on an inductive scheme. This step was undertaken to ensure that the theme authentically reflected the respondent's own viewpoint, free from any influence of prior theoretical frameworks or the researcher's preconceived notions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Identified themes designated the respondent's initial perception of psychological factors contributing in wellbeing of law enforcement officers. The result section contains relevant quotations in italics, which were translated into English. Subsequently from available summary an iterative process was carried out by the research members to attain higher order mutually agreed themes. Major themes were psychological factors, social factors and organizational factors and later sub themes were grouped and separated by using the Cohen's Kappa analysis that estimates degree of agreement amongst dichotomous scores, ranging from -1.0 least agreement to +1.0 perfect agreement (Li, Gao, & Yu, 2023). The inter-rater reliability was statistically significant with score of .74 which indicated a good reliability (Wood, 2007).

III. RESULTS

Personal factors: Psychological contributors of wellbeing

Thematic analysis resulted in categorization of data at three distinct levels. The initial and most critical was individualistic level which we termed as psychological factors in this study. These factors shaped the strongest and most recurrently discussed domain during interviews. Internal strengths and coping capacities were consistently highlighted by the officers as indispensable for succeeding and surviving in their highly stressful circumstances of performing their routine duties. One of the officer who was appointed and commanding a unit in operation area at North Waziristan commented about psychological health importance,

If I can't keep my mind calm and clear, I'll definitely be unable to form right decision under odds. These are a person's internal strengths that helps him keep going and absorbing all pressure at worst times. Obviously mental toughness is as important as we keep ourselves physically fit in military. When I am calm and emotional balanced, I'll be better able to rise against challenging situation with my team.
(Military Officer, Age 41, participant 9)

The officers stressed on psychological/ individualistic factors as they act as buffer against stress, also they help them to adapt adversity as well as helps to boost emotional control. In combine tri-arch, all of these factors insert direct effect on personal stability and professional effectiveness. We extracted three core psychological contributors i.e. resilience, emotional intelligence and coping.

Figure I: Wellbeing model Comprising Associated Contributing Factors in Military and Law Enforcement Officers

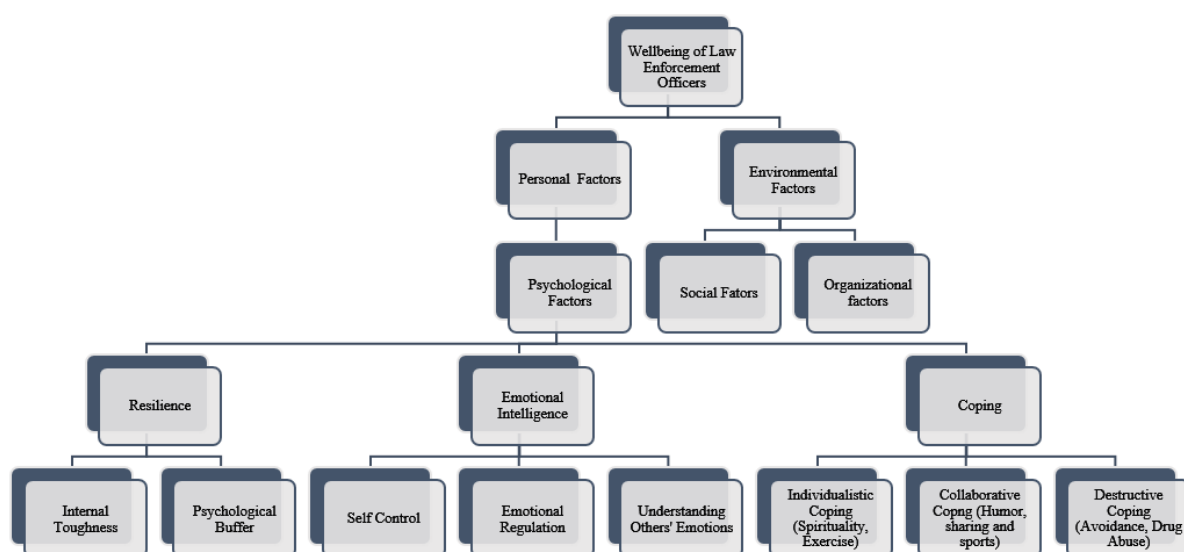


Figure 1 demonstrates a holistic view of wellbeing with contributing factors extracted after thematic analysis as demarcated by law enforcement officers.

Resilience: An Adaptive and Ongoing Process Emerging from Exposure, Meaning and Training

Resilience appeared as one of the sturdiest psychological determinants of wellbeing among officers. They emphasized that resilience is much more than an innate process rather this is built over the years with service dynamics and continues to shape up with every obstacle faced during service. Their insight manifested that it is the resilience that help them to rise when outcomes didn't go as they are expected. Rather absence of resilience may lead to failure in obtaining operational objectives even though the circumstances are not that much detrimental, while drastic changes can be absorbed when resilience is there and men under-command can be directed to move to and fro for fulfilling operation objectives. Resilience is cultivated through continuous exposure to trauma, moral strain, hardships and uncertainty. Resilience can't be tested when variability and obstructions are missing in someone's career. As a Police officer from interior Sindh spoke,

Every day there are some crisis in our duty. Every new exposure is unlike from the previous. Definitely the criminals carry more advance weapons than us, they have nothing to put on stake, but yes we have so much to lose (i.e. family and friends), but giving up is not the way. Actual strength and beauty of system is that when we utilize every new hurdle as learning opportunity and having the passion to protect society, we learn how to pick ourselves up again and fulfil assigned responsibilities rather than being carried away by these adversities.

(Police Officer, Age 39, participant 11)

An officer serving in Punjab rangers quoted

In start of career, even when operation is finished, the job of mind is not finished, mind remain alert for days particularly when risk is more evident, but yes it is the time and exposure which helps to learn how to minimize this pressure and enhance threshold to absorb such uncertain situations.

(Punjab Rangers Officer, Age 38, participant 14)

Functioning of resilience as a psychological buffer, empowering officers to avert emotional breakdown despite contact to chronic risk. Adversity was demarcated as part of professional identity by officers, which facilitated to transform harrowing experiences into untroublesome challenges. Many officers associated resilience with discipline, institutional culture, hierarchy, training and collective identity. Resilience here is not merely "toughness"; rather it is a multifarious assortment of habituation to stress, cognitive reframing, and a sense of purpose resulting from service. It also imitates the occupational expectancy that "breaking down" is intolerable, fortifying emotional suppression as a tactic of survival. Therefore, resilience becomes as a regulator of emotional patterns in situations where stigmatization is associated with vulnerability. As a female officer serving in Punjab prisons department quoted:

Yes, indeed it is quite tough being on duty among offenders who are generally deviant from societal norms, as well as a male dominating department rarely miss any opportunity of causing emotional distress or obstructions in duties. However, definitely it is the perseverance and dedication that allow me each day to get up and stand firmly against such hazards. (Punjab Prisons Department Female Officer, Age 35, participant 18)

Emotional Intelligence: A Maintenance Mechanism for Relationship stability, Authority and Control

Among psychological factors the second sub theme that emerged was emotional intelligence. Officers highlighted that being emotionally balanced and intelligent was quite compulsory particularly when exposed to situations like conflict driven encounters, tense public interactions or reactions, negotiation scenarios and leadership roles. As an officer from military commented;

Definitely if an officer cannot manage his anger or don't know the underpinning causes of unusual behavior from his team or a particular member, then even the issue may not seem that much distressing apparently, but can escalate the tension of larger magnitude. Same goes when we deal with public particularly in operations against terrorism. The general public maybe preoccupied with negative propaganda from social media. I can call several situations

where we on duty often face abuse by public or even harmful intents them, but in those situations emotional control plays fundamental role to control own self and understand others.

(Military Officer, Age 33, participant 4)

It was demarcated by the participants from almost all the departments that emotional intelligence serves to maintain interpersonal interaction and internal team dynamics. More empirically speaking emotional intelligence serves as a relational instrument which empowers the communication, moral, and trust with in team. Study participants linked it with leadership effectiveness, as EI doesn't only crucial for emotional regulation rather it is paramount for operational safety and objectives. A rangers' officer commented;

When I talk about good leader, he is the one who not merely focuses his comfort or wellbeing or personal gains, rather a sensible leader is who understands the stresses of his team and their mood in the meantime of employing instructions for the operation. Yes, I'll say that you don't only need to give orders but you must understand your subordinates and people.

(Rangers Officer, Age 39, participant 7)

In terms of wellbeing, emotional intelligence as a psychological strength seems as operated through regulatory mechanism which not only helps in relationship building but also aids to resolve the conflicts both at interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. Participants commented that officers who are emotionally intelligent can manage authority without escalation, helps to better navigate emotionally charged situations, and cultivate trust with in team. Emotional intelligence leads towards reduction in occupational stress, subtle and read cues in men under command, promote psychologically safer environment for work for team and boost morale. As the quote discussed above regarding anger illustrates that minor escalation due emotional mishandling can directly jeopardize objectivity and safety of operations. Officers considered that against emotional exhaustion, EI act as a buffer. In military and police where hierarchy of command is maintained, EI assists officers in maintenance of authority without resorting to aggression which directly linked with unit stability and wellbeing.

Coping: A Multi-layered Phenomenon for Managing Emotional Overload and Cumulative Stress

Moving forward in psychological/ individualistic factors the coping to stressors emerged as third important contributor of wellbeing among officers. Our analysis revealed that, although these coping strategies appeared diverse and few approaches were found to be beneficial keeping in view the psychological and cognitive perspective while some other were found vice versa. Participants expressed that we cannot put a full stop against stressors as these things go beyond their control due nature of duties and department they are employed in, but we can better manage and cope in best available way. Coping mechanism were found both on individualistic and collectivistic level. A military officer on operational duties in Baluchistan province of Pakistan quoted,

For me the way you counter to obstacles is important, as in our culture it is said sharing of sadness reduces its intensity and sharing of happiness enhances the magnitude of pleasure. I adopt same pattern and also I encourage me under command to follow same. Whenever we return from exhausting or life threatening situations where there is no family or friends I ask my troops to laugh and joke while sitting together in mess or accommodations. Similarly, I at the address them to develop their spiritual bonds to God.

(Military Officer, Age 37, participant 29)

Our analysis further revealed that coping for officers is more essential and indispensable because they have to bear institutional pressure and public scrutiny. Coping is a continuous process because once the pressure and stress find an opportunity to take over it enhance burnout, impaired decision making and emotional numbness. Participants responded it doesn't matter that either we are dealing with public hostility in police, managing violent inmates in prison setting, facing combat readiness in military or handling high risk operations in rangers, coping becomes the internal strength that safeguards emotional stability and reduces temperamental outbursts. The officers highlighted that coping only is not necessary rather it is the constructive coping which safeguards internal balances, as coping mechanism heads towards unhealthy activities it turns out to be drastically harmful for physical and mental wellbeing. As quoted by a police officer;

In our daily assignments during duties, stress is not occasional, it is a daily companion. But yes the important thing is the mechanism that stops the internalizing of pressure in mind. Once coping fails this stress act as two-way destructor, affecting our peace, family life and eventually returns to work as well. But one thing is important and may not be mixed it is the good coping that matters and act as armor to mind and body, bad coping such as drugs and avoidance can severely damage the relation with family, profession and with the person's wellness itself. I can call many of my subordinates who try to perform their religious practices as compensatory approach.

(Police Officer, Age 34, participant 27)

Our analysis highlighted that coping functions as critical buffer against breakdown. With individual personality differences, coping strategies also differ. Some people prefer moving towards problem solving patterns and generating strong connections with others. While some may engage themselves towards emotion focused or individual practices, like praying and humor or exercising. However, avoidance and isolation as well as unhealthy coping like use of drugs can increase the chances developing of psychological disturbances and job burnout and may interrupt someone's interpersonal relationships as well as familial affairs.

IV. DISCUSSION

This research delivers insight into experiences of law enforcement officers related to significance of psychological factors in their wellbeing, as maintaining mental health is quite challenging for officers serving in Pakistan who deal with national security as well as law and order situation. The findings highlighted the centrality of psychological resources. The officers who were part of this research highlighted the value of resilience that seem to be the biggest defense when they encounter a situation which is highly unpredictable and sensitive. Resilience being the core component may carry some part from inheritance but it is largely shaped by culture and institutionally with service exposure and maturity (Chbeir & Carrion, 2023). Resilience broadly act as internal strength for optimal performance, particularly where implicitly or explicitly emotional breakdown is culturally sanctioned. The resilience is widely recognized as a core success component by researchers and practitioners for military and paramilitary organizations (McInerney et al., 2024). This also aligns with contemporary resilience frameworks that conceptualize resilience as adaptive functioning overtime rather than innate hardiness (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017).

In association with resilience, the emotional intelligence also appeared as a critical psychological dynamism and that not only help the officers to maintain self-control, or self-regulation at hard times, but it is even more important when dealing with colleagues and under command when they become emotionally touchy, seem drained and exhausted, as well as conflict arises with in teams. Poor emotional handling and anger may escalate the conflict and make the situation even worse (Zohuri & Dalili, 2023). In fact, emotional intelligence seems a soft skill for survival competence and operational efficacy in volatile environments. The findings of the research are aligned with previous empirical findings and literature that manifest that emotional intelligence can improve decision making, educe burnout and can enhance leadership outcomes (Kant & Shanker, 2021; Khalisah, 2023; Saha et al., 2023; Saxena, 2025). Officers demarcated that emotional intelligence operates at the intersection of public safety and psychological wellbeing. Emotional intelligence has a dual role particularly when dealing with hostile elements as not only managing own emotions and anger but also not falling to emotional trap by criminals and anti-state elements.

The inputs by officers highlighted coping strategies, as requisite for dealing cumulative stress and emotional exhaustion. Rather than adopting one single approach the patterns appeared as a multi model coping repertoire, that comprise of both individualistic and collective efforts. This approach was in-line with previous models and theories on coping and stress appraisal (Wolf & Fisher, 2023). Interestingly, as though in Pakistani culture, that generally officers rarely move towards spiritual practices and religion. However, spiritual coping was evident from analysis and was truly on template of society i.e. faith based practices, moral assurance and emotional containment. As discussed in result section, instead of relying solely on the individual coping, the utility of collectivistic coping was also evident amongst officers, as they share common job stresses. Nevertheless, these are the personality trait that defines one's coping mechanism as proved by previous literature (Schmitz & Schmitz, 2022). We argue in light of

previous literature that excessive use of avoidance coping or emotional detachment can lead to long term risks of developing emotional fragility or psychological ailment (Squires et al., 2021).

Implications for Theory, Practice and Policy

The outcomes of this research propose that in sensitive setting i.e. law enforcement the intervention programs must move to target core psychological competences rather than generic stress management. The training institutions of the law enforcement departments must embed culturally grounded coping, emotional intelligence development and resilience boost programs. The institutions need to discourage and move beyond traditional methods i.e. emotional suppression rather in organizational framework they must advocate and promote adaptive emotional processing. In terms of theory this study advocates to adopt integrated wellbeing models where psychological resources are designated at the top level. In context of Pakistan, where formal psychological services are limited but operational stress is high, the strengthening psychological capabilities may offer culturally congruent and impactful pathways for enhancing wellbeing of the officers.

V.CONCLUSION

This research critically advocates that officers perceive psychological factors as more reliable and controllable as compared to social and organizational resources. The officers consistently mounted wellbeing as 'controlling own mind' highlighting that psychological capability determines how efficaciously external support can be utilized. The traditional culture of Pakistan as being a developing country, it is least expected from the organization that their policy development will consider wellbeing of employees. So, in such scenario the importance psychological resources to overcome hazards become even decisive.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The authors received no funding from any organization.

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