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UNVEILING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AMONG WAR VICTIMS IN PAKISTAN: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to explore the lived experiences of psychological trauma among war victims in Pakistan. A sample of 12 participants (6 males and 6 females), aged 25-35 (*M = 27.8, SD = 2.16*), was recruited from the ex-FATA regions of Pakistan through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized to analyse the lived experiences of psychological trauma. The results showed that war-related traumatic experiences of participants persisted even when they were not directly exposed to violence. They continued to impact their psychological and emotional well-being. Participants were living under persistent fear and experienced hypervigilance to potential danger, which could carry traumatic experiences back into the present. Moreover, they endured grief and emotional distress as an outcome of bereavement and loss of loved ones and belongings due to war and displacement. After the traumatic experiences, people suffered from anxiety, anger, frustration, depression, and psychological disruption, as well as difficulties in starting their routine life over. Achieving a sense of normality even after the initial trauma was also difficult for the individuals who experienced war atrocities. Therefore, the results depict that psychological trauma was experienced not merely as a reaction to a past event but as a continuous psychological experience that formed their perceptions of safety, emotional functioning, and routine life. The research emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive trauma-focused interventions for war-affected populations in Pakistan.

I. INTRODUCTION

Psychological trauma caused by conflict and displacement may have adverse consequences on the mental health and overall well-being of those who are affected by the conflict (Almoshmosh, 2016). The mental health disorders that are most common among the displaced populations have been classified as major depressive disorder, psychological distress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Guajardo et al., 2016). In Pakistan, areas more affected by war and conflict such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the formerly administered Tribal Areas (ex-FATA) have experienced the prolonged outcomes of war (Manzoor et al., 2026). In regions of conflict, an estimated 15-18% of the adult population suffers from mental health issues (Iqbal et al., 2025). According to research by Khan et al. (2024) in regions like Swat and North Waziristan, poor mental health among people not only results from direct

experiences of traumatic events and atrocities of war but also from post-conflict challenges such as poverty and substandard living environment. Individuals in ex-FATA and Balochistan experienced security-related activities, drone attacks, bombings, conflicts, and recurrent displacement for an extended period of time, which they came to consider part of their daily life routine (Ehsan et al., 2018; Ganapathy et al., 2022). The likelihood of psychological harm and other mental health issues increased due to constant exposure to violence and conflict (Sanaullah, 2025).

In conflict zones, traumatic experiences are common and have significant effects on many people exposed to traumatic events. The damaging impacts of these experiences are more likely to worsen when survivors are displaced or are forced to seek shelter in unknown places (Almoshmosh, 2016). An empirical community-based study highlighted that 41% of internally displaced women from FATA regions were diagnosed with PTSD, and age was identified as a major predictor of the severity of symptoms (Ehsan et al., 2018). Psychological trauma is one of the significant effects of continuous conflict and displacement. Individuals may experience or witness adversities such as death, injury, loss of safety and shelter, destruction of livelihoods, and threats to their lives. These experiences can contribute to persistent cognitive and emotional responses, included heightened alertness, intrusive memories, avoidance, fear, emotional distress, and problems in regaining a sense of security (Carpiniello, 2023). Significantly, the psychological outcome of displacement may persist even after people have physically relocated away from war zones. In particular memories of war and an anticipated insecure living environment maintain a sense of danger and threat (Yim et al., 2023).

Displacement can also be a contributing factor to future anxiety, fear, insecurity, loss, and psychological trauma (Cuadrado et al., 2023). This makes war-related displacement a substantial area of research on how war can harm mental well-being, and it provides a basis to investigate the experiences of displaced individuals. A systematic review of psychosocial therapies for forcibly displaced individuals suggested that traumatic experiences, loss of social support, and poverty are significant stressors associated with poor psychosocial well-being of displaced individuals (Nguyen et al., 2023). Additionally, physical displacement not only involves geographical movement due to instability and security issues but also a major disruption to people's livelihood and property, social connections, public ties, safety, familiar environment, and psychological lives that ultimately produce an individualized and accumulating distressing experience (Sisenop et al., 2025; Swaroop & DeLoach, 2015). Individuals who experiened displacement may subsequently experience insecurity about their well-being, living conditions, economic survival, chances of returning to their hometowns, and being perpetually resettled. As a result, the psychological consequences of war can also persist beyond the immediate experience of violence (Carpiniello, 2023). Previous research has found that trauma, displacement, as well as substance use were associated with several psychiatric problems such as anxiety, depression, dissociative disorders, and PTSD, with a significant impact on women in FATA regions of Pakistan (Wazir et al., 2022).

Understanding the lived experiences of psychological trauma and its expression by war victims and displaced individuals with the detailed cultural context of Pakistan is important, despite increasing information concerning the psychological impacts of conflicts and forced displacement. The majority of the research has focused on the prevalence of PTSD and other psychological problems. Relatively less attention has been given to the subjective experiences through which trauma occurs in daily life after prolonged war and displacement. Individuals living in areas like the ex-FATA region of Pakistan have frequently been exposed to violence, conflict, and other atrocities of war and displacement. Being exposed to these circumstances may have unique cultural impacts on the nature and meaning of psychological trauma. For a better understanding of emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social effects, the present research aims to explore the lived experiences of psychological trauma among war victims in Pakistan. This knowledge can contribute to the establishment of culturally relevant psychological assessment and intervention approaches for the Pakistani war-affected population.

Indigenous Literature

Indigenous research from Pakistan has documented substantial psychological consequences of armed conflict, terrorism and forced displacement. A study of 349 pregnant women in Swat, Pakistan showed that 38.1% of the women reported psychological distress due to exposure to conflict. Most significantly, a year after the conflict ended, exposure to three or more conflict-related traumatic events was still substantially linked to psychological

distress, indicating that the psychological impacts of traumatic experiences may last past the violent time. The study also discovered that significant life events that occurred after the conflict were linked to psychological suffering, underscoring the ongoing psychological burden encountered during post-conflict transition (Khan et al., 2015). Similarly, Mujeeb (2015) investigated the psychological impacts of displacement due to armed conflict among 126 internally displaced people residing in the Jalozai camp. The results showed that displaced people had lower psychological well-being and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and despair. Increased internalizing issues were also linked to family loss after displacement. These results are especially pertinent to the current study because participants had similar experiences with mourning, family member loss, property loss, and ongoing emotional distress after displacement and war.

Significant trauma-related psychological effects have also been shown by studies conducted after the terrorist strikes in Peshawar. Abbas et al. (2017) looked at witnesses, rescuers, and survivors of terrorist attacks in Peshawar and found that those who were exposed to these events had significant PTSD symptoms. These results reinforce the significance of threat exposure and its ongoing psychological repercussions in conflict-affected groups by showing that psychological trauma can develop not just among those who were directly hurt but also among those who watch or respond to violent events. Additional data from Pakistan has connected exposure to trauma with a variety of psychological issues. When Ullah et al. (2018) looked at psychological symptoms and trauma exposure in 303 college students, they discovered that 28% of individuals had symptoms that could be indicative of PTSD. Dissociative, depressive, and anxiety symptoms were linked to intrusive experiences and changes in responsiveness, suggesting that traumatic events may have an ongoing impact on emotional and psychological functioning. The current findings regarding traumatic memories, enduring terror, emotional distress, and disruption in psychological functioning are pertinent to this evidence.

PTSD in a community uprooted by fighting in Pakistan's Malakand Division was further investigated by Rashid et al. (2020). PTSD was found to be independently linked to low birth weight among the displaced population under study. The study was carried out against backdrop of the armed conflict and widespread displacement experienced in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results highlight the wider effects of trauma on people residing in conflict-affected areas and offer more indigenous evidence of the psychological repercussions linked to conflict and displacement. When combined, the indigenous researches show that trauma due to combat is linked to long-term psychological discomfort, PTSD symptoms, anxiety, despair, intrusive experiences, and challenges after loss and displacement. Nonetheless, a large portion of the indigenous research currently publication has focused on quantitative assessments of psychological symptoms. By qualitatively examining how war victims themselves endure psychological trauma, such as ongoing anxiety and hypervigilance, exposure to dangerous situations, grief and loss, emotional pain, and challenges adjusting to everyday life, the current study expands on previous research.

II. METHOD

Research Design

In this research, a qualitative research design using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was employed. The research focused on the lived experiences of psychological trauma among war victims in Pakistan. To acquire a thorough understanding of how individuals impacted by prolonged war and conflict, either directly or indirectly, interpreted and made meaning of their psychological trauma, as well as how they suffered and adapted to these experiences throughout their lives.

Research Question

- What are the lived experiences of psychological trauma of war victims in Pakistan?

Objective

- To explore the personal narratives of psychological trauma experienced by Pakistani war victims.

Participants

The sample was recruited through purposive sampling. From the ex-FATA region of Pakistan, a sample of *N*=12 (6 males and 6 females) with a mean age of (*M=27.8, SD=2.16*) were selected. All participants attained at least bachelor's or master's level of education and all reported experiencing displacement. The majority of participants were students (83.3%), unmarried (83.3%), and residing in rural areas (91.7%). They all had experienced displacement for more than one year (83.3%). Furthermore, participants belonged to different districts of the former FATA region of Pakistan. Most participants reported living in large families comprising 13 or more members (75.0%).

Measures

[I] Socio-demographic Form: To gather demographic information, including age, gender, education, and occupation, as well as marital status, number of family members, experience of displacement, and duration of displacement, a socio-demographic data sheet was used. [II] Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Data were collected using semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to gather data from the participants. To draw rich verbal discourse for research purposes, open-ended questions of the interview guide were developed in the Urdu language. During the formulation of the interview guide, it was ensured that the key elements of the literature were followed and that discussions with the research supervisor were incorporated.

Procedure

The study received ethical approval from a relevant committee of Government College University Lahore. For the purpose of data collection, personal interaction was utilized to recruit study participants. Initially, a total of fifteen individuals were contacted, of whom twelve agreed to participate in the research. Written consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the interview. In-depth interviews were conducted with all the participants in Urdu. The interviews were completed in forty to fifty minutes. In the present research, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to explore and analyse the lived experiences of participants. After the interviews were transcribed, the verbatim transcripts of participants were analysed through IPA. Case-by-case analysis was carried out. Each transcript was thoroughly analysed by the researchers. The major coding was done by the researchers, and all the transcripts had the initial coding highlighted and recorded in the left margin. These codes later evolved into emergent themes. In the second phase, themes similar in meaning and context were grouped. In the third phase, superordinate themes were generated by utilizing already developed emergent and subordinate themes (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). To ensure privacy and confidentiality of research participants, pseudonyms were used instead of their original names. Before commencing the data collection, written informed consent was obtained from the participants. Participants were also informed about the goals of the research. Similarly, the confidentiality and privacy of the participants were ensured. All the participants agreed to take part in the research willingly, and they were allowed to withdraw at any time. When required, they were provided with counselling services. An empathetic relationship was built with interviewees due to the sensitivity of the information before the interview.

III. RESULTS

To explore the lived experiences of psychological trauma among war victims in the ex-FATA region of Pakistan, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed. The analysis revealed four distinct superordinate themes, highlighting that the individuals had experienced trauma in several interlinked ways: Psychological Trauma, Exposure to Threat and Traumatic Events, Traumatic Psychological Impact, and Emotional Distress. The variety of psychological experiences that participants had after being subjected to war and conflict is reflected in these themes.

Table I: Master Themes for all the Participants (N=12)

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Emergent Themes
Psychological Trauma	• Persistent fear and hypervigilance	• Flashbacks of atrocities • Alertness to signs of threat and danger • Persistent fear of danger • Fear of death and further violence • Heightened sensitivity to sounds • Startle response due to random sounds
	• Bereavement and loss	• Loss of family members • Grief and mourning • Loss of home and belongings • Sense of irreversible loss • Deprivation of Parental Love, Care, and Time • Separation from parents and Family
Exposure to Threat and Traumatic Events	• Direct exposure to violence	• Experiencing violence directly • Witnessing violence and atrocities • Exposure to bombing and shelling • Threat to life and physical safety
Traumatic Psychological Impact	• Long term psychological effects of violence	• Lasting psychological effects of conflict and violence • Psychological disturbance due to violence
	• Disruption in psychological functioning	• Changes in emotional and psychological functioning • Difficulty returning to normal life
Emotional Distress	• Negative emotional experiences	• Persistent sadness • Emotional pain and suffering
	• Emotional dysregulation	• Anxiety and psychological tension due to instability • Anticipatory worry and apprehension • Emotional breakdown and crying due to uncertainty • Feelings of frustration and anger due to circumstances • Perceiving widespread psychological distress among displaced people • Enduring emotional pain • Emotional Numbing toward Repeated Adversity

Superordinate Theme 1: Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma emerged as a super-ordinate theme from participants' data. Data showed their lived experiences of prolonged exposure to conflict, violence, and displacement. Psychological trauma was described as an ongoing experience formed by repeated, prolonged exposure to fear, instability, insecurity, disruption of daily life activities, and loss across all twelve participants' accounts. Their narratives depicted that even after immediate fear and threat had passed, experiences of trauma stayed psychologically active. This influenced their emotional states, familial and other relationships, as well as their routine life functioning. The descriptions thus indicate that trauma was experienced not only directly through exposure to violent events but also indirectly through witnessing suffering, anticipating threats, and perceiving the emotional distress of family members and society. Participants frequently reflected that their environment was insecure and unpredictable.

Male participant 1 reflected that:

"اچانک وہاں سامنے سے شیلنگ، گنشیپ ہیلی کاپٹر یہ سب ہورہا تھا۔"

"Suddenly, shelling, firing, gunships, and helicopters were all happening there."

Male participant 2 indicated that:

"جو وقت اس (بچے) کے کھیلنے کا تھا قلم لینے کا تھا کتابوں کا تھا اس وقت اس (بچے) نے بم دیکھے۔ لانچر راکٹ دیکھے۔"

"At the age when we should have been playing, holding a pen, and reading books, we saw bombs and rocket launchers."

Male participant 3 described:

"ان حالات کا ہمیں سامنا تھا، دھماکے، ٹارگٹ کلنگ۔"

"We faced such circumstances, including explosions and targeted killings."

Male participant 6 remembered the unexpected start of widespread violence:

"اتنے بڑے بم دھماکے ہو رہے ہیں۔"

"Such huge bomb blasts were taking place."

He further highlighted:

"ایک دم سے توپ خانی سٹارٹ ہوئی"

"Suddenly, the artillery shelling started."

Similarly, female participant 1 described the continuing threat of firing:

"کبھی بھی فائرنگ ہو جائے اور کبھی بھی کسی کو بھی لگ جائے"

"Firing could happen at any time and could hit anyone."

Further, female participant 3 shared that:

"ماموں کے بیٹے کی شہادت ہوگئی، گاڑی میں دھماکہ ہوا تھا۔"

"My maternal uncle's son was martyred; there was an explosion in the vehicle."

Another female participant recalled the sudden start of the war; she stated that:

"ایک دم سے جنگ وغیرہ سٹارٹ ہوئی تھی۔ ایک دم سے یہ سب ہوا۔"

"The war and everything started suddenly. Everything happened all at once."

These narratives depict the perception of losing safety at any moment due to unpredictable violence. Participants experienced their environment as constantly threatening rather than viewing threat as an isolated incident. The accounts further showed that exposure to conflict extended beyond witnessing violence to include direct exposure to firing, bombing, death, and physical injury. However, male participant 6 recalled:

"لوگ اس طرح مر رہےتھے۔"

"People were dying like this."

Male participant 6 also shared the physical consequences of conflict:

"آنکھیں جو تھی وہ ضائع ہوگئی، کئی لوگوں کے کان ضائع ہوگئے۔"

"People lost their eyes, and many people lost their ears."

Similar narratives showed the emotional and profound sensory impact of witnessing physical injury and death. The participants' memories of violence appear to have been intensely obstructed by the unpleasant consequences of these episodes, which persisted beyond the initial encounter. Participants' remembrance of such incidents also highlighted the persistence of traumatic experience.

Male participant 1 remembered:

"جس دن جنگ سٹارٹ ہوئی تھی پہلے دن ظہر کا وقت تھا۔"

"The day the war started, it was around noon on the first day."

Depending on how exactly the experience was recollected, some memoirs might have remained mainly prominent in autobiographical memory.

Male participant 5 stated that:

" ہمارے لوگوں کو نفسیاتی اور ذہنی صدمات کا مسئلہ ہوا ہے۔ تو ایک ٹراما سے گزر رہے تھے۔ کراچی میں تو کافی ٹارگٹ کلنگ ہوئی۔ بہت لوگ انکا شکار ہوئے جنکا کوئی گناہ نہیں تھا۔ بہت مشکل حالات سے گزرے ہیں۔"

"Our people experienced psychological and mental trauma. We were going through a trauma. There was considerable targeted killing in Karachi. Many innocent people became victims of it. We went through very difficult circumstances."

Likewise, female participant 2 reflected that traumatic experiences continued to distress people psychologically, declaring:

"لوگوں کوگزرے وقت کے بارے میں خواب آتے ہیں۔"
"[They] have dreams about past events and circumstances."

Whereas also noticing that:

"لوگوں کی نیندیں خراب ہیں۔"
"People's sleep is disturbed."

Male participant 3 specified:

"جو صدمات اور حادثات ہیں وہ نیند میں بھی آجاتے ہیں۔"
"The traumas and incidents also come into my dreams."

These narratives highlighted how memories, dreams, and disturbed sleep are certain ways that trauma can still invade daily psychological life. The development of persistent hypervigilance toward potential danger was a significant feature of participants' narratives. The participants perceived themselves to be psychologically ready for the possibility of new experiences of violence. Female participant 2 described:

"کبھی بھی فائرنگ ہو جائے اور کبھی بھی کسی کو بھی لگ جائے۔"
"Firing could happen at any time and could hit anyone."

This account reflects an enduring perception of unpredictability. Likewise, female participant 2 further added:

"ڈرباقی رہتا ہے۔"
"The fear remains."

This reflects the continuity of perceived fear. It suggests that fear was not limited to experiences of actual threat but stayed present over time.

Male participant 3 reported:

"ہم سوچ ہی رہے ہوتے ہیں یہاں کوئی نیا واقعہ ہوا ہے۔ جمگٹا کو اکٹھا یا زیادہ لوگوں کو دیکھ لوں۔ وہاں پر بھاگ رہا ہو کوئی یا اکٹھے لوگ دیکھوں تو اس سے میرے اوپر نفسیاتی مسئلہ ہے۔"
"We keep thinking that some new incident might have happened here. If I see a gathering or a large number of people, or see someone running, or a group of people, it causes a psychological problem for me."

These persistent feelings of hypervigilance were also experienced by the family members. Female participant 1 explained:

"جب تک وہ گھر نہ آئے ہمیں ٹینشن ہوتی ہے۔"
"Until they come home, we remain tense."

Female participant 5 shared that:

"میرے بچے ہیں تو ان کا کیا ہوگا۔ بوڑھے لوگوں اور بچوں کا کیا ہوگا۔"
"I have children, so what will happen to them? What will happen to the elderly and children?"

Consequently, hypervigilance functioned through continuous monitoring of both environmental danger and the safety of loved ones. Trauma seems to remain psychologically active through recollections of violence, flashbacks during sleep, discussions of adverse events, and persistent reactions to reminders of violence. The repeated discussions among families and communities may also keep traumatic experiences psychologically significant. Female participant 2 reported that adverse events were repeatedly discussed in their communities:

"گزرے حالات کے بارے میں باتیں ہر وقت ڈسکس ہوتی ہیں۔"
"They discuss past events all the time."

Male participant 6 described the continuing effects of trauma on the everyday lives of people:

"یہ چیزیں ہمیں کافی زیادہ ڈسٹرب کر رہی ہوتی ہیں، عام روٹین میں ہمیں ڈسٹرب کر رہی ہوتی ہیں۔"
"These things disturb us considerably; they disturb us in our normal routine".

This depicts how participants experienced trauma not only as a psychological symptom but as something that interfered with the daily life functioning of individuals. The narratives also show a process of emotional adjustment to repeated violence. Female participant 1 shared:

"اتنا قتل عام ہے کہ اب وہ چیزیں فیل ہونے کی بجائے ہم سوچنے لگ جاتے ہیں۔"
"There has been so much killing that instead of feeling these things, we have started thinking about them."

The participant further added:

"اب فیل نہیں ہو رہی یہ چیزیں۔"
"Now we do not feel these things."

Trauma was further magnified through experiences of death and loss of family members. Male participant 6 recalled:

"اس کے گھر کے اٹھارہ لوگ مر گئے۔"
"Eighteen people from his family died."

The interpersonal and social domains of trauma related to conflict are highlighted by such extensive loss. The emotional burden of providing care for vulnerable loved ones during displacement was also discussed by participants. Male participant 6 shared:

"آپ اپنی فیملی کو لے کر چل رہے ہیں، آپ صرف اپنے آپ کو نہیں دیکھ رہے۔"
"When you are taking your family with you, you are not looking only after yourself".

He also recalled the painful uncertainty surrounding an elderly family member:

"ان کو چھوڑا پھر پتا نہیں وہیں پر مر گئی یا کوئی جنگلی جانور ان کو کھا گئے۔"
"They left her [Mother] behind, and then we did not know whether she died there or whether some wild animal had eaten her."

This uncertainty adds another dimension to traumatic loss because death was not usually witnessed or confirmed, leaving survivors with unresolved questions. The emotional consequences of family suffering were also explicitly recognized. Male participant 6 stated:

"والدین پریشان ہوں تو ان کو دیکھ کر پریشان ہو جاتا ہوں۔"
"When my parents are worried, seeing them makes me worried too."

Superordinate Theme 2: Exposure to Threat and Traumatic Events

Persistent exposure to threat was a particularly strong aspect of psychological trauma. Participants shared experiences of living in an environment where violence could occur unexpectedly. This unexpected exposure created a sense of apprehension and worry about safety among individuals and their loved ones. Female participant 2 described that her father's job placed him at risk:

"ابو پولیس میں ہیں، ان کو مطلب خطرہ ہوتا ہے۔"
"My father is in the police, so he is at risk."
"ان کو کچھ ہو جائے گا، کوئی ان کو مار دے گا۔"
"Something might happen to him; someone might kill him."

These narratives highlighted that even when the participant herself was not exposed to the event, her perception of danger to loved ones became a source of continuing psychological threat. Likewise, Female participant 2 further described the anxiety linked with waiting for family members to return home safely:

"جب تک وہ گھر نہ آئے ہمیں ٹینشن ہوتی ہے۔"
"Until they come home, we remain tense."

Participants' narratives highlight the relational nature of psychological trauma. Their emotional safety was closely linked to the perceived safety of significant others. Additionally, gunfire and violent events had become normal within everyday life. Female participant 2 added:

"فائرنگ وغیرہ ہوتی ہے، یہاں پر فائرنگ بہت ہوتی ہے۔"
"There is firing and such violence; firing happens a lot here".

Similarly, Female participant 1 mentioned:

"جب ہم فائرنگ سن رہے ہوتے ہیں۔"
"When we hear firing."

Female participant 4 shared that:

"ایک دم سے جنگ وغیرہ سٹارٹ ہوئی تھی۔ ایک دم سے یہ سب ہوا۔"
"The war and everything started suddenly. Everything happened all at once."

In describing individuals' responses to the potential for violent events, these accounts suggest a proactive situation in which routine environmental noises may take on threatening implications.

Superordinate Theme 3: Traumatic Psychological Impact

The third superordinate theme, traumatic psychological impact, emerged from participants' data. Due to war and conflict, participants experienced prolonged psychological effects. Participants further reported psychological challenges that affected their psychological and emotional well-being and persisted after the primary stressful experiences. They also shared facing difficulties in getting back to their routine lives and feeling normal again. This theme included two sub-themes: disruption in psychological functioning and long-term psychological effects of violence. Participants shared their accounts as:

"یہ آج بھی ہماری زندگی پر اثر کرتا ہے۔"
"It still affects our lives today."
"ذہنی طور پر آج بھی بہت سے لوگ متاثر ہیں۔"
"Even today, many people are psychologically affected."

"نفسیاتی طور پر ڈپریس تھے۔"
"They were psychologically depressed."

Participants further added:

"مینٹل اور سائیکولوجیکل ڈس آرڈر تو بہت ہی زیادہ ہیں۔"
"There are a lot of mental and psychological disorders."
"خاص کر ڈپریشن ہے۔"
"Especially depression."
"لوگوں کی زندگی بہت زیادہ ڈسٹرب ہے۔"
"People's lives are very much disturbed."

These narratives of participants reflect the enduring impact of psychological trauma on the psychological wellbeing of individuals exposed to war and atrocities for an extended period of time.

Superordinate Theme 4: Emotional Distress

Emotional distress was the fourth superordinate theme that emerged from participants' data. Following the experiences of war and conflict, intense and persistent emotional challenges were experienced by the participants. The psychological consequences of these experiences were evident in participants' descriptions of anxiety, nervousness, fear, stress, sadness, anger, and other emotional disturbances. Negative emotional experiences and emotional dysregulation are two sub-themes included in the current theme. Female participant 2 described experiencing anxiety following threatening circumstances:

"اس کی وجہ سے تھوڑی گھبراہٹ ہوتی ہے۔"
"Because of this, there is some anxiety/nervousness."

She further added:

"انگزائٹی بہت ہوتی ہے۔"

"There is a lot of anxiety."

She also described heightened sensitivity, adding:

"میں بہت ہی زیادہ سنسیٹو ہو گئی ہوں۔"

"I have become very sensitive."

These narratives reflect that persistent exposure to threat may have impacted participants' emotional reactivity, making them more sensitive that might be more dangerous. Moreover, psychological distress was also perceived as a continuing situation rather than a transient response. Female participant 2 described:

"سائیکولوجیکل سٹریس تو بندے کو ہو ہی جاتا ہے۔"

"A person inevitably experiences psychological stress."

And further explained:

"یہ چیزیں بندے کو سٹریس میں تو ڈال ہی دیتی ہیں۔"

"These things inevitably put a person under stress."

Likewise, female participant 1 described the experience as:

"اتنی ان کو سٹریس ہے۔"

"They experience so much stress."

These accounts demonstrate that emotional distress was experienced not only at the individual level but as a collective community experience. Significantly, experiences of bodily manifestations of emotional distress were also shared by the participants. Female participant 2 described:

"ڈائجسٹیو سسٹم خراب ہو جاتا ہے۔"

"The digestive system becomes disturbed."

While she also recalled:

"میرے ہاتھ پاؤں کانپنے لگ جاتے تھے۔"

"My hands and feet would start trembling."

These descriptions reflect the nature of psychological trauma. Emotional distress felt while dealing with psychological trauma not only manifested through emotional states but was also embodied and experienced through physical sensations. Female participant 1 described the intensity of her emotional reaction:

"میں گھر آ کے اتنا روتی تھی۔"

"I used to cry so much when I came home."

Similarly, she stated:

"اچانک آپ اداس ہو جاتی ہیں۔"

"Suddenly, you become sad."

These experiences depict the unpredictability and intensity of emotional reactions following stressful experiences. The emergence of fear during a routine and safe activity such as sleeping reflects that the psychological sense of threat extended beyond the immediate conflict environment. Fear was another recurring emotional reaction. Female participant 1 shared:

"جب سونے کا وقت ہوتا ہے تو مجھے اتنا ڈر لگتا ہے۔"

"When it is time to sleep, I feel very frightened."

Female participant 1 simply expressed:

"غصہ بھی ہوتا ہے۔"

"There is also anger."

Female participant 1 described the behavioural consequences of emotional dysregulation:

"غصے اور فرسٹریشن کی وجہ سے بچوں کو مارتے ہیں۔"

"They hit the children due to anger and frustration."

It indicates that untreated psychological and emotional distress disrupts interpersonal relationships. It not only influences the individual experiencing trauma but also family dynamics. Generally, these narratives represent

psychological trauma as continuing interpersonal, embodied, and rooted within the social context of conflict and displacement. The lived experience was not confined to exposure to violence itself; rather, it encompassed persistent fear, intrusive recollections, emotional distress, bodily reactions, family-related anxiety, bereavement, and disruption of everyday functioning. Moreover, participants also demonstrated different ways of making sense of these experiences, from intense emotional reactions and fear to emotional numbing and cognitive distancing. Psychological trauma can be viewed as a continuously mediated experience in which individuals attempted to make sense of violence, loss, insecurity, and its enduring impacts for themselves, their families, and their society.

IV.DISCUSSION

The current research explored the lived experiences of psychological trauma among war victims from the ex-FATA region of Pakistan. The findings suggested that psychological trauma occurred not only as a singular, unique, and independent reaction. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis highlighted that participants described trauma as a layered and enduring experience that consists of recurrent fear and hypervigilance, bereavement and loss, direct exposure to threat and traumatic events, traumatic psychological impact, and emotional distress. The four superordinate themes suggested experiences of violence had impacted the everyday functioning, emotional health, and mental capacity of individuals in war zones even long after the violence had ended. These findings are supported by previous research that suggests psychological outcomes of war and displacement may continue through persistent perception of threat, loss, family disruption, trauma memories, and stress faced post-displacement rather than being limited to initial traumatic experiences of conflict (Bunn et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2023).

Psychological trauma was the first superordinate theme that emerged from participants' data. The theme comprised more general experiences of participants such as bereavement and loss as well as continuing fear and hypervigilance. Participants shared feelings of heightened alertness, extreme sensitivity to loud noises and sounds, anticipating potential threat and constantly remaining vigilant for sudden violent events, as well as anticipating and fearing death. These narratives indicate that even after the original threat has receded, the experiences of conflict and violence continued to impact their sense of safety. Moreover, participants described, rather than categorizing, danger as an unexpected reaction to a particular event; they associated a persistent state of psychological readiness for threat. These findings are in line with previous researches of war affected communities. Previous studies have investigated that being exposed to conflict can alter individuals' perceptions of security and lead to enduring post-traumatic responses. Post-traumatic stress was significantly high among individuals affected by war and who experienced displacement in Pakistan due to conflict in their hometowns, which was also linked to impaired daily life functioning (Rasool & Mehmood, 2020). Likewise, Kazmi et al. (2022) suggested the prevalence of PTSD among trauma survivors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) individuals who had experiences of traumatic events of several kinds, including bomb blasts and the deaths of loved ones.

The descriptive nature of current findings expands the depth of previous research by highlighting the subjective experiences of continuing threat. The psychological impact of war and conflict goes beyond the initial trauma, as suggested by the findings that participants experienced persistent fear and hypervigilance, were reactive to loud noises, and anticipated future threats. A contemporary phenomenological study on civilians exposed to the India-Pakistan conflict in 2025 reported high levels of anxiety and alertness in reaction to perceived danger, specifically loud noises and news of potential threat (Saleem et al., 2026). The phenomenological results of the study showed that, even though the difference of geographical context and the nature of conflict difference, war-related threats can create a sense of hypervigilance and fear among people.

Bereavement and loss were another important sub-theme that emerged from participants' data while describing experiences of psychological trauma. Participants shared losing loved ones, experiences of bereavement and mourning, loss of home and property, and a perceived sense of irreversible loss. One of the participants also reflected on being deprived of parental care, love, and their presence. Being separated from parents and family due to forced displacement was a challenging experience for children especially. The current findings showed that war-related trauma cannot be understood only in relation to experiences of violence because the outcomes of

conflict include significant disturbances in attachment, relationships with family, and life continuity. These findings are supported by previous research on young Nigerians. The results suggested that witnessing atrocities of war in the form of killing and losing family members were linked to sadness, depression, grief, and other mental health challenges (Olufadewa et al., 2022). Another qualitative study on Syrian refugees also supported the findings of the current study, as it suggested that loss during war and forced displacement cuts deeper than material possessions. Bunn et al. (2023) investigated that war and displacement made individuals experience losses including their sense of safety and security, social connections, cultural identity, and future aspirations. Therefore, home is not solely a physical structure, but it represents a sense of security, attachments, and familiarity with the place. This perspective is specifically related to the current findings because people from ex-FATA shared losses of home, belongings, family, and a feeling of normalcy as interrelated experiences rather than a separate event.

Psychological trauma also stems from the relational dimension of war trauma. This was often experienced by participants as deprivation of parental love, care, and time, as well as being separated from family due to forced displacement. For emotional regulation and security, family ties can be an important source that is why disturbance in relationships and social ties may heighten the psychological impact of traumatic experiences. Qualitative research on Syrian refugee families suggested that being separated from family due to displacement may create a sense of uncertainty and induce substantial emotional burden on parents and families (Eltanamly et al., 2022). Another study also found that long term family separation worsens the trauma and grieving period and could impact the coping mechanisms of individuals. These findings suggest that psychological outcomes of war and conflict can be influenced by disturbed attachment patterns and family support. The second superordinate theme that emerged from the participants' data was exposure to threat and traumatic events. The theme reflected the direct experiences of conflict, including witnessing war atrocities and violence, being exposed to bombs and shelling, and danger to life and physical safety. These findings showed that the psychological reactions of participants were rooted in direct exposure to threat, and did not arise solely from indirect perception of violence. The participants' accounts highlighted that they had experienced situations in which physical safety was not possible. The findings of the current research are in accordance with previous studies, as Rasool and Mahmood (2020) investigated a high rate of PTSD among internally displaced individuals in Pakistan who were exposed to conflict and violence.

These results elaborate the current finding by showing how exposure to direct violence can be structurally embedded in participants' personal accounts. This distinction is important for research using IPA because the interpretation of an event is not solely inherent to the event itself. Different people may experience violent events, but interpretation of the experience is highly idiosyncratic due to losses, circumstances, and subsequent exposures. The findings suggested that exposure to violence had altered the sense of safety of participants as well as impacted their understanding of emotional and mental functioning. A systematic review suggested that stressors related to pre-migration, migration-related, and post-migration experiences can influence the psychological effect of primary traumatic experiences (Jannesari et al., 2020). Analysis revealed traumatic psychological impact as the third superordinate theme. It captured the enduring psychological consequences of war. Participants shared long-term psychological effects, disturbances, and changes in emotional and psychological functioning. They further described the difficulties in starting normal life again. These results depict that individuals experienced trauma as a long-lasting disturbance rather than a temporary emotional reaction to wartime circumstances. The results indicated that individuals experienced challenges in starting normal life again are particularly important. They indicate that the effects of conflict extend into everyday life functioning and impact the ability to experience normal life after the initial traumatic situations gave changed.

Previous research complements these findings, as it reported that IDPs in Pakistan faced challenges in daily life functioning after being exposed to post-traumatic stress. The findings are also in line with previous literature as indicated that women were at higher risk for PTSD, while both genders showed difficulties in daily functioning (Rasool & Mahmood, 2020). Results are also consistent with previous qualitative research on refugees in Germany, as it explored the interaction between the current living conditions and post-traumatic symptoms of participants. Symptoms of trauma are closely related to the post-migration environment, where a challenging living environment makes psychological pain worse. Moreover, the research suggested that uncertain situations, concern about loved ones, limited control over circumstances, and challenging living conditions worsen the

psychological trauma (Rzepka et al., 2022). Therefore, disruption in psychological functioning as a lived experience of war trauma is the important contribution of the present research. The experiences of participants indicate that trauma influenced their broader capacity to experience life as normal. These results are relevant for people from ex-FATA as exposure to conflict, displacement, and other atrocities of war may occur simultaneously. Therefore, psychological effects of war should be considered in the wider social environment in which coping takes place rather than being understood only as a sole clinical symptom.

The fourth superordinate theme was emotional distress, which includes negative emotional experiences and emotional dysregulation as sub-themes. In response to repeated adverse circumstances, participants experienced, persistent sadness, emotional suffering and pain, anxiety and psychological stress associated with uncertainty, anticipatory anxiety, worry and a feeling of apprehension. They further explained emotional breakdown, crying, anger, and frustration due to circumstances. Participants also shared the widespread experiences of psychological distress among other displaced individuals. These results showed that emotional distress was both an individual experience and perceived as an extended feature of life within war-affected and displaced communities. These findings are consistent with Olufadewa et al. (2022). They found that displaced youth experienced sadness, loss of interest, crying, depression, and enduring sadness when remembering the loss of family members and friends. The accounts of participants about anxiety, anticipatory worry, and feelings of apprehension further suggested that emotional distress was associated with an understanding of insecurity and future threat. Distress consisted of anticipation of what might happen next rather than being limited to sadness after past encounters. This finding is consistent with previous research that investigated uncertainty about asylum status and worries about family members as current stressors that interacted with post-traumatic symptoms.

Cumulative emotional burden of enduring adversity was reflected by emotional breakdown and crying. Likewise, anger and frustration may represent emotional reactions to situations in which individuals experienced restricted control over their safety, living circumstances, or future. Previous research is in line with current findings, as Bunn et al. (2023) suggested that the post-displacement environment could impact reactions to conflict along with original traumatic events. Emotional numbing toward repeated adversity was an important and meaningful finding of the current study. This may highlight that enduring exposure to conflict can change the way people emotionally react to outcomes of traumatic experiences. The participants' narratives suggest that repeated exposure to conflict may sometimes be experienced as emotional exhaustion rather than assuming that reduced emotional recovery was reduced. The finding should be interpreted with caution because people interpret emotional numbing differently and cannot be considered equal to clinical symptoms without further evaluation. However, the emergence of this theme from participants' accounts indicates the importance of qualitative research in highlighting culturally and contextually meaningful expressions of emotional distress that may not be fully understood through clinical assessment. Generally, the results show the multidimensional nature of psychological trauma among war victims. The findings also support the need for culturally relevant psychological interventions that deal not only with trauma-related symptoms but also with sadness, family disruption, and the broader consequences of displacement.

V. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the results indicated the multifaceted nature of psychological trauma. War victims in the ex-FATA region of Pakistan experienced psychological trauma through long-term fear and hypervigilance, exposure to threat and traumatic events, the psychological impact of trauma, and emotional distress. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of trauma among individuals exposed to prolonged conflict and displacement. It is recommended that mental health services in war-affected areas incorporate culturally sensitive, trauma-focused psychological interventions that address both immediate emotional distress and persistent trauma-related experiences. The findings have implications for clinical practice, mental health policy, and future research by emphasizing the need for contextually appropriate assessment and intervention approaches for conflict-affected populations in Pakistan. Future research may study psychological trauma across different age groups and conflict-affected communities.

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