

BREAKING THE BARRIERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AMONG PAKISTANI YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Access to mental health services among young people in Pakistan may be hindered by social stigma, lack of knowledge about mental illness, financial constraints, parental pressure from families and religion. The research explored young people's perception of the barriers that prevent them from getting mental health services in Pakistan. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with males and females aged between 18-25 years from various universities of Islamabad. The participants were selected through purposive quota sampling. Audio recordings of interviews were done under informed consent for privacy protection purposes. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participant's experiences and perceptions. There are five interrelated clusters: personal well-being and coping; social and familial factors; stigma, discrimination, and awareness; spiritual and emotional perspectives; and professional help and therapy. Family expectations, fear of being criticized, gender-based restrictions, stigma, lack of knowledge about mental health, cost of mental health services and travel costs are barriers that prevent people from identifying their own problems and seeking professional help. Religious and cultural values influenced perceptions of mental health issues, with participants recognizing spirituality as a source of comfort while expressing concerns about relying exclusively on religious practices instead of professional treatment. Participants also acknowledged the potential value of psychological services and supportive relationships in addressing mental health difficulties.

I. INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being is an essential component of overall health; therefore, access to appropriate mental health care is crucial for enabling individuals to maintain their well-being and lead fulfilling lives. Nevertheless, within some societies such as Pakistan where people have stigmas against mental illness, they are reluctant about seeking help from professionals due to fear of being judged negatively by others or family members. We aim at identifying problems encountered by people who need psychological help so that we can suggest ways of improving availability and reducing prejudice towards them.

Mental Health Services in Pakistan

Mental health services in Pakistan face several challenges and barriers, which negatively impact access and the quality of care for those in need. According to Afsar et al. (2021), there is an acute shortage of mental health professionals in Pakistan with only 400 psychiatrists and 500 clinical psychologists for a population of more than

220 million people. It also shows that there is a shortage of funds for mental health care services within Pakistan where less than 1 percent of the country's total health spending goes towards it. There is still stigma around mental health problems among people of Pakistan due to poor understanding about them, lack of information from society and unwillingness for seeking help. The stigma might discourage people from seeking help for mental health issues and also prevent them from sharing their problems with others like friends or relatives (Bashir & Bokharey, 2019).

One major problem to be faced by people living with mental disorders is the limited availability of mental health services in rural and remote areas of the country. There is a lack healthcare facilities and mental health professionals, making it challenging to access the mental health services they need (Ilyas et al., 2018). There are many problems with mental health service provision to people living in Pakistan that affect their ability to get proper treatment due to poor accessibility issues and low-quality healthcare delivery systems. There is an acute shortage of mental health professionals in Pakistan, with only 400 psychiatrists and 500 clinical psychologists for more than 220 million people (Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, 2022).

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges faced by young people in accessing mental health services?
2. How perceived barriers affect the access to mental health services among Pakistani youth?
3. What are the barriers identified in our society?
4. How family dynamics affect mental health in youth?
5. How do cultural and religious beliefs impact the perception of mental health and the treatment in Pakistani youth?
6. To what extent do socioeconomic factors, such as income and education, influence the access to mental health services among Pakistani youth?
7. What is the role of stigma in preventing Pakistani youth from seeking mental health services and how can this be addressed?
8. What preventive measures should be taken for these barriers?

II. METHOD

A qualitative approach was chosen to carry on this research as the topic demanded in-depth-analysis of individual experiences and perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants.

Participants

The study was conducted at various universities in Islamabad and the sample consisted of young participants between the age ranges of 18 to 25 years old. Both males and females were part of this study.

Measures

Interview guide was prepared in collaboration with the professionals. Interview guide consisted of 8-9 questions. The questions in the interview guide were open ended and the participants were free to answer the questions as they want to so that results obtained would be unbiased. It was ensured that the participants did not get any harm because of the interview questions and were not triggered.

Procedure

Purposive sampling was used in this research. In which the research focused on quota sampling. Data was recorded in the form of audio taping with the participants consent and were assured of their confidentiality and the anonymity.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Summary for Research Questions is as Follow

Cluster	Theme	Codes
Cluster 1: Personal Well-Being and Coping	Theme 1: Mental Health and Well-Being	Maintaining relationships; coping; well-being; use of technology; workplace stress; approaches to well-being; deep breathing and calming techniques; feeling stressed; anxiety; panic attacks; heart racing; trust; self-care; kindness; dementia; anorexia; sleep disturbance; therapy; resolving mental health issues; medication; psychiatrist help; youth services; reducing financial barriers; community programs
	Theme 2: Psychological and Physiological Issues	Disturbance of sleep; overthinking; disturbed diet; anxiety attacks; depression; panic attacks; insomnia; bulimia; anorexia; physiological problems; physiological health
	Theme 3: Stress and Pressure	Stress; workplace stress; emotional suppression among men; middle-age pressure; job opportunities; criticism; rigid beliefs of the older generation; generation gap; social media role; stress management
Cluster 2: Social and Familial Factors	Theme 1: Social and Family Pressures	Judgment; gender-specific pressures; family pressure; peer pressure; parental pressure; cultural barriers; gender stereotypes; parental bond; family dynamics; family expectations; criticism; stress; middle-age pressure; family issues
	Theme 2: Parental Bonding and Family Dynamics	Lack of career counseling; family issues; family dynamics; communication; guidance; stigma; gender stereotypes; judgmental attitudes; status discrimination
Cluster 3: Stigma, Discrimination, and Awareness	Theme 1: Stigma and Discrimination	False narratives; lack of awareness; cultural barriers; educational barriers; social status discrimination; spreading awareness; unhealthy home environment; gender discrimination; access to mental health services
	Theme 2: Access to Resources and Services	Access to mental health services; financial issues; lack of awareness; financial constraints; educational barriers; cultural barriers; disparity; social status discrimination
	Theme 3: Education and Awareness	Educational barriers; lack of awareness; awareness of disorders; interest in mental health awareness; accessible education; access to mental health services
Cluster 4: Spiritual and Emotional Perspectives	Theme 1: Spiritual and Religious Views	Religious perspectives; spiritual healers; religious fatalism; religious barriers; inner battles; distinct spirituality; intermixing with spirituality
Cluster 5: Professional Help and Therapy	Theme 1: Professional Assistance	Therapy; resolving mental health issues; medication; psychiatrist help; therapy techniques; counseling; help; treatment; expression

Five interrelated factors affecting Pakistani university students' perception and access to mental health services are identified by thematic analysis as (1) social stigma and lack of awareness about mental illness; (2) financial and structural barriers; (3) family dynamics and gender-related limitations; (4) cultural/religious beliefs; and (5) professional help versus informal support.

Theme I: Social Stigma and Limited Mental Health Awareness

Stigma and lack of knowledge are some obstacles towards identifying mental health problems by people for getting help from a doctor or therapist. There are times when mental health issues were ignored by society due to stigma which discourages people from talking about them. One participant explained, "Many people are unaware

of disorders/psychological issues; even if they realize their existence, society puts an obstacle between individuals to seek assistance and consult a therapist." (translated from Roman Urdu). Also, participants talked about that mental health issues were usually overlooked by people. The fear of criticism and misunderstanding might prevent people from sharing their problems, indicating low knowledge levels and negative attitudes towards seeking assistance.

Theme II: Financial and Structural Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

Practical problems such as financial limitations and lack of professional psychologists are major issues. Participants highlighted students' limited resources, transportation expenses, and the high cost of psychological consultations. According to one participant, "Students already have many expenses, such as travel costs; they are often unable to manage their finances properly and may not have enough money for therapy." (Translation of Roman Urdu). Also, there were issues regarding access to psychotherapists and difficulty finding qualified ones. High costs of therapy along with lack of funds may prevent people from getting help due to mental health issues despite knowing they require it. Also, they thought that there was a lack of knowledge regarding mental illness among people living in rural areas due to limited access to healthcare facilities. The information provided shows how accessibility is related to cost-effectiveness, availability of services, and knowledge about treatments available.

Theme III: Family Dynamics and Gender-Related Restrictions

Family relationships influenced whether participants felt able to disclose psychological difficulties and seek assistance. Strict parenting, fear of criticism, and dismissive responses from family members are barriers for open communication. A participant said that "if a parent is too strict, students might be afraid of telling them anything because they are struggling with their studies and are punished rather than understood". (translated from Roman Urdu). Participants also described cases in which family members failed to take reported psychological distress seriously, potentially leaving young people uncertain about obtaining help. Gender related expectations also posed difficulties especially to women who had limited freedom of movement and autonomy. One participant said that "women are often confined at home where they cannot go out of their comfort zone or talk openly with people; thus, they might have trouble seeking help from anyone else for their issues" (translated from Roman Urdu). Social norms of female schooling/employment were also talked about by participants while there are some gender roles which prevent males from showing feelings to others. Family response and gender norms may affect disclosures as well as access of patients for psychological services.

Theme IV: Cultural and Religious Beliefs About Mental Health

Participants described cultural traditions and religious interpretations as influential in shaping understandings of psychological difficulties. Some perceived rural communities as having limited familiarity with mental health disorders. According to a participant "Pakistan has various cultures; in some rural areas, people may be unaware of mental health issues and might not know about someone being called a mental disorder" (translated from an interview). Religious belief was also talked about by participants regarding psychological issues. While some saw religion for spiritual guidance and comfort; while others worried about misinformation or thinking that religious rituals by themselves would be enough without seeking help from professionals. One person said, "Religion also explains illness and its treatment; however, it should be understood that there are psychological issues which affect everyone and for them we need professionals." These accounts indicate that cultural and religious influences were not uniformly discouraging. The perception of their impact was determined by what they thought about it and if there is an option for treatment that seems reasonable to them.

Theme V: Perceptions of Professional Help and Informal Support

Participants recognized the value of supportive relationships and professional assistance. Trusted individuals were often described as the first people with whom someone might discuss personal difficulties. According to one person "people tend to share their problems first with those they feel comfortable talking to and with whom they can be open". Participants also acknowledged that psychological difficulties could affect every day functioning and require professional attention. Nevertheless, stigma, lack of knowledge about it, cost issues and worries regarding access to services may hinder people getting proper treatment. Informal support could provide an initial opportunity to express distress, but it did not necessarily remove the barriers to professional treatment.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study is concerned about how difficult it can be for youth to get access into psychological care facilities. Peer pressure, parental expectations, gender stereotypes, stigma, cultural beliefs and education/employment related stresses were found to be major obstacles for this study. Academic expectations, career uncertainty, and pressure to conform to societal norms may lead people towards depression rather than seeking help. Gender stereotypes can also prevent people, especially men, from expressing emotions or acknowledging psychological difficulties. The results are in line with those of e of Salaheddin and Mason (2016), regarding stigma, financial problems, lack of knowledge about mental health issues, and unwillingness to seek help from psychologists.

Effects of Perceived Barriers on Access

Secondly, this study is concerned with understanding what prevents people from accessing mental health care facilities due to social stigma around them. Financial constraints are an issue since consultation, therapy sessions and medications might not be affordable to people living below the poverty line. Limited knowledge also makes it difficult for people to get help because they might not know what signs of mental illness are there and where to find a therapist. Some people might depend solely upon relatives or religious leaders.

Societal Barriers to Mental Healthcare

This study addresses a third issue of access to psychological care for people living in rural areas. Stigma, fear of being judged by others; gender stereotyping; social class prejudice; economic inequality; myths surrounding psychopathology, shame and weakness might be seen by people as psychological problems that discourage them from talking about these issues and getting help from professionals. While men are often expected to show strength, women may be subjected to pressure for tolerating their own emotional pain quietly.

Influence of Family Dynamics

Parental support provides a sense of safety, motivation for speaking up about problems. On the other hand, favouritism, neglect, abuse, persistent conflict, and excessive expectations can lead to stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Hafeez et al., 2026). Pressure from families to succeed academically, choose careers and marry might be overwhelming for youth especially if there is a conflict between those desires and what they want. Career counselling is limited which leads to more uncertainty and dissatisfaction among people. Communication problems could also hinder youth from talking about their emotions due to fear of criticism or rejection.

Cultural and Religious Influences

The fifth research question is about culture and religion impact on perception of psychological issues and its treatments. The results show that people tend to understand mental illness mainly by means of religious beliefs instead of seeking help from a doctor/psychologist. While prayer and religious practices can be helpful to people, they might not work well if used instead of seeking help from a professional therapist. Family honour, reputation and social stigma can lead to reluctance among youth for revealing mental health problems.

Socioeconomic Factors and Service Accessibility

The sixth research question is about how the amount of income that individuals possess as well as their education level determine accessibility towards mental health services. Limited financial resources may restrict people from getting medical care like therapy sessions, medication expenses and travel fees for them. Education might be related to mental health awareness and availability of healthcare services. Those with better education level are more likely to recognize symptoms of psychological disorders and seek assistance whereas individuals lacking adequate knowledge may be prone towards false beliefs regarding such conditions leading to postponement for medical care.

Stigma and Help-Seeking Behavior

Seventh research question is about preventing Pakistani youth to seek help for psychological issues due to stigmatization. The fear of being judged by others, discrimination against them or their families' status may deter

people from seeking help. Gender role misconception about mental health problems may contribute to these obstacles. Some people might be afraid of being labeled as weak or mentally unstable, whereas others may think that professional help isn't necessary. Knifton (2012), studied mental illness stigma which might be useful to understand this research. Addressing stigma requires public education, confidential services, supportive social environments, and open discussions about psychological well-being.

Preventive Measures

Eighth research question is about reducing access issues of psychological services. The findings support several strategies. Initially, mental health education needs to be included in schools and colleges for better understanding about psychological disorders as well as their treatment options. Also, they may help dispel myths by promoting dialogue among people about them. Thirdly, community engagement needs to include parents/teachers/religious leaders for better awareness of issues and less prejudice towards them. Fourthly, there is a need for better affordability of mental health care by increasing government spending on it; expanding its availability within the public sector as well as integrating it with general medical treatment. Counseling programs must be strengthened by educational institutes for better student support through career advice regarding schoolwork and job opportunities.

Limitations

1. The results of qualitative study are context-specific and may not be generalizable to the whole population of Pakistani youth.
2. The sample size and selection procedure may have an impact on the participants' representativeness, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other groups or areas.
3. Participants may have trouble accurately recalling earlier events, especially when talking about issues to obtaining mental health services. Accuracy may also be impacted due to biasness towards remembering certain details while ignoring others. To minimize recall bias, researchers may consider using prompt questions or conducting many interviews.

Recommendations

1. To overcome these issues, promote collaboration among psychologists, teachers, lawmakers and local officials. Interventions should be developed through an interdisciplinary approach considering social, economic, and cultural factors affecting access of individuals for mental healthcare treatment options.
2. Culture and religion are important factors that influence people's perception of mental illness within Pakistan. Therefore, we need to overcome these cultural obstacles so that young people of Pakistan can access psychological care. It could mean collaborating with religious leaders and organizations for challenging negative attitudes toward mental health and increasing acceptance of mental health services.

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