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Exploring the Mental Health Challenges of Unemployment among Graduate Youth in District Lower Dir of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract: *Unemployment among graduate youth is a critical socio-economic issue in Pakistan with numerous implications for mental health. This study examines the impact of unemployment on the mental health of unemployed graduate youth in the Lower Dir District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. It explores various strategies for maintaining their well-being. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants through semi-structured interviews with 16 graduated youth through convenience sampling who graduated during the previous 5 years. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Findings from the study revealed that prolonged unemployment contributes to low self-esteem, frustration, depression, anxiety, and feelings of social exclusion. Participants also describe intense family pressure, loss of social status, uncertainty about the future, and difficulty finding a job despite graduation. The study fills a significant research gap in northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It offers various implications for policy makers, universities, and mental health practitioners to foster resilience and mitigate the psychosocial scarring of graduate unemployment.*

Introduction

Unemployment is a complicated socioeconomic issue in which a segment of the economically active population remains unemployed despite actively pursuing employment alternatives. It has negative socioeconomic implications and is a major worry because it impedes the development of both individuals and nations (Agrahari & Neelam, 2023). Psychological well-being is defined as the subjective experience of positive psychological states such as happiness, fulfilment of life, and a sense of purpose (Dhanabhakym & Sarath, 2023). Unemployment has profound consequences on psychological and social well-being. Joblessness stops many opportunities for social interaction and leads to social isolation. Financial dependence reduces confidence and leads to intensified feelings of inadequacy and stress. Prolonged unemployment is closely linked with loneliness, emotional strain and diminished self-worth, which collectively affect the mental health of a person. Research consistently shows that psychological disorders, including depression and anxiety, occur in those individuals who are unemployed compared to those who are employed (Knieps & Pfaff, 2019; Kroll et al., 2017).

Furthermore, unemployment has been associated with both physical health and mental health of youth graduates. In some cases maladaptive coping behavior such as drug use or suicidal ideation (Freyer-Adam et al., 2011). Studies suggested that jobless people are more vulnerable to adverse mental and physical health. This group of youth faces a higher rate of mortality than their employed counterparts (Herbig et al., 2013).

In Pakistan, unemployment has remained a persistent challenge over the past few decades. During the 1990s, the average unemployment rate was around 5.7%, which rose to 6.8% in the 2000s. In the last three years, the rate has stabilized at approximately 6%. The rise in unemployment during the late 1990s was the main cause of slow economic growth and fiscal tightening. In the 2000s, additional factors such as deteriorating law, global recession, energy crises, order conditions and unfavorable macroeconomic trends further contributed to sustained unemployment. Moreover, privatization and restructuring of public sector enterprises under the World Bank structural adjustment programs led to significant dismissals, exacerbating the problem during periods of slow economic growth (Kalim et al., 2003).

In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, extensive research has sought to understand personality and behavior in times of crisis and social transformation. However, much of this scholarship has been conducted in relatively stable, well-developed market economies. Social psychology emphasizes the importance of analyzing universal and context-specific factors that influence individuals under unique historical and cultural circumstances. This translates into examining the psychological and behavioral patterns of individuals as they respond to unemployment within a distinct cultural and historical context (Raymond & Sajid et al, 2005).

In Lower Dir, regarding the mental health of individuals, a study shows that the number of suicide attempts is different in different localities of this region. In this context, for instance, the rate of mental health issues is higher in hilly areas as compared to plain areas (Jabbar et al., 2019). A particularly relevant area of inquiry involves clarifying the link between unemployment and mental health disorders a relationship that continues to raise the question of whether such disorders are primarily the cause or the consequence of unemployment (Fatana et al 2024) There is no specific relevant study available in the region of the present study, Lower Dir, however some field data in the form of existing literature, in this context, the present study expands the scope to find out the challenges faces by unemployed graduates in Lower Dir. and identify various strategies that can be used to maintain their mental well-being.

Research Question

1. What are the lived experiences of mental health challenges among unemployed graduate youth?
2. What strategies are used by unemployed graduates to maintain their mental well-being and to cope with the impacts of unemployment?

Research Objectives

1. To explore the lived experiences of mental health challenges among unemployed graduate youth.
2. To examine the strategies used by unemployed graduates to maintain their mental well-being and to cope with the impacts of unemployment.

Literature Review

Graduation and higher education are vitally important for the formation of adult identity, career self-efficacy, and establishing independence. But when a graduated youth remains unemployed for years, such a condition can ruin his life and his family as well. Acero (1993) studied and presented structural factors not fully captured by the neoclassical method. He claimed that persistent unemployment often

arises from inefficiencies in the job search process, which includes workforce heterogeneity, imperfect labor market information, and costly training. Long-term unemployment further worsens these issues, while the additional contributor's include wage rigidity, the influence of labor unions, and restrictive labor legislation. Intended for youth, who characterize the most highly educated and aspirational cohort, unemployment is particularly destabilizing, as it occurs at a life stage when they are biologically and on a social basis primed for growth and contribution (Nolte *et al.*, 2023).

Well-being is often conceptualized as multidimensional, encompassing both hedonic (happiness, absence of negative effect) and eudemonic (meaning, purpose, self-actualization) components. Joblessness primarily affects eudemonic well-being by restricting the capacity for meaningful contribution and self-determination (Roberts *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, psychosocial distress in the framework of unemployment typically establishes as a cluster of related, but distinct, mental health issues: Misery is considered when there is persistent sadness, anhedonia (loss of pleasure), and feelings of worthlessness. Nervousness is revealed as excessive worry, generalized tension, and physical symptoms related to chronic stress. Stress is the individual's feeling of being overwhelmed, often directly tied to financial strain and the pressure of the job search. Low self-efficacy is a condensed belief in one's ability to successfully secure employment or perform job-related tasks, a core psychological casualty of prolonged job search failure (Prince *et al.*, 2007). Some mental health models and developmental theory provide the core theoretical foundation for understanding how job loss translates into mental distress, offering an essential framework for studying youth weakness, particularly in developing economies (Jahoda, 1982). The covert deprivation model is an opening theory arguing that employment provides five crucial non-financial, or latent, functions that are fundamental to psychological equilibrium and social integration.

Pakistan's graduate unemployment rate, which is over three times higher than the nation's general jobless rate, presents a serious problem. Pakistan's overall unemployment rate fluctuates between 5% and 10%, according to historical statistics from 2001–02 to 2020–21. However, the unemployment rate for graduates increased steadily during this time, reaching a peak of 17.9% in 2014–15 from 9.2% in 2001–02. The imbalance between the expanding number of new university graduates and the limited job vacancies contributes to this issue. Furthermore, a significant percentage of people finish their postsecondary education in fields with low demand. In Pakistan, 31% of young people with education are unemployed, with women making up 51% of all unemployed people (Ahsan & Khan, 2023). Internally, educational programs provided curriculum in national and regional universities and colleges often fail to align with the limited industrial and commercial needs of the region, leading to an intense educational mismatch. The university degree becomes less about skill acquisition and more about acquiring a credential, a ticket to the job queue. When the ticket proves invalid due to organizational rigidities, the graduate is left with debt, high expectations, and non-marketable skills. The mainstream of graduates holds generic degrees (e.g., Arts, Humanities, general Sciences) that do not equip them with the in-demand vocational skills (e.g., advanced technical certifications, specialized management, IT skills) required by the few emerging employers.

Without a job graduate suffers a tangible loss of familial status. They return from an expected independent adult role to a dependent one, often leading to increased tension and conflict with parents, siblings, and extended family members, who feel their investment in the education, has been wasted. This social outcome severely weakens the graduate's primary source of support. Family addiction, while a financial buffer, is a profound psychological stressor (Fryer, 1986).

Methodology

The research took place in the district of Lower Dir, which is in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The population for this study was unemployed adults residing in the Dir District. A convenience sampling method was used. The data was collected from unemployed graduates who graduated in the previous 5 years from different universities, colleges, or institutes, and who are facing unemployment problems. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants who are readily accessible and willing to participate. Permission to access personal thoughts was obtained from each individual. A message was circulated describing the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and assurances regarding anonymity and voluntary participation.

To maintain confidentiality, the data collection process ensures that individual responses cannot be trace back to specific participants, the interview guide was made into different key parts corresponding to the central variable of this current study, mental health and well-being, economic conditions, employment status, and demographic background (including age, gender, education, relationship status, and housing situation). Data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Each interview lasts for 30 to 40 minutes and explores various social, psychological and economic effects of unemployment. The thematic analysis technique discussed by Braun and Clark (2006) is employed in this research due to the fact that this procedure is more suited for an exploratory study in the social sciences. Furthermore, this analysis is more suitable when the researcher wants high applicability and validity.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on data collected from District Lower Dir only, which may limit their generalizability to other regions. Mental health outcomes were assessed through self-reported measures and may be affected by reporting bias and social stigma. Other contextual factors influencing psychological well-being were not examined in depth.

Results and Discussion

The detailed findings of qualitative research offered by this chapter were derived from the in-depth semi-structured interviews of 30 to 45 minutes with 16 participants who were recent graduates from the different areas of District Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The basic data for this research were collected for the aim is to address the psychological effect of unemployment on youth graduates of Dir lower.

Challenges Faced by Unemployed Graduates in Relation to Mental Health

Research objective 1 is addressed directly by theme 1, and that is to find out the challenges faced by unemployed individual graduates in Lower Dir. All those challenges are intensely structured by the provincial framework of inadequate job markets and strong familial prospects prevalent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Emotional Distress

In the present research, the most instant and majorly reported challenge was the regular involvement of negative emotion, often increased by the feeling of being in limbo. Participant (P01) repeatedly reported feelings of anxiety and depression that were revealed physically in their body. *"When I get up early every morning, I feel this deep, heavy weight on my chest. It's the constant worry. Will my father ask about my interviews again to find a job? It never stops. It's like a quiet fever."* This situation of the participant is similar to the global literature showing that unemployment is strongly correlated with increased occurrence of affective disorders, particularly anxiety and depression (Murphy & Athanasou, 1999). The most profound finding was the acute psychological distress experienced by participants, resulting in a crisis of identity that directly challenges Erikson's Identity Theory (1968).

The emotional background of the selected individuals for this study was dominated by a prevalent sense of psychological health issues about an uncertain future and a very deep feeling of hopelessness. In this context, P02 discussed his situation like *"it is not always a panic attack, but it is always there in the surroundings like a very low hum, and it makes it difficult to concentrate on anything else"*, which is similar to the idea of future anxiety described by Zaleski (1996), which is particularly acute in situations of perceived helplessness. For some individuals, this situation increased in symptoms that border on clinical, *"My sleep pattern is totally changed, I can't sleep until 4 am, I am overthinking what if and then I sleep until noon. I don't know the reason. My appetite is gone; my mother worries I am getting sick."* Likewise, P02 stated constant headaches and admitted to a short temper... *I get angry at my wife over small things, and then I feel guilty afterwards. I am not real."* These are body level and behavioral manifestations that are consistent with a large body of meta-analytic work (e.g., Paul & Moser, 2009; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). This information provides the qualitative description substance to these statistical correlations, demonstrating how psychological distress is lived and experienced daily, which firmly establishes a causal link between unemployment and increased rates of both anxiety and depression, including psychosomatic symptoms. Anxiety symptoms and depression like incidents in the study samples mainly reflect frequent global meta-analyses, which indicate that the unemployed consistently report psychological distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to their employed counterparts (Milner et al., 2017).

Self-Identity and Self-Esteem

Different participants in this present research stated that their identity, which had been tied to their academic success and their career perspective, had been harshly negotiated and neglected. The social stigma associated with unemployment in a status-conscious culture contributed significantly to low self-esteem. Graduates with specialized degrees reported low self-esteem, a significant context-specific finding. A male participant with a professional background lamented: *"I feel like my degree is a worthless piece of paper. The institution gave us degrees but did not teach us how to navigate the corrupt job market"* (Ahmad Khan, Participant 10). This indicates a complete breakdown of outcome expectations (Lent et al., 1994) despite high initial self-efficacy. This is exacerbated by the necessity of engaging in unpaid 'volunteer' work simply to stay professionally relevant (Participant 10)—a form of exploitation previously unrecorded in this context, demonstrating a desperate attempt to maintain a professional identity in the face of systemic barriers. In this context P03, discussed his situation like *"when I got a master's degree, I was hoping that soon I would be on a job, but now I am just sitting here. My education feels worthless. I avoid family gatherings because I know someone will ask, 'What are you doing now?' I feel like a burden, and I feel that I failed my family, too."* The result of this study specifies that the graduates in the study region, Lower Dir KPK, experience loss of earned identity, an idea precarious within the anticipations of the Pakistani cultural context. Most of the different individuals, and their identity as a graduate was a very tough-earned achievement that multiplied the understood possibilities of social mobilization and their respect. This identity is shattered primarily by unemployment. According to this, a P01's heartbreaking statement is, *"I feel very little of a man when I meet with those friends who are already an employ of an institution"*. The concept this statement reflects is what a thoughtful identity calamity. In this context, the deprivation is not just of a job, but of the social status and personal identity that was expected to follow the attainment of a degree. And this verdict is very parallel with the result of Jahoda (1982), who contended that employment provides covert functions, as well as structured time, shared experiences, and collective purpose, the absence of which leads to severe psychosomatic deprivation.

The duration of these variables of unemployed graduates is specifically prominent, and 4 participants have been living as unemployed for a period of less than a year; the maximum of them have experienced joblessness for around 3 years or more. So, this too-long duration of joblessness, specifically the long-term nature of the participant P08, is intensely connected worldwide with a progressive worsening of psychological health. This aligns with the research by Paul & Moser (2009) that shows the health consequences, including psychological distress, increase with the duration of unemployment. The participants in the 2-3 years bracket (P02, P05, P07, P13) suggest chronic distress and highlight the critical nature of the employment crisis in Lower Dir. Extensive spells in it led to greater economic stress, social seclusion, loss of identity, and diminished self-efficacy, making re-entry into the labor market more difficult (Wanberg, 2012). The results presented in the current research show a clear acceleration in the harshness of psychosomatic standpoint and issues as the duration of unemployment increases, which are highly reliable and comparable with extensive global and regional literature on the psychosocial influence of joblessness on youth, predominantly graduates. This dose-response association, where a longer experience of stress like unemployment, shows a relationship with a greater negative outcome like mental health issues are robust finding in universal studies (Strandh et al., 2014; Paul & Moser, 2009). So, cases of anxiety and depression reported rise progressively, moving from those unemployed for less than a year to those experiencing unemployment for over three years. Furthermore, joblessness intensifies the intermediate period 1-2 years, $n=7$, during which the occurrence of problems increased, and depression and family pressure are added to mental issues. This is a transition that marks a critical shift: the acute anxiety of the initial phase evolves into a more persistent, debilitating state. The existing literature often shows this time as one of the intense ongoing jobs probing united with high anxiety about the immediate future (Darity and Goldsmith, 1996). And that is often characterized by an acute shock and immediate worry over income and future uncertainty. For a longer period of time, the unemployment rate (2–3 years, $n=3$, and >3 years, $n=2$), the uplift is stark.

The mental health primary issues include depression, hopelessness, low self-care and ultimately social isolation. In other words, the global finding is that prolonged unemployment leads to chronic psychological impairment (Strandh et al., 2014). Moreover, P05, a female graduate that is female expressed a similar sentiment, emphasizing that the catastrophe is not gender based but a demonstration that differs: their statement is *"I was a public speaker in college, so when it is time for my career or job, I closed my mouth and became quiet because my unemployment status seemed to invalidate my opinions. I feel my degree has become a reminder of my failure, not my accomplishment"*. This work aligned with the work of Feather (1990) on the negative effects of unemployed status, signifying that in contexts where scholastic achievement is highly valued, the fall from graduate to unemployed is particularly steep and damaging to one's own behalf. The emergence of depression is a widely reported consequence of prolonged joblessness, often linked to the loss of self-esteem, sense of control, and loss of the latent benefits of work. Hopelessness and low self-esteem gathering is a classic display of the internalization of catastrophe and the loss of an expressive social role, moving away from simple economic pressure. So, the final expression, social loneliness observed in the >3 years category, is a severe sign of withdrawal, stigma, and resignation, which is often found in the most chronic cases internationally and locally (Nilsen and Reiso, 2014).

Social Isolation

Unemployment among recent graduates led to voluntary social isolation, predominantly to left-hand judgment and the regular need to explain their situation. This resulted in a strained association,

especially within the immediate family. This situation is best described by participant Nida Rizvi P05 as *"I am always avoiding my old graduate friend, particularly those who have found jobs. It's too painful. My younger siblings think I'm lazy. The tension with my parents is always there, unspoken, but it's the worst part. I feel completely alone in my struggle."* Social stigma is also well-documented in the worldwide mental health pressure of unemployment. Being without a job often results in a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) because work is the basis for social identity, belonging, and perceived dignity. The result that male individuals reported a social stigma for females aligns more closely with the traditional global view that men, especially in patriarchal societies, face greater external judgment and stigmatization due to the violation of the normative breadwinner role. For female graduates, the financial expectation operates through the lens of marital value. P05 noted: *"The stigma for an unemployed girl is different. For us, it's about being a 'finished product' ready for marriage... My engagement is strained because they expected their son to marry a working woman"* (P05). This context-specific finding demonstrates that unemployment jeopardizes a woman's perceived societal value and leads to unique pre-marital tensions, adding complexity to the discussion of women's economic roles in conservative regions. On the other hand, lower stance for women is concerned with the fact that their joblessness is pressure and the primary social demands for them is still focused on domestic roles, thus slightly mitigating the external social stigma of lacking paid work compared to men in the public sphere. The successful shift to remote freelance work, Burhan (P14), age 26, represents a new finding from Lower Dir an individual attempt to circumvent the local system of 'sifarish.' However, this active coping generates a new form of stress, as the work is not understood or validated by the family: *"My family doesn't understand this 'online business.' They think it's not a real job"* (P14). This suggests a significant generational and ideological conflict regarding career paths, where resilient behavior leads to social isolation. On the other hand, females reporting social isolation indicate a significant internalization of failure and worthlessness, suggesting the stigma experienced by women is perhaps more related to family disappointment rather than just external community judgment. Overall, the data underscores that the core issues of psychological distress are universal among the unemployed, and the gender-based variance highlights the critical role of specific socio-cultural and economic contexts, like the patriarchal expectations and strong family structures in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in mediating the experience of unemployment. Research in all over the world frequently highlights that unemployment can have a more pronounced negative impact on men's mental health in contexts where male identity and social status are heavily tied to their employment and financial provision role, particularly in gender regimes where the need for male employment differs significantly from that of women (Strandh et al., 2013; Falkstedt, D., Backhans, nd).

The frustration that is faced by the unemployed graduates in this present study is likely highlighted due to the associated loss of stigma and self-care. Kidwai & Sarwar (2015) stated that the lack of employment for educated women in Pakistan still represents a significant setback regarding personal autonomy, utilization of educational investment, and societal expectations

Conclusion

Qualitative study plays an important role in finding out mental health issues and the well-being of unemployed graduates in the district of Lower Dir. It reveals that unemployment has a devastating impact on the psychological well-being and mental health of graduates. In short, these findings suggest that policy intervention should be multifaceted. The majority of the youth who are the victims of unemployment are aged 23-27 years. Besides the urgent need for job creation, there is a critical need to develop community-based mental health programs that play an essential role in minimising the stigma

related to unemployment, psychosocial support services which foster resilient coping, career guidance, counseling, and professional advice that can bridge the gap between local society expectations and the realities of the globalized digital labor market. The sustained unemployment of graduate youth in Lower Dir is a multi-layered social crisis marked by profound, gendered psychological distress. Some results from the study of the Lower Dir resonate potentially with worldwide research concerning the psychological and social outcome of unemployment, predominantly amongst accomplished youth. It suggests that the stresses observed are universal aspects of unemployment amplified by local cultural context.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, some of the recommendations are proposed in the following points;

1. Realistic job market information and a job-oriented degree program: It is associated with current market demand.
2. Professional CV writing and interview preparation workshops: It enables the graduate to enter the work market.
3. Mental health is first aid training: It enhances mental health among graduates.
4. Integrate Mental Health Education, which includes coping strategies and mental health awareness training in undergraduate curricula to build resilience before employment challenges arise.
5. Develop Skill-Based Programs: It shifts focus from purely academic education to include practical, market-relevant skills through short courses and certification programs. These courses will diversify job opportunities for jobless youths.
6. Train Community Mental Health Workers: It builds capacity among existing community health workers to identify and provide basic support for unemployment-related mental health issues.

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