

FRUSTRATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Original Article

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ABSTRACT

Background: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) significantly affects not only the developmental trajectory of diagnosed children but also the psychological health of their caregivers. In particular, frustration and compromised psychological well-being are increasingly recognized as core challenges for parents of children with autism. However, these aspects remain underexplored in Pakistan, where limited awareness, social stigma, and resource scarcity may further burden families. Investigating the psychological impact on parents in this cultural context is essential for shaping effective support mechanisms.

Objective: To explore the relationship between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children with autism in Pakistan, and to assess how sociodemographic factors may influence this association.

Methods: A cross-sectional correlational study was conducted involving 300 parents (215 mothers and 85 fathers) of children formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling from major cities including Lahore, Islamabad, Gujranwala, Multan, Rawalpindi, and Karachi. The Frustration Discomfort Scale and the Ryff Psychological Wellbeing Scale were used to assess frustration levels and psychological well-being, respectively. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, employing Pearson's correlation and subgroup analyses based on gender and educational background.

Results: The mean age of the participants was 34.76 ± 5.91 years. A significant negative correlation was found between frustration and psychological well-being ($r = -0.11$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher frustration was associated with poorer psychological health. Subgroup analysis revealed that this association was more pronounced among mothers and parents with intermediate educational levels.

Conclusion: The study emphasizes the emotional burden experienced by parents of children with autism in Pakistan. It highlights the need for culturally sensitive psychological support and structured intervention programs targeting both emotional regulation and caregiver well-being.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Caregivers, Frustration, Mental Health, Parents, Psychological Wellbeing, Stress.

INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex neurodevelopmental condition, as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which typically presents in early childhood and persists throughout life. It is marked by notable challenges in social interaction and communication, alongside restrictive and repetitive behaviors that are often tied to a strong preference for routine (1,2). While much attention has been given to the behavioral and developmental aspects of autism in children, the condition's profound impact on the psychological health and daily life of parents remains a critical, yet often underexplored, area of concern. The demands of caregiving, coupled with the emotional toll of navigating a child's developmental challenges, frequently lead to parental frustration and psychological distress (3,4). Frustration experienced by parents of children with autism is not merely episodic but tends to manifest in chronic forms, affecting various aspects of daily functioning. Parents often report symptoms such as irritability, emotional exhaustion, disrupted sleep patterns, appetite changes, and strained family relationships. Studies have shown that sleep disturbances among these parents are significantly more prevalent than in parents of typically developing children, with stress emerging as the most consistent predictor of poor sleep quality (5,6). Moreover, qualitative findings underscore the emotional and logistical burdens parents face, including feelings of denial, guilt, sadness, and the challenges of accessing therapy and education, often intensified by transportation difficulties and financial strain (7). These stressors are compounded by the child's behavioral challenges, which have been strongly linked to heightened parental irritability and emotional overload (8).

Psychological well-being, encompassing emotional balance, autonomy, purpose, and quality of interpersonal relationships, is frequently compromised in this population. The caregiving role alters the psychological trajectory of parents, often resulting in diminished self-acceptance, reduced sense of control, and lower life satisfaction (9,10). Evidence suggests that parents of children with autism are at increased risk for clinical levels of psychological disturbance. One study highlighted that over half of the parents assessed demonstrated such levels, with gender and employment status being significant contributing factors, while support systems appeared to offer limited protective value (3). Similar research confirms the heightened stress and depressive symptoms in these parents compared to those raising typically developing children (11). Interestingly, some findings note that the specific diagnosis of the child may not always determine the degree of psychological strain, suggesting that individualized mental health support is essential regardless of diagnostic categorization (12). Despite the growing global recognition of caregiver burden in autism, there remains a paucity of research focusing specifically on the interplay between parental frustration and psychological well-being within low- and middle-income countries, including Pakistan. Cultural expectations, limited access to resources, and social stigma may further exacerbate these challenges in such settings. Therefore, there is a critical need to understand how these variables interact within the Pakistani sociocultural context. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children with autism in Pakistan, thereby contributing evidence that may inform culturally appropriate interventions and support mechanisms.

METHODS

The present study employed a cross-sectional correlational research design to investigate the relationship between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in Pakistan. A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation from both public and private institutes catering to special needs children. A total of 300 parents were recruited from various cities, including Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Gujranwala, and Rawalpindi. Participants were eligible if they had at least one child formally diagnosed with autism by a recognized institute, the child was below 18 years of age, and the participating parent had attained a minimum education level of intermediate or higher. Parents who did not meet these criteria or who had children with multiple neurodevelopmental disorders were excluded to minimize confounding variables. Data collection involved standardized self-report measures, namely the Psychological Well-Being Scale developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995) and the Frustration Discomfort Scale introduced by Harrington (2005). The Psychological Well-Being Scale is an 18-item instrument rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), designed to assess six key dimensions of well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (13,14). The instrument has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.87 to 0.93. The Frustration Discomfort Scale, consisting of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, was used to assess frustration intolerance, with subdomains including emotional intolerance, entitlement, discomfort intolerance, and achievement frustration. Reliability coefficients for the Frustration Discomfort Scale in the present study ranged from 0.84 to 0.94, indicating strong internal consistency.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the affiliated academic department, following the APA 7 ethical guidelines. Formal permissions to utilize the aforementioned scales were secured from the original authors. A structured questionnaire was developed, incorporating informed consent, demographic information, and both psychometric instruments. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained after a thorough explanation of the study’s purpose, procedures, and the right to withdraw without any consequences. Data collection was facilitated through formal invitations extended by the heads of selected special education institutions. Each participant completed the questionnaire in approximately 20 minutes within a designated environment ensuring privacy. No incentives were offered, and no identifying personal data were collected to maintain ethical standards. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their time and cooperation. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic variables. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was applied to assess the relationship between frustration and psychological well-being. Additionally, linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive strength of frustration on psychological well-being scores.

RESULTS

The analysis of demographic data revealed that the mean age of the participants was 34.76 years with a standard deviation of 5.91. Among the 300 parents surveyed, a substantial majority were mothers, accounting for 215 individuals (72%), while fathers constituted 85 participants (28%). Regarding educational attainment, 105 parents (35%) held an intermediate-level qualification, followed by 95 parents (32%) with a bachelor's degree, 85 parents (28%) with a master's degree, and only 15 parents (5%) having earned a PhD. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children diagnosed with autism. The findings indicated a statistically significant negative correlation between the two variables ($r = -0.11, p < .01$). This suggests that higher levels of frustration were associated with lower levels of psychological well-being in the studied population. Subgroup analysis was performed to further investigate whether demographic characteristics moderated the relationship between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children with autism. Stratified correlation analysis revealed that the negative correlation persisted across both gender and qualification subgroups, although with varying magnitudes. Notably, the correlation between frustration and psychological well-being appeared stronger among mothers than fathers, suggesting a heightened vulnerability to emotional strain in maternal caregivers. Similarly, among educational subgroups, individuals with intermediate and bachelor-level qualifications exhibited more pronounced negative associations compared to those with higher academic degrees. These findings underscore the importance of considering sociodemographic context when designing mental health interventions, as certain subgroups may benefit from more targeted psychosocial support.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=300)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviations
Age			34.76	5.91
Parents of Children with Autism				
Father	85	28		
Mother	215	72		
Qualification				
Intermediate	105	35		
Bachelor	95	32		
Master	85	28		
PhD	15	5		

Table 2: Correlational Analysis between Study Variables (N=300)

Variables	1	2
1.Frustration	-	-.11**
2.Psychoholical Wellbeing		-

Note. ** $p < .01$

Table 3: Subgroup Correlation Analysis

Group	Correlation (r)
Father	-0.08
Mother	-0.15
Intermediate	-0.17
Bachelor	-0.13
Master	-0.09
PhD	-0.04

Interpretation: The negative correlation is more pronounced among mothers (-0.15) than fathers (-0.08), indicating that maternal caregivers may experience a stronger inverse relationship between frustration and psychological well-being. Among educational subgroups, intermediate-level participants showed the strongest negative correlation (-0.17), followed by bachelor’s degree holders (-0.13), suggesting that lower educational attainment may be associated with increased vulnerability to psychological distress linked to frustration.

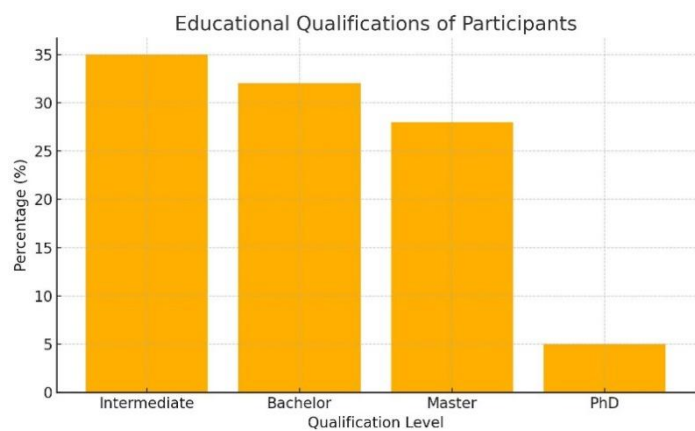


Figure 1 Educational Qualification of participants

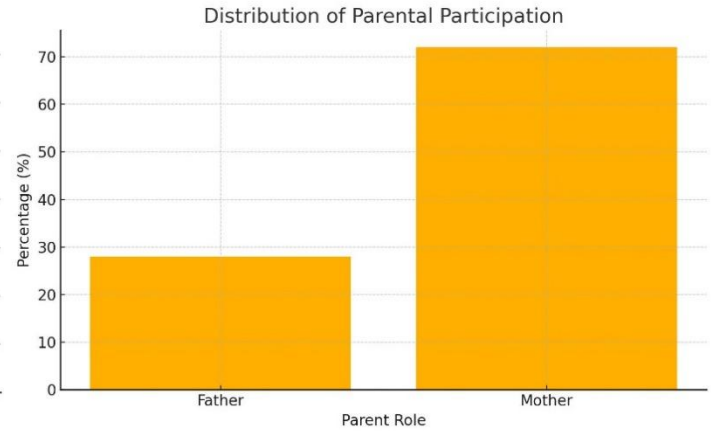


Figure 2 Distribution of Parental Participants

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the association between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children with autism in the Pakistani cultural context, addressing a significant research gap in the local literature. The findings revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between frustration and psychological well-being, confirming the study's primary hypothesis. This result aligns with existing international literature, which consistently shows that higher levels of stress and emotional burden among parents of children with autism are associated with poorer psychological outcomes. In studies conducted across various countries, particularly in Asian and Middle Eastern regions, similar trends were observed, reinforcing the notion that caregiving under chronic stress can compromise emotional resilience and psychological stability (15-17). Several contributing factors explain the inverse relationship observed in this population. Continuous supervision, managing impulsive and hyperactive behaviors, and the absence of consistent emotional or institutional support all contribute to psychological strain (18,19). Emotional burnout and frustration may be further exacerbated by cultural stigmatization and a general lack of awareness regarding autism spectrum disorder in Pakistan. In such a socio-cultural environment, judgmental attitudes toward parents and children with neurodevelopmental conditions often replace compassion, deepening isolation and distress (20). The results from subgroup analysis further validated that, mothers and individuals with lower educational attainment experienced a more pronounced negative correlation between frustration and well-being, pointing toward disparities in emotional resilience and access to coping resources. These findings have strong implications for designing inclusive support systems, especially for vulnerable caregiver subgroups. The study contributes novel insights into the psychosocial realities of parenting children with autism in Pakistan (21,22). One of its key strengths lies in its attempt to contextualize psychological outcomes within a specific cultural framework, thereby laying the groundwork for locally relevant interventions. Additionally, the use of validated

psychometric tools and a multi-city sampling strategy enhances the internal reliability and geographical generalizability of the results to a certain extent.

Nevertheless, several limitations merit consideration. The cross-sectional nature of the study restricts causal inference and limits the understanding of how frustration and psychological well-being may evolve over time. A longitudinal design would allow for better insight into the temporal dynamics of caregiver stress and adaptation. Furthermore, the sample was imbalanced in terms of gender, with a majority of participants being mothers. This skew may limit the applicability of findings across both parental roles. Another limitation involves educational disparity within the sample; the low representation of highly educated parents hindered the possibility of conducting robust comparative analyses using inferential statistics such as ANOVA. Moreover, the sample size, though adequate for correlational analysis, was not sufficiently large to permit more sophisticated multivariate modeling or to explore regional or institutional variations in caregiver experiences. The implications of these findings are multifaceted. There is an urgent need for widespread community-level awareness campaigns to dismantle stigma and normalize discussions around neurodevelopmental disorders. Mental health professionals should be actively engaged in delivering seminars and workshops aimed not only at parents of children with autism but also at the broader community, including educators and healthcare workers (23). Encouraging help-seeking behavior and providing culturally sensitive psychotherapy could mitigate the emotional toll on caregivers. Parents should be equipped with practical behavioral strategies, such as visual cueing and structured routines, which have been shown to reduce caregiving challenges and enhance child outcomes. On a policy level, the study underscores the critical need for government-led investment in public special education institutions, given the limited access and high cost of private facilities. Furthermore, national mental health initiatives must integrate caregiver support as a central focus to sustainably enhance the well-being of families affected by autism. Addressing the emotional and psychological burden on caregivers is not only a moral imperative but also a necessary step toward inclusive developmental health care planning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study successfully highlighted a significant negative association between frustration and psychological well-being among parents of children with autism within the cultural framework of Pakistan. By addressing a crucial gap in the local literature, the research underscores the emotional toll faced by caregivers and the urgent need for targeted mental health support and awareness programs. The findings emphasize the importance of culturally tailored interventions, accessible support systems, and community-level education to reduce stigma and promote emotional resilience in families affected by autism. This study contributes meaningful insights for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals working to improve the quality of life for both children with autism and their caregivers.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Mussarat Shabbir*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Pulwasha Anwar	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Aqsa Rasheed	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Muhammad Imran	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Inzar Naeem	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Asmat Raza Jaffri	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Marium Arain	Contributed to study concept and Data collection Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Natasha Bibi	Writing - Review & Editing, Assistance with Data Curation

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