

Exploring the Role of Family Dynamics in Suicide Attempt: Indigenous Perspective

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Abstract

Background and objectives. In recent years, incidences of suicide appear to have increased in Pakistan and suicide has become a major public health problem. Present qualitative inquiry aimed to explore different family dynamics that leads to suicide attempt.

Method. In present study collective case study was used as research strategy. Research participants were recruited through purposive sampling strategy. Sample comprised two female suicide attempt survivors, aged 24 and 25 years. Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool of data collection.

Results. The findings of the study revealed that in family dynamics, parental neglect, hostility, disregard, bundles of restrictions, lack of warmth and communication gap had the leading role towards suicide attempt in young adults. Moreover, findings showed that conflictual relationship with parents and siblings makes an individual feel worthless, and consider self as burden for the family. It is also emerged from the data that parental disputes had devastating effects in life of young adults. Psychological outcomes of all sorts of unhealthy family dynamics were worthlessness, hopelessness and suicidal ideation ultimately leading to suicidal attempt.

Conclusion. Research findings contribute to a meaningful understanding of how suicide risk is increased by unhealthy family dynamics and paved the way for an effective intervention plan.

Keywords. *Family dynamics, suicide attempt, conflicts, communication gap, worthlessness, hopelessness.*



Introduction

The rates of suicidal attempts among adolescents and young adults, ages 15 to 25 years, have increased substantially during the past decade (WHO, 2014). More than 700 000 people die due to suicide every year. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19 year-olds. 77% of global suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries. Ingestion of pesticide, hanging and firearms are among the most common methods of suicide globally (WHO, 2019). In recent years, incidences of suicidal have increased in Pakistan and suicide has become a major public health problem (Shekhani et al., 2018; Khan, 2007; Agha, 2001). Brent (1993) have found among adolescents with a psychiatric disorder, that past suicidal ideation with a plan is as strongly associated with completed suicide.

Suicide, an act of deliberately killing one's own self, emerges from a population of suicide ideators. Suicide and suicidal behavior has long been regarded as a serious social problem. Suicidal ideation is defined as thoughts about suicide which may be as detailed as a formulated plan, without the suicidal act itself (Bo Bi et al. 2010). Suicidal ideation has been identified as both a common antecedent and a significant risk factor for suicidal attempt and complete suicide (Gliatto, Michael & Anil, 1999).

The social environment plays an important role in shaping individuals' behavior and preparing them for life's challenges. The family as a social resource is viewed as an important regulating mechanism of society in that stable families contribute towards a stable society (Thompson, 2012). The way family members live and interact with each other makes family dynamics. Family patterns has deep relation with individual personality, so if family dynamics are unhealthy individual would be affected. Better formation from the family improve the adolescent's mental growth and there by benefits the society whereas unstable family patterns can lead adolescents towards self-destructive behaviors like suicide (Evans, 2004).

Empirical Evidence consistently found lower levels of family cohesion among the families of suicidal youth as compared to the families of non-suicidal psychiatric subjects and healthy controls (Gencoz & Or, 2006). Individuals with family problems commonly manifest a suicidal attempt, which highlights the importance of family environmental factors when assessing suicide risk (Xing et al., 2009). So, the present research aimed to explore different family dynamics that leads to suicidal attempt.

Rationale

In an adolescent's world, the family dynamics are of paramount importance because their lives are centered initially around their families so family becomes the primary agent of socialization (Zhang et al., 2011). This special significance of family dynamic has important consequences in the life of an individual. Low family cohesion and support (Reams, & Jacobs, 1982) as well as familial conflict and dysfunction (Gencoz & Or, 2006) can lead to suicidal behaviors or can indirectly aggravate risks through depressive symptoms. In Pakistan, family is a very strong institution and has a deep impact on the individual's life. So, it is of great importance to explore family dynamics in relation with a suicide attempt, which is now a days very alarming issue in Pakistani youth.

Research question

What are the family dynamics leads to suicide attempt?

Sub questions

- What sort of parental relationship contributes towards suicide attempt?
- What sort of sibling relationship contributes towards suicide attempt?
- What is the role of parent's marital relationship in contributing towards suicidal attempt?

Method

Research strategy. Present qualitative research is based on collective case study. As in present inquiry, two suicide attempt survivor cases were chosen for within and cross case analyses.

Sampling strategy. Purposive sampling strategy was used to select the research participants. Specifically, among purposive sampling, intensity sampling was used which contains information rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely. Sample comprised two unmarried female participants aged 24 and 25 years. Sample was taken from Government Sector Universities of Pakistan. The education of case 1 and case 2 participants was graduation and matric respectively.

Inclusion criteria

- Physically and medically healthy female participants.
- Female participants with atleast one suicide attempt.
- Duration after suicidal attempt less than 4 months.

Demographic information of cases. Case I.

Factitious code 01 was assigned to participant. She was young unmarried female of 24 years. She had education till graduation. Her mother was of strict nature and her father was not alive; he died due to blood cancer. She had 4 sisters and no brother. She was the youngest child among siblings. She lived in a nuclear family system with her parents, one sister was married. She was teacher in private primary school.

Case II. Factitious code 02 was assigned to participant. She was young unmarried female of 25 years. Her education was matriculation. She had 3 sisters and two brothers. She was the youngest child among her siblings. All siblings were married. She lived in a joint family system with her parents and two married brothers.

Data collection tool. For the purpose of investigation semi-structured interview guide “containing questions regarding family dynamics (Relationship with Parents, sibling relationship, relationship between parents) and suicidal attempt” was developed by the committee which comprised researchers and subject matter experts. Interview guide was developed in Urdu language. The duration of each interview was approximately 45 to 50 minutes. Each interview was audio-taped then interview data were transcribed and subsequently analyzed to facilitate the development of themes.

Procedure

Data was collected from two females who attempted suicide 4 months earlier. The participants were identified through purposive sampling strategy. Written consent was taken from both participants. Interviews were conducted in distraction free room and participants were seated comfortably on couch. Each participant was interviewed face to face using the semi-structured method of open-ended questions. Confidentiality of data was assured to participants. Within case analysis of both cases and cross case analysis on common themes of both cases were completed. Results were reported and discussed.

Results

The first stage of analyzing the data involved focusing on one transcript, this stage included reading and re-reading the text and making notes of any initial thoughts and observations. The second stage was to identify and label themes that were emerging from the data. In the third stage the researcher proceeded to connect the themes within the transcript and thus formed ‘clusters of themes’. The fourth stage involved constructing a summary table of the structured themes, together with verbatim from the transcript that illustrate each theme. The themes within the table only included themes that capture something about the quality of the participant’s experiences of the phenomena. The four stage process was then applied to the next transcript from which themes were identified and clustered together with the themes from the first transcript.

Within case analysis I. Method of suicide attempt. She attempted suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. It was her first suicidal attempt. Her family environment was stressful, there were several conflicts in her family. Her family was going through financial crisis. She had feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness that contributed to her suicidal attempt.

Relationship with Parents. Parental relationship refers to how parents interact with their offspring. Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category are as follows:

Communication Gap. For the purpose of current study, communication gap is defined as when individuals cannot express to each other. Participant listed lots of complaints about her relationship with parents. She wanted to have warm, caring parents but she did not have. She reported her mother very strict person who can only express anger and cannot understand other’s point of view. She also told that she cannot share anything with her mother even if she wants to.

امی بہت سخت مزاج ہیں۔ بات بات پر ڈانٹ دیتی ہیں۔ ویسے بھی کچھ شیئر نہیں کیا جا سکتا ان سے۔ وہ کچھ نہیں سمجھتی غصہ کرتی ہیں۔ امی سے رشتہ اتنا close نہیں ہے۔ امی سے کوئی بات شیئر نہیں کرتی۔

Neglect. In present study, neglect in relationships refers to give little attention or disregard towards the participants by family members. Participant sadly expressed that her mother never loved her never paid attention to her. She also told that her mother always humiliated her for being girl. As she was last born among her sisters so at her birth her mother desperately wanted to have a boy but again it was a girl that's why she never attained love, care and warmth that she deserves to get from her parents.

کبھی پیار نہیں دیا امی نے کبھی توجہ نہیں دی۔

Hostile. Hostile means feeling or showing dislike or opposition marked by malevolence or having an intimidating, antagonistic, or offensive nature while talking with someone. Participant revealed her mother's hostile attitude by telling that her mother always disregarded her daughters especially participant for being girl. Her mother never gave respect to her and always being very ironic on all her daughters that was quite disappointing for participant.

امی یہ کہتی ہیں میرا کوئی بیٹا ہوتا میرا سہارہ بنتا۔ پھر ہم ساری بہنوں کو بہت دکھ ہوتا ہے۔ ان کی یہ باتیں سن کے۔ طعنے مارتی ہیں بیٹی ہونے کے کوئی عزت نہیں دی جاتی۔

Restrictions. Restrictions is defined as to keep or confine within limits. Participant reported that parents put lots of limitations on everything life feels static. No personal decisions were allowed no one could live life of their own choice. Further participant reported.

بہت پابندیاں ہیں یہاں نہیں جانا وپا ن نہیں جانا۔ دوستوں کے ساتھ نہیں جانا۔ اور کبھی چلے جاو اور دیر ہو جائے تو بہت ڈانٹ پڑتی ہے۔ اکثر تو اجازت ملتی ہی نہیں۔ اگر کچھ کرلو اپنی مرضی سے تو ناراضگی ہو جاتی ہے۔ جھگڑے ہوتے ہیں۔ اس لیے میں کچھ کرتی ہی نہیں۔ گھر میں ہر لحاظ سے بہت سختی ہے۔

Sibling Relationship. Sibling relationship is defined as, the way siblings in a family interacts with each other. Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category are as follows:

Conflicts. For the purpose of analysis, Peterson (1983) definition of Conflicts was used, and he defined conflicts as inter personal process that occurs whenever the actions of one person interfere with actions of other persons. Participant reported that there were always conflicts between siblings on little things.

بہنوں کی آپس میں زیادہ تر لڑائیاں ہی ہوتی رہتی ہیں آپس میں بہت ہی زیادہ - چھوٹی چھوٹی باتوں پر جھگڑا ہوتا ہے۔

Communication Gap. Participant's siblings were having lack of communication. There was lack in sharing anything with each other rather a sort of cold distant relationship existed between them as reported by participant. کوئی بہن خیال نہیں رکھتی کسی کا۔ لڑائیاں نہ بھی ہوں تو آپس میں بات چیت بہت کم ہوتی ہے۔ بہت کم ہوتا ہے کہ کبھی اکٹھے بیٹھ جائیں۔ ورنہ عام طور پر ایسا نہیں ہوتا بس سب چپ چپ ہی رہتے ہیں۔ ایک دوسرے سے باتیں شیئر نہیں کرتے۔

Selfishness. Selfishness is showing concern excessively with oneself, seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others. Sibling's relationship in participant's family was quite selfish as no one care for other person. Participant reported in interview that

میں نے اپنی کبھی بھی اپنی بہنوں میں یا گھر میں یہ چیز نہیں دیکھی کے سب مل بیٹھ کے کسی مسئلے کا حل نکالیں ہر کسی کو اپنی اپنی پڑی ہوتی ہے۔ ہر کوئی اپنی فکر کرتا ہے۔ دوسرے کی کوئی پروہ نہیں کرتا۔ کوئی بھی چیز گھر میں اجائے سب لڑنے لگتے ہیں کے یہ میں نے لینی ہے یہ میں نے لینی ہے۔

Relationship between Parents. Relationship between parents refers to how parents interact with each other. Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category are as follows:

Conflicts. Participant told that her parents always had conflicts and they use to scream on each other every day. Financial crisis was one of the reasons of fight between parents. Another main reason of all time conflicts was, that her mother didn't have son. Because of that her parents always use to feel irritated and exhausted and her father always blamed her mother for not having son.

امی ابو کی لڑائیاں ہوتی تھی۔ امی ابو کو بیٹا نہیں دے سکی یہ وجہ ہوتی تھی لڑائی کی۔ خرچہ بھی زیادہ تھا۔

Dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction have been defined as the state of being displeased, discontented, or uneasiness proceeding from the want of gratification. Participant's parents used to feel dissatisfied form their life and the main reason of that dissatisfaction was not having a son in their life.

دونوں مطمئن نہیں تھے اپنی زندگی سے۔

Psychological Outcomes. In present study psychological outcomes are what participant feels about herself and life. Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category are as follows:

Worthlessness. Worthlessness for the purpose of analysis is defined as feeling one own self of no, dignity and value. Participant shared her feelings of worthlessness by telling that she felt herself a burden for family and assumed that after her death her family's problem would be resolved.

مجھے لگا میرے مرنے کے بعد میری فیملی کے مسئلے حل ہو جائیں گے۔ کسی کو کوئی پریشانی نہیں ہوگی۔ پہلے سب روٹیں دھوئیں گے لیکن بعد میں سب ٹھک ہو جائیں گے۔

Hopelessness. Hopelessness refers to having no expectation of good or success. Participant revealed that she is not hopeful regarding her life and future. She also showed feelings in entire interview that life will be always be the same.

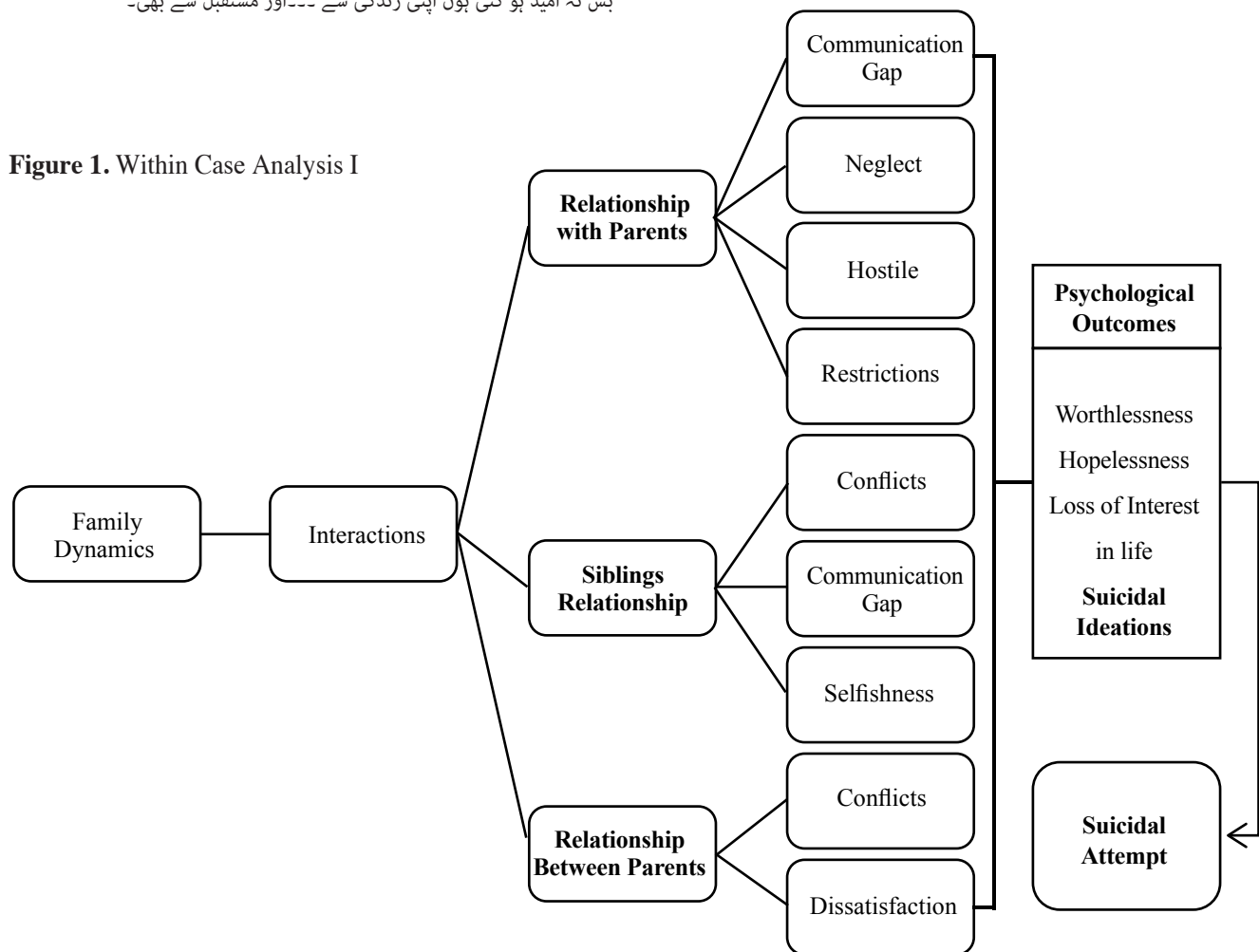
بس نہ امید ہو گی ہوں اپنی زندگی سے -- اور مستقبل سے بھی۔

Loss of interest in life. Loss of interest in life refers to when person doesn't find life charming and colorful anymore. Participant depicted same kind of loss of interest in life because her family was quite heedless and irritating; no one in her family could understand her. She used to share her problems with her friends that she should have discussed with her sisters and parents. So as she reported.

مجھے زندگی میں کوئی دلچسپی نہیں رہی۔ میں دوسروں کو دیکھتی ہوں کہ سب کے گھر والے اتنے اچھے ہوتے ہیں آپس میں خوشی سے رہتے ہیں لیکن میرے گھر ایسا کچھ بھی نہیں ہے۔

Suicidal ideation. Participant was having suicidal ideations very frequently whenever some critical moment came in her life. As participant reported that

مشکل وقت میں سوچ تو ہمیشہ آتی ہے کہ مار لوں خود کو۔ لیکن کیا میں نے صرف ایک بار ہے۔ لیکن جب بھی کوئی پریشانی آتی ہے تو یہ سوچ آتی ہے کہ خودکشی کر لوں۔



Within Case Analysis II. Method of suicide attempt. She attempted suicide by taking overdose of sleeping pills. Sleeping pills were recommended by doctor to her one tablet daily because she had complained of sleeplessness but during stress she used it for suicide. She didn't tell anyone about her decision of suicide attempt. Her family environment was stressful; there were several conflicts in her family (i.e. Conflict with parents, conflict between siblings and conflict between parents). Participant had feelings of worthlessness and wish to die that might lead her towards suicidal attempt.

Relationship with Parents. Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category were as follows:

Communication gap. For the purpose of this study, communication gap was defined as something when there is no proper communication between family members. Participant reported that she could not share her feelings and thoughts to her parents. She had a distant relationship with his father. She was reserved from her family. She showed a need for love and care from her father. She wasn't not involved in any family decisions. Decisions of the family were taken by mother and elder brother. She never shared her feelings and thoughts with her mother.

میرے والد ہم سے دور دور رہتے ہیں۔ وہ شروع سے ہی ایسے ہیں۔ وہ ہمارے میں نہیں بیٹھتے۔ میرادل کرتا ہے کہ میرے والد مجھے پیسے دیں۔ لیکن وہ کہتے ہیں کہ بھائی سے لو۔ گھر کے فیصلے بھی امی کرتی ہیں۔ یا بڑے بھائی کرتے ہیں۔ ہمارے والد کا زیادہ عمل دخل نہیں ہے ہمارے گھر میں۔ میری والدہ مجھ سے بہت پیار محبت کرتی ہیں۔ نہیں والدہ کو نہیں بتاتی [باتیں] میری والد اور والدہ سے بہت ہی کم بات چیت ہوتی ہیں۔

Restrictions. For the analysis restriction was defined as limitations or rules set by the family which cannot be broken, either explicit or implicit. Participant wasn't allowed to look outside the door and to go outside the house. If she had to go, she should go with brother. She had to take permission from elder brother if she wanted to arrange meeting with friends. It pictured a complex restricted family environment.

ایک حد تک جتنی لڑکیوں کو ہوتی ہے مگر ہم باہر نہیں دیکھ سکتے۔ باہر نہیں جا سکتے۔ اپنے علاقہ کا بہن میں تو بالکل نہیں جا سکتے۔ جانا ہو تو بھائی لے کے جاتے ہیں۔ گھر میں رہ کر جو مرضی کرو۔ اگر کچھ خاص کرنا ہو تو بڑے بھائی یا والدہ سے اجازت لینی ہوتی ہے۔ اگر کسی سے غلطی ہو جائے تو ہم اس سے ناراض ہو جاتے ہیں۔ اس سے بات نہیں کرتے۔ کبھی لڑائی ہو جاتی ہے۔

Sibling relationship. Sibling relationship was defined as the way siblings in a family interact with each other. Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category were as follows:

Injustice. For the current study, Injustice was defined as gross unfairness. Participant was facing difficulty of injustice at home. Her brothers were being unfair to her. They didn't take her to shopping and she was deprived of money as well.

میرے بھائی میری بھابیوں کو خود شاپنگ کرواتے ہیں۔ ہماری دفعہ صرف ٹھوڑے سے پیسے دے دیتے ہیں کہ جا کہ کر لو۔ اپنی بیویوں کو زیادہ دیتے ہیں۔ میرادل کرتا ہے کہ میرے والد دیں مجھے پیسے اور زیادہ دیں لیکن وہ کہتے ہیں کہ بھائی سے لو۔

Incoherence. Here incoherence specifically means lack of cohesion among family members. Participant reported that her family lack coherence. Everyone had their isolated life. After the marriage of siblings, everyone got busy in their own family. She reported that we never had a family lunch and dinner together.

نہیں سب علیحدہ علیحدہ کھاتے ہیں۔ میں کبھی امی اور بھانجی کے ساتھ کھا لیتی ہوں۔ بھائی بھابیوں ساتھ اور ابو الگ ہی کھاتے ہیں۔ بہن بھائی اپنی اپنی زندگی میں مصروف ہیں۔

Communication gap. Communication gap for the analysis of this study, was something when there is no proper communication between siblings. In participant's family, a communication gap was existed. She reported that she could not share her feelings and thoughts with her siblings.

امی سے باتیں نہیں کرتی۔ ہم بہن بھائی ایک دوسرے سے باتیں شیڈ بہت کم کرتے ہیں۔ چھوٹا بھائی تو بالکل نہیں کرتا باقی پھر بھی کر لیتے ہیں۔

Relationship between Parents. Themes that emerged from this category are as follows:

Conflict. Participant told that relationship between her parents was conflictual. They always disagreed with each other.

میرے والدین بہت زیادہ لڑتے ہیں۔ شروع سے ہی ان کی آپس میں نہیں بنتی۔ بات ہی نہیں مانتے ایک دوسرے کی

Psychological Outcomes. In present study psychological outcomes are what participant feels about herself and life Themes that emerged from data analysis of this category are as follows:

Wish to die. In the current study, wish to die theme means when someone don't want to live. Wish to die is different from wish to suicide but it could lead to suicidal attempt. Participant developed feeling of hopelessness and wish to die. When she was inquired, why you attempted suicide, she replied that she didn't want to live.

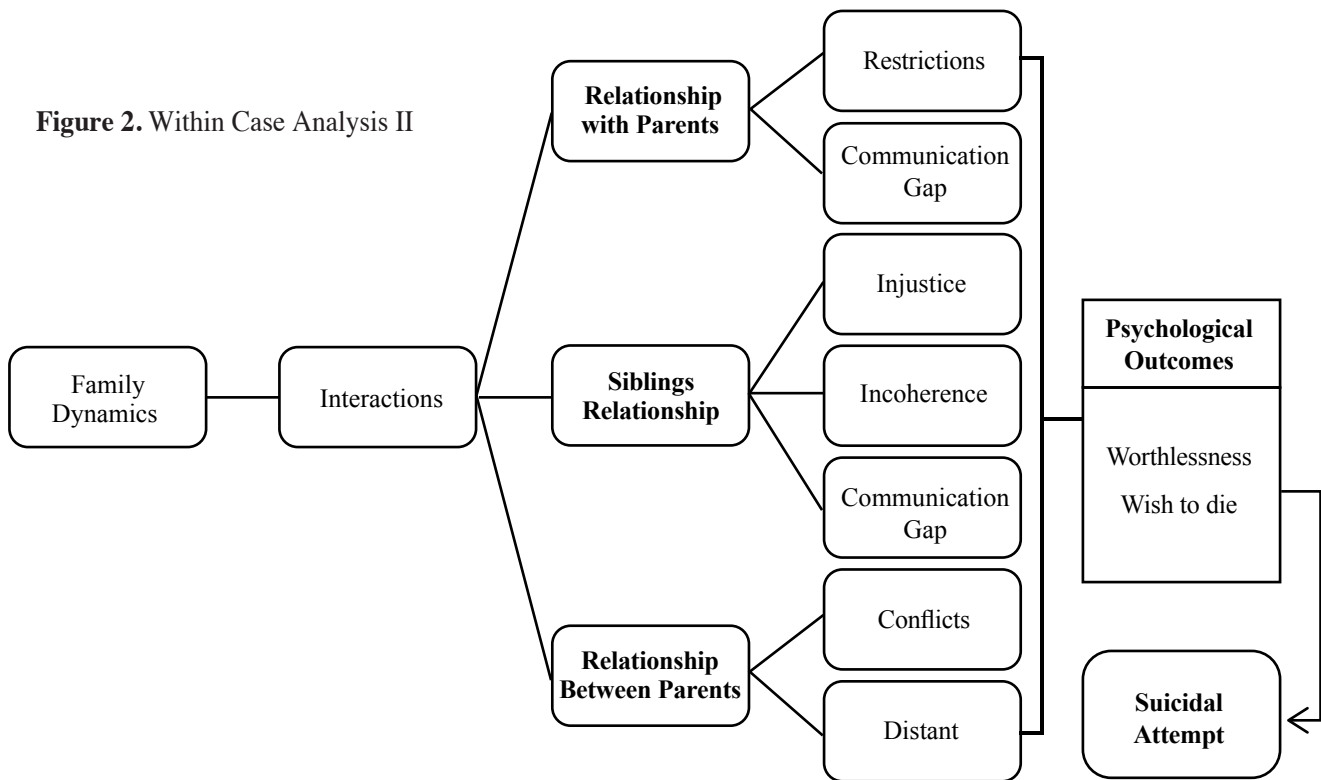
بس زندہ رہنے کا دل نہیں کرتا تھا۔

Worthlessness. In present study for the analysis of worthlessness theme, Grohol (2010)'s description of worthlessness was used. Participant experienced feeling of worthlessness.

She had unrealistic negative evaluations of her own worth. Moreover, she used self-critical dialogue that generated a sense of worthlessness. She considered herself as a reason of family conflicts. As she said "I feel that my death would comfort all". Her self-worthless caused distress and lead her to commit suicidal attempt.

میرا رشتہ نہیں ہوتا تھا تو گھر والے آپس میں لڑتے تھے۔ مجھے لگتا تھا میں عذاب ہوں۔ اس لیے میں نے خود کشی کر لی۔ مجھے لگتا تھا کہ میرے مرنے سے سب سکون میں ہو جائیں گے۔ سارے کہتے ہیں کہ میری وجہ سے بھائیوں کی لڑائی ہوتی ہے زیادہ تر۔

Figure 2. Within Case Analysis II



Cross case analyses

Themes that were identified as common in both cases are discussed below. In present research, participants of both cases experienced communication gap and bundles of restrictions from their parents that made them feel worthless, hopeless and eventually lead them towards suicide. These findings are consistent with some of the existing researches. Researchers have found contextual factors (family violence, support from parents and peers) as well as personal factors (reduced levels of hope, low self-esteem and self-efficacy) as contributing to an increased risk of self-destructive behaviour (Beautrais, 2000; George, 2005; Hall & Torres, 2002; Larson, Wilson & Mortimer, 2002). Lipschitz et al (1990) suggested that emotional neglect was an important and deleterious component of maltreatment experiences and might be a more powerful predictor of suicidal behavior in hospitalized adolescents than physical abuse, emotional abuse, and physical neglect.

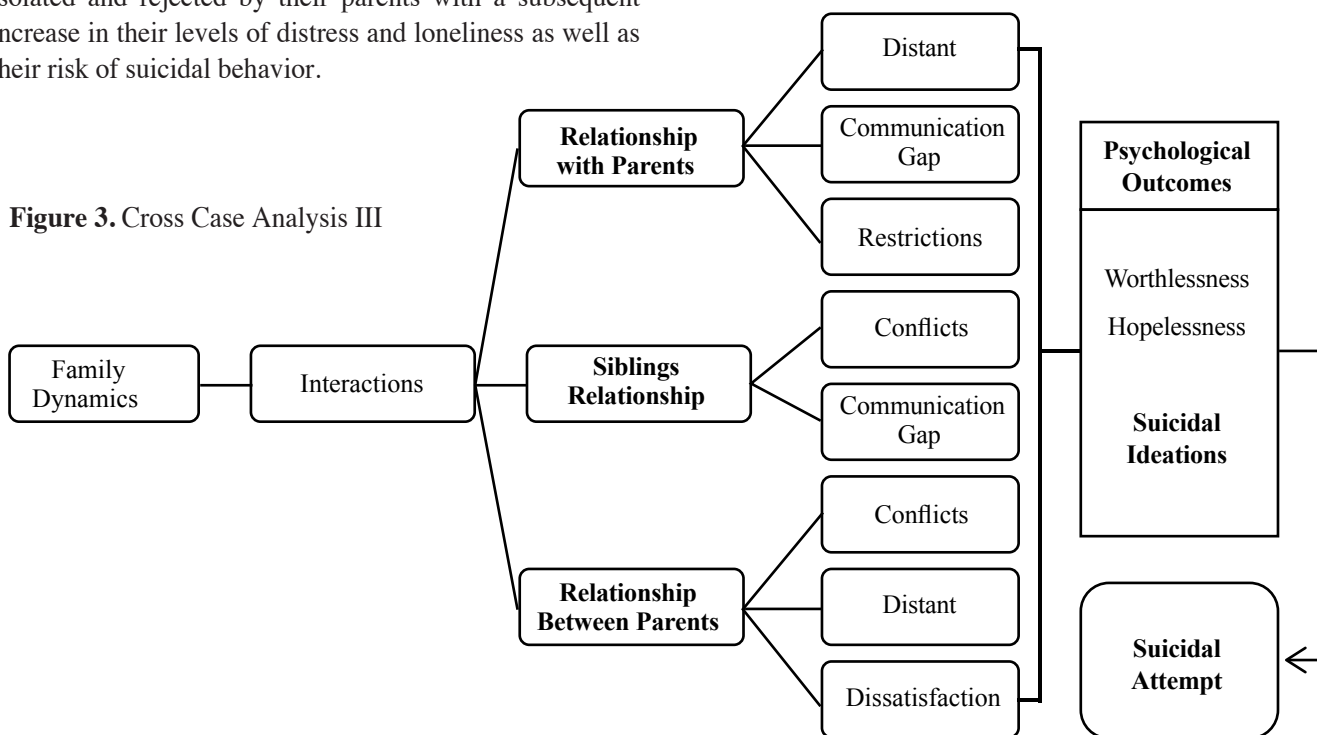
Results of present research are also consistent with findings of Hollis (1996) research in which he assessed the specific influence of family relationship difficulties on the risk of adolescent suicidal behavior. Family discord, disturbed mother-child relationship, and low familial warmth were the prominent risk factors suicide behavior.

Conflictual relationship between parents emerged as significant theme in both cases. It is evident from previous researches that stable relationship between parents was found to protect adolescents from suicidal behavior (Evans et al., 2004; Paulson & Overall, 2001). Adolescents with good relationships with their parents appear less intimidated by stressful experiences and better equipped to manage negative situations. Consequently, their resistance to suicidal behavior is augmented (Liu, 2005). Conversely, adolescents who perceive that their relationships with their parents are problematic, report greater difficulties in forming relationships outside the family and express a negative outlook on life (George, 2005). King et al (2001) suggested that suicidal attempters as compared to people with suicidal ideations were experienced more discordant relationship between their parents, stressful life events, poor family environment, parental psychiatric history, low parental monitoring, and low instrumental and social competence. Jackson and Nuttall (2001) found that adolescents who are affected by their parents' marital instabilities and discord report feeling isolated and rejected by their parents with a subsequent increase in their levels of distress and loneliness as well as their risk of suicidal behavior.

In both cases family relationships were not stable as there was communication gap among parental and sibling relationships. Evans et al. (2004) posit that good communication and understanding in the family, family harmony and cohesion and spending quality time with the family are considered protective factors while family discord, poor cohesion, and living apart from the family were viewed as risk factors. Stivers (1988) suggested that parent-adolescent communication had relationship to adolescent depression and suicide proneness. If parent-adolescent communication is not well established it could lead to depression and suicidal attempt.

As the themes related to parental and siblings relation like conflicts, communication gap, restriction that emerged from the current research showed that negative family relationship have adverse influences on individual life and can eventually lead them to suicide attempt similarly various researchers describe the strong impact of the family as a predisposing factor in adolescent suicide while stable family relationships was found to be a strong protective factor (Beautrais, 2000; Compton, Thompson & Kaslow, 2005; George, 2005; Marianne & Wamboldt, 2010; 2004; Pena, 2011).

Figure 3. Cross Case Analysis III



Conclusion

Cyber victimization is a new kind of social evil which Findings of study revealed that in family dynamics parental neglect, hostility, disregard, bundles of restrictions, lack of warmth and communication had negative impact on individual's relationship with parents. Poor parental relationship could make person feel worthless, and seeing self as burden for the family and ultimately leads to suicidal attempt as well conflictual relationship between parents having devastating effects on life of their adolescents. Siblings' relationship is one of the most important factor of family dynamics and the findings of the study indicated that the impact of siblings' relationship is quite profound in the life of an individual, without siblings' support it's hard to cope with problems of life. Communication gap, conflicts and selfishness among siblings' relationship can lead to an individual towards self-destructive behavior like suicidal attempt. In sum present study highlighted unhealthy family dynamics as potential indicators of suicide attempt.

Limitations and suggestions

For future research male participants should also be included in the sample. After effects of suicide on life of suicide attempt survivor were not explored that should be evaluated in future research.

Implications

Findings of the study would enable us to create awareness through counseling programs among parents that if they provide healthy family dynamics to adolescents, risk of suicide can be prevented. Both parents and adolescents can benefit from these counseling programs through developing skills to strengthen adolescents' resistance to suicidal behavior.

Declaration

Consent. All the participants involved in the research signed consent form to participate in the research.

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