

Perception of God's Attributes for Mental Comfort in Stressful Life Events

Maryam Khan & Naeem Aslam

Abstract

Background: In recent years, the concept of using religious methods to deal with stressful life events has emerged as a major concern in the field of psychology. Empirical pieces of evidence have demonstrated the vital impact of religious coping on the physical and mental health of individuals. The aim of this study is to examine how a person uses the perception of God's attributes for experiencing mental comfort in stressful life events.

Methods: A sample of 53 individuals with age ranged from 20 to 30 years ($M= 22.8$, $SD=1.77$) participated in this qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in which participants were asked that during stressful situations which attribute of God they conceive and how these perceptions help them for mental comfort.

Results: In content analysis, four major themes relevant to the attributes of God emerged. That included God as Responder, Helper, Healer, and Provider. These conceptions consequently revealed positive experiences such as resolution and recovery, strengthening existing beliefs, comfort, and mental satisfaction, a sense of personal growth and achievement, feelings consoling and acceptance.

Implications: This study has certain implications in health and social psychology. Counselors, practitioners, and therapists should take into account the spiritual or religious coping when assisting individuals in stressful situations or during counseling etc.

Conclusions: Subjective self-reporting nature of data and lack of standardized measures are the limitations of the study. The findings have practical implications and to address mental health issues and spiritual needs.

Keywords: Conceptions of God's attributes, Mental comfort, Mental discomfort, Positive experiences, Stressful life events.

1. Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Capital University of Science & Technology, Islamabad.

2. Lecturer, National Institute of Psychology, Center of Excellence, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maryam Khan, National Institute of Psychology, Center of Excellence, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.. Email: maryamaurangzeb@gmail.com.



Background

Stress reflects the environmental, social or internal demand requiring the individual to change the behavior patterns for adjusting the change (Singh, Sharma, & Sharma, 2011). The physiological or emotional arousal is considered as stress reaction resulting from the stress or perception of stress. Hamilton, Moore, Johnson, and Koenig (2013) identified stressful life events such as the death of a loved one, followed by a life-threatening illness, and stress related to work. It is well documented that after experiencing stressful event people usually suffered with mental discomfort (Singh, Sharma, & Sharma, 2011). The general view about stressors advocates that it motivates the individual to put efforts for coping with the demands of the situation and with the emotional reaction too (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). People usually have multiple options to cope up with the stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1989). However, individual's preference towards religion or turning towards God to deal stressful situation seems to be quite common.

In recent years, the concept of using religious methods to deal with stressful life events has been emerged as a major concern to be considered in the field of psychology. Empirical evidences showed the clear and vital impact of religious coping on physical and mental health of individuals (Pargament & Raiya, 2007).

Perception of God's attributes is considered as a particular way of moving towards God for experiencing mental comfort in stressful situations (Hamilton, Moore, Johnson, & Koenig, 2013). Strong (2012) stated that attributes are the unique properties of divine nature without them the idea of God is imperfect and which are the source of His bounties to His creatures. These qualities are being called as attributes as these are attributed to God as His exclusive possessions. The psychological explanation of comfort states that it includes everything contributing in the well-being and ease of life reporting directly to satisfaction and pleasure (Pineau, 2008). Moreover, the conception of God's attributes serves as a source of comfort or reduction of stress in stressful life events (Hamilton et al., 2013).

Moreover, followers of a particular religion, who regularly practice religious services, may attain richer spiritual experiences and strengthened religious beliefs, as well as they experience positive emotions along with the release of negative emotions (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Levin & Chatters, 1998).

Use of coping strategies is usual among people in distressing conditions and perception of God and the quality of relation with God influences these strategies significantly (Gall, 2000). Greenway et al. (2003) demonstrated that there are positive as well as negative impressions associated with the image of God. In positive impression suggests that God is a merciful and supportive whereas negative impressions include God is punishing and negligent. People in adverse situations perceive God as Protector, Beneficent, and Healer. Men are more likely to

perceive God as Beneficent and Healer whereas women will be more likely to perceive God as Protector (Hamilton et al., 2013)

Numerous studies has been conducted regarding the concept of religious orientation, religious affiliation, and religious behaviors, however, considerably less attention has been given to the more subjective affiliation or connection to God. Furthermore, unique and subjective experiences of spirituality are being ignored in previous work (Khan, Aslam & Younas, 2018). Religious Coping, Mental Comfort and Stressful Life Events: Pakistani Perspective

The psychology of religion presented two kinds of orientations namely extrinsic and intrinsic connections to practice religion. The distinction between these two types is generally recognized in terms of different modes of coming closer to religion and the way people view religiosity. Extrinsic orientation is characterized with attempts to gain external, social and personal rewards taking religion as a tool to achieve materialistic benefits whereas, intrinsic orientation takes religion as an eternal end. They have internal inclination towards religion for getting mental comfort, meaningfulness and value in their faith. In other words, extrinsically oriented ones in actual uses their religion and in intrinsic involvements people are motivated to live their religion (Younas, Muqtadir & Khan, 2018). This attempt in actual incorporated both these facets of religious orientation in terms of calling the names of God, attempts for immediate resolution of problems and also trying to get mental comfort in the remembrance of God.

The few researches addressing the concepts related to this study, bonding to God, attachment to God or relationship of an individual with God, in Pakistan are as follows. Saleem (2004) has developed a scale with the name of bonding to God scale and investigated the relationship between bonding to God, psychological well-being and life satisfaction among adults. Findings suggested that there exists a significant positive correlation between these variables. Khan (2014) has studied the relationship between bonding to God and emotional intelligence among maddrasah students. The results indicated the significant relationship between both variables.

Various researches are available on other variables of psychology of religion. Raza (2004) had investigated the relationship between religious orientation and mental health. The variables were particularly studied with the objective of clarifying and understanding these constructs in Pakistani context. Sample was comprise of 100 individuals with the age ranging from 20-55 years. Findings of the study revealed non-significant relation between intrinsic religious orientation and general health questionnaire but significant positive relation between extrinsic religious orientation and general health questionnaire.

Safia (2005) has studied the relationship between religious orientation and personal meaning of life. Results indicated that there exist significant positive correlation between religious orientation and meaning of life. Zahra (2007) has also studied religious orientation with locus of

control among madrassa and university students and found that extrinsic religious orientation and external locus of control are positively related to each other but intrinsic religious orientation was related to the God mediated locus of control.

Ghous (2003) has studied the relationship between moral judgment and religious orientation of adolescents, young adults and adults by using Padua Moral Judgment Scale (PMJS) and Religious orientation Scale. Findings reflect the significant relationship between the stages of PMJS and intrinsic, extrinsic dimensions of religious orientation scale.

The recent advances in scientific research present neurotheology and the biology as two newly emerged sciences from the progressing work on religion and spirituality. Neurotheology is about the exploration of neuroscience, religion and spirituality as integrating. It is elaborated that religious and spiritual attempts result in positive and healthy outcomes because of the physiological effects of rituals, prayers and meditation. It is stated that such behaviors are associated with the activation of parasympathetic nervous system, resulting better functioning of immune system, reduction in the release of associated hormones like cortisol, calming individuals down with lowering heart beat and making them feel relaxed. On the other hand, theobiology, a bit more inclusive discipline, is characterized to study interrelationship between wide range of discipline like biology, psychology, theology, sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies and other related disciplines. It in actual presents the effort to integrate science and religion for a non-competitive association. A relationship which involves different attempts to value the effectuality of both science and religion for understanding the condition and requirement of human beings (McMahon & Biggs, 2012). This study would further such attempts for generating an empirical evidence.

Additionally, the relationship with God influences psychological health and it has now emerged as an important theme for research. It seems interesting to consider that the sense of loving God and being loved by God may act as health promoting strategy (Saleem, 2004). Also, the goal of this study is to encourage research in area of religion and health psychology. The concepts of religious orientation, religious affiliation, and religious behaviors are overly studied but there is considerably less attention towards the more subjective affiliation or connection to God. Now there is a need for researchers to move from simple constructs of religiousness to the unique and subject experiences of spirituality that are being ignored in previous work. Due to scarcity of literature available for perception of God's attributes as well as for mental comfort, these variables are considered novel in this study than some frequently addressed relevant topics including religious coping and mental health. Furthermore young adulthood is regarded as the stage of dramatic breakthrough for the spiritual understanding of certain individuals, initiating the extensive journey towards the profound connection with the divine power yet posing a critical point presenting the basis of later insights (Khan,

Aslam & Younas, 2018). Thus this study will address the emotional as well as serious understanding of young adults concerning their relation with God.

Moreover, evidence repeatedly reveals that poor quality of life, dissatisfaction and negative strategies are often found to be the outcomes of neglected spiritual needs. Although faith healing practices come under the controversial subjects in this scientific era but still it is a sound fact that substantial number of individuals believe its potency and consider it as a first resort in different cultures, so in Pakistan. Thus, the proliferation of faith healing practices, and general interpretation of stressors in terms of religious contexts (Peprah et al., 2018) justify the need for this study.

Method

Design

This was the qualitative study, in which semi structured interviews were conducted to explore the participant's responses regarding the conception of God's attributes and personal meanings associated with such conceptions for experiencing mental comfort in stressful situations. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the base line characteristics of the sample and interrater reliability and frequencies and percentages were computed.

Participants

In the present research 53 males and females were selected from Islamabad, Pakistan. It was purposive sampling. The age range of participants was 20-30 years ($M=22.8$, $SD=1.77$). The sample comprised of with almost equal participation of (51%) males and (49%) females, (92%) had 16 years of education and (8%) had 14 years of education. The most frequently identified stressful life events that participants described were death of parents and friends, physical and psychological problems, road accidents, property or financial losses, educational related problems, work load related stressors, and relationship related problems. On the basis of these stressors that the participants reported, we generated five categories from the data including educational problems (30%), illnesses and accidents (28%), death incidences and relational conflicts both were reported (17%), and financial crisis were found to be (8%).

Measures

Perception of God's Attributes. Strong (2012) stated that attributes are the unique properties of divine nature without them the idea of God is imperfect and which are the source of His bounties to His creatures. These qualities are being called as attributes as these are attributed to God as His exclusive possessions.

Perception of God's attributes can operationally be defined as the imagination of qualities of God. It is a way an individual perceives or imagine his Lord. The Responder, The Helper, The Healer and The Provider are the major conceptions regarding the attributes of God.

Mental Comfort. Mental comfort is a term used to elaborate feelings of contentment and ease and a state reflecting physical and mental wellbeing (Chappells & Shove, 2004) whereas feelings of irritability, anger and pain reflects mental discomfort (Hansen & Streltzer, 2005). Mental states of comfort and discomfort can operationally be considered as the states of wellbeing and distress. The resolution of a problem, recovery from an illness, feelings of consoling and acceptance, mental satisfaction and comfort, sense of personal growth and achievement and strengthening existing beliefs etc are associated with the reflection of mental comfort whereas distress on prayers or denying the impact of prayers and shattered beliefs reflects the state of mental discomfort.

Stressful Life Events. Stressful life events are defined as the environmental, social or internal demand requiring the individual to change the behavior patterns to adjust after the change (Holmes & Rahe 1967). Stressful life events can operationally be defined as the adverse situation turning out to be the source of mental disturbance for an individual. Death incidences, illness and accidents, financial crisis, educational problems and relational conflicts reflect the frequently experienced stressful situations.

Interview Guide. An interview guide-line was developed on the basis of the work of Hamilton, Moore, Johnson, and Koenig, (2013) addressing three questions such as would you like to share any stressful life event from past that has caused a significant stress in your life?, what were the attributes of God or any religious act that helped you during that time to come out of that situation and how conception of that attribute of God or the religious act you mentioned helped you to come out of that situation.

Procedure

Before data collection, informed consent was taken from the participants than data was collected on the basis of voluntary participation. Participants were instructed about the nature and purpose of the study. At first, confidentiality was ensured and participants were briefed about the processes of the interviews. They were told that they can discontinue at any time during the interview if they feel uncomfortable. No deception was involved. Interviews were recorded however; some of the participants did not give permission for recording their interviews so notes were taken to pursue the processes. At the end, the participants were thanked for their participation in this study.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed. Content analysis of the interviews was done using the approach called conventional content analysis in which researchers allow the categories to be formulated directly from data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is a research method being widely used in the health studies in past few years. It is considered as a

flexible method for the analysis of data (Cavanagh, 1997). The inter-rater reliability agreement between the two raters on outcomes of the study came out to be ($Kr = 0.78$, $P < .01$, $95\% CI = .030, .037$) which can be interpreted as good agreement according to the interpretation ranges provided by Altman (1991).

Results

After data collection the interviews were transcribed and it was analyzed to extract codes. Coding is used to categorize the merging and overlapping codes into single representative entity (Krippendrof, 1990). Different categories are gathered to formulate respective themes. The frequencies and percentages were computed as per the responses of the participants.

Table 1

Themes and Categories of the Outcomes of Perception of God's Attributes (N = 53)

Themes	Categories	f(%)
Perceived Positive Outcomes (N=49)	Resolution and Recovery	23(46.9)
	Strengthening existing beliefs	19(38.7)
	Comfort and Mental Satisfaction	13(26.5)
	Sense of Personal Growth and Achievement	7(14.2)
Perceived Negative Outcomes (N=4)	Feelings Consoling and Acceptance	4(8.16)
	Denying the impact of religious practices/ Distrust on prayers	1(25)
	Shattered beliefs	3(75)

Note. Participants could have experienced more than one type of outcome in stressful event.

The emergent themes regarding the conception of God's attributes were God as Responder (92%), God as Helper (68%), God as Healer (27%) and God as Provider (87%). It was reflected in the study that the most frequently reported theme for conceiving the attributes of God was came to be the responsiveness of God. God as responder was the highly repeated theme by the participants followed by God as provider, than helper and the least reported theme was God as healer. The outcomes of conception of God's attributes in stressful situations were associated with both mental comfort as well as mental discomfort encompassing the subjective explanation of the participants. Two major themes were generated including perceived positive outcomes and perceived negative outcomes (Insert table

below).

Discussion

First major theme is related to perceived positive outcomes which include the subjective explanation of the participants reflecting positive results after the conception of a particular attribute of God. This theme includes five categories such as resolution and recovery, strengthening existing beliefs, comfort and mental satisfaction, sense of personal growth and achievement and feelings consoling and acceptance.

The first category “resolution and recovery” category includes the outcomes reflecting that the problems of the participants were resolved and patients were recovered resulting from the conception of Attribute of God. The second category is “strengthening existing beliefs” which includes the event in which the positive assumptions of the participants met with similar outcome, which reinforces the act of the participants by strengthening their existing belief for getting assistance in future.

The third category “comfort and mental satisfaction” includes the events in which the problem of the participants was not completely resolved but got compensated or it somehow satisfies the participants. The fourth category “sense of personal growth and achievement” includes events in which the outcomes bring sense of confidence and attainment of benefits serving as necessity of life. The fifth category “feelings consoling and acceptance” is a category in which the participant get assistance of God in the form of strength to bear the loss and to live on with the sense of relieve when the turmoil is over.

Thus, perceived positive outcomes are related to calmness of nerves, reassurance of confidence, soothers the sensitivity, solution of crisis, feelings of warmth and contentment which may take time but must come after the distressing event leading to the state called mental comfort.

The second major theme emerged is “perceived negative outcomes” (8%) which further includes two categories. One is about the denial of the participant (25%) about the influence of the religious practices and another is about shattered beliefs after the negative experience (75%).

The first category “denying the impact of religious practices” includes the event related to the feelings that religious practices have no influence in the life of the participant. The second category “shattered beliefs” includes the change in the existing believes of the participants due to the negative experiences resulting in weekend beliefs regarding their religious efforts to get assistance from God. Thus perceived negative outcomes includes the experiences representing distress, denial, inadequacy and insecurities bringing dissatisfaction and remorse.

The objectives of the current study were to explore of conception of God’s attributes, and the subjective explanations of the participants associated with these attributes or practices. Stressful life events include different events that require adjustment after an immense kind of environmental changes (Schwarzer& Schulz, 2001). In the current study five kinds of stressful situations including death incidences, illnesses and accidents, financial, educational, and relational conflicts were found.

Results showed that the participants conceive four major attributes of God as responder, helper, healer and provider having different categories representing associated attributes of God. These conceptions brought positive outcomes including resolution and recovery, strengthening existing beliefs, comfort and mental satisfaction, sense of personal growth and achievement, feelings consoling and acceptance leading to mental comfort. Whereas, negative outcomes included denying the impact of religious practices and shattered believes inclined towards mental discomfort. Emergent themes regarding the conception of a particular attributes of God in current study are discussed as follows

God as Responder. The first major theme is “God as Responder” which includes the frequent use of the perception of God’s ability to reply everyone at any time in most desirable way. The name of God *Al-Mujib*, The Answerer, confirms the responsiveness, availability and willingness of God to respond on the call of believers whenever they ask for protection as reflected in Quranic Verses (Bonab, Miner & Proctor, 2013). Moreover, this perception that God is responding may be conceived from this verse of Quran “Believe that my Lord is near (to everyone) and responsive of prayers (of everyone)” [Al-Quran, 11:61].

The emergent themes regarding the attributes of God can be explained with clear and strong justification in the light of Quranic Verses. As mentioned above the Quranic verse regarding God as responder revealed that indeed God is nearest, hearing the call of a follower and He is for sure available as a responsive Lord by dealing with the need of the individual. Stories from the Qur’an give many examples of God protecting individuals from various adversaries. Allah saving Noah and his followers (Al-Qur’an 7:64); protecting Moses and his people from the persecution of Pharaoh and his army (Al-Qur’an 2:49); saving Moses from grievous consequences and protecting him from Pharaoh’s plot to kill him when he was a child (Al-Qur’an 20:40), are but a few of many examples that speak of the protection of God that believers can and do call upon when required (Bonab, Miner, & Proctor, 2013).

God as Helper. “God as Helper” emphasized the God’s ability to facilitate, protect, and to help out the perceivers during the stressors or life threatening experiences. The reason behind conceiving this particular attribute of God was mentioned as He is only able to pay attention to their every need and to present suitable alternatives. It is written in holy Quran that “Allah is

sufficient to support and sufficient to help” [Al-Quran, 4:45].

The verse presented in the theme God as Helper suggested that it was evident in Quranic chapters and stories that God helped the believers who turned towards Him as proved to be sufficient for supporting and helping His followers (Bonab, Miner & Proctor, 2013). In the story of Abraham there is a message for believers that God is the One able to protect and provide refuge to His followers. In chapter 21 of Holy Quran, the tragedy of Abraham is discussed when Abraham was caught in a threat of death because of his opinion that idols do not deserve to be worshiped but the Lord of the world is the only One who deserves to be worshiped. In this situation God saved him and this story testified the essential attributes of God as Helper.

God as Healer. “God as Healer” reveals the God’s ability to heal, love and to shower His mercy upon the requesters in problematic situations. One reason for conceiving the healing power of God may be associated with the Quranic teachings revealing that God always relieves the afflictions of oppressed and people usually relate their situations with the stories of Holy Quran and experience positive emotions by assuming the healing nature of God. The same is explained in Quran, for example, “Worthier is He who redresses grievances of desperate one and relieves affliction” [Al-Quran, 27:62].

This verse proposed that there is no reservation that God is worthiest responding to the individual who cry out to Him in danger and He Almighty reliefs his burden as cleared in Quranic stories of different Prophets as well for instance the responsiveness of God to Jonah in case of distress as mentioned in Quranic chapter 21 can help us to understand the power of God as Healer.

God as Provider. The fourth theme was “God as Provider” was the last theme highlighting the mutual

relationship of an individual with God representing that God is the controller of all, having the capability of rewarding His believers or followers. One reasonable justification of perceiving God as the Provider includes moving towards Holy Quran for getting support and guidance in adversity. It is considered that provision of nourishment, protection, comfort and shelter belongs to (God) the ever Provider (Mottaghi, Esmaili, & Rohani, 2011). Same is explained in holy Quran in such as a way, “Surely, Allah is self Provider, Strong (and) Powerful” [Al-Quran, 51:58].

The verse presented here in the theme of God as provided demonstrated the obvious and understandable fact that God is Provider, Who provides everything to everyone in most appropriate and desirable manner confirming that the provision and fulfillment of everyone’s needs is always directed towards Him (Bonab et al., 2013) as presented in Quranic stories stating the actual reason behind conceiving these attributes of God. In Holy Quran (28:14) about Prophet Moses God explained that he was provided with

religious knowledge when he attained the full strength and perfection in manhood and He Almighty rewards the good doers. Moreover, the two kinds of positive and negative outcomes were obtained reflecting that these outcomes were associated with mental comfort or discomfort respectively in the light of literature. Mental health and positive outcomes considered as the effects of spiritual coping strategies (Pargament et al., 1998).

The first category of positive outcomes is named as “resolution and recovery” presenting the conditions in which problems were completely over explained as the direct gratification or fulfillment has a significant role towards meaningful life (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005; Watson, 1895). The second category is “strengthening existing beliefs” in which the positive expectations of the participants were met thus reinforcing their beliefs which can be explained as Durayappah (1995) suggested that past experiences have an influence on present condition of an individual and it will persist as per the urge to pursue happiness in future.

The third category “comfort and mental satisfaction” presents partial compensation resulting in relaxation and satisfaction which can be explained as when participant prayed, it brings feeling of satisfaction generating positive emotions leading to mental comfort (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). The fourth category called “sense of personal growth and achievement” includes the feelings of self-confidence and accountability which can be explained as the state of inner experiences, including maturity and autonomy than concerning about external status (Diener & Lucas, 1999).

“Feelings consoling and acceptance” represents fifth category stating the experiences of participants as the feelings of being capable to handle the situation and accepting it which can also be considered by relating the outcomes with the view presented by Diener et al. (1999) that cognitive feelings of having strength to handle the situation brings satisfaction originating positive emotions resulting in mental comfort.

Negative outcomes reflect poor health in both mental and physical domains as a result of negative conception of God (Dozier, Stovall-McClough, & Albus, 2008) consequential for poor coping (Belavich & Pargament, 2002). Thus, negative outcomes reflect insecurity and distrust representing dissatisfaction and agony.

The categories includes “denying the impact of religious practices” and “shattered beliefs” includes the feelings of dissatisfaction of the participant towards religion as there is a denial about the acceptance of the prayers representing low self-esteem of the participant. Whereas second category reflects weakening of the beliefs of the participant which can be explained as the cognitive experience of negative outcome leads to dissatisfaction reducing the comfort of the sufferer (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999).

Limitations and Implications of the study

Subjective self-reporting nature of data and lack of standardized measures are the major limitations of the study. Also, the sample was only comprised of Muslims thus, the study would better be extended by addressing such concerns of different religious minorities in Pakistan. Findings of the study may be generalized with caution with other age, educational or ethnic groups. This study has certain implications in health and social psychology. Counselors, practitioners, and therapists should take into account the spiritual or religious coping when assisting individuals in stressful situations or during counseling etc. This study presents a step forward towards the exploration of the deep rooted yet least traveled path of more personal and insightful phenomenon of conception of God's Attributes for experiencing proximity as well as intimacy towards God.

Conclusion

Perception of God attributes (such as, responder, helper, healer and provider) in the stressful situation seems to be associated with the mental comfort. Mental health professionals and counselors should consider the individual's perceptions and associations with God while devising the intervention plans as one of the possible attempts towards speedy recovery. Evidence ensures that some of the clients are very much inclined towards spirituality and religiosity during counselling, in particular highlighting a self-chosen element of therapy (McMahon & Biggs, 2012). Given this, counselor and practitioners can assist clients with the useful aspect of these strategies for the exploration of existence, providing meaning and purpose of life.

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Author Information

Affiliations

Department of Management and Social Sciences, Capital University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan
Khan, M. (Lecturer)

National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan.

Aslam, N. (Lecturer)

Contributions

Khan, M. and Aslam, N. contributed to the study concept and design. Khan, M. was involved in the acquisition of data, carried out the analysis and interpretation of data and drafted the manuscript. Aslam, N. performed critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual

content; and all authors have seen and approved the final version to be published.

Corresponding author

Correspondence to Khan, M. maryamaurangzeb@gmail.com

Ethics declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (National Institute of Psychology, Islamabad). A written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare to have no competing interests.

Additional Information

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