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Analysis of Factors that Influence the Sexual Orientation of Homosexual Males in Pakistan: A Biopsychosocial Perspective

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Abstract

Since a recent law protecting the rights of LGBTQ people was implemented in Pakistan, homosexuality has become a hot-button issue. The rights that will be granted to the LGBTQ community are controversial; some people support them, while others oppose them. So, the present study aims to analyze the factors that influence the sexual orientation of homosexual males in Pakistan by approaching a biopsychosocial perspective, who despite being the resident of a state in which homosexuality is unacceptable, presents themselves as homosexual males. A total of thirty male participants who identify themselves as homosexuals aged between 18 to 35 were selected by using purposive and snowball sampling techniques from Karachi. However, participants were also approached by using potential Facebook groups. Their participation was entirely voluntary and consented. The study was conducted as a qualitative telephonic survey method and data was collected through a self-generated interviewing questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions based on three themes i.e., Biological, Psychological, and social factors. The findings indicated that social factors are the most influencing paradigm which has the biggest impact on male homosexuality, followed by biological and psychological factors.

Keywords: Homosexual, MSM, LGBTQI, Biopsychosocial, Homosexuality, Biological

Introduction

Human sexual patterns are extremely complicated, with a wide range of possible sexual preferences, suggesting that sexual orientation is not entirely fixed but somewhat fluid (Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2006). A complex interaction among several biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors influences the occurrence of same-sex sexual behaviour in males in Pakistan. This requires a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding these influences that should consider individual experiences and wider societal perspectives. Fetal and early neonatal life, and sometimes childhood, are critical periods for the formation of sexual preferences (LeVay, 2017; Bem, 1996). During these

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times, sexual orientation can develop as primarily heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual. However, exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality are influenced by a complex interaction of inherited genes and environmental factors during development (Bailey et al., 2016; Rahman, 2005). As society's understanding and acceptance of gender identity and sexual orientation grow, the acceptance of diverse lifestyles has also increased. Interest in brain development and the effects of genetics, hormones, and the environment during critical periods on gender identity and behaviour has never been higher than today (Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Ngun et al., 2015). Despite robust scientific research, the topic has become highly politicized, making it challenging to express opinions without offending various groups. (Drescher, 2015; Herek, 2009). The said phenomenon would be more critical in countries where collectivism and religiosity are the basic social value, such as Pakistan.

In Pakistan, homosexuality is a cultural, social, and religious taboo. Despite the lack of research on the biopsychosocial etiology of homosexual behaviour in Pakistan, surprisingly there has been a notable increase in people identifying as homosexual (Equal Times, 2014; Lau, 2018). Therefore, the present study aims to identify the factors supporting the biopsychosocial approach in Pakistani homosexual males who, despite societal disapproval, identify as homosexuals (Christian et al., 2021; Aurat Foundation, 2016).

The definitions and concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity are evolving. Terms that were once considered acceptable for LGBT individuals are now viewed as offensive. Sexual orientation refers to the sex of people to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted (American Psychological Association, 2012). "Lesbian" and "gay" describe those attracted to the same sex, while "bisexual" describes attraction to both sexes (Gates, 2011). The reasons behind preferences for same-sex or both-sex partners may vary, and this study focuses on homosexual males, or men attracted to men (LeVay, 2011).

Review of the Literature

According to available literature, factors contributing to homosexuality include both nature (biological characteristics) and nurture (sociocultural and environmental factors). Neither hypothesis alone fully explains homosexuality's origins (Bailey et al., 2016). However, the biopsychosocial model suggests that a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors influences sexual orientation. Biological factors like genetics and hormones, psychological factors like early experiences and personality traits, and social factors like cultural and family influences all play roles (Bogaert, 2006; Herek, 2007). However, the precise interactions of these factors remain

unclear (Mustanski, Chivers, & Bailey, 2002). Research on biological factors contributing to homosexuality is ongoing, with no single factor identified as definitive. Genetics, hormones, and epigenetics are among the proposed biological influences. Some studies have found that certain genetic markers are more common in individuals identifying as homosexual, suggesting a genetic component. However, the specific genes or mechanisms involved are not yet clear, and this area remains a topic of active research (Mustanski, Chivers, & Bailey, 2002; Mustanski et al., 2005). Hormones like testosterone and estrogen influence sex-specific characteristics, including brain development and behaviour. Some research suggests differences or imbalances in hormone levels may play a role in homosexuality, though the evidence is not strong (Rahman & Wilson, 2003).

Changes in gene expression not caused by changes in DNA sequence may also influence homosexuality. Environmental factors such as stress or nutrition can affect epigenetic changes, potentially impacting sexual orientation (Rice et al., 2012). In addition to that, Certain genetic markers are more common among homosexual individuals, but specific genes or mechanisms remain unidentified (Mustanski et al., 2005). Hormonal influences on brain development and behaviour, and epigenetic changes influenced by environmental factors, are also being studied (Rahman & Wilson, 2003; Rice et al., 2012). Psychological factors such as early experiences and personality traits may also contribute to sexual orientation. Traits like openness to new experiences have been linked to homosexuality, but causation is unclear (Lippa, 2005). Freud's assumption of psychosexual development argues that sexual orientation could be affected by childhood experiences and family relationships. It is an approach that implies that unresolved psychosexual conflicts may result in homosexuality (Freud, 1905; Smith, 2023).

Social influences are also significant in the development of sexual orientation. Some research suggests that positive relationships with same-sex parents during childhood may be associated with identifying as homosexual in adulthood (Bell et al., 1981; Mills-Koonce, 2018). The cultural and social environment can impact sexual orientation. Acceptance of homosexuality in certain cultures may lead to more individuals identifying as homosexual (Whitam & Mathy, 1986; Rahman et al. 2019).

Individuals with more same-sex friends or who are part of accepting social groups may be more likely to identify as homosexual (Bell et al., 1981; Vanita, 2002). Boys in Pakistan, across many of its educational institutions such as same sex schools and madrasas, share brotherhood among themselves. Such an environment where girls are absent may contribute to the development of same-sex attractions (Frost & Meyer, 2009). There is a cultural and educational

segregation aimed at males as well as females that limits opportunities for heterosexual interactions, thereby enhancing same-sex attractions due to male peers' availability and accessibility (Murray, 1997; Mehta & Strough, n.d.). In Pakistani society, there is often heavy homosociality in which men mainly associate with other men. This can provide an occasion for similar-sex relationships to come into being because women are not present within several communities (Khan, 2021). Young men sometimes find solace in emotional and physical intimacy with other young men instead of seeking heterosexual relationships that would be deemed premarital by their culture; this is made possible by the fact that these other males are more accessible and less socially prohibited. Through this religious or moral backdrop, homosexuality often becomes a curse word leading to inner turmoil experienced by individuals who experience SSA (same-sex attracted).

It can also determine how they express themselves sexually or behave according to their sexual orientations (Boellstorff, 2005). Evidence for biological, psychological, and social mechanisms underlying sexual orientation is diverse. One study compared the ratio of naturally homosexual men to those who adopted homosexual behaviour under certain conditions. The findings indicated that a significant portion of men engaged in homosexual activity due to misconceptions, fear of heterosexual contact, peer pressure, and alcohol influence. Many homosexual individuals recall experiencing same-sex attraction years before their first sexual encounters, suggesting a predetermined orientation (Bell et al., 1981; Savic, & Lindström, 2008).

Male homosexual activity has existed in most cultures with available data, and the prevalence rate for male androphilia is similar across different cultural settings. Claims that male androphilia is absent in certain cultures are often false, even when lacking specific terms to describe it (Murray, 2000; Nanda, 2014; Smith et al., 2003; VanderLaan et al., 2013; Whitam & Mathy, 1985; Boswell, 1982/1983; Norton, 1997; VanderLaan et al., 2014). Understanding sexual orientation requires considering a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. Research in this area is ongoing, and while significant progress has been made, much remains to be understood. As society continues to evolve, so too will the understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations, leading to a more inclusive and empathetic world.

Rationale

In a country like Pakistan, Homosexuality is considered a Cultural, Social, and Religious Taboo. It has been an area of interest for previous researchers as well to find out the factors contributing to homosexuality, but up to today, no work has been done so far in Pakistan that highlights the etiology of homosexual behaviour in the light of

a Biopsychosocial Perspective (Torres, 2019). Despite homosexual behaviour being considered unacceptable in Pakistan, still, an enormous number of the homosexual population is part of our society. This is a very hidden population due to unacceptability in our culture, religion, and society, although they are working in every sector of society. The main idea behind conducting this study is to identify the biopsychosocial factors catering to homosexuality in males of Pakistan who, despite being the residents of a state in which homosexuality is unacceptable present themselves as homosexual males. There must be certain factors leading to such behaviour. We the researcher need to highlight so that necessary action can be taken to eradicate the root cause which can potentially contribute to homosexuality in an individual. This research will help to raise awareness about the likely aspects of one's behaviour that can cause homosexuality which will help parents to understand and to strengthen the Parent-child relationship. It will also lay a foundation for building a bond of trust among family members. We also aim to build a safe space for victims to open up and be counselled accordingly. Moreover, educators can also get benefit from this study to get to know the problems their students may be going through.

Objectives

- To observe what is the etiology of behaviours that play a role in the alternation of sexual orientation.
- To determine the factors leading to homosexuality according to the biopsychosocial perspective.

Hypotheses

- There will be certain genetic factors that lead to homosexual behaviour in young homosexual males.
- Several social factors contribute to homosexual behaviour in young homosexual males.
- Psychological factors will play an important role in homosexual behaviour in young homosexual males.
- Homosexuality in males is likely to be predicted by biopsychosocial factors.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed in which the one-on-one and telephonic in-depth Interview methods were used to collect the data.

Sample

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, the purposive sampling approach and the snowball method were used to identify respondents who fit the research's predetermined criteria. A sample of 30 self-identified homosexual males aged 18 years onwards who are residents of Pakistan were contacted one-on-one and through different online platforms after they willingly consented to be part of the study.

Procedure

Males who met the study's inclusion criteria and were willing to be part of the study were approached. Participants were approached using potential Facebook groups and were explained the objectives of the study. An online Interview was conducted after obtaining informed consent. A list of structured open-ended interview questions was prepared and utilized in a one-on-one in-depth interview setting. Also, the use of the in-depth interview method and tool allowed the researcher to probe (where necessary) to gain more information as well as a deeper explanation and more detail of the experience of the respondents in terms of the source of their self-professed homosexuality. Apart from briefing participants about the purpose of the study, they were given the right to withdraw from the study at any point and were assured that their identity and responses to our questions would remain confidential.

Research Tools

Demographic Information Sheet

A demographic information sheet was created in which the participant's age, birth order, total number of siblings including number of brothers and sisters, participant's birth order, family type, socio-economic status, educational qualification, and early childhood schooling were asked.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

A pilot study was conducted on 15 participants and they were asked to write down the questions they would like to ask from homosexual males. Their questions were then checked thoroughly and were distributed in the subscales of biological, psychological, and social subscales. The questions were open-ended in nature.

Research Findings

Figure 1: Pie chart showing the distribution of sample with reference to its age between 18 to 35 years:

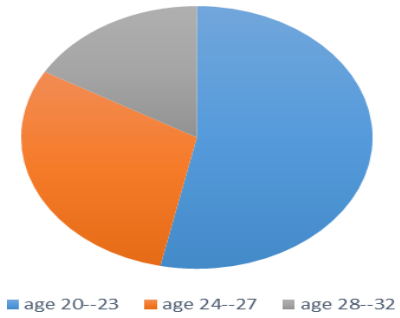
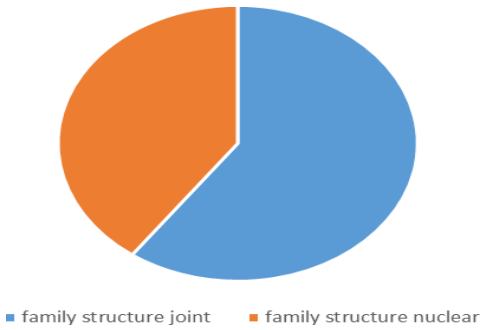


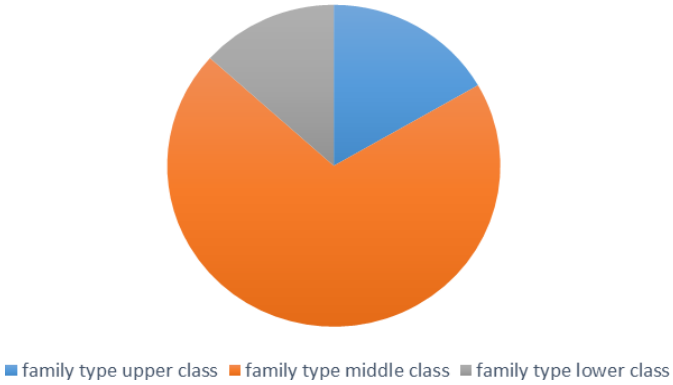
Figure 1 shows that the participants of the research aged from 18 to 35. Out of total 30 respondents 16 were aged between 20 to 23 years, 09 aged between 24 to 27 years and only 05 were between 28 to 32 years of age.

Figure 2: Pie chart showing the sample distribution with reference to the family structure of participants classified into joint and nuclear family structure:



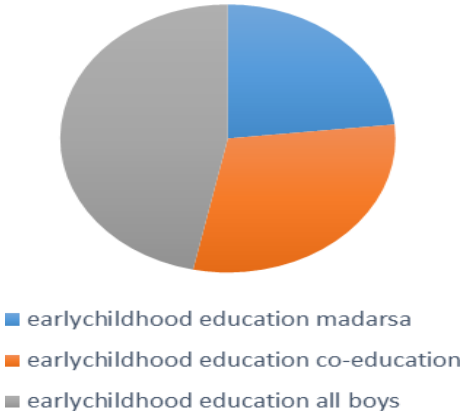
The figure 2 illustrates that out of 30 participants; 18 belonged to the joint family system while 12 were from the nuclear family type.

Figure 3: Pie chart showing the Socioeconomic status of participants classified into upper middle class, middle class and lower middle class:



The figure 3 shows that out of 30 participants; 21 belonged to a middle-class family, 05 from upper middle class and only 04 presented themselves as lower middle class.

Figure 4: Pie chart showing the Early childhood education of participants labelled as madrasa, all boys schools and coeducation institutions.



The figure 4 shows that out of 30 participants; 14 participants reported that they had their early childhood education from all boys school, 09 were sent to co-educational setup however only 07 of them received their early education from Madariz or Islamic Schools.

Analysis and Interpretations

The research objective was to explore the factors contributing to homosexuality in males according to the Biopsychosocial Perspective. The study was designed accordingly and the participants were interviewed based on the following subscales. From the verbatims of the respondents, several themes were identified which were further classified into three main themes i.e., Biological, Psychological, and social aspects.

Table 1: Sub-themes categorized into main themes.

Sub Themes	**Main Themes**
Trauma	**Psychological**
Bullying	
Forced Sexual Contact	
Familial Mistrust	
Failed Marriages	**Social**
Cheating Partners (Husbands/wives)	
First Intimacy	
Same sex best friends	
Early all-boys educational institutions	
Familial sexual contact	
Physical body urges	**Biological**
Hormonal rush	

Social Perspective

Out of a total of 30 participants, the responses of the majority depicted that the factors behind homosexuality lie in social surroundings and experiences. The demographics revealed a strong link between family type and early childhood education with homosexuality. A maximum of the respondents reported their first sexual interaction with their male cousins or with their schoolmates/friends. The finding revealed that early childhood years and family type influences sexual orientation in a significant manner. Many of the respondents believed that their sexual orientation is affected by their early childhood experiences.

Verbatim of Participant A

"Since childhood, my education was in a madrasa, and I feel that because of studying in a madrasa, I started liking boys there. Because there were only boys there, and I only interacted with boys, my interest in girls completely faded. I think that to a large extent, due to studying only with men in the madrasa, my interest has remained solely in men."

Verbatim of Participant B

"I had been living in a joint family since I was born. The closest friend I had was my uncle's son with whom I had my first intimate encounter. After that, I never had the urge to make intimate relationships with any girl nor I felt any attraction towards the opposite gender."

Verbatim of Participant C

When I used to take coaching for my grade ninth, one of my seniors tried to have non-consensual sex with me. I have been feeling sexual urges for men only ever since.

Verbatim of Participant D

I have fallen in love with my childhood best friend and all the feelings I have in me is only and only for him. I know what I am doing is not permissible in my religion and is wrong but I feel that this is something that is beyond my control and I don't think that I can love anyone other than my best friend.

Biological Perspective

Some of the participants believed that choosing a sexual orientation is not a matter of choice; they believed that this is not in their own hands and this comes naturally to them. They think that there might be hormonal changes that play a role in determining their sexual and physical changes when they feel arousal toward the same sex partner.

Verbatim of Participant

Whenever I feel sexually attracted towards any male, I start feeling changes in my body. No matter how much I try, I cannot get my mind off it. I feel like this is something that is beyond my control and is happening naturally to me.

Psychological Perspective

The participants of the study responded positively when they were asked if any traumatic event influenced their sexual orientation. They reported that they were sexually assaulted by a close male relative/ friend. Few of them reported that their first sexual experience was non-consensual which highly impacted their perception of their sexual orientation.

Verbatim of Participant A

My uncle tried to have sex with me when I was a kid and this kept on happening with me from time to time for a longer period. At first, I used to feel uncomfortable with what was happening, but with time I got used to it. I feel that If I did not have such things during my childhood, my sexual orientation would have not been the same. I also feel that all those things I went through in my childhood including the role of my family have contributed a role in determining my sexual orientation.

Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis of the factors that may lead to homosexuality among males in Pakistan revealed a complicated interplay of biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Each of these factors emphasizes the various processes involved in sexual orientation formation. The participant's responses depicted that social aspects of one's life play the most significant role in changing one's sexual orientation. In the case of homosexual males, the data revealed that most of the respondents belonged to the joint family systems and their early childhood education was from all boys' schools and madaris. The respondents also reported that their first sexual encounter was with some family member or with some classmate which highly influenced their sexual orientation. A few of the participants also reported that their homosexuality is not by choice, and they cannot do anything to get rid of it. They, despite knowing that it's forbidden and considered Haram in their religion, are unable to get over it and strongly believe that it's natural and the hormonal changes in their bodies are the primary cause of it.

From the psychological perspective; the responses of the participants showed that the majority of them had non-consensual sexual experiences from their close relations at an early age causing them to be traumatized initially before eventually developing a taste for it. The previous studies (Wang, 2019) indicated several biological perspectives involved in determining one's sexual preference, but due to the limited availability of resources and the study having a qualitative nature was only able to highlight more social and psychological aspects of contributing factors.

Additionally, cultural beliefs continue as necessary components since they are the ones that define the exercise of sexuality and sexual preference. Heterosexual

intercourse before marriage is socially illegitimate in Pakistan, and therefore, young men partake in homosexuality as it is readily available and not as culturally reprehensible as the involvement with females. Also, the religious and moral background deems homosexuality as a sin; therefore, individuals experiencing homosexuality have conflicted perceptions. Such conflict of the domains of self-interest with the expected roles of the individual in society can have immense impacts on the activities as well as other expressions related to sexual orientation.

It can be pointed out that different factors have an impact on homosexual behaviour in males in Pakistan and they are all interrelated therefore research on the issue and efforts to deal with it should also involve different fields of knowledge. Future studies should try to isolate the impact of each of the factors and investigate their connection. Also, the cultural and social determinants in Pakistan should be considered to create suitable culturally appropriate support structures for persons with homosexual orientation.

As a result of nature-nurture interactions, it is expected that the approaches aimed at analyzing the problem should reach out to all aspects of human existence as people are unique, different, and complex. The discussion synthesizes data from multiple fields to provide a more complex comprehension of homosexual conduct among males in Pakistan. It is for this reason, that by understanding how biology, psychology, social, cultural, and environmental interact and influence one another sexual orientation can be seen as a multi-layered experience rather than a single-squared phenomenon.

Limitations and Recommendations

Sexual orientation is a complex concept that can be altered as a result of several predisposing and precipitating factors however, the study only focused on the biopsychosocial perspective while there could be so many other aspects that were not considered as part of the study that can influence one's sexual orientation. The scope and nature of the study can be extended for future researchers to explore further factors contributing to one's sexual orientation alteration. Also, the study was conducted in a limited period on a limited number of individuals due to the unavailability of the participants as the topic was sensitive and people were reluctant to be part of the study. The study may be conducted on a greater number of samples to get more accuracy in results. In addition to that it was merely difficult to find out the biological aspects behind one's orientation as the nature of the research was qualitative in nature and biological factors are explored in a laboratory setting. Future researchers can work on hormones and the genetic makeup of participants to explore the actual biological factors contributing to sexual orientation.

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