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Capturing the Phenomenological Perspectives of Psychological Flexibility among Parents of Children with ASD

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Abstract: Parenting a child with ASD causes a lot of challenges in the parent's life that have a significant effect on the psychological health and well-being of the parents. Despite extensive research on parenting ASD children in Pakistan, there is a significant gap in understanding psychological flexibility among parents, especially in the Pakistani context. The purpose of the current study is to explore the phenomena of psychological flexibility among parents of children with ASD. Qualitative research design was used in the current study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of 20 participants from different cities of Punjab, Pakistan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. After data collection, the verbatims were transcribed, and data were analyzed using Barun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure. As a result of thematic analysis, five main themes of Mindfulness, Acceptance, Adaptation, Executive functioning and Resilience were identified under the concept of psychological flexibility. The study highlights the importance of psychological flexibility in helping Pakistani families raise children with ASD. Institutional and government-level therapies and seminars should be organized to enhance parental psychological flexibility, enabling them to better adapt to changes in behaviours and routines relating to the needs of ASD children.

Key Words: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Pakistan, Parental Psychological Flexibility, Qualitative Study, Punjab

Introduction

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) describes autism spectrum disorder as social and communication challenges that can accompany repetitive behaviours. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are common and are estimated to occur in one of every 110 children born today, but the prevalence and incidence have risen significantly over the last few decades; currently, there are roughly 1 out of every 54 births diagnosed with ASD worldwide (CDC, 2020). In 2020, Khalid et al. reported that one in every 89 children has ASD in Pakistan. Parents with a child who has ASD may be dealing with a lot of challenges, including managing their child's behaviour, trying to navigate the healthcare system, locating appropriate educational resources and facing stigmatization and lack of support from family. All of these challenges result in stress, depression and anxiety (Kausar et al., 2019) that have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of parents (Tran, 2020; Dieleman et al., 2018). Similarly, Kausar et al. 2019 also reported that parents of children with ASD are highly vulnerable to psychological stresses. However, some parents have better psychological flexibility, which helps them deal with all these challenges more successfully while still maintaining higher levels of well-being (Gur & Reich, 2023).

Psychological flexibility in parenting may be defined as the ability to implement good parenting practices and maintain a strong relationship with children while also being willing to experience negative emotions, thoughts, and impulses associated with a child's specific condition (Burke & Moore, 2015). Previous research suggests that parents who are high in psychological flexibility accommodate their children's inflexibility by displaying higher levels of acceptance, lack of judgement, and emotional

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regulation towards it (Daks et al., 2020; Beeckman et al., 2019). Previous research showed a positive relationship between psychological flexibility and life satisfaction and improved psychological well-being (Daks & Rogge, 2020; Marshall & Brockman, 2016; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). As far as the researcher knows, there is not a single study that has explored this phenomenon in the Pakistani context. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the phenomena of psychological flexibility in parents of children with ASD in Punjab, Pakistan, to fill the gap.

Material And Method

Research Design

In the current study, the parents' perspective regarding psychological flexibility was investigated using a qualitative research design. This design helps to get insight into participants' experiences from their socio-cultural perspective (Hennink et al., 2020).

Sample

In the present study, 20 parents of children with ASD were selected through purposive sampling. The parents with primary-level education and ages between 25 and 60 years were included in the study. Moreover, parents having only one child with ASD were part of the study. Parents with any kind of physical or mental disability were excluded from the study.

Characteristics of Participants

Table 1 shows the demographic details of the participants. The sample was comprised of 10 fathers and ten mothers. The participants were between the age of 29 to 53 years. However, participants' educational backgrounds range from primary to master's level, with primary education accounting for the majority. The majority of the children were male.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the Participants (n=20)

Participant IDs	Age(in years)	Gender of parents	Residential Area	Education	Gender of child with ASD
P1	36	Male	Urban	Bachelor	Male
P2	41	Male	Urban	Primary	Male
P3	32	Female	Urban	Bachelor	Male
P4	45	Female	Rural	Intermediate	Male
P5	53	Male	Urban	Primary	Male
P6	29	Female	Rural	Matric	Female
P7	38	Male	Rural	Primary	Male
P8	42	Female	Urban	Intermediate	Male
P9	43	Male	Urban	Primary	Female
P10	36	Female	Rural	Matric	Female
P11	33	Female	Rural	Primary	Female
P12	45	Male	Rural	Primary	Male
P13	50	Male	Urban	Bachelor	Male
P14	32	Male	Rural	Primary	Male
P15	40	Female	Rural	Primary	Female
P16	35	Female	Rural	Primary	Female
P17	30	Male	Urban	Bachelor	Female
P18	35	Female	Urban	Bachelor	Female
P19	39	Male	Rural	Master	Male
P20	42	Female	Rural	Primary	Male



Instruments

The instruments for the current study consisted of the consent form, a demographic form and the interview guide. An interview guide was developed by the researcher in Urdu language by conducting a thorough review of the literature on psychological flexibility and ASD. The interview guide comprised 13 open-ended questions.

Procedure

First, approval was obtained from the heads of special educational institutes for conducting interviews at their institutions. The parents were then called, and the interview time was mutually agreed upon. Before the interview, parents were informed about the study and its objectives, and a signed agreement was obtained from them. The interviews were conducted in the participants' native languages, Urdu and Punjabi. Participants were asked questions from the interview guide. Each interview started with generic questions, following a relaxed and adaptable approach. A few questions served as a framework for the interview. To obtain rich and clear data, certain probing questions were also asked, such as "Could you please explain it more?" and "Can you clarify what you mean? Explain with an example?" All participants shared their opinions and ideas about their experiences, and each question was thoroughly discussed. Participants are referred to as P1, P2, and so on to maintain confidentiality. The interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. After the interviews, participants were thanked for participation.

Ethical Consideration

The ethics of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality were followed in the study. Moreover, the right to leave the study was also discussed with participants before the study.

Results

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, six steps proposed by Barun and Clarke (2006). The six steps included familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes and reporting the results. This approach helped find, assess, and interpret recurrent themes about psychological flexibility in the dataset, which offered insightful information about the viewpoints and experiences of the participants. As a result of thematic analysis, five main themes with 14 subthemes were identified.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Main Themes	Subthemes
Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotional Regulation ▪ Openness to Experience ▪ Focus on Present
Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotional Acceptance ▪ Behavioural Acceptance ▪ Cognitive Acceptance
Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotional Adaptation ▪ Behavioural Adaptation ▪ Cognitive Adaptation
Executive Functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to Generate Alternatives ▪ Goals Adjustment ▪ Multitasking
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-Efficacy ▪ Positive Appraisal

Theme I- Mindfulness

The first theme was mindfulness, which can be defined as the ability to be in the present moment, focusing on present situations and the ability to regulate emotions according to the situation. This theme has the following subthemes:

Sub-Theme 1: Emotional Regulation

In this theme, the majority of participants' narratives reflect that despite facing a lot of challenges in parenting a child with ASD and experiencing a lot of emotional problems as well they tried to regulate the negative emotions into positive ones. The parents also emphasized the importance of keeping calm emotionally when dealing with a child's challenging behaviours. Furthermore, parents emphasized the importance of developing appropriate coping methods for dealing with negative emotions while embracing their presence. As one parent stated, *"It's ok to feel overwhelmed and upset sometimes as we are human too. What matters most, though, is learning how to deal with these emotions effectively and not allowing them to influence our parenting or personality overall"*. So, this theme highlighted that parents acknowledge their overwhelming emotions but try to regulate them in a positive way for the betterment of their child with ASD.

Sub-Theme 2: Openness to Experience

The theme open to experience highlights the adapting mindset of parents of children with ASD. The parents also stated that they didn't know anything before the diagnosis, but once they came to know that their child had autism, they tried every possible thing that could help in the development of their child in a better way. Most of the parents reported that, first of all, they contact professionals and specialists to learn about autism. Then, they tried to implement the strategies and techniques that had been suggested by the professionals to make things better. Moreover, most of the parents stated that they also join support groups of parents of children with ASD to get a deeper understanding of the parenting experience of the parent that has children with ASD and to get a better understanding of how they deal with their children in an effective way as one parent said that *"Initially I was afraid of everything like how to deal with this. What will happen once I overcome all of these thoughts? I tried to get more and more information regarding ASD, and I contacted the professionals join support groups so I can get maximum knowledge on how to bring an ASD child in an effective way"*. Another parent stated, *"I never feel hesitate in implementing new parenting strategy that can have a positive effect on my child. All I want is to give the best possible treatment to my child."* The narratives of participants reflect that they are open to trying anything new that can help them in dealing with their child with ASD effectively.

Sub-Theme 3: Focus on the Present

The sub-theme is centred on the outstanding ability of parents whose children have autism to prioritize present time over future concerns. Initially, they might be anxious about what will happen to their child after diagnosis. However, with the passage of time, they have a paradigm shift in their viewpoint, and they realize that it is important that they become more available for their children in the present moment rather than worrying about what the future holds for them. Her words one of the mothers said, *"At first, I used to worry too much about my child's future, but now I have learnt to focus on the present moment, and this enables me to relate well with my child"*. The parents stated that they tried their best to be with their children fully, either through play or conversation. One mother says, *"I always try to be there with my child not only physically but also mentally to make them feel loved"*. The parents also stated that they take pleasure in their child's minor accomplishments and are proud when they make progress. Another parent says, *"One thing I change in myself is to celebrate the little changes in my child instead of waiting for big changes or worrying about what can't change. You can say that for me, what matters now is the present condition of my child, so if it improves a little bit for me, it's also a big achievement"*. In a nutshell, parent's narrative reflects that rather than worrying about the future of their child with ASD, they try to live in the present moment.

Theme II-Acceptance

The second main theme is acceptance, which reflects how parents accept their child's condition and the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive challenges related to it.

Sub-Theme 1: Emotional Acceptance

This subtheme depicts parents' emotional acceptance as they raise a child with autism. The parents claimed that the most difficult stage after diagnosis is accepting the emotions that they were experiencing



at the time, but once they accepted those emotions, their lives became easier and better. When parents first learnt their child had ASD, they went through a roller coaster of emotions, beginning with shock, followed by denial, rage, guilt, and acceptance. They adapted to the change over time and learnt to embrace emotions as a normal aspect of parenting. *“My first emotion upon learning that my child had ASD was a shock, followed by frustration and uncertainty about my ability to be a parent. Then gradually, with time, I acknowledged and accepted my emotions, and only then could I become strong enough to focus on my special child's upbringing,”* a parent described their initial response to their child's diagnosis. This subtheme concluded by emphasising how crucial it is for parents to accept both their good and negative emotions. Parents can only focus on their children's upbringing if their emotions are in order, and once that is done, they can form genuine connections with their children and demonstrate compassion.

Sub-Theme 2: Behavioral Acceptance

This subtheme focused on the behavioural acceptance of parents of children with ASD. Despite all the responsibilities, the parents stated that they tried to provide their child with adequate attention and unconditional love. The parents stated that their child needs are most important to them, and for them, they can make any change in their lives. As one mother said, *“For me, my child is most important, so if he needs some things to change, I try to make them change because I love my child and I accept him with his special needs”*. The parents also consult with mental health professionals to help their special child grow and develop properly. Parents motivate their children with ASD to participate in activities with other children while avoiding discrimination against them. Participants stated that, *“I advise my child to play with their siblings and try to include them in social gatherings so they don't feel left out”*. In conclusion, parents' actions and behaviours show how committed and supportive they are to their child with ASD. Their dedication to seeking expert advice, adapting their lifestyles to accommodate the needs of their special child, and their efforts to include their child with ASD in social activities all demonstrate their parents' unconditional affection for them.

Sub-Theme 3: Cognitive Acceptance

This subtheme reflects how parents of children with ASD accept their children with ASD, their special needs and their overall impact on their lives as a whole. The parents stated that the first step in cognitive acceptance is the mental acceptance of the fact that these children are different from others and have different demands. The parents reported that they also accept the fact that parenting such a child needs a lot of effort and that it's not an easy task. As one parent said, *“You know what is more difficult is to accept that your child is different from others, and so the challenge you face in parenting will also be different than the others. Once you accept it mentally, nothing bothers you more”*. The parents said that they tried to keep a positive mind when facing difficult situations regarding parenting a child with ASD. In conclusion, this subtheme highlighted that parents accept the fact mentally that their child is unique and has special needs that are challenging, but all they can do is accept them mentally and try to deal with all the difficulties with an open and positive mindset.

Theme-III: Adaptation

This theme represents how parents adapt emotionally, behaviorally and cognitively according to the demands of their children with ASD.

Sub-Theme 1: Emotional Adaptation

This subtheme sheds light on how parents try to adapt emotionally to their child with ASD. Most of the participants stated that even though controlling negative emotions and staying optimistic all the time while parenting a child with ASD is not possible, it's very important to adapt the emotions according to the situation and demands of the child. Most of the parents' narratives highlighted that they tried to be flexible and modified their emotional response towards their child's challenging behaviours. *“It can be stressful when a situation arises, and I want to express my feelings and have an outburst, but I always attempt to adjust them in such a manner that it doesn't negatively impact my child's psychological well-being”*, commented a parent about shaping their own emotions in difficult situations. In a nutshell, this theme highlighted the parents' effort to adapt their emotions in a positive way and according to the betterment of their child.

Sub-Theme 2: Behavioral Adaptation

This subtheme focuses on how parents modify their personal schedules, social interactions, and parenting approaches in order to effectively fulfil the demands of a child with ASD. One parent stated, *“My whole day is scheduled according to my special child's routine; I know that only I am responsible for my child's development, so I try to focus on him more than anything else”*. This reflects parent's efforts to accommodate their life according to their special child's needs. *“I try to incorporate new strategies into my parenting style and see if that is more beneficial for my child or not”*, reported another parent. The parents stated that they attempt to make their home environment as comfortable as possible for both their child with ASD and other members of the family. *“I make adaptations to the household environment to accommodate my special child while ensuring that my other family members are not disturbed”*, stated one mother. In conclusion, this theme sheds light on how parents accommodate the needs of a child with ASD by modifying daily schedules, household settings, and social life.

Sub-Theme 3: Cognitive Adaptation

The focus of the subtheme of cognitive adaptation is on how parents of children with autism spectrum disorder adapt their thinking processes, beliefs, values, and perspectives in order to provide the best parenting to their child. Most of the parents reported that they are always ready to change their thinking when it comes to fulfilling the needs of their children. As one parent stated, *“I tried to adapt my thinking in a way that is more beneficial for my child as well as for my mental health”*. This demonstrates parents' willingness to adjust their thoughts and perspectives in order to satisfy their child's needs and to remain psychologically healthy. The parents also reported that although before their child with ASD, they had different perspectives of parenting and thoughts on how to deal with children after the child with ASD, they now start thinking in different ways that are rational, positive and effective for their child's upbringing. In conclusion, this theme emphasises how parents provide a loving and supportive environment for their children by being willing to adjust their mental processes, beliefs, and perspectives.

Theme IV: Executive Functioning

The 4th main theme was executive functioning, which reflects parents' ability to find alternative solutions to problems, manage tasks and adjust goals effectively. This main theme has subthemes of the ability to generate alternatives, goal adjustment and multitasking.

Sub-Theme 1: Ability to Generate Alternatives

This theme highlighted parents' ability to find alternatives or different strategies and solutions when dealing with challenging situations or problematic behaviours of their child with autism. *“When I feel like I'm stuck in a problem related to my child, I always look for the best possible solutions to resolve it,”* a parent said. This demonstrates their willingness to go above and beyond to overcome obstacles in the life of their child with ASD and to make a positive impact by persistently seeking out the best alternatives and novel ideas for the child's development. *“While dealing with my child, I always try to use alternative strategies in parenting to make it more effective”*, reported the parent. In this theme, the narratives of participants reflect that they generally believe that in order to make their child's life better, they must approach them in a variety of effective ways. Their ability to handle challenges creatively and be flexible in the management of their child with ASD allowed them to create a comfortable and healthier environment for their special child.

Sub-Theme 2: Goals Adjustment

This subtheme reflects the ability of parents to adjust their life goals according to the changing demands of their children with ASD. The parents' narratives show their love and dedication towards their child as they consider their child's needs when setting their personal, family, social, and career goals. *“I am willing to change my life goals if that facilitates my child's needs”*, shared a parent. Another parent reported *when I set goals for my personal, family and social life, and I keep my special child in mind before implementing it”*. The parents state that they try to align their life objectives towards their special child's needs to excel at their



role as caregivers. In conclusion, this theme shows how parents modify their goals regarding every aspect of life to accommodate their special child's life and to provide them with a supportive environment.

Sub-Theme 3: Multitasking

This theme explains how the parents of children with ASD try to manage multiple responsibilities in an effective way, along with the responsibility of caring for a child with autism. Most of the parents reported that initially, they faced a lot of difficulties because the demands of children with ASD are challenging. However, with the passage of time, they are equipped with the ability to multitask. Now, most of them effectively manage their personal, family and social lives along with their child's needs efficiently. *"I have adapted to multitask and manage everything with my special child. I can take care of my special child, do house chores and focus on my career simultaneously,"* as stated by a parent. Parents' narratives reflected that they organize their tasks more carefully and prioritize their tasks according to the situation in which their special child's growth and development are not ignored.

Main Theme V: Resilience

This theme reflects the parent's capacity to cope with the challenges of life and hardship effectively. This theme has a subtheme of self-efficacy, as it reflects that parents are confident in themselves, and the positive appraisal subtheme reflects their ability to appraise challenges in a positive way.

Sub-Theme 1: Self Efficacy

This subtheme reflects how parents of children with ASD have a firm belief in their selves that they can face all the challenges regarding parenting a child with ASD with great courage. One of the parents said, *"My child always has good days and bad days. It's up to me how I manage them. I believe in myself to overcome those challenges and difficult behaviours in the best possible ways"*. Regardless of all the hardships they face as parents, they remain firm and dutiful in their roles as parents and try to cater to all the needs of ASD children to the best of their capabilities. A parent said, *"I am confident that the way I am raising my child is best to my abilities, and no one is more capable to raise my child than me"*. Moreover, the parents showed utmost confidence in their parenting and their ability to maintain equilibrium in all aspects of life, along with rearing the special child. Overall, this theme highlighted that the parents know their roles and they are trying to fulfil their responsibilities efficiently and with confidence in their abilities.

Sub-Theme 2: Positive Appraisal

This theme demonstrated how parents of children with ASD remain optimistic and find positivity even in difficulties they face while rearing a child with autism. Most of the parents stated that despite the many things that made them worried and hopeless, they tried to see positivity in everything, even the minor progress their child made. Most parents reported that after their children, their faith in God increased, and they think that they are blessed because God chose them to have a special child. A parent reported, *"I believe my child is a blessing in disguise by God, to show us that we are worthy of taking care of a special needs child"*. Another parent stated, *"My special child has made me into a new person who is brave as well as patient"*. This shows the strength they developed as a parent of an ASD child and how much they endured during the child's rearing time with patience. In conclusion, this theme of positive appraisal shows how parents find their purpose and hope to show determination, strength and gratitude in their journey of raising a special needs child.

Discussion

The current study was conducted with the aim of exploring the perspectives and experiences of parents of children with ASD, particularly focusing on understanding parental psychological flexibility. The first theme, mindfulness, emphasises the parents' skill to effectively regulate their emotions when needed, their focus on the present phase of life, and their ability to accept new experiences in the way of parenting a child with ASD with an open mind. Previous research reported that mindfulness parenting plays an important role in increasing psychological functioning and has a positive impact on the mental health of parents of children with ASD (Shorey & Ng, [2021](#); Cheung et al., [2019](#)). Parents of children with ASD try to

accept their child's condition challenges the way of parenting a child by accepting it through their emotions, actions and thinking. A qualitative study on Thai mothers of children with ASD identified acceptance as one of their major themes (Chantasiriwate et al., 2019), which backed the second theme of acceptance in the current study. The theme of adaptation highlights how parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) effectively adapt to the changing circumstances while rearing a child with ASD by changing their parenting methods and daily routines to meet the needs of their special children. Goh et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative descriptive study in Singapore on parents of children with ASD. In their findings, adaptation emerged as a main theme, thus supporting current findings. People who possess strong executive functioning skills are better equipped to manage the challenges that come their way (Diamond, 2020).

The theme of executive functioning also demonstrates effective planning and prioritization skills, the ability to switch between tasks as needed, and adaptability in the face of unexpected situations for parents of children with ASD. A study found that mothers who used positive cognitive appraisal had higher life satisfaction (Schlebusch & Dada, 2018). In addition, parents with higher resilience have lower levels of depression and greater self-efficacy in raising their children (Higgins et al., 2023). This supports the fifth theme of resilience, which includes self-efficacy and positive appraisal, as most parents believe in their ability to handle challenges and maintain a positive outlook, which makes parenting easier.

Strengths and Limitations of The Study

The strength of this research lies in its novelty, being the first qualitative study on psychological flexibility among parents of children with ASD in different cities of Punjab, Pakistan. By delving into this previously unexplored area, the study provides valuable insights into parental experiences within a specific cultural context, contributing to the understanding of how psychological flexibility manifests in Pakistani society. However, the focus only on one province restricts the findings' generalizability because experiences can vary across different areas and cultural contexts within the country.

Future Recommendations and Implications

Future studies can be carried out using diverse samples. Longitudinal studies may also be carried out in the future to assess how parents' experiences and psychological flexibility evolve over time. Furthermore, social workers, policymakers, and other professionals can use the most recent research to create policies that support parents' psychological flexibility by improving services for children and their parents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, getting an in-depth understanding of psychological flexibility phenomena in parents of children with ASD helps clinicians, professionals, and policymakers tailor interventions and policies that aid in increasing psychological flexibility in parents raising children with ASD. Because improved psychological flexibility not only results in decreasing stress, anxiety and depression but can also improve parents' bond with their children. Further, a strong emotional bond between parents and children results in an improved quality of life for the family as a whole.

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