



Emotional Coping, Paternal Support, and Family Relationships among Generation Z Women in Urban Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Studies of the mental health of South Asian women have largely focused on diasporic populations and been lacking in qualitative research in the context of rapidly evolving urban South Asia. The aim of this study was to explore the experience of emotional distress among young women living in Karachi, Pakistan, as well as to whom these women seek support. Thirteen semi-structured developmental interviews were transcribed from undergraduate psychology students, who were unmarried, and these were analysed reflexively using this approach. Three themes were derived. First, participants always controlled distress internally, crying, withdrawing to sleep, and rumination, describing self-containment as competence and not a deficit. Second, the findings challenge the literature portraying mothers as the first choice of confidante for daughters, with a considerable number of respondents describing the father as being the closest and most trustworthy emotional resource, an image of him as a logical, calm listener. Third, the participants talked about autonomy as the autonomy within family belonging, not as opposition to it, and how they felt they had control over their own decisions, but were still part of a larger group. Results expand the scope of the self-silencing theory to a non-diasporic setting in Pakistan and highlight an under-researched aspect of family life – paternal confiding. Implications for culturally responsive clinical practice are discussed.



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Introduction

Young women in South Asia are a unique group that struggles between the demands of the collectivist family culture, the gendered social expectation, and the rapidly changing educational and occupational opportunity. Their coping with emotional distress and to whom they share it has significant implications for mental health service design when treatment gaps remain a problem, in a region where they have access to fewer services. However, the qualitative research literature on this group has tended to be geographically skewed. Most of the research that focuses on the emotional suppression, help-seeking and family experiences of South Asian women is

based in the UK, Canada, the USA and Australia, and samples focused upon first and second-generation migrants (Aktar & Tribe, 2024; Gunasinghe et al., 2019; Yasmin-Qureshi & Ledwith, 2020). There is relatively little qualitative work that focuses on the dynamics of these processes in urban South Asia, where the cultural norms under investigation are not experienced as a heritage identity negotiated with a host culture, but instead as the ‘normality’ of social life.

This is an analytical difference. Emotional restraint is often theorized in diasporic research to be the result of bicultural tension, wherein women are described as being in between heritage collectivism and host-country individualism – the negotiating of disclosure strategies following from the tension between these two ascribed cultural/civic values (Sen et al., 2024). If there is no such friction, the mechanisms which sustain restraint can be different. Research in Pakistan is limited and Rafique (2010) found few studies that investigated metacognitive beliefs about rumination in relation to depression in Pakistani women, and his study was conducted on clinical rather than general samples. This study aims to fill this void and investigates the perspective of young women living in Karachi.

Self-Silencing and Emotional Restraint

Self-silencing theory holds that individuals, particularly women, inhibit the expression of thoughts and feelings judged likely to threaten valued relationships (Jack et al., 2010). Across South Asian populations, self-silencing has been repeatedly identified as a mechanism for maintaining familial harmony and conforming to gendered social roles. Jack et al. (2010), working in Nepal, documented how self-silencing operated to preserve social and familial equilibrium, with gender-specific consequences. Sathyapal and Deb (2025), in an interpretative phenomenological analysis of Indian adults, characterized the practice not as passive inhibition but as active, adaptive negotiation calibrated to socio-contextual cues, situating personal agency within hierarchical family structures.

Two cultural constructs recur across this literature. *Izzat*, denoting honour and family reputation, and *sharam*, denoting shame, function as codes of conduct regulating female behaviour and constraining disclosure. Gunasinghe et al. (2019), in an interpretative phenomenological study of six British Pakistani Muslim women, found that fear of jeopardising family honour drove the self-management and silencing of psychological distress. Sangar (2018) applied Foucauldian discourse analysis to the accounts of South Asian girls and their teachers, characterising shame as an oppressive and regulatory force that foreclosed opportunities for help-seeking. Sangar and Howe (2021) extended this to show how discourses of *sharam* shaped help-seeking behaviours among British-born girls of South Asian heritage.

Whether emotional suppression should be understood as maladaptive is contested. In individualist settings, expressive suppression is consistently associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Ramzan & Amjad, 2017). In collectivist contexts, however, the association attenuates, and suppression is sometimes unrelated to, or associated with, better outcomes where it supports social cohesion (Silva, 2020; Tamir et al., 2023). Tsai and Lu (2018) similarly argued that the health consequences of emotion suppression and disclosure are culturally contingent. A parallel refinement has occurred in the rumination literature: brooding is consistently maladaptive, whereas problem-solving analysis may function adaptively among individuals from interdependent cultural backgrounds (Choi & Miyamoto, 2022; Tsai, 2010). These debates remain largely untested in non-diasporic South Asian samples.

Paternal Roles and the Father–Daughter Relationship

The study investigates the roles fathers play and their relationship with their daughters. Significant family studies research also shows that there has been an intergenerational change in father's roles from authoritarian and emotionally distant fathering to one that is more involved, mentoring and emotionally involved. Although it is a norm in Chinese culture to avoid overt emotional expression, a majority of adolescent girls in Shanghai reported feeling close to their fathers (Xu, O'Brien, 2014) and fathers in Shanghai involved in emotional and financial aspects were reported (Xu, Yeung, 2013). In India, Singh et al (2019) noted that attitudes towards their daughters were more liberal than their practices with educated daughters, whereas Joeg and Sriram (2019) noted a history of fathers treating their daughters as property to supporting their daughters' individual aspirations. Day (2025) postulated that a generational transition was taking place in which intimacy was being reciprocated in daughter–father relationships in the United Kingdom.

This course is still subject to the caveat. Many studies have documented daughters' perception of their mothers' relationships being more communicative and emotionally close than fathers' (Nielsen 2007). Patterns of seeking paternal advice on topics of low intimacy and motherly advice on topics of high intimacy have been observed by Sprague (1999), and similar patterns have been observed in adolescent girls' confiding relationships by Monck (1991). In the presence of socioeconomic disadvantage, traditional authority-based fathering seems to continue, with Lesch (2023) having found that daughters in low income rural South Africa were not able to open up with their fathers. Corleis and Lesch (2024) found that while fathers are more likely to be considered fathers of their daughters' empowerment, actual reciprocal intimacy is far from even.

For present purposes, it is important to note that there is a significant amount of evidence from China, India, Iran, South Africa, the United States and Western Europe, but very little from Pakistan. Little research has been conducted on the role of fathers as emotional support providers to grown-up daughters, and the daughters' perceptions of this role. This research study sought to understand the coping strategies for emotional distress and who young women in urban Pakistan consider as emotional support providers. Because the purpose of the study was exploratory in nature with no prior findings in this particular population and context, an inductive qualitative approach was chosen.

Method

Design

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was employed in this qualitative design. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its ability to uncover patterned meaning in accounts, its flexible application to theory, and the fact that the study was designed to generate themes, rather than test them. Analysis was carried out from a critical realist perspective, taking the accounts of the participants as representations of their lived experience rather than as a true reflection of it, but recognising that the accounts were contextually constructed. The six phases were applied to the procedural aspects based on the worked example from Byrne (2022). We report on the basis of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007), and a completed checklist is provided in the supplement.

Data Collection

Data were collected at a university in Karachi within a psychological testing and assessment module in which interviews served a dual purpose: fulfilment of a supervised training requirement and contribution to the present study. Students enrolled in the module were informed prior to commencement that the interviews they conducted and participated in would be used for research and possible publication, and consent was obtained on that basis before any data were generated. Each interview was semi-structured, following a common developmental schedule covering family history, academic history, and social and personal history, and was documented in a structured written record alongside a standardized assessment battery. The present analysis draws exclusively on the interview material; psychometric data were not analysed.

Interviews were conducted by peer interviewers under academic supervision and were recorded in written form rather than transcribed verbatim. Accounts therefore reach analysis in structured written summary rather than as verbatim speech, and the assessment context within which interviews took place will have shaped both what was elicited and how it was recorded.

Participants

Participants were 13 unmarried young women residing in Karachi, aged 19 to 23 years (median = 20). All were identified as Muslim and all were undergraduate psychology students enrolled in the same programme. Family systems included nuclear, joint, and extended arrangements, and birth-order positions spanned eldest, middle, and youngest. Participants are identified throughout as P1 to P13; identifiers were randomly assigned and do not correspond to the order or naming of the source documents. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Only interviews were included that met the following criteria: Female undergraduate psychology student between the ages of 18 and 25 years, living in Karachi and a completed developmental interview in all three domains of family, academic, and social. Fourteen interviews were selected for these criteria. However, one of these was removed from the study during screening as it was married and working and was a different life stage to the rest of the sample, and so would have introduced systematic error for the themes of family relationships, autonomy and emotional disclosure. A final sample of 13 interviews was homogeneous in terms of marital status, academic programme and age bands. Homogeneity of this type is suitable for an analytic purpose to investigate patterned meaning within a specific group, rather than to make intergroup comparisons. The module used a reciprocal peer-interview format and one of the participants who remained in the final sample had previously interviewed the other participant who was excluded. This is made clear by the fact that this is a statement from her, made by another interviewer.

Analytic Procedure

The reflexive thematic analysis was performed iteratively, according to the six phases. The repeated reading of the entire corpus was used in the process of familiarisation. Initial codes were inductively generated using both semantic and latent coding, with attention to what participants were reported as saying, and to the interpretive frames in which it was recorded.

Coded extracts were compared against the full data set and codes were collated into candidate themes and refined. Themes were used when they were present in a significant number of accounts and when they were logically developed in an analysis rather than just superficially similar in content. Patterns that were found in a minority of the candidates were not added as themes but were kept as patterns of divergence.

Reflexivity

The analytic team comprised researchers based in Karachi with backgrounds in psychology and academic instruction, sharing the broad cultural context of the participants. This proximity afforded familiarity with the normative frameworks participants described, including the salience of family reputation and the ordinary organisation of family decision-making, and carried a corresponding risk of treating culturally familiar patterns as unremarkable. A reflexive log was maintained to document interpretive decisions. Particular attention was given to resisting the assumption, prevalent in the wider literature, that mothers necessarily occupy the role of primary confidant; the paternal pattern reported below was noted precisely because it ran counter to analytic expectation.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted within a teaching context in which data collection served both training and research purposes. This arrangement carries specific ethical obligations, which are set out below.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the respective department prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from every participant before any interview took place. Participants were informed of the study aims, the dual training and research purpose of the interviews, the anonymisation procedures to be applied, the intended publication outlet, and their right to withdraw their data at any point prior to submission without giving reason and without academic consequence. Consent was obtained separately from the peer interviewers who documented the accounts. No participant declined or withdrew.

All directly and indirectly identifying information has been removed. Participants are referred to throughout by randomly assigned alphanumeric codes that do not correspond to the order, naming, or filing of the source documents. Personal names, family members' names, precise residential neighbourhoods, institutional identifiers, and student registration numbers have been withheld. Ages are reported as a range and median rather than individually where combination with other characteristics could permit identification. Given the small size of the cohort and the possibility of internal recognition among classmates, quoted material has been limited to short, non-distinctive extracts, and no extract is attributed in a manner that would allow a reader familiar with the cohort to identify its source.

Results

Three themes were generated. Participants described managing distress inwardly rather than voicing it; identified a parent, frequently the father, as the principal emotional anchor; and articulated autonomy as exercised from within family belonging rather than against it. The

themes are analytically interrelated: inward coping presupposes a restricted field of disclosure, and the parent who is exempted from that restriction is thereby significant.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics (N = 13)

ID	Age	Marital status	Programme	Family system	Birth order
P1	19	Single	BS Psychology	Extended	Youngest of 3
P2	19	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Middle of 3
P3	21	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Eldest
P4	21	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Eldest of 4
P5	20	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Eldest
P6	20	Single	BS Psychology	Joint	Only child
P7	19	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Youngest of 3
P8	20	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Middle of 3
P9	21	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Eldest of 4
P10	20	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	2nd of 5
P11	21	Single	BS Psychology	Joint	Eldest of 4
P12	20	Single	BS Psychology	Nuclear	Eldest of 3
P13	23	Single	BS Psychology	Not specified	3rd of 4

Note. Ages and family details are drawn from examiner records. Identifiers were randomly assigned.

Theme 1: Managing Distress Inwardly

The commonality across all of the patterns was that they tended to be 'containers' rather than 'seekers'. This orientation was manifested in a recurring pattern of behaviors: crying in isolation, falling into sleep, and prolonged rumination. Crying and excessive sleep was noted as one of the participants' responses to stress, with the preference of isolated routines (P7). One was reported to be suppressing emotions and not expressing feelings to anyone in the family except one confidante, P2. A third reported a preference to solve most problems alone, not relying on others (P8), and a fourth was described as independent and organized, preferring to solve problems alone (P13). Some of the participants had a more time-limited distress, manifesting as being overwhelmed by thoughts often at night, or crying at bedtime (P5). Overthinking was pervasive in almost all narratives as the common symptom of distress, often intertwined with a fear of the future and performance.

There are two aspects of this theme which are important to highlight. Firstly, the avoidance of containment was less common. It was more frequently presented as competence, a desired skill for independence, implying emotional independence as a resource rather than as an absence. It is consistent with reports of self-silencing as an active process instead of a passive process of inhibition (Sathyapal & Deb, 2025) and with findings that the psychological price of repression is lessened when it is part of a social process that fosters social cohesion (Silva, 2020; Tamir et al., 2023). Second, there was no complete, but rather a "selective" restriction of disclosure, participants who did not disclose to the household often had one specific outlet, usually a parent or one trusted friend.

Theme 2: The Parent as Emotional Anchor

In nearly every report, the first place that a parent turns during distress was identified as a parent. The analytic interest is in the parents. For a significant number this was the mother (P6 "for a very close and friendly relationship with my mother" and P4 "the first person she would turn to in difficulty is always my mother").

For a similar proportion, however, the most immediate and trustworthy presence was the father, who was always described as composed, rational and dependable. One participant said her dad was good at listening, giving logical explanations and guidance (P7). Another was found to have a more special relationship with her father, who was a 'calm listener and a good source of support' (P10). A third consulted her father regularly on important life choices, and was termed her mother's favorite (P9).

One of the other characteristics of these bonds was their changeability throughout the life span. For some participants the anchoring relationship changed: for one, in adulthood the emotional proximity shifted from mother to father, when the father became more available in the family due to new work responsibilities (P3); for others, the previous closeness of the maternal bond had grown distant, and/or emotional closeness to the father remained weak despite the improvement in relations with the mother (P8, P12).

This result is in contrast to a large body of research that has consistently found daughters to perceive their relationships with their mothers as more intimate than their relationships with their fathers (Nielsen, 2007) and that their fathers' advice is requested for matters of low intimacy but not high intimacy (Monck, 1991; Sprague, 1999). For high intimacy support, fathers were specifically named in the present accounts. It is more aligned with the research that highlights a shift towards emotionally connected fatherhood over the years (Day, 2025; Joeg & Sriram, 2019; Xu & O'Brien, 2014; Xu & Yeung, 2013), but very few studies have been conducted in Pakistan. However, the theme as a whole can be described as a feeling of parental anchoring, and the father proved to be a chief confidant more often than the literature would suggest.

Theme 3: Autonomy Within Belonging

A consistent pattern concerned the negotiation of personal autonomy within a collectivist family structure. Rather than framing independence as separation from the family, participants characteristically described a dual arrangement: inclusion in collective decision-making alongside retained authority over personal choices. The formulation recurred with notable regularity across otherwise dissimilar cases. Participants were described as being involved in important family decisions while preferring to make personal choices independently (P6); as consulted in major family decision-making as the eldest child (P3); and as actively included in family decisions while demonstrating strong personal autonomy in their own choices (P7). Others were reported as feeling confident in making their own choices while actively seeking family advice, yet ultimately reserving personal decisions for themselves (P2), or as involved in education-related family decisions while making personal decisions independently after consulting trusted family members (P10).

The consistency of this construction suggests a culturally patterned model of selfhood in which agency and embeddedness are not experienced as opposed. Autonomy was exercised from within

belonging rather than as a break from it. This complicates a simple individualist–collectivist dichotomy and is consistent with characterisations of self-silencing and related practices as involving strategic agency within hierarchical structures rather than the absence of agency (Sathyapal & Deb, 2025).

Discussion

This study examined how young women in urban Pakistan describe managing emotional distress and identifying sources of support. Three findings emerged: distress was managed inwardly and narrated as self-reliance; a parent served as the principal emotional anchor, with fathers featuring more prominently than the literature anticipates; and autonomy was exercised from within family belonging rather than against it.

Extending Self-Silencing Beyond the Diaspora

The inward management of distress documented here closely resembles the self-silencing described across South Asian diasporic samples (Gunasinghe et al., 2019; Jack et al., 2010; Sangar, 2018). Its appearance in a non-diasporic Karachi sample is theoretically consequential. Diasporic accounts frequently attribute emotional restraint to bicultural tension, framing it as a response to conflicting expectations between heritage and host cultures (Sen et al., 2024). The present findings indicate that comparable restraint is present where no such tension obtains, suggesting that bicultural friction intensifies or reshapes a pattern that exists independently of it, rather than generating it.

The framing of self-containment as competence rather than deficit should be read with the sample's disciplinary background in mind, since psychology students may be more inclined than others to characterize their own regulation strategies in evaluative terms. With that qualification, the pattern supports the position that suppression in collectivist contexts is not straightforwardly maladaptive (Silva, 2020; Tamir et al., 2023; Tsai & Lu, 2018). It also cautions against the clinical pathologizing of culturally normative restraint. At the same time, the pervasiveness of overthinking across these accounts is a reminder that restraint has cognitive costs; the distinction between adaptive problem-solving analysis and maladaptive brooding (Choi & Miyamoto, 2022; Tsai, 2010) is likely to be clinically consequential here and merits direct investigation in Pakistani samples, extending Rafique's (2010) work on metacognitive beliefs about rumination.

The Father as Confidant

The prominence of fathers as emotional confidants is the study's most unexpected finding. The father–daughter literature documents a broad generational movement toward emotionally engaged paternal roles across China, India, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere (Day, 2025; Joeg & Sriram, 2019; Singh et al., 2019; Xu & O'Brien, 2014; Xu & Yeung, 2013), yet consistently qualifies this with evidence that mothers remain the preferred confidants for intimate matters (Monck, 1991; Nielsen, 2007; Sprague, 1999). The present accounts diverge from that qualification, and they do so in a national context effectively absent from the existing literature.

Several interpretations are available and cannot be adjudicated from these data. The paternal qualities participants emphasized were consistently cognitive rather than affective: fathers were valued as calm, logical, and reasoned. It is possible that in a context where emotional expression

carries reputational risk, a confidant characterized by measured reasoning rather than emotional reciprocity is precisely what is sought, and that this constitutes a culturally specific form of intimacy not well captured by instruments developed elsewhere. This aligns with the observation that Western-centric conceptions of intimacy may misread non-Western expressions of care and authority. Alternatively, the pattern may reflect the specific socioeconomic profile of this sample, whose fathers were largely educated and whose daughters were pursuing higher education. Dyadic research incorporating fathers' own perspectives, which the existing literature identifies as a persistent gap, would be required to distinguish these possibilities.

Implications for Practice

First, reluctance to disclosure should not be interpreted as a lack of support and clinical services should not assume that this is the case when working in this context; participants reported active and selective disclosure to specific individuals. Mobilizing an existing confidant may be more acceptable than making a disclosure to a new professional, in line with the arguments for culturally responsive frameworks that recognize and integrate familial and religious contexts (Yasmin-Qureshi & Ledwith, 2020). Second, family-centred practices should not assume that this means that mothers must be involved. When a dad is the chief confidant, his absence from a treatment strategy takes away the individual the client actually confides in.

Limitations

There are several caveats to these results. Interviews were not recorded in a literal way but in a structured written form with complete texts not being available and analyses of the texts based on summarized accounts. Interviews were undertaken by trained peers, not by experienced researchers, and it is possible that the assessment situation has favoured the reporting of experiences in clinical or diagnostic terms. Peer interviewing could also have affected disclosures in both ways, making it easier to be honest because of knowing others and more difficult because of fear of how one might be perceived in the group.

Another issue related to the sample is the makeup of the sample. All participants had a prior academic exposure with psychological constructs, assessment vocabulary and clinical framing, as they were psychology undergraduate students. The words that were found in more than one account were considered part of the disciplinary vocabulary of which the participants were formally introduced. The findings thus speak to how psychologically literate young women talk about their emotional lives as opposed to young women in Pakistan, in general. It is an empirical question this study cannot answer whether this same expression would take place (or whether this same expression could take place) among women without this training.

Conclusion

Urban young women painted emotional distress as an internal state of containment, one they discussed with a trusted personal other, typically father, and that they managed based on personal choice rather than against a sense of family attachment. The results sheds new light on self-silencing theory that is based in a diasporic context and highlights paternal confiding as an overlooked aspect of family life in this population that should be directly examined with primary data.

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