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Perceived Family Dynamics in the Socio-Cultural Context of Pakistan: Insights from Intersex (Transgender) Individuals

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Abstract

This study is unique because it is pioneer in exploring family dynamics in socio-cultural context of Pakistan among inter-sex; one of the category of transgender. Current study aims to explore the conceptual understanding of family dynamics of inter-sex. It is a qualitative, cross-sectional study conducted in the region of south Punjab of Pakistan. Research question was designed keeping in view the purpose of the study. The goal of the research question was to tap personal experiences and observations related to the phenomena under study. Using mixed sampling technique, participants were approached from different regions. Face to face. Semi-structured, in depth interviews were conducted from 11 participants. Responses of the participants were audio recorded, transcribed, translated to English and were further analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Careful dealing and immersion with the entire data, three major themes were identified as family dynamics of intersex in the socio-cultural perspective of Pakistan. According to the findings, Parental Dynamics; Inter- Family Dynamics; and Extended Family Dynamics were main themes based on several sub-themes and many codes. The entire study was conducted using a well-established and rigorous method including all ethics followed throughout the study. The findings of this research have the potential to guide family counseling practices and shape social policies that strengthen support systems for intersex individuals in Pakistan. By promoting more inclusive and understanding family environments, these insights may contribute to greater acceptance of intersex individuals within households and, ultimately, to

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progressive societal change. Considerable suggestions for future researchers are given.

Keywords: Intersex, Transgender, Family Dynamics, Pakistan

Introduction

While the broader understanding and acceptance of transgender individuals have improved in recent years, this community still experiences elevated levels of discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Such factors often interact with internal psychological processes and have implications for how transgender individuals direct moral decisions and engage with their own ethical frameworks. Essentially, the family environment also plays a central role in influencing moral development of individuals. Creating awareness and acceptance towards transgender may help Pakistani society in developing favorable attitudes toward transgender thus eliminating stigma.

According to Transgender Persons Protection Rights Act (2018) of Pakistan, there are three categories of transgender. This study particularly focuses on first category; Inter-sex, defined by the mentioned law. According to this, Inter-sex are the individuals with mixture of male and female genitals. In other words, inter-sex is that category of transgender individuals that are neither biologically males nor biologically female; can be a biological combination of both female and male. Second category of transgender is those females who were males by birth. Similarly, third category is vice versa, encompassing those females who were males at birth.

Family Dynamics

Fundamental unit of human development is the family whereas children depend on their parents who fulfill their basic needs like support, nurturance, and assistance (Hammen, 2010) ¹. For transgender individuals, family dynamics can be both supportive and challenging. Reality is that the transgender individuals are born to parents from diverse backgrounds within society, as anyone capable of reproduction can become a parent to a transgender child. Consequently, the significance of family dynamics in the lives of transgender individuals is evident.

According to Tahira (2020) Family dynamics refer to the patterns of family and environment, interactions with family members, relationships between family members, overall supportive family environment. Family dynamics can also be described as the interaction between the members, their relationship with each other, their conflicts, how cohesive the family is, their adaptability, organization, and, how well they communicate with each other (Lewandowski et al. 2010).

Family relationships influence the lifestyles of transgender persons. In many cases, further rejection and ostracism from the family of origin create feelings of isolation and compel transgender persons to use maladaptive coping strategies, such as moral disengagement (Moore et al., 2012). The association of support from the family of origin with moral disengagement is particularly relevant since a literature review indicates that the development of such disengagement strategies can be lessened if warmth from parents prevails (Bautista-Aranda, 2024). However, little is known about family interactions that exist and how the transgender people in Pakistan influence moral reasoning. Such

information is essential because acceptance or rejection from family can dramatically change the psychological well-being and social integration of transgender individuals.

The quality of family relationships—especially positive communication, appreciation, and coping ability—significantly influences health outcomes for trans youth, though some aspects like family commitment and shared enjoyable time are less studied (Brown et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2024). In current research, researcher also tried to explore positive dynamics of family but participants reported very little enjoyable moments, much of them reported having no positivity in family. Perhaps this could be the reason of less research on the positive family relationship among transgender.

Barriers to care, such as lack of parental support or healthcare systems requiring parental involvement, can hinder access to necessary medical treatments for trans youth, particularly for non-binary individuals (Clark et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2020).

Research indicates that gender-diverse individuals, including transgender, non-binary, and broader queer populations, face a high risk of physical abuse and other forms of violence from family members. Studies from various countries show that a significant proportion of transgender and non-binary individuals report experiencing family violence, with emotional and physical abuse being especially prevalent among transfeminine individuals, and efforts to change gender identity or expression more common among transmasculine individuals (Chan et al., 2024; Barboza et al., 2016; Donovan et al., 2023; Yeasmin & Infanti, 2025).

This study is grounded in Family Rejection Theory, which posits that the degree of acceptance or rejection an individual receives from their family significantly shapes their psychological well-being and social adjustment. While the idea of family rejection as a contributor to psychological distress has older roots in attachment theory and family systems theory, Ryan et al. (2009) were the first to formalize and empirically validate the specific *Family Rejection Model* through large-scale research with LGBTQ+ youth. They demonstrated that higher levels of parental and family rejection were strongly linked to depression, suicidal ideation, substance use, and risky sexual behaviors.

In the Pakistani context, intersex individuals often experience conditional acceptance, social invisibility, or outright discrimination within their families due to cultural and religious norms. Applying Family Rejection Theory provides a framework for understanding how family attitudes and behaviors contribute to the psychosocial challenges faced by intersex individuals and offers insight into how familial support or rejection impacts their quality of life.

While *Family Rejection Theory* was initially framed through LGBTQ+ research, intersex scholarship often parallels these frameworks with unique cultural considerations. A book *Intersex people, doctoring, and clinical authority: Resistance and resilience*, by Jones and co-authors (2017) provides detailed insight into the lived experiences of intersex individuals,

Research also shows that the process of "coming out" and seeking gender affirmation is complex for both trans parents and their children, with age and family dynamics influencing responses (Charter et al., 2022). Overall, the literature underscores that affirming, informed, and communicative parent-child relationships are protective for trans youth, while highlighting the need for further research and support for families navigating these experiences (Johnson et al., 2020; Brothers, 2025; Brown et al., 2020; Sansfaçon et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2024).

Objectives

1. To explore the conceptual understanding of family dynamics of inter-sex.

Research Questions

Keeping in view the research objective of the study, following research question was designed to explore the family dynamics of transgender.

1. What are the key elements or factors that inter-sex individuals perceive as contributing to family dynamics?

Method

Population

This study was conducted on inter-sex; one category of transgender, according to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Right) Act (2018). Transgender under the mentioned category either living with other transgender or living with parents were approached for participation from the region of Punjab, above age 18, any religion and language.

Sample Size

In this phase, qualitative research design was used and personal interviews were conducted till the point of saturation of data. Saturation reached at 11 participants.

Sampling Technique

Mixed- sampling technique was used to gather data. First of all, the purposive sampling technique was used to target a specific category of transgender individuals, that is, intersex. Thereafter, data collection was carried out through the use of the snowball sampling technique to better reach hard-to-access populations.

Research Design

This is a qualitative cross sectional study. From the lens of paradigm, current study is rooted in post positivism era, catching the lived experience of participants, hence operates on phenomenological approach.

Instruments

Two screening questions were implied before the informed consent, demographic sheet and interview questions. Purpose of the screening questions was to ensure that the participant is transgender and particularly intersex.

Informed Consent

A detailed document of Urdu version of informed consent was provided to every participant that contains the required information about objectives of research, confidentiality, anonymity, rights to withdraw and contact details.

Demographic Sheet

Designed by researcher to collect demographic details of the participants including details like type, age, city, qualification, family system, parental qualification, number of siblings, current living status of parents etc.

Interview Questions

Based on the objective of the research, two semi-structured, face-to-face, in depth interview questions were asked to the research participants.

Procedure

First of all, the literature was reviewed thoroughly. Purpose of the research was made by considering the future suggestions given by other researchers in their publications and by identifying the less explored area. Intersex individuals were asked a series of open-ended questions designed to address the central research inquiry, focusing on the factors they perceive as shaping and influencing family dynamics. These questions encouraged participants to share their lived experiences and personal interpretations allowing for an in-depth exploration of aspects of their familial relationships. This approach enabled the collection of rich, narrative data that captured the complexity of family interactions within the broader socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

Participants were approached, greeted well and requested to participate in interview. They were told about the importance of research and approximate time taken. Special care was taken while adjusting the language of the questions that it should be according to respondent's mental abilities and education level. Simple and understandable Urdu language was selected to formulate the questions.

After every interview taken, audio recordings were listened again and again to get familiarized with data. After several exposures with data, it was transcribed and translated into English, for the need to report findings in English.

Analysis

Data in the form of text was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Next, the data was searched to highlight meaningful segments that will be relevant, interesting and provoking. These codes will be grouped into relevant categories. Finally, the themes were generated.

Ethics

Ethics of research were followed throughout, ranging from approaching the participants, elaborating research objectives, requesting consent, recording the interviews, confidentiality, freedom to leave, and ending up appropriately.

Evaluation Criteria

Researcher conducted the entire study using a well-established and rigorous method under the guideline of Tracy (2010). Tracy not only identified eight criteria for a rigor rich qualitative research but also the ways to achieve these criteria. Hence the criteria of Tracy were found to be more comprehensive and explanatory in nature that made the researcher to follow particularly in phase I of the current study.

Findings

Carful dealing with data, and after a thorough process of reflexive thematic analysis, researchers reached following findings of the study:

Table 1

Exploration of Family Dynamics as Perceived by Inter-sex (Transgender) Individuals

Major Themes	Sub Themes	Codes	Indicators
Parental Dynamics	Overprotectiveness	Parental Supervision and Control	Parents want me to live under their supervision
		Authority	Parents want me to obey them
	Conditional Acceptance	Conditional Love	Parents love transgender children only when they conform to expectations My parents accept me only, if I obey them.
			If I earn, parents behave nicely
	Strict Parenting	Parental Neglect	Family remained silent when relatives sexually abused transgender
		Harsh paternal behavior	Fathers are usually cruel Limited financial support from father, is provided Father discriminates between me and other siblings
Inter-Family Dynamics	Little Physical Support	Unfulfilled physical needs	Family provided me little support for physical needs
		Physical Abuse	Families should not physically abuse us
	Lack of Understanding	Low Emotional Support	Families should understand my feelings Families should not get under influence of relatives Families should support transgender individuals Families should pay attention to us Family does not trust transgender individuals
			If transgender financially supports family, family accepts them
		Financial Acceptance	Family should respect transgender individuals Families should treat us as human, Families should accept us
		Disregard	
	No Religious Obligations	Religious Teachings	Families should fulfill religious obligations toward transgender

			individuals Family do not consider us in property share
	Need for Autonomy	Freedom to form friendships	Families should allow us friendships with other transgender individuals
		Choice to dress up	Families have objection on our style of dressing
		Objection on accent	Families point out our accent and speaking
Extended Family Dynamics	Misconduct	Misbehavior	Relatives don't let us live Relatives often mock transgender individuals Relatives are dangerous, not positive Relatives criticize us
		Sexual harassment	Relatives do or tries to harass us sexually
	Social Pressure	Honor Culture	Parents genuinely love their transgender child but social pressure stop them Parents faces social problems due to having a transgender child
		Gender Roles	Males of the family consider us as socially disrespectful Males of family think social status is at risk Males consider transgender as socially inappropriate

Discussion

Current study is unique as it first time explored the ignored area of family dynamics of inter-sex, particularly in the context of Pakistan. According to the findings of current study, family dynamics reported by inter-sex are grouped into three major themes, *Parental Dynamics*, *Inter- Family Dynamics*, and *Extended Family Dynamics*. Overall, the literature underscores the need for more research focused on intersex experiences in diverse cultural settings, including Pakistan, and highlights the importance of supporting parents to foster acceptance and autonomy for intersex individuals (Horowitz et al., 2024).

Parental Dynamics

Parental Dynamics further consist of three sub themes; *Overprotectiveness*, *Conditional Acceptance* and *Strict Parenting*. These sub themes are derived from various codes interpreted from the direct responses of the participants (indicators in table 1).

Parental overprotectiveness to having an intersex child can be hindered by uncertainty about the child's future and societal expectations, which may lead to stricter or more controlling parenting styles, particularly in environments with strong gender norms or religious influences (Horowitz et al., 2024). This phenomenon is also observed in current study as reported by the participants:

Parents want me to live under their supervision, Parents want me to obey them.

Relevant researches reported that hostile sexism in parents, for example, predicts less warmth and more authoritarian (strict, controlling) parenting, which can negatively impact children regardless of their gender identity or sex characteristics (Overall et al., 2023). Additionally, the desire to transmit conservative values is stronger among parents with higher levels of benevolent or hostile sexism, which may translate into stricter upbringing, especially in traditional societies (Barni et al., 2022).

While there is no direct research on parental strictness specifically for intersex individuals in Pakistan, studies in other contexts suggest that traditional or sexist parental attitudes are associated with more controlling and less responsive parenting behaviors (Barni et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2023). Recent study explored the ideas of *Parental Neglect* and *Harsh paternal behavior* derived from the responses like:

Limited financial support from father, is provided.

Family remained silent when relatives sexually abused transgender.

Father discriminates between me and other siblings.

Fathers are usually cruel.

While talking about conditional acceptance, two closely related ideas interpreted from the participants' detailed response were, *Conditional Love* and *Money-Driven Acceptance*. Responses like:

Parents love transgender children only when they conform to expectations.

My parents accept me only, if I obey them.

relates the idea of conditional love whereas money-driven acceptance is relatively simple as seen in the given response, Similar financial acceptance is also observed by other members of family, reported as:

If I earn, parents behave nicely.

If transgender financially supports family, family accepts them.

There is very limited research directly addressing poor financial support from parents and discrimination among siblings as reported by intersex individuals. Most available studies focus on sexual minorities more broadly or on gender-based disparities. For example, research from Sweden shows that wealth and financial outcomes can differ significantly among siblings based on sexual orientation, with women in same-sex couples experiencing persistent wealth penalties compared to their siblings, suggesting possible financial disadvantages linked to non-normative gender or sexual identities (Dujeancourt et al., 2024).

Studies on other gender minorities (gay and lesbian individuals) like inter-sex; indicate that lack of family support increases the risk of experiencing discrimination, harassment, and violence, while strong family support can reduce these negative experiences (Worthen & Jones, 2022). Research on gender discrimination more generally finds that financial hardship and perceived discrimination are linked to poorer mental health outcomes, and that social support from family can buffer these effects (Stepanikova et al., 2020). However, none of these studies specifically examine intersex individuals or sibling discrimination in the context of intersex experiences.

There is a clear gap in the literature regarding the unique financial and familial challenges faced by intersex people, especially in relation to parental support and sibling dynamics. But, this gap is explored by current study in the context of South Punjab, Pakistan. It was found that financial condition of an inter-sex makes his/her valuable by his own family including parents and siblings. In other words, one parameter of acceptance for inter-sex is their earning that supports other family members.

Other researchers reported that barriers to parental acceptance and adjustment are often reinforced by institutional and cultural pressures, and parents may struggle to provide supportive environments due to these external factors (Horowitz et al., 2024).

Inter-Family Dynamics

Inter-Family Dynamics is the second major theme of family dynamics perceived by inter-sex (transgender) of Pakistan. It represents dynamics related to all family members, not restricted to parents (as covered in first major theme). This main theme is further comprised of following sub-themes: *Little Physical Support, Lack of Understanding, No Religious Obligations, and Need for Autonomy*

Physical victimization due to gender identity or expression is strongly associated with increased risk of suicidal ideation and attempts, highlighting the severe mental health consequences of such abuse (Barboza et al., 2016; McGeough & Sterzing, 2018). Findings of current study adds in the literature by identifying patterns of unmet physical needs and abuse directly reported by participants like:

Family provided me little support for physical needs.

Families should not physically abuse us (reported by many).

Several participants reported receiving minimal support from their families in fulfilling their basic physical needs, particularly when compared to the treatment of their other siblings. This lack of support encompassed areas such as pocket money, educational expenses, and other essential necessities of life. In addition to neglect, many participants described experiencing physical abuse from parents or elder siblings. Such abuse often occurred when participants demonstrated limited compliance with family expectations, refused to follow instructions, or engaged in behaviors perceived as socially unacceptable by their families. These behaviors included meeting with other transgender individuals, dressing according to their personal preferences, and wearing jewelry or makeup. In many cases, these actions were met with punitive responses aimed at enforcing conformity to traditional gender norms and discouraging expressions of gender identity. This pattern of neglect and abuse not only affected the participants' physical well-being but also reinforced feelings of rejection, marginalization, and emotional distress.

Statistical evidence also shows that family non-acceptance, pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, and societal stigma are major contributors to this abuse, often leading to non-disclosure of gender identity and suppression of gender expression (Chan et al., 2024; Yeasmin & Infanti, 2025). Moreover, the impacts of family abuse extend beyond immediate physical harm, contributing to long-term mental health issues such as depression, PTSD, and substance misuse (Barboza et al., 2016; Yeasmin & Infanti, 2025; McGeough & Sterzing, 2018). Despite the high prevalence, help-seeking from formal services remains low, partly due to invisibility of the issue and lack of confidence among professionals in responding appropriately (Donovan et al., 2023).

Parameters for lack of understanding reported by inter-sex is based on the ideas like Low Emotional Support, Financial Acceptance, and Disregard; each of these are interpreted from various statements of the participants.

Families should understand my feelings.

Families should not get under influence of relatives.

Families should support transgender individuals.

Families should pay attention to us.

Family does not trust transgender individuals.

Above statements are considered as the signs of lack of emotional support received from family members, as perceived by intersex. Such aspects of emotional support are expected by inter-sex of Pakistan, from family members either parents and siblings. It would be fair to

state that intersex individuals often experience low levels of emotional support in various aspects of life. This occurs when they feel misunderstood by their families, receive little to no encouragement, experience inattentiveness, or sense a lack of trust from family members. Such feelings are further intensified when family members are influenced by the opinions and pressures of extended relatives or the broader society.

These indicators are addressing both *need for autonomy* and regard for intersex, particularly looking from the family. Family environments are frequently described as violent and oppressive, leading many intersex and transgender individuals to leave their parental homes and form alternative support networks or "families of choice" where they can express their identities more freely and find acceptance and resilience despite ongoing societal challenges (Alamgir et al., 2024; Saeed et al., 2018).

In other cultures, research indicates that intersex and sexual minority individuals often perceive lower emotional support from their families compared to their heterosexual peers. Studies show that same-sex couples and sexual minorities frequently experience ambivalent or non-supportive attitudes from their families, which can negatively impact their emotional well-being and relationship quality (Rostosky et al., 2004; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). In particular, many gay and lesbian individuals report receiving more emotional support from friends than from family, highlighting a gap in familial support networks. The lack of family support is associated with increased psychological distress, while strong support from friends can buffer some of these negative effects (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987).

Closely related to emotional support is the idea of regard that also falls under the category of lack of understanding. Regard is an ethical right of every person not only inter-sex. But the inter-sex has reported receiving minimal respect and regard from their own family.

Family should respect transgender individuals.

Families should treat us as human.

Families should accept us.

Recent literature from Pakistan highlights that intersex and transgender individuals, often face significant disrespect, violence, and marginalization within their families of origin. These experiences are rooted in deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that define what is considered "normal" and "abnormal," with concepts of family honor, religious beliefs, and rigid gender expectations playing a central role in perpetuating stigma and oppression (Alamgir et al., 2024).

Globally, similar patterns of family rejection and lack of respect for intersex and transgender individuals are reported, though the specific cultural and religious factors may vary. In Pakistan, the pressure to conform to heteronormative roles and the social obligation to marry

further complicate the disclosure and acceptance of non-binary identities within families (Saeed et al., 2018; Alamgir et al., 2024). While some research focuses on broader issues of gender non-conformity—such as female breadwinners facing stigma for violating gender norms—these studies reinforce the idea that deviation from traditional gender roles often results in social isolation, stigmatization, and strained family relationships (Shah, 2023).

Another significant issue reported by many participants was the perception that family members did not consider them rightful heirs within the family. Despite the provisions of religious teachings regarding inheritance, parents—and later, even siblings—were often unwilling to grant them their due share of property.

Families should fulfill religious obligations toward transgender individuals.

Family do not consider us in property share.

As part of the Muslim country, participants related Islamic laws of inheritance and it was identified that most of the inter-sex are unable to receive their due right in property by their own family members. Conclusively, family support is crucial for emotional stability, mental health, and resilience. When families provide emotional support, individuals experience greater well-being and are better equipped to handle stress and adversity (An et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2021).

Extended Family Dynamics

Extended Family Dynamics is the final major theme based on two sub-themes; namely, *Misconduct* and *Social Pressure*, generated from the careful dealing of responses of the participants. Following statement represent misbehavior of extended family by inter-sex:

Relatives don't let us live.

Relatives often mock transgender individuals.

Relatives are dangerous, not positive.

Relatives criticize us.

Relatives do or tries to harass us sexually.

Whereas sexual abuse and sexual harassment is also reported by inter-sex. whereas societal pressure included *Honor Culture* and *Gender Norms*. Social pressure on family by extended family members, neighbors and family friends is taken important for inter-sex because these presentations effect attitudes and behaviors of their own family members. Given below are the responses that indicates honor culture is a social pressure that directly influence family members and indirectly impact on intersex.

Parents genuinely love their transgender child but social pressure stop them.

Parents faces social problems due to having a transgender child.

Similarly, gender norms that inter-sex perceives a social pressure on them.

Males of the family consider us as socially disrespectful.

Males of family think social status is at risk.

Males consider us as socially inappropriate.

Summarizing the findings, family dynamics of intersex individuals in socio cultural context of Pakistan falls under three broad dimensions. First dimension shown the factors related to parenting only; second dimension adds up the role of siblings too whereas third dimension is solely based on the members of extended family, family friends, neighbors and somehow society as whole. Overall theme of rejection and discrimination is observed with the most emphasizes on the role of parents. When talking about parents, participants were observed more signs of grief as compared to other members.

Such dynamics perceived by inter-sex is of great significance, highlighting the alarming need for understanding the phenomenon. Literature shows that parents themselves experience a range of emotional and cognitive reactions when their child comes out as trans, and their journey toward acceptance can be transformative, often requiring support and information to navigate this process (Brothers, 2025; Sansfaçon et al., 2020). There is a clear need for trans-inclusive and queer-inclusive family violence prevention and intervention strategies, as well as greater visibility and support within local services and civic life (Chan et al., 2024; Donovan et al., 2023; Yeasmin & Infanti, 2025). Overall, the literature underscores the need for more research focused on intersex experiences in diverse cultural settings, including Pakistan, and highlights the importance of supporting parents to foster acceptance and autonomy for intersex children (Horowitz et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This pioneering study highlights the complex parental, inter-family, and extended family dynamics experienced by intersex individuals in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. The findings reveal how family structures, attitudes, and interactions shape the lived realities of intersex people, often influencing their sense of belonging, acceptance, and support. By uncovering these dynamics through rich qualitative insights, the research underscores the need for culturally sensitive family counseling practices and social policies that foster inclusivity. Ultimately, the study contributes to greater awareness and paves the way for progressive societal change toward the acceptance and empowerment of intersex individuals.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to intersex individuals, representing one category within the transgender community, and is conducted within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

Recommendations for Future Researches

Future researchers interested in family relevance of transgender are suggested to target parents and family members of transgender as main population of the study.

Implications of the Study

The implications of this research could inform family counseling practices and social policies aimed at improving the support systems for intersex individuals in Pakistan, fostering a more inclusive family environment. This could ultimately lead to enhanced understanding and acceptance of intersex individuals within families, contributing to broader societal change in Pakistan.

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