
SUICIDE CASES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF PAKISTAN; FACTORS AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

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Pakistan is an Islamic Country. Suicide and attempt of suicide are against the Islamic teachings and laws of the country. The reported cases are rare, but the actual scenario of unreported incidents may be different. Reasons for suicide may be variable but lead towards exclusion from the educational stream, creating a threatening environment, thereby leaving its impact on fellow students and faculty. Suicides are not confined to only students but also have ingress in faculty. This paper is a cross-case analysis of three suicide cases with students and faculty related to higher education institutions. A qualitative research paradigm is used with a mix of secondary data available through print and electronic media and primary data of self-interaction of researcher with affiliated people of surroundings. Data were analyzed using three-stage thematic analysis, i.e. coding, clustering, pattern recognition and final write-up. The paper endeavours to understand the reasons, complex risk factors and their implications on the overall functioning of the educational process in higher educational institutions. Significant findings included but were not restricted to the relation of suicides with ethnicity, societal acceptability, harassment, and gender discrimination. Factors in these findings may contribute to students' overall safety and security in attaining educational objectives.

KEYWORDS

Exclusion, ostracism, safety, security, higher education institutions, suicide

INTRODUCTION

Every society has a social fabric. This fabric comprises threads of many compound and interconnected factors, including demographic factors and factors related to economic conditions, behavioural patterns, social institutions, tribes, social organizations, e.g. religious or educational organizations and societal networks or associations among people (Hayden, 2011). Beliefs and sentiments of the people strengthen the social fabric of society because they have a strong sense of attachment, thereby making it a source of their identity with that particular societal setting. Social institutions, including home or community and social organizations such as schools, colleges, universities and prayer places have a significant role in constructing social norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours. All these elements are not only visible with clarity in educational institutions but are supposed to be nurtured to allow full participation of all communal groups in curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities with no threat to them and their beliefs (Lutfiyya & Bartlett, 2020).

Inclusion in educational institutions is as vital as in any other social organization. It was identified that "social exclusion" is prevailing in educational institutions in other parts of the world at multiple tiers in the educational system (Peter, Sonia, & Judy, 2002). Phenomena of social exclusion or inclusion are not that pronounced in the common narratives of Pakistan. However, internationally these are considered of great value and are discussed in maximum available forums. One significant aspect of this exclusion is visible in private institutions that are not affordable to many, thereby creating social pressures on students and faculty to attain the desired degree in the field of study (Ali, Saeed, & Munir, 2018).

In Pakistan, almost 30% population is between 15 to 29 years of age, with university enrollment rates of 10–15%. Although there is a growing concern for the mental health of university students across the globe, studies from low and middle-income countries like Pakistan are scarce. Educational institutions are also part of the bigger problem. First, they charge high education fees, and then they maltreat their students. High fees are arranged by some means, but maltreatment of students leads them to stress and mental anxiety. If students are not given proper attention, they ultimately think of ending their life through suicide. Educational institutions have developed the concept of charging a high fee and providing academic education only. The ethics and nourishment of the student are entirely ignored (Sadia, 2020).

When we examine the incidents or the violent acts in real life in retaliation to the deprivation caused to an individual, the victims may not be the only actual doers. However, bystanders will also be hurt in the course of that incident. The details gathered on the incident on 20 April 1999 in Columbine High School located in a Little Town, Colorado, USA, killings by gunfire opened by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold

revealed that the shooters chose Christians, minorities and athletes. Investigators found out that both of the students, aged 18 and 17 respectively, were being ostracized and excluded by their class fellows. These killings may have resulted in many innocent deaths which were not involved in ostracizing both the killers, who later committed suicide with their guns (Mark, Robin, Laura, & Stephen, 2003). It is essential to realize that students with suicidal thoughts and tendencies in the most modern societies have reported reasons such as social narratives and their loneliness based on a difference of perspective from the dominant narrative especially mentioning the use of social media. Interestingly they also mentioned how the close relationships among families and friends could help them reduce these tendencies (Testoni, Piol, & D Leo, 2021).

Limited availability of literature in the Pakistani context and more studies on international scenarios diverts the reader in linking the phenomenon of exclusion solely with religion, depicting it as the only or primary cause of unrest and disturbing scenario in Pakistani society and educational institutions. Most incidents in higher educational institutions are reportedly linked with religious hype and negativity. The assumption is that while analyzing causes of exclusion, authors of the reports and research studies may have missed other factors of social scenario. These factors may have given rise to marginalization and exclusion, thereby instigating a person or group to take some extreme steps, which may include but are not restricted to taking their own life or the life of others in addition to their own (Healy & Schlunke, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Words are used in multiple contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify the meaning of any specific context to the readers. Likewise, if we want to know about specific phenomena, we need to understand the terms and elements associated with that phenomenon (University of Leicester, 2009). Socialization and social settings are the key factors of bonding between families, communities and institutions. In the case of educational institutions, the teachers have to ensure the transformation of youth into productive members of society (HEC, 2012).

If we see society on a more comprehensive or macro canvas. The social structures in a society can be gauged on socioeconomic distribution in strata or can be conveniently termed class distribution. On the middle-scale or meso-tier, social structure can be the interactions between community members or the organizations. Lastly, at the bottom of the micro-tier, it deals with the transformation and shaping of norms which gives birth to the behaviour of the members in some specific social setup (Fabrizio, Juan, & Miguel, 2006). The dynamics of exclusion may include but are not restricted to self-segregation or ostracism, cross-cultural communication apprehension and stigmatizing the individuals. These can be overcome by generative interventions, adaptive cognitive reprocessing, and repeated contact (Ruth, Paul, & Judith, 2019).

Individuals experience a threat to and a desire to restore their sense of meaningful existence after exclusion. Exclusion undermines an individual's sense that other people see them and acknowledge their existence (William, 1997). The restoration of feelings of meaningful existence has been suggested to explain one of the most damaging consequences of social exclusion, i.e. aggression. Individuals may attempt to restore their diminished meaningful existence by engaging in attention-seeking behaviours, some of which may be violent. One theory behind school shootings is that the shooters were socially excluded by their peers and sought to regain their sense that others knew they existed.

In the Indian context, social exclusion is linked to many marginalized communities who have experienced discrimination on multiple grounds, including race, untouchables, and low-caste termed *Dalits*. The case is the same as an aboriginal community segregated in Australia. In most countries, the phenomenon of marginalization is a byproduct of colonization. Colonization has ended, but the effects are still prevailing because of strengthening the power structures and systems which promote exclusion (Collins, 2012). In India, the students are segregated based on caste and creed. This segregated community does not have many educational opportunities available in early education, thereby excluding them from higher education. The incidents of committing suicide were also reported among doctorate students, for which causes of stress were more closely related to social interactions (Pandey, 2017).

In India, there are many examples of self-exclusion where the students commit suicide to evade the unusual behaviours of the majority by secluding them based on caste and class differences (Pandey, 2017). This self-exclusion leads to erecting walls around an individual or the group, thereby depicting no concern with the activities in a social setup (Stanford University, 2016). The tendency of suicide among university students has been studied concerning psychological distress, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. All these factors, when further elaborated, are not only associated with the person's mental health but also with the environmental stressor (Owusu-Ansah, Addae, Peasah, & Asante, 2020).

Suicides have been explained in multiple ways and have also been theorized. However, the most prominent name emerging is sociologist Emile Durkheim. He proposed a strong basis for a sociological perspective on youth suicide. According to his work on suicides, Durkheim is considered one of the founders of sociology and sociological thinking on suicide (S. Mueller, Abrutyn, Pescosolido, & Diefendorf, 2021). Richard Sennett (2006), who wrote an introductory piece to a recent translation of Durkheim's famous book on suicide, says:

"Durkheim saw that suicide has a social dimension. He observed that groups in which there is a good balance between individual initiative and communal solidarity have the

lowest rates of suicide. Suicide cannot be understood simply as a form of mental illness. Less psychology and more sociology are required to explain why some groups more than others might kill themselves."

Purpose statement and significance

Given the reported incidents and trends, the onset of marginalization and social exclusion in educational institutions is rising. The phenomena of social stratification may not be visible but cannot be ruled out. A single incident of dropout from educational institutions due to socioeconomic status or elimination of a single individual from the educational process by dropping out even at the cost of his/her life cannot be ruled out.

The available literature from domestic and international sources demystified the phenomena of marginalization, inclusion and exclusion. Theories from various theorists also supported the presence of this phenomenon in diverse societies globally. The domestic and international researchers have not denied the existence of exclusion in Pakistani society in general and educational institutions in particular. This phenomenon in the shape of deprivation due to caste, creed, gender biasness or harassment cannot be negated. The affected may fall victim to depression leading to any extreme action. This paper tried to highlight the phenomenon of exclusion, which may lead to ostracism leading to ending own life or the life of others in the course of psychological pain that the victims endured in daily life.

Theoretical framework

The responsive theory of social exclusion explains the targets and the sources. It says that the needs should be maintained better by using the existing sources of explicit verbal communication. It was proposed that sources mainly have three options: explicit rejection, ostracism or ignorance, and ambiguous rejection. In the case of an explicit rejection, feelings are less hurt than ambiguous rejection and ostracism, so we can say that the communication used in rejection plays a pivotal role (Freedman, D. Williams, & S. Beer, 2016).

The normative theory can be linked with self-exclusion, where an individual puts oneself aside after trying to fight the norms without separating from society. In India, there are many examples of self-exclusion where the students commit suicide to evade the unusual behaviours of the majority by secluding them based on caste and class differences (Pandey, 2017). This self-exclusion leads to erecting walls around an individual or the group, thereby depicting no concern with the activities in a social setup (Stanford University, 2016).

Sigmund Freud gave the theory of psychoanalytic. Sigmund Freud believed that basic

biological instincts combine with societal factors to shape personalities which consist of the identity, ego, and superego. These three parts must interact appropriately for a person to function well in society. If one of the three parts becomes dominant, personal and social problems may result. If a person does not develop a superego at an early age, he may not become strong enough to overcome the identity, resulting in antisocial behaviour (Freud, 2016).

Assumptions from stated theories

Human beings are slaves to the needs in life. Until the needs are fulfilled, a person goes on in life. Ignorance, rejection or degradation of moral values and ethics may lead to ostracism. Norms differ from society to society and play a role in regulating an individual's life irrespective of his / her liking or disliking. Until the situation favour, the person adjusts to the norms, but at a certain point, these norms may segregate a person from the mainstream. Hence, while remaining in society, a person is involved in self-exclusion, which sometimes leads to inflicting self-damage or damage to others. Basic social and biological instincts, including identity, ego, and superego, shape personalities. Over or under development of these factors leads to uncertain behaviour under which a person may go to any extreme to get back the ego and identity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What can be the probable causes of depressive behaviour leading to exclusion?
2. How does exclusion lead to ostracism, thereby giving or taking lives by an individual in HEIs?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was designed in a qualitative paradigm and was an interpretive phenomenological study to explore the social exclusion phenomena in higher educational institutions of Pakistan. Data were derived through document analysis, case studies, focus group discussion and targeted interviews. The data flow from these sources in the shape of themes and subthemes was matched with one other to surface the phenomena.

The first phase of data was transcription in the original language of conversation, and after that, the same was translated into English for interpretation. Data were analyzed using a three-stage thematic analysis. We go beyond counting phrases and words in the process. Coding, clustering, pattern recognition and report writing from the emergent themes identified implicit and explicit underlying ideas within the dataset. Transcription and open coding were adopted to get the correct interpretation, as specified by Corbin and Strauss (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). NVivo was used for qualitative analysis.

FINDINGS

Data comprised of presentation of three significant cases of suicide in three different universities of the country happened in the last five years. In addition, data was extracted from documents, focus group discussions with students and targeted interviews with faculty of five major universities in the country.

Presentation of significant cases of suicide

On 26 November 2018, Rushaan Farrukh, a private university student in Lahore, jumped from the fourth floor of her university. Rushaan was 20 years old. Sitting at the edge of the roof, dressed in an orange sweater and blue jeans, very pretty, her legs dangling, she did not move when her friend begged her to. She looked at her friend quietly for a few seconds and jumped. Her friend failed to stop her. Other people had just watched and perceived it as an attention-seeking stunt or a drama. Later they made videos of her dead body. The reason remained unknown for the unhappiness of a young lady. However, as per the views of her family, she was suffering from depression. She had been posting on social media, indicating that she had been suffering from anxiety, depression, and a tendency to inflict harm on herself.

Muhammad Afzal, a lecturer of English at the Government College in Lahore, committed suicide on 9 October 2019 by consuming a toxic substance. He was accused of harassment by one of his female students. College's Principal ordered an inquiry conducted by the Dean, Faculty of sciences. She had informed Muhammad Afzal that he was innocent in the case of harassment. He demanded a copy of the official verdict but could not get it for three months. Afzal stated in his suicide note that his family life was disturbed by the allegations, and his wife had also left him for the same reason. In addition, he also mentioned that he was in severe depression because of his tarnished reputation due to the non-availability of an official verdict of the inquiry declaring him innocent.

Saqib Hussain Hakro was a fifth-year Electrical Engineering student at a private university in Islamabad. He took his life and left a suicide note behind. He has asked to share his story on social media and police in his note. He has also left a separate note for his family in which he praised his parents for support. His suicide notes revealed that he was under immense pressure due to continuously failing in one subject. He felt suffocated in the depressive environment of the university and decided to take his own life. He nominated two university teachers, favouritism and nepotism. He wrote in his suicide letter that the university was responsible for his death. Two university teachers stopped him from wearing "AJRAK" and "TOPI" in university and threatened him with dire consequences. Due to these grudges, they failed him in one subject many times.

Focus group discussion and interview data

After going through the cases and available literature, the factors and scenarios were discussed with students of five central universities in provinces. Some of the critical issues extracted from focus group discussions are as under: -

- The environment in educational institutions is such that the students are not aware of the policies and fundamental rights and privileges.
- Policies for countering harassment and discrimination are in place, but the focal person details are unknown to students.
- Contact numbers and emails for various committees are not published on the university's website.
- Despite knowing the procedure, students are hesitant to contact faculty because of the fear of discrimination and harm.
- Financial pressures and status divide play their part in the deprivation of some of the students.
- Ethnicity and racism of some specific group or place overshadow the fundamental rights guaranteed in policies and charters of universities. It restricts some students from participating in routine co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- Exclusion and feelings of leaving the scenario are on the rise.
- Student counselling and assistance facilities are either not prevailing or are out of the reach of students. Harassment in various forms is prevailing for both male and female students and faculty members alike.

DISCUSSION

In data collection and interpretation, the main objectives were kept in mind so that nothing was left behind. Data analysis revealed that students in private and public sector universities are overburdened with the competition to get good grades. The societal divide in terms of class structure is increasing with time. Scholarships provided by universities or the government are insufficient to meet the overall expenses of a university student. On some occasions, students have contributed to paying some needy students' fees. This societal divide virtually makes it challenging to cope with heavy fee payments by less-income students.

Racism and ethnic divide affect minor groups whom majority groups in educational institutions continuously maltreat. Language divide and promotion of local culture are being promoted. Students from other provinces are deprived of participation, or those students prefer to remain away from those gatherings due to the sarcastic attitude of local majority groups. In addition, religious groups also play dominating role, and even faculty members are seen as reluctant to check them due to the fear of being labelled as anti-religious.

Exclusion and self-isolation are due to multiple factors, including but not restricted to fear of the unknown, deprivation and homesickness. The isolation and fewer interactions with other fellow students make others unable to understand the situation from which the lonely student is passing through. The loneliness and self-isolation may develop the feeling of ostracism, which sometimes results in taking own life or the life of others.

Self-respect, ego and super ego are the crucial factors of one's survival. When the ego or the self-respect of an individual is in danger or tarnished, he/she will try to restore it, and in the absence of restoration feeling of revenge is developed, which will result in self-harm or harming others. Norms and traditions of the community or a society cannot be ruled out, which play a pivotal role for those who are rebellious or alien to those.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The phenomena of social exclusion and ostracism in educational institutions and their prevalence in Pakistani society cannot be denied. Justice dispensation is slow due to procedural irregularities or negligence of the administrative echelons creating disappointment among the affected. In the absence of supportive colleagues, coping with the depression and anxiety developed due to the mentioned problems becomes difficult. Therefore, depression and anxiety may lead to feelings of getting out of the scenario. It was observed that few students were ready to migrate to other universities in the areas of their native places to get out of the situation. At times, the university's administration turns down the migration request, so as a last resort, the victim conceives freedom from these problems by taking his/her life as a last resort.

Exclusion leading to ostracism contributes to rising disappointment and loss of precious lives in the shape of suicides. A single case of life lost due to exclusion cannot be overshadowed as it may further degrade the situation, thereby affecting education attainment by the younger generation. Educational administration may consider the cases and devise the mechanism to improve the situation. One lost life might be just one case for administration, but he was the only son or daughter to support his/her parents.

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