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## THE ISOLATION TRAUMA IN PERCEIVED NARCISSISTIC HOUSEHOLDS: CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

Abeer Obaid<sup>1</sup>, Sadia Huda<sup>2</sup> & Zainab Ali<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Professional Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Bahria School of Professional Psychology, Bahria University, E8 Campus, Islamabad, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>School of Professional Psychology, University of Management & Technology, Lahore Pakistan

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Perceived Narcissistic Household, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Study, Children's Perspective	The present research study aimed to examine the psychosocial experiences of children residing with parents perceived to be in narcissistic household. The study recruited five participants (N=2 male, N=3 female) who were growing up within the household perceived to have a narcissistic parent. The data was analysed through thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed several themes & sub-themes. However, current research paper discusses one of the themes and its subsequent subthemes, i.e., Isolation Trauma: social isolation, financial isolation and social rejection. The findings of the study highlight psychosocial and emotional challenges that children undergo while growing up in a narcissistic household. Thus, this research contributes to understanding of the psychosocial and emotional abuse that children experience by parents with perceived narcissistic tendencies. The study provides significant and valuable information in reaching conclusion and contributing the existing knowledge from different perspectives. The study provides insight for future researchers, clinicians, and policy-makers in order to guiding them in the sensitive assessment and interventions for the considerations of these issues in a tailor-made format for ensuring desired consequences.
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Corresponding Author	Sadia Huda: <a href="mailto:Sadiahudakhan@gmail.com">Sadiahudakhan@gmail.com</a>
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## INTRODUCTION

The personality disorders are referred to as an enduring pattern of behavior, thought and inner experience that deviates from a person's culture (APA, 2013). In many aspects of a person's life, it can be considerably disruptive and impairing. Therefore, personality disorder will disrupt relationships, emotive self-regulation, cognition & physical health (Cloninger, Svrakic, Lester, Tosevski, Koldobsky & Botbol, 2017). Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), as cited in the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition, is indeed one of the most multifaceted clinical representations to understand and treat. Narcissistic Personality Disorder was classified as an impairing disorder in the men and women alike. In a study of 34,365, the degree of impairment in people with the narcissistic disorders is very different (Eaton, N. R., Seijas, Krueger, Campbell, Grant & Hasin, 2017). Estimates suggest that NPD may be affecting a disorder prevalence of less than 1% in the general population, therefore making it fairly rare. NPD, is the pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for the admiration, and a lack of empathy (DSM-5).

The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria used to understand and identify the underlying behaviors and psychological traits of NPD are strong indicators, and first way to recognize NPD. Narcissism is connected with the adverse traits, such as tendencies toward violence and entitled, deceitful behavior. This conduct can lead to maladaptive relationships and socially damaging behaviors that are both detrimental to the narcissist and those surrounding him or her (Miller, Lynam, Hyatt & Campbell, 2020). Victims of narcissistic abuse often socially isolate themselves, exhibit self-blame, and also exhibit symptoms of PTSD, including the intrusive thoughts, nightmares, hypervigilance, and problems concentrating (Staik, 2017). Although narcissism may appear as someone retaining an over-inflated sense of self-importance outwardly, their self-assessment may likely be fragile. The even more concerning part is that those around the individual who deliberately participated in the relationship with the individual diagnosed with NPD will be impacted and the potential of the narcissism to truly affect those around them (Hendrick, 2016; Staik, 2017).

Narcissistic traits profoundly impact the parenting style of parents, which subsequently affects child in several ways, such as adjustment-related issues. (Horton, 2021). Abuse by narcissists is defined as a particular experience aimed at mind control. This generally happens because of covert psychological abuse known as the subtle emotional manipulations (Staik, 2017). Many perceived narcissistic parents try to control their kids by imposing their demands and wants on them using intrusive, manipulative methods (Parise, Manzi, Donato & Iafrate, 2017; Choe, Lee & Read, 2021). The abuse can take many different forms in a perceived narcissistic home. In this connection, the perceived narcissistic parent or caregiver may manipulate, minimize, or dismiss the feelings and experiences of their family members, which is a common kind of the emotional abuse in diverse circumstances (Munich, 2009). Signs of narcissistic abuse include low self-worth and sureness, purposelessness, hypervigilance, difficulty regulating emotions, intrusive thoughts and memories, social isolation, reality doubt, and trauma bonding (Kilgore, 2023).

Hence, the behavior of the Narcissistic parent greatly affects the children's psychosocial and emotional development (Estlein, Meydan & Dottan, 2024). Narcissistic parent are mostly seen to control their children through emotional abuse and threats (Vignando & Bizumic, 2023). Thereby, children of narcissistic households have been seen maladjusted in their relationships because of the emotional void (McBride, 2008). Interpersonal disputes and emotional suffering for people involved might result from their egocentricity & lack of empathy (Campbell, 2019).

Young adults' sadness and anxiety are linked to perceived parental narcissism, possibly over parenting marked by intense control and scarce compassion (Dentale, Verrastro, Petruccelli, Diotaiuti, Petruccelli, Cappelli & Martini, 2015). The interactions within perceived narcissistic families typically center on the perceived narcissistic parent's need for control, admiration, and validation, minimizing the child's emotional needs. This research aims to assess the challenges and psychosocial well-being of children within alleged narcissistic families with specific focus on Pakistan.

## RESEARCH METHODOGY

The sample of five individuals consisted of three biological females,  $N = 3$ , and two biological males,  $N = 2$  in current research study. To be eligible, the participants must: (a) be an adult aged eighteen (18) or over; (b) perceive that one or both of their parental figures had thus narcissistic traits.

**Table**

*Demographic Information*

SN	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Education	Birth Order
P1	27 years	Male	Single	14 years	Middle Born
P2	22 years	Female	Married	15 years	Middle Born
P3	23 years	Female	Single	16 years	First Born
P4	21 years	Female	Single	15 years	Last Born
P5	37 years	Male	Married	14 years	First Born

## Data & Interview Procedure

The participants were recruited from social media and online forums focused on mental health using a purposive snowball sampling procedure. Participants provided verbal consent to participate and were informed of study's purpose before participation. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews due to flexibility, while providing consistency for each participant in data collection process. The interview guide was developed with help of (a) unstructured discussions with survivors of suspected narcissistic abuse, and (b) insight into the literature related to the narcissistic parenting, psychological abuse, and trauma during childhood, which ensured the guide was comprehensive and meaningfully conceptually created. Thus, among the sample questions were: What are/were dynamics of relationships between your parents and siblings? To ensure comfort and candidness, interviews occurred at sites selected by the participants (home or neutral meeting place). The interviews took place over the course of 25 to 60 minutes. Thus, all interviews were audio recorded, with permission, and transcribed word for word.

## Ethical & Analytical Considerations

Throughout the research process, confidentiality and anonymity were prioritized to protect the details of the participants. Participants provided verbal informed consent for the collection of data. The objective of study was also shared with participants. They were guided about the counselling services that be provided to them in case they express need for it post-interview.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The thematic data analysis involved the following stages: familiarization with data, coding, finding recurring patterns amongst codes and finally theme development.

## RESULTS OF STUDY

### Isolation Trauma

A theme emerged in the interviews was the participants' feelings of isolation from others and a lack of frequent assistance, which many people take for granted. This oftentimes entailed being quietly prevented from developing bonds or leaving house. They described it as suffocating experience that grew the apparent over time, rather than a single moment. As a result, they felt isolated and unclear where to turn for help. Participants have discussed that several forms of isolation such as social isolation, isolation and social rejection that child at narcissistic household may feel.

### Social Isolation

The participants shared how this isolation affected their daily lives. They felt that their family environment kept them away from friends and relatives. This made them more reliant on their controlling parent for small amounts of warmth or approval. P1, for example, remembered keeping everything to himself because he thought it was wrong to speak poorly about a parent. Reflecting on his childhood, he shared: "I wasn't anti-social in my childhood like this; we never used to tell anyone about this trauma thing, that's what used to happen at our home. It was only inside us, and we never told anyone anything about this. And especially I didn't have any friend back then towards whom I could share that my father was doing this and that". P3 also discussed how her father's rules restricted her capacity to interact with others. She thought that these limits caused her to withdraw over time, making it difficult to form and maintain the friendships.

As she reflected on their father-daughter connection, she recounted how his dominance and relentless control impacted her social life and sense of independence. She said: "I'm not able to mingle with people". She also elaborated her situation: "So, I'm unable to build any relation socially with people, irrespective of # person. Feels like I'm living in seclusion, and it's not that I'm lacking something, I can show love, affection, and care as well, but still I'm unable to build any relation." She further explained her situation, narrating an incident, she stated: "I used to talk a lot in my childhood when one of my dad's friends came into our house and said, 'she doesn't talk like she used to do in childhood, ' dad threatened me. I can't even smile in front of guests, I don't even laugh outside, make friends. I don't feel comfortable anywhere". P4 noted that she had always had trouble making friends, mostly as a result of the boundaries her father imposed.

She remembered how difficult it was to blend in or form a social circle in Saudi Arabia because of those limitations. As she put it: "Because ahhh.. my dad was so much ahhh... because I lived in Saudia Arabia and because of that people are different there and to adjust in societies there, you've to groom yourself according to it, which my father never let happen. In this connection,

because of it I don't have friends also I've been bullied many times so that's why I was unable to make a friend's circle". Thus, her experience showed how external factors, such as cultural differences, parental control, along with even financial constraints, subtly combined to make friendships challenging to establish or sustain. Therefore, P5 also mentioned having few social connections further showed that how prevalent this feeling of loneliness was throughout these interviews.

### **Financial Isolation**

Money issues were brought up repeatedly in interviews, not only as a practical requirement, but also as a tool of exerting power within the family. Participants mentioned situations where assistance was withheld at critical moments, being kept to a bare minimum, and having to be grateful for basic necessities. They interpreted this as silent message to power, who possessed it and who did not, and financial strain. P1 recalled his father establishing clear boundaries and stating unequivocally that no more would be granted. In his own words: "I'm giving you food; I'm giving you shelter. You should be... you know... you should be thankful to me, and I won't do more than that" P2 recalled time leading up to her wedding when her father refused to cover any costs and even ceased with family: "We needed money at our home and instead of asking about our problems leading from front, he stopped talking to us and made his brother to manage it".

This pattern had deeper significance for P1. Considering his beliefs and experience, remarked: "Even though it's written in Islam that if someone's envious, stay away from them. Now they didn't tell who that envious person is. It's just being said 'stay away from the envious'. So why shouldn't I stay away when the envious person is my father, who takes everything from the income and spends the least on the kids? To isolate them financially because it's a narcissistic trait and tactic you isolate by putting pressure socially, financially, and religiously". He further added, explaining his perspective on financial deprivation, stated: "If you don't have money, anyway, you'll always be in trouble because money is the biggest problem". These experiences demonstrated how money was more than just quantity in participant lives; it served as means of establishing boundaries, fostering dependency, determining what they were able & unable to accomplish.

### **Social Rejection**

Participants have also discussed experience of social rejection. When family problems arose, participants reported feeling isolated, questioned, or rejected by family members and wider community. They were rejected in various ways, including being laughed at, prohibited from, and interrogated in an intrusive manner. Participants have further discussed how family and community made them feel more anxious and alone, eroding their sense of identity self-worth. A few participants attributed to Pakistan's traditional view that parents, particularly children, should not openly discuss the dysfunctional conduct of their parents. "Still, people don't know specially in Pakistan. If child says this to another person, that father is like that, they'll say he's your father. Why are you talking like that? Don't talk badly about him. Father is heaven's door,

this, that, so what if my heaven's door has fungus on it then obviously, I'll go to hell instead of Heaven".

Participants recalled stress she endured on her wedding day, when family members focused more on her father's absence than on her happiness: "Why did your father block you? Why doesn't your father send you money? Why does he say that you have wasted all his money? And on my wedding day, I was still answering people's questions." She again quoted what the relatives said that made her and her family feel blamed, "What did you guys do that your father wasn't present at the wedding?". P5 shared his perspective on the relationship dynamics with relatives because of the dysfunctional relationship with his father. He stated: "There were other relatives from my mother's side, whom she believed at that time could take shelter, but I alleged that they were not good people to have shelter from". When taken as whole, participants' experiences demonstrated how cultural expectations around parental authority and deference increased emotions of rejection & further prevented open communication about dysfunctional families.

## DISCUSSION

In findings of present study, participants highlighted a gradual, long-term sense of emotional and interpersonal estrangement that children may experience in the narcissistic household. [Ali et al. \(2021\)](#) define enforced stillness and limited the social contact as being congruent with [Bowlby's \(1988\)](#) attachment theory, which connects stable early bonds to emotional well-being. They also show that how children can suppress their demands in relationship characterised by control and distance. [Schimmenti and Bifulco \(2015\)](#) found that many people were taught at a young age that it was inappropriate to exhibit hurt. [Erikson \(1963\)](#) proposed that discouraging peer contact during identity formation may limit a child's environment. Money was another source of influence as participants of study described fathers who offered little or no financial support for major life events, leaving children self-sufficient but required to display gratitude for necessities. Their experiences are compatible with [Stark's \(2007\)](#) economic abuse as a kind of coercive control, as well as [Walby et al. \(2018\)](#) concept of the deliberate financial autonomy constraints.

P1 recalled being told to "be thankful" for food and shelter when his requests for more were denied, indicating emotional impact of material scarcity. The cultural expectation that males provide for their families, even if such help is used inappropriately, aggravated the problem. P2's story of her father abandoning her while she was planning her wedding illustrated how a lack of cash may cause both short-term stress and a long-term sense of hopelessness. Thus, it is discussed by the participants that it is difficult to discuss dysfunctional behaviour of parents. Participants of the study explained that criticising a parent was deemed socially unacceptable in Pakistani culture, particularly for realizing the diverse desired consequences. Participants reported relatives who questioned, criticised them, even on good occasions, which is consistent with [Gallyamova et al.'s \(2022\)](#) findings on the pressure to maintain family image and [Triandis' \(2001\)](#) views on collectivist cultures in which shared honour takes precedence over individual sorrow.

According to these accounts, children from perceived narcissistic parents may confront social and emotional isolation as result of society's expectations that they be respectful and obedient. Leaving them stressed in multiple ways. Participants shared that in their experience, family and society question them for discussing the dysfunctional behaviour of parents who exhibit narcissistic traits. The abuse by narcissists is defined as a particular experience aimed at mind control as this generally happens because of covert psychological abuse known as the subtle emotional manipulations. To sum up, due to isolation and rejection from society, it becomes very difficult for victims of narcissistic abuse to seek psychosocial help and to maintain their well-being.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dynamics of the relationship of children living in a household where either of the parents is perceived as having narcissistic tendencies. The study highlights the challenges and struggles of children in Pakistan who are living with a perceived narcissistic parent. The children verbatim highlights about the relationship problems, financial pressures, and social isolation that these children often experience in diverse circumstances. In Pakistan, where parental power is rarely probed, moral stigmatization together with the social silence worsen their experience. To sum up, the experiences shared by the participants offer a glimpse into the complex dynamics of the perceived narcissistic households that aid in understanding the issue.

## Limitations & Implications

The small sample size limits the generalizability of the research. Thus, a sample from a diverse socioeconomic background was not curtailed. Future studies can include the perspectives of psychologists as well. The focus continues to be on emotional truth that participants encounter since "perceived narcissism" is a subjective concept that doesn't consistently align with clinical standards. In this linking, the quantitative research studies with larger samples in forthcoming studies must be conducted to assist in the systematically assessing prevalence, psychological effects, and enduring impacts on children's psychosocial and emotional health of children who survived maternal or paternal narcissism in the household. For educators and mental health practitioners operating in the culturally sensitive environments, the findings have significant implications.

This study highlights the need for psychoeducation on distinguishing between healthy familial respect and coercive control, which should be a part of the therapy, and practitioners must be trained to acknowledge non-physical abuse, such as emotional neglect as well as the financial manipulation, as legitimate and detrimental. Schools should offer safe venues for children to talk about family dynamics without fear of reprimands and condemnation, and public health campaigns should try to de-stigmatize the discussions about parental abuse, particularly in the narcissism. Thus, this study promotes knowledge about narcissistic abuse and care advocates, informing them about the injuries, raising awareness, and providing more empathetic support networks.

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