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Impact of Negative Attribution Style on Non-Suicidal Self-Injurious Behavior among Homeless Individuals

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Abstract

Non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors have been examined by researchers for several decades (Klonsky et al., [2016](#)). Negative attribution style is considered as a possible contributing factor in explaining non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. The current study was carried out to explore the impact of negative attribution style on such behaviors among conveniently selected 300 homeless individuals from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). The individuals were approached and briefed about the research and data collection procedure. The participants completed the Attributional Style Questionnaire and Ottawa Self-injury Inventory along with the demographic sheet. Negative attribution style was found to be positively related to non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. The results revealed that this style positively predicted such behaviors among homeless individuals. Furthermore, it explained 13.1% variation in this type of behavior. Both subcategories of this attribution style positively predicted non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. The results also revealed that stability explained 15.5% variation, whereas globality explained 9.6% variation in such behaviors. Moreover, the study revealed significant gender-based differences with respect to self-injurious behaviors. Strategies can be developed to target negative attribution styles and to promote positive ones. Psychosocial intervention targeting non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors can be used in this regard.

Keywords: gender differences, globality, negative attribution style, non-suicidal self-injurious behavior, stability

Introduction

Robinson ([2017](#)) identified homeless as an individual who lacks a proper, fixed, and regular residence. Literature explicates the impact of homelessness on individuals' mental health and resulting psychopathological problems, such as depression and many other mental

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health problems (Pinillo, [2021](#)). Being deprived of the basic life needs and facing adversities makes their lives vulnerable to psychological and behavioral problems (Alowaimer, [2018](#)). Gleason et al. ([2018](#)) pointed out that homeless individuals are more likely to engage in non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. Richards and Kuhn ([2023](#)) highlighted a higher prevalence of mental health problems, as well as substance use problems, among homeless individuals. Perry and Craig ([2015](#)) reported that the residents of shelter homes and homeless individuals have a higher prevalence of mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety. According to them, homelessness is also associated with self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Qu et al. ([2023](#)) defined non-suicidal self-injury as deliberate, repetitive harm with an intention to die. Non-suicidal self-injury is characterized by voluntarily and directly damaging the body (da Silva Bandeira et al., [2022](#)). Hendrick ([2016](#)) pointed out that self-injurious behavior is also known as self-mutilation, self-harm, or cutting one self. It is characterized by cutting, hair pulling, crippling, rubbing, or using other painful methods. Burton ([2014](#)) pointed out that youngsters have a higher ratio of injuries caused by non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors.

Non-suicidal self-injury occurs on a continuum, from least damaging to severe form of bodily damages. At the lower end of the continuum, it is characterized by a bearable quantity of damage, such as skin-picking, hair pulling, and lip-biting. On the other hand, the upper end of the continuum is characterized by moderate-to-severe actions, such as cutting the body or burning bodily parts (Floyd, [2019](#)).

A causal explanation for non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors is traced back to attributional style. It is defined as the causal analysis of the behaviors and can be classified into two major domains, namely positive and negative attribution (Pan et al., [2018](#)). Robinson ([2017](#)) also stated that the attribution style has two main dimensions, that is, optimistic and pessimistic attribution. Optimistic or positive attribution style is characterized by unstable, specific, and external explanations for the causality, whereas pessimistic or negative attribution style is characterized by stable, global, and internal explanations for causality.

Zimmermann and Papa ([2020](#)) defined attribution theory in terms of attribution about the reasons or consequences. The attributional styles are

based on the dimensions of the locus of control (internal vs external locus of control), stability (unstable vs stable causation), and extent (specific vs global).

According to Frumkin et al. (2021), several studies have focused on figuring out the role of thinking style in suicidal attempts or self-harm. They noted that individuals involved in non-suicidal self-injury or attempted suicide dwell more in the present, as compared to the past or the future. Boone and Brausch (2016) reported the link between self-injurious behavior and cognitive style. They noted that self-harming behavior is often used to escape negative cognitions. They also added that the pessimistic attributional style is more likely to relate to self-injurious behaviors.

Cohen et al. (2015) argued that self-criticism or self-blaming, a part of the negative cognitive style, is often linked with feelings of loss and worthlessness. Such feelings, in turn, may lead to self-harming acts. Notably, individuals with a history of non-suicidal self-injury have a higher endorsement for ruminating, as compared to individuals with no such history. It is evident that rumination increases the vulnerability for non-suicidal self-injury. Emotional Cascade Theory (Selby et al., 2009) suggests that rumination results in a negative effect and individuals might use non-suicidal self-injury as a distraction mechanism. Research showed the amplifying effect of affective states in attenuating existing cognitive dysfunctions. Arguably, higher levels of negative effects were related to depression and non-suicidal self-injury. O'Connor (2011) reported that negative attribution style serves as a powerful predictor of non-suicidal self-injury.

The current study intends to examine the impact of negative attribution style on non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors among homeless individuals. Indeed, there is a dearth of research concerning homeless individuals and their problems in Pakistan.

Objectives

The objectives of the current study are as follows:

1. To assess the relationship between negative attribution style, its subtypes (globality and stability) and non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors among homeless individuals.

2. To assess gender differences regarding negative attribution style and non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors among homeless individuals.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the current study are given below.

1. Negative attribution style positively predicts non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors.
2. Gender differences exist with respect to non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors.

Methodology

Operational Definitions of Variables

Negative Attribution Style

Negative attribution style is defined as a negative evaluation of any specific event. Negative attribution can be classified into global and stable, internal and external, specific and temporary attribution (Monfort-Escrig & Pena-Garijo, [2020](#)). In the current research, it is operationalized using Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ). Higher scores indicate higher levels of negative attribution style.

Non-suicidal Self-injury

Non-suicidal self-injury consists of deliberately harming one's body tissues through various methods, such as cutting, burning, self-poisoning, hitting, hair pulling, biting, and even doing overdose of drugs (Samari et al., [2020](#)). In the current research, it is operationalized based on the score obtained on Ottawa Self-Injury Inventory (OSII). Higher scores indicate higher levels of non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors.

Research Design

The current study is correlational and based on a cross-sectional survey design.

Sample

The sample comprised conveniently selected 300 homeless individuals from the vicinities of Hazara Division. The sample was further divided according to the gender and age of the participants.

Research Instruments

For the current research, the Urdu versions of Ottawa self-Injury Inventory (OSII) and Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) were used as data collection tools.

Attribution Style Questionnaire (ASQ)

The Urdu translation of ASQ (Dykema et al., [1996](#)) was used. It consists of 12 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale and assesses negative attribution style. It further assesses the stability and globality dimensions of this style. A higher score indicates more negative attributional style. The reported reliability of ASQ was .93.

Ottawa Self-Injury Inventory

Urdu version of OSII (Lewis et al., [2019](#)) of this scale is a 31-item inventory. Each item is measured on a 7-point scale with responses scored on a range of -3 to +3 for each item. The total score reflects the intensity of non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors, with higher scores reflecting higher intensity of such behaviors. OSII has a reliability coefficient of .87.

Procedure

The data were collected from conveniently selected 300 homeless individuals. They were approached individually, as well as in group settings, across the shelter homes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). After the formal introduction of the researcher, they were briefed about the purpose and process of research. They were ensured about the privacy and confidentiality of the data and that no ethical violation would occur during the course of research. They were also offered counselling for the issues that emerged during the course of data collection. Further, they were advised to consult a psychologist for the proper management of non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. They were informed about their liberty to participate in the research or to withdraw from it at any stage. Finally, they were thanked for their participation and advised to seek professional help.

Results

The results were analyzed and both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed for the data.

Table 1

Correlation between Negative Attribution Style, its Subscales and Non-suicidal Self-injury among Homeless Individuals (N=300)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. ASQ	-	.90***	.87***	.36***
2. ASQ-G		-	.84***	.39***
3. ASQ-S			-	.31***
4. NSSI				-

Note. ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire; ASQ-G = Attributional Style Questionnaire Globality; ASQ-S = Attributional Style Questionnaire Stability; NSSI = Non-Suicidal Self-Injury

Table 1 indicates a significant positive correlation among negative attribution style, its two subscales (stability and globality), and non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. The results showed that an increased negative attribution style is associated with a higher prevalence of non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. Similarly, both subtypes of negative attribution style, that is, stability and globality were found to be positively associated with such behaviors, indicating that their increased levels are related to increased non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors.

Table 2

Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Negative Attribution Style as Predictor of Non-suicidal Self-injurious Behaviors among Homeless Individuals (N=300)

Variables	R	R ²	B	B	F	SE
ASQ	.36	.13	.15	.36	44.92	.02

Note. ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire

Table 2 indicates that negative attribution style accounted for 13.1% variation in non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. The results showed that a greater negative attribution style results in increased non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. So, the negative attribution style is a significant predictor of non-suicidal self-injurious behavior ($B = .150, p < .001$).

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis of Attribution Style Subscales (Stability and Globality) as Predictors of Non-suicidal Self-injurious Behaviors among Homeless Individuals (N=300)

Variables	B	SE B	B	95% CI		p
				LL	UL	
ASQ-S	.49	.09	.64	.30	.68	<.001
ASQ-G	-.23	.10	-.27	-.44	-.02	<.001
R ²	.16					
F	30.01	***				

Note. ASQ-S = Attributional Style Questionnaire Stability; ASQ-G = Attributional Style Questionnaire Globality

Table 3 indicates that the two negative attribution styles, namely stability and globality, accounted for 16.8% variation in non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. The results also illustrated that both stability and globality contribute significantly to predict such behaviors.

Table 4

Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-values of Men and Women with Respect to ASQ, its Subscales, and OSII (N=300)

Variables	Male (n=133)		Female (n=167)		t(298)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
	OSII	43.33	6.80	53.90			

Note. OSII = Ottawa Self-Injury Inventory

The results indicated significant gender differences in inflicting self-injury. Men scored significantly lower as compared to women on non-suicidal self-injury ($t = 7.16, p < .001$). Hence, women are more likely to engage in non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors as compared to men.

Discussion

The current research explored the role of negative attribution style in explaining non-suicidal self-injury. For this purpose, Urdu versions of the two scales, namely Ottawa Self-Injury Inventory (OSII) and Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), were administered to a sample of 300 homeless individuals approached from the vicinities of Hazara Division, KPK.

The data analysis revealed alpha coefficients of ASQ and OSSSI as .96 and .87 respectively, indicating that both scales have a high reliability. It was found that negative attribution style is positively related to non-suicidal self-injury ($r = .36, p < .001$). Further, higher levels of negative attributions are related to higher levels of non-suicidal self-injuries. Müller et al. (2016) reported that self-injurious behavior has a positive relationship with negative attribution styles.

The results also revealed that negative attribution style caused significant changes in non-suicidal self-harm. Indeed, it explained 13.1% variation in it [$F(1, 298) = 44.92, p < .001$]. Previous studies also indicated the association between negative attribution styles and self-harm. Müller et al. (2016) stated that self-harm is the most reported function of negative attribution styles.

Furthermore, it was determined that both subscales of negative attribution style, namely stability and globality, caused significant changes in non-suicidal self-harm. Both explained 16.8% variation in it ($F(2, 297) = 30.01, p < .001$). Labelle et al. (2013) pointed out that the dysfunctional attribution style, characterized by stable, global, and internal attribution, leads to self-harm and even suicidal attempts. Barrocas et al. (2015), in a longitudinal study of adolescents, also found that non-suicidal self-injurious behavior is related to negative attribution style and its sub-dimensions.

Moreover, significant gender differences were determined in self-injurious behaviors. Women exhibited more self-injurious behaviors than men ($t = 7.16, p < .001$). Fox et al. (2018) also found that women are involved to a greater level in self-injurious behaviors as compared to men. Goubet and Chryssikou (2019) reported gender differences in self-injurious behavior and found that women are more likely to engage in such behaviors.

Conclusion

The study concludes that negative attribution style and its subcategories (stability and globality) are positive predictors of non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors. Moreover, gender differences exist with respect to self-injurious behavior, with women scoring higher on the scales.

Limitation and Suggestions

The current study has certain limitations. Some are discussed below, followed by possible suggestions.

1. The study was based on participants from the vicinities of the Hazara Division. A more diversified sample would increase the generalizability of the findings.
2. Only two demographic characteristics of the sample, that is, age and gender of the participants were taken into consideration. Further research can be conducted keeping in view other demographic characteristics to ensure more diversity in the sample.

Implications of the Study

The results of the current study are useful for professionals, such as clinical psychologists, social workers, and psychotherapists. The results give them a better understanding of the association of negative attribution style and self-injurious behaviors. It can be useful to develop strategies to target negative attribution styles. Protective factors can be identified to decrease the negative styles and increase positive ones. Proper residence and psycho-social assistance are required for homeless individuals to make them productive citizens.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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