

Perceived Behavioral Inflexibility and Family Functioning among Parents of Children with ASD: Role of Psychological Flexibility

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the relationship among parental psychological flexibility, perceived behavioral inflexibility and family functioning in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The study was conducted in 4 cities of Punjab, Pakistan with a sample of 400 parents (200 mothers & 200 fathers) selected through purposive sampling. Data collection involved the use of the Psychological Flexibility Scale (PFSS), the Behavioral Inflexibility Scale for Children with ASD and Other Developmental Disabilities, and the Autism Family Experience Scale. The results revealed that parental psychological flexibility had significant negative correlation with perceived behavioral inflexibility and strong positive correlation with family functioning in parents of children with ASD. The study also found that parental psychological flexibility significantly predicts family functioning among parents of children with ASD, explaining 75% of the variance. In the context of raising children with ASD, these findings highlight the value of parental psychological flexibility in fostering effective family functioning.

Keywords: *Psychological Flexibility, Behavioral Inflexibility, Parents, ASD, Family Functioning.*

1. Introduction

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), autism spectrum disorder is characterized by significant challenges with social relationships, verbal and nonverbal communication and repeated behaviors. ASD has become more prevalent in recent decades therefore there should be efficient support system for the people with ASD and their families (Zeidan et al., 2022). The children with ASD exhibit rigid patterns of behaviors that are challenging for parents. Due to these rigid behaviors the parents experience stress frequently as it makes their daily tasks difficult which ultimately sparks conflicts in family. The parenting stress make it difficult for parents to cope efficiently with the challenges of life and fulfill needs of their children which in turn effect their bond with their children (Papadopoulos, 2021; Walton & Tiede, 2020; Fuld, 2018). The inflexible pattern of thoughts, social communication and interactions all are part of these inflexible behaviors among ASD. According to Lecavalier et al. (2020), symptoms include

echolalia, perseverative language, prolonged ruminating, and difficulty adjusting to changes. The parental psychological flexibility plays an important role in this situation as it is an ability to be present in the moment, open to new experiences and align behaviors with one's goals and values (Hayes et al., 2012). Psychological flexibility in parenting refers to maintaining healthy relationship with children and using effective parenting strategies which allow oneself to be open to unpleasant feeling, thoughts and urges related to one child condition (Burke & Moore, 2015). Effective family functioning is characterized by positive interaction and defined roles in families with problem solving skills and flexibility. All of these increased family wellbeing (Olson, Waldvogel & Schlieff, 2019). Family Functioning is greatly influenced by the child behavioral inflexibility and parental psychological flexibility. Studies reveal that improved family functioning is related to increased psychological flexibility (Daks & Rogge, 2020).

Parents with greater psychological flexibility are generally better at handling their children's difficult behaviours. Parenting becomes more effective and flexible when parents possess higher degrees of acceptance, nonjudgment, and emotional control (Daks et al., 2020; Beeckman et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2015). Therefore, increasing psychological flexibility in parents of children with ASD can enhance connections between parents and children, reduce stress, and generally improve both parents and children's living. The following characteristics have been highlighted in Pakistani research on parents of children with ASD: stress, anxiety (Rauf, Haque & Aftab, 2017; Nadeem, Choudhary, Parveen & Javaid, 2016); resilience, hope, locus of control and mental health (Sarwar et al., 2022; Waheed, Khan & Khurshid, 2020; Furrukh & Anjum, 2020; Kanwal & Asad, 2018). As per researcher knowledge no study has been documented pertaining the parental perspective related to psychological flexibility, children's behavioral inflexibility, and overall family functioning in Pakistan. Therefore, current study aimed to fill this gap by investigating these phenomenas in Pakistan's perspective.

2. Research Objectives

1. To measure the relationship among parental psychological flexibility, perceived behavioral inflexibility and family functioning in parents of children with ASD
2. To measure the predicting role of parental psychological flexibility in family functioning among parents of children with ASD

3. Subjects and Methods

A correlational survey research design was used to determine the relationship among parental psychological flexibility, perceived behavioral inflexibility and family functioning in parents of children with ASD. A sample of 400 parents (200 mothers & 200 fathers) of children with ASD was selected using a purposive sampling technique. The sample was taken from clinical settings and special education institutions in four (Lahore, Lalamusa, Jhelum & Kharian) cities of Pakistan. The study included parents between the ages of 25 to 60 years and had only a single child with ASD. Whereas parents with more than one child with a disability were not part of the study. Parents who were separated or widowed and had any kind of physical and mental illness were also excluded. The data were collected using demographic form, The Psychological Flexibility Scale, The Behavioral Inflexibility Scale (Lecavalier et al., 2020) and The Autism Family Experience Scale (Leadbitter et al., 2018). The Psychological Flexibility Scale was developed by the researcher and it consists of 32 items with a 5-point Likert scale. The Behavioral Inflexibility Scale was adopted in Urdu by researcher for assessing perceived behavioral inflexibility and it consisted of 34 items with 6-point Likert scale. The family functioning was measured by The Autism Family Experience Scale and it was translated into Urdu before being used by the researcher. It consists of 48 items and has 5-point Likert scale for response. All scales show high reliability in the current sample. First of all, permission from the higher authorities of special education institutes and clinical settings were taken. Moreover, the permission from the developer for using their scales were also obtained via email. After the permission were granted, parents were approached for data collection during their monthly visits to the respective schools and clinics. The goals of the study were explained to participants and their written agreements were taken for participation. Before scales administration participant were provide necessary instructions. Then the demographic form and 3 scales (The Psychological flexibility Scale, The Behavioral Inflexibility Scale and The Autism Family Experience Scale) were administered on the respondents. Participants were requested to carefully read each statement and response honestly. The questionnaires were completed in 15 to 20 minutes on average by the participants. At the end, they were thanked for their participation and cooperation.

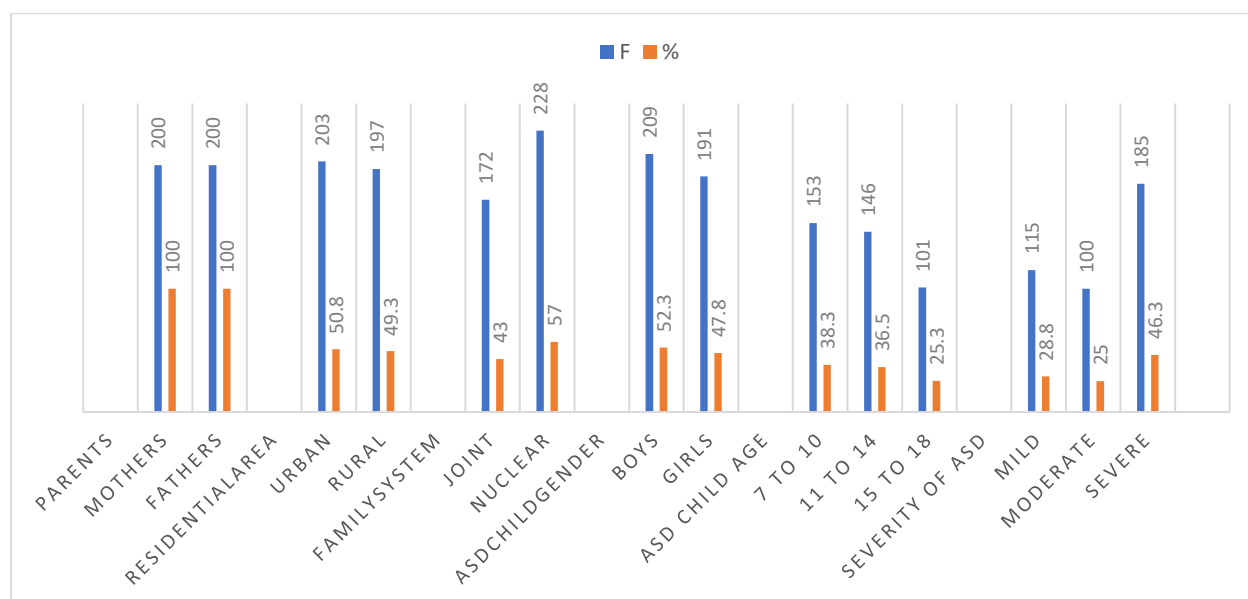
4. Ethical Consideration

The ethics of privacy and confidentiality were maintained by the researcher throughout the study.

4.1.Results

The Graph 1 show that sample consisted of equal numbers of participants on the basis of gender (50 % mothers & 50% fathers). Most of the participants were living in nuclear family system (57%) and were form urban areas (50.8%). Further it revealed that majority of participants had male child (52.3%). The graph also revealed that 46.3% children had severe level of ASD and 33.8% were from age group between 7 to 10 years.

Graph 1: Frequencies and Percentages Distributions of Participants Demographics



F=Frequencies, %= percentages

Table 1. Correlation among Parental Psychological Flexibility, Perceived Behavioral Inflexibility and Family Functioning among Parents of Children with ASD (n=400)

Measures	1	2	3
Psychological Flexibility	-	-.614**	.869**
Behavioral Inflexibility		-	-.548**
Family Functioning			-

Note: correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level,

Table 1 show that parental psychological flexibility had statistically significant negative correlation with perceived behavioral inflexibility ($r = -.614$, $p = .00$) and had strong positive correlation with family functioning ($r = .86$, $p = .00$). The finding also revealed negative correlation between perceived behavioral inflexibility and family functioning ($r = -.548$, $p = .00$) in parents of children with ASD.

Table 2. Overview Linear Regression Analysis: Parental Psychological Flexibility as a Predictor of Family Functioning Among Parents of Children with ASD.

Predictor	R	R ²	ΔR^2	F	P
Psychological Flexibility	.869	.755	.754	1224.65	.000

Note: R² = R square, P = significance

According to regression analysis, parental psychological flexibility accounts for 75% of the variance in family functioning and is a significant predictor of family functioning among parents of children with ASD. [$R^2 = .755$; $F(1, 398) = 1224.65$, $p = .00$].

5. Discussion

Present research aimed at finding a relationship among parental psychological flexibility behavioral inflexibility and family functioning in parents of children with ASD. Psychological flexibility plays an important role in helping parents to deal effectively with challenges related to parenting a special child and reduced stress in them. This will help them to perceive their child behavioral rigidity and inflexibility as natural aspects of their condition (Jacobs et al., 2020; Davis, 2018). The findings of the current study also supported this notion as findings reveal negative relationship between parental psychological flexibility and perceived behavioral inflexibility. It means that parents with more psychological flexibility will tend to perceive less behavioral inflexibility in their children with ASD.

Additionally results also demonstrate strong positive correlation between parental psychological flexibility and family functioning. It means that over all functioning of family improves when parents are more psychologically flexible. The parents who are psychological flexible have good skills of problem solving and communication which help them in maintain positive family environment. Psychological flexibility has been linked to good mental health and positive family functioning in earlier researches (Chorão, Canavarro & Pires, 2022; Daks & Rogge, 2020). The family functioning had negative correlation with perceived behavioral inflexibility according to the findings of current study. Children with high level of rigidity and behavioral inflexibility had negative impact on overall functioning of family. Moreover, it negatively affects the family routines and its cohesion which result in increasing stress for family as it struggling to manage these problematic behaviors. These findings are consistent with researches indicating that behavioral issues in children with ASD are a major source of parental stress and can negatively impact family functioning (Operto et al., 2021; Hsiao, 2018).

Psychological flexibility also enables parents to cope with the unique challenges of raising a child with autism, including effective communication and managing stress. This promotes harmonious family environment. In the end, it improves resilience, emotional control and open communication between parents and their kids (Hayes, 2020). The current study's regression analysis supports the notion that parental psychological flexibility is a major predictor of family functioning, since it explains 75% of the variation in family functioning among parents of children with ASD.

The current study strength is that it is a first study according to researcher best knowledge on the correlation among parental psychological flexibility, perceived behavioral inflexibility and family functioning in parents of children with ASD in different cities of Punjab, Pakistan. However, by only included four cities of province its findings cannot be generalized as different areas and cultural context can have different experience

Larger and more diverse sample could be included in future researches for increasing validity and applicability. The findings of current study can guide policy making and in planning treatments or interventions.

6. Conclusion

The study's conclusions indicated that parents of children with ASD are having a very tough time controlling their kids' behaviour problems. Having an ASD child in the family not only requires social, physical but psychological adaptation as well. Psychological flexibility is one of the most important mental condition of parents which help them to deal and adapt with this difficult situation. Hence it can be concluded that if the parents show psychological flexibility, it would positively influence their family dynamics and enhances their family functioning.

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