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Behind the Sacred Facade: Exploring the Psychological Determinants of Child Sexual Abuse in Religious Institutions in Pakistan

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Abstract
The study explores the aspects of child sexual abuse (CSA) in religious settings in Pakistan that relate to psychology. A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used to understand how the participants understand the phenomena related to CSA, based on their experiences and perceptions. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with five participant groups, including the accused, the families of victims, medical professionals, psychologists, police officers working on the case, and teachers and administrators at Madaris. The final sample consisted of 35 individual interviews and eight focus group discussions. From the thematic analysis, four major psychological categories were identified: personality and psychopathology, behavioral patterns, emotional and cognitive processes, and developmental history. Emotional and cognitive processes were identified as the most important categories with rationalization and repression of sexual drives, loneliness, and social isolation, moral disengagement, and shame and guilt cycles. Personality and psychopathology represented cognitive distortions, emotional immaturity, and a lack of impulse control, with narcissistic and antisocial behaviors and interests, and deviant sexual interests. Developmental history represented a traumatic past, abuse, difficulties of attachment, exposure to sexual content at an early age, neglect and failure to supervise appropriately at an early age, and a lack of appropriate supervision. Behavioral patterns included grooming, gradual crossing of boundaries, and a power-oriented behavior of high risk and secrecy. The overall findings suggest that CSA should not be explained by a single dimension of psychology, but should be framed by an integrated view of cognitive, emotional, personality, developmental, and behavioral dimensions. The findings have the potential to generate context specific qualitative data. It also has the potential to inform psychological assessment, improve safeguarding efforts and provide the required

oversight, improve training, and develop confidential reporting systems and policies to protect children in religious institutions in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Child sexual abuse; Psychological determinants; Religious institutions; Phenomenology; Cognitive distortions; Moral disengagement; Grooming behavior; Pakistan.*

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) causes life-long damage of a psychological, emotional, and developmental nature (World Health Organization [WHO] 2022). CSA is a major problem in Pakistan that is both significant and largely unreported. The stigma, fear, and social and family pressure as well as limited means for reporting the abuse, all contribute to victims and their families' reluctance, or complete refusal, to report the crime (Abbas, 2021). Cruel Numbers 2025 indicated that, in Pakistan, in the year 2025, a total of 3630 cases of child abuse were reported, representing about an 8% increase over the previous year (Jabeen, 2021). Due to the amount of time many children spend in their company, religious institutions are a critical area. Children build trusting and dependent relationships with religious teachers and other religious personnel that have an imbalance of power (Sarwar, 2024). According to the available research, child sexual abuse in a religious context is the result of the interplay of the individual, the interpersonal dimension, the institutional context, and the authority structure (Anwar, 2022).

Although CSA in Pakistan is acknowledged to be an alarming problem, studies on the psychological factors behind abusive behaviors in religious contexts are very rare. The few psychological studies conducted in Pakistan have examined the reporting of cases, the features of victims, the criminal justice response, and the overall child protection system. They have not addressed the psychological factors and dynamics of abusive behaviors (2022 Hadi). Overseas studies have identified several psychological risk factors of CSA, some of which include cognitive distortions, problematic sexual interests, social and emotional troubles, and maladaptive attitudes towards children and sexual behaviors (2022 Zia). There are, however, several reasons for abuse, and the presence of psychological factors is by no means sufficient (2021 Jafar). Within religious institutions, authority, obedience, and trust can create conditions of excessive dependency, all of which can be exploited by offenders (2024 Bilal). For that reason, the psychological factors and dynamics that contribute to CSA in religious institutions in Pakistan need to be studied in greater depth.

While a lot of research has been completed on CSA in various religious institutions, writing on the psychological aspects of this abuse in the non-Western sphere is still lacking. The majority of the international research has focused on the experiences of victims, institutional responses, prevalence, and the after effects of the abuse. Easement has been given to the psychological processes of the abusive behavior. Systematic reviews have shown how abuse is either facilitated or is concealed by an institution, or a given culture/society. The majority of the research on this is from Western and Catholic institutions. Pakistan has some Child Protection research, and this has documented some of the reported cases of abuse and has documented some of the characteristics of the abuse. There are also many other research gaps in Pakistan. There are few if any, investigations of the psychological aspects of CSA that are found within the religious institutions. There are many aspects to social phenomena like CSA, that are hard to

quantify. Because of this, research suggests that investigating the subject of CSA, and the abuse of children, through psychology and other qualitative methods, will give us much more insight than we could with a purely quantitative study. This study will try to address these gaps by doing a qualitative study on CSA in religious institutions.

Studying the psychological factors connected with CSA will allow Pakistani religious institutions to develop and implement better protective and preventive measures. In terms of theory, the study will aid the understanding of CSA by presenting psychological dimensions within a framework of interpersonal and institutional conditions, rather than treating abuse as an individual psychological problem (Bhattacharya, 2020). In terms of practice, the study will provide mass religious institutions, policymakers, children protection agencies, and law enforcement the ability to develop more effective systems for monitoring and controlling child protection activities (Shahbaz, 2020). The study will help religious institutions to identify early warning signs and behavioral / psychological risks while avoiding the misconception of certain psychological traits being the automatic and only the predictor for sexual offending (Okah, 2025). In addition, developing and understanding the interactions between psychological vulnerabilities and institutional environments will strengthen safeguarding measures, and help inform more effective supervisory systems for children (Hussain, 2022). The study will thus provide a valuable evidence base from Pakistan for helping to strengthen protective services and improve the academic study of child sexual abuse from religious and educational institutions in Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Psychological Determinants of Pedophilic Behavior

Pedophilic conduct in institutional cases illustrates structural elements with clear ordering. Personality disorders and psychopathologies are at the foundation of the “factors” at the individual level. At the institutional level, anyone with the combination of substance abuse and “deviant” sexual interests is considered at high risk of a pedophilic offense, especially in “deviant” individuals with longstanding and sustained strong interest in pedophilia and who are “desensitized” (Ashraf & Ibrar, 2024). Presence of ‘deviant’ sexual arousal does not guarantee pedophilic offending. It is the combination of sexual arousal and poor self-regulation and control that results in offending. Inhibitory self-regulation is poor, and people act on their deviant sexual arousal urges, especially in unregulated or unsupervised context. Narcissistic traits and antisocial personalities, which include a lack of empathy and are manipulative in nature, are all characterized by an inclination to participate in activities of exploiting vulnerable people. This is all coupled with intrapersonal emotional immaturity, which is inability to create and sustain healthy adult sexual relationships with an appropriate sexual partner, and therefore, emotional and sexual relationship with children.

These individuals develop distorted cognitive perceptions. For example, they believe children can give consent, and that sexually abusive behavior is pedagogy that is “harmless” to the child (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2024). Distorted perceptions developed in this way become and remain justified as internal excuses to feel no guilt, and to overcome the moral duty not to commit the act (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2024). Within madrassa systems, authority figures operate without any scrutiny, and thus, these types of distorted perceptions are likely to become and remain entrenched. These behaviors are “complex” for

several reasons; however, research shows that offending behaviors are due to social isolation and chronic loneliness. Social isolation tends to occur more in segregated and socially disconnected populations, especially when there are limited constructive social connections. Madrasas, particularly the residential kind, lead to social isolation. The emotional isolation due to the inflexibility of systems leads to social withdrawal, especially in the presence of limited or no social contact. In an effort to resolve internal conflicts related to lack of expression of sexuality, especially in sexually repressed and religious environments, people tend to suppress self-loathing, and avoid seeking remedial services. At some point, an individual subconsciously enacts moral disengagement, justifying and describing the act as self-defense, including the defense of the victim. Mercy killing, euthanizing a terminally ill patient, is a common example. Rationalization tends to occur more in religious institutions, where self-justification and defense cloak actions in the guise of spiritual discipline, mentoring, and teaching. It serves to maintain the offender's self-image of moral and spiritual alignment.

The cognitive and emotional dimensions refer to the internal aspects of the offense behavior that can be sustained or explained. Many people, in describing phenomena of imprisonment, including segregation, in socially isolated settings lacking access to socially supportive peers within the community, cite social isolation as a source of feeling lonely. Residentially, many madrassas create these conditions, particularly in socio-emotional deprivation, since interaction with the outside world is restricted. This can cause serious social and emotional deprivation (Khan & Jafar, 2021). This social environment coupled with the restriction on defensively focused sexual discourse lack in positive sexual education, may create internal conflicts as there is a discrepancy between social and religious norms and one's sexual needs which may result in the development of sexually deviant behaviors (Ahmed & Yasmin, 2025). Here, the tension between shame and guilt is important. While shame and guilt may inhibit various behaviors, self-loathing and secrecy will increase, as well as the avoidance of seeking help. These individuals will engage in various forms of moral disengagement. This includes justifying harmful acts and blaming the victim (Naz & Masood, 2021). The justification of morally and religiously opposing acts by the offenders characterizes many religious establishments where the justification of their actions is done under the pretext of discipline, mentorship, and/or spiritual guidance.

Pedophiles exhibit gradual and calculated grooming behavior leading up to the abuse. Grooming includes an offender luring a community to trust them. Offenders achieve this by being friendly or even fake-good like being over the top with their religiousness. This strategy can be highly effective in madrassas, as clerics and teachers are highly respected. To start, offenders may perform preliminary acts with no real harm. This can involve an offender giving a child a special "gift", like a privilege. Beyond this, an offender engages in a lot of touching and contact with a child to understand where the child's comfort level is. Stroke play is normalized and the goal is to understand how much the child will tolerate prior to them reporting the incident (Akram & Yasmin, 2023). The power-obsessed madrassa system, coupled with an unwavering obedience system, magnifies the behavior and devolves into complete control and subjugation of the children (Paracha & Khalid, 2023). Offenders exhibit a behavioral pattern addressing their risk taking and their constrained decision-making. Organized and calculated risk-taking behavior can allow an offender to plan their activities to avoid getting caught. They can target victims that they believe will not go to the authorities and exploit unstructured systems and/or unmonitored gaps in a

given framework. On the other hand, an absence of external control can result in offenders acting impulsively and rapidly (Ibhate et al., 2025). Certain Madrassas execute very little oversight, systems, or formal reporting procedures and operate grounded in cultural stigmas pertaining to sexual abuse and/or discussing sexual abuse. In these circumstances, offenders are more likely to act impulsively, due to the absence of reporting and punishment. The responding behavior also can become a habitual behavior to the offender and was irreverent to the legal and ethical implications (Iraklis, 2025).

Understanding maltreatment in religious education requires analysis of various factors such as social factors, psychological factors, and context of different situations. Most madrassas are closed systems lacking external oversight. This is especially harmful to people with social vulnerabilities. This is further complicated by the religious authority in Pakistan, and the 'command culture' combined with the reluctance to question elders. This leads to the eventual normalization and acceptance of abuse within these systems. Further, the abuse victims often fear social ostracism and even abuse and potential retaliation, which results in a complete unwillingness to report the abuse. This perpetuates the maltreatment of individuals. In addition, Pakistan has a severe shortage of mental health services, and often a lack of awareness of mental illness, meaning maltreatment and abuse goes completely unrecognized and unaddressed (Yaar et al., 2023). A part of the reason abusers continue is an idea/behavior reinforcement cycle. After an abuser crosses a certain line, there are no substantial, negative social or physical consequences, and if they don't get caught and punished, a behavior that is positively reinforced and learned is not socially discouraged. If an abuser does not obtain/gain sexual satisfaction, they will continue to engaging in the behavior. The abusers' thought process becomes even more rigid in justification of the behavior, and in order to keep their psychological equilibrium. This creates a self-sustaining behavioral deviance cycle, where the abuser's thought process becomes even more rigid and self-justified, and social and institutional factors create an environment and support structure to meet that behavioral deviance. In places where there is a culture of institutional silence, and no accountability (i.e. madrassas), it persists for a long time (Batool et al., 2024).

Current data suggests the analysis of paedophilia in madrassas can be addressed on multiple psychological levels at the individual, community, and institution. Each case of potential offending is the result of a unique combination of personality, developmental history, emotions, cognition, psychosocial behavior, and patterns of behavior. The abuse of children is much more likely to occur in an institutional environment characterized by a hierarchical system, significant control, and a high degree of boundary isolation supervision. The use of psychological methods, early engagement, and altering the institution and the culture will assist in addressing the problem. Until the internal and external factors of behavior are both recognized, there can be no hope of formulating adequate preventative measures and response systems. (Ali et al., 2025)

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Sample and Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to describe what individuals who experience or are involved in child sexual abuse in religious institutions in Pakistan perceive, think about, and make sense of such experiences. Phenomenology allows researchers to study people's experiences

and what they perceive to be the meaningful or important aspects of such experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study uses purposive sampling to nominate individuals with direct involvement or professional knowledge on child sexual abuse and the psychological factors associated with it in religious institutions (Shah, et al., 2023). Participants were selected from the following groups: the accused, the victim's family, medical doctors and psychologists, police investigators, and teachers and managers of the Madaris. Table 1 shows an approximate estimate of 20,000 people belonging to the five participant categories. The interview sample was estimated to be between 52 and 77 people, though the actual study included 35 interviews. The interviews included 6 accused people, 8 family members of victims, 5 medical doctors and psychologists, 6 police officers, and 10 teachers/administrators from the Magaris. The study also estimated to include 8-13 focus group discussions (FGDs) and included 8 FGDs. Sample size was determined based on the availability of participants, the importance of the participant to the study and the extent of participant involvement to the level that the interviews and discussions were able to shed sufficient light and demonstrate repetitive patterns to the information presented. For qualitative research, particularly phenomenology, adequacy of the sample is defined by the participants' experiences, repetitive patterns of information, and the extent of understanding of the phenomena rather than by the size of the sample or how it would impact the population as a whole (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The interview protocol contained open-ended questions to gather participants' perceptions and experiences related to psychological nuances of child sexual abuse, including the person, cognitive and emotional processes, social relations, behavior and the context that may support or block the occurrence of abuse. With accused persons, emphasis was on their perceptions and experiences, while what victims' family members perceived and understood of the circumstances that led to abuse was the emphasis with them. Perceptions of medical doctors and psychologists on the psychological factors were sought, as were police officers' perceptions on the investigation process and the perspectives of teachers/ administrators on the processes of surveillance, authority and protection. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were employed to collate perceptions and understand similarities and dissimilarities in the different experiences and perceptions of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because child sexual abuse is very delicate, great importance was placed on ethical considerations and confidentiality of study participants while data were being collected. Participation was voluntary and participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Prior to each interview and FGD, informed consent was obtained and participants were made aware of these opportunities during the study.

Thus, to ensure confidentiality, personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and during data analysis and reporting, pseudonyms or participant codes were used. Interviews were conducted in a private secure location. The intention was to minimize the disclosure of personally identifiable data or information in the questions and to avoid asking questions that could potentially cause distress to participants. Reflexive notes were maintained in order to recognize and manage preconceptions and the potential for the researcher to influence the study participants, which is important in phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of 35 individual interviews, combined with 8 FGDs, were

conducted in this study to account for the varying perspectives of different groups and to avoid an overreliance on a single participant group. Methodological triangulation builds the integrity and the depth of the findings of qualitative studies by examining the various perspectives from different sources of data (Rahim et al., 2021). Given the multifaceted dimensions of child sexual abuse (psychological, social, institutional, and interpersonal), having the varying opinions of the participants in this study built a strong foundation for identifying common themes about the psychological aspects of child sexual abuse that occur in religious institutions in Pakistan.

Table-1: Proposed and Actual Sample for Interview and FGDs

Sr. #	Categories of Participants	Estimated Population	Proposed Sample Size Interviews	Actual Sample Size Interviews	Proposed Sample Size of FGDs	Actual Sample Size of (FGDs)
1	Accused Individuals	200	8–12	06	1–2	2
2	Family Members of Victims	800	12–18	08	2–3	1
3	Medical Doctors & Psychologists	120	6–10	5	1–2	1
4	Police Officers (Investigation Units)	280	8–12	6	1–2	2
5	Teachers/Administrators of Madaris	18,600	18–25	10	3–4	2
	TOTAL	**20,000**	**52–77**	**35**	**8-13**	**08**

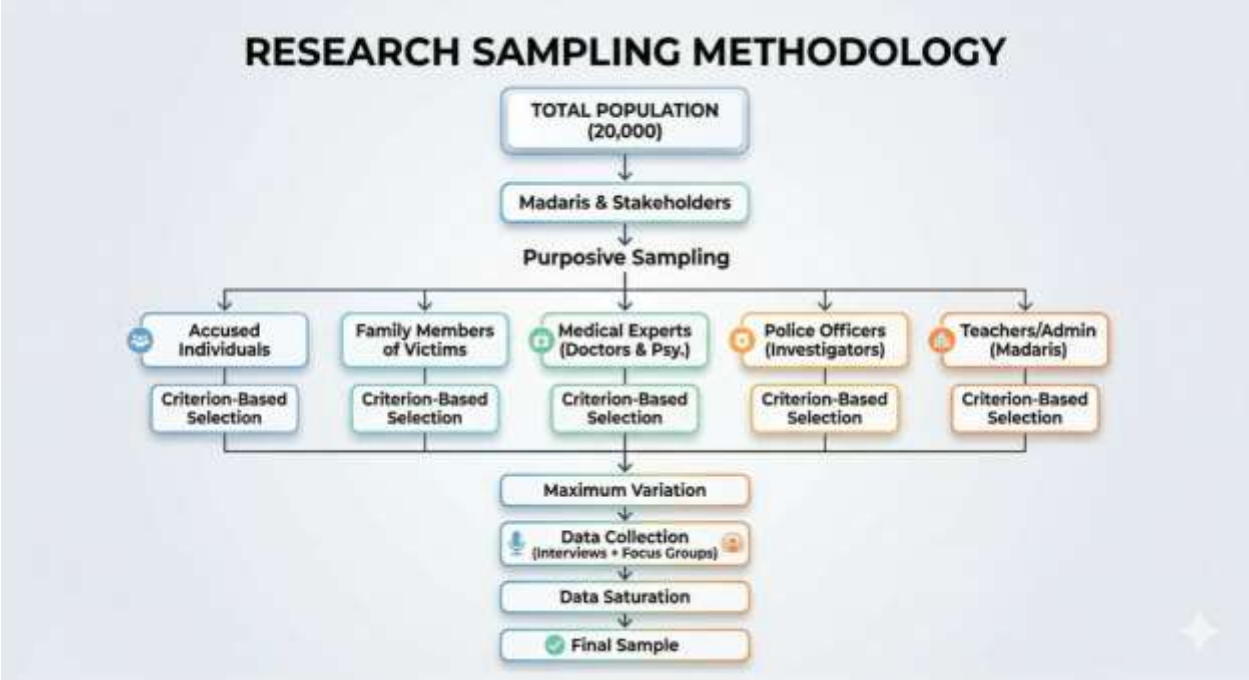


Figure-1: *Research Sampling & Methodology*

3.2. Data Analysis.

Building on Braun & Clarke (2006), this study uses thematic analysis as the primary method of qualitative data analysis to analyze and interpret interview data from the study's participants. Following Sebele-Mpofu (2020), thematic analysis is one of the most popular methods in qualitative research, due to its flexibility. Instead of reporting on the main points of the interview, thematic analysis is useful for detailing the interviewee's perspective and experience. (Khan et al., 2024). As thematic analysis is well suited to the nature of the problem(s) under study, it will be the primary method of analysis for this research (Ahmed et al., 2021) It is also capable of capturing the multiplicity of participants' voices, including victims, accused persons, their families, defense psychologists and doctors, and police officials (Walsh et al., 2024). The pair referred to in the reference stated that the approach of the analysis was to achieve the consistency and rigor that was required. The end goal was to identify participants' opinions, and capture them as substantive themes. (Ullah et al., 2024). The steps in the analysis process were not linear. Rather, analysts could move between the data, coding, and theme development at different stages. Braun et al (2021). The iterative approach was used to create insights while at the same time ensuring that the analytical interpretations stayed close to the data. (Nowell et al., 2017). Each transcript was analyzed for its contribution to the overall understanding of the research phenomenon. (Ali et al., 2022). Each transcript was analyzed by the researcher to ensure that no detail was overlooked. (Ghorbani et al., 2021). This also helped to unlock the hidden meanings in participants' accounts. The focus of the analysis was on the participants and therefore the findings of this study represented the analysis of the participants lived experiences in detail. (Shoib et al., 2022).

Methodological rigor was achieved by following the six stages of Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis framework. These stages included data familiarization, code generation, and theme searching, reviewing, defining, and naming, and finally the report writing stage. To ensure openness and fairness of the process, each of the stages was employed methodically. The analysis was thus credible and replicable. (Farhan & Iqbal, 2024). Though it had a rigid structure, the analysis was flexible enough to go beyond expectations and offer insights based on the data. This approach enabled the analysis to go beyond the previously mentioned stages. The framework had been employed with the objective of ensuring the development of findings through the audit trail. (Asad et al., 2025). The use of thematic analysis provided a way of accommodating varying stakes within a single framework. This was particularly important for the sampling frames used in this study as they represented a range of different experiences. This analysis was also suitable for capturing the variation of experiences of participants. (Noor et al., 2025). This approach also deepened the findings of the study. By bringing together the experiences of diverse participants, the validity of the study was also deepened. (Khan et al., 2025).

The analytic process incorporated reflexive practices that aimed to reduce bias and enhance interpretive credibility. For reflexivity, the researcher assessed the self, identified assumptions and beliefs, and the degree to which these shaped the interpretation of the data, following Finlay (2002). This was particularly pertinent to the emotional aspect of the research. The aim of this reflexive journaling was to gain insight into the analytic process and the research progress to capture analytic depth. To achieve this, the researcher documented interpretations and analytic judgments that were occurring throughout the process. This recording process guided the elaboration and the selection of themes. Participants' responses dictated the outcomes of the research process, rather than the researcher's assumptions. Thus, this process helped achieve the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, as per Sanchez et al. (2021). The analysis was carried out in a structured, systematic and intensive manner to ensure the credibility, transparency, and depth of the outcomes. However, this elaboration is included in Figure-2.

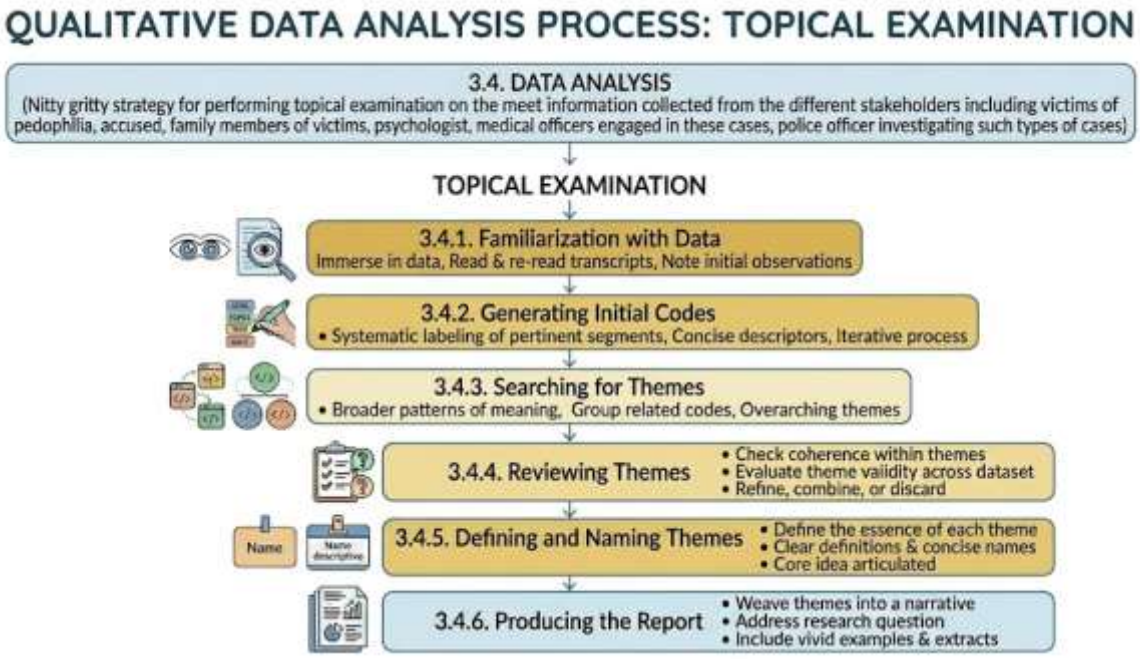


Figure-2: *Data Analysis Strategy*

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Personality and Psychopathology

The first major category involving Personality and Psychopathology observed an overall frequency of 55, suggesting that in participants' accounts, there was frequent mention of personality aspects and psychological issues that could be related to child sexual abuse. Within this category, cognitive distortions were the most prevalent theme (13), whereas emotional immaturity (12), impulse control problems (11), narcissistic or antisocial traits (10), and deviant sexual interest or paraphilic inclinations (9) were also present. A tipping factor within cognitive distortions is the presence of an individual's explanations for, justifications of, and rationalizations for their own sexual conduct. Other studies have documented distorted attitudes and beliefs, problems of self-control, and problematic interpersonal conduct as some of the psychological aspects associated with sexual offenses against children (Azhar et al., 2024). However, these must be viewed as only contextual risk factors and cannot be considered conclusive of child sexual abuse as an individual may possess these psychological characteristics and not go on to sexually abuse a child (Shah & Unar, 2024).

4.2. Developmental History

"Developmental History" had a total of 43 occurrences. This suggests participants related early developmental issues to later patterns of abusive and problematic behavior. The most reported theme was childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, or exposure to sexual content, which ranged from 8 to 13,

respectively. Neglect, insecure attachment, and exposure to sexual content were reported between 8 and 10 cases, respectively. It is possible that adverse experiences during childhood and disrupted environments may carry issues with emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships and create challenges with attachment and behavioral boundaries. These findings align with what is known in the literature that adverse and disruptive developmental experiences increase the likelihood and risk of adult psychological and behavioral issues, including trauma and neglect during childhood. I have interpreted these findings to suggest that developmental adversity is one of many psychosocial factors.

4.3. Emotional and Cognitive Processes

Emotional and Cognitive Processes accounted for 67 percent of cases in the table and included the framing of inappropriate conduct as “teaching” or “discipline”, as well as the repression of sexuality, loneliness, social isolation, moral disengagement, shame, and guilt. The fact that this category was the most mentioned indicates that the participants were thinking about how they could interpret and justify inappropriate behavior in connection to emotional and cognitive processes and in particular how they could rationalize and morally disengage to justify inappropriate conduct and in the end resign from taking any responsibility whatsoever (Bandura, 1999), as loneliness and social isolation can also lead to maladaptive social behavior, although they should not be considered contributors to sexual abuse and abuse (Raza et al., 2023). From these findings, we may conclude that the psychological pathway to abuse involves emotional issues, cognitive distortions, moral disengagement and self-justification rather than single psychological variables (Razzaq et al., 2023).

4.4. Behavioral Patterns

Behavioral Patterns had a total of 54. This means the majority of the participants described observable behavioral processes. In this category, the theme of grooming was mentioned the most, 15 times, as compared to gradual boundary violation, 14; power seeking, 13, and risk taking combined with secrecy, 12. The prevalence of grooming themes along with gradual boundary violations shows that abusive behavior likely happens in a step-wise manner as progressively more interpersonal trust is built and more effective boundaries become incrementally less constraining, preceding more serious behaviors. (Craven et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2012). The presence of power-seeking behaviors illustrates the relevance of adult dominance and inequality in the organization of power within the institution, especially in the child/adult power relationship that is present in most institutional settings (Abrams et al., 2021). These examples, along with the others in this category, show that psychological determinants are transformed into behavioral patterns of grooming, testing boundaries, secrecy, and the use of power differentials; however, these behaviors should be interpreted in light of their context and relationships rather than as a direct correlation to the inevitability of child sexual abuse (Okafor et al., 2022).

Table-1: Psychological Determinants (Individual-Level)	
Themes and Categories	**Frequencies**
1. Personality & Psychopathology	***55***
1.1. Deviant sexual interests / paraphilic tendencies	09
1.2. Impulse control deficits	11
1.3. Narcissistic or antisocial traits	10
1.4. Emotional immaturity	12
1.5. Cognitive distortions (e.g., justifying harm)	13
2. Developmental History	***43***
2.1. Childhood trauma or abuse (cycle of abuse hypothesis)	13
2.2. Attachment disorders	10
2.3. Early exposure to sexual content	08
2.4. Neglect or lack of supervision	12
3. Emotional & Cognitive Processes	***67***
3.1. Loneliness and social isolation	13
3.2. Repressed sexuality	14
3.3. Shame and guilt cycles	12
3.4. Moral disengagement mechanisms	13
3.5. Rationalization strategies (“teaching”, “discipline”, etc.)	15
4. Behavioural Patterns	**54**
4.1. Grooming behaviours	15
4.2. Gradual boundary violations	14
4.3. Power-seeking tendencies	13
4.4. Risk-taking vs. secrecy patterns	12

PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS: A WORD TREE ANALYSIS

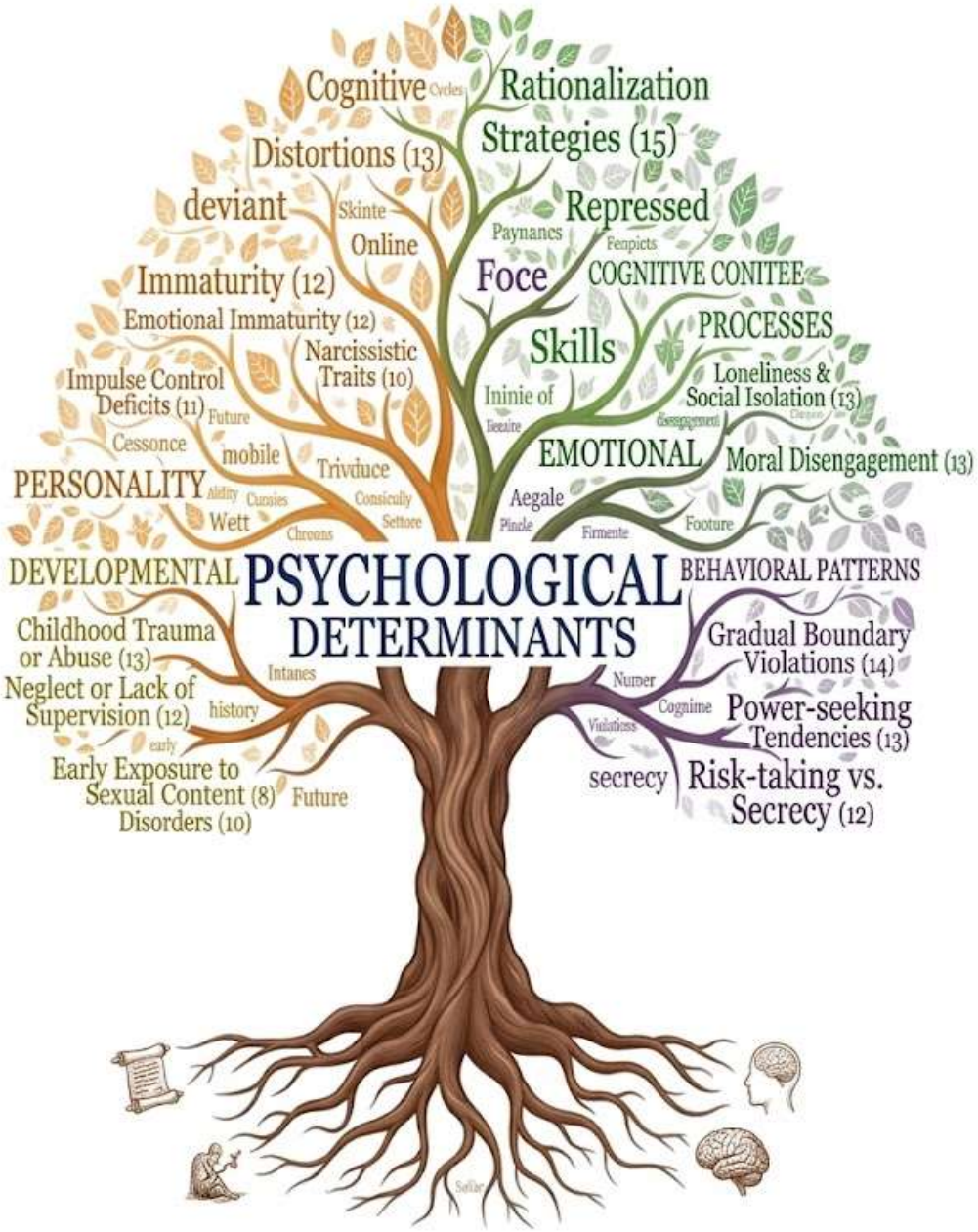


Table-8: Psychological Determinants

Figure-3: *Psychological Determinants of Child Abuse in Religious Institutions*

5. Discussions

This qualitative study added to the existing literature on child sexual abuse in religious institutions in Pakistan by examining the psychological framework. Respondents primarily reported on the categories of Emotional and Cognitive Processes. These were followed by Personality and Psychopathology, Behavioral Patterns and Developmental History. These findings indicate that there are a number of cognitive, emotional, personality, developmental, and behavioral processes. These many processes are far too complex to consider child sexual abuse as a singular psychological process. These findings are also consistent with the multifactorial models of sexual offending. These models argue that the combination of individual risk factors, situational factors, and distorted cognitive processes combine to create the conditions necessary for abusive behavior (Jabeen & Abbas, 2025). The findings support the notion that psychological vulnerabilities increase the risk for child sexual abuse, however these vulnerabilities do not fully determine the likelihood that child sexual abuse will occur. (Russell et al., 2020).

The importance of emotional and cognitive process implication makes this next finding most significant. The most reported themes were rationalization, repressed sexuality, loneliness and social isolation, moral disengagement, and the guilt and shame cycle. Participants indicated the importance of a cognitive interpretation of a behavior as a part of abusive behavior, specifically when an individual may attempt to explain inappropriate behavior as teaching, discipline, emotional, or guidance related acts. Participants' findings correlate with moral disengagement where individuals reframe cognitive structures of behavior and perceive a lack of responsibility and moral self-sanction for their behavior (Rashid & Barron, 2023). Research on sexual offending suggests cognitive distortions and offense supportive beliefs are important within a framework of causing a lack of perceived harm and misinterpretation of victim response while justifying inappropriate behavior (Anwer et al., 2024). The findings highlight the interaction of emotional feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt, and other cognitive processes may contribute to behaviors and thoughts that are concealed, rationalized, and repeated. Loneliness, shame, and guilt should not be considered causation of CSA.

Additional personality and psychopathology findings support the importance of psychological characteristics at the individual level. Participants' themes included cognitive distortions, emotional immaturity, problems with self-control, narcissistic or antisocial traits, and problematic sexual interests. Preliminary findings suggest that individuals have a great deal of trouble interpreting social boundaries and regulating themselves to the point of abusive behavior. Earlier studies have documented self-regulation issues, antisocial characteristics, deviant sexual interests, and cognitions that are associated with sexual offending as risk factors for sexual offending (Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023). The findings reinforce the need to distinguish risk factors from clinical diagnoses. Not every individual with self-regulation issues, antisocial personality traits, or problematic sexual interests, or psychological issues, necessarily engages in sexual abuse. Not every individual who engages in CSA necessarily fulfills the diagnostic criteria for pedophilia (Salwa et al., 2025). The focus of the psychological assessment should be the presence of risk factors and behavioral indicators, rather than a single diagnosis.

According to developmental history, childhood trauma, previous abuse, neglect or insufficient supervision, issues with attachment, and early exposure to sexual content all seem significant. Childhood trauma and neglect are the strongest overall, and align with existing literature, which indicates that adverse developmental experiences can be connected with problems of psychological functioning and sexual offending risk (Zulkarnain et al., 2025). The finding regarding attachment difficulties is of some theoretical interest. Disrupted early relationships will affect the ability to regulate emotions, to trust and to empathize, as well the ability to appropriately place boundaries in relationships (Sarfraz et al., 2025). The results cannot be taken to support a "cycle of abuse" view. While some offenders report histories of childhood victimization, the majority of adults who were children when they experienced victimization do not go on to perpetrate child sexual abuse (Kattula et al.,2025). Therefore, developmental adversity is but one of many potential vulnerabilities.

The behavioral findings add substance to the importance of grooming, boundary crossing, and power-seeking behavior. Of the behavioral groupings, grooming and progressive boundary crossing occurred most frequently. Abusive behavior may be a consequence of a pattern of many small boundary crossing behaviors, rather than a single large crossing event. This is consistent with other research on grooming that focuses on gradual behavior toward accessing children and creating a situation of trust to accept and minimize the likelihood of reporting (Tabassum & Tabassum, 2022). The behaviors of power seeking and secrecy are also of concern to religious organizations, as adult authority and a trusted position may increase adult access and their power and control over children. The overall results of the study point to psychological factors of behavior being of importance and needing to be integrated with institutional factors of authority and opportunity, supervision, and protection from abuse, as opposed to looking at psychological factors in total isolation (Arnez & Nisa, 2024). This study attempts to fill a gap in the study of child sexual abuse in Pakistan. It advocates a multidimensional psychological and an integrated, multiple level perspective that incorporates individual-focused interventions and strengthened institutional measures, enhanced professional supervision, confidential avenues to report, and policies that protect children.

5.2. Practical/Managerial Implications

These findings have serious implications for both religious organizations and policymakers in Pakistan, as well as for psychologists and child protection agencies. The findings show high levels of cognitive distortions, emotional issues, and developmental challenges and include grooming and boundary violations. Thus, prevention efforts must go beyond increasing general awareness and include active measures to ensure safety. Religious institutions should implement pre-employment structured psychological assessments and screening and establish comprehensive codes of conduct and professional boundaries with reporting requirements, as well as supportive, clinical supervision, and mentoring (Ali et al., 2023). Training of religious leaders and administrators should be focused on identifying cognitive distortions and rationalizations, grooming behaviors, and other behavioral indicator as well as boundary violation that should not be confused with psychological characteristics in the absence of a valid/credible reason for concern of encouraging offending (Mulla & Chowdhury, 2024). The findings provide psychologists and child protection professionals with the framework for developing

prevention and protective programs focused on emotional regulation, cognitive distractions, moral disengagement, and interpersonal difficulties including belief supportive of offending. (Abbas et al., 2023). Law enforcement should provide a greater emphasis to confidential reporting and complaint systems to improve monitoring, supervision, and child safeguarding. In combination, these strategies should assist religious organizations in Pakistan in fulfilling their legal obligations and allowing them to respect legitimate religious education and authority of the Paxt religions.

5.3. Limitations and Avenue for Further Studies

This study's limitations and future research opportunities are discussed here. First, due to the use of a qualitative methodology and purposive sampling, the findings cannot be extended to all religious institutions or populations in Pakistan (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, the qualitative nature of this study, the sensitive and stigmatized nature of child sexual abuse, and the nature of socially desirable responses and the tendency to retain child sexual abuse experiences and then provide socially desirable responses and/or interpret the experiences retrospectively, may impact the breadth and accuracy of the findings. Third, the study focuses primarily on the psychological perspective. As a result, the social, cultural, organizational, and structural aspects are largely unexplored (Shah et al., 2025). Future researchers must incorporate more mixed method or longitudinal approaches to research, focusing on interaction between social, cultural, and institutional factors in combination with psychological factors. Quantitative approaches could study the prevalence and categorize the relative significance of the components examined in this study, while comparison studies could examine the relative significance of these components across various religious institutions, geographical divisions, and educational settings in Pakistan. Other authors should consider the perspectives of concerned stakeholders of survivors and safeguarding professionals and maintain the same level of rigor as this study. Longitudinal research could assess if the identified risk factors consistently predict subsequent problematic and abusive conduct.

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