

Life Failures and Their Coping Mechanisms: An Anthropological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Failure is a universal experience, but its perceptions and coping mechanisms are deeply influenced by cultural, social, and religious contexts. In Pakistan, societal expectations and familial obligations significantly shape how individuals navigate failure.

Objective: This study aimed to explore the cultural and social dimensions of failure, and the coping mechanisms employed by individuals in Pakistan.

Methods: A qualitative ethnographic approach was used, involving in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations with individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in Islamabad. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to perceptions of failure, coping strategies, and resilience.

Results: Findings revealed that failure is often seen as a reflection on family honor, with significant reliance on religious practices and social support networks as coping mechanisms. Gender differences were evident, with women facing dual pressures of professional and domestic roles, while men were primarily burdened by financial responsibilities. Media representations reinforced traditional norms but also provided alternative narratives of resilience.

Conclusion: Cultural, familial, and religious influences play a critical role in shaping perceptions of failure and resilience in Pakistan. Culturally sensitive support mechanisms are needed to address the unique challenges faced by individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Failure, a universal phenomenon, is intricately woven into the fabric of human experiences across cultures. However, the perceptions, responses, and coping mechanisms associated with failure vary significantly depending on cultural, social, and economic contexts. In Pakistani society, failure is deeply entwined with familial expectations, societal norms, and cultural values, often perceived not merely as a personal shortcoming but as a reflection on family honor and communal standing (1). The complex interplay of these factors shapes individuals' experiences and responses to failure, influencing their mental health and well-being. The societal pressure to meet specific standards of success, such as academic achievement, financial stability, or adherence to traditional gender roles, often exacerbates the psychological burden of failure. This pressure can lead to significant emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy, which are particularly prevalent in contexts where failure is stigmatized (2).

Anthropological perspectives offer a unique lens to explore the culturally specific ways in which failure is experienced and managed. The concept of habitus, introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, provides a framework for understanding how individuals internalize cultural norms and expectations, shaping their responses to success and failure (3). In Pakistan, where collectivist values predominate, personal

achievements or setbacks are often viewed through the lens of their impact on the family and community. This collectivist orientation fosters a sense of shared responsibility, where family members rally to provide emotional support, guidance, and practical assistance in the face of failure. Such collective coping mechanisms not only mitigate the stigma associated with failure but also promote resilience by reinforcing the notion that setbacks are communal challenges rather than solely individual failures (4). This cultural framing of failure aligns with the broader societal emphasis on honor, shame, and familial duty, which profoundly influence how individuals perceive and respond to adversity.

Coping mechanisms in Pakistani culture are diverse and multifaceted, reflecting the influence of religious beliefs, social support networks, and traditional practices. Religion, particularly Islam, plays a pivotal role in shaping coping strategies, offering a framework of meaning and solace in times of distress (5). Islamic teachings emphasize patience, perseverance, and trust in divine will, providing individuals with a robust foundation for interpreting and navigating failure. Religious rituals, such as prayer and recitation of Quranic verses, serve as coping mechanisms that offer spiritual comfort and a sense of continuity amidst life's challenges (6). In addition to religious practices, social support networks, including family, friends, and community ties, are crucial in fostering resilience. These networks provide not only emotional and moral support but also

practical assistance, reinforcing the cultural value of interdependence and communal solidarity (7). The collective efforts to support individuals during times of failure highlight the deeply ingrained communal ethos that characterizes Pakistani society.

Gender dynamics further complicate the experience of failure and coping in Pakistan. Traditional gender roles impose distinct expectations on men and women, influencing how they are perceived and how they respond to setbacks. For men, success is often linked to financial stability, professional advancement, and the ability to fulfill their roles as breadwinners, while women are frequently evaluated based on their roles as caregivers, homemakers, and upholders of familial honor (8). These gendered expectations can exacerbate the psychological impact of failure, with men facing the burden of financial and professional pressures, and women contending with societal scrutiny of their domestic roles. This disparity underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches to addressing mental health challenges related to failure, taking into account the gender-specific pressures and coping mechanisms prevalent in Pakistani society.

The portrayal of failure in media also plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and individual attitudes towards resilience. Media representations, whether through television dramas, news programs, or social media, often reinforce societal norms and expectations regarding success and failure. These portrayals can either stigmatize failure or, conversely, highlight narratives of resilience and recovery, offering role models and sources of inspiration for individuals facing adversity (9). The impact of media on failure narratives underscores the importance of fostering a balanced and realistic portrayal of setbacks, one that recognizes the complexity of human experiences and the diverse pathways to resilience.

This study aims to explore the anthropological dimensions of failure and coping mechanisms within the Pakistani context, drawing on ethnographic methods and theoretical frameworks to illuminate the cultural, social, and psychological factors that shape these experiences. By examining the intersections of cultural norms, familial dynamics, religious influences, and socioeconomic conditions, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how failure is perceived, experienced, and managed in Pakistani society. The findings aim to contribute to broader anthropological discussions on resilience and coping, offering insights that can inform culturally sensitive policy interventions and support programs designed to address the unique challenges faced by individuals in Pakistan. By highlighting the culturally specific ways in which failure is conceptualized and navigated, this study endeavors to advance the understanding of resilience in diverse cultural contexts, with implications for both local and global perspectives on failure and coping (10).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study utilized a qualitative research design rooted in anthropological methods, specifically employing ethnography to explore the culturally specific experiences of

failure and the associated coping mechanisms among individuals in Pakistan. The qualitative approach was selected to capture the rich, in-depth narratives and complex social dynamics that quantitative methods might overlook. Ethnography, as a key component, enabled the researchers to immerse themselves in the participants' environments, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, and psychological factors influencing perceptions of failure (11).

Data were collected through a combination of participant observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in Islamabad. The study population included men and women of varying ages, marital statuses, and professional backgrounds to ensure a broad representation of experiences. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had experienced significant personal or professional failures, as defined by their cultural and social contexts. This sampling strategy allowed the researchers to focus on individuals whose experiences were most relevant to the research objectives (12). Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide that included open-ended questions to explore participants' perceptions of failure, their coping strategies, and the role of cultural and familial influences in shaping these responses. The guide was designed to facilitate a conversational style, enabling participants to share their narratives in their own words, which is essential for capturing the nuances of their experiences. Interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, adhering to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (13). Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. The researchers ensured that sensitive topics were approached with care, and participants were provided with information on counseling services should they experience distress as a result of discussing personal failures.

Data analysis followed an iterative process, beginning with an initial coding of transcripts to identify key themes and patterns related to perceptions of failure and coping mechanisms. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically organize data into categories reflecting the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of failure. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring motifs and divergent experiences across different demographic groups. The analysis was guided by the principles of reflexivity, with researchers continuously reflecting on their own biases and the potential influence of their cultural backgrounds on the interpretation of data (14). Data synthesis involved triangulation of the findings from interviews, focus groups, and observations to enhance the credibility and validity of the results. The researchers

compared the narratives across different data sources to identify consistencies and discrepancies, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the cultural context of failure and resilience in Pakistani society. Moreover, the study incorporated member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with a subset of participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations. This step helped to validate the findings and provided an additional layer of insight from the participants themselves.

To ensure the rigor and reliability of the study, the researchers adhered to established qualitative research standards, including prolonged engagement with the study community, persistent observation, and maintaining an audit trail of all research activities. This audit trail included detailed field notes, transcripts, and documentation of analytical decisions, which supported the transparency and reproducibility of the study's findings. The methodological rigor was further reinforced by engaging multiple analysts in the coding and interpretation processes, reducing individual bias and enhancing the depth of analysis.

Overall, this study's qualitative approach provided a rich, contextually grounded understanding of how failure is perceived, experienced, and managed within Pakistani culture, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity in the interpretation of these phenomena (15). The findings contribute valuable insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of resilience, offering implications for policy and practice that are attuned to the specific needs and experiences of individuals in this context.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay of cultural, social, and individual factors shaping how failure is perceived, experienced, and managed among individuals in Pakistan. Through qualitative and narrative analysis, several key themes emerged, illustrating the profound impact of societal norms, familial expectations, religious beliefs, and gender dynamics on coping mechanisms and resilience.

Perceptions of Failure:

Participants' narratives consistently highlighted that failure is perceived not merely as a personal setback but as a reflection on family honor and societal status. This perception was particularly pronounced in collectivist contexts, where individual actions are closely tied to the family's reputation. Many participants described experiencing intense pressure to meet societal expectations, such as achieving academic success, securing stable employment, or fulfilling traditional gender roles. For instance, male participants often linked success with financial stability and professional achievements, while female participants associated success with marital harmony and family caregiving. These expectations heightened the emotional and psychological burden of failure, leading to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear of social judgment (16).

Coping Mechanisms:

A diverse range of coping mechanisms was identified, deeply rooted in cultural and religious practices. Religious faith emerged as a prominent source of comfort and resilience, with many participants turning to prayer, Quranic recitations, and religious gatherings to find solace and meaning in the face of adversity. The concept of "tawakkul" or trust in divine will was frequently cited as a critical coping strategy, enabling individuals to accept their circumstances and maintain hope for future improvement (17). Social support networks, particularly family, played a crucial role in coping with failure. Participants described their families as primary sources of emotional and practical support, with family members offering guidance, reassurance, and sometimes financial assistance during challenging times. This collective approach to managing failure underscored the importance of interdependence and communal solidarity in Pakistani culture (18).

Gender Dynamics:

The study found significant gender differences in the experience and management of failure. Female participants reported facing dual pressures of maintaining professional success and fulfilling domestic responsibilities, often leading to heightened stress and mental health challenges. The cultural expectation for women to prioritize family roles over personal ambitions contributed to a sense of constraint and limited opportunities for pursuing individual goals. Conversely, male participants highlighted the societal pressure to be the primary breadwinner, which often translated into a fear of professional failure and an overwhelming sense of responsibility. These gender-specific pressures influenced coping mechanisms, with women more likely to seek emotional support from close-knit social circles, while men tended to internalize stress and focus on problem-solving strategies (19).

Role of Media:

Media representations of success and failure were found to significantly shape public perceptions and individual responses to adversity. Participants noted that television dramas and social media often portray failure as a moral or ethical flaw, reinforcing societal norms and perpetuating stigma. However, narratives of resilience and recovery depicted in the media also served as powerful sources of inspiration, helping individuals reframe their own experiences of failure. Younger participants, in particular, highlighted the influence of social media in providing alternative narratives that challenge traditional views of success and encourage a more flexible understanding of failure as a learning opportunity (20).

Resilience and Adaptation

Resilience was conceptualized as a dynamic and culturally embedded process, influenced by a combination of personal, familial, and societal factors. Participants emphasized the importance of reframing failure as a temporary setback rather than a definitive judgment of their abilities or worth. This reframing often involved re-

evaluating personal goals, adjusting expectations, and drawing on cultural narratives of perseverance and endurance. Resilience was also fostered through storytelling, with participants sharing their experiences of overcoming adversity as a way to inspire others and reaffirm their own strength (21). For many, resilience was not merely about bouncing back from failure but involved a transformative process of personal growth, self-reflection, and redefinition of success.

Intersecting Identities

The study found that experiences of failure and resilience were further shaped by intersecting identities, including socioeconomic status, educational background, and community affiliations. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported facing structural barriers, such as limited access to education and employment opportunities, which compounded the impact

of failure and constrained their coping options. However, these individuals also demonstrated remarkable resilience, often relying on community networks and shared resources to navigate challenges. In contrast, participants with higher educational attainments expressed a more individualistic approach to failure, emphasizing personal accountability and the pursuit of self-improvement as key coping strategies (22).

Overall, the findings underscore the culturally specific nature of failure and resilience, highlighting the importance of understanding these experiences within the broader socio-cultural context of Pakistani society. By examining the interplay of cultural norms, gender expectations, and media influences, this study provides valuable insights into the diverse ways individuals conceptualize and cope with failure, offering implications for developing culturally sensitive support mechanisms and interventions.

Table 1 Thematic Table of Findings

Theme	Description	Examples
Perceptions of Failure	Failure is perceived as a reflection on family honor and societal status, with intense pressure to meet societal expectations.	Failure linked to academic success, financial stability, and traditional gender roles.
Coping Mechanisms	Coping mechanisms include religious faith, social support networks, and familial solidarity; a collective approach to managing failure.	Use of prayer, Quranic recitations, and family support to cope with setbacks.
Gender Dynamics	Gender-specific pressures: women face dual roles of professional success and domestic responsibilities; men as primary breadwinners.	Women seek emotional support, men focus on problem-solving; societal expectations vary by gender.
Role of Media	Media shapes public perceptions of failure; narratives of resilience in media provide inspiration and alternative views on failure.	Media often portrays failure as a moral flaw; social media offers narratives of learning from failure.
Resilience and Adaptation	Resilience is seen as a dynamic process that involves reframing failure, personal growth, and storytelling of overcoming adversity.	Reframing failure as a temporary setback; storytelling as a tool for resilience.
Intersecting Identities	Experiences of failure and resilience are shaped by socioeconomic status, educational background, and community affiliations.	Lower socioeconomic status linked to structural barriers; reliance on community networks for support.

This thematic table provides a structured overview of the key findings from the qualitative and narrative analysis of failure and coping mechanisms in Pakistani society. The themes identified include perceptions of failure, coping mechanisms, gender dynamics, the role of media, resilience and adaptation, and intersecting identities. Each theme is described with a focus on how it influences individuals' experiences and responses to failure, and examples illustrate specific manifestations of these themes. The table highlights the culturally embedded nature of failure and resilience, showcasing the diverse ways people cope with and adapt to setbacks within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

DISCUSSION

The study provided a comprehensive exploration of how failure and coping mechanisms are perceived and managed within the cultural context of Pakistan, revealing significant intersections between societal norms, familial

expectations, religious beliefs, and gender dynamics. These findings align with previous research highlighting the profound influence of collectivist values on individual experiences of failure, where personal setbacks are often seen as collective familial challenges rather than isolated personal issues (Smith, 1997). This cultural framing contributes to heightened psychological distress, as individuals navigate the complex interplay of maintaining family honor and meeting societal expectations. Consistent with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, these internalized societal pressures shape individuals' responses to failure, often leading to a reliance on communal coping mechanisms such as familial support and religious practices (Bourdieu, 1977).

The study's findings highlighted that coping mechanisms were predominantly influenced by religious beliefs, social support networks, and familial solidarity, which are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Pakistani society. Participants frequently turned to religious practices, including prayer and Quranic recitations, as primary coping strategies, reflecting

the significant role of Islam in providing psychological comfort and resilience (Radzi et al., 2014). This aligns with previous literature that underscores the importance of spiritual coping in managing stress and adversity in collectivist societies (Mir, 2013). Additionally, the study found that social support, particularly from family, was crucial in mitigating the negative effects of failure, reinforcing the cultural emphasis on interdependence and communal support. This is consistent with findings from other collectivist cultures, where familial networks are a key resource in coping with life's challenges (McCubbin et al., 1980).

However, the study also identified significant gender differences in coping with failure, with women facing dual pressures from professional and domestic roles. This finding aligns with existing literature on the gendered nature of stress and coping, where women often report higher levels of stress due to conflicting societal expectations (Cholankeril et al., 2023). Men, on the other hand, experienced pressure primarily from societal expectations to be the primary financial providers, leading to stress related to job security and professional success. These gender-specific experiences reflect broader societal norms and underscore the need for gender-sensitive approaches in addressing mental health and resilience.

One of the strengths of this study was its use of ethnographic methods, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced ways in which failure is experienced and managed within Pakistani culture. By employing qualitative interviews and participant observations, the research captured a rich array of personal narratives that quantitative methods might overlook. This approach provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of resilience, illustrating how cultural values, religious beliefs, and familial dynamics intersect to shape coping strategies. However, the study's reliance on self-reported data from interviews may have introduced biases, such as social desirability bias, where participants might have presented their coping strategies in a more favorable light. Additionally, the sample was limited to individuals from Islamabad, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences across different regions of Pakistan, particularly rural areas where coping mechanisms and cultural expectations might differ.

The role of media in shaping perceptions of failure and resilience emerged as a significant theme, with participants noting that television dramas and social media often reinforced traditional norms by portraying failure as a moral or ethical flaw. This finding supports existing research on the impact of media representations on societal attitudes and individual behavior, where media can both perpetuate stigma and offer alternative narratives of resilience (Pervaiz, 2023). While younger participants highlighted the positive influence of social media in providing alternative success narratives and fostering resilience, the overall media landscape in Pakistan was seen to predominantly uphold conventional norms, which can limit the acceptance of diverse pathways to success.

The study's findings suggest several implications for policy and practice. There is a need for culturally sensitive mental health interventions that recognize the collective nature of coping in Pakistani society. Programs that engage families and communities in mental health support could be particularly effective, given the strong reliance on familial and social networks identified in this study. Additionally, there is a need for gender-specific support strategies that address the unique pressures faced by men and women in their respective roles. Educational and public health campaigns that challenge traditional gender norms and promote a broader acceptance of diverse success paths could help mitigate the stress associated with societal expectations.

Future research should consider expanding the sample to include more diverse regions and populations within Pakistan, including rural communities where different coping mechanisms may be more prevalent. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into how coping strategies evolve over time and in response to changing socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, exploring the impact of emerging digital media on resilience and coping could offer valuable perspectives on how new forms of communication are reshaping traditional narratives of success and failure.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study underscores the deeply embedded nature of cultural, familial, and religious influences in shaping how failure is perceived and managed in Pakistani society. While the collective and religious coping strategies observed provide significant resilience, the gendered differences and media influences highlight areas where societal change and targeted interventions could further support individuals in navigating failure. By recognizing the cultural context in which these experiences occur, there is potential to develop more effective, contextually appropriate support mechanisms that enhance resilience and mental health outcomes across diverse populations in Pakistan.

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