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Demographic Correlates of Self-Defeating Personality among the Community Population of Pakistan

Maseera[1], Aasma Yousaf[2]
[1]Centre for Clinical Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan
Email: maseera719@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor, Centre for Clinical Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan
Email: psychologist.yousaf@gmail.com

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Corresponding author:
Maseera
Email:
maseera719@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Self-Defeating Personality, characterized by a reluctance to pursue enjoyable activities, encouraging others to exploit oneself, and focusing on one's worst traits, has been studied only in Western populations, leaving a gap in the literature regarding how these tendencies manifest in Asian populations. This study aims to examine the demographic correlates of self-defeating personality in a community sample of the Pakistani population. The demographics considered in this study are age, education, income, gender, occupation, birth order, family system, and marital status. A correlational research design was used. Using purposive sampling, data was collected from 430 participants. Participants aged 18 to 40, who related to the brief description of Self-Defeating Personality, were included in the study, while those diagnosed with any psychological disorder were excluded. The Urdu version of the Coolidge Axis II Inventory Self-Defeating Personality Disorder Scale (Coolidge & Merwin, 1992), along with a demographic sheet, was used. After gathering the data, analyses were conducted using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression on the variables. The results reveal that only marital status and doctorate level of education were significant predictors, with single status linked to higher levels and doctorate level of education linked to lower levels of self-defeating personality. Family system showed a significant correlation but did not remain a significant predictor in the regression model. Age, gender, income, occupation, and birth order showed no significant relationship or predictive effect on self-defeating personality. The results of this study can be used in early intervention and psycho educational programs targeting self-defeating patterns and could be particularly helpful for single individuals.

Introduction

Pakistani culture, along with other collectivistic cultures, emphasizes selflessness and self-sacrifice for the common good of family and community members. From childhood, people are taught to put their desires aside to meet the demands of their families. It is not only a social expectation but also a moral principle, which includes honor (izzat) and the welfare of the whole society as well. In this regard, a woman should be selfless, a man should take care of the family, and everybody should work for the common good (Yaqoob et al., 2023). Although norms like these promote social integration, too much self-sacrifice becomes a problem in instances where it denies any kind of choice or autonomy to the individual. In these instances, culturally accepted selflessness begins to take on characteristics of self-defeating behaviors. In the everyday life of Pakistan, numerous examples can be seen of people stuck in

toxic relationships, missing opportunities in their careers, suffering in silence, and accepting failure, but these people receive positive appreciation from their families and communities and define these behaviors as patience, loyalty, and selflessness. (Soysal & Bakalım,2023). However, looking through the perspective of psychology, these people demonstrate typical signs of a self-defeating personality such as procrastination, learned helplessness, self-handicapping, fear of success, fulfilling negative expectations, difficulties with self-regulation, and, in some cases, addictions or even self-destructive activities. Individuals with these traits often continue to choose situations that lead to suffering or disappointment, sometimes deriving a paradoxical sense of familiarity or satisfaction from them (Visser & Arntz, 2022). The poetic representation of this theme could be seen in Mirza Ghalib's poetry. Ghalib often portrays his complicated experience of pain, viewing pain and heartache not only as unavoidable elements of life but also as something beautiful (Iqbal & Kazmi, 2022).

Self-defeating personality is the persistent pattern of such behaviors. Self-defeating personality was first introduced as a disorder in DSMIII (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) as a descriptor of "other personality disorders" and then in DSM III R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) in the appendix. Also known as Masochistic personality disorder, it was defined as a persistent pattern of behavior marked by an individual's active avoidance of pleasure, their rejection of opportunities for success, and their inclination to put themselves in situations that lead to failure, pain, or disappointment. This complex and frequently unpleasant cycle stems from a deep-seated unwillingness to recognize or pursue happy experiences, which causes the person to focus obsessively on their perceived shortcomings or bad aspects of themselves (APA, n.d.; Kass , 1987). The disorder was later removed and not introduced formally in DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) due to its controversial nature (Reich, 1987). Despite its removal, it still maintains its significance in clinical practice as a way of explaining persistent self-sacrifice, decision-making in guilt, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, especially among individuals belonging to cultures in which this pattern is encouraged.

During that time period, several studies were conducted to check its prevalence in the clinical population. Some studies also focused on the non-clinical population. In 1987, Reich conducted a study in which 40 volunteers were gathered through advertisement and screened to exclude depressive and psychotic symptoms. Among them, 5% were identified as having Self-defeating personality disorder. Several years later, in 2001, Torgersen and his colleagues found that the prevalence of self-defeating personality disorder was 0.8% in a community sample (Torgersen et al., 2001). These results show that the Self-Defeating Personality Disorder is also prevalent in community samples in addition to clinical samples, but very few studies have focused on it.

Aside from prevalence rates, several other studies have looked into the distribution of SDPD among important demographic variables like gender, age, education level, occupation, and marital status, giving valuable background on which subpopulations may be at risk. Historically, clinical studies reported a significantly higher prevalence of SDPD in women, with sex ratios estimated between 2:1 and 3:1 (Kass, 1987; Skodol et al., 1994). However, community-based epidemiological research found that while the disorder was twice as common among women, these gender differences were not statistically significant (Torgersen et al., 2001). Furthermore, research using non-clinical undergraduate samples found no evidence of gender bias, with men sometimes scoring slightly higher than women on self-defeating scales (Cruz et al., 2000). Clinical samples in which SDPD has been assessed have generally consisted of participants in the early-to-mid 30s (Hyler et al., 1992; Kass, 1987). Conversely, community-based epidemiological data indicate that the risk for personality disorders, including SDPD, is highest among individuals older than 49 years (Torgersen et al., 2001). Other research suggests a developmental trend where older subjects may score slightly lower on self-defeating personality scales than younger, college-age individuals (McCutcheon, 1998). SDPD is strongly associated with lower educational attainment. Prevalence is significantly higher among individuals with a high school education or less (Torgersen et al., 2001). While personality disorders are generally associated with unemployment, patients diagnosed with SDPD have been found to be significantly more likely to be employed (54%) compared to patients with other personality disorders (26%). This finding is often noted as contradicting the theoretical "self-sabotage" aspect of the disorder (Skodol et al., 1994). Research indicates a strong correlation between SDPD and living without a partner. Single, divorced, or separated individuals are represented more frequently in SDPD samples than those who are married or cohabiting (Kass, 1987; Torgersen et al., 2001).

Almost all of the studies on this topic have been done on Western populations, individualistic cultures, which creates a huge void when it comes to analyzing how this pattern manifests itself in collectivist societies, like that of Pakistan, where values like self-sacrifice and endurance of hardship are highly valued. In Pakistan, where the culture is more collectivist and honor-based, certain sociocultural norms might be encouraging for developing some characteristics of self-defeating personality , such as self-sacrifice, tolerance of pain, and self-harming tendencies in order to maintain family honor and prevent dishonor (Cultural Atlas, 2016; Amjad & Yousaf, 2026). The culture that stresses the importance of interdependence, family allegiance, and role specification leads people, especially women, to value compromise, perseverance, and sacrifice above their own needs and sees it as virtue or religious obligation, thus reinforcing such intrapersonal constructs as negative self-perception, guilt, and victimhood (Amjad & Yousaf, 2026;

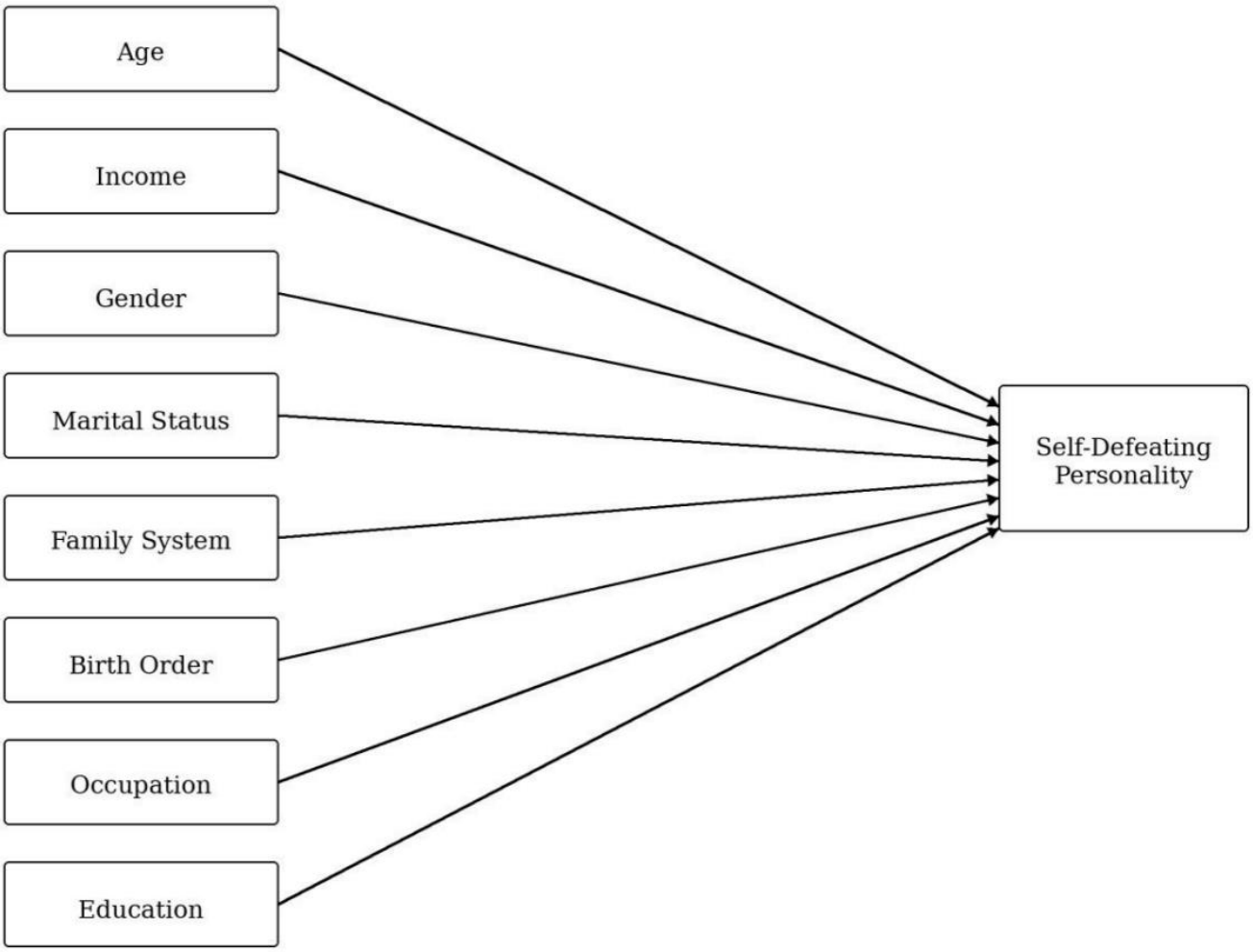
Rizvi et al., 2014). In this situation, such behaviors as staying in unsatisfactory relationships or denying personal ambitions to maintain social harmony and family honor fall under the category of self-defeating personality in terms of preference for disappointing situations and refusal of help, although they are culturally adaptive responses, not a psychological disorder (Cultural Atlas, 2016).

Moreover, much of the existing literature is primarily based on restricted demographic differences and fails to answer the question of which particular subgroups of people in Pakistan might be at risk for such trends. The knowledge of these correlates holds potential for practical application as it may help develop psycho educational approaches for early recognition and intervention.

Aims and Objectives

This study attempts to examine the relationship between demographic variables, including age, gender, family system, marital status, education, occupation, income, and birth order, and self-defeating personality . In particular, it aims to investigate whether these demographics predict the self-defeating personality in the community sample of the Pakistani population.

Proposed Model of the Study Variables



Proposed Model Figure 1

Note. Arrows represent the proposed predictive relationships between the eight demographic variables and self-defeating personality.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

A correlational research design was used to examine demographic correlates of self-defeating personality in a community sample.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

For the purpose of data collection, purposive sampling was used. Approximately N=480 were approached, out of which n=430 were retained for the main study. The sample consisted of a heterogeneous community sample from diverse backgrounds within the age range of 18-40 years (M= 25.3, SD= 6.9), with a mean monthly income of PKR 53,134.9(SD = 112,099.6). Participants were included in the study if they understood Urdu and reported identifying with the brief explanation of self-defeating personality that was given to them, like getting into painful relationships repeatedly, self-sacrifice tendency, feeling less valued in their relationships, and feeling familiar with pain. Participants who had been diagnosed with any psychological disorder based on the DSM-5 checklist and did not relate to any of the above features were not included in the sample.

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages for Demographic Characteristics (N = 430)

Characteristic	f	%
Gender		
Men	212	49.3
Women	218	50.7
Education		
Illiterate–under matric	7	1.6
Matric–intermediate	95	22.1
Undergraduate–graduate	310	72.1
Diploma	9	2.1
Doctorate	9	2.1
Occupation		
Student	242	56.3
Housekeeping	55	12.8
Employed	133	30.9
Birth order		
First born	176	40.9
Middle born	210	48.8
Last born	44	10.2
Marital status		
Married	129	30.0
Single	301	70.0
Family system		
Nuclear	237	55.1
Joint	193	44.9

Note. f = frequency, %= Percentage

Assessment Measures

The following measures were used in the study.

Demographic Information Sheet

The demographic information sheet collected information about the participants such as gender, age, education, occupation, monthly income, birth order, marital status, and family system. Questions were also added relating to the exclusion criteria to exclude those who claimed to have a diagnosed psychological illness. In addition, the sheet contained a statement that participation

was strictly voluntary and that participants could leave the study at any time without consequences. There was also a portion for the participant to sign to acknowledge their understanding and acceptance of these terms.

Coolidge Axis II Inventory Self-Defeating Personality Disorder Scale (Coolidge & Merwin, 1992)

The Self-Defeating Personality Disorder scale of the Coolidge Axis II Inventory (Coolidge & Merwin, 1992) was used to assess Self-defeating personality. It is a self-report scale designed to assess the tendency for a pattern of self-defeating behaviors, such as choosing unsatisfactory circumstances, making excessive compromises, and believing that one is deserving of unfavorable treatment. The eight DSM-III-R diagnostic criteria for self-defeating personality disorder serve as the foundation for the measure. It is rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from SF= Strongly False (1) to ST= Strongly True (4). It demonstrated adequate reliability in the authors' initial research. The 15-item scale version was used in the current investigation. In the present study, the Urdu translation of the scale was used. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the Urdu version was .82.

Procedure

After seeking permission from the author, the scale was translated into Urdu according to the WHO rules of Forward and Backward translation (World Health Organization, 2010). After the translation, a pilot study was done on a limited number of participants, 10, to determine the comprehensibility and cultural appropriateness of the translated scale. After the informal feedback from the participants who reported no issues and felt the items were relatable and meaningful, the questionnaire was used in the main study. A final sample of n= 430 was recruited for the main study. The sample comprised people between the ages of 18 and 40 years, regardless of their level of education, marital status, or occupation. Data was gathered from the community and many university departments. Permission was obtained from the relevant university departments in order to administer the questionnaire to the student population. The data was collected through individual administration, and the questionnaire was mostly administered in written form. However, for those participants who could not read Urdu, the questions were read to them, and the answers were written down.

Ethical Considerations

Following approval from Departmental Doctoral Program Committee to conduct the research, permission to use and translate the scale into Urdu was obtained from the original author. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and any potential risks and benefits. Participation was entirely voluntary. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection, and both anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

Results

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Item scores on the CATI Self-Defeating Personality Disorder Scale were summed to create a total self-defeating personality score.

Correlation Analysis

To assess the relationship between demographic variables and Self-Defeating Personality, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was run. Table 2 shows the correlation between demographic variables and Self-Defeating Personality.

Table 2: Relationship of Self-Defeating Personality with Different Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1) age	1	.19**	-.09	-.02	.74**	-.04	.08	-.07	-.75**	.30**	.58**	.16**	-.16**	.10*	-.13**	.17**	-.09
2) Income		1	.03	-.07	.18**	-.04	.06	-.05	-.14**	-.10*	.21**	-.05	-.15**	.14**	-.07	.10*	-.02
3)Gender (male)			1	.30**	-.10*	-.04	.00	.05	.12*	-.34**	.12*	-.09*	.27**	-.29**	.15**	.05	-.05

4) Family System (nuclear)	1	.10*	-.05	.05	-.00	.02	-.01	-.02	.01	-.17**	.20**	-.13**	.00	.10*
5) Marital Status (single)		1	.04	-.06	.04	.59**	-.39**	-.35**	.20**	-.12*	-.05	.10*	-.12*	.15**
6) First Born			1	-.81**	-.28**	-.04	.08	-.01	-.07	-.01	.03	-.02	.01	.01
7) Middle Born				1	-.33**	-.01	-.07	.06	.02	-.02	.00	.05	.02	-.05
8) Last Born					1	.08	-.01	-.08	.14**	.04	-.04	-.05	-.05	.06
9) Student						1	-.44**	-.76**	-.15**	.15**	-.10*	.10*	-.10*	.07
10) Housekeeping							1	-.26**	.17**	-.05	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.03
11) Employed								1	.03	-.13**	.10*	-.10*	.11*	-.05
12) illiterate-under matric									1	-.07	-.21**	-.02	-.02	.04
13) Matric-Intermediate										1	-.86**	-.08	-.08	.00
14) Undergraduate-graduate											1	-.24**	-.24**	.05
15) Diploma												1	-.02	-.04
16) Doctorate													1	-.16**
17) Self Defeating Personality														1

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level , *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), N=430

The results indicate that family system and marital status significantly correlate with the Self-Defeating Personality. Participants from nuclear families and those who are single demonstrate a significant positive relationship. Among the different levels of education, only individuals with doctorate degrees show a significant negative relationship, suggesting that people with higher education levels tend to have lower self-defeating tendencies. Additionally, demographics such as age, income, gender, occupation, and birth order do not show significant correlation with the Self-Defeating Personality.

Multiple Linear Regression

Multiple linear regression was used to test whether the demographic variables predicted self-defeating personality. The assumptions for this analysis were met, as indicated by a Durbin-Watson value of 1.89.

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression for Self-Defeating Personality

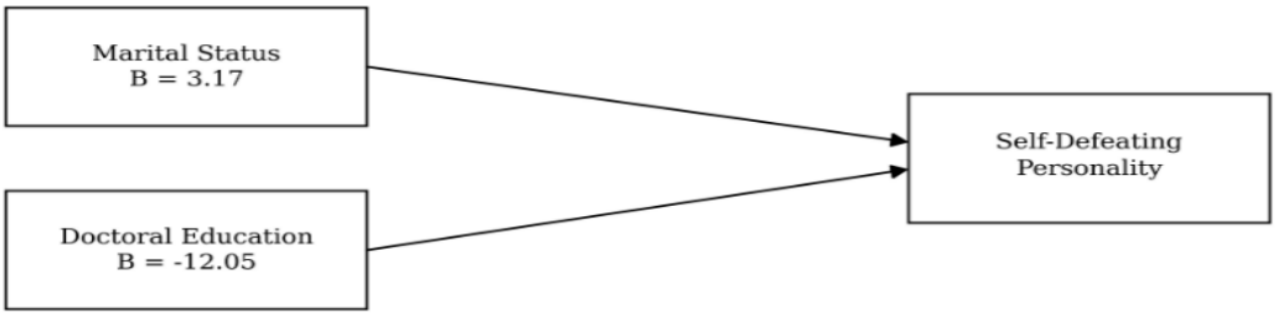
Variable	B	SE	β	R2	Adjusted R2
				.06	.03
Age	.05	.11	.04		
Income	.000001	.00	.01		
Gender	-.27	.95	-.02		
Family System	1.21	.88	.07		
Marital Status	3.17*	1.40	.17		
Birth Order					
Middle Born	-.56	.87	-.03		
Last Born	.96	1.44	.03		
Occupation					
Student	-.15	1.65	-.01		
Employed	-.21	1.50	-.01		
Education					
Matric-Intermediate	-3.89	3.44	-.19		
Undergraduate-Graduate	-3.70	3.32	-.20		
Diploma	-5.95	4.45	-.10		
Doctorate	-12.05**	4.33	-.20		

Note. B= Unstandardized Coefficients B, SE= Standard Error β = Standardized Coefficients Beta, Variables were dummy coded as 0 = Female, 1 = Male, 0 = Joint family, 1 = Nuclear family, 0 = Married, 1 = Single. For birth order, occupation and education; First Born, Housekeeping and Illiterate-under Matric served as the reference groups respectively, *p < .05. ,

**p < .01.

The results reveal that the demographic variables explained approximately 3% (Adjusted R2) of the variance in Self-Defeating Personality. Marital status and doctorate-level education are significant predictors of Self-Defeating Personality. Single individuals have 3.17 points higher levels of self-defeating personality as compared to married individuals, holding other variables constant. Individuals with a doctorate degree have 12.05 points lower levels of self-defeating personality as compared to illiterate or under matric individuals while keeping other variables constant. No other demographic variable significantly predicted self-defeating personality.

Emerged Model After Multiple Linear Regression



Emerged Model Figure 2

Note. Only the two significant predictors are shown. B = unstandardized regression coefficient.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the demographic correlates of self-defeating personality in a community sample of adults in Pakistan with an age range of 18-40 years. The findings showed that marital status and doctorate level of education are significant predictors of Self-Defeating Personality, whereas age, income, gender, family system, occupation, and birth order were not.

Marital status was a significant predictor, with single participants having higher levels of developing self-defeating personality than married participants. This finding supports earlier studies that have found the association between unmarried, divorced or separated status and higher levels of self-defeating patterns (Kass, 1987; Torgersen et al., 2001). Marriage in a collectivist Pakistani society offers social support, emotional buffering, and a sense of purpose, which can help to buffer against self-defeating tendencies. It provides a sense of social completeness and identity. In societies that strongly emphasize marriage and family, however, single people can feel more pressure and stress, especially regarding the expectations of their social identity, which could manifest in the form of self-defeating patterns such as diminished self-worth (Cultural Atlas, 2016; Shahrak et al., 2023).

Furthermore, doctoral-level education being a significant predictor and negatively correlated with SDPD is supported by findings of negative correlations of higher education with mental health problems (such as personality disorders and mood disorders) (Cohen et al., 2020; Di Novi et al., 2021). Higher education might promote enhanced flexibility of thinking and problem-solving ability, self-efficacy, and socio-economic advantages, making people less prone to developing destructive behavioral loops. People with doctorates generally spend years in a highly achievement-oriented environment, pursuing their goals and interacting with other people who model adaptive coping, i.e., factors that prevent the development of self-destructive tendencies. On the contrary, people with poor education (illiterate or under matric) have fewer opportunities for mastery and are exposed to greater socio-economic stress, which makes them more prone to self-defeating patterns.

The significant correlation with family system during correlation analysis, which was not a significant predictor after regression analysis, can be explained in the cultural context. Participants residing in a nuclear family reported significantly more self-defeating personality as compared to the participants residing in a joint family system. Joint family may offer lots of social support, responsibilities, and emotional regulation from several members with strong collectivistic values. On the other hand, nuclear families might lead to increased feelings of isolation, personal burden, and pressure to conform to societal expectations, leading to enhanced self-sacrificing and self-defeating patterns (Hilpert et al., 2016; Saleem & Gul, 2018). The absence of any significant effect indicates that irrespective of other variables like marriage and income, there may be no individual impact of family structure on self-defeating behavior in this particular group.

The study found that gender was not a significant predictor of the self-defeating personality. This is contrary to some Western studies which suggested that women had higher scores than men (Kass, 1987; Skodol et al., 1994). This finding is consistent with findings from recent community based studies which indicate that the gender differences in SDPD may not be as significant for non-clinical populations (Cruz et al., 2000; Torgersen et al., 2001). It could be the reason that in the Pakistani context, in which the cultural values are deeply rooted in a collectivist culture, both men and women are expected to sacrifice themselves and endure in different domains, women in the role of a member of the family and men in the role of provider (Amjad & Yousaf, 2026; Yaqoob et al., 2023).

Self-Defeating Personality cannot be predicted by age. This contradicts some Western epidemiological data that indicate higher risk in older age groups (Torgersen et al., 2001), but is consistent with studies on younger adult age groups suggesting a modest developmental decline in self-defeating patterns from younger to older adulthood (McCutcheon, 1998). Since Pakistan has a culture which emphasizes endurance and sacrifice throughout life, age may not be as significant in the manifestation of endurance and sacrifice within Pakistani society. Moreover, as the current sample consisted of adults (18-40 years old), it may be that any age related pattern that was seen in Western samples using older participants was not adequately represented in the current sample.

No significant predictions were observed in self-defeating personality with regard to income, occupation, and birth order. The lack of association between self-defeating personality and the occupation variable means that the self-defeating tendencies are not specific to any particular occupational group in the sample. Moreover, the findings regarding birth order are also in line with a large number of studies from all over the world showing that the effects of birth order on personality characteristics are minor or close to zero when the sample size and methodological issues are taken into consideration (Rohrer et al., 2015). After controlling for the relational and educational factors, income does not have an independent linear effect on self-defeating tendencies in this population. Overall, these results show that individual demographic characteristics have a less important influence on self-defeating personality characteristics compared to relational and educational factors.

Limitations and Suggestions

First, the education comparison is limited by very small sample sizes (only 7 participants in the illiterate/under-matric group and 9 in the doctorate group), which reduces the reliability of this finding. Future studies should strive to have more balanced and larger samples of subgroups for more robust findings. Second, due to the use of purposive sampling, selection bias may have occurred and affected the generalizability of the results. Further research is therefore recommended to use probability sampling methods to reduce this form of bias. Third, the sample was restricted to adults aged 18–40 years; therefore, conclusions may not be drawn for older adults. Future studies should examine self-defeating personality in a wider age range to be able to see if the patterns are similar later in life.

Strengths of the Study

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study conducted in Pakistan that systematically examined the demographic correlates of self-defeating personality in a non-clinical population. It used a relatively large community sample of 430 participants, thus increasing the reliability of the results.

Implications of the Study

Results of this study have implications for clinical practice and community mental health. The protective function of advanced education suggests that higher levels of education can act as a general resource for mental well-being. Practically, mental health clinicians working in Pakistan can take into account marital status and educational level as part of their assessment of young adults, and culturally appropriate prevention measures could be developed for single people with lower educational levels.

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