

## PSYCHOSOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN INSTITUTIONALIZED ORPHANS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17587239>

Received  
11 September 2025

Accepted  
21 October 2025

Published  
12 November 2025

### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate the psychological factors influencing the mental health of orphans in institutional care, focusing on aspects such as childhood trauma, attachment disruptions, life satisfaction, and social isolation. By employing thematic analysis, the research delves into students' diverse experiences, examining their living environments, social participation, and future aspirations. The findings reveal varying levels of engagement, ranging from active involvement and contentment to feelings of isolation and nostalgia for home. Emotional impacts also differ, with some students reporting improved well-being, while others struggle with mental disturbances and homesickness.*

**Keywords:** childhood trauma, self-concept, life satisfaction, mental health, institutional care

Institute for Excellence in Education & Research

### INTRODUCTION

An orphan is defined as a child who has lost one or both parents. In response to the widespread devastation caused by the AIDS pandemic in the mid-1990s, which led to millions of parental deaths globally, UNICEF and USAID broadened the definition of an orphan to more

accurately reflect the growing number of children raised without one or both parents. This shift introduced terms such as "single orphan" (a child who has lost one parent) and "double orphan" (a child who has lost both parents). Additionally, orphans are further categorized as paternal orphans (those who have lost their father) and maternal orphans (those who have lost their mother) (UNAID global report, 2008). Orphan hood, or the experience of losing one or both parents during childhood, is widely acknowledged as a significant stressor and a risk factor for adverse mental health outcomes in children (Morantz et al., 2013).

According to the UNICEF annual report of 2022, adolescents aged 10-19 in Pakistan comprise approximately 22.7% of the total population, which represents an estimated 212 million people. This underscores a substantial segment of young people in the country, highlighting the importance of addressing their unique needs and challenges to promote their well-being and development. In Pakistan, orphan hood often arises due to the death of parents, divorce, or the birth of children to unwed parents. However, cultural factors in Pakistan frequently discourage the adoption of orphans, perceiving them as financial burdens or outsiders. As a result, many orphaned children rely on state or private charity organizations for their basic needs (Lassi et al., 2011).

This study focuses on a marginalized segment of society—adolescent orphans—and aims to explore their mental health and the role of

self-concept, life satisfaction, and childhood traumatic experiences. This study explores these dynamics and emphasizes the need for targeted mental health support for institutionalized orphans.

#### **Objectives of Qualitative research study**

To examine the psychological and emotional experiences of orphaned children that are residing in institutional care settings.

To explore the key challenges and stressors perceived by orphaned children in their daily lives.

To identify how orphaned children describe and make sense of their mental health and overall mental well-being.

To explore emerging themes and underlying mechanisms that shape the mental health outcomes among orphan adolescents in institutionalized settings.

#### **Method Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews within a phenomenological framework to delve into the lived experiences of participants. The current qualitative research study employed a phenomenological research design that is used for the exploration of institutionalized lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenological approach used for the understanding of an individual that how they perceived, interpret and make sense of the lived experiences of an individual. In this current research design make sense of the subjective realities of the orphan adolescents who are residing in the orphan homes, with an aim of exploring the predictors of psychosocial factors that are effecting or influencing their mental health. That research design allowed the identification of challenges, and coping strategies that are exclusively to the orphan adolescents living in orphan homes.

In this qualitative research study phenomenological research design was used for exploring the lived experiences of adolescent's orphans who are in institutionalized care setting. Phenomenological approach was used in that study because this approach is good in exploring in depth information of how the participants understand their lived experiences

(Creswell and Poth, 2016). Phenomenological approaches are good in identification of psychosocial factors that are effecting mental health of adolescent orphans.

#### **Participants**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling that are appropriate for qualitative research study that have in-depth study (Palinkas et al., 2015) from orphan homes in Lahore, Pakistan. Data was collected from 10 participants as saturation reached out at 10<sup>th</sup> participant.

The sample consisted of ten orphans, aged 12 to 18, with an equal representation of boys and girls. All participants were students ranging from the preparatory level to eighth grade. The Orphanages provided housing along with basic necessities such as utilities, food, and education, ensuring that the participants' fundamental needs were met.

#### **Procedure**

The research process began with the issuance of a formal letter from the university to the orphanages, requesting permission to conduct the study. Adolescents were individually approached in a private setting to explain the research. Participant information sheets detailed the study objectives, the use of audio recordings during interviews, and their right to withdraw at any point. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to starting the Interviews. Interviews were conducted in person, individually, and were audio recorded to ensure precise transcription. Each interview lasted between 20 to 40 minutes and was conducted in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, allowing participants to express their experiences and emotions fully and authentically.

#### **Instruments**

The following instruments were utilized in the study to gather and analyze data:

#### **Participant Demographics Datasheet**

The demographics datasheet provided a detailed overview of participant characteristics, including gender, age, and education level, number of siblings, birth order, and parental

status.

The sample consisted of 60% girls and 40% boys. Age distribution was split with 60% of participants aged 12 to 14 years and 40% aged 15 to 18 years. Educationally, 20% were in

Preparatory education, while 80% were enrolled in grades 1 to 8. The number of siblings varied: 40% had 1 to 2 siblings, 30% had 4 to 5 siblings, and another 30% had 6 or more siblings. Birth order was categorized as follows: 30% were firstborns, 40% were second to fourth-born, and 30% were fifth-born or later. Regarding parental status, 60% had a living father and 40% had a deceased father; conversely, 70% had a deceased mother and 30% had a living mother. This Comprehensive demographic profile is crucial for contextualizing and interpreting the research findings.

#### Interview Protocol

A semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol was employed to gather qualitative data. This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while providing the flexibility to probe further into emerging themes during the interviews. Interview protocol was validated by expert opinion. Expert matter committee review each question in the interview protocol and they all agreed on few questions. Expert matter committee includes 2 assistant professors, 1 expert in quantitative research and 1 qualified clinical psychologist.

#### Data Analysis:

The interview transcripts of orphan adolescents that was analyzed by using thematic analysis that was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006), a six phase method for coding and theming. An inductive approach was used that allowing codes and themes that emerging directly from the participants narrative s rather than being forced from pre-existing theoretical models. Analysis was conducted at both semantic and latent levels. At semantic level, focus was on explicit meanings conveyed by the orphan adolescents. On the other hand at latent level, deeper level of interpretation were carried out to identify underlying assumptions, psychosocial processes, and on wider pattern

determining the experiences of orphan adolescents.

Six phase analysis process by Braun and Clark's (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defying and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

This dual level of inductive analysis confirmed that both explicit expressions of orphan adolescents underlying psychosocial predictors influencing their experiences were accurately represented and defined.

#### Results

Thematic analysis showed the following themes and subthemes

#### Self-Concept

##### Subtheme 1: Positive Personal Changes

Some participants reported significant positive changes in their personality due to their surroundings. For instance, a 16-year-old girl noted, "Living here has strengthened my personality, determination, and decision-making courage."

##### Subtheme 2: Minimal Impact

Conversely, others perceived minimal impact from their environment. A 12-year-old girl shared, "Living here hasn't made much of a negative or particularly positive impact on my personality," indicating stability despite environmental changes.

##### Subtheme 3: Mental Well-being

Participants express significant challenges related to mental well-being in their current living situations. One 16-year-old girl in class two shares, "While living here, sometimes I get disturbed mentally. I often think about going home and wonder when I will finally return," highlighting the emotional toll of being away from familiar surroundings. Similarly, a 17-year-old girl in class two reveals, "Because of living here, I feel a lot of anger. I remain very

distressed," emphasizing the adverse impact of the living environment on mental health. Understanding these dynamics underscores the importance of supportive living conditions to promote overall wellness.

#### **Subtheme 4: Career Aspirations**

Individuals exhibit a wide range of perceptions regarding their future, reflecting diverse career goals and attitudes toward uncertainty. While some have clear, determined visions for their careers, others face ambiguity with a more passive or resigned approach. Understanding these varied outlooks is crucial for guiding individuals in navigating their future trajectories with resilience and purpose.

"I want to become a teacher after completing my education." – 13-year-old girl, class two

"I want to become a TikToker. I have a great interest in photography." – 18-year-old girl, class three

#### **Subtheme 5: Uncertainty**

A pervasive sense of uncertainty is present in some, such as a 17-year-old girl in class two who shares: "I don't think about anything; I just think about going back." This highlights a focus on present discomfort and unclear future.

#### **Subtheme 6: Positive Social Dynamics**

Social interactions and relationships significantly influence individuals' emotional health and overall satisfaction with their environment. Participants generally report positive social interactions. One 16-year-old girl notes, "My relationships with everyone here are good, and the behavior of everyone here is positive." A 14-year-old adds, "The behavior of everyone here is fine, but sometimes when someone argues, I prefer to stay quiet," indicating a tendency to avoid conflicts despite generally positive interactions.

#### **Subtheme 7: Ambiguous Future**

Participants express varying degrees of uncertainty about their futures. Some show a proactive approach despite the uncertainty, while others exhibit a shift towards a more passive attitude or reduced focus on future planning. These responses highlight the different ways individuals cope with and respond to future ambiguity.

"I think a lot about myself. Whatever is destined to happen will happen." – 16-year-old girl, class two

"I have stopped thinking now. My attitude is the best." – 14-year-old girl, class two

#### **Subtheme 8: Academic and Career Goals**

Participants exhibit contrasting perspectives on their academic and career paths. Some, like a 12-year-old boy in class prep, express clear goals: "I want to complete 12th grade and join the army and become independent." Others struggle with ambiguity.

#### **Subtheme 9: Absence of Problems**

Participants reported no significant issues in their living environments. However, they highlighted personal coping strategies, such as choosing isolation during emotional distress. A 13-year-old prep student shared, "No problem, everything is fine. I used to play cricket sometimes, but when I'm upset, I prefer to be alone."

#### **Life Satisfaction**

##### **Subtheme 1: Positive Living Experiences**

Participants generally perceive their living environment positively, expressing feelings of security, contentment, and access to resources, which enhance their well-being. The peaceful environment and absence of threats were key factors. For instance, a 12-year-old boy said, "Living here is very good. There is peace, and no one can forcibly evict me." Similarly, a 13-year-old boy highlighted, "Everything is available, and there is peace."

##### **Subtheme 2: Impact on Personal Growth**

Some participants highlighted the transformative impact of their living situation on personal growth. A 12-year-old boy shared, "Living here has put an end to the fear of being forcibly evicted from home anytime. No one can hit me, and I have also got the opportunity to study now." Similarly, a 13-year-old girl noted, "Living here has brought positive changes within me. Being here allows me the opportunity to pursue my studies."

These insights reflect the varied experiences participants have with their environment, ranging from satisfaction with amenities and

safety to recognition of opportunities for personal development.

### **Subtheme 3: Absence of Significant Issues**

In the perceived issues and satisfaction with the living environment, the first subtheme, Absence of Significant Issues, reflects contentment from students across different age groups and classes. A 12-year-old boy in preparatory class notes, "Here, all facilities are available. Everything necessary is easily accessible and available for use" Similarly, a 17-year-old girl in class two states, "There are no problems here. Everything is fine." Both perspectives convey a positive living environment and overall satisfaction with the conditions.

### **Subtheme 4: Enjoyable Living Experience**

Participants generally report a positive experience with their current living situation. One participant, a 16-year-old girl in class eight, expresses: "Living here is enjoyable. Even when I came, I was happy. Everything is here for a good life, and there is everything here to stay happy." This highlights a successful adjustment and strong contentment with the environment.

### **Subtheme 5: Mixed Emotions**

Conversely, other participants express mixed emotions about their living situation. A 17-year-old female student in class two states: "I can't sleep well here. Since I came here, I don't feel content." This reflects the emotional complexity of adapting to new circumstances, where feelings of unease and dissatisfaction coexist.

### **Subtheme 6: Active Participation**

Participation in social activities varies, with some individuals eagerly engaging in community events. For example, a 13-year-old boy stated, "I participate in social activities when the opportunity arises," and an 18-year-old girl shared, "Whenever there is an event, I participate in it." These statements reflect active involvement and a willingness to engage socially.

### **Subtheme 7: Better than Home**

Participants expressed mixed feelings when comparing their current living environment to home. Some viewed it as an improvement, feeling content and fulfilled. For instance, an 18-year-old girl described it as "the best place to live," while a 14-year-old girl stated, "No, this is a better place for me."

### **Subtheme 8: Nostalgia for Home**

Other participants felt a strong sense of nostalgia and discomfort with their current situation, longing for the comfort of home. A 12-year-old girl said, "I just don't want to stay here; I want to go back," and a 16-year-old reflected on the happiness of her childhood, stating, "Living with my maternal uncle was happier than staying here."

This contrast highlights the complex emotional responses individuals have toward their living arrangements.

### **Subtheme 9: Positive Environment**

Participants' views on their living environment varied. One participant, a 13-year-old boy, expressed contentment, stating, "The experience of living here is good because everything is available, and there is also peace."

### **Subtheme 10: Positive Interactions**

Experiencing harmonious relationships and positive behavior fosters a sense of well-being and acceptance. A supportive environment enhances one's overall experience, emphasizing the importance of encouraging interactions. "My relationships with everyone here are good, and the behavior of everyone here is positive." — 16-year-old girl, Class Eight

### **Subtheme 11: Comparisons with Home**

A 15-year-old girl provided a neutral comparison, describing the environment as merely "ok" when compared to her previous home.

### **Subtheme 12: Educational Opportunities**

Access to education enhances self-confidence, peace, and happiness. The same participant emphasized: "Living here has given me self-confidence, mental peace, and happiness. After studying, I can find a job as well." Education, as shown, plays a transformative

role in personal development and future success.

### Subtheme 13: No Significant Issues

The majority of students expressed contentment with their living environments, citing no major problems. Access to basic necessities, good facilities, and an organized lifestyle were recurring points of satisfaction. While occasional homesickness or minor disputes among boys were mentioned, these were not seen as significant issues.

"There is no problem here except that some boys sometimes engage in fights." - 12-year-old boy, Prep student

"While living here, I don't feel any problems or difficulties." - 16-year-old girl, Class Eight

"There are no issues here, and everything needed is provided." - 12-year-old girl, Class One

"There's no issue here, just sometimes I miss home." - 13-year-old girl, Class Two

"No problem, everything is fine." - 13-year-old boy, Prep student

## Mental Health

### Subtheme 1: Emotional Expressions

Some participants expressed happiness, while others experienced more complex emotions.

"I am happier here." - 16-year-old girl, grade 8

"Living here has made me emotional." - 16-year-old girl, grade 2

### Subtheme 2: Anger and Frustration

Many reported increased anger and frustration in response to their living situation.

"I get angry very easily; arguments happen very quickly here." - 17-year-old girl, grade 2

"After coming here, I have become very prone to anger." - 18-year-old girl, grade 3

These emotional responses, ranging from happiness to anger, highlight the complex impact of the environment on emotional well-being.

### Subtheme 3: Positive Childhood Memories

Participants reflect on their childhood with nostalgia, cherishing moments of joy and innocence. For some, childhood is seen as a golden period:

"Childhood life was the best." - 12-year-old girl (Class 1)

"I liked my childhood life better." - 16-year-old girl (Class 2)

### Subtheme 4: Mixed Feelings about Childhood

Others express a more complex relationship with their past, blending hope for the future with a pragmatic approach to the present:

"Living here makes it feel like I might be able to do something good in the future." - 12-year-old boy (Class Prep)

"I have stopped thinking now. My attitude is the best." - 14-year-old girl (Class 2)

These reflections highlight the fluidity of individual perspectives, shaped by present circumstances and future aspirations.

### Subtheme 5: Mixed Feelings and Adjustments

Some participants conveyed more complex emotions about their living environment. A 12-year-old girl remarked, "*Living here is fine; there is nothing bad about it,*" while others, like a 17-year-old girl, expressed dissatisfaction, "*I can't sleep well here. Since I came here, I don't feel content.*" A 16-year-old girl acknowledged challenges but accepted them, stating, "*Despite the difficulties, everything is okay in its own way.*" This variability highlights the importance of individual experiences and interpretations.

### Subtheme 6: Psychological Impact

Participants report varying psychological impacts from their living situations. One 12-year-old boy shares "Living here has given me self-confidence, mental peace, and happiness" indicating positive outcomes. Conversely, another 12-year-old girl states, "Living here has created restlessness within me, and my self-confidence has diminished" revealing a negative psychological impact. These contrasting experiences highlight how living conditions can affect mental health in diverse ways.

The contrasting experiences emphasize the diverse factors influencing social participation, from personal choice to societal norms and access to resources.

## Discussion

Previous studies, such as Bjarnason et al. (2012), have explored the relationship between

life satisfaction and mental health among orphaned adolescents, showing that those who have lost parental figures report lower life satisfaction compared to their peers living with parents. This research indicates that orphaned adolescents experience heightened emotional challenges (Mostafaei et al., 2012), including increased anxiety and depression linked to diminished life satisfaction. Consequently, parental influence significantly shapes adolescents' life satisfaction, impacting their mental health outcomes. Enhanced life satisfaction serves as a protective factor against psychological disorders like depression and anxiety, highlighting the need for comprehensive examinations of life satisfaction, especially in adolescents who have experienced parental loss (Sanurizwanie et al., 2023).

The mental well-being of children and adolescents is critical to their overall health and development (Greydanus & Merrick, 2012; Waddell et al., 2007). Adolescents with positive mental health can recognize their strengths and cope effectively with challenges (World Health Organization, 2012). However, various psychological issues contribute to the prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescents (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2017; Aud, Ramani & Frohlich, 2011; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Reports from the WHO indicate a consistent rise in mental health disorders among children and adolescents, with projections of a further 50% increase by 2020 (Bayera et al., 2010). Adolescents with low life satisfaction are particularly susceptible to psychological disorders characterized by negative emotions (Gilman & Huebner, 2003).

This qualitative study reveals diverse student perspectives on aspirations, social engagements, reflections on childhood, and comparisons with home environments, perceived issues, interpersonal relationships, and feelings of security. The findings indicate a range of clarity and uncertainty in academic and career aspirations, with some students demonstrating clear goals while others experience ambiguity or nostalgia for past environments. This disparity emphasizes the importance of tailored support in educational

settings to nurture individual aspirations and enhance future planning.

The study highlights the critical role of social participation in students' well-being, identifying barriers that limit involvement in social activities, such as familial restrictions or lack of opportunities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for educators and policymakers aiming to foster inclusive environments that support students' emotional development.

Participants' experiences of their living environments are multifaceted, with many feeling secure and content while others encounter emotional distress. This complexity underscores the significant role of living conditions in shaping mental health, personality development, and social interactions.

#### **Limitations**

The study's findings are limited by several factors, including a small sample size of ten participants, which restricts generalizability. The lack of diversity in age groups and educational levels, along with reliance on self-reported data, introduces potential biases. The qualitative nature of the data constrains the ability to quantify patterns, and the cross-sectional design captures data at only one point in time, failing to account for long-term changes.

#### **Conclusion**

This research highlights the multifaceted nature of individuals' experiences and perceptions within their living environments. Through thematic analysis, diverse perspectives on well-being, emotional responses, social participation, and perceived issues emerged. Participants expressed a range of sentiments, from feelings of security and contentment to challenges like emotional distress and limited social engagement. These findings emphasize the complexity of human experiences and the importance of recognizing individual differences. By understanding these diverse perspectives, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners can better address the unique needs of individuals, ultimately fostering inclusive and supportive environments that promote well-being and satisfaction for all.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATION:

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed assent was secured from the children, along with consent from legal guardians or institutional authorities. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality strictly maintained. Interviews were conducted sensitively by trained professionals, and psychological support was available if needed.

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