



Exploration of Embitterment among University Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Positive and negative feelings are felt by all of us in our lives. When an individual goes through an unjust, personal humiliating or hurtful event which results in psychological stress and even strong urge for revenge, the individual is suffering from embitterment (Linden, 2003). Students play vital role in make or break of any society. It is essential to address the emotional disturbances they might have. Current study explores the phenomenon of Embitterment in university students. Data was collected from students using Semi structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Assessment of happenings in life of students, negative impacts of bad happenings and unfairness, positive and negative reactions to unfair behavior and ways to overcome it are discussed. It was concluded that if events in students' life are looked into carefully then possible reactions can be identified. This way it leads to have more control on embittered mind and solutions can be found. This study will contribute in helping students for friendly atmosphere to grow academically and have a better life in general.

Keywords: Embitterment, Thematic Analysis, University Students, Interview, Reactions to Unfair Behavior

1. Introduction

Positive and negative feelings are felt by all of us in our lives. The way we react to the situation might differ depending on multiple factors. It is important to know the causes and consequences of negative feelings to better understand ourselves and resolve issues. When it feels that we are being humiliated, we may have stress and want to take revenge but not successful every time. These feelings come up with emotion called embitterment (Tuncay,2008). In current study, it shall be explored that how the phenomenon of embitterment prevails in our culture and how to measure it among university students.

A term was introduced by Linden in 2003 explaining negative feelings. According to Linden, when an individual goes through an unjust, personal humiliating or hurtful event which results in psychological stress and even strong urge for revenge, the individual is suffering from embitterment (Linden,2003). In Linden's view specific event lead to embitterment while another school of thought focused on all the negative events and conditions one might go through. In Sensky's view, the emphasis on single event narrow down the focus of clinicians and it becomes hard to identify and work on all aspects of life including personal and contextual factors (Sensky, 2010).

There are other distinct moods which lead to feel bad but embitterment can be distinguished from those emotions. Tuncay explained embitterment as an emotion characterized by feeling of humiliation with the strong desire to fight but not being able to achieve that goal (Tuncay et al., 2008). Moral injury is treachery of right by individuals who are on authoritative positions (Shay, 2003). Moral injury and post traumatic embitterment disorder cannot be distinguished from each other as two different constructs (Carter, 2021).

Clinical practice recommends that, while embitterment can be found back to a primary trigger, a key feature of the state is its rise over time. That is why, the condition is possibly more correctly described as chronic embitterment (Sensky, 2010). A support has also been provided for the chronicity of embitterment and a mean timing of 32 months was suggested (Linden et al., 2008).

Linden (2003) introduced embitterment first time in terms of Post Traumatic Embitterment Disorder (PTED). A self-report scale was developed in 2009 and it focused on clinical population (PTED scale; Linden et al., 2009). Opposite to the proposed diagnosis of PTED and categorical approach of Embitterment, Znoj and colleagues explained embitterment as normal emotional reaction to negative life events and "being treated unjust by others" as core-relational theme of embitterment. The model offers an elucidation of the different emotional states after stressful life events, which depends on the perception of agency and the activation of the motivational system. Four quadrants of mood, distortion and emotions are proposed, which are personal growth (development), depression, aggression and embitterment. Different population confirmed existence of this concept (Znoj, 2008).

Embitterment is an emerging concept of psychology. Studies have unfaillingly revealed that embitterment is a very common emotional reaction to negative events in life (e.g., You & Ju, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2019; Sensky et al., 2015; Maercker et al., 2000). In everyday life embitterment term is commonly used in context of bitterness either one looks bitter or speaks in such a way. Bitterness is not a new topic in the field of psychology. Alexander (1966), proposed bitterness as a distinguished emotion. But research has not focused much on emotional components of embitterment involved in it. Lack of research continues to open the room for debate about considering chronic feelings of bitterness as unique emotion (e.g., Ortony & Turner, 1990; Linden, 2003; Znoj, 2016).

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As daily life events which are unresolved may lead to mental health problems and eventually seen in form of disorders so there is a need to explore the phenomenon of embitterment in general population. In current study embitterment will be explored in Pakistani university students.

There is scarce of studies done on embitterment with normal population. It is important to study because if negative feelings are traced and resolved at earlier stage then we can avoid to face its consequences on one's life. There are a few studies conducted on embitterment in Pakistani population. But the focus was on people with disorders and severe disturbances. Current study will explore the phenomenon of Embitterment in university students. Students are assets for a nation but their academic performance get affected if they have emotional disturbances. Other areas of life also may have bad impacts. That feelings of being mistreated may go long way if unaddressed. This study will serve the purpose.

1.1. Research Question

What is embitterment, how it is perceived by students themselves and which possible effects it may have on their lives?

1.2. Objectives of the Study

- To study the phenomenon of Embitterment among university students by assessment of happenings in life of students.
- To see impact of Embitterment and reactions of students.
- To explore perception of students on how to overcome bitter feelings.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Participants

The researcher used qualitative paradigm to explore the phenomenon of embitterment. Thematic analysis research method was used with semi structured interviews as data collection technique. Six university students were selected for interviews. Age of the participants was above 18. Students with exposure to negative life events and who had significant effects were included in the study. Those students who have experienced negative events but they have serious medical illness, any kind of disorder or/and any kind of disability they were excluded from the study.

2.2. Procedure

Interview method was used to explore phenomenology of embitterment. Researcher encouraged the participants to share lived experiences. Informed consent were taken from participants prior to conduction of the study. Identity of participants was not disclosed. Rather dummy codes were used to refer to interviewee. Data collected in one on one interview was kept confidential and used only for the said purpose. Participants were debriefed of the purpose of interview. Interviews were recorded and transcripts were typed and entered in software. Data gathered from interviews were analyzed qualitatively. QDA Miner Lite was used for coding and emerging themes and sub themes out of it. It is qualitative data analysis software developed by Provalis Research. Thematic analysis was carried out to explore the phenomenon and meet the objectives of the study.

3. Findings and Discussion

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. This technique is used for understanding texts from focus groups, transcripts of interviews, or survey responses. Through this researcher can understand people's ideas, experiences and knowledge from data qualitative in nature. Subjectivity is one of the drawbacks of thematic analysis. Unbiased analysis should be done because whole analysis depends on the judgement of researcher. New phenomenon can be discovered easily and it can deal larger sets of data. Two approaches can be used in thematic analysis. In inductive approach, themes are generated from data collected. Pre-existing theory is base for coding. While theory driven approach is called Deductive approach where the researcher expects certain themes based on existing knowledge theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In current study inductive approach has been used.

First of all, the researchers made themselves familiar with responses by reviewing in the form of transcript repeatedly. Repetitive content and common ideas were checked. Next, content was coded on each line of transcript. Themes were generated based on similar codes. The content was gone through by experts' eye as well to avoid biased judgment. Following themes emerged through analysis of interviews

3.1. Assessment of Happenings in Life of Students

First theme included happenings in students' life. There are different experiences in life of a student but here we are focusing in relevance with Embitterment. Following sub themes emerged.

3.1.1. The Impact of Others' Negative Perception

They mentioned that the people unfair in their surrounding affect them a lot. Other people's negative perception affects academic achievement and productivity over all in life of the students.

“Aaj tak na mujhe positivity nahin mili hai mere erd grd logo ny mujhe kabhi motivate nahin kiya hai” (P1, Par 27, Col 111).

3.1.2. Learning from Life Experiences

Exposure in life taught them much and helped them learn why should not expect from others. Others don't appreciate instead people leave no chance to disturb us.

wo worst experience of my life of friendship tha k mje pata ni chla lekin ab me kbhi kbhi sochty hu k ye sb hona zruri tha agr university me mere sath essa kuch hojata (P4, Par 85, Col 28).

3.1.3. Teacher's role in student's life

Role of others like teachers, parents and peer group has been discussed. About teachers they said that they can play significant role in any students' life. They can boost confidence but at the same time if they are not sincere with their pupils that can be very harmful for them. Further they mentioned that role of teachers in students' life can be distracting if they can't do anything about the behavior of teachers. Universities have ranking system where they can rank the quality of education they are getting and assessment of the instructor. So what they do, they rank teachers as they deserve because there is no other way they can directly mention that the behavior of teachers is hurting them.

“Boht bura feel hua mtlb mra confidence e unho ne khtm kr diya. Waha pai mri himmat e ni hui. Kuch smjh ata ya ni “yes sir” “yes sir” kh dena (P4, Par 91, Col 0).

3.1.4. Family support matters

How parents deal children can be a source of happiness. A student told that he studies more by thinking of parents and wants to make them proud. But if parents do not give proper attention it demotivates and creates frustration. One interviewee mentioned that when parents give more attention to other siblings it instigates an urge to get fir treatment.

“Mere liye mere maa baap aur mere ustad aise hain k mujhe zindgi ka sarmaya sab kuch yh lagte hain” (P1, Par 65, Col 0).

“Apne bacchon mein yah chizen observe kar li thi jo alarming lagi. Unho ne environment change kiya. Hamare parents ne hamari wajah se apni company bhi change ki” (P2, Par 56, Col 79).

3.1.5. Relationships either make you or break you

In general discussion of relationships, they said that relationships have enough power that they can either make you or break you. One of them mentioned that keeping silence is best to keep relations. Further help can be sought if cannot handle the situation.

“Mujhe class mein kisi bacche ne blackmail bhi kiya tha voice note ke zariye k main aapko uthva lena hai agar usse friendship na todi to” (P1, Par 112, Col 114).

3.1.6. Disruption of Routine Spurs Irritation

Students have different routine and if their routine is disturbed they feel bad. Hectic routine and burden makes them unable to manage things. They had limited activities due to COVID and also less time for activities. COVID changed lifestyle. One of them said introvert personality is one of the reason to limit activities.

“Activities jitni b hain wo ak circle k under close ho kar reh gai hain” (P3, Par5, Col 123).

3.1.7. People are unfair & don't appreciate

They have trouble while dealing with different people who are not considerate. One of them explained that people cannot see you getting success instead they leave no chance to degrade you. People do not give you any importance and don't respond as other deserves.

“Apko kisi par blindly trust nahi krna chyea” (P4, Par 35, Col 10).

Students mentioned that there is no social approval of friendship with opposite gender which affects sometimes. Girls get jealous and do drama. They felt that teachers favor female students more.

“Ladkiyan mujhe aise lagta hai na ke unke andar ek jealousy element hota hai” (P1, Par 44, Col 9).

First objective of the study met by assessing happenings and different factors affecting life of students. So in these different perspectives students see their lives which can lead them to have embittered mind. Psychological discursiveness may affect perception and classroom engagement may foster positive learning engagement (Ramzan et al., 2023). Another qualitative study found that psychological factors affect learning process (Ikramullah et al., 2023). Social support can help in social adjustment and academic achievement (Maqbool et al., 2021). Mindfulness of teachers is also impacted by stress (Javaid et al., 2023). In another study, when general population was inquired about negative events happened in their lives, feelings of embitterment were reported by half of them (Baumann & Linden, 2015).

3.2. Negative Impacts of Bad Happenings and Unfairness

Next theme and major concern in exploration of phenomenon is the impacts injustice and bad happenings may have. What interviewee told on its basis a few points are noted which will be discussed here. They explained that unfulfilled wishes create frustration. Unfair behavior cannot be tolerated easily. Tension causes headache. It also made feel ill. Bitter past ruins future as well. Failure makes you weak. One can sit in sad mood for long if experienced unfair

behavior repeatedly. It makes sensitive people cry. Child abuse makes people bitter for long. Students cannot study properly due to emotional traumas. They get rejected by peer group, parents, teachers and society.

“Mera jo hai gaon mein hote sexual abuse hua tha to use vakya ne bhi jo tha ki voh aap yah kehlen k kafi mujhe disheart kiya tha yah chizyn zindagi badi be-mani se lagne lagi thi” (P2, Par 71, Col 10).

3.3. Negative Reaction to Unfair Behavior

Another theme emerged was on negative reaction in response to unfair behavior. They mentioned different reactions to injustice like they want to scold the one causing them pain. Unfair treatment makes people aggressive which can be verbal and physical. Breaking things when bad happens or shouting. Facial expressions also change if cannot get revenge. Those who do wrong cannot be forgiven and social withdrawal happens.

“Mare papa ne kha jao to mje itna gussa crha k me chair utha k mari to mene kaha k pata nai kaisay baaap haink esay kon krta hai” (P4, Par 45, Col 61).

3.4. Positive Reaction to Unfair Behavior

Next theme was on positive reactions to unfair behavior of others. Students mentioned a few reactions they commonly give or try to practice if others are treating them unfairly. They try to show patience and keep silence for some time at least so that matters can be discussed and solutions are sought nicely. They try to forget minor issues and hurting words but they were only successful in forgetting the ones which are less in intensity. They try to understand the situation and believe in Allah. They try to divert attention so that they can forget.

“I am a good fighter” (P1, Par 30, Col 79).

The second objective of the study was to explore what bad impacts unfair behaviors can have and how students react to those situations. Above given discussion fairly illustrates how ruthlessly embitterment can disturb students. Further how positively or negatively they react to the situations underlying. Literature supports the analysis. There is higher risk of suicide in people who are high on embitterment (Conner & Weisman, 2011). Emotions affect language usage of students (Javaid et al., 2023). Another study found that Embitterment is a reaction to injustice, breach of trust and humiliation and these are major stressors in social domain for adults (Bülau et al., 2016).

3.5. Ways to Overcome Embitterment

Last theme included way to overcome Embitterment. Following subthemes emerged through the experiences and perceptions of the students interviewed.

3.5.1. Be happy and Move on

It was described that being happy and keeping others happy can be a real source of satisfaction. One of them said money can buy happiness. In this way you will be more empowered. They discussed that catharsis is important. If bad memories are recalled, you cannot move forward so one should learn to move on and leave the nasty stuff behind. *“Aik hi mind me baat bethai hui hai ke khush rho. Khush krein ge tu khush rhein ge. Respect dein ge tu respect lein ge” (P5, Par 616, Col 59).*

3.5.2. Be hopeful and Prove yourself

Further, it was explored that if you know your worth then others cannot drag you to the level it affects you hard. One should focus on future. Keeping abilities and refining oneself also helps. They mentioned they had good learning experience at university. They learned to bring out positive energy and became more career oriented. Time should be invested in learning new skills and productive activities. Team work connects and fills the gap leading to good communication and less revengeful thoughts. They told they are hopeful for academic achievement.

“Zyada se zyada koshish hoti hai ki main best perform karun” (P1, Par 27, Col 4).

3.5.3. Be calm and Emotionally intelligent.

It was established that we should not judge others. Students should learn when to react intelligently with appropriate selection of words and when keeping silence is the best solution. One should be a good listener. If you control your nerves and do not react abruptly, it can make difference.

“Har person ko suno. Kro apni” (P5, Par 612, Col 58).

Third objective of the study was to know perception of students on the ways to overcome embitterment. Above mentioned points explained the factors emerged through discussion of students. Literature supports the ideas pinpointed here. Linden said that naming and accepting them all (acceptance and perception of emotions) can be helpful (Linden et al., 2011). Wisdom psychology is referred as special approach (Linden et al., 2011). By dealing tough situations in life and showing resilience on negative life events wisdom can be manifested (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996).

4. Conclusion

Students are the pillars of society. Their mental health is worth attention. Current study explored the phenomenon of embitterment. Objectives of the study were to see Embitterment among university students by assessment of happenings in life of students, to see impact of Embitterment and reactions of students and to explore perception of

students on how to overcome bitter feelings. Data was collected through semi structured interviews. Thematic analysis was done which sub grouped data in themes and sub themes. Main themes were assessment of happenings in life of students, negative impacts of bad happenings and unfairness, positive reactions to unfair behavior, negative reactions to unfair behavior and ways to overcome embitterment. It was concluded that if events in students' life are looked into carefully then possible reactions can be identified. This way it leads to have more control on embittered mind and solutions can be found.

4.1. Implications of the Study³

4.1.1. Clinical Implications

This study will help students to have self-actualization. They can better understand their moods, emotional disturbances and possible reasons for that. This study focused on youth who are vulnerable to more trauma and have hard time understanding and discussing it. Current study provided a way to speak out their concerns and make them feel they are being heard. Institutions in general and specifically teachers and peer group can be communicated and worked on to guard mental health of students with utmost care realizing the destructive effects it might have. Unresolved conflicts can be addressed. Researchers may have a platform and motivation to study more under the cover emotions.

4.1.2. Policy Implications

Policymakers should place a high priority on emotional wellbeing by offering mental health resources and required emotional intelligence education in order to combat embitterment among university students. It is necessary to build early detection and intervention mechanisms, crisis response teams, and conflict resolution education. It is crucial to strengthen anti-bullying legislation, encourage peer support groups, and regularly survey students. Community involvement, continuous research, and faculty development in identifying emotional discomfort are essential components. Dissemination of policies and awareness campaigns should promote accountability and transparency in execution, fostering a more encouraging and emotionally stable learning environment for students.

4.2. Limitations and Suggestions

Limited participants were asked for detailed interviews. In future more techniques can be used in combination to extract data for better outcomes. Data was collected from one city. More geographical areas can be covered in future to have representation of more cultures and generalizability. University ungraduated students were part of study. Students from varied age groups, disciplines and study programs can be added in future research. University students were population of study. In future other relevant groups like teachers, parents, peer groups might be considered as part of study to have more clear picture and comparison of facts.

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