

The Structural Determinants of the Urban Ethnic and Political Violence in Pakistan

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Abstract

In Pakistan, ethnic and political violence between different social groups is the result of disordered social conditions caused by inadequate political policies and economic imbalances. Violent confrontations and violent responses become a way of life for people, ultimately shaping a culture of violence, in the absence of equal and proper distribution of social advantages. The major aim of this study is to find out why people select violent behavior and how they explain their lives and motivational reasons. This goal was met through interviewing convicted violent offenders held in various jails throughout Sindh. Their shared experiences and accounts analyzed through a thematic analytical process provided vital insight into why and how they felt inspired to pursue violent activities. Thematic analysis of the prisoners' narratives found that those from urban communities were more affected by social disparities, unclear employment prospects, political situations, and ethnic and political conflicts. The convicted inmates described how severely participants blamed their social circumstances for their murders, injuries, and participation in violent assaults. They did not believe that their acts of violence were ethically wrong, but rather that they were justified. In this regard, violence became a cultural response and a justified act.

Keywords: structural determinants, ethnic, political, violence, narratives, convicted prisoners

Introduction

In Pakistan, violent clashes between different social groups have presented a severe threat to human life and progress. In the early days of 2019, a religious scholar, Mufti Taqi Usmani, and his accompanying guards were shot to death in Karachi (Verkaaik, 2016). Soon after, in retaliation for the killing, a young leader of the opposition's religious party was killed in the Orangi Town, Karachi (Verkaaik, 2016). Such occurrences demonstrate that people's lives are at

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greater risk of violence in Pakistan and that anyone can be killed. For example, Shaikh Aziz claimed in an article published in the publication 'DAWN' on 30 October 2016 under the title 'A Leaf From History: A History of Ethnic Violence,' that various ethnic and political groups have been involved in violent activities in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh province, at various times. He claims that Pashtuns, an ethnic group, were involved in a variety of criminal and violent activities in Karachi, including drug peddling and violent battles with other ethnic groups such as Sindhi, Urdu-speaking communities known as "Muhajir," and Punjabi. Violence was frequently met with violence in return. He claims that to exact vengeance, terrible riots occurred in the Qasba and Aligarh colonies, killing and injuring hundreds of Pashtuns and Muhajirs. In his piece, he also mentions that in July 1989 and May 1990, two distinct political party students from the PPP and the MQM engaged in violent clashes, hurting and murdering several young people on both sides. Furthermore, in various clashes based on linguistic and political conflicts across Pakistan, teachers, students, businessmen, bureaucrats, foreign diplomats, engineers, military and police officials have been injured or killed in all of Pakistan's major cities, including Karachi, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Multan (Irfani, 2004, Verkaaik, 2016). These events demonstrate that violence between ethnic, religious, and political groups poses a serious threat to Pakistan, and as a result of this insecurity, law enforcement agencies, policymakers, and social scientists are keen to learn why these incidents occur and how to prevent them in Pakistan.

Pakistan's population is diversified, with several communities speaking a variety of languages and adhering to various sectarian ideologies. Ethnic variety with human capacities and intellectual levels, on the other hand, can play a constructive role in the development of any society's social, economic, and political capital (Irfani, 2004; Quraishi, 2008; Mustafa et al, 2010; Yusuf, 2012). Ethnic marginalization, polarisation, and opposing conditions, on the other hand, promote social disintegration and political schisms, resulting in societal disorder. Other studies argue that ethnic violent conflicts arising from a certain set of structural restrictions have an impact not just on interpersonal or community connections, but also on cross-cultural levels (Rosenfeld, 2004). Furthermore, lousy governance, inefficient state policies, and corruption become commonplace sources of experiences that impact people's behavior and thought patterns. Most of the issues and conflicts that occur within ethnic groups and provinces are said to be caused mostly by social and economic imbalances and "social power imperatives" (Mustafa, 2013: 68). If political and governing entities fail to provide equal chances and equal social justice to the population, violent conduct would arise, affecting not only social groupings and communities, but also disrupting

national integrity and sovereignty (Mustafa et al, 2010). In other words, ethnic cohesion and national unity can be created if people's issues are effectively addressed.

Understanding the violence that occurs within social groupings is a difficult task. Some criminologists and sociologists, for example, who analyze violence from the standpoint of criminal offenders or agents of violence, describe violence as a justified and justifiable act (e.g., Kanwar, 1989; Gill & Brah, 2013). Those who research it from the standpoint of the victim see it as illegitimate, destructive, and hazardous conduct (Abbasi, 2016). In this study, a violent act between social groups is defined as a pattern of behaviour in which a person threatens or causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm to others or to oneself (Stanko, 2001:316). Within the circles of social scholars, however, there has been a constant debate about how and why people resort to violence.

However, in Pakistan, a proper theoretical and methodological understanding of violence has yet to be formed. For example, Fasihuddin admits that in Pakistan, criminology as an academic discipline and as a profession does not get the deserved status and respect. Some others share the same opinions, for instance, Quraishi (2002) explains the culture of researching criminal and violent behavior has not been developed on academic and professional levels, and no institutional or financial support has been offered to study it, so low critical knowledge provides no idea how to understand or prevent it.

Social structural variables and violence

According to criminologists and social researchers, the violence that occurs in different groups in the urban realm is heavily influenced by social structural conditions (see Shaw and McKay, 1942; Kanwar, 1989; Kramer, 2000; Abbasi, 2016). For example, Ronald C. Kramer argues in his article "Poverty, Inequality, and Youth Violence" that structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion have a significant impact on people's behavior, particularly young people's willingness to engage in violent activities in urban environments (Kramer, 2000). The conditions like low socioeconomic opportunities and unequal distribution of social and political benefits, according to American criminologists Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay's theory of "social disorganization" based on quantitative data analysis, influence the aggressive and violent behavior of people (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Kubrin & Wo, 2016). Therefore, it can confidently said that these disordered conditions shape hostile and violent attitude and belief system of individuals. Similarly, Robert Agnew, a "General Strain Theorist," believes that a lack of social demands or a lack of routine leads to dissatisfaction and anger within social groupings (Agnew, 2007). Social links, cultural

connectivity, and collective cohesion do not exist as a result of these issues, yet the existing social disorder and disorganization have an impact on people's lifestyles. That is why, according to the criminological argument, structural differences in social classes and communities influence people's willingness to engage in violent behavior, define crime, and respond to criminal occurrences (Tierney & O'Neill, 2013).

Cultural circumstances have also been linked to violence as a motivating element. According to Johan Galtung (1992), when a big number of people are greatly upset with monetary requirements and structural anomic constraints, resorting to violent events and minor disagreements becomes their cultural response and reaction. Some scholars, such as Charis and Ronald (2017), feel that when violence is used routinely to resolve minor conflicts, society loses control of its citizens and provides justifications for criminal and deviant behavior. If the population grows but resources shrink (Urdal, 2008), unemployment increases (Novta & Klas, 2016) and social and political initiatives become inefficient in addressing those issues (Mustafa, 2013; Hashmi & Majeed, 2014), hostile attitude and action become a prompt response. All these disorganized conditions shape a culture of violence.

Urban psychological determinants of ethnic and political violent identity

Human personality and psychology have an impact on human conduct. In response to external events, how ethnic and political groupings become psychologically motivated and build justifying justifications. Emotions, according to Stuart Kaufman, serve as motivational grounds and a source of attachment for ethnic, political, and religious groups (Kaufman, 2006). If their identity and survival are threatened, however, their response may be harsh and hostile. If experiences of victimization and relative hardship become a way of life and a cultural norm in communities, the emotions of individuals may turn to be more violent and radical (Mustafa, 2013). People who identify with ethnic groupings are preoccupied with their ethnic identity and affinity.

The term "ethnic" is a type of group identity that a cluster of people uses to distinguish themselves from other groups in terms of race, family, language, customs, way of life, culture, religion, and so on (Schwartz, et, al., 2007). Ethnicity is a socially and psychologically created identity in which ethnic individuals prioritize their 'relational self' with specific groups and values while rejecting the identity of others (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2011: 513). The 'relational self' is expressed and sustained by affiliation with a specific group; it may exist inside discourses, as some scholars argue (e.g., Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2011: 508), and ethnic identity is subject to societal restrictions and personal experiences.

Identity is a dynamic aspect of commitment to one's ethnic, religious, or political "selves." Identity as a subjective feeling has been articulated in a variety of ways, for example, 'self' tends to be explained as a person's feeling of individuality and the judgement of them who they are and who they are not. Such feelings and judgmental knowledge they induce through social interaction (Grant, 2008, p.2). Despite being influenced by external social, cultural, and psychological influences, a person's "self" still clings to their parent culture's conceptions and practises, which helps it justify its actions and ways of thinking. For example, as the same author explains that ethnic minority communities, particularly immigrants, narrate or demonstrate higher ethnic identity and attachment than native or local inhabitants (Grant, 2008). In this regard, identity is a subjective sense of attachment to one's self and group to retain or demonstrate respect and character. Previous experiences of victimization within that group, as well as the perception of expected future dangers, may be used to establish and develop a sense of belonging to a specific group and community.

The majority of such theoretical understandings of structural difficulties and their resulting violent interactions have come from empirical study and statistical data gathered through case studies, rather than implicitly from qualitative research based on learning from persons who have faced such issues. Many of these studies are believed to have 'methodological flaws,' such as Homer-research and Dixon's which failed to look at countries that are experiencing resource scarcity and ethnic violent conflicts (Urdal, 2008:593). Importantly, serious empirical work on the relationship between population, resource constraint, and violent conflict situations has shown unclear and contradictory conclusions thus far. Some research, such as those conducted by Chandra and Wilkinson (2008) and Urdal (2008) have revealed statistical support for the link between social problems, dense populations, and violent armed actions in cross-sectional studies. While some authors, such as Esty & Porter (1998) and Osgood & Chambers (2000), found no statistically significant link between rising population problems and intercommunal violent activities, particularly in metropolitan areas. These quantitative studies leave a void in this research by neglecting to learn from people participating in various ethnic and political violent acts, as well as their personal experiences. As a result, the goal of this study is to look at the personal experiences, subjective narratives, and biographical records of people who have been involved in various violent acts in Pakistan.

Knowing the gravity of the situation, this project tries to see how much we can learn from convicted criminals participating in various violent actions about their driving elements and how they develop their violent narratives. As a result, this qualitative research has two objectives.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how individuals choose the path of ethnic and political violence
2. To examine the motivational factors of the involvement in ethnic and political violence

Research Methods

This is an interpretive qualitative research project aiming to analyze the problem of ethnic and political violent conflicts and their underlying causations from the perspectives of those perpetrators involved in ethnic and political-based violence in Pakistan. In order to study this issue data was collected from 40 (forty) prisoners convicted of violent crimes such as kidnapping, robbery, honour killing, violent assault, and murder. (The data was actually collected previously for the PhD research purpose by the first author. Some of the narratives from the PhD thesis will be used in this study). Official permission from the Inspector General of Prisons (IG, Prisons), Sindh, was sought, and each prisoner participant was requested to take part in this data collection process. After explaining the purpose and objectives of this research, consent was secured from each participant. Rapport was established with them and my questions were related to their early life experiences within family and friends, their experiences of involvement in different social activities, and the reasons why they came to prisons.

The urban offender participants were convicted of a variety of violent crimes, including murder, attempted murder, violent assault, and robbery, and they belonged to various ethnic and political groups (for this article, I will use interview data of those who belonged to urban areas). Some of them had primary education while a few had graduation and master's degrees; the majority had no permanent jobs while a few had government jobs. Some worked on shops like bangles and iron, and a few were rickshaw and taxi drivers, and some painters. The majority of the interviewed men fall in the age group of 31 to 40, some belonged to the 22 to 30 years age group, while a few to the 51 to 65 years age group. For the ethical purpose, the collected data was kept confidential, and the participants' identities were kept anonymous.

The narratives of the participants were analyzed through a thematic analytical process that involved discovering codes or themes in the texts of the interviews. This process of discovering and identifying different themes is done by reading and rereading closely the interview texts keeping in view the objectives of the study. Discovered different 'basic' themes found across the next were further

sorted out and assembled under broader themes as 'organized' and 'global' themes (Thomas, 2006; Attride-Stirling, J., 2001). The major themes found in the data are given below.

Results

The major aim of this article was to look at ethnic and political violence in Pakistan's cities, as well as the elements that contribute to it. Thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained from urban inmates convicted of violent crimes revealed narrative descriptions and explanations that physical violence was heavily impacted by social factors in urban settings. Low prospects of work, a lack of education, a shattered family structure, and the political structure of the community all contributed to violence. The experiences of the prisoner participants revealed that their lives had been unhappy and vulnerable to social and political situations since they were children. Because their parents died when they were young, they were forced to look for work and social survival, which led them down a path of violent confrontations, including ethnic and political violence.

Poor social conditions and violent lifestyle

Violence was an everyday occurrence in the lives of city dwellers. They developed a sense of normality of violence as a result of their exposure to violent episodes and engagement in disputes. Some of them strongly believed that harming others, having violent fights, and killing people were all normal parts of life. They described how they had witnessed and participated in a variety of fatal and risky behaviours, including hurting, violent confrontations, receiving gunshots, and terrorism. They did not consider their acts of violence to be criminal or morally reprehensible; rather, they saw their acts of violence as a minor offence and justified. Following the party's regulations and obeying the orders of the leaders were the most important agenda items for them, as well as sources of pride and financial prospects. A person with a strong sense of ethnic identity who had been involved in a number of violent crimes saw his aggressive behaviour as normal and expected. A prisoner regarded his violent deeds as "not serious," despite the fact that he was proud of his atrocities. The prisoner who was recently arrested and sentenced for cellphone stealing saw his arrest as a humiliating outcome for him. If he had been arrested for murder or killing, he described it. A prisoner described his political existence by bragging about his violent past:

“There were no significant events, but there were several instances of disagreements, such as when we used pistols and exchanged bullets; I also received bullets (shots), and I shot other individuals; it was a typical part of life at the time”.

External conditions, such as political violence, heavily influenced people's lifestyle choices. As some have explained, their notion of normality and neutralizing of criminal violence was greatly influenced by ethnic and political conditions, as some explained:

“There aren't many, but I recall only one: a strike in [an urban region] that lasted 7 to 8 days and was accompanied by continuous gunfire across the city; it was [a political party]. They shot a victim in front of my eyes, then shot two more people, and then fled. There was tremendous chaos at the assassination of (a political party leader); my family forbade me from going out; and the police detained everybody they found”.

Though a few of them denied having observed and been involved in violent activities like violent disputes, destructive fighting, killings, injuring with knives, robbery, and kidnapping, their narrative explanations indicated their involvement. For example, a prisoner who presented an image of self as law-abiding stated:

“I wasn't the type to get engaged in such things; I was calm and collected. I was never involved in any violent activities, and everybody in my area who knows me will tell you how excellent I was. My headmaster and teacher thought highly of me”.

While many prisoners shared they observed urban people engaged in political and ethnic-based violent activities which included violent disputes like breaking arms and skulls, violent assaulting and injuring with wooden pieces and knives, killing, kidnapping, robbing, and incidents of terrorism. They observed violent disputes between young children of their family and found adults became involved in the injuring, killing, and aggressive assaults. One prisoner shared some children from his family playing cricket had violent disputes with other children on street. As a result, other adult people from both sides came to resolve the issue but it intensified to the position that an old man from his family was seriously injured and his head skull was broken. He shared:

“On a cricket ground, my brother and a boy from my family got into a brawl. After a while, 15 to 20 members of our family arrived to fight alongside us. The adults with beards were abusing my younger brother, and when I told them that they were abusing my younger brother, they showed no remorse. They also struck us with hefty sticks, breaking my father's head. My father was taken to the hospital by us. The situation deteriorated significantly. Our relatives returned to our home after transporting our father to the hospital and assaulted

our family members once more. The next day, there was a fight in which one of them was shot and killed, and my brother-in-law was also slain. It was dreadfully uncomfortable”.

From minor disputes leading to lethal results and serious actions like injuring and killing impacted so much the life of urban people, their violence became normalized and routine behavior. Lack of social justice and no prompt response from law enforcement agencies further encouraged them to be violent and to continue their criminal life. Violence not only at an individual level but also at the collective level was enacted in the urban environment.

Urban structure and ethnic and political

Poverty, frustrating job requirements, and family pressures defined the life structure of urban people. Having no adequate monetary collection and poor adults played a significant role in encouraging young people to respond to their life by searching for jobs and engaging in deviant activities. For their economic and social survival, they engaged in different jobs which did not satisfy their basic social needs. Narratives revealed that some were highly concerned with their family conditions and economic strains that prompted them to switch from one job to other. One of them convicted of murder shared:

“I had a bangle store. My younger brother graduated from high school and now works at the shop with me. I grew up in [a city] and obtained no formal schooling. As I regained consciousness, I found myself in my father's bangle shop. My family consists of three sisters and two brothers; although my eldest brother does not live with us, I nevertheless financially assist him. Following my mother's death, I was responsible for my sisters and brothers. My father wanted us to receive an education, but we were misbehaving children who refused to listen to him and were also involved in criminal activities on the streets”.

Not having economically stable conditions at home, some from their early life became deprived of getting an education. Finding no good source of feeding them at home, many of them began their practical and earning life from an early age. A life full of strains and relatively no educated skills encouraged urban people to look for lucrative jobs that could help them meet their increased social needs. Therefore, to pursuit for better economic life, some people chose willingly or unwillingly political careers which could help financially or give meaning to their life. A prisoner who was convicted of violent assault and attempt to murder shared how the urban environment was facilitating for them for deviant, criminal, and violent opportunities. He said:

“Yes, poor individuals in Karachi frequently stroll the streets looking for work. Most of the time, they are captured by a gang member, leader, or powerful person, and they are handed weapons, which they misuse in a variety of ways”.

Some participants described their life stories that how they were encouraged to participate in different several violent situations which further demanded them to continue their life of violence. Entering political gangs and becoming active members of the political parties, they described, was a seriously risky endeavor. About their violent life, some shared that they injured, violently assaulted, and they also killed their opponents during their political life activities. For carrying out such activities, they used many weapons including knives, pistols, Kalashankovs, guns, and heavy sticks. Life became normalized for them so for their involvement in aggressive conflicts and violent interactions and criminal survival, they needed weapons. A prisoner who engaged in such political activities shared:

“During the hanging of some posters and chalking on walls, we needed firearms. No one wants the other side to do such things, even if it's just chalking in their neighbourhood”.

Violent interactions and interpersonal conflicts as was narrated were part of the life of some urban people which demanded them behave in a hostile and aggressive manner. Violence became part of life and regularized activity, for that they were not much concerned or worried. For carrying such activities, they were psychologically encouraged to continue to maintain their identity and image of the party. In their life, to be injured and engaging in violent assaults, or injuring or killing others were part of their political requirement. Life stories of the urban individuals was full of violent acts, including the pride, arrogance for political and ethnic identity, and aggressiveness were some of the features that explained their life and structure of urban environment and lifecycle. A satisfied and proud narrative about violent political life was shared by one violent man in a response to a question about his life activities:

“Yes. I recall receiving a Kalashnikov blast in the right side of my tummy. They shot me in a deceptive manner. In one notable occurrence, the leader of [a political party] was assassinated in [a city neighbourhood]. That burst happened to me throughout that scenario. I had a terrible injury”.

He was confident and serious, and when he told his experiences, he felt proud and had neither guilt or pride, which he neutralised with a smile. He described himself as having a violent existence and being such a powerfully domineering figure in his party that no one dared to speak out against him. However, now that he is in his 40s and has a wife and a child, he has stated that he wants to abandon his aggressive and political lifestyle.

Some prisoners who were convicted of murder and kidnapping did not believe their sentences were fair. Some refused to admit they had committed any crimes, claiming instead that they had been wrongfully implicated in criminal prosecutions. They blamed the improper judicial system for their violent feuds, accusing police and court systems of being corrupt and pushing people to be deviant, criminal, and aggressive. Due to a lack of opportunities in social and economic life, teenage and adult residents of metropolitan areas spent their time engaging in criminal and violent activities. As a result of their frustration with economic conditions and unemployment, urban residents have turned to violent means to ensure their social existence.

Discussions and conclusion

Violence is a physical act that originates in chaotic social situations, as understood from the analyzed narratives of convicted violent criminals. Poor people's lives are impacted by economic problems, lack of parental supervision, family disruption, and limited opportunities for job and education. Being frustrated with such conditions, poor people attempt to seek their identity and survival through violence. As social disorganization theory indicates, a disorganized society and unequal political conditions become decisive variables in urban life. According to certain theorists (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Agnew, 2007; Abbasi, 2016), the lack of systematic and suitable social structural conditions play a critical role in driving individuals down the path of violence. On the other hand, political and ethnic leadership and connections provide important pathways for urban residents' lives, which eventually serve as sources of pride and confidence. Data reveal that crucial elements that help individuals normalize their violent behavior and derive their cultural attitude to violence are the experiences of their life related to deviance and violence. As a result, experiences of relative marginalization and economic inequity develop motives for criminal violence and violent identity, as well as a fundamental motivation for choosing a violent lifestyle. The same ideas were shared by some others like Ferrell, et al (2008) and Abbasi (2016) that in metropolitan environments, the existence of criminogenic factors aids the development of the psychology and culture of violence.

Psychologists as discussed in the literature review portion (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2011; Gill & Brah, 2013) believe that emotional attachment with political, religious, and ethnic groups and communities are shared identities that are to be maintained by all means including violence. Another idea related to this perspective is that other encountering groups are continuously threatened with their identity, so to maintain one's identity and self, competing groups need to be violently encountered with extremist justification. Being exposed to violent incidents in life, people become used to them and adopt them as cultural and routine behavior. Therefore, becoming involved in such criminal and violent activities does not make them consider their violent crimes as morally wrong but rather justified.

Psychologists think that emotional commitment to political, religious, and ethnic groups and communities are shared identities that must be maintained by all means, including violence, as stated in the literature review section (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2011; Gill & Brah, 2013). Another thought linked to this perspective is that other encountering groups are constantly fearful of the activities of other political and ethnic groups, hence they feel the rival groups must be forcefully confronted with violent means. In these situations, poor people become accustomed to violent occurrences as they occur in their daily lives and adopt them as cultural and customary behaviour. As a result of their involvement in such criminal and violent acts, they do not regard their violent crimes as morally reprehensible, but rather as justified.

Urban structure characterised as low chances of social and employment development, weak governance, and political inefficiencies of leadership, according to the biographical accounts and lived experiences of the violent perpetrators in the study, encourage people to deal with their personal, political, and ethnic issues through violent means. This research piece strongly believes that unequal and incorrect distribution of the social structural conditions will hurt social groupings, community members, and the public. People who are dissatisfied with their social circumstances because they lack basic needs do not live a healthy and productive life, instead, opt for a violent job as a means of survival and identity.

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