

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceived Stress and Anxiety among Unemployed Psychology and Sociology Degree Holders in Pakistan

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Abstract: Unemployment is one of the major issues in Pakistan. It causes psychological distress among individuals irrespective of their educational status. However, there is scarcity of research with reference to graduates from the discipline of Psychology and Sociology. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the association between perceived stress and anxiety among unemployed individuals with degrees in Psychology and Sociology. A cross-sectional correlational design was adopted, and stratified simple random sampling was used to collect data from 384 Pakistani men and women who hold Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD degrees in Psychology or Sociology from public and private universities recognized by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC). Perceived Stress was measured through the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), whereas anxiety level of the respondents was measured using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (Second Edition). The findings revealed a significant and positive association between perceived stress and anxiety ($r=.83, p<.01$). Moreover, perceived stress was found to significantly and positively predict anxiety ($\beta=.83, R^2=.69, p<.001$), accounting for 69% of the variance in anxiety scores. The study offers several important implications, including encouraging help-seeking behaviour from mental health professionals, promoting relaxation exercises, providing psychoeducation to reduce societal pressure on unemployed individuals, and urging the government to take firm action against nepotism, lack of merit, and bias in both public and private sectors. Ensuring transparency in the employment selection process is also essential.

Keywords: Unemployment, Anxiety, Stress, Psychology, Sociology, Pakistan, Psychological Distress

Introduction

Unemployment refers to a situation in which an individual actively seeking employment cannot find work. It is a key indicator of a nation's economic health—lower unemployment typically signifies a strong economy, while higher rates suggest economic weakness (Belkin, 2025; Blom et al., 2023). In Pakistan, unemployment remains a pressing issue, with millions currently unemployed. The problem is particularly severe among young adults, with the highest unemployment rate observed in those aged 18 to 25, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2023–24 (Buisson et al., 2023; Imran et al., 2020).

Unemployment is strongly associated with psychological distress, particularly perceived stress and anxiety, as highlighted in previous and recent studies (Bordea, 2017; Chen et al., 2025; Mæhlisen et al., 2018). Perceived stress refers to how individuals evaluate the level of stress they experience over time, often influenced by feelings of uncertainty and confidence in their ability to cope (Cohen et al., 1983; Lee et al., 2012). Anxiety is characterized by feelings of fear, uneasiness, and tension, and may cause physical symptoms like sweating or a rapid heartbeat (Akiskal, 2019; Craske et al., 2011).

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Unemployment among fresh graduates not only adversely affects economic productivity but also severely influences mental health of the fresh graduates. A previous study at Punjab University found that 63% of graduates, mostly aged 23–29, were unemployed despite having average GPAs. This highlights the urgent need for targeted employment policies and further research (Asif et al., [2022](#)). Another study using labor force survey data and a logit model analyzed the factors driving vulnerable employment among women in Pakistan. It found that being young and part of a large household increased vulnerability, while education and migration reduced it. These findings underline the importance of education and skills development programs to improve female employability (Andlib & Zafar, [2023](#)).

A Danish study found that high levels of everyday stress nearly doubled the risk of unemployment over 98 weeks. Using health survey and registry data, the study revealed consistent patterns across education and income levels, emphasizing the need for strategies to reduce both workplace and everyday stress (Mæhlisen et al., [2018](#)). Another cross-sectional study examined stress during the unemployment-to-work transition among 395 individuals. While most participants reported low stress, women experienced significantly higher stress levels than men. These findings indicate the need for gender-specific stress management strategies in health promotion initiatives (Costa et al., [2021](#)). A separate study involving 208 unemployed individuals explored how coping strategies affect stress, anxiety, and depression. Results showed that individuals using problem-focused coping mechanisms experienced the lowest levels of psychological distress (Bordea, [2017](#)).

Unemployment anxiety is also prevalent among university students. A survey of 2,767 Turkish students and graduates in aviation-related fields revealed widespread anxiety, as many worked outside their field due to limited opportunities. The findings highlight the need for employment-focused support systems for young, educated adults (Ateş, [2019](#)). A study of 384 individuals in Pakistan found that unemployment negatively impacts both personal and family status. Most respondents believed corruption was linked to unemployment. Other contributing factors to stress and anxiety included low education levels, unskilled labor, nepotism, and a mismatch between education and labor market needs (Shehzad, [2024](#)).

Graduate unemployment is a growing concern in South Asia. A study in Sri Lanka found that humanities and social sciences graduates face significant challenges due to skill mismatches and limited job growth, prompting calls for higher education and labor market reforms (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, [2022](#)). Similarly, a study at Dhaka University revealed that graduates preferred government jobs but faced barriers such as corruption, curriculum deficiencies, and lack of job specialization (Rashid, [2019](#)).

A U.S.-based study argued that while college remains a worthwhile investment, employment prospects vary widely by major. Technology-focused and occupation-specific fields yielded better outcomes than general studies, although some specialized fields like Architecture suffered post-recession. Graduate degrees may help, but outcomes vary (Carnevale et al., [2013](#)). Another Sri Lankan study used survival and logistic regression analyses to identify factors affecting unemployment duration among Science and Arts graduates. Influential variables included gender, degree type, sector preference, English proficiency, family income, and university experiences such as extracurricular participation (Gunarathne & Jayasinghe, [2021](#)). A study conducted in Pakistan examined perceived stress among 150 employed and unemployed fresh male graduates in Islamabad/Rawalpindi. Results showed higher stress among unemployed individuals (MUSTAFA, [2021](#)).

Although there is substantial literature on the association between perceived stress, anxiety, and unemployment, such studies remain limited in Pakistan. Despite being a major issue in a developing country facing economic crises, political instability, and frequent merit violations, research on this topic is sparse. Therefore, this study aims to address the gap, focusing specifically on unemployed individuals with degrees in psychology and sociology—fields often overlooked in the job market and lacking public awareness. The

study will provide insights and implications to reduce psychological distress and enhance well-being among these graduates.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant association between perceived stress and anxiety among unemployed psychology and sociology degree holders in Pakistan?
2. Does perceived stress significantly predict anxiety among unemployed psychology and sociology degree holders in Pakistan?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between perceived stress and anxiety among unemployed psychology and sociology degree holders in Pakistan.
2. To assess the impact of perceived stress on anxiety among unemployed psychology and sociology degree holders in Pakistan.

Hypotheses

1. There is likely to be a positive and significant association between perceived stress and anxiety among unemployed sociology and psychology degree holders in Pakistan.
2. Perceived stress is likely to have a positive and significant effect on anxiety among unemployed sociology and psychology degree holders in Pakistan.

Method

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationship between unemployment and psychology and sociology graduates in Pakistan.

Sampling and Inclusion Criteria

A stratified simple random sampling technique was used to collect data from a sample of 384 participants, including both men and women, aged 21 years or older. Participants were required to have completed a minimum of a four-year BS (Honours) or equivalent degree in Psychology or Sociology and must be unemployed for the past one year and be Pakistani residents and citizens.

Instruments

The study utilized two instruments to measure the study variables: the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Beck Anxiety Inventory Second Edition (BAI-II). The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1994) consists of 10 items, with responses recorded on a Likert scale ranging from "never" (0) to "very often" (4). The reliability of this scale ranges between 0.84 and 0.91. Additionally, the Beck Anxiety Inventory – Second Edition (BAI-II), developed in 1988 by Aaron T. Beck et al., comprises 21 items and uses a four-point Likert scale (0–3), where higher scores indicate greater anxiety. The reliability of the BAI-II is reported to be 0.92, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Ethical Considerations and Procedure

The study adhered to APA 7 ethical standards. The authors of the instruments were approached for permission to use their questionnaires. Approval was obtained from the relevant institution before data collection. Participants were provided with a written consent form, which outlined the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any stage, and information regarding confidentiality. Upon obtaining written consent, participants completed demographic and study-related questionnaires. No emotional or physical harm was caused to participants. Data collection was conducted in a safe and supportive environment. After completing the questionnaires, participants were thanked for their contribution. The data

was gathered from Swat, Peshawar, Lahore, Faisalabad, Islamabad and Karachi. The data was then entered into SPSS version 27 for analysis.

Results

Table 1

Characteristics of the Respondents (N=384)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age			27.18	5.30
Gender				
Men	135	35		
Women	249	65		
Socioeconomic Status				
Lower Class	233	61		
Middle Class	124	32		
Upper Class	27	7		
Educational Qualification				
BS/MA/MSC Psychology	87	23		
BS/MA/MSC Sociology	89	23		
MS/MPhil Psychology	91	24		
MS/Phil Sociology	92	24		
PhD Psychology	13	3		
PhD Sociology	12	3		

The above table shows that 135 (35%) men and 249 (65%) women participated in the study, with a mean age of 27.18 ± 5.30 years. Among the participants, 233 (61%) belonged to the lower class, 124 (32%) to the middle class, and 27 (7%) to the upper class. In terms of educational qualifications, 87 (23%) participants held a BS/MA/MSc degree in Psychology, while 89 (23%) held a BS/MA/MSc degree in Sociology. Additionally, 91 (24%) participants had an MS/MPhil degree in Psychology, and 92 (24%) had an MS/MPhil degree in Sociology. Furthermore, 13 (3%) participants held a PhD in Psychology, and 12 (3%) held a PhD in Sociology.

Table 2

Correlational Analysis (384)

Variables	1	2
1. Perceived Stress	-	.83**
2. Anxiety		-

Note. **p<.01

The table above depicts significant positive association of perceived stress with anxiety.

Table 3

Regression Analysis (N=384)

Variables	B	SE	β	R ²	F	P	95% CI	
							LL	UL
				.69	851.41			
Constant	.59	1.06				.37	-1.41	3.06
Perceived Stress	1.78	.06	.83			<.001	1.66	1.91

Note. ***P<.001

The above table depicts perceived stress as predictors of outcome variable anxiety. Perceived Stress significantly and positively predicts anxiety ($\beta = .83^{***}$, $R^2 = .69$, $F = 851.41$) and it accounts for 69% variance in anxiety score.

Discussion

Unemployment is on the rise in Pakistan, and psychological distress is commonly associated with it. However, limited literature is available on this issue—specifically when it comes to degree holders in Psychology and Sociology. Therefore, the objective of the current study is to find the association between perceived stress and anxiety among unemployed degree holders in Psychology and Sociology in Pakistan.

The first hypothesis of the study is supported: among unemployed Psychology and Sociology degree holders in Pakistan, perceived stress and anxiety are significantly associated with each other. This means that as perceived stress increases among these unemployed individuals, so does anxiety. This finding aligns with a previous study conducted on unemployed individuals in Pakistan, which also showed a significant and positive association between stress and anxiety (Qureshi et al., [2025](#)). One of the primary causes of mental health distress due to unemployment is financial strain, as money is required to pay bills, buy food, travel, and meet other basic needs. When individuals are unable to afford necessities, it creates stress and anxiety. Moreover, a cultural factor in Pakistani society is the lack of awareness regarding mental health. When mental health issues are not addressed early, they can deteriorate and lead to serious consequences, including suicide.

The second hypothesis of the study states that there is likely to be a significant and positive effect of perceived stress on anxiety among unemployed degree holders in Psychology and Sociology in Pakistan. Regression analysis confirmed this assumption, showing that 69% of the variance in anxiety scores could be explained by perceived stress. This result is consistent with a previous meta-analysis of 324 studies comprising 300,000 participants, which found that elevated mental health distress—such as depression, anxiety, and stress—is more strongly associated with blue-collar workers in low-income countries compared to those in high-income countries (Paul & Moser, [2009](#)). Another study conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, found that unemployment causes psychological distress, with family and societal pressure identified as key factors contributing to this distress among unemployed youth (Shah et al., [2020](#)). Prior research has also identified issues such as lack of transparency in merit-based recruitment, favoritism, bribes, and compromised merit as major causes of unemployment in Pakistan. These issues contribute to mental health distress by preventing individuals from meeting their daily needs (Qureshi et al., [2025](#); Pervaiz et al., [2012](#); Wani et al., [2024](#)).

Limitations and Recommendations

The first limitation of the study is that data was collected only from Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, Faisalabad, Peshawar, and Swat. As such, the findings may not be applicable to other regions of Pakistan. Future studies should aim to include participants from more diverse geographic areas. The second limitation is that the study only included unemployed degree holders in Sociology and Psychology. Future research should consider including degree holders from a wider range of academic disciplines. Another limitation is the use of a cross-sectional study design, which does not allow for tracking changes over time. Longitudinal research designs are recommended for future studies to examine how psychological distress evolves over a longer period of unemployment. Finally, there was an imbalance in gender and socioeconomic status among participants. Future studies should aim for better representation across demographic categories.

Implications

The results of this study have several important implications. Adults in Pakistan with degrees in Psychology and Sociology are experiencing significant psychological distress. There is a need to encourage these individuals to seek psychological help. Community awareness campaigns are also needed to reduce stigma,

blame, and discrimination against the unemployed, as these social attitudes further exacerbate psychological distress. The government should take immediate action to address issues such as nepotism, corruption, favouritism, and bias in the recruitment process. Increasing the number of job opportunities for Psychology and Sociology graduates in both the public and private sectors is essential. Merit-based recruitment should be transparent and fair. In addition, individuals with degrees in Psychology and Sociology are encouraged to practice stress-reduction techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing exercises to help manage their psychological distress.

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