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<b>Article:</b>	<b>SOCIAL STIGMA AS A PREDICTOR of PERCEIVED STRESS AMONG PARENTS of CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS</b>
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### Abstract

Current study was designed with the aim to explore the relationship between perceived social stigma(PSS) and perceived stress(PS) among parents of children with special needs. The study was conducted from September, 2019 to June, 2020. The sample of 500 parents (250 mothers & 250 fathers) was selected using purposive sampling. The results of the study revealed that there is a significant positive correlation ( $r=.83^{**}$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between social stigma and perceived stress among parents having children with special needs. Findings indicated that mothers experienced higher level of social stigma and perceived stress as compared to fathers. Similarly, parents of children with autism spectrum disorder experienced elevated level of PSS and PS as compared to parents of children with intellectual disabilities and down syndromes. Findings also indicated that Perceived social stigma is a significant predictor of perceived stress [ $R^2 =.691$ ;  $F(1, 498) = 1115.2$ ,  $p<.01$ ]. Results concluded that parents need counselling and clinical services to minimize the negative impact of perceived stigma and in order to reduce their stress.

*Keywords:* Social stigma, perceived stress

## INTRODUCTION

When parents are informed about their children's exceptionality, they are always stunned and depressed deeply (Festen et al., 2014). This can be an overwhelming and frustrating process to raise a child with a disability and can cause many issues for parents. Because of their care-giving experience, carers can face emotional burden, stigma (social exclusion), physical burden, and economic burden (Ae-Ngibise, Doku, Asante & Owusu-Agyei, 2015). Such problems can cause a number of psychosocial issues e.g. decreased quality of life and social isolation not only for the disabled person but for family members also. Most parents of children with special needs tend not to socialize because they are afraid of their neighbors, relatives or friends who may make derogatory comments about their kids. These families distance themselves from society and do not want support from the society (Duran & Ergun, 2018). Such parents feel alone and guilty to this condition (Shetty & Menezes, 2013). Empirical evidences indicated higher level of stress among parents of children with special needs. Because of negative attitude of society parents perceived the presence of children with special needs as stigma. Stigmatization can be said to be the mechanism in which individuals appear in society as 'unwantedly different.' get labeled and lost respect in society because of labeling, prejudice, social and cultural elimination, and adverse emotional responses by the majority of public (Kayama, Haight, Ku & Cho, 2017). Parental stress can be described as the parents' experience of stress in their everyday lives, not only because of their children but also because of other factors (social, environmental) and responsibilities (Woodman, Mawdsley & Hauser-Cram, 2015).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Different researches have been conducted on social stigma and perceived stress among parents of children with special need. Parents of children with special needs are also vulnerable to enduring high rates with stigma. Agyekum (2018) conducted a qualitative study to identify the problems and coping mechanisms used by the parents of autistic children in Ghana. Outcomes reflected people stigmatized these children and their family members. It affects parents emotionally and society's reaction to autistic child recognized stigmatized attitude of society discouraged them. Duran and Ergun (2018) did a qualitative analysis with parents of children with IDD. The overall results showed that children's parents have not been embraced by family members, peers and society as a whole and feel stigmatized.

Gobrial (2018) did qualitative work on autistic children's mothers. Semi-structured interview with 14 mothers was performed, and data were analyzed thematically. Research found that stigma was frightening for mothers coping with ASD. Results indicated that lack of resources for education and health care and stigma are the main problems for mothers. Rauf, Haque and Aftab (2017) conducted a cross-sectional study to evaluate perceived stress among autistic children's parents. The sample had been recruited from Rawalpindi and consisted of 103 parents of autistic children. Study findings showed that autistic children's mothers felt more stress than fathers. A study to assess parental stress among parents of children with and without disabilities was conducted. The sample of 200 participants (100 parents of normal children & 100 parents of disabled children) were recruited from Bahawalpur, Pakistan's private and special education schools. Result of the study showed that stress levels among parents of disabled children were higher than those of normal children (Nadeem, Choudhary, Parveen & Javaid, 2016).

In 2015, Parasar and Sharma conducted research to assess parental stress among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Mental Retardation. The study included 75 parents. Result of the study showed that parents of autistic children experienced greater stress relative to parents of children with mental retardation.

Up to researcher's best knowledge, no study was reported in Pakistan particularly in the Gujrat district relating to social stigma and perceived stress among parents of children with special needs. So, this issue must be addressed to make the public aware of how their words and attitude influenced the parents having children with special needs. The objectives of the study are:

- A) Measure relationship between social stigma and perceived stress among parents of children with special needs
- B) Measure differences in levels of social stigma and perceived stress with respect to demographic variables of the participants

Further, the hypothesis of the study is as follow:

- A) Social stigma would be a significant predictor of perceived stress among parents of children with special needs.

## **SUBJECTS AND METHODS**

Cross sectional survey resaerch design was used to assess the correlation between social stigma and perceived stress among parents of children with special needs. The sample consisted of 500 parents (250 fathers & 250 mothers) of special needs children recruited from Lalamusa, Gujrat, Kharian and Jhelum, Pakiustan. Sample was drawn from special education schools and clinical settings of four cities of Pakistan through purposive sampling technique. Parents aged 25 to 60 years, having at least one child with special needs (age 5 to 18 years) in each category (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability Disorder & Down Syndrome) and

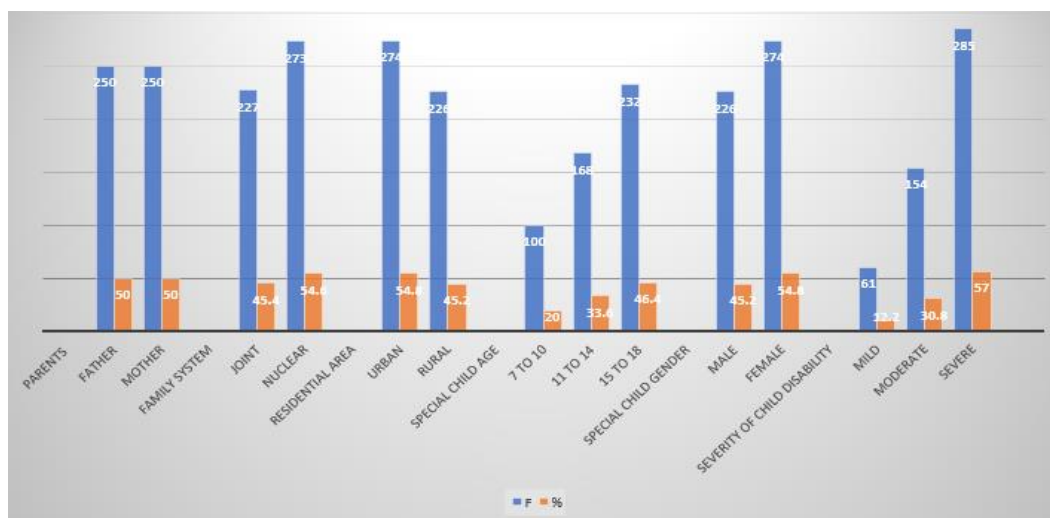
having both parents living together were included in the study. Parents with more than one disabled child or children with other disabilities were not included in the research. In addition, participants who were divorced, widowed, separated and were physically and mentally ill were not part of the study. Parental Perceived Stress Scale (Kausar, Akram, Dawood & Ahmad, 2019) and Social Stigma Scale (Mazhar & Kausar, 2020) was used for collection of data. Parental Perceived Stress Scale (PPSS) comprises of 32 items. The participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The alpha reliability of the instruments was reported as .95 and convergent and divergent validity were reported as  $r=.29^{**}$ ,  $r= -.04$ , respectively. Social Stigma Scale (SSS) used to assess social stigma among parents. It comprises of 20 items. The response format was based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agreed (5) to strongly disagree (1). High scores on SSS show high level of social stigma where as low scores show low level of social stigma. Scale has Cronbach's alpha reliability of .86 to .94. It also has good test retest reliability ( $r=.89^{**}$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The convergent validity and divergent validity were reported as  $r=.87^{**}$ ,  $r= -.07$  respectively. After taking consent of participants and informing about research purpose, questionnaires were administered. It took about 15 to 20 minutes on average for each administration. Study has maintained the ethical principle of informed consent and confidentiality. All respondents were also told that they are permitted to leave the study at any time. Data were analyzed on 21 version of statistical package for social sciences. Descriptive statistics were used to assess the frequencies and percentages of demographic variable of the participants. Inferential statistical analysis of independent t-test, one-way anova and linear regression were used to meet the objectives and to test the hypothesis of the study. All the procedures and materials used were reviewed and approved by Advance Studies and Review

Board of The University of Gujrat, Pakistan. University reference letter was used to obtaine the permission from the head of institutions and administrative authorities. Study has maintained the ethical principle of informed consent and confidentiality.

**RESULTS**

The Graph 1 showed that study consisted of 250 fathers and 250mothers. The majority of participants (67.4%) lived in the nuclear family system. Most participants lived in urban area (51.6 %). Results also revealed that the majority of disabled children were female (59.8%)have severe level of impairment (79.2%) and most of them fall in the 15 to 18-year age group (55.4%).

**Graph 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Demographics of the Respondents**



**Table 1: Correlation Between Social Stigma and Perceived Stress (n=500)**

Measures	Social Stigma	Perceived Stress
Social Stigma	-	
Perceived Stress	.831**	-

Note: \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Findings of Table 1 shows a statistically significant positive correlation (.83, p > .05) between social stigma and perceived stress among parents of special needs children.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation and *t*- values on Social Stigma and Perceived Stress in Respect to Participants' Gender (N=500)

Variable	Males		Females		t (498)	p	CI 95%		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
SS	70.24	26.69	84.71	12.17	7.80	.000	10.82	18.12	0.7
PS	113.16	39.08	133.7	19.72	7.42	.000	15.13	26.01	0.6

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, LL= lower limit, UL= upper limit SSS=Social Stigma and PS=Perceived Stress

Table 2 indicates independent t test demonstrating mean differences in the scores of social stigma and perceived stress among fathers and mothers of children with special needs. The outcome of t test demonstrates that there is statistically significant difference among the mean scores of fathers (M=70.24, SD=26.69) and mothers (M=84.71, SD=12.17) conditions (t=7.8, p<.001,95%CI). The results further indicates that mothers (M=84.71, SD=12.17) face greater social stigma as compared to fathers (M=70.24, SD=26.69). Similarly, independent t test shows mean difference in the perceived stress scores among fathers and mothers of special needs children. The outcome of t test illustrates that there is statistically significant difference among the mean scores of fathers (M=113.16, SD= 39.08) and mothers (M= 133.73, SD=19.72) conditions (t=7.4, p<.001,95%CI). The results indicate that mothers (M= 133.73, SD=19.72) face high perceived stress as compared to fathers (M=113.16, SD= 39.08).



Table 3. Mean, Standard Deviation and *t*- values on Perceived Stress with Respect to Child's Gender among Parents (N=500)

Variable	Male Child		Female Child		<i>t</i> (498)	<i>p</i>	CI 95%		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Parents		parents				LL	UL	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
SSS	72.575	25.658	81.521	17.386	-4.62	.000	-12.17	-5.14	0.40
PS	115.973	39.08	129.609	25.482	-4.75	.000	-19.3	-8.0	0.41

Note: *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation, *LL*= lower limit, *UL*= upper limit SSS=Social Stigma and PS=Perceived Stress.

Table 3 shows an independent *t*-test demonstrating mean difference in perceived stress scores and social stigma among fathers and mothers of children with special child needs on the basis of child gender. The *t* test results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of parents having male children ( $M=115.97$ ,  $SD=38.29$ ) and parents having female children ( $M=129.60$ ,  $SD=25.48$ ) ( $t=-4.75$ ,  $p<.001$ , 95 % CI). The results indicate that parents have female special children ( $M=129.60$ ,  $SD=25.48$ ) are experiencing elevated levels of perceived stress as compared to parents having male special child ( $M=115.97$ ,  $SD=38.29$ ). The *t* test result also indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of social stigma among parents of male children ( $M=72.57$ ,  $SD=25.65$ ) and parents of female children ( $M=81.52$ ,  $SD=17.38$ ) ( $t=-4.62$ ,  $p<.001$ , 95 % CI). Similarly, the results indicate that parents with girls as children ( $M=81.52$ ,  $SD=17.38$ ) are experiencing high levels of social stigma relative to parents with boys ( $M=72.57$ ,  $SD=25.65$ ).

Table 4. One-Way Analysis of Variance of Social Stigma on Type of Disability (Autism, ID, Down Syndrome) (N=500)

Scale		SS	df	MS	F	Sig
Social Stigma	Between Groups	125664.419	2	62832.209		
	Groups Within	114902.339	497	231.192	271.775	.000
	Total	240566.758	499			
Perceived stress	Between Groups	193737.312	2	96868.656		
	Groups Within	336504.230	497	677.071	143.070	.000
	Total	530241.542	499			

Note: SS= Sum of square, MS= Mean Square.

Table 4 suggests that there is a significant difference between the level of social stigma and perceived stress on the basis of children types of disability. There was a significant impact of child disability type on perceived stress at the  $p < .05$  level for the three conditions [ $F(2, 497) = 143.07, p = 0.01$ ] and on social stigma at the  $p < .05$  level for the three conditions [ $F(2, 497) = 271.7, p = 0.01$ ].

Table 5. Summary of Linear Regression Analysis of Social Stigma as Predictor of Perceived stress among Parents of Children with Special Needs

Predictor	R	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	F	p
Social Stigma	.831	.691	.691	1115.2	.000

Note: R<sup>2</sup>= R square, P= significance

Table 5 shows that social stigma is a significant predictor of perceived stress among parents of children with special needs and explains 69% of variance [ $R^2 = .691; F(1, 498) = 1115.2, p < .01$ ].

## DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to determine the relation between perceived stress and social stigma. The results indicated that there is significant positive

correlation between social stigma and perceived stress. The findings are in line with the studies of Karenhappachu and Sridevi(2014) and Anne and Wallston (2014). The findings also reveals that there is statistically significant difference in the level of perceived stress and social stigma among fathers and mothers of children with special needs. Mother particularly experiences elevated levels of perceived stress and social stigma as compared to fathers. The findings are in line with Sharaket al.(2019) who found that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities had a higher level of stress relative to fathers. The findings are also supported by Rauf et al. (2017) and Kocabıyık and Fazlıoğlu (2018) studies who backed current findings that mother has a high degree of social stigma as compared to fathers. Findings also indicates statistically significant difference between the level of perceived stress and social stigma among parents of boy and girl child with special needs. Particularly girl child's parents experience high levels of perceived stress and social stigma as compared to parents of boy child. The findings are supported by Gupta, Mehrotra and Mehrotra (2012) study reported that there was a higher level of stress among parents of girl child. Results also shows that there is statistically significant difference in the level of perceived stress and social stigma among parents of children with special needs on the basis of type of child disability. Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder in particular face a high degree of perceived stress and social stigma in contrast to parents with children with intellectual disabilities and down syndromes. The findings are consistent with the Jordan-based Amireh (2019) study which reported that parents of children with autism are experiencing higher stress rates relative to parents of children with down syndrome. Kinnear et al.(2016) conducted a survey with parents of autistic children also supported current findings that parents of autistic children were more stigmatized than parents of children with other disabilities. The hypothesis

of the study was that the social stigma would be the significant predictor of perceived stress among parents of children with special needs. Results showed that social stigma among parents of children with special needs is the significant predictor of perceived stress. The results adhere to Lovell and Wetherell (2019) study on autistic children's parents stated that social stigma predicts perceived stress positively.

Parents of children with special needs faced high level of social stigma and perceived stress. The level of stigma and perceived stress is higher among mothers as compared to fathers. Moreover, results also indicated that parents having girl special child experience more social stigma and perceived stress as compared to parents of boy child. Findings conclude that there is an intense need of counseling services for parents of children with special needs. Further, lectures and seminars can be arranged for community in order to provide them awareness about the negative effect of their attitudes on parents of children with special needs.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors report no conflict of interest.

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