It's Complicated: Socio-Cultural Factors and the Disclosure Decision of Transgenders in Pakistan

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Socio-cultural factors and the disclosure decision of transsexuals

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Abstract

The literature on the disclosure decision of transsexual individuals

is sparse, and that which does exist either uses empirical quantitative methods, or aggregates transsexuals with other non-heterosexual individuals. The current study focuses this under-researched group and examines the disclosure decision of transsexual people in Pakistan, a developing Muslim country with a unique amalgam of social, cultural, and religious ground realities. Drawing on thematic analysis technique using in-depth interviews with 16 transsexuals,

we show how socio-cultural factors that are inherently embedded in the environment influence the disclosure decision in work and non-work settings. In particular, our respondents illustrate that their disclosure decision, which ranges from total disclosure on one end to nondisclosure on the other end, is influenced by the complexities of family honour, tightly integrated family network, social obligation to get married and prevalent religious beliefs in the society. This study advances understanding of identity and disclosure decision of transsexual individuals by explicating the ways in which socio-cultural factors are intricate part of their decision of coming out.

Keywords: Disclosure decision; Transgenders; socio-culture factors, Pakistan

Introduction

The topic of stigmatized groups in the work and non-work domains has garnered increasing attention among the identity management scholars in recent years (Jones & King, 2012; Bell et al., 2011; Clair et al., 2005). A growing body of evidence reveals that members of stigmatized groups are denigrated, discredited, faced interpersonal derogation, and are targeted for discrimination (Jaspal, 2012; Ozturk, 2011; Wijngaarden, et al., 2013). Notably, some individuals have stigmatized identities that are easily visible, such as racial identity, age, and physical disfigurements whereas some people have invisible identities like religious beliefs, illness, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Goffman, 1963). Importantly, individuals who possess concealable characteristics have the option of not disclosing this fact to others to avoid negative consequences ranging from verbal abuse to physical violence unlike people with visible stigmas whose main goal is to attenuate interpersonal tension in social interactions (Jones & King, 2012). Consequently, the main issue facing these individuals with concealable stigmas is whether to reveal—often termed coming out— or not that part of themselves to others in the society and workplace (Ragins, 2008).

Like many other hidden identities (e.g., religious beliefs, illness, sexual orientation) transgender identity is also considered a concealable identity (Beemyn & Rankin, 2013). Transgender people who are living "covered" are unknown as transgender to almost everyone in their lives –family members, co-workers, employers, friends –and instead living only as their assigned gender. Transgender refers to the 'broad spectrum of individuals who transiently or persistently identify with a gender different from their gender at birth' (DSM, 2013). Some

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transgender people conceal their gender identity and live full-time as their assigned gender in order to avoid discrimination and abuse associated with revealing. Whereas those who open up and reveal their gender identity face negative reaction ranging from subtle discrimination to overt violence. According to Chrobot-Mason et al. (2001) identity management is a particular approach or strategy for presenting one's hidden identity in public; and disclosure decision is not a dichotomous choice between passing or openly identifying one's identity rather there are multiple paths associated with disclosure decision which involves various identity management strategies ranging from full disclosure to total concealment. Importantly, this degree of openness varies across time and context. Our intention in this study is to examine how such strong reaction from the society effects gender non-conforming people to reveal their hidden identity. Particularly, we focus on Pakistan and study the environmental conditions under which gender non-conforming individuals reveal or conceal their identity.

There is a burgeoning literature which focuses on sexual orientation discrimination and discusses the challenges faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in the daily routine life. Studies in this area have mainly focused on the extent and type of discrimination (Jaspal, 2012; Taylor, 2009), the antecedents and conditions that promote disclosure (Ozturk, 2011; Schilt & Connell, 2007), and the consequences of coming out in the workplace (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Ozturk, 2011). According to Jami and Kamal (2015) much is written about *hijras* in India (see e.g., Khan & Ayub, 2003; Nanda, 1999, 2008; Pande, 2004; Sharma, 2000; Talwar, 1999; Winter, 2002) but very little research is available about *hijras* in Pakistan (Haider & Bano, 2006) particularly on their disclosure decision. Despite the increase of academic interest in LGBT in recent years, transgender population still remains under-researched (McFadden, 2015).

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Notably, transgender individuals are either ignored in the existing studies or viewed similar and thus lumped together with other non-heterosexual individuals (Law et al., 2011). Besides, there are important differences between those who are classified as transgender (one's psychological identification as male or female) and those who are classified as LGB (one's sexual orientation).

In essence, transgender people have a self-image or identity, not traditionally associated with their biological maleness or femaleness (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2004). Evidently, these individuals are inherently different from LGB individuals (who are characterized by romantic object choice, not gender identity) and hence deserve to be studied in their own right. Transgender is in fact an umbrella term which refers to individuals who do not identify with the gender that is socially ascribed to them, but rather feel that they are actually of another gender in terms of their inner psyche (Kugle, 2013). Some of the sub-categories of transgender are trans-man, trans-woman, cross-dressers, gender queer, third gender etc. Transgender also includes transsexual people, who feel their gender and biological sex do not line up (having feeling of being trapped in the wrong body) and desire to bring their body and identity into alignment. This study focuses exclusively on the disclosure decisions of transsexual individuals. In doing so, we consider transsexuals who desire to be the gender opposite of their biological sex but have not yet taken steps to physically transform.

Over the last few decades, transsexuals in Western countries have made great gains in social acceptance and tolerance. Unprecedented numbers of them have come out of the closet and engage openly in employments (Schilt & Connel, 2007). However, the situation for transsexuals in developing, particularly Muslim, countries is strikingly different (Teh, 1998) Far

from making celebratory declarations of their gender identity, they continue to face prejudice and discrimination. Consequently, in many cases the only viable option for them is to remain silent and stay closeted. Despite of the fact that Supreme court has recognized them as the citizen of Pakistan in 2009, the situation of the transgender community is still worse because they are left ignored from health care facilities, education, and employment opportunities which make their condition more severe than other marginalized communities (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014). This article focuses on Pakistan where a transgender person is perceived as immoral and unacceptable(Jami & Kamal, 2015) as it runs counter to traditional norms that accentuate lineage continuity and filial piety. As such, the Pakistani transgender community warrants further examination. Like many other hidden identities (e.g., religious beliefs, illness, sexual orientation) transgender identity is also considered a concealable identity (Beemyn & Rankin, 2013). Transgender people who are living 'covered' are unknown as transgender to almost everyone in their lives –family members, co-workers, employers, teachers, friends –and instead living only as their sex assigned at birth. The objective of this study then is to investigate how socio-cultural factors, which are inherently embedded in the environment, determine the disclosure decision of Pakistani transgender in daily lives. Our main focus of study is to examine the disclosure decision in general social contexts which includes both work and non-work context. Importantly, under what circumstances transgender reveal or conceal their identity and to what extent (fully or partially)? For example literature suggests that supportive organizational factors are a source of motivation for revealing the stigmatized identities at workplace setup in western world (Clair et al., 2005; Law et al., 2011).

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By undertaking this research, we make two-prong contributions. Firstly, this study considers specifically transgender people and examines how these individuals navigate through the obstacles and challenges they experience. This group has been grossly understudied; the notable exceptions are Schilt & Connell (2007) and Law et al., (2011) who examined the workplace experiences of transgender employees in USA. There is another study Wijngaarden, et al. (2013) that examines the social stigma associated with transgender in Pakistan. However, their focus is to examine the extent of sexual abuse and HIV vulnerability amongst young transgender sex workers. Moreover, it is likely that experiences of transgender people may be different from other minority groups in the population e.g. lesbian, gay and bisexuals, which may affect their identity management strategy. Such differences might occur due to the fact that their stigma relates to gender which is one of the most fundamental distinctions that our society makes. Secondly, although the research concerning transgender is extremely sparse, the few studies that have investigated this group remained focused on the Western context (e.g. Schilt & Connell, 2007; Law et al., 2011), leaving the experiences and challenges that transgender face in developing countries unexplored. This gives the literature on identity management an incompleteness that must be remedied. Present study attempts to fill this literary gap by investigating the complexities of disclosure decision faced by transgender employees in a developing country across both work and non-work domains.

Transgender in the Pakistani context

In Pakistan gender is governed to confirm a stereotypical form of patriarchy that clearly demarcates the spheres for women and men. This predominantly Muslim society, which manifests distinctly dichotomous male and female roles, permits no place for any other gender, neither in the legal structure nor in the religious sphere. Transgender in Pakistani society, also termed as *Hijra* or *Khusra,* isolate themselves in self-sustaining, close-knitted groups where a leader, or *guru* [word used in *hijra* culture for the leader/mentor], adopts transsexual children after they have been rejected or disowned by their parents at a young age because of social stigma and personal shame associated with them (Wijngaarden, et al., 2013). The *hijra* community is composed of a strict hierarchy with outsized groups of *hijras* from various areas forming different dynasties or houses called '*gharanas'*. Each of these *gharanas* is headed by a *Naayak*, who is the principal decision maker for that house (Kalra, 2012). These *Naayaks* also act as policy makers for the *Hijra* community (Nanda, 1999). Each *Naayak* may have a number of gurus under him. These gurus rule over the community members regulating their day-to-day life. One guru can have a number of *Chelas* (followers) below him (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014). *Hijras* are marginalised and stigmatised sexual minority in Pakistan (Jami & Kamal 2015). The *Hijra* community consists of only those transgender who have adopted a certain lifestyle while revealing their gender identities whereas there are a many transgender people who live in the mainstream society by concealing their gender identities. Experiences of such transgender persons can be better explored by including both work and non-work context as in the collectivist societies there is a blurred line between professional and personal contacts. Our study

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exclusively focuses on those transgender who remain part of the mainstream society and have to make decision regarding disclosure.

Effeminate boys in Pakistani society are not considered to be transgender because of the prevailing perception among general population that transgender are only those individuals who are born with sexual deformity (intersex), people don't accept male-to-female transgender as *hijra* (Jami & Kamal 2015). The female tendencies of effeminate boys are considered to be treatable by providing them male company and through marriage. So, as long as a transgender person is not an intersex, his family considers him to be a pure man irrespective of his gender identity. Thus, until and unless the transition process starts or the person reveals himself, trans-identity can be hidden.

Subhrajit (2014) show that transgender individuals in Pakistani society have to face insensitivity, violence, harassment, and continuous victimization of hate crimes. The elder transgenders are even excluded from the legal financial resources and community support. Studying the social adjustment issues among the transgender in Punjab, Pakistan, the Abbas et al. (2014) indicate that these individuals were unable to find any suitable jobs or resources for education like the other citizens. They are not allowed to perform Hajj like the rest of the Muslims and also other religious obligations. These transgender face high level of violence and were even tried to be killed by their parents. Another study conducted on studying the access to the human rights by the transgender in Pakistani society, the researcher indicated that these individuals experience the varied attempts to impose binary gender norms by the society and are coerced to remain silent and invisible. These individuals face abuse, stigma and biasness not only

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by their families but also at their schools, workplaces as well as their *guru dera* because of which they develop the feelings of self-devaluation. (Alizai et al., 2016)

Disclosure decision

Stigmas are individual attributes that are viewed as personal flaws within a social context (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatized individuals may be seen as having some undesirable, deviant, or repulsive characteristics which society may look down upon. These undesirable characteristics lead them to suffer negative consequences such as discrimination, limited access to opportunities, and deterioration of interpersonal relationships (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001). Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) proposes that transgender identity is stigmatized by the society, which may lead to a person being discredited when that attribute is revealed. Gender non-conforming individuals often feel that they are being closely scrutinized by others and that once their stigma is revealed; they become marked, such that the stigmatizing characteristic is given primacy over other characteristics (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001). Hence, stigma theory suggests that minorities based on gender identity tend to conceal their gender identity in the society and workplace when negative consequences are expected as an outcome of becoming marked.

Drawing on stigma theory, Clair et al. (2005) presented a comprehensive and systematic model consisting of two broad strategies by which transgender people can manage their gender identity in both work and non-work settings: passing (concealing) and revealing (coming out). Passing may take through three tactics: fabrication, concealment, and discretion. Fabrication occurs when someone deliberately provides false information to construct a false (non-

stigmatized) identity. Concealment is an information-limiting strategy where transsexuals actively prevent others from learning personal information that has the potential to reveal a stigmatized identity. In contrast, discretion entails avoiding questions, conversations, activities, or contexts that might lead to personal disclosure of any kind. Regarding the revealing strategy, the most relevant technique to our context is signalling tactic[1]. Clair and her colleagues suggest that there are three approaches to reveal concealable identity: signalling, normalizing, and differentiating. Signalling involves revealing information about one's invisible stigmatized identity indirectly through sending messages, dropping hints, and giving clues. Transgender people signal their gender identity in their environment by subtly illuminating a transsexual identity, but not entirely coming out and saying it. Often transsexual people use signalling to test whether full disclosure will be acceptable or not. Essentially, disclosure is not a binary construct, and those with conceal identities exhibit a wide range of disclosure behaviour regarding their identity from fully closeted at one extreme to openly expressing themselves which varies across time and context.

The societies in developing countries, such as Pakistan, place great emphasis on family and its honour. Because of collectivist culture, honour accrues to the family as a whole, not just to individual person within it, and the advancement of their corporate honouris one of the most important targets which families set themselves (Werbner, 2007). Any action breaching some moral norm customarily embraced in a given culture would bring shame (dishonour) to the family. In such a scenario, verbalizing one's trans-identity to others can disrupt the social status of the family. More importantly, in a patriarchal society, like Pakistan, a male-to-female

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[1]For detail review on these strategies see Clair et al. (2005).

transgender has a particularly difficult path because it is reprehensible to identify and express a lower status when everything in the culture praise and support performance of duty and seeking a higher status (Bolich, 2009). Further, beyond the nuclear family, kinship network is another significant element of the society in Pakistan which serves as a support network and a safe environment for the reinforcement of socio-cultural practices. However, in such a closely knit community it would not be possible for someone to maintain private boundaries (Jaspal, 2012). Therefore, revealing self-stigmatized identity to a limited people and on a preferred time is more difficult, almost impossible, in such inter-dependent family units. Similarly, in Asian culture singleness is not prized and is considered traditionally an anomalous deviant behaviour, which disturbs the order of social life. This often becomes a critical moment for transsexual individuals, as they must decide to comply with their parents' request to marry, or reveal their gender identity. Lastly, religious faith—Islam— practiced in Pakistan, do not accept others beyond the male-female gender norms. Any notion not accepted or stated within the Quran, such as living beyond the male-female gender binary system, is regarded as anti-Islamic and handled with extreme forms of violence. Given the prevalence of faith within the society, transgender individuals are being forced to remain quiet and deter from revealing their identity.

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Methodology

This study is a qualitative exploratory study[2] because we wanted to explore the variables that can be influential to reveal or conceal the invisible social identity i.e. gender identity in the Pakistani culture and environment. An exploratory research is adopted to gain new insights into the matter at hand (Jaegar & Halliday, 1998). So the research strategy that we followed is the un-structured in-depth (qualitative) interviews. In-depth interviews are informal and unstructured and they are often called as 'qualitative research interviews' (King 2004).

Transgender are socially marginalized group which makes it difficult to approach them. Identifying transgender employees in Pakistan is even more challenging task because firstly they are invisible, secondly, societal prejudices and institutional policies that perpetuate discrimination against trans people has distanced them from formal employment, which made it very difficult for us to find transgender people working in organizations, and lastly, the history of silence around the discussions about the experiences and realities of transsexuals in Pakistan as well as the prevalence of widespread transphobic attitudes in society made many people hesitant to participate.

Since the target population is hidden and mostly very difficult to identify therefore snowball sampling is used as it was the only suitable sampling technique in this study. In the snowball sampling, some individuals are interviewed regarding the topic at hand and then they are considered as informants who identify other potential candidates to be interviewed who may

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[2] Exploratory study is done when we want to understand a problem to seek new insights and to evaluate phenomena in new light by exploring the variables (Saunders et al., 2009)

qualify to be the part of the sample, and then the suggested interviewees are approached to be interviewed (Bailey, 1994). It is common technique in qualitative studies (Connel, 2010; Brotman et al., 2007; Schilt & Connell, 2007 among others).

A sample of 16 self-identified transgender was recruited from Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Lahore between 2014 and 2015. The criteria for eligibility included self-identifying as transgender, being over the age of 18, and have some employment experience. There were a certain number of standardized questions in the interviews which revolved around the topic at hand and were in-line with the research questions in order to make sure that appropriate data is collected. The rationale of having standardized questions in the interview is to have a variety of responses and views on similar questions which are compared afterwards to draw the results and conclusions from them (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Ethical research principles were maintained during the interview. Each participant was provided the details about the purpose of the study, including research objectives, time required for interviews, who would have access to data, and how data would be maintained. It was assured that any information identifying the participants' identity would be removed from the report. Most importantly, consent to participate in the study was taken from each person before the interview. Once the anonymity was firmly assured, participants of our study were happy and eager to participate. Many of the people we interviewed were grateful for our interest in their lives and viewed our project as an opportunity which allows their voices to be heard for the first time.

On average, the interviews lasted about 60 minutes each with the longest one extending to about 100 minutes. During the interviews, notes of the important points were taken and all of the interviews were recorded to be transcribed later**.** Permission was taken before recording the interviews. The transcripts were then used to extract the important and relevant information. Interviews focused on transgenders' experiences of making disclosure decision at both work and non-work places. The overarching design of interview process started from inquiring information on certain demographic characteristics such as age, education, gender orientation, marital status, job, and organizational affiliation. Subsequent questions often delved into their experiences as transsexual in the organizational and social domains. Finally, questions probing into the effects of socio-cultural factors on their disclosure decision were asked. During the interviews, special care was taken to encourage the individuals to bring forth details and themes in a longer, unconstrained and unfettered answer pattern. All the interviews were conducted either in the homes of participants, the participants' friends' homes, or at public locations such as cafés.

Once the interviews were transcribed, thematic analysis was carried out on the information acquired. Thematic analysis is a common analysis technique when working with qualitative data. The data is scrutinized for themes that might occur in the responses of particular research questions and then those themes are coded and meaningful patterns are acquired (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis:

The information obtained from each question's response was then analysed to draw themes or patterns from similar responses. These themes were then recorded in Microsoft Excel and tables were created for each question along with the frequency of occurrence of each theme that was noted next to it which was then used to determine the percentage of similar responses. The factors that influence the disclosure decision were explored and the participants highlighted them. The factors were socio-cultural factors such as family honour, collectivism, social obligations and religious factors as well as the organizational factors. Then, questions were asked about the influence and importance of these factors in the lives of transgender employees and themes were developed through their responses.

To manage the research data throughout data analysis process, NVIVO, a Qualitative Data Analysis Tool developed by QSR International is used. For the thematic analysis to be done, the interview contents were transcribed and tallied against the audio recordings to check for accuracy. In next step the data was converted to text form, different categories were formed to sort the responses in order to develop potential themes. In the later phase of data analysis, themes were extracted from the data at hand and refined in the process so that the required information can be drawn from them. Once the thematic analysis was done, the findings of the research have been produced.

Analysis

As can be observed from Table 1, the age of the participants ranged from 22 years to the mid-50s. The majority were in their late 20s and early 30s. Their education levels ranged from college degree to postgraduate degree. One of the participants had undergone a sex change operation and few are taking hormones. Of the 16 transgender individuals, 12 were male-to-female transgender while remaining individuals were female-to-male. Regarding the level of disclosure of gender identity, 10 were fully concealed, four were partially revealed and remaining two were fully revealed. As for as employment is concerned, eight were working in private organizations in various industries (e.g., financial, advertising, real estate), three were working in private education sector, three were working in private health care sector, and two were working in technical department of a government sector. As far as marital status is concerned 12 participants were single whereas three were married and one divorced. The research findings presented below are organized along three analytical themes.

Family honour and collectivist culture

Muslim families are mostly close-knit and widespread. Family head controls its members to preserve family honour, the reputation of family is often valued more than an individual family member's own identity or welfare (Kugle, 2013).One of the primary factors which influence the choice of identity management strategy is to maintain the family honour. All respondents anchored expression of transsexualism as a threat to family honour and experience extreme

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pressure of maintaining it. For example, one respondent in late twenties described his anxiety over how his transsexualism may affect family honour:

My parents always remind me that I am the eldest son. Specially, my father used to tell me "you have social and moral responsibilities, you cannot do anything wrong because we have to live in the community; I have to face everybody every day. So just think how much pressure I had to live with". My parents are extremely important to me and I have always been a responsible person. I don't want them to feel like I don't love them and all this stuff. I could rather sacrifice myself for them, so what I did in this issue (transsexualism)? I never opened up myself.

Among the people interviewed in this study, several suggest that once the parents perceive their signals of true gender identity they just deny it and take a stand against your lifestyle and keep pushing you until you might start behaving in a more socially acceptable way. This point was expressed by one respondent who indirectly revealed his invisible identity by adopting signalling strategy:

My siblings somehow suspected me and let the mother know about it. She was kind of surprised. Instead of understanding me she started to routinely check my daily activities, kept pushing me to change my lifestyle [……] and concurrently kept threatening me that she would tell my father and elder brother about it if don't change. All that was unnerving and causes psychological distress.

It is noteworthy that despite that disclosure decision in home and in the workplace are interlinked at greater extent as Ozturk (2011) suggests that the decision to come out at work seemed linked

to experiences or expected consequences at home and vice versa, however, the situation is quite different in our case. The news of coming out in home might not propagate from home to work most likely because family would conceal it within the family to maintain their public persona and esteem. It is manifested in an account by a transsexual participant who is partially open (only in home) about his gender identity:

I have given the signals about my gender identity within the family. In response, my parents strictly asked not to say a single word about it to anybody else. Subsequently, they don't let me socialize within the family, even with my cousins, nobody. They tried to hide my gender identity from everybody outside the nuclear family as a family secret.

In continuation, most respondents believed that revealing their gender identity to normal people at work would ruin their reputation and name in that social setting. A 28-year-old female-to-male fully closeted transsexual states:

At work, I don't think I can say anything about it to anyone. Most of my colleagues are kind of people who don't have a lot of compassion or understanding for people that are different from them. If I had told somebody amongst them, you know, they might straightforward label me as 'immoral' or 'deviant' which would destroy not only my name but also my family's name in the workplace. So, I don't see any reason to tell them.

Beyond the nuclear family, social organization known as the *biradaris* [Biradaris a large kinship network whose members have a common ancestor; usually the biradaris is identified by its caste or subcaste name] is another significant factor that shapes the disclosure decision in Pakistani

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society. The underlying foundation of this social organization is collectivism which is reflected in greater readiness to cooperate with extended kin on decisions affecting most aspects of life. So, being a collectivist society, Pakistani people tend to value interdependence, social hierarchies, and conformity to social norms. Beyond the *biradari*, Pakistani people are also often closely tied with larger religious communities. Thus, if transsexual make decision to coming out, they may risk losing both their families and their community ties. Respondents reported that even when you make decisions about your own life,a priority is placed on making others happy and individual expression is outweighed by social obligation. Retaining the trust of elders of family lineage was cited as a decisive factor for not coming out, as illustrated in the following narrative:

There are some of the positives [of having large biradari] and also some of the negatives. A wonderful thing with this is we are tightly integrated; we are one entity in grief and happiness. But there is a lot of judgment. There are pre-defined frame and you have to fit into this very small frame of who you should be and what you should do. It is very hard to go against it.

The striking feature of this theme was that families migrated from small to large cities having close connections with their roots seem more concerned about their *biradari* (kinship network) as compared to parents settled in large cities having a weaker relationship with their *biradari*— back in small cities. One interviewee whose parents migrated from a neighbouring city to Islamabad described:

My parents always reminded me "we came to Islamabad for the better prospects and opportunities so that our children could get what we couldn't." They have always these big

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ambitions for us, especially for me because of being son….I remember my mom used to tell us what our cousins are studying and what their grades are and we have to be ahead of them. In a way, the entire biradari especially that resides back in a small city is looking on us as we are blessed [as living in Islamabad] and are role model to them. Whenever we travel back to our native city, our parents present us as their accomplishment. Under such condition when entire family is looking up to you it is almost impossible to do anything for your personal satisfaction. You have to act like a role model.

Additionally, despite that there is no open display or verbalization of one's gender identity, due to close knitted family structure; one cannot adopt a 'don't ask, don't tell' practice. It has been reported that in order to maintain space and boundary, silence is sometimes a strategy employed by the individuals with stigmatized identity in individualistic societies like in USA and Europe (Bell et al., 2011).In contrast, the don't-ask-don't-tell approach may function less as a technique of genuine concealment in a collectivist society. Barging in the privacy, keen to know about the personal lives of relatives and making other people the subject of gossip are the common practices within Pakistani society. News passes quickly from people to people via their frequent contacts through a wide range of social gatherings (e.g., from weddings to funerals) in non-work setting and through gossips in workplace. Concealment and discretion are, thus, not suitable strategies to conceal one's invisible identity in such a closely knitted society. Given these circumstances, fabrication is considered as a most appropriate strategy in such environment. One participant reported that one of his cousins saw him once dinning with one of his transsexual friend (who has revealed his identity), and he heard this news from his mother after one week. Similar experience is shared by another participant:

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I think concealing a secret inside the family is very difficult because most family members share the same space. If they know your secret it becomes a 'headline' during social gatherings. One of my cousins suspected me to be trans and he tried to find out some connection in my organization and through that link he inquired personal information about me. That is unacceptable. As I'm educated and have an accomplished career, I just wish my space is respected.

The narrative indicates that even distancing themselves from others, and publicly distancing themselves from homosexual topics and issues is not a viable strategy in Pakistani society. In the workplace, respondents fear being identified as transsexuals, thus becoming the subject of wicked and malicious gossips by their colleagues. Once people start gossiping about you, it may go viral, morphing into increasingly distorted and exaggerated dimensions which in turn harm the reputation and may also cause psychological trauma to the targeted person.

Social obligation

Marriage is regarded as an unavoidable social obligation which everyone has to fulfil. In the Pakistani society, marriage plays a vital role in the continued maintenance of a social system and promoting procreation. Marriage is not seen only a union between the two individuals getting married, but also between the two families. The cultural belief is that it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children get married at an appropriate age. Children with gender identity problem can't defer marriage by attaching priority to education, career, and financial stability for a longer period. Ultimately, individuals reach a point where they must take a decision—either reveal their gender identity or comply. A common theme emerged from interviews is that participants experience pressure to marry and have children because their

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family members believed that by marrying and having a family they would "get over it". One participant recounts his experience:

Every time my mother goes to a wedding or social gathering she gets concerned by an aunt or second cousin or any other relative (because of their questions). "When is your son getting married? Why isn't he married? Just marry him then he will be fine". Once she returns home, she shares their concerns verbatim with me to make me realize how wrong I am.

Some families also use marriage as a 'cover' to hide stigma from the community. Few participants described that emphasis on getting married did not stop even after parents learned of their gender identity. These parents who knew the gender identity of their children proposed an 'offer' to children that they can tolerate their trans life as long as they remain married. A male-to-female transsexual recalled:

My parents and grandmother told me that I can have my life as I want after getting married [to a woman]. In that way people will stop asking questions to us. If you are not married and don't have children then you will not be considered you as a mature and successful person.[….] They don't think that you are real person until you have a family and children.

There was an agreement among the respondents on the idea that such 'cover' which is a part of fabrication strategy also beneficial in the workplace. It is illustrated from the narrative of one 32 years old concealed female-to-male transsexual:

If you are female and not married by my age, it will give a judgment call to your colleagues. They start speculating the reasons why she is not married yet. Their guesses can range from

failed love affair (heart-broken) to some kind of fatal illness. Sometime even you can be the target of your colleague' fling. In such situation, getting married works best.

A common norm in Pakistani society is arranged marriages, where families find a suitable potential partner for their children to marry. Additionally, marriages within families, particularly between cousins, are common and regarded as means of strengthening the family. Noticeably, society has established a custom in which if you give a daughter within the family then in return you have to receive the same commonly termed as *watta satta* system. Participants in the current study also felt pressure to get married from their family members. One married individual shared:

My family feels comfortable with their sons and daughters marrying within the family. There is not any marriage outside the family which I can recall.… I have one younger sister. From the age of 23 my mom started to mention the names of the girls' within the family from whom I can choose a future wife. When I started to avoid this topic [discretion strategy] she made it clear that if I'm not going to marry within the family then my sister can't get married within the family and we can't marry her outside. So, I didn't have any choice, I couldn't see my sister stay unmarried. Due to this social obligation, I have chosen to get married and lead a life with dual identity.

Religious beliefs in the society

The last main factor that shapes transsexual people's disclosure decision is prevailing religious beliefs within the society. Islamic teachings emphasize on maintaining the masculine identities by males and not to act in feminine way in terms of putting make-up, cross-dressing, taking

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hormones, or undergoing sex change operation (Yip, 2004). So, transsexuals in Pakistan are considered be violating the tenets of Islam, and consequently are delinquents in Pakistani society. The participants rationalized that it is challenging to deal with religious thoughts prevalent in the society and best is to conceal the true identity, as one individual testifies:

In my neighbourhood there is a mosque belongs to a conservative Islamists and the local community is strongly influenced by their preaching. I think in Islam it is very difficult to be transsexual. Owing to negative religious stance towards transsexualism it is almost impossible to have their [local community] acceptance. Whenever you have contact with those people attached to the mosque it is frightening. They present horrifying picture of hell which is the place for sinners like transsexuals…..It is better to remain closeted.

Nevertheless, a large number of Muslims in Asian countries practice a gentler, more tolerant faith, which is strongly influenced by Sufism where religious tolerance toward transgender people is still evident (Kugle, 2013). One young interviewee who is fully out as transsexual and tried to assimilate into local religious gatherings explains that he found more comfort in keeping in touch with people of this school of thought. They are moderate and understandable to some extent. He expressed that his religion and contact with mosque is important to him and these moderate religious views have allowed him to integrate his religious and trans identities.

I spoke to one cleric, a prominent figure in local community, about transsexualism. He took it well and did not bring up arguments against it. In fact, in his conversation he mentioned a sufi (Muslim saint), Shah Husain, who transgressed the boundaries of gender norms to embody playfulness in worship and religion. I was happy that he knew about such personality.

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Discussion and Conclusion

Through qualitative research methods, we have identified socio-cultural factors that influence the disclosure decision of transsexual people in both work and non-work settings. Results show that fear of losing the honour within the society and the organization is an important impediment in revealing the hidden identity. Importantly, all study participants perceive that their true identity is interconnected with the identity of their families and honour is an important facet of it. Since social relations in Pakistan have traditionally been cantered on the family, transsexual people often fear that their transsexualism would disrupt these important relationships. The narratives also suggest the anticipation of experiencing physical violence from the family members to defend their honour. In a study conducted by Ahmed et al., (2014) on examining the social exclusion of such people from the society, the findings suggested that transgender in Pakistani society are considered as shame for their family and are condemned by the family members. Their family members feel embarrassed because of their identities. Family members in Pakistan often adopt potentially threatening, dismissive and emotionally abusive attitudes when transsexualism is revealed (Ozturk, 2011). Clearly, the perception that coming out could induce physical harm or even threats one's life can push these individuals to conceal their gender identity for well-being. Nevertheless, it is obvious from the narratives that individuals have to give some degree of indirect clues to their family about their gender before the explicitly revealing their invisible identity. Through signalling they tend to assess the level of family reaction and consider it as an interim step to see if it seems safe to reveal more. In most of our

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cases, the fierce reaction from the family members discouraged them to fully reveal their identity.

Several participants perceive that collectivist society has a panoptic eye (Ozturk, 2011), an overarching omniscience that is forever observing and judging the activities. This constant monitoring within the societal and organizational domains causes a persistent inner fear that any wrong step may reveal their hidden identity. Therefore, even distancing themselves from others, and publicly distancing themselves from gatherings, and discussions is not a viable strategy in Pakistani society. A prominent theme which emerged from the impact of collectivism is that individuals belonging to families embedded in close knitted family network experience more pressure to fully conceal their identities. Importantly, due to tightly integrated social system, don't-ask-don't-tell approach is not effective to conceal one's stigma. In contrast to Western societies where disclosure discourse may involve leaving the family and starting a life with new identity (Strommen, 1989), for Pakistani transsexuals, walking away from the family is not possible as you are recognized through the family (*biradari*) name. In Pakistani society, *biradarism* holds a central position in shaping the social system. The bonds formed on the basis of *biradari* system are stronger than any religion, ethnicity or ideology. Loyalty of an individual is determined on the basis of *biradari* and it then influence the cultural pattern of that particular area (Ahmed & Naseem, 2011).

Furthermore, marriage is perceived a social obligation which affects the disclosure decision. Several participants' accounts of their lived experiences converge on the perception that traditional norms of marriages with the cousins, and unwillingness of parents to marry the

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children outside the family are the additional forces shaping the disclosure decisions of transsexual individuals. Some interviewees suggest that marriage is a convenient cover to hide (concealment strategy) their true identity in both work and family spheres. It is worth mentioning that the lingering societal pressure to marry is a lot higher on women than men, as being female and single in late 20s is perceived the greatest tragedy in Pakistani society. Hence, this pressure puts female-to-male transsexuals in more fragile position as compared to male-to-female transsexuals. Lastly, religious beliefs prevalent within the society play a pivotal role in shaping the environment both in work and non-work contexts which influences the decision regarding disclosure. Strictly conservative views of colleagues and the members of social circle about transsexualism construct greater social and psychological challenges for individuals who intend to come out. Despite the pervasiveness of unsupportive religious stance on transsexualism, as Islam curses those males who appear like females and those females who appear like male and are considered to be the one tampering with the God-made nature and is not even allowed to lead the Muslim prayers (Haneef, 2011), respondents express that alternative environment exist in which transsexual people feel they are able to connect with religion. Importantly, transsexual people who choose to reveal and want to have a connection with the religious community it is more appropriate for them to follow the social norm and show no gender differences.

Taken together, the present study served as an important attempt to examine socio-cultural factors associated with disclosure decision among transsexual people. For transsexuals in Pakistan, family members are the first whom they tend to reveal (mostly partially) their gender identity. However, the negative reaction from the family stops them to reveal their identity further to workplace or to other people. On the theoretical front, our results contribute to the

Goffman's stigma theory which assumes a self-determining and independent individual with choices of disclosure. In underdeveloped societies these assumptions of being independent are problematic in the presence of the prevalent situation and the circumstances that are faced by these individuals and our findings also show that mass society exerts strong pressure on individuals through family values, marriage and religion beliefs to conform social norms and thereby conceal their gender identity.

The results emerged from the study of transsexual people in a developing Muslim country pushes towards making the case that transsexual individuals need to be studied on their own and can't instead merely be included in studies focused on other minority groups. Despite the fact that the current findings mirror, to certain extent, those reported in Yip (2004), who reported the complexity in disclosure and difficulty in maintaining the identities to fulfil the social and religious obligations, nevertheless, in broader term our results are neither directly comparable with studies of LGB in Muslim countries (e.g., Ozturk, 2011; Bereket & Adam, 2008) since the social representation of homosexuality is taboo within the Muslim countries which rule out the question of coming out, nor studies focusing on LGB community in developed countries (e.g., Schilt & Connell, 2007; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001) where acceptance of homosexuality in both work and non-work domains have been facilitated by social, political and legal changes. Additionally, the transsexuals have been consistently associated with sex work (Wijngaarden et al., 2013), which is universally viewed as shameful and demeaning. Because of this and the systemic bias towards transsexual individuals in general, transsexual people face an extra level of social stigmatization (as in Pakistan it is typically associated with dancing and prostitution) that LGB people do not.

Given that the disclosure decision is confounded with conflicts between traditional culture and identification of your true self, intervention is required to create supportive environment for transsexuals that build social ties as well as individual self-confidence. In the absence of strong protective laws for such people in society and in workplaces, the harassment, discrimination that such people face, both in society and within their family, cannot be stopped. This intervention can build on the significance social networks have in Pakistan and the influence that these networks may have on individuals' behaviour. Providing a safe and non-judgemental environment where gender non-conforming people can openly discuss their issues and seek advice will facilitate them to manage pressure from their families and friends. The positive effect of social network support on the disclosure of one's concealed minority status is found amongst other similar stigmatized groups (e.g., Wright & Perry, 2006). Theory and evidence-based efforts and interventions collectively promote ways which help in reducing negative reactions to gender disclosure. Such interventions can focus on empowering transsexuals, developing disclosure skills, and providing information to disclosure targets through disseminating the research findings to a range of audience including family members, business leaders, policy makers, and religious leaders that is likely to reduce negative responses.

It is worth mentioning that by exclusively focusing on culture we are not negating the impact of wider structural factors within the society that shape the lives of Pakistani transsexual people. There are persistent problems of systematic social inequality primarily manifested in social class and caste system which may impact on decision about disclosure. As Taylor (2009) documents that individuals that belong to upper social class are less likely to reveal their stigmatized status than working class people. Future studies, thus, should further extend this line

of research among transsexuals across social classes to examine possible similarities and differences in the disclosure decisions.

The study will help to understand the experiences of the transsexuals in a under-developed society and how these societies shape the experiences of such individuals and influence the decision of coming out. The research helps to identify the need to formulate the policies to protect these minorities from the discrimination they face. Future research could be conducted by including a large sample size and studying the experiences of transsexuals belonging to the smaller areas. Lastly, we focus only on three socio-cultural dimensions, there are others societal aspects such as economic position, caste, and locality may also influence the disclosure decision. Future research can extend the existing research by including those dimensions.

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Table 1: Participants characteristics

Gender identity	Age	City	Education*	Marital status	Disclosure level	Organizational affiliation
Male-to-Female	34	Islamabad	MBA	Unmarried	Concealed	Private large financial firm
Female-to-Male	32	Lahore	MSc degree	Unmarried	Concealed	Private large telecom firm
Male-to-Female	26	Rawalpindi	MA	Unmarried	Fully revealed	Private small social welfare firm (NGO)
Male-to-Female	25	Lahore	B.Com	Unmarried	Partially revealed	Health care firm
Male-to-Female	30	Islamabad	BA	Married	Partially revealed	Private large telecom firm
Female-to-Male	28	Islamabad	MA	Married	Concealed	Private education institute

Male-to-Female	49	Rawalpindi	BA	Unmarried	Concealed	Private large social welfare firm (NGO)
Male-to-Female	54	Islamabad	Technical diploma	Married	Concealed	Governmental firm
Female-to-Male	23	Rawalpindi	MA	Unmarried	Concealed	Health care firm
Male-to-Female	44	Islamabad	MA	Married	Concealed	Private medium pharmaceutical firm
Male-to-Female	31	Lahore	MSc	Married	Partially revealed	Governmental firm
Male-to-Female	24	Rawalpindi	BA	Unmarried	Partially revealed	Health care firm
Female-to-	25	Islamabad	MA	Unmarried	Concealed	Private education

Male						institute
Male-to-Female	29	Lahore	BA	Married	Fully revealed	Private large real estate firm
Male-to-Female	30	Lahore	MSc	Unmarried	Concealed	Private education institute