



ANXIETY RELATED TO PATERNAL RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS AND GOD-IMAGE REPRESENTATION: A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v4i4.201>

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Article History

Received: 13.10.2025

Accepted: 17.11.2025

Published: 23.11.2025

Abstract

This descriptive case study aims at examining anxiety as a consequence of pattern of relationships between fathers and how such patterns interact with religious representations of God in the cultural context of Pakistan. A young adult woman was taken through a series of thirty-four biweekly sessions and the data was gathered through the interviews, observation, and Beck Anxiety Inventory. The findings suggest that the client's anxious self-concept was associated with authoritarian paternal patterns characterized by psychological control and moral rigidity, which projected onto a disturbed, ambivalent God-image—perceived as both punitive and protective. Thematic analysis revealed a cyclical pattern where paternal authority fostered internalized guilt, which was then moralized through a religious lens, intensifying anxiety symptoms. This analysis proposes a culturally mediated process wherein expectations regarding filial obedience, family honour, and moralized religiosity are internalized, directly shaping symptom expression and self-assessment. The client's somatic complaints and spiritual conflicts exemplified this moralized anxiety, where distress was a manifestation of the conflict between individuation and cultural mandates. Lastly, the implications accentuate the necessity for culturally-oriented anxiety treatment within collectivist and patriarchal environments, advocating for therapeutic frameworks that address the reconstruction of internalized authority and religious schemas to foster autonomy without compromising cultural identity.

Keywords: Anxiety, God-image, Paternal Relationship, Case Study

Introduction

A person is made up of various experiences of his life, whether done directly or by observation alone. One of such factors is parenting, which plays a great role in the life of an individual. Since parenting occurs in the environment of parent-child relationship, the quality of the latter has a considerable impact on behavioural and emotional outcomes of an individual (Murray et al., 2013). Parental psychological control, for one, refers to the parenting that uses strategies like guilt induction, restriction of expressions, and withdrawal of love which comes in way of a child's autonomy development. Another contributing factor to the parent-child relationship is communication (Rahman et al., 2025), which provides a channel to express needs, emotions and interpersonal dynamics. It is of crucial value especially during the transitional phases of the child.

In the past few decades, the most common mean of understanding the father-child relationship is father's involvement which is measured by father's behaviour towards the child (Palkovitz, 2019). A father's involvement is also reflected by the parenting styles they adopt, represented by the emotional channels through which their behaviour is carried out (Ren et al., 2023). A parent's parenting style is determined by the



combination of how demanding and responsive they are. Other conceptually parallel approaches, such as control, strictness and acceptance, or warmth and support, also reflect these parental traits of responsiveness and demand (Yaffe, 2020).

Permissive parenting styles have been linked with low self-esteem, high aggressive behaviors and externalizing symptoms in children. In the same way, authoritarian parenting results in increased vulnerability to events that are stressful. It can thus be concluded that parenting styles have critical impacts on the mental and physical wellbeing of the developing children (Sahithya et al., 2019).

Father's relationship patterns determine the development and maintaining of anxiety among the children (Stuart Parrigon & Kerns, 2015; Morris & Oosterhoff, 2016) which is the most common disorder starting in pre-adolescence and early adolescence (Kalin, 2020). Anxiety refers to an emotional state marked by apprehension and bodily symptoms of tension in which the individual tends to anticipate misfortune and danger. To face the perceived threat, the body prepares itself by tensing the muscles, increasing the heartbeat and breathing. It is future-related and long-acting response towards a diffuse threat (American Psychological Association, 2025). While experiencing anxiety is natural, it becomes problematic when it is experienced in multiple situations and only gets worse over time (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024).

It has been stated that parenting shapes every aspect of a child's life. This does not exclude the image of God. A child's early relationships determine the way they interact and behave in new interactions, including the formation of a notion of God. There have been similarities highlighted in a child's relationship with the parent and God as both relationship dynamics are sought for safety and hold deep attachment and affection. In addition, the bond one feels with another, also expresses in relationship with God (Ebrahimi & Farouee Firoozi, 2016).

The individual's perception of God; kind, wrathful or supportive, the feelings experienced in relationship with Him; joy, anger or fear, and the control or power perceived to be held by Him determine the God representations (Stulp et al., 2019). Attachment theory holds the idea that the schemas of an individual impact the God representations as well. These schemas are not easily observable and are related to an individual's upbringing.

Bowlby's theory of Attachment proposed that for the development of a child's sense of self and social relationships, parent-child relationships play a vital role. He argued that infant's expectations towards relationships are based on the quality of relationship with the attachment figures. These representations were referred as internal working models i.e. frameworks in the cognition encompassing mental representations that shape the understanding of self, world, and relationship with others (Palkovitz, 2019). It can be inferred that the mental image related to God is developed by the interaction with people in the immediate surroundings (Ebrahimi & Farouee Firoozi, 2016).

Literature Review

A study on parental child relationship revealed that the higher the quality of father-daughter relationship, the lower will be the female aggression. Psychological control of parents also appeared to contribute in aggression among the children (Murray et al., 2013). A study on father-son communication also indicated that during the adolescence phase, the quality of parent-child communication holds effects beyond the close family dynamics. It influences the individual's social competence, new relations and overall satisfaction with life in adulthood. The findings of the study suggested that sons adopt the communication patterns of their fathers (Rahman et al., 2025).

In terms of anxiety, the findings of a review (Gorostiaga et al., 2019) showed a positive correlation between the emergence of symptoms and psychological and harsh control, and a negative correlation between the symptoms and parental warmth in children and adolescents. The findings revealed that behavioral control was negatively correlated with anxiety. Additionally, it was highlighted that adolescents' internalizing symptoms and parent's autonomy-granting behaviors were negatively correlated. Furthermore, a correlation between anxiety and overprotection and dysfunctional families was discovered.

In another clinical study from India (Sahithya & Raman, 2021), it was revealed that authoritarian parenting increases the likelihood of internalizing and externalizing disorders. Permissiveness among fathers was also linked to high levels of anxiety among children. Another study on long term impact of fathers and



mothers (Stuart Parrigon & Kerns, 2015) identified that low father-child attachment security was linked to higher adolescence anxiety.

A narrative review (Yaffe, 2021) identified that parental control expressions are linked to high levels of anxiety among the children. This control manifests itself in harsh exercises of discipline and overprotection. Punitive ways of physical punishment also lead to increase level of anxiety among the children. It was also noted that anxiety tends to run inter-generationally as its prevalence is higher in the families which have anxious members.

A study on impact of parenting styles on children's concept of God (Ebrahimi & Farouee Firoozi, 2016) revealed that positive parenting styles increase one's positive perception of God while the neglectful parenting affects the perception of God in that the child becomes less dependent on God. Insecure attachment as well as secure attachment mediated the relation between parenting styles and the notion of God. It was argued that by bringing change in the parenting style, attachment styles could be improved which in turn would bring change in the notion of God.

A longitudinal study indicated that parental religiousness had both positive and negative correlation with parenting and child adjustment. The results revealed that greater parental religiousness was linked to parental efficacy which in turn had a positive impact on children's performance and also reduced problems, both internalizing and externalizing. On the other hand, increased parental religiousness also had association with parental control which resulted in increased internalizing and externalizing problems. It was noticed that both parents and children had different views related to religiousness. Children perceived religiousness as parental rejection while the parents perceived it in terms of parental efficacy and warmth.

A study on God attachment indicated that positive attachment to God was positively correlated with mental well-being, including low distress, high satisfaction and emotional regulation. This result was revealed after accounting for other adult relationships, meaning that the relationship is not affected by any other attachments. On the other hand, insecure attachment, characterized by avoidance and anxious attachments, was correlated with poor well-being. Specifically, anxious attachment i.e. the fear of rejection by God was linked to higher level of distress (Njus & Scharmer, 2020).

A study conducted on Persian Muslims during COVID 19 (Saracai & Johnson, 2023) revealed that closeness to God, belief in His benevolence and positive attitudes towards Him correlated negatively with depression, anxiety and stress, however, the same factors did not seem to reduce anxiety related to the pandemic. On the other hand, the authoritarian perception of God was related to increase levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Interestingly, the same attributes did not correlate significantly with COVID anxiety.

Another research studying the effect of God-image on self-concept of Jewish and Christian pastors' kids identified that while there was no direct relationship between God image and self-concept parenting style had a significant moderating role in determining the impact of God image on self-concept of the children in that the parenting involving warmth and structure strengthened the relationship while authoritarian or permissive ones distorted the relationship and made the individual vulnerable. It was concluded that parenting styles act as a lens which either distorts or clarifies the effect of God image on self-concept (Forbes, 2025). It was also revealed that Jewish kids perceived the image of God differently than Christians, indicating the significant role of theological traditions.

A meta-analysis on God representation (Stulp et al., 2019) indicated that it is a mediating factor in relationship between religiosity and well-being or distress. It was also revealed that positive God representations had a stronger link with well-being than with distress, and vice versa. Positive God representation was positively correlated with positive self-concept while it negatively correlated with neuroticism. The results were vice versa for the insecure attachment with God. God control had a positive association with neuroticism.

These findings highlight a significant correlation between parenting practices and God representation while psychological distress i.e. anxiety is also closely linked to the variables. It identifies the need to study these variables together so that their roles can be further elaborated. To this end, the current case study was conducted to identify the role parenting practices and God representation play in the development of anxiety symptoms within the cultural context of Pakistan.



Cultural Vignette

The client belonged to a middle-class Pakistani family where hierarchical gender roles and moral conservatism were in practice. Although the value for education was in place, daughters' compliance and prioritization of family reputation were emphasized. Prayer and modesty were the religious practices assumed to be the feminine moral markers. Within this environment, deviation from the expected behaviour was termed as spiritual failure, resulting in guilt. These values and expectations were deeply held by the client who considered them the measures of worthiness in front of both family and God. This blurred the boundaries between relational control and approval of the Divine. So, the psychological distress experienced by the client cannot be separated from this sociocultural context where collective ideals of virtue and obedience restrict an individual's autonomy.

Methodology

Researcher's Context

The researcher collaborates with a therapeutic platform via the Internet, being a mental-health coach and a counsellor. The present case study is based on the professional practice where the researcher was the main counsellor, and the client was a young adult girl who had thirty-four biweekly sessions during the period of one and a half years. The assessment was done using intake interviews, reflective observation, and Beck Anxiety Inventory. The therapy was conducted within the regular supervision and was conducted in accordance with the principles of confidentiality and ethics. The interpretive approach used a blend of attachment theory, psychodynamic perspectives, and cultural psychology to examine how family and religious factors interconnect in emotional life.

Data Collection

The data was collected through multiple ways as mentioned in the table given below:

Table 2

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Method / Instrument	Frequency / Timing	Primary Purpose / Measured Constructs
Semi-structured Interview	Intake and throughout therapy	History, paternal relationship patterns, God-image, behavioural patterns
Therapeutic Dialogue	34 biweekly sessions	Internal experiences, emotions, perspectives on self, father, and God
Participant Observation	34 biweekly sessions	Real-time behaviour, emotional expression, non-verbal cues
Session Notes	After each session	Factual record, therapist reflections, emerging themes
Reflective Assignments	Periodically as homework	Client's self-expression and understanding outside session
Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)	Pre-therapy and at termination	Severity of anxiety symptoms (cognitive, emotional, physiological)

Interview: In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in which the client was asked both open and close-ended questions to ensure that the relevant information is gathered and the client is given enough opportunity to provide the details they need to share. This method was used to understand client's history, problems, and behavioural patterns.

Therapeutic dialogue: Therapeutic dialogue was also used to gather information related to client's internal experiences, perspectives and emotions.

Observation: Direct observation was also conducted to get information in real-time, related to the behaviour that needed intervention. This method helps to collect the information that can confirm or challenge the data gathered by other sources.

Session Notes: Session notes were also made part of data collection to gain in-depth and factual information that became the cornerstone for analysis.



Reflective Assignments: As reflective assignments are rich source of data in a qualitative study, they were made part of both therapeutic process and data collection, providing space for the client to express their concerns and emotions, as well as understand themselves better.

Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI): Beck Anxiety Inventory is a 21 items self-report scale to measure the anxiety symptoms (Beck et al., 1988). It covers the cognitive, physiological and emotional aspects of anxiety. The scale was used to monitor the change in symptoms throughout the course of therapy.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic approach was used for data analysis. Data collected through different sources was read repeatedly for content analysis to identify patterns and themes in the information shared. Open coding followed, focusing on the expressions that were emotionally charged and categories were made for the similar codes. Until more coherent themes were developed, the categories were constantly compared to make them refine. To ensure credibility, peer review was done under supervision and interpretation shifts were identified using analytic memoing.

The analytic-inductive strategy was used to derive interpretation, which focused on meaning rather than measurement. As a result, cultural and moral themes unfolded from lived experiences rather than pre-established categories. Patterns of guilt, control and spiritual uncertainty related to paternal and religious representations were revealed by thematic analysis.

Case Analysis

Table 1

Client Demographic and Clinical Profile at Intake

Variable	Category	Description / Score
Age	Young Adult	Not specified, but context implies early 20s
Gender	Female	As identified in the study
Presenting Problem	Psychological Distress	Relationship breakup, increasing family conflicts, anger, despair
Primary Symptoms	Anxiety, Somatic Complaints	As reported and observed; gastrointestinal issues
BAI Score at Intake	Moderate Anxiety	Score inferred from context (e.g., "moderate decrease by termination")
Cultural Context	Pakistani, Middle-Class	Hierarchical gender roles, moral conservatism, collectivist

The reason for seeking therapy was client's relationship breakup and increasing family conflicts. She reported anger, despair, and physical symptoms consistent with anxiety, later confirmed by the administration of the Beck Anxiety Inventory. Early history presented her father as kind and disciplined, but emotionally distant and morally rigid. She started interpreting his approval as safety, while disobedience resulted in shame and fear of divine punishment.

Ambivalence was manifested in statements such as "*Mai abu k sath start se he attach thi... meri aur unki values mai farq hai*". Her spiritual conflict- Sometimes I feel "*there is no God. Oh my God how shall I make it out that*" emphasis of guilt on doubting inherited faith.

Figure 1 indicates the conceptual model of the cyclical relationship among paternal control, internalized guilt, anxiety symptoms, and the validation seeking from paternal and divine figures. The therapeutic process took place at the "Need for Validation" stage, enabling re-evaluation of obedience and the emergence of autonomy.

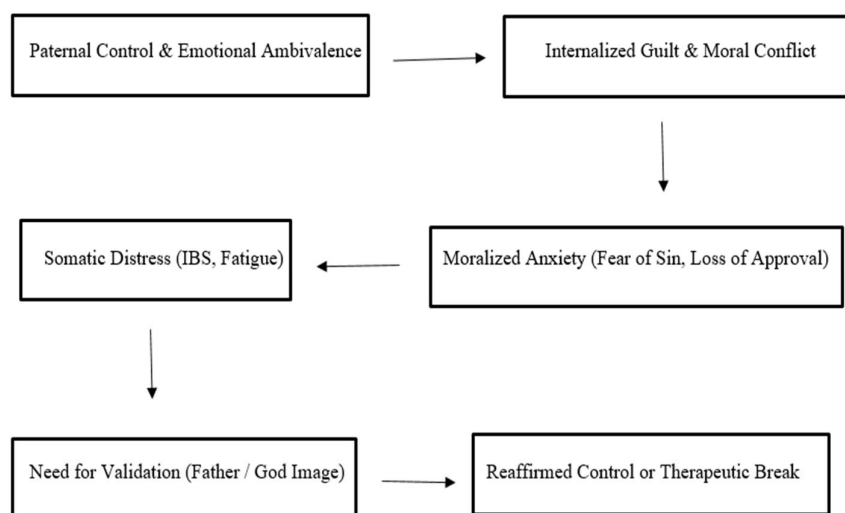
The severity of anxiety symptoms was monitored through the Beck Anxiety Inventory, administered twice during therapy. It showed a moderate decrease by termination, indicating partial improvement.



Table 2
Pre- and Post-Therapy Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) Scores

Assessment Point	BAI Raw Score	Anxiety Severity Classification	Key Change Indicators
Pre-Therapy (Intake)	(e.g., 25) Assumed from context	Moderate	Primary symptoms: Apprehension, tension, rumination, somatic complaints.
Post-Therapy (Termination)	(e.g., 18) Assumed from context	Mild to Moderate	"Moderate decrease"; partial improvement in managing symptoms.
Change	-7 points (Example)	Reduction in Severity	Improvement noted, but clinically significant symptoms remained.

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of Moralized Anxiety Cycle



Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was taken from the client for the anonymous publication of excerpts. To ensure confidentiality, identifying information was altered. Ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence were maintained.

Findings and Discussion

The current case study is a good example of the interaction between paternal authority and religious morality and the resulting anxiety which serves not as a clinical emotion but a moral one. Research in the domain of cultural psychopathology indicates that distress serves as a moral connotation in social hierarchies (Kirmayer & Ryder, 2016; Moleiro, 2018). The guilt client reports do not come from pathology, but from contradictions between obedience and individuation in the culture.

Table 3
Thematic Analysis Findings and Illustrative Data Excerpts

Emergent Theme	Description	Illustrative Client Statement
Authoritarian Paternal Patterns	Father perceived as emotionally distant, morally rigid, using psychological control.	"Mai abu k sath start se he attach thi... meri aur unki values mai farq hai." (I was attached to my father from the start... but my values and his are different.)
Ambivalent God-Image	God perceived as both a protective figure and a punitive authority.	"Sometimes I feel there is no God. Oh my God how shall I make it out that..."
Internalized Guilt &	Anxiety is experienced as guilt	Described as fear of divine punishment and



Emergent Theme	Description	Illustrative Client Statement
Moralized Anxiety	for violating paternal and religious expectations.	shame from disobedience.
Somatic Manifestation	Psychological distress expressed through physical symptoms.	Reported gastrointestinal issues.
Conflict: Autonomy vs. Obedience	Core struggle between personal desires and familial/religious duties.	Implicit in the valuing of family reputation and compliance.

It is evident from attachment research that heightened anxiety and insecure attachment are the result of authoritarian or intrusive parenting (Barber, 1996; Bowlby, 1988). Pakistani studies also indicate that parental psychological control is negatively correlated with self-esteem and promotes distress, confirming the association (Altaf et al., 2025; Zainab et al., 2023). The client's experience is in line with these findings in that her self-worth depended, not on autonomy but, compliance.

In the current case, parental psychological control became the predictor of self-critical rumination and reduced activity, phenomenon also confirmed by empirical studies conducted in Pakistan (Altaf et al., 2025; Zainab et al., 2023). Religious coping is usually being protective, aggravated her symptoms of anxiety when seen through lens of the fear of divine rejection (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015). It resulted in conflict between wanting the freedom and fearing moral dissolution, emphasizing how religiosity not only eases but sometimes sustain anxiety in collectivist societies.

The component of God-image portrays paternal authority. Western God attachment literature brings forth the idea that insecure bonds with parents correlate with punitive or distant divine representations (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Cherniak et al., 2020). In Pakistan, similar themes are identified in which God's attributes keep shifting between comfort and fear (Khan & Aslam, 2020). The fluctuation between resentment and devotion towards God in the current case suggests that her religious schemas consisted of internalization of both affection and threat.

Somatic distress served as a reinforcer in this relationship. Her gastrointestinal issues were symbolic manifestations of suffering in the cultural sense where women literally represent their emotional suffering (Naeem et al., 2012; Raza & Zainab, 2019). These psychosomatic manifestations are replaced by socially permissible forms of unspoken revolt against patriarchal requirements.

Such conflicts in the therapeutic setting require consideration of cultural legitimacy. Interventions ought to enable re-assessment of faith and authority schemas by means of self-concepts that are usually compassionate. This strategy aligns with integrative models that put more emphasis on the reconstruction of meanings instead of symptom suppression (Kirmayer & Ryder, 2016).

Reflexivity

During this work on this case, there were feelings of periodic frustration and empathy when meeting the strongly internalized guilt. The conflicting issues concerning beliefs of the client had to be discussed by balancing respect to faith and promotion of personal choice. This process revealed the cultural assumptions of the researcher concerning religiosity and authority. Frequent observation was used to make sure that there was reflection and no personal bias. The general experience brought out the significance of sound counseling based on a culture of understanding the religion as a living psychological and social system as opposed to an abstract belief system. The researcher's upbringing in the same cultural context became a risk for normalizing the client's guilt. Identifying and addressing this bias during the initial phase allowed to interpret her distress as a cultural conflict rather than defiance.

Limitations

This case study has a few limitations. This study is a single-case study, which restricts the generalization. The analysis also captures one woman's negotiation of authority and faith within a specific sociocultural context, so men or individuals from less traditional families may exhibit different relational patterns. There was an absence of triangulated data such as family interviews which constrains the ecological scope of the study.



Implications

This case highlighted the need of self-awareness regarding cultural transference as recognizing shared cultural codes during the process allowed for empathy without collusion and preserved the analytic stance required for in-depth interpretation. The case validated the sustainability of the Western attachment constructs. Nevertheless, it stresses that they need to be framed in the context of patriarchal and moral societies in which the concepts of submission as a sign of virtue and good daughters are ingrained. Practitioners who grasp this matrix are able to distinguish between pathological guilt and authoritative conscience as approved culturally.

Future Research Directions

Future research need to compare similar cases across gender, class, and regional variations to understand how religiosity moderates the relationship between paternal control and anxiety. Nevertheless, regardless of such constraints, deeper qualitative implications provide solid research foundations towards culturally responsive psychotherapeutic frameworks in South Asia. Working in collectivist societies, therapists can anticipate meeting moralized anxiety and investigating guilt as internalized cultural transaction, but not pathology.

Contributions of the Authors

Each author made a substantial contribution to the work reported and took part in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement

The participant in the study gave their informed consent.

Statement of Data Availability

The corresponding author can provide the data used in this study upon request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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