

INTERETHNIC IDENTITY AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS AMONG BALOCH AND PUNJABI STUDENTS IN LAHORE

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how Punjabi and Baloch university students in Lahore construct inter-provincial identities and perceive one another within academic and social contexts. Using purposive and snowball sampling, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The analysis generated four major themes: (a) provincial identity, highlighting both pride and feelings of otherness; (b) language and communication, where Punjabi students benefited from a bilingual advantage while Baloch students often experienced stigma; (c) media, stereotypes, and reframing through direct contact, which revealed the tension between negative portrayals and lived interactions; and (d) campus interactions, which simultaneously fostered solidarity in times of crisis and reinforced divides through student politics and social clustering. Findings indicate that Baloch students, as a minority, often asserted their identity while navigating marginalization, whereas Punjabi students experienced a normative and privileged sense of identity. Despite these asymmetries, positive peer interactions and cultural exchange activities occasionally bridged divides and nurtured mutual respect. The study suggests that universities can play a transformative role in fostering national cohesion by strengthening cultural exchange programs, institutional support for diversity, and structured opportunities for inter-provincial dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

The human identity is inherently social, and it is formed by affiliations that make individuals belong to bigger communities and predetermine their interactions. According to the social psychologists, the identity integrates both individual and collective factors in which the belonging to social categories shapes the self concept and the behavior of the individual (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Ethnic identity, in particular, refers to the

belonging of a person to an ethnic group, which can be defined by common descent, culture, language, and traditions in a manner that it creates an impression of mutual origin and unity (Epstein and Heizler, 2015). Ethnic identity does not represent a fixed or fixed set of certain features which a person is born with but is a movable form and can evolve through social interaction and change with time and situation (Yinger, 1986; Phinney, 1992). People can often

have multiple social identities in place at the same time, and this may take salience in different contexts (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

Interethnic identity is made operative when the interactions between people of different ethnical backgrounds occur. This construct is not limited to belonging to one group and it defines the orientation of individuals working in areas that cross ethnic boundaries. Other theorists define interethnic or intercultural identity as a psychological position of openness and flexibility towards other ethnicities, an identity that includes the members of an outgroup too, but not a strict us- them boundary (Kim, 1988).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a basic framework that can be used to understand intergroup relations. Firstly developed by Tajfel and Turner, SIT is a theory according to which people derive a significant part of self-concept out of group memberships, which can be ethnic, religious, regional, or institutional (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Tajfel (1974) describes that membership to a salient social group gives identity, source of pride and self-esteem (Epstein and Heizler, 2015). Cognitive behavior of classifying oneself and other people into groups may lead to prejudice and competition as people struggle to contribute to the status of their ingroup and to contrast it with outgroups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Through these mechanisms, the ethnic cleavages may tend to be emotionally charged and enduring in multiethnic societies.

SIT is especially relevant within the Pakistani context that is a multiethnic country since its formation. The society of Pakistan is pluralistic and has a number of ethnolinguistic and regional identities, including Punjabi, Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi, and many others, and each of them has unique history and position. The aggressive expression of these ethnic identities, in some cases antagonistic, since 1947 has been a critical threat to the cohesiveness of the nation-state (Majeed, 2025). The struggle of groups to gain recognition, resources, and political authority often occurs in the shape of ingroup/ out group identity politics. According to Social Identity theory, minority group members could develop a low sense of belonging to the state identity, and

increased

attachment to their provincial or ethnic identity when a single ethnic group is dominant in the state institutions (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This is supported by empirical evidence in Pakistan: when surveyed, a number of Baloch young people, such as, in example, state that they feel more connected to their ethnic or provincial identity than to the national identity that may include the state as well as the other ethnic groups (Kakar et al., 2023). Also, the Social Identity Theory alludes that the boundaries of groups are fluid; when a larger identity, like a group identity as students or as Pakistanis is prefigured, it would cut across these smaller ethnic lines and serve to reduce the intergroup strains (Gaertner et al., 1993).

Colleges and universities can be regarded as important spheres of interethnic interaction, especially in ethnically not homogenous states. These informative spaces bring together young adults of diverse backgrounds, usually, either for the first time, to live, learn and socialize. Institutions of higher learning are therefore micro-cosms of a multiethnic society, and in many ways more general social processes are often carried out on a smaller basis. The studies on different cultural contexts show that the diversity in campuses may have complex impacts on the relationships between groups. On the one hand, when under favourable conditions, more contact between the students of different ethnicities will help them to become culturally aware, reduce prejudices, and enhance bridging social capital (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). On the other hand, it is also found that students can join their fellow ethnic group members as a form of comforting themselves especially when they feel they are not represented well or when they feel some form of discriminating against them in the larger campus environment (Sidanius et al., 2004).

The role played by positive interethnic relations in universities cannot be underestimated. Universities and colleges serve as breeding grounds of future leaders and practitioners, the behaviour and skills developed in these four years tend to be transferred into the broader society.

When the universities manage to incorporate norms of respect, cross-cultural communication, and collaboration, graduates stand a better chance to work towards creating an integrated and harmonious nation (Gurin et al., 2002). Besides academics, the students bargain during their daily campus life on their ethnic and national identities and are learning more to overcome the stereotypes about the other communities. An analysis of Baloch students in Punjab highlighted the issue of cultural diversity as an opportunity, yet one that comes with a set of challenges that must be overcome to facilitate proper communication; however, when such challenges are overcome via conscious efforts, campuses can be transformed into a more inclusive and friendly place to everyone (Razzaq et al., 2023).

The historical asymmetries in terms of politics and economy shape the Punjab-Balochistan relations. Demographic, institutional and state power in Punjab have always been strong which is why Balochistan though endowed with resources has not developed to provide a sense of exploitation and marginalization. Hughes turning points in history, such as the annexation of Kalat in 1948 and the frequent insurgencies, the 2006 kidnapping of Nawab Akbar Bugti, have further escalated Baloch resentment and strengthened discourses of Punjab-dominated federalism, sometimes increasing interethnic suspicion and violence (Hashmi, 2015; Cheema, 2022). Such tensions are prevalent at the macro level, an element of university life in Lahore; Baloch students are likely to experience stereotyping and develop a cautious approach to identity management, whilst Punjabi students might be less aware of the resentment on the side of the Balochs because of the dominant national discourse. Baloch students in turn have increasingly formed student councils on campus to facilitate cultural expression and welfare, despite activism being a rather shaky area due to surveillance concerns, causing an unresolved tension just below the surface of normal campus life (Cheema, 2022).

Objectives of the Study

- To explore how university students from Punjab and Balochistan express their own provincial identities in a university environment
- To examine how students from both provinces perceive and interpret the identity of the other group
- To investigate how academic and social interactions on campus influence interprovincial identities and perceptions

Research Questions

- How do university students from Punjab and Balochistan living in Lahore express their own provincial identities, and how do they perceive the identity of the other group?
- In what ways do academic and social interactions on campus shape, challenge, or reinforce inter-provincial identity and perceptions?

Method

In this study, the research design was qualitative with semi-structured, in-depth interviews being used to study how inter-provincial identity and related perceptions were constructed among Punjab and Balochistan based university students studying in Lahore. Such exploratory goals are especially appropriate to be addressed through qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). The sample of the participants was comprised of fifteen student members of universities aged between 18 and 30 years, originally belonging to either Punjab or Balochistan and resided in Lahore at least one year. Each participant was admitted to a private or a public university in Lahore hence making all the respondents have an experience of inter-provincial interactions. Non-probability purposive sampling method was used to sample the individuals purposely to identify those who were most relevant to the research objectives. The recruitment started by use of university networks and student groups and a snowball sampling method was later adopted whereby initial volunteers referred other potential volunteers.

Table 01

Characteristics of the sample of Punjabi and Baloch students living in Lahore ($N=17$)

Name	Gender	Age (years)	Education	Ethnicity	Residential Area	Years of stay at Lahore
P 01	Female	23	BS English	Punjabi	Urban	2.5
P 02	Female	22	BS Nutrition	Baloch	Rural	3
P 03	Female	22	BS English	Punjabi	Urban	3
P 04	Female	24	MPhil Psychology	Punjabi	Rural	4
P 05	Male	25	MBA	Punjabi	Rural	6
P 06	Female	26	CA	Baloch	Urban	14
P 07	Female	23	BS Sociology	Baloch	Urban	4
P 08	Male	25	BS Zoology	Baloch	Rural	1
P 09	Male	24	BS Gender Studies	Baloch	Rural	4
P 10	Male	26	MPhil IR	Baloch	Urban	1
P 11	Male	24	BS IT	Punjabi	Rural	4
P 12	Female	23	BS Gender Studies	Punjabi	Urban	5
P 13	Male	22	BS Psychology	Punjabi	Rural	4
P 14	Female	23	MS Psychology	Punjabi	Urban	6
P 15	Male	24	BS Gender Studies	Punjabi	Rural	7

Note: PKR Pakistani rupees; P = Participant

Instruments

A brief demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide that was created by the researcher were used to obtain data. The demographic sheet identified background variables to provide a context of each participant, whereas the interview guide, based on the themes found in the literature and consistent with the goals of the study, contained open-ended questions to explore the main topics, such as the expression of provinciality, perceived discrimination or stereotypes, language and communication experiences, and campus interaction between the Punjabis and the Baloch students.

Procedure

The guide was pilot-tested on two students (one Punjabi, one Baloch) before the main study, and clarified and made culturally appropriate. The pilot interviews triggered slight changes in wording, so that questions were easily interpreted and brought out the relevant information. In the primary research, informed consent was taken, and the principal researcher then interviewed each participant on a one on one basis. The

interviews were conducted privately and securely in a face-to-face environment in a quiet campus room or an encrypted video-conferencing session, depending on the preference and the availability of each participant. All interviews took about 30-45 minutes and were recorded through audio tape by the consent of the interviewee. The interviewer followed the semi-structured guide during the sessions, but also used probing questions to get into unforeseen issues by the interviewees. The interviews were all done in Urdu so as to bring the participants to the level of language they would be comfortable with. The audio transcriptions were made word-to-word in the original language and then translated to English so that one can analyze it.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data (transcripts and field notes) in a six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodological system consisted of familiarizing oneself completely with the information by reading transcripts over and over again and initial note-taking (Phase 1). Second, salient ideas were coded, line-by-line, to meaningful portions of text (Phase-2). Patterns were then analyzed in these first codes and

encompassed in the possible themes and subthemes (Phase 3), including shared experiences of otherness, manifestations of cultural pride, and occurrences of intergroup solidarity. The candidate themes were also analyzed and narrowed down by comparing them with the data to make sure that it is coherent and distinct (Phase 4). After this was complete, every theme was clearly identified and named to indicate its essence (Phase 5). Lastly, the results were reported in a narrative report, which has illustrative quotations of respondents to represent each theme (Phase 6). In the process, the analyst followed rigor standards of a qualitative analysis such as peer debriefing and keeping an audit trail of code development (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

The research was based on all the ethical standards of conducting research with human subjects. Prior to data collection, the authorities of the concerned university approved and gave permission to carry out the study. All participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study in detail and all of them signed

informed consent.

They were made aware of their privacy rights and the option of quitting the study at any point without any form of penalty. The identities of participants were kept secret by giving those pseudonyms and any information that could be used as a form of identification was either eliminated or generalized in the transcripts and report. Transcripts and recordings of the interviews were kept safely and could not be accessed by any other individuals other than the research team. The researchers made sure that the interviews were carried out in a respectful and not judgmental way as they understood that they were talking about a sensitive topic of ethnic and provincial identities. Culture was also a major concern; thus, the interviews were carried out in the desired language of the participants (Urdu) and at suitable and comfortable locations. In the interviews participants were made to freely talk and they were assured that there was no right or wrong answer hence creating an open dialogue. The participants were shown gratitude after data collection as a way of appreciating their experiences.

Results

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which resulted in the identification of four major themes.

Table 2

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Provincial Identity	Feeling of Otherness and Identity	• Minority status
	Concealment (Baloch Students)	• Feeling judged by others • Concealing identity • Outsider feelings • Stereotyped as rebels
	Pride and Assertion of Identity (Baloch Students)	• Pride in cultural identity • Asserting identity openly • Refusal to hide identity • Representing Baloch culture • Confidence and empowerment
	Sense of Privilege and Security (Punjabi Students)	• Feeling safe and secure • Access to greater facilities • Privileged majority status • Feeling fortunate/grateful • More personal freedom (especially for women)

	Cultural Expression and Pride (Punjabi Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingual pride • Showcasing culture at campus events • Pride in Punjabi cuisine • Embracing mother tongue • Promoting regional heritage
	Shared National Identity and Unity (Both Groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistani-first” identity mindset • One-nation unity beyond provinces • Mutual respect across provinces • No cultural discrimination on campus
Campus Interactions	Crisis collaboration dissolves distance (Baloch Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National integration and harmony • Contact hypothesis • Prosocial helping • Shared adversity • Mutual aid • Solidarity cues • Stereotype disconfirmation
	Student politics & media narratives can harden divides (Baloch Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political polarization • Student wings • Media framing • Perceived negative spotlight • Vigilance
	Open-minded contact reduces bias (Punjabi Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity sensitivity • Openness to experience • Mutual perspective-taking • Flexibility • Intergroup learning
	Cultural days & seminars as bridges (Punjabi Student)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcoming climate • Structured intermixing • Cultural exchange • Visibility • Inclusive programming • Institutional scaffolding
	Acknowledging structural advantage & stereotypes (Punjabi Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority advantage • Perceived employability gap • Stereotype awareness • Teacher-assigned mixing • Cooperation under task interdependence
Media, Stereotypes & Reframing Through Contact	Stigmatizing labels (Baloch Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media misrepresentation • Security-state framing • Historical grievance frames • Stereotype spillover on campus • Suspicion/othering • Identity defensiveness

	Selective visibility & voice erasure (Baloch Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No provincial TV voice • Negative salience • Erasure of positive stories • Desire for constructive/positive media
	Media-shaped suspicion before contact (Punjabi Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground reality vs news • News framing (شرپسند/دہشت گرد) • Fear/avoidance • Family/environment echoes; Overgeneralization • Belief in operations/security discourse
	Reframing via direct interactions & academic collaboration (Punjabi Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact hypothesis on campus • Helping behaviors • Group work & trust • Openness/critical thinking • Identity de-polarization
Language and Communication Experiences	Stigma for speaking mother tongue (Baloch Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taunts • Accent-based distancing • Fear of speaking Balochi • Identity defensiveness • Hostel exclusion
	Bilingual advantage & 'host etiquette' (Punjabi Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingual ease (Urdu/Punjabi) • Cultural mediation • Supportive correction • Confidence • Host responsibility

Interpretation

First theme emphasizes the impact of provincial affiliation on the self-concepts and social positioning of students in quite different ways for Baloch and Punjabi students. Baloch students felt great otherness within the campus a lot time. In response, some responded with concealment of their identity, devaluing or concealing their Baloch identity from others for fear of being stigmatized. At the same time, there was a countervailing trend amongst many of the Baloch participants for pride and assertion of identity. They expressed strong pride in their cultural roots, and openly asserted their identity, refusing to conceal their roots and actively defending the culture of their people in student life on campus. Punjabi students by contrast associated a sense of privilege and security by virtue of being members

of the predominant provincial group. They generally perceived safety, acceptance and good resource on campus and experient experience access to better facilities and greater personal freedoms (particularly for women) as a natural feature of their majority status. Notably, even though it is ambiguous to draw an analogy between an often-marginalized Baloch identity and a normalized Punjabi identity, both groups drew upon a framing of national identity and national unity to serve as a higher-order frame of reference.

The second theme shows that positive forms of intergroup contact, either spontaneous or structured, may promote intergroup understanding and empathy while politicized or stereotyping environments may hinder these gains. Students' interactions in campus life became important in reducing or enhancing intergroup divisions. One the one hand

collaborative experiences in the times of crisis or need proved to dissolve social distance between Baloch and Punjabi peers. Broaching served as a way to break down barriers as they described how both groups in times of difficulties or emergencies, gave prosocial help and mutual aid, which contributed to a moment of solidarity. On the other hand, open minded engagement by Punjabi students reduced bias powerfully. Punjabi participants who sought out the Baloch with curiosity and openness to learning described transformative experiences: through mutual perspective taking and openness to flexibility in their cross cultural interactions, they came to new understanding that convinced them of things they had never known before. This attitude created an inclusive and welcoming climate on campus which suggests that in the presence of the moderating influence of majority group members being motivated to be inclusive (high on openness-to-experience) intergroup learning takes place and prejudices are put aside.

Third theme entering into the ways in which external stories create impressions between people from different groups, and then how direct contact can reverse the stereotypes mediated. Baloch students said they they came to DR to Lahore, carrying with them stigmatizing labels, which national media often attached to their community. They felt they were misrepresented significantly with the news coverage that primarily framed Baloch identity with the frame of security threats and conflict that good Baloch equals 'troublemakers' or rebel because of the insurgencies which have been fought over the years. Consequently, what is salient to the public (including Punjabi peers) are mostly negative headlines and what is everyday reality and contribution of Baloch students remains buried. From the perspective of the Punjabi students, on the other hand, media-defined perceptions before contact were indeed influential. Many Punjabi participants acknowledged the impression that on hearing the news and second-hand talk, before actually meeting any Baloch in person, terms like ("miscreant/terrorist") attached to Baloch in the media reports and even in familial or social

circles. This resulted in an anticipatory bias: there was a sense of vague fear or avoidance when it came to interacting with Baloch classmates beginning early in their life trajectory, and this was how the media framing can lead to anticipatory bias and lead to overgeneralization of an entire out-group of people.

The last theme illustrates two faces of the coin: for Baloch students, language was an area of vulnerability and threat to their identity whereby, for Punjabi students, language served as an arena to exercise inclusion (or in case of mishandling, exclusion). The findings highlight the importance of respectful, empathetic communication for multiethnic universities, in which the dominant group makes efforts to reduce the language barriers, not only serves to empower the minority students, but is in line with the broader theories of cross-cultural adaptation, which postulate host receptivity and host support as a key to integration of the minority students. Baloch students often found themselves stigmatized when taking to school their mother tongue: here was the language in terms of a place of latent prejudice. Several of the Baloch participants noted the potential to attract sneers or taunts from some Punjabi peers if they used the Balochi language in public (or even Urdu with a Balochi accent). Such reactions made them keenly self-conscious; they felt that they were marked by the identity of an accent and this standing led to understated distancing in social interactions.

Discussion

The first major theme, Provincial Identity, uncovers the struggle of Baloch and Punjabi students to find themselves in a multiethnic campus setting. Baloch participants spoke of being conspicuous minorities in Lahore and some downplayed or explicitly concealed their identity in order not to be prejudiced. This a classic "passing" response to stigma and what has been documented among other marginalized ethnic groups who hide their background in order to sidestep bias (Dobai & Hopkins, 2021). In our study a single student from Balochistan confessed that sometimes she didn't mention her

ethnic origin from the province when meeting new students; these reflect the "meta-perceptions" of being viewed through a stereotype.

At the same time, what many of the Baloch students demonstrated was the opposite, pride, and assertiveness in speaking about who they are. They were very vocal about their culture, dress and heritage, and incidentally portrayed their Baloch identity, despite being in the minority. This pattern has some resonance with the "rejection-identification" effect in social psychology: Exposure to discrimination can actually cause some increase in affiliation with the marginalized group as a form of self-affirmation (Branscombe and others, 1999). In our context, openly embracing Baloch identity is actually a form of collective empowerment, whereby the students are able to reject these negative labels and to find pride in their heritage. Punjabi students, on the other hand, mostly felt the provincial identity as a positive secure and privileged identity. As belonging to the majority group in the Punjab's capital, they felt "at home" on campus. However, many people have described an implicit comfort. This privileged position is not mere anecdote; it is one of structure and reality. Punjab's rise in power structure of Pakistan translated to having better educational resources and opportunities to its youth while Balochistan has lagged behind (Nasser et al., 2017). Our reflections of Punjabi participants of India as feeling "fortunate" and "well-prepared" in Lahore feeds into that enjoyment of systemic advantage. Unlike Baloch students who risk being perceived as "outsiders" for speaking Balochi, Punjabi students can be associated with no such stigma of using Punjabi and celebrating Punjabi. In fact, societal attitudes tend to stereotype minority accents or customs as less "proper" as they validate those from the group that is the dominant group (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

Interestingly enough, for all these contrasts, Baloch as well as Punjabi students often used a common denominator of a national identity ("we are all Pakistani"). They emphasized the people's need that provincial differences should not prevent them from feeling united as countrymen.

This emphasis on a superordinate identity is a conscious reframing that is consistent with the Common Ingroup Identity Model in intergroup relations. According to this model, when people of different groups reach the reconceptualization of oneself as a part of one inclusive group, intergroup bias can be reduced (Arendt, 2023). Gaertner and Dovidio (2014) suggest that encouraging a more inclusive "we" can lead to greater positive attitudes between groups, particularly when it does not require people to eliminate their subgroup identities and instead it encourages people to superimpose them with a larger group identity. This finding offers some cause for optimism in the face of pessimistic views that strong provincial identities are inevitably threatening national unity.

The second theme, Campus Interactions, looks at how, in their daily interpersonal interactions, students Baloch and Punjabi either mitigated or reinforced the divide between Baloch and Punjabi students. On the positive side, participants had many examples of collaborative or helping behaviors that dissolved barriers. Baloch students recalled how in a crisis (fundraising, for instance), their Punjabi classmates stooped to be their allies. Working under stress together brought a sense of solidarity that broke down the normal social distance. These stories provide excellent examples of the classic principles of the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1986) in action: cooperative interaction based on shared goals, in conditions of equal status, which would lead to more positive intergroup attitudes. In those times of collective struggle, Baloch students felt they were team members and not strangers and Punjabi students viewed their Baloch counterparts in a more humanized light. Such findings are well-supported by vast amounts of research, in fact, a recent meta-analysis found that intergroup contact as a strategy for prejudice reduction is reliable within the context of prior threat or discrimination, provided that there is meaningful positive interaction that is facilitated and positive contact that occurs (Van Assche et al., 2023). In our research, "dissolving distance" through crisis collaboration is a great example of how

experience a common ingroup is formed inter-provincial adversity.

However, our participants also indicated that specific campus contexts had the opposite effect, to harden intergroup boundaries. Baloch students, in particular, felt as though the undercurrents of ethnopolitical discord in the campus would sometimes facilitate an "us vs. them" mentality. Some students, Baloch students, were acutely aware that whenever a security event back home was sensationalized by the news, they felt suspicion from their peers. These situations essentially amount to negative forms of contact, or at least negative indirect contact, for which social psychologists know can make situations worse for the bias. Research has shown that although positive interactions can form trust, just a few negative interactions (or negative portrayals) can have disproportionate effects on attitudes (Graf et al., 2014). Barlow and colleagues (2012), for example, found that negative intergroup contact tends to lead to stronger prejudice than positive contacts of equal frequency reduce prejudice. In our context, the "negative spotlight" on Baloch activism acted as a form of negative contact by proxy, it primed Punjabi students against them and put Baloch students on the defensive. Consequently, some neutral interactions on campus were viewed through the prism of distrust.

Despite such problems, many Punjabi students proved that the cycle of prejudice could be broken if an open-minded posture was used. Several Punjabi interviewees spoke to their misconceptions of the Baloch peers at first, which were mostly based on hearsay, or even media, although they actively chose to reach out to them with curiosity and friendship. By having honest discussions, group projects and social activities, they went through what one called a "transformative experience." This brings in the role of individual dispositions and will in making contact be effective. In consistency with previous research, students high on openness-to-experience and empathy were more likely to have meaningful cross-group friendships with, and learn from, them. Through mutual perspective-taking, these Punjabi students were not only able

to shed their own

biases, but they also contributed to a welcoming climate in which to encourage others to mingle. Their accounts are consistent with what Van Assche et al. (2023) observed at a broader level, that there are positive effects of contact even for those initially inclined towards prejudice, if they engage in the process in good faith. Importantly, our data show that positive attitudes spread beyond one-on-one interactions: When influential students champion inclusivity, it sends a message that prejudice is not the norm. Over time this may change group norms to become more accepted.

The third theme, Media, Stereotypes, and Reframing through Contact, goes more in depth about how outside stories affect how students view one another in the beginning, and how they are affected after they interact with others first-hand. Baloch students engaged in discussions of how frustrated they were by the stigmatizing labels that have been placed on their community as part of the national discourse. In Pakistani media (and by extension many Punjabis' minds), the word "Baloch" has at times been synonymized to "troublemaker," "separatist," or even "terrorist." Headlines in the news and talk shows talked incessantly about Balochistan as the land of insurgents and uprisings with hardly any visibility of the normal peaceful life of Baloch people. This single-dimensional picture put a burden on the Baloch students in Lahore in that they felt obliged to prove that they were 'normal' and patriotic and actively refute the presumption of disloyalty. Unfortunately, such media-driven stereotyping is well-documented. Studies confirm that when a group is consistently portrayed in a negative manner within the media, consumers of that media will form prejudiced attitudes and expectations towards the group in question. For example, Saleem et al. (2015) found that when people are exposed to stereotype-consistent news about an outgroup, they have more negative perceptions of them, while counter-stereotypical news can lead to attitude improvements. In our case, the security driven narrative related to the Baloch people primed many Punjabi students

into being wary or fearful, before ever having met a Baloch peer.

Several Punjabis admitted in the interview that before university they had never met someone from Balochistan, so their only references were media reports (often about conflict) and second-hand comments. It is, thus, not surprising if some kept a distance initially or if they felt anxiety around Baloch classmates. From the stand point of the students of Baloch, the media's projection was not only unfair but a sort of erasure to their real voice. They deplored the fact that there is "no provincial TV channel to tell our side of the story." Positive stories of the youth of Balochistan and their successes in academics and contributions to the country do not often reach the mainstream. Instead, it is only when something goes wrong (a protest, a violence incident) that Balochistan gets attention and even then the coverage is often tinged with suspicion. One participant explained this as visibility only in negativity, which gets at what media scholars refer to as a coverage bias for minority groups. The students contended that this skewed visibility generates a false image for the public that all Baloch are aggrieved rebels which is then used to justify more surveillance and suspicion from the authorities and from society as well. Indeed, a close reading of one of the latest writings published in the Dawn revealed that "stigmatising and labelling pushes Balochistan's marginalised youth deeper into an identity crisis," since educated Baloch are constantly having to fight assumptions that they are disloyal or primitive (Rana, 2023). Our findings echo that sentiment: Baloch students in Lahore hoisted these stereotypes making some students resort to defence mechanisms.

Crucially, however, the story did not end there. The latter part of this theme is "Reframing through Contact" and our data provide one hopeful testimony to that process. As Baloch and Punjabi students made real relationships on campus, these face-to-face encounters broke down the stereotypes more on both sides in the media. Punjabi participants described how they were able to quickly break away from the monolithic image of "The Baloch" through everyday

interactions

including chatting in dorms, working together in labs, eating together in the cafeteria, and so on. One student anxiously reflected on how "embarrassed" he felt after working closely with a Baloch classmate for a semester that he ever believed the news-fueled generalizations about them. Studies in other contexts have in the same way found that face-to-face friendship overrides media bias. For example, studies conducted in the United States have established that although news often primes negative attributes about certain ethnic groups, personal friendships cause cognitive dissonance with those stereotypes which will eventually lead people to question the accuracy of the news media they consumed (Arendt, 2023). In a study carried out by us, Punjabi students tended to become critical of the media after getting to know their Baloch friends, they came to see how one-sided the media had been. This is a positive development: It implies the possibility that by enabling meaningful ethnic contact, universities can have an indirect effect on mainstream prejudices.

The final theme, Language and Communication Experiences, considers how experience of linguistic difference affected the sense of inclusion and identity of the students on campus. For Baloch students, language presented an interesting case in which it became a double-edged sword, as it is a core part of their cultural identity and at the same time they are being prejudiced by the Punjabi dominant environment. Several of the Baloch participants admitted having been made fun of or stared at when speaking Balochi or even in Urdu with a Balochi accent. They have described cases where Punjabi peers made taunting remarks such as "What did you just say?" "That sounds alien!" Such reactions made the Baloch students feel very conscious and unwelcoming. This painful dynamic is consistent with patterns of linguistic prejudice seen all around the world: speakers of minority or non-standard languages are often subject to stigma, pressure to conform and even bullying in communities where a majority language dominates (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Linguists Gluszek and Dovidio (2010) state that an accent

or dialect can serve as an audible badge of being a member of a group, which is subject to the same stereotyping and discrimination as are more visceral identification markers. In our study, as a result of a Baloch student's thick accent, they were immediately "not local" and, unfortunately, that would be then informing them and their peers that they are of the negative characteristics. Recent studies conducted in the organizational context have shown that non-native speakers who fear being discriminated on the basis of accent have experienced an increased level of anxiety and a lower sense of belonging in the workplace (Russo et al., 2016). We do see the same linkage with our situation: Stigma based on language led to some Baloch students feeling that regardless of how hard they worked to fit in; they would always be viewed as outsiders in Lahore. On the flip side of that, Punjabi students were enjoying something we might call a bilingual advantage on campus, and some conscientiously used it to include people. Being fluent in both Punjabi (mother tongue) and Urdu (national lingua franca) in general, Punjabi students were well positioned to adopt formal or informal context easily. They were not policed in terms of how they spoke, a privilege which is often invisible to them. Research about attitude toward accent affirms that speakers of the dominant accent/language in any context are considered to be more competent or "normal" by default (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

Implications

The findings contribute to the literature in several important ways regarding theory about intergroup relations and social identity in an ethnically diverse campus context. This study adds to the existing theories by demonstrating how these dynamics occur in Pakistan's university context, and by examining the importance of direct contact in overriding stereotypes perpetrated in the media, as students in the study unlearned the biased narratives by making friends in person, exposing that open communication can drive stereotypes away from the students. Beyond there are practical implications to higher education policy, campus diversity programs and

national integration efforts. The results provide a suggestion that universities can play a transformative role in the cohesion process by introducing cultural exchange activities, institutional support of ethnic diversity and structured opportunities for inter-provincial dialogue. Such initiatives would promote meaningful contact and mutual understanding of students in different provinces. At the policy level, the findings highlight the need to address the grievances and inclusion of minorities in the field of higher education in Pakistan. Strengthening support structures on campus (counseling, student associations, language support) for underrepresented groups can help manage feelings of isolation or stigma. It is suggested that university and college administrations should adopt policies that will make student life more inclusive and affirming of all ethnic identities with the view to bring about a transformation of campuses into microcosms of the harmonious, pluralistic Pakistan.

Limitations

This study has limitations as well which should be admitted. First, their sample size was small (15 participants) and chosen using a process of purposive and snowball sampling instead of random selection. Although this enabled an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, it means that there is limited statistical generalizability of the findings. The information was based on self-reported perceptions based on interviews, which can be prone to certain types of bias that correlate with social desirability as well as interpretation by the researchers. The qualitative nature, being an exploratory study, it essentially means that the research is rich with narrative understanding, but can't determine causality or prevalence of the phenomena within the larger school population of students.

Future Research Directions

Future research should involve increasing the scope and methods in order to gain a better understanding of the interethnic relations in Pakistan. One important step is to increase the

demographic and geographic scope of the research. Comparative studies in more than one province and one ethnic group would help to see if they repeat across a range of locations or present themselves in a different way. A larger, possibly multi-site sample would also have provided for better representativeness of findings and the possibility of regional comparisons. In methodologies, the use of mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches can provide better and more nuanced insights. A mixed-methods approach would be useful to quantify the prevalence of attitudes and test for relationships between variables to complement the depth of narratives obtained from the interviews. Meanwhile, a longitudinal study, in which students are followed over a period of time, could shed light on how interethnic attitudes and identities develop or change over the course of their university education.

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