

Experiences and Practices of Contemporary Sufis in Pakistan

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, we cannot underestimate the importance of spirituality in the field of Psychology. Spirituality contributes in psychotherapeutic practice and healing process. Sufism is a subjective science of spirituality that is based on the reparation of the soul and the heart and connects the Sufi to the absolute reality, i.e., God Almighty. The purpose of this study was to explore spiritual and social experiences and practices of contemporary Sufis in Pakistan. For this investigation, a qualitative approach was employed. Based on previous research and theoretical models of Sufism, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed. A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect data from ten Sufis. The information obtained from the Sufis was in the form of audio recordings that were later transcribed. Sufis' views and experiences were interpreted by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Five super-ordinate themes that emerged from the data were: inclination towards Sufism, spiritual journey, practicing Sufism, social experiences, and self-actualization. These themes were interpreted in the context of given sub-ordinate themes and verbatim of the participants.

Keywords: Contemporary Sufis, Spirituality, Spiritual Experiences, Social Experiences, Self-actualization, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Sufism has been an important spiritual tradition in Islam, considerably contributing towards spiritual well-being of a large number of people within and outside the Muslim world. Sufism has a large following in the Muslim world. Spirituality is at the heart of Sufism and emerges from the value system of many religions that influences well-being of individuals. Recognizing this, the spiritual well-being, in line with the social and cultural patterns, was accepted as one of the significant determining factors of health by the World Health Organization during the 37th World Health Assembly in 1984 (Basu,

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1995). Moreover, spiritual teaching has found its place in the curriculum of many medical schools in the Western world (Puchaski et al., 2001). Spirituality is a broad concept; it involves the feeling of connecting to something immortal and superior to ourselves, and usually involves the pursuit of a life purpose. It is human experience of the universe - something that affects us all. Man and spirituality have a strong bond with each other. In the contemporary era, where rationalism has occupied the whole world, man has an inherent desire and need to experience and absorb the metaphysical world. More specifically, s/he wishes to diminish the distance between his “existing being” and the “actual being”. It is simply because of this fact that the outcome product will be the *Nafs-e-Mutmaena* i.e., the contented self (Tacey, 2004). Since the inception of this universe, man has been in the pursuit of something that goes beyond his self (Heelas et al., 2005).

Sufism is the process in which one tries hard to actualize the existence of divine ethics. Sufism encapsulates a being who is more or less enlightened with something metaphysical or spiritual in nature. It can be said that Sufism offers a pathway, an enlightened road to the real world of knowledge and existence. *Sufis* are of the view that to transcend one’s self towards knowing the existence of God, they need to be aware of the route that will lead them to divine knowledge (Stoddart, 2012). It should be noted here that humans have been practicing Sufism since a long time to transcend themselves towards the journey to know the existence of divine power.

Sufism is a path to transcend the materialistic world and it also helps to develop a strong connection with the spiritual world (Arasteh, 2013). If we assume that Sufism is a candle that shows us a path to know the reality of our existence and connects us with the divine force, we can elaborate it through citing the story of *Rumi* (a theologian) about a group of men who were moving through the regions of the subcontinent. The common element among all of them was that they had never seen an elephant before. One day, all of them spotted an elephant. They approached it in a complete darkness and tried to explore it on the basis of their sense of touch. Afterwards, they started describing it according to their own perceptions. As expected, the descriptions offered by every one of them were different. The person, who had touched the leg, imagined that the elephant was more like a big pillar. For the other one, who touched the ear, thought that elephant resembled a fan. So, each of them had offered an explanation of the physical characteristics of the elephant based solely on their senses of touch. Even if we consider the explanations offered by each of them to be true, still they fall short of describing the animal in totality. If they would have taken a candle with them, this difference of opinion had never existed (Chittick, 1983).

Who is a Sufi?

A *Sufi* happens to be a person who has a rich and greater understanding of the religion. He is the one who sets aside worldly desires and wishes and submits himself totally to the will of Allah (Arberry, 1977). The main purpose of his life is to understand the existence of God and experience Almighty through all possible means. A *Sufi* is a person who cuts himself from the world in order to understand the world from a spiritual dimension (Ahmed, 2010).

Spiritual Practices

The practices of *Sufis*, more often referred to as devotional practices, vary amongst different *Sufis* and their orders. The authorized leader and master of the path are termed as a healer of hearts. The intention of the master of the order along with all of his followers is to serve Allah. Most of the *Sufis* are of the view that the seeker of *Sufi* knowledge does not have the ability to self-diagnose. For these seekers, the process of engaging in different practices can be really harmful and misleading without a guide or spiritual master. It is in the presence of a teacher that a student will realize what to pay attention to (Gülen & Gülen, 2004).

Zikar

A major Spiritual practice in Sufism is Zikar (remembrance of Allah). The remembrance of Allah Almighty has been ordered in the Holy Quran. For this reason, all Muslims adhere to the teachings of the Holy Quran as it is free of any errors or changes. The repetition of the divine names of Allah and other forms of supplications are some examples of Zikhr (Zamhari & Howell, 2012).

Muraqaba

Muraqaba (meditation) is a practice that has been observed in many religions and *Sufi* orders. It has been linked to different forms of meditation. It should be considered that this word has been derived from one of the names of Allah, Al Raqib, which stands for “The Vigilant”. It is through this practice that a person is able to watch over himself and tries to purify his heart, mind, and soul. He should focus his senses and all energies on divine entity while cutting him away from the preoccupations of this world. In all of these practices, the focus should always be on the remembrance of Allah (Isgandarova, 2019).

Chilla Practice

Some modern schools of thought emphasize to allocate some days or the forty days called *chilla* to revive the knowledge of Sufism and to be in touch with their spiritual mentors. During this period, they have to be cut off from the formal worldly affairs to renew the learning or to upgrade themselves in religious knowledge and practices. In this way, they learn to control their *Nafs* i.e., self, being mentally and psychologically stabilized in their choice of such style of living (Gülen & Gülen, 2004).

Qawwali

Though *Qawwali* (*Sufi* music) is a modern institution of Sufism, originally introduced by a classical *Sufi* Ameer Kusru in the subcontinent, it has been specifically adopted by a specific class of modern *Sufis* who entertain the pilgrims of different shrines on the eve of *Urs* (*Sufi* festival) and other religious festivals.

Amalgamation of Sufism and Psychology is not a new phenomenon. Researches on the role of Sufism have been conducted especially, in Clinical Psychology and Counseling Psychology. A study conducted to show the commonality in the goals of Sufism and psychology, concluded that Sufism and psychology give significance to Self and both aim to create harmony in the existing being to make it conflict free. Like psychology, Sufism is also considered as the science of soul (Wilcox, 2014).

In the contemporary Psychology, we cannot refute the significance of spiritual dimension of human health and well-being. Currently, spirituality is an extended field of research especially, in mental health science. A study conducted by Nizamie et al. (2013) highlight the need of Sufism in the contemporary times in therapeutic practices for improving mental health and well-being. Another study was conducted on spirituality and social health among cancer patients. Results showed that the dimensions of spirituality are moderately associated with the capacity of patients that they tried to maintain the social role with satisfaction and the relationship in the context of cancer (Jim et al., 2015). Studies have also established that spirituality and spiritual coping strategies are significant predictors of human well-being. A study was conducted to see how spiritual coping styles, hope, and social support influence in reducing the psychological distress of 309 cardiac patients. Results showed a negative association between spiritual coping strategies and distress among cardiac patients (Ai et al., 2007).

Researchers are also empirically testing the efficacy of rituals practiced by *Sufis* in mental health and how modern therapeutic techniques have been influenced by *Sufi* practices. Mirdal (2012) conducted a study on the

commonality of *Rumi's* philosophical concept of mindfulness and psychological concept of mindfulness in therapies and it was found that both have certain similarities.

We cannot make assumptions on the effectiveness of *Sufi's* rituals and practices in enhancing the mental health and well-being of individuals, unless we empirically explore the perception of contemporary *Sufis* regarding their practices. To the best of our knowledge, no study had yet explored the in-depth multifaceted experiences of *Sufis* of the modern times, so that we can develop therapeutic plans by incorporating the experiences and insights of *Sufis* regarding certain *Sufi* practices.

Rationale of Study

The Muslims and the Sufis of the modern era have faced invasion of western modernity with all its components of modern democratic features, economic ideologies, modern discourse of education with the advancements in science, and a need to progress in all the fields of knowledge with scientific methods and techniques. The modern western institutions, whether political or economic, challenged the old structures of Sufism and the configuration of the Muslim states and called for a need to revive all the foundations of Sufi order and the composition of typical Muslim states (Sirriyeh, 2014).

There are very few empirical studies on the experiences and practices of modern world/ contemporary *Sufis*. The current study was designed to explore the experiences and practices of contemporary *Sufis* in Pakistan. Most of the previous work on Sufism is either theoretical in nature or the studies have been conducted mostly in South Asian cultural contexts, which do not represent the practices and experiences of contemporary *Sufis* in Pakistan (Werbner, 2013).

Research Questions

1. What are the spiritual practices of contemporary *Sufis* in Pakistan?
2. How do contemporary *Sufis* in Pakistan perceive their spiritual and social experiences?

2. METHODOLOGY

Sample

An exploratory qualitative research design was used in this study, in which a researcher shapes a holistic picture based upon the reports of information (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016). A purposive sampling technique

was used and participants were selected on the basis of their availability and willingness to participate in research (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016). Twelve *Sufis* who belonged to different *silsala* (orders) of Sufism were approached. Two *Sufis* refused to participate, and data were collected from ten *Sufis*.

Inclusion Criteria

Practicing *Sufis*, as mentioned by people who were in contact with them and who themselves claimed that they were *Sufis*, were included in the study. They claimed to have more than thousand followers. *Sufis*, who were Muslim by religion and were performing religious rituals and had been involved in *Sufi* practice for at least ten years were included in the study.

Table 1: Demographics of the Participants (N=10)

Participants	Age	Residential area	Social class	Followers' social class	Source of income	*Silsalla-e-tassawuf	Spiritual background
1	53	Cha- Miran	Middle	All	Translation & book writing	Warsiya	Yes
2	30	Narowaal	Upper middle	Lower middle – middle	Business	Naqshbandi Mujajdi Qadriya	No
3	29	Muzafarghar	Middle	All	Agriculture	Chishti	Yes
4	86	Okarah	Middle	All	Education	Chishtie Qadri Naqshbandiya	Yes
5	67	Lahore	Middle	All	Proof reading	Naqshbandiya Mujajdiya Masomiya	Yes
6	37	Dipalpur	Middle	All	Agriculture	Chistie Qadire	Yes
7	45	Jalalpurjatan	Middle	Middle	<i>Dum</i> : sacred breath	Chishtie Qadrie	No
8	45	Lahore	Middle	All	*Imam	Chishtie Qadrie	No
9	48	Lahore	Middle	All	*Imam	Naqshbandiya	No
10	50	Jalalpurjatan	Middle	Middle	Agriculture	Chishtie Qadrie	No

Note: * Silsalla-e-tassawuf is a typical term that is used in *Sufi* tradition which shows the meaning of *Sufi* orders. *Imam is a leader of a mosque who leads prayers.

All participants were Muslim, had spiritual background, indicating that they had other *Sufis* in their family.

Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected from ten *Sufis* via semi-structured interviews. Interview questions covered different dimensions of practices and experiences

of the *Sufis* participating in the current study. Initially questions were prepared related to the life experiences and spiritual practices of these *Sufis*. The purpose of the questions was to generate information from the *Sufis* in relevance to their spiritual practices and experiences. The questions were designed keeping in view the research questions. This list of questions was given to six experts from the domain of Sufism and psychology. They were asked for their opinion on the interview schedule and the questions to be asked in semi-structured interviews. After having analyzed the suitability and appropriateness of the questions, the experts gave their comments which were incorporated to prepare final interview schedule. Some of the redundant questions were excluded, some questions were rephrased and some suggested questions were added to collect in-depth information. Initial questions were reduced to a small number of questions by adding prompts and probes. Two *Sufis* were also engaged to finalize the interview schedule, so that the maximum dimensions of the phenomenon of Sufism could be covered in the semi-structured interview schedule.

Finally, for the semi-structured interviews, a set of 15 questions was prepared in Urdu language keeping in view the convenience of the participants. For data collection, all the participants were personally approached by the first author at the time and places suggested by the participants. Most of the interviews were conducted at the residential places of the participants. It took between 30-55 minutes to complete every interview. Initially, the *Sufis* were resistant to share their experience in depth, but once rapport was developed, interviews went smoothly and in a comfortable environment. After the interviews had been conducted, the authors transcribed the data.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The transcribed information gathered through the interviews was subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), because IPA worked through the transcripts generated from the semi-structured interviews. It encompasses the method of strategic reduction, analysis of comments, specific and general statements and through the search of common and differential meanings inside the data. It includes and describes the accounts of the specific experiences shared by the participants (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The reason for which IPA was used in this study was due to its suitability for the analysis of lived experience. Since this study is based on exploring the accounts of spirituality and Sufism, experienced by practicing *Sufis*, IPA was the most appropriate tool, as it allows for the analysis of experiences in an effective and structured manner. It was also due to its systematic nature that IPA was the most preferred approach for this study. Another main aim of using IPA was that it helped in grasping the quality as well as texture of the

experiences of the *Sufis*. During the coding process, the first and second author had regular meetings and these codes and themes were verified by the third party (A researcher expert in IPA).

IPA was used primarily for an in depth analysis of the verbatims. As a result of this analysis, a number of emergent themes were generated from each of the interview. Similar as well as different emergent themes were subjected to clustering together for the purpose of forming major themes. In addition, tables for each of the major themes were developed in a strategic manner keeping in view the IPA standards for formulating tables. One of the main purposes behind the development of these tables was to gain a better understanding of the *Sufis*' experiences. In addition, the tables are also helpful for those who wish to take an overview of the themes. It should be noted here that the clustering was done keeping in view the common elements and facets among the emergent themes.

The next step was to develop tables for master themes. The major themes were combined together in the same manner keeping in view the similarities for each. The tables also help in offering complete information in relevance to each of the emergent themes. The analysis was done in a meticulous manner in order to complete coverage of the themes.

Table 2. Master Table (N=10)

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes	Keywords	Translation
Inclination towards Sufism	Chosen by God	اللہ تعالیٰ نے چن لیا ہے اب اسی کے نام کا حقہ جلانا ہے (لائن 2-12) اللہ تعالیٰ نے عطا کیا، یہ اس کا انعام ہے (لائن 7-112) "بزرگوں نے بشارت دی، مبارک ہو اللہ کا ولی پیدا ہوا ہے (لائن 8-111)	Allah Almighty has chosen me. I distribute the blessings of His name among people. 12-2 Allah Almighty has bestowed me with it; this is His reward (Line 112-7). When, I born, the elders gave the glad tidings, "congratulations, you are Blessed by Allah with the saint" (Line 111-8).
Spiritual Journey	Spirituality is transmitted Childhood Spiritual Experience	خلافتیں لی ہیں میں نے اور اپنے بزرگوں سے اکتساب فیض کیا ہے (لائن 3-18) بچپن میں اپنے بزرگ صاحب کے حکم پر بسم اللہ پڑھ کے بیمار بچے کو دم کیا وہ ٹھیک ہو گیا (لائن 6-118)	I have taken caliphates and I have benefited from my elders (Line 18-3). As a child, I recited Bismillah at the behest of my elder brother and threw whiff on the sick child and he recovered (Line 118-6).

Spirituality and books reading	کتابوں کے مطالعے سے جو دین اور روحانیت کے موضوع پر ہوں یعنی سوانح عمری ہوں پڑھوں تا کہ سیکھ سکوں۔ (لائن 5-26)	I can read books that are on the subject of religion and spirituality, that is, biographies, so that I can learn (Line 26-5).	
Journey of spirituality is infinite	تصوف میں جہاں ہم آ کر رکے ہیں وہاں صرف احساسات ہیں ہمیں بھی پتہ نہیں چل رہا کہ ہم کہاں آ کر رکے ہیں (لائن 86-8) یہ لامتناہی منزل ہے جس کا کوئی کنارہ نہیں اسی میں چلتے جانا ہے۔ (لائن 8-30)	There are only feelings where we have stopped in the journey of spirituality, we don't even know where we have stopped (Line 86-8). Or there is an infinite destination that has no end (Line 30-8).	
Religious rituals	اللہ کے آگے جھکنا اور اس کی سب مان لینا، اور اسی کو سجدہ کرنا ہے۔ عبادت ہماری ریاضت کی روح ہے۔ (لائن 8-15)	To bow before Allah and to obey Him is to prostrate to Him. Worship is the spirit of our discipline (Line 8-15).	
Spiritual power	اللہ کی تجلیات دیکھتے ہیں (لائن 8-29) اللہ کے نام کی تجلیات (لائن 4-137)	See the manifestations of Allah (lines 29-8) Manifestations of God's Name (Line 137-4).	
Practicing Sufism	Suppressing pleasure seeking	نفس کنٹرول کرتے ہیں اس کو مارتا ہوں سدھارتا ہوں۔ (لائن 5-27)	I control myself, I exterminate it, I correct it (Lines 27-5).
Zikar and prayers	دعا اور ذکر کی تجلیات دیکھتے ہیں اور دکھاتے ہیں۔ (لائن 4-97)	Observe and demonstrate the manifestations of prayer and remembrance (Line 97-4).	
Fanafe Sheikh (submission to mystic leader)	فنا فی الشیخ (لائن 1-7) شیخ کی کرامت سے مجھ کو اکتساب فیض ملا (لائن 3-119)	submission to mystic leader (Line 7-1). By the grace of Sheikh (mystic leader), I am successful in the acquisition of my purpose (Line 119-3).	
Taqwa(God-fearing piety)	ہر وقت اللہ سے ڈرتے رہتے ہیں کہ ہم سے چھن نہ جائے کہیں، ہم بھٹک نہ جائیں (لائن 8-83)	We are occupied with the fear of Allah all the times, lest he snatch away, lest we astray (Line 83-8).	
Social experiences	Follower's expectation	پیروکار بہت سی توقعات لے کر آتے ہیں ان کو پورا کرنے	Followers come with a lot of expectations and we try to meet them (Line 28-5)

Spiritual treatment of diseases	<p>کی ہماری کوشش ہوتی ہے۔ (لائن 28-5) 98% لوگ دنیا کے ستائے ہوئے آتے ہیں۔ (لائن 29-5) کچھ بیچارے غریب لوگ بیماری یا ان کا علاج کروانے آتے ہیں۔ کچھ وہ بھی آتے ہیں جن کو ڈاکٹرز کے علاج سے آرام نہیں آتا۔ (لائن 30-5)</p>	<p>98% people come who have worldly problems (Line 29-5).</p>	
Superstitions	<p>کچھ کالے جادو کے توڑ اور جنات اور پریوں کے سائے میں ہوتے ہیں، کوئی جلساز ان کو یہ کہہ دیتا ہے پھر وہ اس توست سے آتے ہیں۔ (لائن 31-5)</p>	<p>Some poor people come for the treatment of their disease. Also there are people who are not healed with the treatment of doctors (Line 30-5). Some believe that they are in the shadow of black magic and are supposed to be possessed by giants and fairies. Many fakers tell them this and then they come to us (Line 31-5).</p>	
Running multi business	<p>میرے ڈیری فارم ہیں، کھاد کا بزنس ہے، امرود کے باغات ہیں، فش فارم ہیں۔ (لائن 16، 17-3)</p>	<p>I have dairy farms, I have a fertilizer business, guava orchards, and fish farms (Lines 16, 17-3).</p>	
Satisfied with social status	<p>شکر ہے سوہنے کا ذکر کرتے ہیں راج راج کہاتے ہیں (لائن 15، 20-3)</p>	<p>I am thankful to Allah, who blessed us with sustenance (Lines 15, 20-3).</p>	
Training of Zikar to followers	<p>روحانی ذمہ داری بھی پوری کرتے ہیں پیروکاروں کو ذکر سکھاتے ہیں اللہ کے ذکر سے ہی سب کچھ ملتا ہے۔ (لائن 8-84)</p>	<p>We also fulfill our spiritual responsibilities and teach zikr (remembrance of Allah) to our followers. Everything comes from the remembrance of Allah (Line 84-8).</p>	
Spiritual trainer	<p>جو روحانی سفر میں چلنا چاہے اسے چلاتے بھی ہیں روحانیت میں منزل مرشد کے سر ہی ملتی ہے۔ (لائن 91-8)</p>	<p>We guide all those who want to adopt a spiritual journey. In spirituality, the destination is reached with help of Murshid (Line 91-8)</p>	
Stage of Sufism	<p>کامل مومن، فنا فی الشیخ، فنا فی الرسول، فنا فی اللہ (لائن 7-77)</p>	<p>Perfect Believer, annihilation in the spiritual leader, annihilation in the prophet, annihilation in Allah (Line 77-7).</p>	
Self-actualization	<p>Belief vs. Self-actualization</p>	<p>انسان کا کامل مومن ہونا ہے۔ (لائن 120-5) رب سے کئے گئے وعدے کی پاسداری کرنا ضروری ہے۔ (لائن 121-8) اگر روحانیت کے درجے پورے کر لے کوئی، تقاضے</p>	<p>Man has to be a perfect believer (Line 120-5). It is necessary to keep the promise made to the Lord (Allah) (Line 121-8). If one completes the levels of spirituality, fulfills the</p>

	پورے کر لے تو روحانیت کی تکمیل ہو گئی۔ (لائن 7-124)	requirements, then spirituality is achieved (Line 124-7).
Taqwa vs. self-actualization	ذات کی تکمیل تقویٰ سے ہی ہے۔ (لائن 8-131)	Actualization of Self comes from God-fearing piety (Line 131-8).
	ذات کی تکمیل سب کے لئے ممکن ہے مگر جو کوشش کرے۔ (لائن 3-132)	Actualization of Self is possible for everyone, but condition is to make efforts (Line 132-3).
Accepting self-vs. self-actualization	ذات کی خصوصیت کو پہچاننا تکمیل کے لئے بہت لازمی ہے۔ (لائن 2-126)	Recognizing the attributes of Self is essential for self-actualization (Line 126-2).

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to analyze the experiences as well as practices of contemporary *Sufis*. The experiences and practices were interpreted through the use of IPA. It should be noted that the findings of the study are consistent with the data available on traditional *Sufis*. However, there are also a number of findings that are unique to this study. The findings of the study are helpful to develop insight regarding the phenomenon of Sufism. Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the data were: inclination towards Sufism, spiritual journey, practicing Sufism, social experiences, and self-actualization.

Inclination towards Sufism

The first super-ordinate theme emerged from the study was 'inclination towards Sufism'. The main subordinate themes that falls under this master theme is 'Chosen by God'. The *Sufis* reported that the decision to adopt the path of *Sufis* was destined and they believed that they were chosen by God for this great mission.

"Allah Almighty has chosen me. I distribute the blessings of His name among people. Allah Almighty has bestowed me with it; this is His reward. When, I born, the elders gave the glad tidings, "congratulations, you are Blessed with the guardian of Allah"

It can be assumed that being a *Sufi* is not something that one opts for by himself or by choice. The verbatim reflects that for being a *Sufi*, a kind of divine selection is required. The literature also supports the notion of contemporary *Sufis* that *Sufis* are selected by God and they follow this path in the light, shown to them by Allah. Maria Dakake who was considered as *Sufi* women of seventh to the thirteenth century has expressed her views on divine love and connection. She expressed the divine connection as "Guest of the

Inmost Heart," in her writings and considered it as God gifted connection (Silvers, 2010). The verbatim also shows that *Sufis* are born *Sufis*, and it is their divine fate that they will start practice at some point in life. The verbatim that *Sufis* are born *Sufis* or are selected by the divine power is in line with the assertion in the literature that *Sufis* are informed directly by Allah Almighty of their being as a *Sufi* and a *Wali*, i.e., high ranked spiritual person considered by the Allah (Shah, 2004).

Spirituality is Transmitted

The second super-ordinate theme emerged from the data was termed as Spirituality was transmitted. The *Sufis* were of the view that they had inherited qualities of *Sufis* and they were trained by their *murshid* (mystic leader/master). This sub-ordinate theme reflects the importance of being under the supervision of another *Sufi* to reach the status of *kamil* (perfect) *Sufi*.

"I have taken caliphates and I have benefited from my elders (Line 18-3)".

The *Sufis*'s belief that they had learnt from their elders and masters is consistent with Mayer (1967) that a *Sufi* clearly says that he has learnt everything about spirituality from his teachers and elders. The verbatim also points out to the importance of the order of *Sufis* who endorse a person as a *Sufi*. It has been suggested that importance should be given to the order to which a *Sufi* belongs. In other words, there are a number of chains of transmission to which each *Sufi* belongs. For this reason, the role of belongingness to an order or to a specific group of *Sufis* or to a specific school of thought is indeed mandatory for *Sufis*. The verbatim also shows that the *Sufis* in our sample had given a great deal of significance to their teachers or to the specific order to which they belong. Literature also supports this phenomenon that spirituality is transferred from *Murshid* (mystic leader/master). *Murshid* has an important role in the training of spirituality to teach the *Shariah* (Islamic religious law), *Tariqat* (Islamic path) and *Haqiqat* that is to actualize the absolute reality (Bashir & Batool, 2018). One of the participants asserted that he was informed by his master that he had some miracle when he was a child.

"I recited Bismillah at the behest of my elder brother and threw whiff on the sick child and he recovered" (Line 118-6).

The claim that they were informed about their status, somehow endorses their belief that their masters had infused the feelings in them that they were different from others.

The *Sufis* in the study believed that they had polished themselves and learned mysticism and piety through reading books, which is in addition to something that is built-in as well as incorporated by virtue of primogeniture.

"I can read books that are on the subject of religion and spirituality, that is, biographies, so that I can learn" (Line 26-5).

It can also be said through literature that experiences of Sufism are enhanced and improved through following the religious practices and other sources (Arasteh, 2013). In other words, a *Sufi* should always comply with the religious principles and practices. Hence, it suggests that *Sufis* are staunch followers of Islam as suggested by the sub-ordinate themes. In addition, a constant connection and submission to Allah Almighty is also imperative for being selected as a *Sufi* and for the spiritual experience. The verbatim reflects that a person who is not consistent or not religious cannot be a *Sufi*.

“To bow before Allah and to obey Him is to prostrate to Him. Worship is the spirit of our discipline” (Line 8-15).

Being a *Sufi* is all about freeing oneself from the pleasures of this world. There are a number of deviations that exist to distract humans from connecting to the divine entity. It was reported that there is no end to the stages through which *Sufis* go through in order to become a *Sufi*.

“There is an infinite destination that has no end”.

This notion is also supported from literature that the spiritual experience is something that is marked for its infinity. Having fear of God and complete acceptance of His Power is an obligation for the *Sufis* (Shah, 2004).

Sub-ordinate themes also illustrate that the journey of Sufism is indefinite; there is no boundary. The connection with Allah can be established through engaging in consistent, never ending and deep spiritual practices. Without acknowledging the power and control of Almighty, no one can transcend through the stages of Sufism. It is also supported through literature that in the journey of spirituality, the ultimate goal of *Sufi* is to reach the level of *Marifat* i.e. knowing Allah through *Mujahada* (ultimate struggle to acquire the spirituality) and spiritual practices (Loutfy and Berguno, 2005). The emergent themes have also helped in removing most of the misconceptions that have been linked to *Sufis* such as they do not offer prayers, and consider them free or acquitted from the boundaries of religion. However, the data gathered from the sample have been helpful to dispel most of these controversies. In simple words, the theme suggests that to become a *Sufi*, primarily, one needs to become a practicing Muslim. It is a pre-requisite for moving towards the first stage of Sufism.

Sufis in the study also believed that they had some spiritual powers. They experience some extra sensory reflections of the creator that other people cannot imagine. It seems, these contemporary *Sufis* are fully aware of their powers and uniqueness of their experiences.

“See the manifestations of Allah. Manifestations of God's Name”.

Literature also supports that *Mujizat* (miracles) are associated with Prophet and *karamat* (supernatural wonders) is associated with *imam/saints*. *Mujizat* are distinguished miraculous deeds of Prophet that are considered as

the distinctiveness of Prophets, while *karamat* are spiritual wonders of saints, for which a saint is known (Flueckiger, 2005).

Practicing Sufism

The *Sufis* proclaim that suppressing pleasure-seeking desires; *Zikar* (meditation) and prayers, *Fana Fe Shaikh* (submission to the mystic leader), and *Takawa* (God-fearing piety) are the hallmark of their practices.

“I control myself, I exterminate it, I correct it... Observe and demonstrate the manifestations of prayer and remembrance... submission to mystic leader. By the grace of Sheikh (mystic leader), I am successful in the acquisition of my purpose”.

“I cannot explain in words, what I feel during meditation”.

“When I am in Zikr, it is between me and Him, no one can feel the beauty of this relationship”.

It reveals that *Sufis* have to control their *Nafs* (self-control) during the journey of Sufism; once a *Sufi* purifies himself, there comes the stage of *Zikr*. It seems that praise of Allah’s blessings and meditation demand purification of soul. Then comes a stage, when a *Sufi* feels himself the part of that divine power. The narration of *Sufis* also reflects that stopping oneself from doing what Allah has prohibited to do is the last stage. *Sufis* never feel pride over their connection with Allah but remain modest and humble and remain fearful of Allah. Engaging themselves in various practices to purify their souls and connect themselves with Allah is in line with the claim by Dehlvi (2009) that *Sufis* believe that the ascendance is possible only through the process of *tareeqat* that is purification of the soul. All forms of mysticism seek a union with the divine and believe that it is only possible through the purification of soul to receive direct knowledge and revelation from the divine (Smith, 1995). However, prayer, fasting, and repentance are the means to receive esoteric knowledge and the ways to access God through purification of self that form the foundations of Sufism (Smith, 1995). Literature supports the notion that *Sufis* go through multiple spiritual practices in their spiritual journey under the supervision of their *Murshid* (mystic leader/master) to acquire the level of spirituality (Kugle, 2011). Although all the *Sufis* in the study talked about their practices, but none of them shared how they felt during these practices and said that they were not allowed to talk about it. In the same lines, previous studies on psychological experience of *Sufi* practices also highlighted this fact. The psychic experiences, partly based on individual accounts of *Sufis*, are immediate, usually momentary, indescribable, inexpressible, unanalyzable, involving close association with a unique other self, beyond time, space and

person, and are felt as a deep sense of ecstasy [Fenwick, 1996; Iqbal, 1934; Smith, 1995].

Social Experiences

This super-ordinate theme covers diversified social experiences of the contemporary *Sufis* for example; followers' expectation, spiritual treatment of diseases, superstitions, running multi business, satisfaction with social status, and spiritual trainer. The first sub-ordinate theme in this regard is based on the follower's expectations. The *Sufis* are of the view that their followers expect a lot from them. They visit them with firm belief and expectations.

"Followers come with a lot of expectations and we try to meet them. 98% people who come, have worldly problems. Some poor people come for the treatment of their disease. There are also those who are not recovered from their illness with the treatment of doctors".

In simple words, *Sufis* seem to believe in them and expect that their *dua* or prayers will put an end to the problems. As per *Sufis'* verbatims, most of the problems of the people are related to what others have done to them. It should also be mentioned that most of their visitors are people who belong to poor economic backgrounds. As they cannot afford treatment of their physiological diseases, they prefer to seek help from *Sufis*. Some of the visitors are of the view that their doctors cannot cure their diseases. *Sufis* are of the view that some segments of population set unusual and wrong expectations from them that they have to address, just to satisfy them. A study supported that the relationship of *Murshid* (mystic leader/master) with his disciple is based on the reciprocated recognition of passion and devotion regardless of disciple's cultural and social background. This relationship is based on the mystical customs as mentioned in *Sufi* tradition (Pinto, 2010).

"Some are in the shadow of black magic and are supposed to be possessed by giants and fairies. Many fakers tell them so, that's why, they come to us."

The theme in this regards also shows that the role of the beliefs and expectations of the followers plays an important role in the fame of *Sufis*. The theme on superstitions suggests that there is a considerable number of those *mureeds* (disciples) who expect them to break down black magic spells. One of the *Sufis* reported that he ran multiple businesses.

I have dairy farms, a fertilizer business, guava orchards, and fish farms. I am thankful to Allah, who blessed us with sustenance".

This claim indeed raises a number of questions on the existing prevalent trends among *Sufis*. This theme has raised a controversy, as literature suggests that a *Sufi* is a person, who is free from worldly desires and pleasures

(Ahmadi, 2000), but modern contemporary *Sufis* in our study hold luxurious status in the society.

Apart from this, social experiences and activities of *Sufis* also include training sessions. *Sufis* do offer some training to their disciples or followers on how to become more spiritual and develop direct connection with Allah.

“We also fulfill our spiritual responsibilities and teach zikr (remembrance of Allah) to our followers. Everything comes from the remembrance of Allah. Those who want to adopt a spiritual journey, we guide them. In spirituality, the destination is reached with help of Murshhid. Perfect believer comes from the annihilation in the spiritual leader, annihilation in the prophet, annihilation in Allah”.

The aim of these practices is to ensure that they become stronger and more connected with Allah Almighty. The ultimate aim of the *Sufi* is communion (spiritual union) with Allah through spiritual realization, which is achieved through the knowledge revealed by Quran (*ilm*) and the practice of Islam (*amal*) (Chittick, 1989). In *Sufi*'s view, as suggested in the literature, a connection with the Almighty is the ultimate solution for all problems. The *Sufis* also assert that the people who wish to join them in their journey are always invited and completely supported. So, it can be said that the social activities of *Sufis* extend to spiritual training as well. It suggests that they are of the view that every person in the world, whether a *Sufi* or not, can seek spiritual guidance and training.

Self-actualization

This super-ordinate theme points to the journey of *Sufis* towards self-actualization. One of the pre-requisites in this regard is to become a complete Muslim or *kamil-momin*. The ultimate goal of a *Sufi* is always to be regarded as a person who is firm in his beliefs in Allah Almighty. Self-actualization for them is something that comes by passing through a number of stages. The first stage in this regard is to fulfill the parameters of spirituality.

“Man has to be a perfect believer. It is necessary to keep the promise made to the Lord (Allah). If one completes the levels of spirituality, fulfills the requirements, then spirituality is achieved. Actualization of Self comes from God-fearing piety”

Literature supports that a *Sufi* is a person who should be compliant with these parameters and requirements in order to ensure that he moves successfully towards self-actualization (Boni, 2010). This theme also points out that the goal of every human being should always be focused at achieving a totality in his/her personality. Without achieving this totality, one can never claim to be a self-actualized person. Another core facet to ponder on is to realize and identify one's most attractive and appealing personality facets. At the same

time, it is also imperative that one should be aware of his/her weaknesses. From these themes, it can be assumed that *Sufis* are indeed aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are also aware of how these facets can be channelized towards spirituality. In other words, they are able to make an efficient use of their abilities and competencies in order to become closer to Allah.

“Actualization of Self comes from God-fearing piety. Actualization of Self is possible for everyone, those who try. Recognizing the attributes of self is essential for self-actualization”.

“Struggle to find the truth does not mean that you cut yourself off from the worldly affairs”.

Contrary to what most people believe about the *Sufis*, they are of the view that the sense of self-actualization cannot be achieved by completely cutting oneself off from this world. One needs to function socially in this mundane world and at the same time focus on establishing a connection with the Almighty. In other words, the world and the spiritual experience both go together. In this regard, a *Sufi* cited an example of the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He said that the life of Muhammad (PBUH) is the best example for those who say that Sufism is about detaching oneself from this world and moving towards a different world. It is clear that *Sufis* do regard the life of Prophet Muhammad PBUH as an example to be followed by everyone as there was no other Prophet who was ever able to be so close to Allah (Chittick, 1979).

Reflexivity and Limitations

- i. During the process of data collection and interpretation, the authors became familiar with the actual meanings of many terminologies (e.g., Fanafe Sheikh) being used in literature on Sufism and learned some of the guidelines for the purification of soul.
- ii. Travelling to the *aastana* (headquarters) of the *Sufis* was a hard-hitting practice.
- iii. During the process of obtaining informed consent, many *Sufis* refused to take part in the study, and the author could not convince them because *Sufis* thought that spiritual experiences were secret communication between *Sufis* and *Murshad* (spiritual leader) and it should not be exposed/discussed.
- iv. During the phase of data recording and transcription, two of the *Sufis* were hesitant and we could not do voice recording of the data, so written notes were taken for the two *Sufis*.

- v. Two *Sufis* were not willing to reveal detailed information on their accounts, and shared information in a small time span due to which the information shared by them might not be wide-ranging.
- vi. Some of the limitations might have influenced the results of the study: Data were collected from the *Sufis* living in cities; the *Sufis* living away from population should also be included in future studies. *Sufis* in the study appeared to hide some experiences that the authors could not probe in and did not force them to share. *Sufis* from Punjab districts were included in the study, so they do not truly represent all the contemporary *Sufis* in Pakistan. During the interpretation stage, some verbatims were found ambiguous, but we could not verify the interpretation from *Sufis*, as they were not accessible to be reinterviewed.

Implications

The analysis of the study asserts that all *Sufis* were following more or less similar route to Sufism and spirituality. Sufism has remained an integral part of Islam. However, few attempts have been made to explore Sufism in an in-depth manner. This study will be of great help for those who wish to explore Sufism and who want to practice some of its rituals to purify their souls. The study will also be useful in understanding the stages involved in Sufism, its origins, how it is practiced, what are the stages through which Sufis have to go through and a lot more. We can integrate the spiritual practices of *Sufis* in therapeutic intervention plans to test its effectiveness in mental health and well-being.

5. CONCLUSION

The study focused on a number of aspects that include: spiritual and social experiences of *Sufis*, their attitudes towards Sufism, and their views towards self-actualization. The study concludes that for spirituality, there needs to be an inclination, patronage of master (*Murshid*) and will to achieve the destination. It appeared from the study that even if spirituality is inherent, a great deal of effort is required to cover the stages of spirituality, and purification of soul to connect to the ultimate divine power. The main concern of spirituality is focusing your energies towards understanding the divine entity. In other words, *Sufis* are of the view that one should be focused towards divine reality. It appeared that Sufism is a divine selection and one does not have control over it. It is the selection of God, not the choice of a person. It is imperative for all *Sufis* to do *Baith* (spiritual oath) of some *Sufi*. They also differ somewhat in terms of their social circles: some preferring solitude while others interact with

their visitors and followers more often. *Sufis* are also found to be as spiritual healers who were treating psychological and physical problems of those who had strong belief in the effectiveness of their prayers and spiritual practices directed by these *Sufis*. Most of their visitors come to them for advice and treatment on health issues, interpersonal problems, and related issues. These visitors have a firm belief in their abilities and knowledge, that compel them to visit them for the solution of their problems and the followers continue to be on the rise. Each *Sufi* associates himself with some order and renowned *Sufi* from the past. Account of *Sufis* in our study contradicts with Maslow's theory of self-actualization. *Sufis* are of the view that it was their commitment towards the ultimate goal that made them focused towards the ultimate goal while putting aside the basic needs. However, Maslow is of the view that one's actualization is achieved only through the process of fulfilling each section of the hierarchy of need that starts with the basic needs. We may conclude that most of the experiences and practices of contemporary *Sufis* are similar to the traditional *Sufis*. Sufism forms an integral part of Islam, however, there is a need for understanding this domain in more detail in order to gain a true insight into the phenomenon of Sufism.

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