

## **Emotional and Family Functioning of Middle-Aged Mothers during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Present study was carried out to investigate the relationship between emotional functioning and family functioning of middle-aged mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, a mixed method approach was used in the second phase of study to explore factors contributing to family conflict and family cohesion. A purposive sample of 100 middle-aged mothers (age ranged between 40-45 years) was approached for this study. The participants were given the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (Cooper & Pertrides, 2010) for measuring emotional functioning and Covid-19 Household Environment Scale (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020) for measuring family functioning. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between emotional functioning, family cohesion, and a significant negative correlation between emotional functioning and family conflict. Moreover, it was observed that family functioning of mothers living in nuclear family system was better than those living in joint family system. The qualitative phase of the study revealed that factors related to finances, household work, limited resources, relationship deterioration etc. contributed to family conflict. While factors of increase quality time, emotional responsiveness, communication, and communal problem solving, contributed to family cohesion. The findings provide comprehensive insight into the characteristics of family functioning in the context of Covid-19 pandemic.

*Keywords.* Emotional functioning, family functioning, family cohesion, family conflict, COVID-19 pandemic, middle-aged mothers

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked destruction around the world. Due to the nationwide lockdown implemented in March, 2020, self-quarantine and social distancing were the only options to

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constrain the spread of COVID-19 (Behar Zusman et al., 2020). In social distancing, family individuals are required to spend longer time in home with restricted individual space. As the most facilities are closed now, children are studying via remote learning; putting the parents with extra responsibilities including supervising and facilitating the children's education and recreation at home along with their own work. In brief, it is setting a domestic circumstance with huge potential for creating problems and conflicts. The circumstances gives openings for expanded cohesion as well, because family members are sharing more time together and are standing up to the challenges together (Behar Zusman et al., 2020 & Jafree et al., 2020). In this burdensome period of pandemic, emotional functioning contributes in battling with it as emotions play a significant role in shaping individual's decisions and actions (Ghanawat et al., 2016). EQ has significant impact on family because it enables the individual in control of their relationships i.e. with parents and children, siblings, in-laws and extended family. Therefore, a person having high EQ tends to manage conflicts and construct meaningful relationships better than those with low EQ (Lopes et al., 2005). Disease outbreaks are known to multiply women's burdens with pre-existing stresses at work and home being enhanced as schools shut down and family members get infected (Bradshaw & Fordham, 2015). The lockdown situation during the pandemic even worsened the situation for the women (Sánchez-Núñez et al., 2020). Moreover, women especially housewives are confronted with more demands than any other individuals of the family since they are required to oversee family work, take care of household chores, watch out of the elderly and their children (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006).

Emotional quotient or emotional intelligence (EQ) is characterized by "the ability to accurately perceive, evaluate, and express emotions; the ability to access and/or feel sensations when they facilitate thinking; the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual development" (Dejoux et al. 2006, p. 167 as cited in Ghanawat et al., 2016). Two domains central to EQ are ability and personality. Ability EQ constitute the cognitive capacities i.e. perception, assessment, and management, to process and understand emotions (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2020; Mayer et al., 2008), while personality EQ constitute one's ability to control their impulse, regulate their emotions, optimism, and assertiveness (Mayer et al., 2000; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). By taking into account the both domains of EQ i.e. ability and personality; *the pyramid of emotional intelligence: the nine-layer model* incorporates the awareness and

management components of self and social (Drigas & Papoutsis, 2018). This hierarchical model depicts how EQ develops over time and its importance. The nine layers of EQ included in this model are emotional stimuli, emotional recognition, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills, self-actualization, transcendence, emotional unity (Drigas & Papoutsis, 2018).

Family functioning is characterized by the effectiveness with which the family members form emotional connections, follow family rules, fulfill their roles, use direct communication, and cope together with the strains and conflicts that arise inside and outside the family system (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983). McMaster model of family functioning that suggested that family functioning is positively related to an individual's physical and mental wellbeing. In order to expand the knowledge regarding family structures, organization and value-based designs related to family challenges, this model has evaluated and defined six dimensions of family system i.e. problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control; that are responsible for the optimal family functioning (Miller et al., 2000).

Two major dimensions of family functioning that are prime focus of the present study are family conflict and family cohesion. Family conflict is characterized as active resistance between family individuals that can take a wide assortment of shapes including verbal, physical, and psychological (Olson et al., 1983). Literature suggests that as a result of Covid-19 pandemic, around two-thirds of guardians/parents have reported that they are unable to balance between fulfilling the combating needs of work and the well-being of their children (Waite & Creswell, 2020). Other probable concerns encompass elevated rates of unemployment and financial uncertainty or instability, remote schooling, compromised social support, and reduced access to basic clinical, sporting and community activities (Evans et al., 2020). Family cohesion is characterized as having a "close connected relationship". Acting as a protective factor, family cohesion aids alleviating the negative results related to stressors of life (Olson et al., 1983). Family cohesion has been discovered to be a protective factor among grown-ups confronting pressure from family providing care (Magana & Smith, 2006) and acculturative stress (Joel-Wong, et al., 2012; Zapata-Roblyer et al., 2017, as cited in Pan et al., 2020). The findings obtained from the study of Evans et al., (2020) revealed broad range of responses with predominant focus on loss and challenge including conflicts related to familial relationships and mental health adversities. However, various families reported positive impact of COVID-19 pandemic, including the chances to form firm

relationships, discovering new hobbies, and the growth of positive characteristics i.e. gratitude, appreciation, and tolerance.

Emotional functioning influence on an individual's functioning is integral. Szczeniak and Tułeczka, (2021) suggested a significantly positive correlation of EQ with family cohesion, flexibility, communication, and family satisfaction. Moreover, a significantly negative correlation was found of EQ with detached and chaotic family functioning. Lekaviciene and Antiniene (2016) indicated that family factors i.e. psychological climate in the home, strength of subject relations with their mother/ father, and subjective perception of family financial status is significantly related to emotional functioning. These findings suggest that a person understands and control of their own emotion is better when family environment is congenial and family members are responsive of each other's needs. Past literature had indicated that EQ serves as a significant factor contributing towards the healthy development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships that are central to family functioning (Brackett et al., 2011; Libbrecht et al., 2014; Schutte et al., 2001). Researches had also indicated that poor quality of interaction of the individuals with their intimate environment, i.e. parents, siblings and friends weaken their emotional functioning (Butt & Hussain, 2021, as cited in Ghanawat et al., 2016). On the other hand, secure family functioning and relationships enhances the emotional and social competencies central to emotional functioning (Chandran and Nair, 2015, as cited in Alavi et al., 2017). Conclusively, emotional functioning and family functioning have reciprocal relationship in which one impacts the other in a consecutive manner as emotional functioning helps in adapting to one's family environment and family members influence each other's beliefs and self-efficacy that impact their development of emotional intelligence (Cole & Rehm, 1986; Ghanawat et al., 2016).

Literature from Western and industrialized countries provide evidence for the significant relationship between family functioning and emotional functioning (Alavi et al., 2017; Drigas & Papoutsis, 2020; Ghanawat et al., 2016; Schutte et al., 2001; Szczeniak, & Tułeczka, 2021). However, the past literature focuses on the role of family dynamics in the development of emotional functioning, while the aim of the present study is to examine the impact of emotional functioning on family functioning, considering the fact that in Asian societies family functioning is a multifaceted concept. A combination of coping strategies, risk factors, and protective factors contribute towards family cohesion and conflict (Miller et al., 2000). However, in literature, these factors are studied in static rather than the dynamic

dimension. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, the interplay of the aforementioned factors has never been studied extensively in Pakistan, as our culture and lifestyle is different (e.g. co-dependency, role of extended families, etc.) and needs more evidence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic therefore, an in-depth exploration of the factors underlying family functioning is required qualitatively. The qualitative methods are useful for exploring the different manifestations of a phenomenon in different contexts as experiences are highly subjective and unique to each individual (Busetto et al., 2020; Rahman, 2020). Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, most of the previous literature with reference to both emotional intelligence and family functioning has extensively focused on adolescents (Alavi et al., 2017; Ghanawat et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2021; Sanchez-Nunez et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021) and little work has done on adult population especially in Pakistan (Evans et al., 2020; Szczesniak and Tułeczka, 2020). Moreover, Literature suggest the vulnerability of housewives and mothers functioning as a result of pandemic as they have more responsibilities of taking care of their children and home especially in Pakistan, so in order to insure the homogeneity of the sample a narrowed age rang was taken as the sample. Moreover, middle aged mothers are at that phase of their life when they have children mostly teen agers, who are not independent and hence requiring care adding to mothers responsibilities also because they are mostly school going so in COVID-19 online classes and managing resources is also a difficult task.

Thus, apart from adding to existing literature, conducting this research will also offer a basis for subsequent research to take place. Lastly, most of the literature has been documented in the developed world so; this study will help address a gap in the literature regarding the implications of the phenomena in reference to the Pakistani population. Such awareness can be helpful for family policy-makers to gain perspective and understand the family functioning implicitly.

In the light of the past literature and to achieve the objectives of the present study, following hypotheses were proposed:

1. There is a significant positive relationship between emotional functioning, family functioning and family cohesion.
2. There is a significant negative relationship between emotional functioning and family conflict.
3. Emotional functioning is a predictor of family functioning, family cohesion and family conflict.

For the qualitative phase, (phase II) the following research question is designed:

4. What are the factors contributing to family cohesion and family conflict.

## Method

A mixed-method research design was used in the present study. The quantitative approach was used to determine the relationship between emotional functioning and family functioning of middle-aged mothers by using correlational research design (phase 1). In the second phase qualitative exploration was done to study the factors contributing to family cohesion and family conflict.

### Phase I

#### Sample

A sample of 100 middle-aged mothers, age ranging from 40-45, ( $M = 42.73$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) years, who were housewives, and currently married, was recruited via purposive sampling. While participants who were currently separated from their spouse and with any psychiatric illness or physical disability were excluded from the study. Sixty mothers reported that they were living in nuclear family setups while forty present were living in joint families.

#### Measures

Along with the following instruments a demographic sheet was also used to get information about their age and family system.

**Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (Cooper & Pertrides, 2010).** It was used to measure emotional functioning. It is 30- item scale consisting of 15 different facets organized into four factors i.e., wellbeing, self-control, emotionality and sociability (Shipley, et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Respondents were asked to use 7-point Likert scales 1-7 (where 1 = completely disagree to 7= completely agree) to rate the extent to which each item is representative of their state. The Cronbach's alpha showing the internal reliability of the data for all the 30 items was 0.88 (Cooper & Pertrides, 2010).

**Covid-19 Household Environment Scale (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020).** It was used to measure dimensions of family functioning i.e. household cohesion and conflict. It consists of 30 items, 15 items for household cohesion, and 15 items for household conflict. Each item had to be rated on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) much less than before to (5) much more than before. The overall value of Cronbach's Alpha was  $\alpha = .808$  (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020).

### **Procedure**

Initially, pilot study was conducted on five individuals in order to ensure if any amendments needed to be made. It was helpful in assessing the comprehension level and understanding of the items and to ascertain conceptual clarity of the scales. Average time taken to complete the questionnaires was also assessed. In the main study data was primarily collected through social media platform due to Covid-19 constraints. The participants meeting the inclusion criteria were sent an email/SMS. The nature of the study was explained to the participants along with the ethical guidelines. Consent was taken and confidentiality was ensured. Participants completed demographic information sheet and later the measures. It took approximately 10 minutes to complete the measures. Later, assessment measures were scored and data was compiled for the analysis.

### **Phase II**

In phase two, factors contributing to family cohesion and family conflict were explored in-depth. Differences were identified by comparing the underline factors of both aspects i.e. family cohesion and family conflict. For this purpose, detailed interviews were conducted to elicit the prevalent themes in their conversations.

### **Sample**

Interviews were conducted with individuals from the phase I, who scored higher on subscales of family functioning. 3 participants who scored higher on family cohesion and 3 participants who scored higher on family conflict were interviewed.

### **Measure**

A semi-structured open-ended questionnaire was used. The interview schedule included open-ended questions relevant to the

exploration of contributory factors leading to family cohesion and family conflict based on the past literature and McMaster model of family functioning.

### Procedure

Telephonic interviews were conducted with the participants due to Covid-19 constraints. Consent was obtained and purpose was explained to the participants. Questions were asked and responses were recorded. Each participant took approximately 10 minutes for the completion of the interview.

## Results

### Phase I

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to assess the Cronbach's Alpha levels of the scales included in the study. Inferential statistical analysis was used to test the proposed hypotheses of the present study. Pearson's Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation was calculated to analyze the relationship between emotional functioning and family functioning. Simple Linear Regression was computed to analyze the predictive association of emotional functioning on family cohesion, family conflict, and family functioning. Independent Samples t-test was computed to determine the differences in family systems.

### *Analysis of Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Family Functioning*

Pearson's correlation was computed to test the hypotheses describing the relationship between Emotional functioning and Family Functioning.

Table 1

*Pearson Correlation among Study Variables (N = 100)*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. EF	4.61	1.09	.93	-	.87**	.87**	.84**	.83**	-.41**	.71**	.71**
2. WB	4.83	1.31	.82		-	.72**	.63**	.64**	-.32**	.63**	.60**
3. SC	4.18	1.36	.79			-	.63**	.64**	-.32**	.68**	.63**
4. EM	4.83	1.09	.71				-	.65**	-.29**	.52**	.51**
5. SOC	4.39	1.31	.78					-	-.46**	.60**	.66**
6. FCON	49.59	8.33	.78						-	-.30**	-.78**
7. FCOH	52.39	9.46	.87							-	.83**
8. FF	92.8	14.3	.86								-

*Note.* EF = Emotional Functioning; WB = Wellbeing; SE = Self-Control; EM = Emotionality; SOC = Sociability; FCON = Family Conflict; FCOH = Family Cohesion; FF = Family Functioning. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation,  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha level.

\*\**p* < .01.



Table 1 indicates that emotional intelligence has significant positive correlation with family functioning ( $r = .71, p < .01$ ) and family cohesion ( $r = .71, p < .01$ ), while significant negative relationship with family conflict ( $r = -.41, p < .01$ ). It indicates that higher the emotional functioning of individuals, better the family functioning will be.

***Analysis of Predictor of family functioning, family conflict and family cohesion***

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify the predictive effect of emotional intelligence on family functioning, family conflict and family cohesion.

Table 2

*Regression Coefficients of Emotional functioning on Family Functioning (N = 100)*

Variables	B	$\beta$	SE
Constant	49.74***		4.46
Emotional functioning	9.35***	.71	.94
$R^2$	.502		

Note. B = Constant, SE = Standard Error,  $\beta$  = Beta. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 2 shows the impact of emotional functioning on family functioning. The results of the regression analysis indicated that emotional functioning explained 50.2% of the variance in family functioning with  $F(1, 98) = 98.34, p < .001$ . The findings revealed that emotional functioning positively predicted family functioning ( $\beta = .71, p < .001$ ).

Table 3

*Regression Coefficients of Emotional functioning on Family Conflict (N = 100)*

Variables	B	B	SE
Constant	64.21***		3.34
Emotional functioning	-3.17***	-.41	.71
$R^2$	.17		

Note. B = Constant, SE = Standard Error,  $\beta$  = Beta. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3 shows the impact of emotional functioning on family conflict. The results of the regression analysis indicated that emotional

functioning explained 17% of the variance in family conflict with  $F(1, 98) = 20.23, p < .001$ . The findings revealed that emotional functioning negatively predicted family conflict ( $\beta = -.41, p < .001$ ).

Table 4

*Regression Coefficients of Emotional functioning on Family Cohesion (N = 100)*

Variable	B	$\beta$	SE
Constant	23.95***		2.94
Emotional functioning	6.18***	.71	.62
$R^2$	.502		

Note. B = Constant, SE = Standard Error,  $\beta$  = beta. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4 shows the impact of emotional functioning on family cohesion. The results of the regression analysis indicated that emotional functioning explained 50.2% of the variance in family cohesion with  $F(1, 98) = 98.75, p < .001$ . The findings revealed that emotional functioning positively predicted family cohesion ( $\beta = .71, p < .001$ ).

### ***Differences in Family System and Family Functioning***

Independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare family functioning across nuclear and joint family systems.

Table 5

*Independent Sample t-test Comparing Score of Nuclear and Joint Family System on Family Functioning*

Variable	Nuclear Family		Joint Family		$t(98)$	$p$	Cohen's $d$
	M	SD	M	SD			
Family Functioning	95.43	14.32	88.85	13.58	2.29	.024	.47

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 5 indicates that there is a significant difference ( $t(98) = 2.65, p < .05$ ) in the scores of family functioning that indicates that mothers from nuclear family system exhibited higher scores on family functioning ( $M = 95.43, SD = 14.32$ ) than those who lived in joint family system ( $M = 88.85, SD = 13.58$ ).

## Phase II

The qualitative method enables researchers to cover a diverse range of aspects that influence the personal experiences of the participant (Punch, 2013). In order to examine the factors contributing to family cohesion and family conflicts, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate. The purpose of this phase of the study was to generate an understanding of the underline factors that contribute to family cohesion and family conflict. The data was collected from participants using the purposive sampling technique and semi-structured interview method.

### *Thematic Overview*

The analysis and the extraction of themes were done using the Thematic Analysis (TA). Data was collected through interview and the information was transcribed and re-read. Labels were generated from the data set and common and main themes were collected. The labels and the collected data were further examined to look for themes and to identify significant broader patterns of meaning. The themes were reviewed and refined and given names.

Table 6

#### *Basic Themes, Categories/Sub-themes and Interview Extracts*

Basic Themes	Categories/Sub-theme:	Interview Extracts
Factors contributing to family conflict	Financial strain	<p><i>“My husband lost his job while my brother-in-law’s job was intact so it was quite upsetting for us living in the same house with them and feeling helpless”</i></p> <p><i>“...As everyone is home, so expenses have been increased because as you know the weather is hot so everyone sit in their rooms with AC on..”</i></p> <p><i>“...schools/universities are closed, but we have to pay the full fee and they don’t even give us discount so it’s quite frustrating”</i></p>
	1. Loss of job/business	
	2. Increased in expenses	
	3. Children’s fee	

*Continued...*

Basic Themes	Categories/Sub-themes	Interview Extracts
	Increase in household work	
	1. Increased responsibilities	<i>"...my mother-in-law is sick and needs proper care and now my husband and children are also home and due to children's online classes, my burden has increased, I have to take care of everything"</i>
	2. Limited help	<i>"...we had a helper, she used to do the domestic chores but after the increased cases of covid, we had to send her home. And now I have to do all the work by myself"</i>
	Relationship deterioration	<i>"My husband is home mostly so he just criticizes everything I do. Now we rarely have amiable conversation with each other"</i>
	1. Conflicts with husband	
	2. Lack of quality time	<i>"You know how children are busy in their own world, busy in phones and due to online classes, everyone had their own schedule, everyone sleeps and wake-up at their convenience so we don't even eat together much as a family"</i>
	3. Unhealthy communication	<i>"...sometimes conflicts occur and they get bigger and we don't talk for 2 3 days"</i>
	Lack of support system	<i>"I have left everything at God's mercy. He is the only one who can help me. My husband is as exhausted as I am, so there's no pint in sharing anything with him"</i> <i>"...if I share my problems with my husband, he starts talking about his own issues and if I try to share with my children, they start talking about their issues. Sometimes i share but mostly i just stay quiet."</i>

*Continued...*

Basic Themes	Categories/Sub-themes	Interview Extracts
	No time for self-care	<i>"My responsibilities never give me enough time, so I don't share anything with anyone"</i> <i>"...I feel frustrated because a person who is quite social and you put them in the house for this long and when people in the house are sick and your daughter is far from home, it becomes very challenging"</i>
	Limited resources	<i>"...also we have only one smart phone and my kids need one for their classes, so there are fights over the use of cell phones"</i> <i>"We are a large family in small house; there is not enough room for all the members. We are hardly meeting our ends"</i>
	Fears and uncertainty	<i>"...my daughter is a doctor so you know what type of job it is, she was exposed to covid every day, she self-quarantined herself numerous times whenever she got any symptoms, so we were scared all the time"</i>
	1. Fear of future	
	2. Health-related fears	
	Covid in family	<i>"...but then my husband, he didn't practice social distancing, so he got covid and that was a very difficult time for us as his business was affected as well"</i>
Factors contributing to family cohesion	Quality time with family	<i>"after lockdown, everyone was home so we started spending more time together. Those who were always busy also got time as my daughter she used to live in hostel so now we all spend time together...we make new dishes together, eat together, we play games and watch movies or dramas together"</i> <i>"I think our home environment is quite satisfactory. Before not all of us could be together but now we spend time together"</i>
	1. Engaging in activities	
	Division of labor	<i>"My children are accustomed to do their duties themselves. I also encourage them that they help me as well like with kitchen chores e.g. setting the table etc."</i>

Continued...

Basic Themes	Categories/Sub-themes	Interview Extracts
	Emotional responsiveness	<i>"yes we show our emotions and we talk about it and we try to connect"</i>
	1.Healthy communication	<i>"...like if someone gets angry we ask them the reason and explain them the situation that it's not like this and if it is it, will not happen from next time. So they understand"</i>
	Decreased in unhealthy food habits	<i>"My children used to go to school and work without having breakfast but now they eat regularly at home. Moreover, now they don't order food from outside and prefer having homemade healthy food."</i>
	Communal problem-solving	<i>"We as family face our troubles together and help out each other as much as we can"</i> <i>"my other family members are very cooperative they know when I need to give time to my children so they cover up for me and do extra household work"</i>
	Work from home	<i>"One of my son is a freelancer, so he is working from home, and staying home due to lockdown has made his job a lot easier as he is able to get more work done and has flexible working hours"</i>
	No financial problems	<i>"I think if you do not face financial issues other things also start to settle down, so things were quite good and healthy for us."</i>

**Theme 1: Factors Contributing to Family Conflicts.** The responses in this theme shed light on the multiple aspects that participants acknowledged as contributing to their family conflicts. The following sub-themes made up the development of this theme: financial strain, increase in household work, relationship deterioration, lack of support system, insufficient time for self-care, limited resources, fears and uncertainty, and Covid in family. The responses of the participants corresponding to each sub-theme are presented in Table 6.

**Theme 2: Factors Contributing to Family Cohesion.** The responses in this theme include the aspects that participants

acknowledged as responsible for their family cohesion. The following sub-themes made up the development of this theme: quality time with family, division of labor, emotional responsiveness, healthy communication, decreased in unhealthy food habits, communal problem-solving, and work from home. The responses of the participants corresponding to each sub-theme are presented in Table 6.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to better understand the family functioning of middle-aged mothers during COVID-19 pandemic as a way to gain information on what factors leads to family cohesion and family conflict in order to understand family functioning implicitly.

It was hypothesized that emotional functioning is significantly positively correlated to family functioning and family cohesion. The current findings support these hypotheses as it revealed that emotional functioning was positively correlated to family cohesion and family functioning. These results are compatible with the previous literature (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2020; Szczesniak & Tułeczka, 2020) indicating that having high emotional functioning enables an individual to stand together with their family in time of crises and affect their ability to cope with daily life stressors and challenges. Moreover, Emotional functioning and family functioning have reciprocal relationship in which one impacts the other in a consecutive manner as emotional functioning helps in adapting to one's family environment and family members influence each other's beliefs and self-efficacy that impact their development of emotional intelligence (Cole & Rehm, 1986; Ghanawat et al., 2016). Prior literature demonstrated a negative relationship between emotional functioning and family conflict (Szczesniak & Tułeczka, 2020), indicating that low emotional functioning is associated with poor family functioning (e.g., elevated conflict and compromised support system). This inference is directly linked to the findings of the current study, where emotional functioning was found to be negatively correlated to family conflict.

It was hypothesized that emotional functioning is a predictor of family functioning, family cohesion and family conflict. The finding of the present study is aligned with the hypothesis that revealed that emotional functioning significantly predicts family conflict, family cohesion, and family functioning. Prior literature provides support to these findings (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2020; Schutte et al., 2001; Szczesniak & Tułeczka, 2020).

A significant difference was observed in family functioning, where mothers who lived in nuclear family system reported to have better family functioning than those who lived in joint family systems. However, the literature provides evidence contrary to it and states that increased social support helps an individual deal with their negative thoughts more effectively and enhances marital and family satisfaction (Qadir et al., 2013). The contrary findings of the present study can be explained by the cultural differences and added pressure lay on mothers who belong to a joint family system leading to frustration and conflicts as family members staying home all day long are in the need for individual space, and requires a quiet and conducive environment that is hardly available in joint family system, which in turn leads to frustration and conflicts (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006; Waite & Creswell, 2020).

In addition to this, the factors, responsible for the contribution in the family conflict and family cohesion as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, were identified qualitatively. The results revealed various factors contributing to family conflict of the participants, such as financial challenges regarding loss of job or business, increased in everyday expenses i.e. electricity bills, increase requirement of food and technology, and children's fee despite the remote learning. Literature provides support to this aspect as economic crises have been found as a leading factor contributing to increased caregiving stress, interpersonal conflict, and mental health problems in families (Conger & Elder, 1994; Schneider et al., 2017). Moreover, mothers reported challenges related to increase household work and limited availability of help in doing household chores. The findings are consistent with the past literature as disease outbreaks are known to multiply women's burdens (Bradshaw & Fordham, 2015). The lockdown situation during the pandemic even worsened the situation for the women (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006; Sánchez-Núñez et al., 2020). And in Pakistan, being a collectivistic culture, there is added pressure on the women. Other factors reported to contribute to their family conflicts included relationship deterioration, lack of social and family support, lack of sufficient time for self-care, fears and uncertainty regarding health and future, and having a family member infected with Covid-19. The factors reported in previous literature are in line with the current research's findings (Feinberg et al., 2021; Hussong et al., 2020; Suffren et al., 2021; Williamson, 2020; Zhang, 2018).

Apart from this, the factors responsible for the contribution in the family cohesion as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, were identified qualitatively as well. Participants reported several factors responsible



for family cohesion in which the most noteworthy factor was the enrichment in their relationship characterized by increase quality time together. Literature depicts that the pandemic provided the opportunity to enhance their functioning in families who optimistically appraise the situation (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020; Conger & Conger, 2002; Gambin et al., 2020; Jafree et al., 2020; Joel-Wong et al., 2012). As the pandemic has multiplied women's burden, having a support system in this strenuous time, with whom you can share your burdens and responsibility attribution of the family members enhances family functioning of the individuals (Magana & Smith, 2006; Sánchez-Núñez et al., 2020). Other noteworthy aspects related to family cohesion were emotional involvement and responsiveness of family members, communal problem solving, and decrease in unhealthy food habits (Carroll et al., 2020; Dalton, et al., 2020; Gambin et al., 2020; Walsh, 2006). The findings from the prior literature have shown that higher parental empathy, problem solving and family communication, are associated with lower parental and family conflicts. Moreover, (Feinberg et al., 2021) reported that parents' ability to resolve disagreements, support each other in the parenting role, and coordinate family efforts in sustaining health protective behaviors are essentials to family cohesion. Lastly, participants reported that if a family is not facing major financial difficulties then their family functioning won't be much affected (Qadir et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2017; Siu, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The present study examined the role of emotional functioning and family functioning in middle-aged mother and it looked to assess in depth experiences of those with family conflicts and those with family cohesiveness by examining the underline factors contributing to their family functioning. The study succeeded in finding considerable support for its hypotheses and it revealed that emotional functioning was correlated with family conflict, family cohesion, and family functioning. Moreover, predictive role of emotional functioning was explored in context of with family conflict, family cohesion, and family functioning. In addition, it was found that family functioning of mothers living in nuclear family system was better than those living in joint family system.

Factors related to family conflict and family cohesion were explored during the interviews which yielded vast variety of responses in which family conflict revealed factors related to finances,

household work, limited resources, relationship deterioration etc. While responses of increase quality time, ability to respond to each other's emotional needs and communicate one's worries, and family's capacity to solve problems together were revealed by the respondents to be responsible for their family cohesion. Prior literature provided concrete evidence for the findings of the current study.

### **Implications**

The findings of the current study have important implications for the ways in which COVID-19 pandemic is perceived among families and how they are enabling themselves to cope with it. The present study aids in comprehensive understanding of the factors and characteristics that are responsible for the conflicts among families and using that information can facilitate family therapists, counselors, policy makers, and healthcare providers' capacity to identify strengths and potential targets to improve family functioning among their clients. It is also critical for developing resources and interventions for families during and after the pandemic such as interventions promoting better coping skills, mood management, family relationship quality, and accessing social support. Given the importance of conducting research about the underline factors of family conflict and family cohesion among community-based Asian populations, this study will help address a gap in the literature regarding the implication of the phenomena in context of our culture that in turn will aid the enrichment of the understanding regarding the functioning of Pakistani families specifically during Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

The restricted diversity in the sample as only middle-aged mothers was the targeted population. The findings of family functioning in the present study reflect the perspective of only one individual of the family i.e. mothers. The perspective of fathers and siblings regarding the dynamics of their family functioning was not included. Data was collected online due to Covid-19 constraints.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Qualitative analysis with respect to coping strategies of families can be incorporated to gain in-depth information and explore the patterns of families other than the responses provided by the

participants. Diversity of the sample is advised by incorporating fathers or siblings' perspective in exploring the family dynamics. More variables can be coupled along with emotional functioning in order to gain greater understanding about the family functioning among the population. Family functioning's influence on family members' mental and wellbeing can be explored to understand not only the factors impacting family functioning but how family functioning is impacting individual family members' wellbeing.

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