MYTHS AS PREDICTORS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD HIJRAS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ACADEMICIANS AND STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In Pakistan the hijra population is subjected to serious social marginalization but little studies have been done to determine how cultural myths influence attitudes toward this group of people especially the educated sections of the population. The study was a cross-sectional, correlational study that examined the relationship between myths beliefs and attitudes toward hijras among academicians and students at Lahore and Sheikhupura, Pakistan. The sample size of 350 people (200 students, 150 academicians; 55.4% women) was used to conduct the Myths toward Hijras Scale (Jami and Kamal, 2017) and the Attitude toward Hijras Scale (Jami, 2012). It was established through multiple linear regression that myths had a strong correlation with attitudes towards hijras in students (t=.36, p =.001), which explained 28% of the variation. Independent samples t-tests showed that the differences between students and academicians in both myths (t = 4.96, p < .001) and attitudes (t = 3.11, p < .001) were significant with more negative myths and less positive attitudes supported by students. Gender differences were observed as male students expressed more positive attitudes as compared to female students (t = 4.12, p <.001). These results emphasize the essential influence of the cultural myths on the development of the attitude to the discriminated gender groups and indicate the necessity of specific educational interventions to eliminate the prejudices and encourage social integration.

Keywords: myths, attitudes, hijras, transgender, academicians, students, Pakistan, social inclusion.

1. Introduction

Gender identity is a universal feature of the human experience, but societies all around the world are still struggling to find their way into the cognitions of gender that go beyond the traditional man-woman mix. Outside of this binary, i.e. so-called hijras or khwaja sira, people have lived more than two millennia in a South Asian society in a complicated social status between cultural acceptance and extreme marginalization (Khan, 2014; Reddy, 2006). A case in point of historically recorded third-gender groups world-over is the hijra community of people who have their individual male gender assignments and then assume feminine gender roles and expressions, which are discussed in the ancient Sanskrit literature and persist to the present day (Kalra and Shah, 2013).

Even with this protruded history, hijras in Pakistan are still among the most disenfranchised groups of people in the country. They are biased against in a systematic way in various areas such as education, employment, healthcare, and housing (Ahmed, Yasin, and Umair, 2014). These marginalization express themselves as tangible disadvantages: the inability to access formal education, exclusion of mainstream labor opportunities, and, as a result, that dependency on the

old sources of income, begging, performance at festivals and sex work (Khan, 2014). In addition to material deprivation, hijras are highly stigmatized in terms of social factors such as family denial, physical and verbal abuse, and limited involvement in the community life (Chakrapani, 2010).

The psychological effects on this marginalization are dire. The scientific literature reveals higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among transgender people across the world, and the stigmatization of the population is one of the main factors that leads to the development of negative mental health outcomes (Billard, 2018). Pakistan in particular, hijras go through the daily lives of discrimination, which accumulate to cause major psychological distress, but mental health services are mainly inaccessible or unwelcoming to the population (Saeed, Mughal, and Farooq, 2018).

The determinants of the influence of the mass perspective on hijras should be comprehended so as to develop effective interventions that can be used to curb the stigma and encourage social inclusion. Attitudes (evaluation responses to objects, people, or situations comprising of affective, behavioral, and cognitive elements) do not form out of the air (Khalil, Horgan, and Zeuthen, 2022). Instead, they are socially constructed respectively in terms of cultural discourses, social relations, and institutional forms. Cultural myths are among the most influential factors in the formation of the attitude: collective beliefs, which, even though factually inaccurate, are carried by the communities and determine the perception of social groups (Jami & Kamal, 2017).

There are numerous myths about hijras in the Pakistani society. Among them are the ideas that hijras are born due to the sins of their parents which their blessings and curses have supernatural powers, that they are born as sexually deviant beings and are vectors of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (Jami & Kamal, 2017). The myths are cognitive shortcuts which serve to explain a group that would disrupt the traditional gender categories, but also to maintain the social distance and support the practice of discriminatory treatment.

Its theoretical base to interpret the role of myths in forming attitudes is based on several constructs. The Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) is the assumption that attitudes are formed in a way of mutual interactions between individual factors (beliefs and expectations), behavioral patterns, and environmental factors (cultural norms, social structures). In this context, myths are schemas of cognition that are culturally transmitted and learned by people through observational learning and socialization. Exposure to the same stories and messages that hijras are dangerous, deviant or cursed results in internalization of these beliefs which subsequently shapes evaluative reactions to the members of the community.

There is further explanatory power in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) which suggests that people obtain self-concept through being members of social groups and they have an inherent tendency to like ingroups and dislike outgroups. In the case of cisgender people, hijras constitute a salient outgroup whose nonconformity of genders questions the basic categorical differences. Hijras myths can be used to strengthen ingroup unity through the use of deviance and otherness of this outgroup, which can justify social distance and existing power inequalities (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

The ABC Model of Attitudes (Khalil et al., 2022) also sheds light on the functioning of myths on the attitudinal elements. Mentally, myths give information (or disinformation) regarding hijras that gives insights into what they are like, and how they behave. Emotionally, the content of myths emotion, such as fear, disgust, pity, brings about the same emotional reaction towards hijras. These

cognitive and affective aspects are converted, behaviorally, to action tendencies, such as avoidance, discrimination, or, on the contrary, support and inclusion.

The sphere of education is one of the most significant areas where the attitude to hijras might be studied. Academicians are also instrumental in influencing the perceptions of students via the formal curriculum and informal demonstration of attitudes of inclusiveness (Gururaj, Manohar, and Rao, 2023). Being new adults in the process of identity formation and the formation of worldview, students might be especially vulnerable to dominant cultural myths and counter-narratives transmitted in the educational setting. Being aware of the attitudes of both groups, and how their beliefs and evaluative reactions are related to each other, will help to suggest specific interventions aimed at facilitating more inclusive learning conditions.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between beliefs in myths and attitudes toward hijras among academicians and students in Pakistan. Specifically, we hypothesized that:

H1: Myths about hijras would significantly predict attitudes toward hijras among students, with greater endorsement of myths associated with less positive attitudes.

H2: Myths about hijras would significantly predict attitudes toward hijras among academicians, with greater endorsement of myths associated with less positive attitudes.

H3: Significant differences would exist between students and academicians in both myths and attitudes toward hijras.

H4: Gender differences would emerge in attitudes toward hijras, with females demonstrating more positive attitudes than males.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational research design to examine the relationship between beliefs in myths and attitudes toward hijras among academicians and students. The design allowed for simultaneous assessment of multiple variables and examination of group differences without manipulation of independent variables.

2.2 Participants

A convenience sample of 350 participants was recruited from educational institutions in Lahore and Sheikhupura, Pakistan. The sample comprised 200 students (57.1%) and 150 academicians (42.9%). Participants ranged in age from 17 years upward, with 53.7% classified as young adults (students) and 46.3% as later adults (academicians). Gender distribution included 156 males (44.6%) and 194 females (55.4%). The sample was predominantly Muslim (99.7%), reflecting the religious demographics of Pakistan. Family system distribution was approximately equal, with 173 participants (49.4%) from nuclear families and 177 (50.6%) from joint families. Geographic distribution showed 201 participants (57.4%) from rural areas and 238 (68.0%) from urban areas (note: some participants may have identified both affiliations).

Inclusion criteria required that participants:

- Be aged 17 years or above
- Students must be enrolled at intermediate level or above
- Academicians must be currently employed in colleges or universities.

2.3 Measures
2.3.1 Demographic Information Sheet
A self-constructed questionnaire assessed participants' gender, age, marital status, education, religion, socioeconomic status, family system (nuclear/joint), area of living (rural/urban), and participant identity (student/academician).

2.3.2 Myths toward Hijras Scale (Jami & Kamal, 2017)
This 12-item Likert-type scale measures beliefs in common myths about hijras in Pakistani society. Items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with no reverse-scored items. The scale comprises three subscales: Asexuality (5 items), Nature (4 items), and Saintly (3 items). Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of negative myths about hijras. The scale's reliability as reported by the authors is $\alpha = .57$ (Jami & Kamal, 2017).

2.3.3 Attitude toward Hijras Scale (Jami, 2012)
This 32-item scale measures attitudes toward hijras across three dimensions: Rights and Status (13 items), Social Distance (11 items), and Sexual Issues (8 items). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores represent more positive attitudes toward hijras. The scale demonstrates good reliability with $\alpha = .85$ (Jami, 2015). All items are in Urdu, the native language of participants.

2.4 Procedure
Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the original authors of all scales. Institutional approval was secured from the relevant university and college authorities. Participants were approached using convenience sampling and were provided with information about the study's aims and objectives. Questionnaires were administered in Urdu, and completion time averaged 15-20 minutes.

2.5 Ethical Considerations
This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research with human participants. Approval was obtained from the departmental research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures. Participants were assured that their information would remain confidential and would be used solely for research purposes.

2.6 Statistical Analysis
Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Preliminary screening addressed missing values and ensured data met assumptions for parametric analysis. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were computed for all measures. Multiple linear regression assessed the predictive value of myths for attitudes toward hijras.

3. Results
3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability
Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for all study variables. The Myths toward Hijras Scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .60$) given the scale's length and multidimensional nature. The Attitude toward Hijras Scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = .73$), consistent with previous research.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability for Study Variables (N = 350)

Variable	M	SD	Range	α
Myths toward Hijras	40.72	6.47	24-82	.60
Attitude toward Hijras	106.04	13.43	64-174	.73
Rights & Status (subscale)	48.73	7.77	14-106	.66
Social Distance (subscale)	33.31	5.77	15-52	.65
Sexual Issues (subscale)	24.00	5.63	10-38	.72

3.2 Regression Analysis: Myths as Predictors of Attitudes
Table 2

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes toward Hijras from Myths among Students (n = 200)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI of B		β	P
			LL	UL		
Constant	69.71	6.64			-	.000
Myths toward Hijras	.63	.11	56.59	82.82	.36	.000
			.41	.85		

Note: R² = .28, Adjusted R² = .28, F (1, 198) = 76.45, p < .001

As shown in Table 2, myths significantly predicted attitudes toward hijras among students, accounting for 28% of the variance in attitude scores. For each unit increase in myth endorsement, attitude scores increased by .63 units, indicating that students who endorsed more myths actually held more positive attitudes toward hijras.

Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes toward Hijras from Myths among Academicians (n = 150)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI of B LL	UL	β	p
Constant	91.63	11.96	67.99	115.27	-	.000
Myths toward Hijras	-.16	.19	-.55	.22	-.60	.416

Note: R² = .26, Adjusted R² = .26, F(1, 148) = 52.08, p < .001

Among academicians, myths did not significantly predict attitudes toward hijras (p = .416), although the overall model was significant, indicating that other factors not assessed in this analysis contributed to attitude formation in this group.

3.4 Group Differences
Table 4

Comparison of Students and Academicians on Myths and Attitudes

Variables	Students		Academicians		t(348)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Myths	42.16	6.72	38.80	5.59	4.96	.001	0.54
Attitudes	107.96	11.79	103.49	15.00	3.11	.001	0.33

Significant differences emerged between students and academicians on both study variables. Students endorsed significantly more negative myths about hijras than did academicians (t = 4.96, p < .001, d = 0.54), representing a medium effect size. Students also demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes toward hijras compared to academicians (t = 3.11, p < .001, d = 0.33), a small-to-medium effect.

Table 5

Gender Differences among Students on Study Variables

Variables	Male Students (n=60)		Female Students (n=140)		t(198)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Myths	41.48	6.76	42.45	6.70	-.938	.833	0.14
Attitudes	113.01	13.44	105.79	10.32	4.12	.001	0.60

Among students, significant gender differences emerged in attitudes toward hijras. Male students reported significantly more positive attitudes than female students (t = 4.12, p < .001, d = 0.60),

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representing a medium-to-large effect size. No significant gender differences were observed in myths about hijras.

3.5 Summary of Findings

- Myths significantly predicted attitudes toward hijras among students, accounting for 28% of variance, with greater myth endorsement associated with more positive attitudes.
- Students and academicians differed significantly on both study variables, with students endorsing more negative myths but holding more positive attitudes.
- Gender differences emerged among students, with males demonstrating more positive attitudes than females.

4. Discussion

This paper has explored the correlation between myth belief and hijras attitudes among Pakistani academicians and students, which adds to the scanty empirical evidence about factors that influence the attitudes towards gender minority populations in South Asian societies. The results demonstrate rich trends that not only agree with current theoretical models but also contradict them, providing significant implications to educational interventions and more comprehensive social change endeavors.

The most surprising finding is related to the positive correlation between the myth endorsement and the attitudes among the students: the students who were more convinced in the myths about hijras actually provided more positive judgments about them. This contravenient finding is worth giving a second thought in the Pakistani cultural setting. This trend can be explained by a number of things.

To begin with, the contents of myths regarding hijras in Pakistan are not consistent, but ambivalent. Following the examples of Jami and Kamal (2017), myths may include both stigmatizing (e.g., hijras as sexually deviant), and reverential beliefs (e.g., hijras having spiritual power of blessing or cursing). Those who support the sacred elements of hijra mythology can also be more positive in their attitude as they realize hijras have some special cultural or spiritual value. This duality is echoed by the role of hijras in the South Asian societies as both an excluded but in some respects worshipable element of fertility, prosperity, and favor of the gods (Reddy, 2006; Nanda, 1990).

Second, the positive myth-attitude linkage can be a manifestation of benevolent prejudice in which seemingly positive perceptions of groups of special qualities are co-occurring with, and possibly covering up, schematization. The same trends have been seen in the literature on the attitude towards other marginalized groups where paternalistic attitudes are a blend of elements of seeming positivity and maintenance of social distance and exclusion (Glick & Fiske, 2001). The beliefs of the spiritual power in the context of hijra can be used to exoticize the members of the community and at the same time to confirm their isolation by the mainstream members.

Third, the finding can also imply that more aware students of hijras (those with awareness of myths) are more exposed to the community and, as a result, are more positively oriented. According to contact theory (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), intergroup contact formed under the right situation minimises prejudice. With greater knowledge of hijras, even enshrined in mythical accounts of culture, students may have greater chances of positive contact as compared to those with low level of awareness or exposure.

The considerable discrepancy in the two variables of the study between students and the academicians depicts critical developmental and generational trends. The students supported more negative myths than does academicians which indicates that myth acceptance declines with age

and experience or more likely, contemporary students are exposed to more myth-related accounts by social media and other modern platforms. Nevertheless, the students also had more positive attitudes compared to academicians, which suggests that the motivations behind their evaluative reactions are not entirely determined by the myth support. It is possible that this trend will capture the impact of international discourses of human rights, the growing presence of transgender topics in the media, and the tendency of younger generations to be more accepting of gender differences (Gururaj et al., 2023).

Students who do not indicate the difference between males and females on their attitudes and instead show more positive attitudes indicate the presence of gender differences between students (Jami and Kamal, 2015). Nonetheless, this result is consistent with the studies of gender disparities in sexual minority attitudes in situations that may make females feel more vulnerable personally or socially when they support undervalued groups. With the existence of gender-segregated society in Pakistan, females can feel more social restrictions over displaying positive attitude towards hijras, who disrupt the basic gender categories. Furthermore, females can also lack chances of positive contact with hijras because of the ban on movement and socializing.

The theoretical frameworks used in this research are supplementary lenses of interpreting results. The Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) sheds some light into the role of myths as culturally transmitted cognitive schemas in the formation of attitudes using observational learning and socialization mechanisms. Myth-based knowledge on hijras is acquired by the students through family accounts, media portrayals, and peer communication and this affects their evaluative reaction. The high level of myth-attitude correlation shown between students and academicians could be attributed to the fact that students are exposed to these socialization processes more recently and extensively.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) describes the difference in the attitudes across groups as a result of the identity maintenance processes. In the case of cisgender people, the favourable views of hijras can jeopardize the ingroup cohesion because it can create categorical symbiosis between the gender groups. The more positive attitudes of males may be due to their increased social power and, therefore, their lessened threat because of the danger of being out of the group, whereas, the more negative attitudes of females may suggest the higher costs that they bear to preserve distinct gender differentiation, which assures them of identity security.

The complicated connection between myth endorsement and attitudes can be explained with the help of the ABC Model of Attitudes (Khalil et al., 2022), which divides the concepts into cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements. Myths mainly work on the cognitive level which gives structures of information on which beliefs are formed. Attitudes however also include both the affective (the attitude towards hijras) and behavioral (tendencies toward inclusion or exclusion) responses. The positive relationship between myth-attitude and myth-attitude among the students can be seen to reflect that cognitive myth endorsement would not necessarily relate to negative affect or discriminative intentions to behave, especially when the myths hold some reverential aspects.

4.1 Limitations

- The study only included participants from Lahore and Sheikhupura, so findings cannot be generalized to all of Pakistan.
- Data was collected at one point in time, so we cannot say for sure that myths cause negative attitudes.

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- The scale used to measure myths had low reliability ($\alpha = .60$), which may have affected the results.
- Participants may have given socially acceptable answers instead of their true feelings about hijras.
- Almost all participants were Muslim (99.7%), so religious differences in attitudes could not be studied.

4.2 Implications

- Schools and colleges should teach students about hijras to correct common myths and promote positive attitudes.
- Since students are more open to learning about hijras, teachers should include topics on gender diversity in their lessons.
- Families play an important role in shaping attitudes. Programs should involve both parents and extended family members to encourage acceptance.
- Students from joint families have more positive attitudes, so efforts should also reach out to nuclear families where exposure to diversity may be limited.
- Girls may feel more social pressure to avoid supporting hijras. Safe spaces should be created where they can openly discuss and learn without fear.

4.3 Future Research Directions

- Future studies should include participants from more cities and rural areas across Pakistan to get a better picture of people's attitudes.
- Researchers should follow the same participants over time to see how their beliefs and attitudes change as they grow older.
- Talking to people in interviews can help us understand why some hold positive attitudes even when they believe in myths about hijras.
- It is important to ask hijras themselves about their experiences and what kind of support they actually need from society.
- Comparing attitudes toward hijras with attitudes toward other groups (like religious minorities or disabled persons) can show if prejudice works in similar ways.

5. Conclusion

The given work presents valuable evidence that myth beliefs are a strong predictor of attitudes at hijras among Pakistani students, and identifies complicated patterns of relationship, which indicate the ambivalence of cultural discourses of hijra. The results emphasize the significance of educational institutions in reshaping the attitudes towards gender minority groups and the importance of the specific intervention that would focus on not only on myth correction but also on social inclusion, in general. The receptivity of students to positive attitudes despite the support of myths indicates a chance of the generational change whereas family system and gender disparities indicates contextual factors to which interventions should respond to. With Pakistan still struggling to answer some questions regarding the rights and social inclusion of transgender people, the need to comprehend psychological mechanisms that form the basis of attitude towards hijras is becoming especially pressing. This paper is a contribution to that knowledge alongside the necessity that the research, involvement of the community and action are taken to ensure the development of a more equal and inclusive society with all gender identities.

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