

WHEN FEELING FADE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPATHY BETWEEN EMOTIONAL DESENSITIZATION AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN POLICE OFFICERS

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ABSTRACT

Police officers are repeatedly exposed to violence and traumatic events, which may lead to emotional desensitization, lessen empathy, and strained interpersonal relationships. The intent of this study is to examine the relationship in emotional desensitization to violence, empathy, and interpersonal relationships of police officers and additionally investigate the mediating role of empathy. The study utilized a correlational research design, and a purposive sample of police officers (N=120) was recruited from different police stations in Lahore, Pakistan. Emotional Desensitization to Violence Scale, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), and the Functional Idiographic Assessment Template Questionnaire-Short Form (FIAT-Q-SF) were used to assess study variables. Pearson moment correlations and mediation analyses using PROCESS MACRO were applied for analysis. Results showed that emotional desensitization to violence was negatively correlated with interpersonal relationships, intimacy, connection, and emotional experience, also predicting reduced empathic concern. Empathic concern significantly mediated the relationships between emotional desensitization to violence and interpersonal outcomes, which personal distress did not mediate this relationship. Findings of this study highlight the psychological impact of repeated exposure to violence and fostering the interventions related to empathy may protect against interpersonal difficulties. The research would be beneficial for organizational and clinical settings to target empathy training and mental health interventions for enhancing officer well-being and community relations.

Keywords: emotional desensitization to violence, empathy, interpersonal relationships, police officers

Introduction

Today's policing environment faces different psychological challenges, particularly in high risked and under-resourced settings, like Pakistan. Officers encounter a range of issues while working in the police, resulting in disturbances in their mental health. Police officers' work involves stressful conditions that require quick decision-making and emotional control, and thus they expose to violence frequently and result in

traumas. Officers repeatedly exposed to violence which can lead to emotional desensitization, defined as numbing of emotional and cognitive responses to violent stimuli (Papazoglu & Tuttle, 2018). Some level of desensitization helps officer to work under pressure in challenging situations but excessive desensitization will lead to diminished empathy, a protective factor for successful policing and healthy social functioning (Turgoose et al., 2017). Nevertheless, excessive

emotional insensitivity to violence may impair the capacity to respond to emotionally charged events (Decety, 2020; Gerdes et al., 2011). Over time, this coping strategy may reduce empathy, a critical element in community-based policing as well as conflict management (Patterson, 2017), and the demands of the job may impact their personal lives, leading to interpersonal issues (Brough et al., 2016). The current study therefore investigates the relationships among exposure to violence, emotional desensitization, empathy and interpersonal functioning in police officers. Studying emotional desensitization and restoring empathy can enhance conflict resolution, community trust, and the personal lives of officers.

Emotional Desensitization to Violence

Emotional desensitization to violence refers to incremental reduction in emotional, cognitive, and physiological responses after repeated exposure to violent stimuli (Galan et al., 2022). Frequent exposure to violence through media, family, friends, community or occupational settings can reduce empathy, emotional distress, and sensitivity toward victims with increasing the acceptance of violence as a normal behavior. This process is studied as a form of habituation, in which repeated exposure weakens emotional reactivity over time (Mrug et al., 2016). Desensitization is associated with a lack of sympathy, reduced physiological arousal, and the poor inhibitory control over aggression (Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2006). Studies investigating that repeated exposure leads to reduction in emotional reactions (Wolpe, 1961) and it can occur through media exposure to violence and exposure to violence in real life (Bandura, 1973). Research linked desensitization with aggression, acceptance of violence, and emotional numbing among individuals experiencing chronic violence in their communities (Huesmann et al., 2003).

Empathy

Empathy, a multi-dimensional construct involving cognitive and affective aspects, and defined as the ability to understand, share, and respond to another person's emotions and experiences from

one's own point of view. Empathy consist of perspective taking, emotional understanding, sympathetic and compassionate feelings about people going through difficult situations. The concept of empathy is derived from the German term *Einfuhlung*," which means "feeling into," coined by Robert Vischer and then translated into English by Edward Titchener. Carl Rogers explained empathy as a crucial ingredient for understanding other people in the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, Mark Davis discussed the two dimensions of empathy using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), namely, Empathic Concern and Personal Distress. While empathic concern is related to feelings of warmth, sympathetic feelings towards people who need help, personal distress is linked to self-oriented responses of anxiety and distress when seeing other people go through tough times. Another important development in the biological explanation of empathy is the discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti. It explained that empathy can be understood biologically since people experience their response to the actions and emotions of other people as well.

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships refer to the patterns of interaction, bidirectional communication, and emotional connection between individuals that influence psychological well-being and social functioning (Callaghan, 2006). These include communication, emotional expression, conflict management, intimacy and responsiveness in social contexts. Interpersonal relationships are central to personality development and the formation of self-concept through social interactions (Harry Stack Sullivan, 1953). Close relationships are essential for emotional and psychological health and it highlighted the human need to belong (Roy Baumeister & Mark Leary, 1995). Interpersonal functioning includes five key domains: assertion of needs, bidirectional communication, conflict resolution, disclosure and interpersonal closeness, and emotional experience and expression. Assertion of needs involves expressing personal needs clearly and appropriately, while bidirectional communication

focuses on active listening and effective feedback exchange. Conflict resolution refers to managing disagreements constructively to maintain relationship stability, whereas disclosure and interpersonal closeness involve self-disclosure and trust development. Emotional experience and expression include identifying, regulating, and expressing emotions effectively in relationships.

Compassion Fatigue framework (Figley, 1995), formulate the emotional cost of exposure to other's sufferings, particularly among professions which repeatedly confronted with trauma and violence. It is characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced empathic capacity, and psychological distancing that emerges as a protective response to chronic exposure to distressing experiences. Continuous exposure to violent or traumatic events may lead to emotional desensitization, where individual exhibits diminished emotional reactivity to suffering and threat-related stimuli. Although this accommodating response may enhance functional performance in high-risk occupational settings such as policing, continuous emotional numbing may compromise empathic responsiveness. As empathy considered as a central mechanism through which individuals understand and responds to other's emotional states, its reduction may negatively affect interpersonal connectedness and relationship quality. Thus, disturbance in emotional processing and empathic functioning may interfere with attachment related relational expectations, leading to difficulties in maintaining gratifying interpersonal relationships.

Habituation theory (Rankin et al., 2009), explained that repeated exposure to violence to the same or similar stimuli leads to gradual reductions in emotional and physiological responsiveness. Initially exposed to violent stimuli typically elicits strong affective reactions such as fear, distress and elevated arousal. However, with continued exposure, these responses reduced due to neural adaptation processes involving reduced reactivity of the amygdala and autonomic nervous system. Police officers reiteratedly exposed to violent incidents may lead officers to emotionally adapt by suppressing or diminishing emotional reactions, allowing them to function affectively in

high-stress environments. However, this adaptive reduction in emotional responsiveness may extend beyond situational necessity and contribute to generalized emotional numbing. As emotional reactivity declines through habituation, it may influence the individual's capacity for emotional impact with others, thereby affecting empathic functioning.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), explained empathic behavior as a learned response developed through observation, modeling and reinforcement. Individuals develop empathic skills by observing others' emotional reactions and receiving reinforcement for prosocial and emotionally appropriate responses. In such environments where emotional suppression is normal, such as in policing profession characterized by frequent exposure to violence, empathic expression may be less frequently reinforced. Overtime, this may weaken empathic reactivity and reduce emotional sensitivity to others' distress. As empathic capacity is shaped by environmental learning and emotional reactivity, reductions in empathy due to desensitization may directly influence the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly in terms of emotional closeness, trust and communication.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978), explained that early relational patterns form perceptions or internal working models that guide expectations of trust, emotional availability and intimacy in later relationships. secure attachment is linked with emotional openness and healthy interpersonal functioning, whereas insecure attachment is linked to emotional withdrawal and difficulties in forming stable relationships. in police officers, individuals who experience diminished empathic reactivity due to emotional desensitization may find it more difficult to maintain emotional closeness and trust in relationships. this is why empathy plays a crucial rule in continuing attachment-based relational bonds.

Literature Review

The chapter overviews past researches concerning emotional desensitization to violence and its relationship with different aspects of empathy and

interpersonal relationships. through the analysis of previous research studies, the current knowledge is put into perspective, gaps are determined, and the provision of basis for the

understanding of basis for the understanding of the intricate relationships for the current research is enabled.

Author(s)	Year	Method/Design	Main Findings
Sanford	2017	Qualitative study; semi-structured interviews with 20 federal law enforcement officers	Job stress contributed to emotional numbing, desensitization, and difficulties in articulating emotions resulting in tensed interpersonal relationships.
Losung et al.	2022	Correlational study among Australian police officers working in sexual assault and child abuse investigations	Empathic concern and emotional regulation are associated with lower level of burnout and secondary traumatic stress while enhancing compassion satisfaction.
Inzunza	2015	Conceptual study and literature review	Proposed a comprehensive model of empathy for police officers, including affective responsiveness, empathic awareness, and perspective-taking.
Peker & Okutan	2024	Cross-sectional study of 211 law enforcement personnel; mediation analysis	Empathy significantly mediated the relationship between burnout and marital adjustment while personal distress negatively affected relationship outcomes.
Chambers	2022	Qualitative study; in-depth interviews with 10 rural paramedics	Emotional desensitization worked as a coping mechanism while negatively influenced empathy and interpersonal relationships in personal life.
Chung & Myung	2014	Correlational study with 84 nursing students	Interpersonal relationships and effective communication was positively associated with empathy.
Mrug et al.	2014	Correlational study with 209 university students	Extensive exposure to real-life violence predicted elevated PTSD symptoms and diminished empathy at higher levels of exposure, indicating emotional desensitization.
Mrug et al.	2016	Longitudinal study of 704 adolescents using Structural Equation Modeling	Chronic violence exposure predicted emotional desensitization, which further increased behavioral and emotional problems.
Iqbal	2017	Quantitative study with 200 participants in Lahore, Pakistan	Frequent exposure to violent decrease empathic responses toward victims and increased tolerance for violence.
Zhang et al.	2017	Cross-sectional study with 850 Chinese college students	Interpersonal trust buffered the relationship between violence exposure and aggressive behavior, with higher trust associated with fewer adverse outcomes.
Huesmann & Kirwil	2017	Review of experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies	Continuous exposure to violence was associated with emotional desensitization, stronger aggressive beliefs, and normalization of violence over time.

Rationale of the Study

This study attempts to fill the void in literature through the analysis of the phenomenon that develops when individuals are exposed to violent acts in their professional capacity repeatedly, which causes them emotionally desensitized, and this desensitization causes on one's empathy and interpersonal skills. The police force in Pakistan is an example of a high-stress occupation; involving law enforcement duties, political instability, counter-terrorism activities, and public distrust. However, little has been done to explore the mental health condition of police officers regarding their emotional sensitivity and interpersonal skills. While Western literature has extensively documented outcomes such as burnout, PTSD, aggression, and emotional numbing among police officers (Violanti et al., 2017), relatively fewer studies have explored these constructs in the Pakistani context, where cultural and religious factors may shape emotional coping differently (Ibrahim & Khan, 2021).

Previous researches in Pakistan has largely focused on operational performance of officers rather than their psychological and relational outcomes (Afzal & Rana, 2020), leaving a significant gap in understanding how chronic operational stress affects emotional reactivity and interpersonal relationships. Although, empathy has been identified as both a protective and risk-related factor in occupational stress (Losung et al., 2021; Peker & Okutan, 2024), its role in correlating emotional desensitization to interpersonal outcomes remains under-examined, particularly in non-Western populations.

While, various researches documented high-stress professions such as paramedics and military personnel suggest that emotional numbing can impair social functioning (Chambers, 2022; Williamson et al., 2021), limited researches has

specifically indicate this relationship among police officers in Pakistan (Ullah et al., 2022). Cross-cultural researches also identified that cultural and religious contexts influence emotional expression and empathy (Decety & Cowell, 2014), highlighting the need for context-specific research. Therefore, the present study tries to fill this gap by examining the relationship between emotional desensitization, empathy and interpersonal relationships among Pakistani police officers. It also explores empathy as a key mediator linking emotional desensitization to interpersonal functioning, consequently contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical implications for improving psychological well-being in law enforcement.

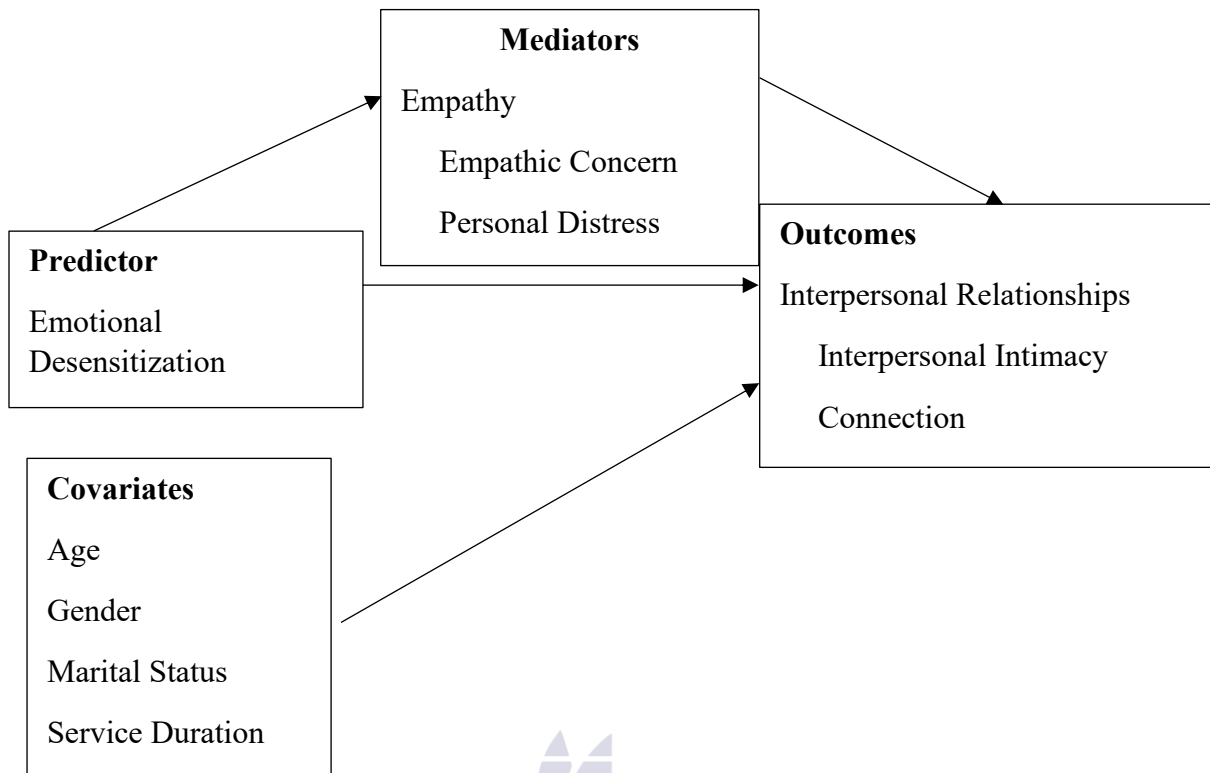
Objectives of the Present Study

- To examine the relationship in emotional desensitization, empathy and interpersonal relationships of police officers.
- To inspect the mediating role of empathy in emotional desensitization and interpersonal relationships of police officers.

Hypotheses

- H1: There is a significant negative correlation in emotional desensitization, interpersonal relationships, interpersonal intimacy, connection and emotional experience among police officers.
- H2: Empathy is positively correlated with interpersonal relationships among police officers.
- H3: Empathy is negatively correlated with emotional desensitization among police officers.
- H4: Empathy mediates the relationship in emotional desensitization and interpersonal relationships among police officers.

Proposed Model Figure 1.1



Methodology

In this section, the objectives, hypotheses, operational definitions of the variables, instruments that are used in the study, sample description and the procedure of the study are discussed.

Research Design

The current study used correlational research design to investigate the relationship in emotional desensitization, empathy and interpersonal relationship of police officers. Further, mediation analysis was used to determine the direct and indirect mediating role of empathy in emotional desensitization and interpersonal relationship.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

The sample for the current study comprises police officers from different police stations in Lahore

(N=120). For the present study non-probability sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014), was used to collect the data from police officers.

Participant Characteristics

Inclusion Criteria

- Must be active duty police officer.
- Both men and women participants will be included.

Exclusion Criteria

- Medical leave in past six month due to trauma or any emotional distress.
- Diagnosed with any psychological disorder prior to service or study participation (Toffol et al., 2024).

Descriptive Statistics Table 2.1

Mean, Standard Deviation, Frequencies, and Percentages of the Demographic Variables

Demographics	M	SD	f	%
Age	31.2	8.76		

Gender		
Men	70	58.3
Women	50	41.7
Education		
Matric	21	17.5
F.A	61	50.8
B.A	35	29.2
Others	2	1.7
Family System		
Joint	57	47.5
Nuclear	63	52.5
Marital Status		
Married	62	51.7
Unmarried	55	45.8
Divorced	3	2.5
Service Duration		
One Year	23	19
Two Years	41	33.0
Three Years	56	46.1
Current Status		
Constable	88	73.3
Head Constable	11	9.2
Others	21	17.5

- Note. M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, f=frequency, %=percentage.

Measures

Demographic Sheet

A demographic sheet was used in order to obtain general information about the participants including their age, gender, family system, marital status, service duration and current status of employment. It was solely utilized for the purpose of record keeping.

Emotional Desensitization to Violence Scale (Galan et al., 2022)

This scale was developed by Galan et al., 2022 to assess emotional desensitization in adults. This scale consists of 19 items measuring desensitization to violence, using 5 point Likert type scale ranging from 1-5. The scale has no additional subscale, and it provides an overall emotional desensitization to violence by simply summing the scores of the items. Urdu translated version of this scale was used in the present study. The high scores indicate high desensitization and vice versa. The scale has high reliability and validity equivalent to that of the original one with

the internal consistency reliability of total scale at 0.87.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980)

IRI (Davis, 1980) is a self-report measure used to assess empathy. This scale consists of 28 items with 4 subscales and each subscale consist of 7 items, using 5 point Likert scale type ranges from 1-5. In this study, we used only two subscales relevant to this research by taking permission from the author to separately use subscales. Most of items were also reversed in this scale. These subscales are Empathic Concern and Personal Distress. Urdu translated version of this scale was used in this study. It contains 14 items of which 6 items are reverse scored. The overall reliability of this scale is 0.89. Internal Consistency of translated and original version was reliable. Cronbach's alpha values for empathic concern and personal distress is 0.76.

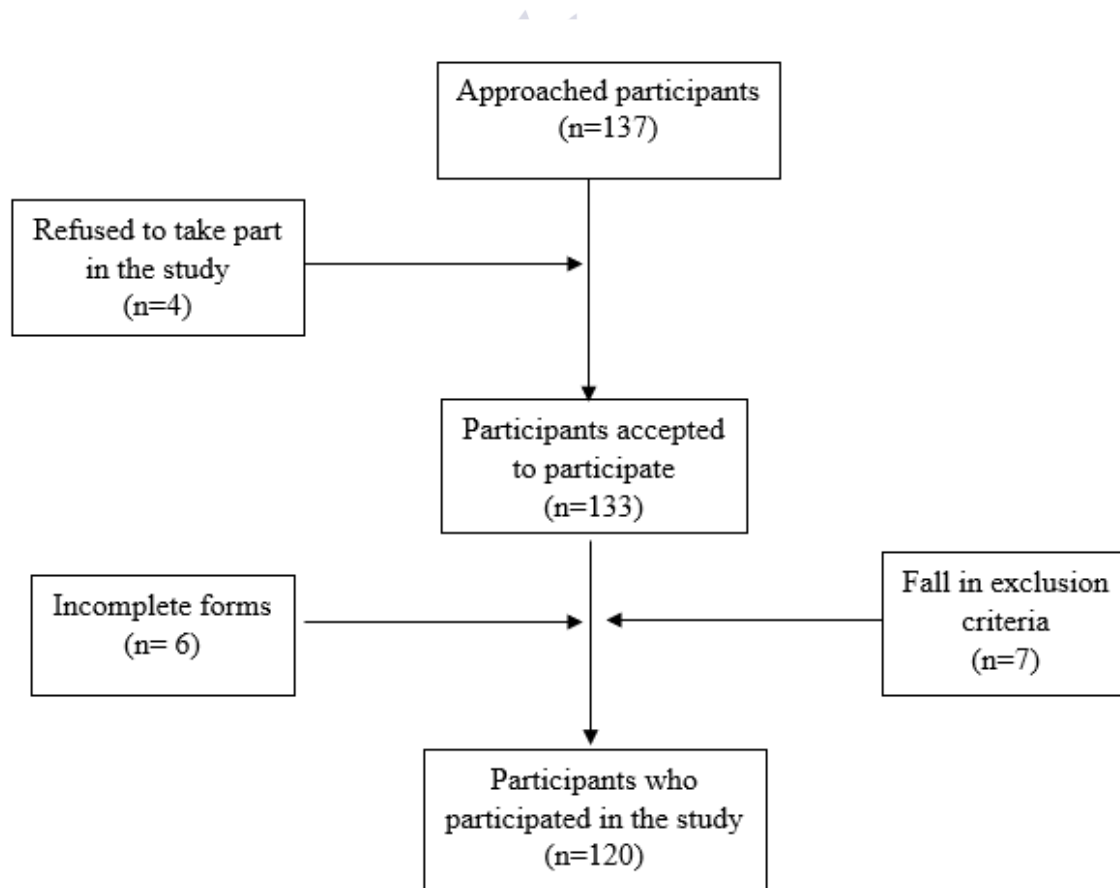
The Functional Idiographic Assessment Template-Short Form (FIAT-Q-SF; Callaghan, 2006)

It is a self-report instrument used to assess interpersonal relationships in adults. It consists of 20 items with 4 subscales including Interpersonal Intimacy, Connection, Conflict, Emotional Experience and Expressing Emotions, using 6 point Likert scale ranging from 1-6. It contains 20 items of which 7 items are reverse scored. Urdu translated version of this scale was used in this study. Internal Consistency of translated and original version was reliable. Cronbach's alpha values for Interpersonal Intimacy is 0.81, for Connection is 0.76, for Conflict is 0.59 and for Emotional Experience 0.71.

Procedure

After conducting an extensive and thorough literature review, title for the research and its aim were discussed with the supervisor. The research topic of the current study was approved by the Centre for Clinical Psychology committee. After that, permission of tools was taken from the respective authors through email. The measures were translated according to the guidelines of WHO Disability Assessment Schedule. These guidelines are focus on meaning, back-translate, use clear, everyday language anyone can understand, adapt examples and terms to fit the culture. Proceeding this, the information sheet, consent form and the demographic sheet were prepared and attached with the respective questionnaires, forming a data collection set. After that, pilot study was conducted.

Figure 2.1
Recruitment of Participants during Data Collection



Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of APA were followed for the conduction of present study.

The research topic was approved by research committee at Centre for Clinical Psychology and the permission was taken from authors to use and translate the tool in Urdu translation. Further the permission was also taken from head of police stations (superintendent of police) for data collection. Informed consent, information sheet and questionnaires were provided to SP and briefly explained the purpose of research. The participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the research without any coercion and the confidentiality of participants were maintained and all the information was only used for research purpose.

Results

This section provides a comprehensive description of the results of the current study.

Statistical Analysis

The analysis of the present study was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-23.0). Reliability analysis was done to calculate the Cronbach alpha of the scales, after that inferential statistic was done which included correlational analysis, to investigate the relationship between variables. Moreover, mediation analysis was performed to determine empathy as a mediator between emotional desensitization and interpersonal outcomes.

Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics are used in data analysis in attempts to draw inferences about the object of the study rather than simply describing these objects (M.K, 2025). These are used to test variables and make predictions on the bases on results and then generalized it to larger population. Pearson correlation analysis, mediation analysis, are used in the current study that are discussed below.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis is a type of inferential analysis used to examine the relationship between two or more variables. It describes as an intensity and

relation that exist between two variables. In correlation analysis, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is the most common measure which ranging from -1 (perfect negative correlation) to +1 (perfect positive correlation) (Field, 2018).

Table 3.2

Summary of inter-correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of the participants scores on Emotional Desensitization, scores on the subscales of Interpersonal Relationships, and the scores on the subscales of Empathy

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD
1 Emotional Desensitization	1	-.41**	-.51***	-.37**	-.07	-.41**	-.37**	-.36**	56.6	16.2
2 Interpersonal Relationship		1	.39**	.59***	.27**	.47**	.48**	-.34**	53.4	12.8
3 Interpersonal Intimacy			1	.35**	.11	.47**	.42**	-.37**	22.9	7.15
4 Connection				1	-.09	.52***	.23**	-.22*	9.43	2.96
5 Conflict					1	.10	.22*	.24**	8.86	2.50
6 Emotional Experience						1	.40**	-.36**	12.1	4.60
7 Empathic Concern							1	-.31**	15.2	2.92
8 Personal Distress								1	18.8	4.35

Note. (N=120), *p <.05**p <.01***p<.001M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation

Mediation Analysis

In the present study, mediation analysis was carried out using PROCESS macro by Andrew F. Hayes. Before using mediation analysis, the assumptions of mediation were fulfilled as normality of data, linearity of predictors and significant prediction in X and M, M and Y, and X and Y through regression analysis. Mediation analysis was run using empathic concern, personal distress as a mediator, by entering

emotional desensitization as predictor and interpersonal relationship, interpersonal intimacy, connection, conflict and emotional experiences as outcomes.

Table 3.3

Summary of the Path of Mediation Analysis with Empathic Concern and Personal Distress as a Mediator between Emotional Desensitization and Interpersonal Relationship

Effect Type	R ²	B	SE	P	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Model Summary	.1846			.0015		
Path a ₁ (X → M ₁) (E.Desensitization →Empathic Conc.)		-0.079	0.0178	< .001	-0.115	-0.045
Path b ₁ (M ₁ → Y) (Empathic Conc.→Interpersonal Relation.)		1.067	0.317	.001	0.439	1.696
Path a ₂ (X → M ₂) (E.Desensitization →Personal Distress)		-0.095	0.026	< .001	-0.043	-0.147
Path b ₂ (M ₂ → Y) (Personal Distress →Interpersonal Relation.)		-0.116	0.216	.591	-0.544	0.311
Direct effect (c') (E.Desensitization → Interpersonal Relation.)		-0.483	0.064	< .001	-0.611	-0.356
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization→ Empathic Conc.→ Interpersonal Relation)		-0.085	0.029	.001	0.147	-0.036
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization→Personal Distress→Interpersonal Relation)		-0.011	0.026	.592	-0.059	0.045

Note. N=120, SE= Standard Error, CI= Confidence Interval, LB= Lower Bound, UB= Upper Bound, X=Emotional Desensitization, M₁= Empathic Concern, M₂= Personal Distress, Y=Interpersonal Relationship



Table 3.4

Summary of the Path of Mediation Analysis with Empathic Concern and Personal Distress as a Mediator between Emotional Desensitization and Interpersonal Intimacy

Effect Type	R ²	B	SE	P	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Model Summary	.4296			.0015		
Path a ₁ (X → M ₁) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc.)		-0.0798	0.0178	< .001	-0.1150	-0.0446
Path b ₁ (M ₁ → Y) (Empathic Conc → Intimacy)		0.3867	0.1870	.041	0.0161	0.7573
Path a ₂ (X → M ₂) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress)		-0.0947	0.0261	< .001	-0.042	-0.146
Path b ₂ (M ₂ → Y) (Personal Distress → Intimacy)		-0.2258	0.1271	.079	-0.477	0.0261
Direct effect (c') (E.Desensitization → Intimacy)		-0.2414	0.0379	< .001	-0.316	-0.166
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc. → Intimacy)		-0.0309	0.0168	—	-0.067	-0.0014
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress → Intimacy)		-0.0214	0.0148	—	-0.051	0.0071

Note. N=120, SE= Standard Error, CI= Confidence Interval, LB= Lower Bound, UB= Upper Bound, X=Emotional Desensitization, M₁= Empathic Concern, M₂= Personal Distress, Y=Interpersonal Intimacy

Table 3.5

Summary of the Path of Mediation Analysis with Empathic Concern and Personal Distress as a Mediator between Emotional Desensitization and Connection

Effect Type	R ²	B	SE	P	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Model Summary	.4296			.0015		
Path a ₁ (X → M ₁) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc.)		-0.0798	0.0178	< .001	-0.1150	-0.0446
Path b ₁ (M ₁ → Y) (Empathic Conc. → Connection)		0.0745	0.0986	.451	-0.1208	0.2698
Path a ₂ (X → M ₂) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress)		-0.0947	0.0261	< .001	-0.0429	-0.1465
Path b ₂ (M ₂ → Y) (Personal Distress → Connection)		-0.0648	0.0670	.336	-0.1976	0.0680
Direct effect (c') (E.Desensitization → Connection)		-0.0693	0.0200	< .001	-0.1089	-0.029
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc. → Connection)		-0.0059	0.0078	—	-0.0224	0.0084
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress → Connection)		-0.0061	0.0070	—	-0.0212	0.0071

Note. N=120, SE= Standard Error, CI= Confidence Interval, LB= Lower Bound, UB= Upper Bound, X=Emotional Desensitization, M₁= Empathic Concern, M₂= Personal Distress, Y=Connection

Table 3.6

Summary of the Path of Mediation Analysis with Empathic Concern and Personal Distress as a Mediator between Emotional Desensitization and Conflict

Note: N=120, SE=Standard Error, CI=Confidence Interval, LB=Lower Bound, UB=Upper Bound, X=Emotional Desensitization, M₁= Empathic

Effect Type	R ²	B	SE	P	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Model Summary	.2896			.1870		
Family System		-1.045	.4572	.024	-1.951	-.1395
Path a ₁ (X → M ₁) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc.)		-0.0798	0.0178	< .001	-0.1150	-0.0446
Path b ₁ (M ₁ → Y) (Empathic Conc. → Conflict)		0.3046	0.0795	.0002	0.1472	0.4621
Path a ₂ (X → M ₂) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress)		-0.0947	0.0261	.0004	-0.0429	-0.1465
Path b ₂ (M ₂ → Y) (Personal Distress → Conflict)		-0.2462	0.0540	< .001	-0.1391	0.3532
Direct effect (c') (E.Desensitization → Conflict)		-0.0122	0.0161	.4496	-0.0442	0.0197
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc. → Conflict)		-0.0243	0.0079	---	-0.0409	-0.0099
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress → Conflict)		-0.0233	0.0094	---	-0.0081	-0.0442

Concern, Y=Conflict



Table 3.7
Summary of the Path of Mediation Analysis with Empathic Concern and Personal Distress as a Mediator between Emotional Desensitization and Emotional Experience

Effect Type	R ²	B	SE	P	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Model Summary	.4296			.0015		
Path a ₁ (X → M ₁) (E.Desensitization→Empathic Conc.)		-0.0798	0.0178	< .001	-0.1150	-0.0446
Path b ₁ (M ₁ → Y) (Empathic Conc.→ E. Experience)		0.3014	0.1229	.016	0.0579	0.5449
Path a ₂ (X → M ₂) (E.Desensitization →Personal Distress)		-0.0947	0.0261	< .001	-0.0429	-0.146
Path b ₂ (M ₂ → Y) (Personal Distress → E. Experience)		-0.0719	0.0835	.391	-0.2374	0.093
Direct effect (c') (E.Desensitization → E. Experience)		-0.1605	0.0249	< .001	-0.2098	-0.1111
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Empathic Conc.→ E. Experience)		-0.0241	0.0096	—	-0.0451	-0.0078
Indirect effect (a*b) (E.Desensitization → Personal Distress → E. Experience)		-0.0068	0.0087	—	-0.0240	0.0115

Note. N=120, SE= Standard Error, CI= Confidence Interval, LB= Lower Bound, UB= Upper Bound, X=Emotional Desensitization, M₁= Empathic Concern, M₂= Personal Distress, Y=Emotional Experience

Figure 3.1

Emerged Model

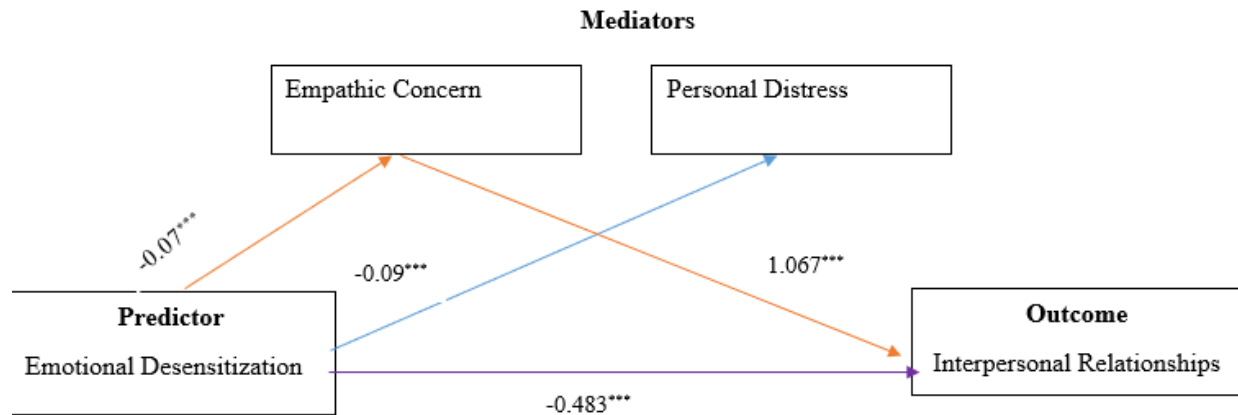


Figure 3.2

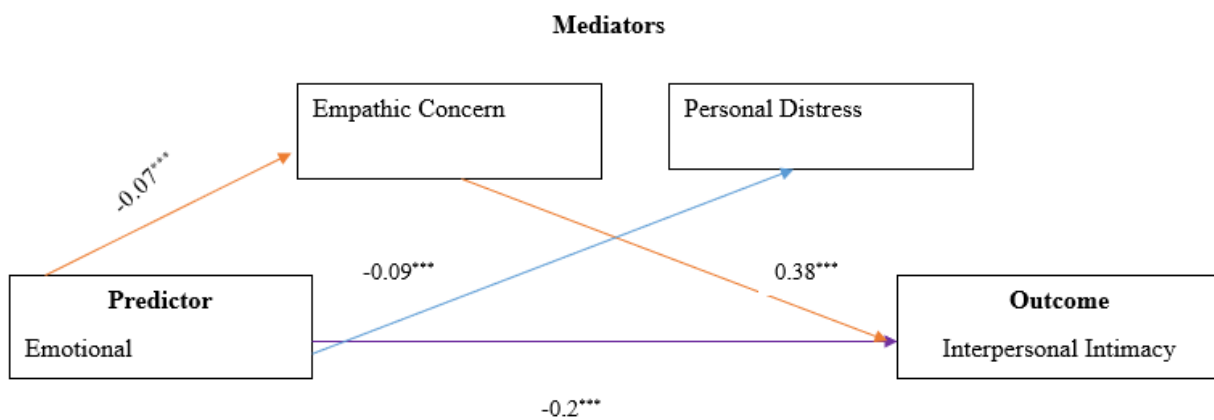


Figure 3.3

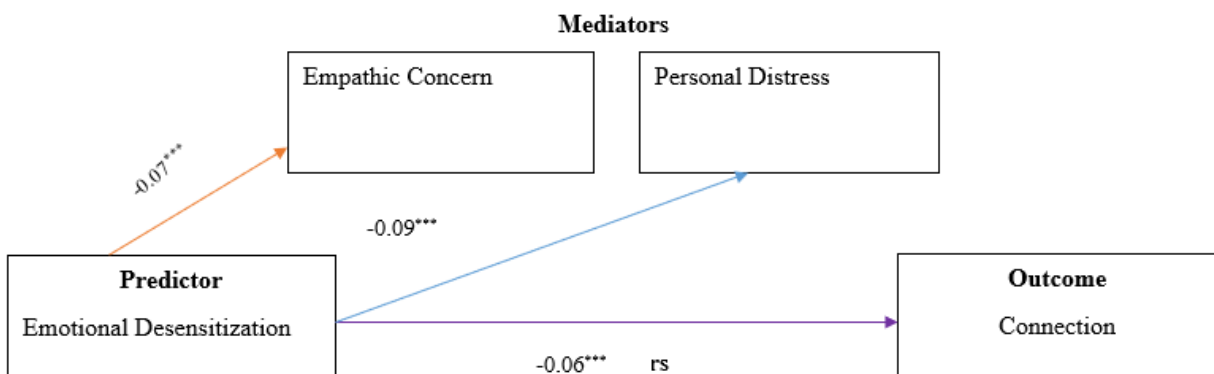


Figure 3.4

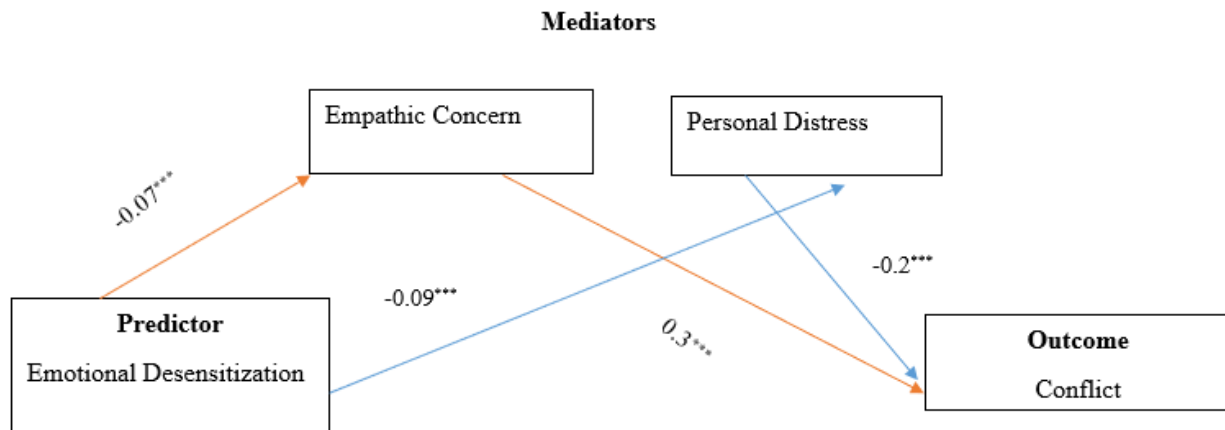
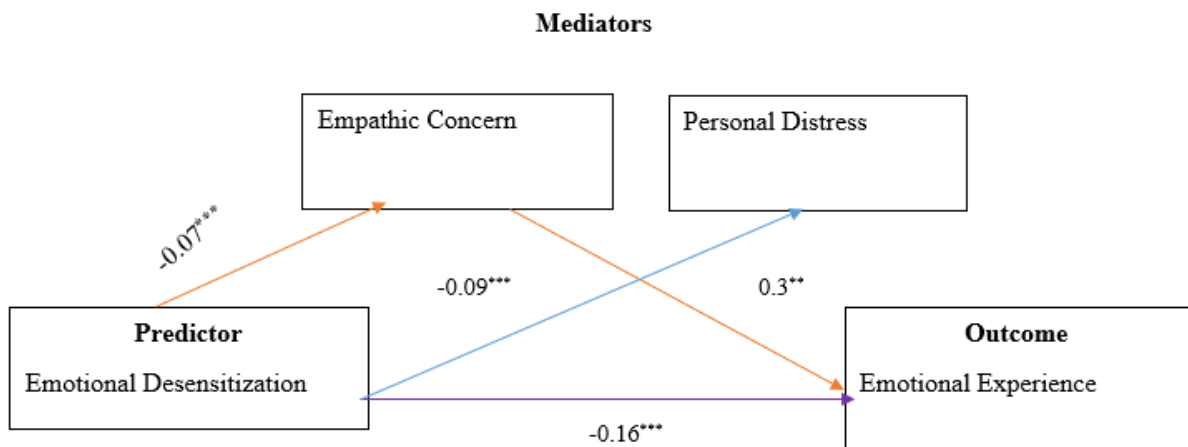


Figure 3.5



Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed that there was a relationship between emotional desensitization, empathy and interpersonal relationships among police officers. Consistent with the hypotheses, emotional desensitization was negatively associated with interpersonal relationships and empathy, while empathy was positively associated with interpersonal quality. Further, empathic concern emerged as a significant mediator between emotional desensitization and interpersonal functioning, highlighting the significance of empathy in maintaining healthy social relationships despite occupational stress.

The findings revealed that higher level of emotional desensitization are associated with poorer interpersonal relationships among police officers. This finding is coherent with previous research explained that repeated exposure to violence, trauma, and occupational stress contributes to emotional numbing, which further impairs interpersonal functioning (Mrug & Madan, 2016; Papazoglou, 2014; Rideout et al., 2021). Police officers often hide their emotional responses as a coping mechanism for job-related stress, while prolonged emotional suppression may negatively affect their personal relationships. From an attachment perspective, emotional suppression and avoidance behaviors associated with desensitization which may disrupt secure

attachment and relationship satisfaction (Bowlby, 1988; Tara-Fasol et al., 2021).

Moreover, emotional desensitization was negatively associated with interpersonal intimacy, connection and emotional experiences. These findings support previous literature suggesting that emotionally desensitized individuals struggle to engage in meaningful interactions and try to avoid emotionally demanding situations (Davis, 1983). It also shown that violence-exposed individuals tend to avoid deep emotional conversations, which hinder intimacy development and emotional closeness between relationships (Kim & Park, 2024). Further, emotional blunting reduces the ability to recognize and react to emotional cues, which may lead to weaker interpersonal connections and feelings of emotional distance (Decety et al., 2010; Riediger & Blanke, 2020). Further, emotional desensitization was associated with less positive emotional experiences such as shared happiness, mutual understanding and emotional expression, resulting in relationships that may feel emotionally flat or detached (Gable & Reis, 2023; Thompson et al., 2019). It may be particularly marked in collectivistic cultures, where emotional sharing and connectedness are central to social relationships (Zhang et al., 2024).

Results also revealed that emotional desensitization was negatively associated with empathic concern and personal distress. Empathic concern refers to feelings of sympathy, compassion and concern for others, while personal distress is self-oriented discomfort when seeing others' in suffering. The findings of this research also consistent with the previous studies suggesting that repeated exposure to distressing situations reduces emotional responsiveness and sensitivity to others' experiences (Coplan et al., 2011; Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Neuroimaging studies also suggest that emotional desensitization is associated with reduced activation in brain regions involved in empathic processing, contributing to emotionally detached behaviors and concern for others (Decety et al., 2010). Similarly, chronic exposure to emotionally demanding situations may lead individuals to adopt emotional numbing as a coping tategy,

thereby reducing personal distress over time (Decety & Lamm, 2006).

Previous studies also shown that interpersonal relationships were positively associated with empathic concern and negatively associated with personal distress. Individuals with higher empathic concern end to establish more satisfying and supportive relationships because empathy enhance emotional understanding, perspective-taking, and prosocial behavior (Davis, 1983; Laurent et al., 2023). While, high level of personal distress may effect relationship functioning by increasing emotional overwhelm and self-focused anxiety. Consistent with the previous research which shown that personal distress is associated with poorer emotional regulation, social anxiety, relationship dissatisfaction, and insecure attachment patterns (Gross & John, 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). While, empathic concern strengthens interpersonal relationships, but excessive personal distress may undermine them.

The findings of the research also shown the significant mediating role of empathic concern in the relationship between emotional desensitization and interpersonal relationships. These findings also suggest that individuals who maintain empathic concern despite the occupational stress are more likely to preserve healthy relationships. the results also consistent with the previous studies indicating that empathic concern mediates the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and relationship quality, highlighting its role in maintain emotional bonding and interpersonal adjustment (Zhao et al., 2021). So, empathy serves as an important protective factor that can buffer the negative effects of emotional desensitization on social relationships.

The findings also indicated that emotional desensitization was not directly associated with interpersonal conflict, however, empathy mediated this relationship. This result is also consistent with previous studies suggesting interpersonal conflict is strongly influenced by empathy-related processes than by emotional desensitization alone. (Mrug & Madan, 2016; Tara-Fasol et al., 2021). These findings further

emphasize the importance of empathy in maintain positive interpersonal interactions.

Overall, the findings highlight the detrimental impact of emotional desensitization on both empathy and interpersonal relationships among police officers. Aligning with previous literature, emotional desensitization was associated with emotional blunting, lower empathy and poorer relationship quality. Moreover, empathic concern emerged as a significant mediator linking emotional desensitization to interpersonal functioning. These findings highlight the importance of promoting empathy and emotional awareness among police officers to alleviate the interpersonal consequences of occupational stress and repeated exposure to traumatic experiences.

Strengths of the study

The study contributes to the literature by concentrating on an understudied population, Pakistani police officers, who work in a high risk profession where they exposed to chronic violence and traumatic events. Unlike existing researches, which examine emotional desensitization in isolation, the present study investigates its interaction with empathy and interpersonal relationships, offering a holistic understanding of their dynamics. Previous studies have largely studied desensitization due to media-violence, this study mainly focused on real-life violence exposure, making the findings particularly relevant to high-stress profession such as policing. By focusing on Pakistani police officers, a unique and high-stress group infrequently explored in detail, the study fills a critical gap in the literature and provides insights that are highly relevant for similar contexts in underdeveloped and high conflict regions. characterized by chronic exposure to violence and traumatic events. Unlike much of.

Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The study relied on self-report measures to assess variables. This approach may introduce social reliability bias or underreporting, especially in culture where emotional expression among police officers may be stigmatized. Future research should add neurobehavioral tasks such as physiological monitoring (e.g., heart rate, skin

conductance), or neuroimaging techniques to objectively assess variables. Further, factors such as any childhood trauma, prior mental health history, or personal coping strategies may confound the observed relationships. Future research should include measures for previous trauma, psychological resilience and social support systems to better isolate the effects of occupational stressors. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study may not capture how increasing exposure over time versus short-term, intense exposure (acute events) differentially affects emotional desensitization and empathy. Future studies utilize standard or validated scales to assess both frequency and duration of violence exposure, improving reliability and comparability.

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