

Psychosocial Experiences and Coping Strategies of Girls having Cross-Gender Behaviors (Tomboys) Living in Hostels: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

The study aimed to looking on the coping mechanisms used by girls having cross-gender behaviors (tomboys) living in hostels between the ages of 18 and 25. An extensive and comprehensive analysis of their accounts was provided via the application of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Five willing respondents were selected for semi-structured interviews. Three key themes were identified: identity construction (self-identification/social acceptance), challenges (social/ misconception/rumors/harassment/psychological) and coping strategies (avoidant). Girls having cross-gender behaviors perceived themselves as a boy and society also accepted them the same. They were independent in every task and lived their life according to their will. People admired them because of their uniqueness and charismatic personalities. But they had to face stigma of being lesbians and face sexual harassment as well. Girls became hesitant because they thought that they had bad intentions towards them. This arose some psychological problems in them like they had to face anxiety and stress. They opted the avoidant coping strategy

to overcome the challenges faced by them. They ignored those people who are destructive for them. The findings here are inconsistent to research conducted in the West as girls having cross-gender behaviors here, are more inclined towards social activities than homosexual orientation. It is imperative that individuals, particularly females, recognize the detrimental psychological effects of cross-gender living arrangements on young people and offer suitable social and psychological assistance.

Keywords: Tomboys, semi-structured interviews, interpretative phenomenological analysis, coping strategies

Introduction

Gender norms and expectations are strongly embedded in Pakistani society, influencing people's experiences and behaviors from an early age. These social standards frequently specify how people should display their gender identity, which results in the classification of particular actions as either feminine or masculine. Some people, meanwhile, might act in ways that are not consistent with the gender to which they have been assigned. Among these are girls who exhibit transgender behaviors, popularly referred to as "tomboys."

The act of taking on the characteristics of the other gender through clothing, hairstyle, speech pattern, and gestures that are deemed typical of that gender by society is known as cross-gender behavior (Van Beijsterveldt et al., 2006). A girl who engages in cross-gender behavior demonstrates traits or actions that are generally associated with boys. Common traits include dressing in masculine attire and participating in physical games and activities that are viewed as the purview of males or unfeminine in certain societies (Pujolar, 2013). This concept frequently serves to reinforce the ideas that there are activities and attire that are specific to girls and males. This might be interpreted as adhering to gender preconceptions while simultaneously rejecting gender roles and customs. This may be partly caused by a culture that exclusively values and craves masculinity.

In certain cultures, girls who exhibit transgender traits are expected to eventually give up their masculine tendencies. In those cultures, girls are expected to accept heteronormativity and revert to feminine conduct around the time of or just before puberty. People who choose not to do so are sometimes stigmatized, mainly because of homophobia. According to Creed (2013), these girls are a "threatening figure" because their "image undermines patriarchal gender boundaries that separate the sexes".

The word "tomboy" itself carries a lot of cultural and societal connotations, frequently evoking a mixture of curiosity, adoration, and occasionally contempt. Tomboys in Pakistani society may encounter particular difficulties in expressing their

individuality and negotiating social expectations since gender roles are frequently firmly established. Hostel settings provide one context in which these difficulties could be most noticeable. Students frequently live in hostels, also known as dormitories, especially those who are studying far from home. These settings can be constrictive, with laws and customs that might not always be able to accept or comprehend actions that go against gender stereotypes. Because they don't follow gender norms, tomboys living in Pakistani hostels may experience prejudice, harassment, or even shame.

It is crucial to comprehend the psychological experiences of tomboys who reside in Pakistani dormitories for a number of reasons. First of all, it clarifies the nuances of gender identity and expression in a cultural setting where these matters are frequently disregarded or misinterpreted. Second, it draws attention to the resiliency and coping mechanisms employed by people who manage conflicting societal expectations and many layers of identity. Lastly, it can guide programs and treatments that are considerate of tomboys' needs and work toward fostering a more welcoming and inclusive community.

There is a dearth of research on tomboys in Pakistan; most studies concentrate on more general questions of gender identity and women's rights. Nonetheless, research conducted in several cultural settings provides valuable perspectives on the psychological journeys of tomboys. For instance, studies conducted in Western nations have revealed that when tomboys defy gender standards, they may experience difficulties such as internalized stigma, bullying, and social rejection (Lobel, 2014).

In order for people to effectively navigate and manage the difficulties related to their gender identity, coping skills are essential. Research has indicated that tomboys might utilize a range of coping strategies, including reaching out to encouraging social circles, exercising to express their identity, or dressing more androgynously (Martin & Ruble, 2010).

Studies on the relationship between women's conduct and interests and how they deviate from the expectations of the female gender role are scarce. According to a report from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, prenatal and genetic variables may have an impact on preschool girls who play with toys that are normally preferred by boys or engage in other gender-role behaviors that are traditionally associated with men (Hines et al., 2002). It has also been observed that girls who exhibit cross-gender behaviors have greater interests in science and technology.

They offer a chance to investigate the reasons behind the ways in which the sexes differ in behavior since they act somewhat like boys. Tomboys and average boys are likely to have been influenced similarly in terms of certain qualities, even though the reasons for differences within the sexes may not be the same as the reasons for differences between the sexes. However, while tomboys exhibit traits that are typical of girls in many ways, they also offer a means of distinguishing characteristics that are

universal within-sex and that distinguish members of one sex from those of the other sex. Regarding sex differences, the most enduring debate is the extent to which they are a result of biological causes, gender cognitions, or social experiences (Berenbaum et al., 2008).

The most widely accepted biological theory holds that androgens during pregnancy induce sex differences in the brain, which in turn generate behavioral sex differences. Research on congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), a condition in which genetic females are exposed to high levels of androgens during pregnancy, indicates that early androgen exposure influences a central feature of cross-gender traits (Hines et al., 2016). Therefore, it makes sense to speculate that these girls also experienced unusually strong early androgen activity, either as a result of sensitive receptors or high androgen levels.

Depending on when hormonal androgenization occurs, genital and behavioral masculinization can happen separately, according to a well-known study on female rhesus monkeys (Goy et al., 1988; Thornton et al., 2009). This theory is supported by Udry's (2000) findings, which show that psychological masculinity was unrelated to hormone exposure in the first or third trimesters and that women who were exposed to higher levels of sex hormone binding globulin (a molecule required for testosterone action) during the second trimester of fetal life were more manly than other women. Regretfully, it is not now feasible to ascertain in the past which ladies have been subjected to the most amount of testosterone during pregnancy. However, girls exhibiting transgender traits are an apparent group to research if biological indicators of early androgen exposure are found.

In the present modern era, the altering and switching the gender role and identity is becoming normal. Everybody feels free to change his/her appearance and role according to their will. Girls having cross-gender behaviors is the clear practical application of this. Many girls switch their gender role to boys because of the gender discrimination that they have to face in their real gender role. They observe the environment difference to accept and value masculinity. To have that sense of acceptance and regard, girls start liking masculine activities and eventually turn themselves into girl having cross-gender behaviors. This transition is not appreciated in our collectivistic culture easily. These girls have to face difficulties and socioeconomic pressure in this regard. Tomboys may have more difficulties in Pakistani culture, where gender roles are frequently rigidly enforced. For those who do not neatly fit into these categories, the cultural significance of gender roles and the pressure to adhere to societal standards can create a hostile environment. Gaining an understanding of how Pakistani tomboys manage these difficulties might help us better understand how gender, culture, and identity connect. To evaluate these living experiences of these girls and how they survive this pressure, this study will be conducted. In the interview, the following essential questions were added:

1. What are psychosocial experiences of girls having cross-gender behaviors living in hostels? What is the extent and impact of social pressure on girls having cross-gender behaviors living in hostels?
2. What are the coping strategies used by girls having cross-gender behaviors living in hostels?

Method

Research design

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Phenomenology and interpretation are the two components of the IPA that concentrate on participants' lived experiences. In the beginning, it shares the objectives of idiographic phenomenology, which analyses in detail portions of the reflecting personal and subjective viewpoint on individual experiences. Individual participation (IPA) takes phenomenology to the next level. The researcher's views of the participant's experience are also considered when reporting on the participant's experience. Thus, the researcher's contributions to study and analysis are recognized. For IPA, researchers are guided by hermeneutic principles in which they seek participants' interpretations of events, experiences, and emotional states. They are influenced by the researcher's notions, beliefs, expectations, and their own experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborne, 1999).

An IPA researcher must articulate their thoughts well, enhancing the analysis (Willig, 2001). For phenomenological research to be valid, participants must engage in reflective methods to accurately depict how they view and comprehend their surroundings (Caelli, 2000). IPA approaches are discussed by Smith et al. (1999). The foundational methodology is the ideographic case study approach. By using this technique, a researcher can analyze typical trends in a small sample size or write up a single case. Bigger sample sizes and the ability to look at inter-conceptual relationships should lead to using a different technique. It was decided to use the ideographic case study approach to identify commonalities across samples. Detailed explanations of one instance or related topics from up to 10 cases may be produced using this approach (Smith et al., 1999). Interviews are recorded and verbatim transcribed for use in an ideographic case study. Predetermined questions are generally avoided when the study aims to learn respondents' viewpoints on the essential phenomenon under examination. Keeping track of nonverbal communication is a good idea. The researcher creates a series of generalizations about the subject matter.

The interviewer's demeanor and the respondent's recall ability are both up for debate. Understanding the data is aided by these observations (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Because it is inductive, IPA opens the door to the unexpected. According to Smith, the inductive character of IPA is its most important feature. Early use of IPA was in health psychology to analyze qualitative data gathered from subjects. The IPA oversaw the study to provide a thorough and gender-balanced perspective on the research questions (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Procedure

First, authorization from the department was obtained in order to carry out the current study. An interview protocol was created to gather information about the participants' intended topic after obtaining approval. Both the informed consent form and the participant information sheet made it clear that the interviews would be audio recorded. The study's participants were reassured that their participation was completely voluntary and that they might leave at any time for any reason. To guarantee that participants were never recognized, acronyms for patients' pseudonyms were utilized. Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Prompts were utilized to elaborate on the questions during the Urdu-language interviews. It was encouraged of the participants to provide thorough information in their own style. The lengths of the interviews varied. Each participant gave a single-session, five to fourteen-minute account of their experiences, which was recorded and transcribed. Following the interview, participants received a debriefing and were urged to ask further questions. The entire investigation has been conducted in compliance with all applicable laws. At the conclusion of the interview, a quick therapeutic counseling session was also offered to the participants if necessary. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. The transcriptions from the original language (Urdu) were translated into English. The data were anonymized during transcription. Nine minutes was the typical length of an interview. In the course of the interview, the interviewer requested the interviewee to explain any points that were unclear or ambiguous.

Participants

Five girls having cross-gender behaviors were interviewed for this research. Those girls were interviewed who had this identity from at least three years, having permanent masculine appearance including dressing and having a boy haircut. It was their "lived experiences" in hostel that were gathered. With IPA, small homogenous samples are used, and individuals are recruited by purposeful sampling; these requirements align with IPA (Smith, 2004). According to the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study, participants were selected following the study's aim.

Table I. Summary of the key participant's characteristics

Participant Pseudonyms	Age (in years)	Sex	Gender identity	Siblings	No. of years living in hostel
A	21	Female	Male	2 sisters 1 brother	2
B	22	Female	Male	Only child	2
C	22	Female	Male	4 sisters	3
D	23	Female	Male	1 sister 2 brothers	2
E	22	Female	Male	1 sister 1 brother	3

Interviews. This method of interviewing is an attempt to fully apply the inductive epistemology of IPA. The ensuing conversation is further shaped by the participant and is not predicated on preconceived notions or themes or assumptions made by the researcher. In order to prepare for potential semi-structured interviews, the study's methodology comprised creating a schedule, considering potential interview questions, and planning the interviewer's probable responses to the participants' answers. This method of interviewing is an attempt to fully apply the inductive epistemology of IPA. The IPA researcher typically uses semi-structured interviews, in which the interviewer has prepared a few key topics for discussion with the participants along with a few prompts, to gather data. To reduce the risk of analysis just reflecting the important themes listed in the interview schedule, an unstructured interviewing method was used. It makes use of IPA's capacity to investigate surprising and unexpected discoveries.

A semi-structured interview schedule was created, and the questions were worded to transition from broad to more focused topics. The semi-structured interview schedule was designed to allow for flexibility in the interviewer's position as an active listener, which could be adapted to address the participant's concerns when necessary. Participants' memories of their ongoing social and psychological experiences of living with and managing with their condition were examined using semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, themes pertaining to the social and psychological environments of the girls residing in the hostel and exhibiting transgender behaviors were examined. Open-ended questions covering psychological issues, societal concerns, and coping methods were included of the interview agenda.

Data analysis. The IPA advised that the study have a limited sample size. Each transcript was examined in great detail. IPA was used by the author to evaluate the transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). The transcripts from these five interviews totaled thirty pages. The researcher can find themes and incorporate them into clusters

through logical procedures that help the interpretive process. The following analysis was done on the data (Smith et al., 2009):

Step 1: Reading and rereading: We read the transcripts and the text aloud several times, trying to picture the participant's voice each time. Reading the transcript was followed by listening to the audio. Exploratory analysis of language usage and semantic content. Understanding how rapport and trust developed throughout an interview was made easier with the help of this reading and rereading, which also helped pinpoint deeper and more specific areas.

Step 2: Take a note: The researcher started by taking basic notes after receiving an overview of the data. The transcript was numbered and featured a sizable left margin. Finding topics was to be aided by this. Semantic content and language usage were observed while taking notes, taking into account their lived experiences. We went over the transcript to look for any noteworthy or captivating passages. Interpretive comments helped to clarify the participants' issues while a descriptive core of remarks that emphasized phenomenology and stayed true to the participant's clear meaning was highlighted at this phase. Understanding the context of the participants' concerns, interpreting abstract concepts, and interpreting their nonverbal cues all aided in the interpretation of the meaning patterns that were noticed.

Step 3: Emerging themes: After the annotations were placed to the left margin of the transcript, the process of abstraction started. The majority of the transcript and preliminary notes were cut, but the intricate mapping of connections, links, and patterns between exploratory notes was retained. Due to this, the original notes had to be the analytical emphasis instead of the transcript. The themes were positioned in a margin to the right of the corresponding data section.

Step 4: Linking up emergent themes: Next, in order to meaningfully define and recognize "superordinate" ideas, we searched for connections between concepts. By comparing the subthemes, it was now able to determine which theme was the "superordinate" one. Researchers should "imagine a magnet, with certain themes drawing others in and helping to make sense of them," according to Smith and Osborn (2003).

Step 5: Next case: The same procedure was followed, searching each instance for fresh and unanticipated themes. The concepts from the first example were bracketed while working on the second transcript, which was examined independently of the other.

Step 6: Finding themes in cases: This stage took into account links between examples and the ways in which a theme in one case emphasized a theme in another. We searched for transcripts that were divergent and convergent. Subordinate/subthemes, themes, and superordinate themes as subordinate/subthemes were all combined to form a new set of themes.

Table 2. Master table of themes

Superordinate themes	Themes	Subthemes/subordinates
Identity construction	Self-identification	Cross-gender appearance since childhood Feel easy in cross-gender dressing Recognize myself as a boy Being a girl having cross-gender behaviors is just a choice to spend life Independence Self-regulation
	Social acceptance	Social recognition as a boy Friendship with both girls and boys Admired by others People accept me People want to talk to me Parental support Friends' support Socialization
Challenges	Social	Appearance is judged by others Being a typical girl is hard Don't initiate in making friends Fake friends Abandoned by friends Girls are hesitant towards me
	Misconceptions	Girls think that I'm staring at them Girls think that I want to touch them
	Rumors	Faced rumors of being a lesbian

	Harassment	Faced sexual harassment Girls develop feelings for me Girls want me to be in relationship with them
	Psychological	Self-isolation Trauma Stress Anxiety Don't want to make friends
Coping strategies	Avoidant coping	Ignore people who are destructive for them Ending unhealthy friendships with people

Results

The analysis resulted in three superordinate themes, 8 themes and 35 subthemes. There is a direct correlation between the three themes: identity construction challenges and the need to learn to cope with these unpleasant feelings and ideas.

Identity construction (self-identification/social acceptance)

Participants reported that they have appearance of a boy since childhood and feel easy in this appearance. They also told that being a girl having cross-gender behaviors is just a choice to spend life. This is their liberty to have social identity of their choice. They are socially accepted and admired by others.

All the participants recognized themselves as a boy. They said that being a boy is way too easy than being a girl. One participant said:

To be honest, I feel easy. The way I sit in boys. It is easy for me because I also have done job so this is comfortable.

They recognize themselves as a boy. One participant said:

I live like a boy. He is doing on his own in the society. I don't feel uncomfortable even if a boy walk near me.

One participant said that he feel independent:

I ride the bike. I do my work on my own. People appreciate me.

Another participant said that he regulate his emotions and behaviors on his own:

I cope with the situation on my own. I don't need family or friends to help me out in this situation.

They said that they are social and have both boys and girls as friends. One participant said:

I have both friends. But feel comfortable with boys because they don't judge you. In contrast, girls starting judging you on little things.

One participant said:

People like me. They want to talk with me and interact with me. I catch the vibes by them that they are liking me. Even some people has told me by their pick-up lines.

All the participant has parental and friends' support throughout their journey. One participant said:

My parents support me throughout my life. My father has alarmed me that I have to face these type of issues. He taught me how to overcome these type of situations.

One participant said that he is very social person:

I socialize freely. I don't hide anything. I like the person who I am. I don't need to impress anybody. That's it.

Challenges

Participants have to face many challenges in their life especially in the hostels. They has respond to multiple questions asked in the interview regard these challenges. These challenges include social challenges, misconceptions, psychological challenges, rumors and harassment.

In regard to the social challenges faced by the participants, many are common among them. One participant said that:

I met a girl. She became my friend. She told about me to his boyfriend. He started judging me on my appearance. He said that I'm Jahannumi. It makes me sad because it's mine and Allah's issue.

Due to the problems face by them, they are reluctant in making friends. They face difficulty in making friends. One said:

When I came to the hostel, I wanted to make friendships. There were many girls from different cities. But no I realized that not everyone is sincere and trustworthy. That's why I stay away from people. If someone wants to make friendship with me, she will surely make efforts.

Many participants faced problems like having fake friends and betrayed by them. One participant said:

In starting, all was good but after the vacations, things were changed. Friends were busy in their work. No one give me importance and ignored me for no reason. Then I realized that I have served energies for wrong people.

Another participant said:

I face difficulties in hostel. Girls think that I'm staring at them but I'm not. They are hesitant towards me as if I have bad intentions for them. They think that I want to touch them.

Girls having cross-gender behaviors face many rumors of being lesbians. Almost all of the participants told about this issue in their interview. One participant said:

Once a girls started spreading rumors that I sleep with some girls and have sexual relationships with them. He spread so many rumors. When she confronted in front of me, then I punched her.

Another said:

I had a friend. We used to sit in a group of friends. Suddenly, that girl started developing sexual feelings for me. She told me about this. I denied that I can't have that type of relationship with her.

One participant also face sexual harassment. He told in the interview that:

A girl wanted to make friendship with me. I said it's to make friends. She invited me in her room. When I go in her room, he turned off lights and jumped over me. I freed myself and run away from her room.

Due to all these situations, they have to face many psychological problems. One participants told that:

After all this trauma, I don't want to go to anyone's room because I don't know about anyone's intention. And I don't want to make friends anymore.

Another participant said:

I occasionally think about this, that why it happens to me. I feel stress and anxiety due to these situation when I don't have intentions like these.

Coping strategy

To cope up with all these situations, they have opt avoidant coping strategy. They avoid being around these type of people who hurt them of who are destructive. One participants said:

Now I started ignoring these type of people, their non-sense talk, their rumors etc. Because they are not important for me so the best way to cope with them is to avoid them.

Another participant said:

I ended the friendship with the girls who has built sexual feeling for me. Now I avoid making friendship with those who likes me desperately.

Discussion

This study provided insight into the lived experiences of the girls having cross-gender behaviors (tomboys) living in hostels regarding their psychosocial experiences and coping behaviors. There are three themes that are arose and form a casual progression starting from identity construction to the challenges faced by these girls to the dire need to opt the coping mechanism in order to maintain the psychological wellbeing. As it is against the typical tradition to have the dressing and appearance of opposite sex, that's why they have to face many problems and challenges and also find way to cope with them.

These girls have their cross-gender appearance either from their childhood or they opt this appearance in their adolescents. But they want to be like a boy and a dire need to become a boy since childhood. It is confirmed the theories that there present

some impressions that confirm the inborn traits that force a girl to have the lifestyle of a boy. These girls struggle with themselves and with the surroundings and dare to become a boy. After the decision, they convince their parents to give her permission to do so. Many of the parents are acceptable for this change and allow their daughter to choose her gender identity.

After choosing a cross-gender or male gender identity, they starting living in that way. The dressing, the hairstyle, the behavior and the life style of a girls now converted into a boy's one. They play with boys' toys and have masculine interests (Peplau & Huppig, 2008). This change in behavior makes them comfortable as his traits demand this lifestyle. They start living like a boy. Do thing, play games, having fun and have physical aggressiveness (Paechter & Clark, 2007) just like a boy. A sense of independence is felt by them. They recognize themselves as a boy in the society. Most people in the society also accept them as they are.

As they have their parents' support and also have friends' support so they go a long way with their ambitions and goals. In their life, they are also admired by the people around them as they have unique and charismatic personality. People want to have a conversation with them. They like to meet them and listen to their life stories. These girls socialize with others in a confident way as their appearance give them a boost in their confidence and self-esteem (Erene, 2017).

But in parallel to this beautiful path, they also have to face some challenges and stigmas by the society as they deviate from the norms and rituals of the society. The main challenge that has to face by them is to clear their sexual orientation. Society needs justification about their sexual life whether they are heterosexual or lesbians. This is the debate of the hour because in our collectivistic culture, homosexuality is not acceptable. That's why they have to face the stigma regarding this issue.

Due to these concerns, many girls hesitate to have friendship with girls having cross-gender behaviors because they thought that they may have bad intentions and want to involve sexually with them. These type of challenges are common and face by them usually. Many people judge them because of their appearance. They have to face the fake friendships because people take them as a story tail character, talk to them and then make fun of them as well. They are abandoned by their friends as people start spreading rumors about them. All these challenges make them mentally sick. They have to face serious mental issues due to these situations. They face anxiety, trauma and stress due to the behavior of others.

To keep themselves strong and mentally stable, they have to cope with these situations. In this regard, many coping strategies can help them. The most used coping mechanisms by the girls having cross-gender behaviors are ignoring and avoiding these type of destructive and unhealthy relationship with people. They end the friendship with people who make them vulnerable to the mental illness.

Conclusion

Idiography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics form the foundation of IPA. In order to comprehend the reported psychosocial experiences of girls living in hostels and engaging in cross-gender behaviors, this study takes a hermeneutic approach. In identifying and "giving voice" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006) to the social and psychological issues of girls living in hostels and exhibiting transgender behaviors, it is phenomenological. Lastly, it is idiographic in that generalizations about the experiences of the five participants were made instead of those about the community of girls who exhibit cross-gender behaviors as a whole.

Limitations and Suggestions

There are a few limitations to the study, despite the fact that it offers insightful information about the psychosocial experiences and coping mechanisms of cross-gender girls (tomboys) who reside in Pakistani dormitories. To begin with, the study's sample size was somewhat small, with individuals drawn from a restricted geographic area and particular demographic backgrounds. This could restrict how broadly the results can be applied to the tomboy population in Pakistan.

Second, self-reported data, which is prone to biases including memory recall and social desirability, was used in the study. Subsequent studies may want to think about combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to strengthen the findings' validity through triangulation. Thirdly, the study ignored the viewpoints of other stakeholders, including parents, peers, and hostel authorities, in favor of concentrating exclusively on the experiences of tomboys. Taking these viewpoints into account could lead to a more thorough comprehension of the difficulties tomboys encounter in dorm environments.

To have a more nuanced picture of how gender identity is produced and negotiated in various circumstances, it would be helpful to investigate the experiences of tomboys in a variety of age groups and cultural backgrounds in future study. Based on the results of this study, interventions and support services catered to the requirements of tomboys could be created, with an emphasis on fostering social acceptability, coping mechanisms, and resilience.

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