

## **EMOTIONAL BLINDFOLDS: THE TRIANGULAR IMPACT OF IMMATURE DEFENSES, FATHER ALIENATION, AND CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT ON GUILT IN SUBSTANCE ABUSERS**

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### **Abstract**

The present research investigated how immature defense mechanisms relate to guilt levels in men who are diagnosed with substance abuse disorder while examining emotional neglect and father alienation as potential moderators. The study examined 185 participants who had an average age of 19.16 years and were diagnosed with substance abuse disorder. Self-report measures were used to gather data, which assessed immature defenses together with childhood trauma, guilt, and family dynamics. The results from Pearson correlation tests demonstrated that denial, immature defenses, guilt, and emotional neglect had strong positive relationships. In contrast, family alienation showed robust negative associations with these variables. The results of a moderated moderation regression analysis established that emotional neglect, together with father alienation, increased the magnitude of the relationship between immature defenses and guilt in the study participants. The relationship between immature defenses and guilt became strongest under low to moderate levels of both emotional neglect and family alienation, yet weakened when these factors reached high levels. Findings indicated that substance abuse treatment interventions require the inclusion of family dynamics and childhood trauma assessment, according to the research findings. This paper presents recommendations for clinical work and directions for additional research.

### **Keywords:**

*Immature Defenses, Denial, Childhood Neglect, Guilt, Shame, Substance Abuse, Defense Mechanisms, Trauma.*

## Introduction

Globally, substance abuse is escalating and is a major challenge to public health systems, families, and individual well-being. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), more than 296 million people worldwide were using illicit substances in the past year, up by twenty-three percent over the previous decade. It is not just one substance or region that is rising, but opioids, cannabis, synthetic drugs, and prescription medications. The situation is equally alarming in South Asia and Pakistan. According to national data, seven million people are drug dependent in Pakistan, with youth aged 15 to 30 being the most prevalent group. Heroin and opium are followed by cannabis (Khan et al., 2021).

Despite the staggering numbers, Pakistan has no integrated national policy for substance rehabilitation, nor access to psychological support and reintegration services due to the social stigma attached to drug abuse. The fact that youth are becoming more and more dependent on each other and that most emotional trauma is untreated makes it necessary to look at the psychological factors that keep people addicted. To develop interventions that are more than symptom suppression, an understanding of the internal psychological world of substance abusers is necessary. However, psychoanalytic theory is a powerful lens to explore how unconscious processes affect addictive behaviors (Freud, 2023). Specifically, immature defenses help to explain emotional mechanisms that people use to manage unresolved conflicts, anxiety, and emotional pain.

Unconscious immature defenses serve in relieving temporarily but ultimately distorting emotional reality and impeding emotional maturity (Ma et al., 2023). They include projection, acting out, passive aggression, and denial, and those with substance use disorders are especially prone to denial. Denial can act as a protective shield from the crushing guilt or shame, but continued use results in an emotional amputation, detachment from the effects of one's actions, and resistance to treatment. In the case of addiction, immature defenses like denial are a psychological shelter (a psychological shield that protects the user from internal accountability, thus perpetuating the cycle of avoidance and dependence (JanaAbadi & Zamani, 2015).

It is rarely arbitrary to rely on immature defenses; it usually arises in response to early relational disruptions. Father alienation is one such disruption that has not been explored sufficiently within the addiction literature. A child can become emotionally estranged from the father, which may result from neglect, harsh parenting, absence, or emotional unavailability, and may impair the sense of security, identity, and self-worth. Traditionally, the father figure occupies a central position in boundary setting, emotional modelling, and discipline, especially in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Suppose that the bond is weak or does not exist. In that case, the child may internalize the feeling of rejection or abandonment and develop mistrust of authority figures, suppression of emotions, and dysfunctional coping mechanisms (Verhaar et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2018). This emotional void is often compensated for by substances among substance abusers, who use the substances to ease the emotional wounds of paternal absence temporarily. The use of immature defenses may also be exacerbated by the psychological gap left by an emotionally distant father lacking the relational framework and emotional tools to deal with distress in a healthy way (Taurino et al., 2021; Cramer & Kelly, 2010).

The issue is worsened further still when the person has experienced childhood emotional neglect, which is a form of maltreatment in which the child's emotional needs are often neglected or invalidated. Emotional neglect is unique because one does not find bruises, but the damage is the same. Children who are raised with emotionally neglectful parents do not learn emotional awareness, empathy, or a coherent self-concept. They learn to squash or reject their feelings, which they believe are unimportant or shameful. Such individuals may also experience low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, and a hypersensitivity to

addiction in adulthood. The psychological impact is increased when emotional neglect is accompanied by father alienation. Individuals who have experienced the combination of two relational traumas are particularly defenseless, and as a result, they rely on immature defenses such as denial to navigate their emotional pain (Bahmani et al., 2022; Kurtuluş & Eleemo, 2023; Ludwig & Rostain, 2009).

How people experience guilt is dependent on the interplay between immature defenses, father alienation, and emotional neglect. Guilt is a moral emotion triggered when one realizes they have violated personal or social standards. Guilt in healthy development can help individuals feel accountable and lead to reparative actions (Young et al., 2019). While guilt is something, guilt filtered through a lens of psychological defenses and unresolved trauma can become distorted. Such as, at times it can lead to chronic self-blame, and emotional paralysis, and at other times it may be completely shut down to avoid psychological discomfort (Kip et al., 2022).

This suppression of guilt is often accomplished in substance abusers by denial, which is a defense that removes one from the emotional consequences of behavior. However, it is not uniform among people. Although using immature defenses, people with secure early relationships can still feel and process guilt. On the contrary, people with a history of emotional neglect and paternal estrangement are more likely to have blunted or absent guilt responses, which not only keep their addiction alive but also prevent the motivation to change (Snoek et al., 2021; Marici et al., 2023).

Therefore, it is necessary to investigate whether emotional neglect and father alienation serve as moderators between immature defenses and guilt. The moderating roles would imply that the individual's childhood relational context determines the extent to which immature defenses affect guilt. People with high levels of emotional neglect and father alienation may have weaker links between immature defenses and guilt. Schindler (2019) and Abbasi et al (2022) stated that these people are more emotionally disengaged. On the other hand, in those who had lower levels of early trauma, immature defenses may still allow feelings of guilt to be experienced. This dynamic is investigated to understand why some substance abusers are guilty and respond to therapeutic interventions while others are emotionally resistant. It is also crucial to examine these interactions in the Pakistani context, which is so culturally oriented towards paternal authority and so under-recognizes emotional neglect as a form of trauma.

The rationale for the present study lies in the limited exploration of the interplay of immature defenses, father alienation, emotional neglect, and guilt in substance abusers, where most studies have concentrated on tracking the individual set of markers around the Western globe. The prior working papers discussed in this research have studied these specific concepts in segregation or done so for Western populations, completely ignoring the cultural masculinity markers and the emotional expression with a family's perception. There is a clear need to focus on potentiating and retrieving some of these variables, together with the help of a psychodynamic approach, incorporating defensive mechanisms and traumatic stress from early relationships. This study aims to demonstrate the interrelationship of neglected emotion and father alienation using the framework of guilt imposition for young Pakistani substance abusers. The outcome is expected to assist in formulating select policy documents and strategic plans targeting culturally appropriate therapeutic frameworks grounded within trauma. Based on the aforementioned empirical and conceptual foundations, the following objectives were outlined:

1. To analyze the complex interplay between psychoanalytic immature defenses, childhood emotional neglect, father alienation, and guilt among substance abusers.
2. To assess the moderating effects of both father alienation and childhood emotional neglect in the association between psychoanalytic immature defenses and guilt.

**Hypotheses of the Study**

- 1. There would be a significant relationship between psychoanalytic immature defenses, childhood emotional neglect, father alienation, and guilt.
- 2. The association between psychoanalytic immature defenses and the experiences of guilt will be moderated by childhood emotional neglect and father alienation.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The study applied a correlational design to explore how father alienation and emotional neglect function together with immature defense methods to affect guilt development in substance use disorder participants. The research analyzed how childhood emotional neglect intensifies the link between immature defenses and guilt emotions that sustain addiction habits.

**Participants and Selection Process**

This study's participants were recruited through a purposive sampling, diagnosed with substance use disorder. These subjects were recruited from government and private rehabilitation centers in Lahore, Multan, and Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. All participants had to be in withdrawal for at least 2 weeks prior to ensure emotional stability and cognitive readiness to complete self-report questionnaires. The sample was exclusively of men, as a proportionate sample of women could not be obtained. The gender distribution was common in rehabilitation centers; most participants were from lower to middle income. Participants had to be between the ages of 15 and 30. Comorbid psychiatric disorders, severe intellectual disability, active psychotic symptoms, and physical impairments that might interfere with participation were excluded. A structured demographic questionnaire was used to collect demographic data of (a) age, (b) educational level, (c) family system, (d) type and duration of substance use, and (e) current treatment phase. The men substance abusers were 185 in number, all of whom were in the relapse prevention phase of treatment. The majority (34.6%) were late adolescents or young adults (19 years), and 28.1% were 17. Most of them had completed either 12 or 17 years of education regarding educational attainment. 88.6% of the participants were unemployed, and 76.2% lived in nuclear family systems. Furthermore, the majority were unmarried (93%).

The study showed that half of the participants (52.4%) used substances for one year, yet another 38.9% maintained two years of drug usage. The survey showed that participants used cannabis as their primary substance at a rate of 51.4%, while heroin came second at 26.5%, and opium took third place at 22.2%. A family history of drug use existed for 21.1% of the total sample, yet 78.9% of participants did not have such a background. Treatment methods for participants primarily involved receiving both medication and therapy (64.3%). The participants received medication treatment as their primary intervention, either alone (16.8%) or combined with spiritual treatment (11.9%) or therapy (7.0%) alone.

**Instruments**

Data was collected through four standardized instruments chosen for their alignment with the constructs under investigation.

The Short Version Defense Mechanism Rating Scale- Self Report-30 (DMRS-SR-30) was developed by Giuseppe et al. (2020). This is based on Vaillant’s hierarchical model of defense mechanisms, which categorizes them into three styles: mature, neurotic (mental inhibitions), and immature. This study focused only on the immature defenses subscale and the items measuring denial, projection, acting out, and passive

aggression because these items are most observed in individuals with substance use disorders. There were 30 items on the DMRS-SR-30, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = not at all true; 4 = very true). It showed the Cronbach's alpha value of .81 for the scale. The instrument was translated and validated in Urdu.

**Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form (CTQ-SF):** The second instrument was the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form (CTQ-SF) from Bernstein et al. (1997). For the present research, the operationalization of the scale, which included assessment of these five dimensions of childhood trauma, only one of which, the emotional neglect subscale, was utilized because it was directly related to the study of early emotional deprivation. The CTQ-SF consists of 28 items, rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never true) to 5 (often true). The internal consistency reliability of emotional neglect was  $\alpha = .89$  in the current sample. Permission from the original authors to validate. The instrument was translated and validated in Urdu.

**Guilt and Shame (TOSCA-A):** The third measure, the Guilt subscale, was derived from the Guilt and Shame (TOSCA-A) scale initially developed and adapted in Urdu by Shahnawaz and Malik (2017). The TOSCA-A self-report measure measures adolescents' dispositional tendencies toward guilt and shame based on hypothetical everyday situations. Only the Guilt subscale was used for this study. The subscale comprises 15 scenario-based items, each followed by guilt-prone response options. Each reaction is rated by participants on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all likely) to 5 (Very likely). The higher the score, the stronger the disposition toward feeling guilty. For example: "You accidentally get a drink spilled at a party and make a mess on someone's carpet." I must be more cautious, which would be your most probable thought. The total guilt score is between 15 and 75. In the original validation, the Guilt subscale has shown good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .76 (Shahnawaz & Malik, 2017). The Urdu version of the scale was administered with permission from the original authors.

**Parental Attachment Scale:** The Father Alienation subscale of the Parental Attachment Scale by Zia and Shahzad (2019) contains 6 items measuring the perceived alienation from the father. The scale used a 5-point Likert scale in which respondents rated '1 = never true' to '5 = always true'. The subscales are 50 items divided into six subscales: Mother Trust (10 items), Mother Communication (9 items), Mother Alienation (6 items), Father Trust (10 items), Father Communication (9 items), and Father Alienation (6 items). The internal consistency for the subscales was good to acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.80 to 0.86.

**Demographic Questionnaire:** A demographic form was developed and used to obtain personal information for analysis, including age, gender, type of drug used, education, marital status, family system (joint or nuclear), duration of substance use, and number of relapses. This information examined links between guilt and defensive functioning and potential demographic correlates.

## Procedure

Data was collected under ethical guidelines, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. SPSS version 26 was used to analyze data. Relationships between variables were examined using Pearson's correlation. Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 3) was then used to test the moderated moderation effects of childhood neglect and father alienation on the relationship between immature defenses and guilt.

## Results

The sample consisted of 185 male participants, with a mean age of 19.16 (SD = 2.20). The average number of education years completed was 12.14 (SD = 2.13), indicating that most had obtained at least secondary or intermediate education. Participants had been using substances on average for 1.64 years (SD = 0.86),

which suggests that most had been using substances for one to two years, on average. The score with 1 representing heroin, 2 representing cannabis, and 3 representing opium, implying that cannabis was the most popular drug. Moreover, the mean score for family history of drug abuse indicated that most had no response to the presence of a family history of drug use. In terms of treatment modality, on a scale of 1 (therapy only) to 4 (medication only), most participants were receiving both therapy and medication (See Figure 1).

**Table 1: Pearson Correlations between Study Variables (N = 185)**

Variable	1	2	3	4
Immature Defenses	-			
Guilt	.62***	-		
Emotional Neglect	.81***	.62***	-	
Family Alienation	-.87***	-.75***	-.82***	-

The Pearson correlation analysis results showed that all key variables have strong and significant relationships with each other. Pearson correlation coefficients between Immature Defenses, Guilt, Emotional Neglect, and Family Alienation. Immature Defenses correlated positively with Guilt ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Emotional Neglect ( $r = .81$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and inversely with Family Alienation ( $r = -.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Guilt was also positively correlated with Emotional Neglect ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and negatively correlated with Family Alienation ( $r = -.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Likewise, Emotional Neglect was negatively correlated with Family Alienation ( $r = -.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ). All the correlations were statistically significant at the 0.01 level and reflected strong associations among variables.





Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables (N = 185)

**Table 2: Regression Results for the Moderated Moderation Model Predicting Guilt (N = 185)**

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Immature Defenses	8.05	1.06	7.61	< .001	[5.96, 10.14]
Family Alienation	7.96	1.43	5.56	< .001	[5.14, 10.79]
Emotional Neglect	24.53	2.72	9.02	< .001	[19.16, 29.89]
Immature × Family Alienation	-0.33	0.06	- 5.84	< .001	[-0.44, -0.22]
Immature × Emotional Neglect	-0.81	0.09	- 9.52	< .001	[-0.98, -0.64]
Family Alienation × Emotional Neglect	-1.01	0.13	- 7.59	< .001	[-1.27, -0.75]
Immature × Alienation × Neglect (3-way int.)	0.04	0.01	7.16	< .001	[0.03, 0.05]

**Note:** *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* = standard error; *CI* = confidence interval.

A moderated (three-way interaction) moderation (family alienation and emotional neglect as moderators) regression analysis of the influence of immature defenses on guilt is presented in Table 2. The overall model explained 76.6% of the variance in guilt ( $R^2 = .77$ ,  $F(7, 177) = 82.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The results suggest that higher levels of immature defenses ( $B = 8.05$ ;  $p < .001$ ), family alienation ( $B = 7.96$ ;  $p < .001$ , and emotional neglect ( $B = 24.53$ ;  $p < .001$ ) were associated with higher levels of guilt. However, all two-way interactions, including immature defenses × family alienation ( $B = -0.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), immature defenses × emotional neglect ( $B = -0.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ), family alienation × emotional neglect ( $B = -1.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) point towards the negative effect that the presence of second and third risk factors had on guilt. The statistically significant three-way interaction of (immature defense × family alienation × emotional neglect) ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was most notable. Risks of immature defenses on guilt are a function of both levels of family alienation and emotional neglect. For instance, among the highest and most positive associations were between immature defenses and guilt, and particularly when emotional neglect was low or absent and when family alienation was either low or moderate. However, over time, this emotional neglect and alienation led to a weaker or perhaps negative relationship, but it appears that prolonged emotional disconnection blunts guilt responses.

**Discussion**

Our study suggested that immature defense systems relate positively to guilt behavior. Our research confirmed the connection between immature defense mechanisms and guilt through a measurable relationship of  $r = .62$  ( $p < .01$ ). Our data showed that immature defenses predict guilt at a significant level ( $\beta = 8.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Previous studies found that people who use immature defense styles, including denial and fantasy, tend to feel guilty more intensely. Studies by Giuseppe and Perry (2021) and Traylor et al. (2022) show that these defenses temporarily decrease anxiety but still leave emotional conflicts unresolved, which leads to more guilt directed towards oneself. When defense mechanisms weaken, people feel guilty for doing activities against their values. When someone feels distant from their family, this relationship weakens, leading to the use of immature defense mechanisms and the experience of guilt. Research showed that when families are less distant, people with immature defense mechanisms experience less guilt ( $\beta = -0.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As the levels of father alienation increase, the link between immature defense mechanisms and guilt weakens.



Bowlby's attachment theory suggests secure family relationships help emotional development and explain why this relationship exists. Weak ties with family can make people less emotionally responsive to shield themselves from pain. The research by Verhaar et al. (2022) supports the notion that family alienation leads to emotional detachment and diminished empathic responses, which reduce individuals' experience of guilt even when they have high defensive mechanisms. Family disconnection of high intensity tends to eliminate typical emotional reactions due to immature defense mechanisms.

The research predicted emotional neglect to function as an intervening factor that affects how immature defenses relate to guilt. The research findings showed that emotional neglect moderated the negative relationship between immature defenses ( $\beta = -0.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The results indicate that emotional neglect levels produce a weakening effect on the positive relationship between immature defense mechanisms and guilt. Research interpreted this discovery using developmental psychopathology frameworks to demonstrate how enduring emotional neglect disrupts emotional regulation, together with emotional understanding.

People who experience emotional neglect in childhood often struggle with identifying and labeling their emotions, according to Rees (2008) and Simon et al. (2024). These individuals might not recognize guilt because their defense mechanisms predict guilt emergence, but they fail to process it sufficiently. People who use substances may lose emotional sensitivity and detachment, which reduces their ability to feel guilty even though their actions would normally trigger such emotions.

The last significant three-way interaction involved immature defenses, emotional neglect, and family alienation ( $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which suggests that the link between immature defenses and guilt is strongest when both family alienation and emotional neglect are low to moderate. However, when both alienation and neglect are elevated, the relationship is weaker (or even negative). The resonance of this gripping feedback process represents a threshold effect: emotional disconnection may be so great and its intensity so intense that it destroys guilt altogether, possibly as a coping device that defends the self from devastating distress. This is in line with trauma literature that excessive emotional deprivation can lead to dissociative or emotional blunting (Hosny et al., 2023). Then, guilt may not arise until someone has minimized some emotional and relational functioning, even if their defense strategies remain immature.

**Implications:** Research reveals important details about the treatment of those who use substances and explains how their defense systems interact with past trauma and family ties when dealing with feelings of guilt. Treatment should combine assessments of immature defenses with information about emotional neglect history and family estrangement to achieve better results. Individualized treatment plans to handle these personal background conditions would help people process emotions better and decrease their tendency to return to substance use. Healthcare providers can improve patient emotional growth by combining trauma-focused therapy with attachment methods when their patients show strong emotional barriers.

**Limitations:** The research has numerous constraints, despite delivering valuable results. The results from the study cannot be generalized beyond male participants since the research method included only male subjects. The research design employs a cross-sectional approach, which limits causal reasoning, and self-report data contains potential biases from social desirability effects and reporting inaccuracies. The research failed to account for co-occurring mental health disorders because they might affect the results between study variables.

**Recommendations:** For generalization, future research needs to be conducted with a more diverse sample, including women and samples from other age groups and social backgrounds. The psychological variables should be further investigated through longitudinal studies to explore how these variables change

over time and relate to relapses or recovery. Secondly, it would be helpful to add clinical interviews or physiological measures to supplement self-reports with a lower level of bias. In addition, the effects of interventions focused on emotional neglect and family relationships need to be empirically tested to prove or disprove their capacity to reduce maladaptive defenses and promote guilt regulation.

**Conclusion:** The study found that there is a very strong link between immature defenses and guilt, and this link is influenced by the degree of family alienation and emotional neglect. Results highlight the need to attend to broader relational and developmental histories in treatment for substance use. Understanding these psychological interactions allows for more nuanced, effective interventions that promote emotional resilience and long-term recovery.

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