




Examining the Mediating Role of Self-Concept in the Relationship between Object Relations and Narcissistic Personality

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to examine the mediating role of self-concept in the relationship between object relations and narcissistic personality.

Methods and Materials: This research was descriptive and conducted using a correlational method. The statistical population included all students studying at universities in the city of Qom during the academic year 2020-2021, from which 397 individuals were selected using convenience sampling. Participants completed questionnaires on narcissistic personality, object relations, and self-concept scales. Structural equation modeling was performed using data obtained from the questionnaires.

Findings: The results indicated that object relations directly explained 63% and indirectly through self-concept explained 25% of the variance in narcissistic personality. Overall, the estimated structural model, where object relations were the predictor variable and self-concept was the mediating variable, explained 88% of the variance in narcissistic personality.

Conclusion: Therefore, it can be concluded that narcissistic personality is explained both directly and indirectly through self-concept by object relations.

Keywords: *Narcissistic personality, self-concept, object relations.*

1. Introduction

The study of narcissism has a long history dating back to the late 19th century, attracting the attention of numerous personality and psychopathology theorists, including Freud's psychoanalytic theory. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud described narcissism in terms of the drive and libido model, suggesting that narcissism results from the withdrawal of energy from

external objects and the libidinal investment in the ego (Demrci et al., 2019; Ellison et al., 2020). According to Freud's model, the emphasis is on drives and fixation at an early stage of development. In contrast, object relations theorists such as Kernberg (1976), Mahler (1975), and Jacobson (1964) focus primarily on the role of interpersonal relationships in the development of representations of self and others and the psychodynamic patterns of personality,

which are considered psychological structures (Miller et al., 2021; Miller & Campbell, 2008). Reviewing Klein's theories also reveals her disagreements with Freud's view of narcissism, as Klein argues that narcissism is a defense mechanism against failed object relations (Rustin, 2017). According to Kernberg (1970), the object takes precedence over the drive, and narcissistic personality disorder results from weaknesses in internalized object relations (Schmidt, 2019). Similarly, Kohut posits that the narcissistic person is vulnerable and fragile, living in a tormenting world where security is attainable only by splitting various aspects of the self to preserve delicate and fragile feelings (Afek, 2019).

The core of all object relations theories is that individuals grow through interactions with real people in their environment, and from these interactions, representations of these experiences are formed within them. These representations shape the developmental trajectory of infants and children and influence how adults anticipate and perceive interpersonal events and their surroundings. More specifically, object relations theories focus on the internalization of early interaction patterns between the child and caregivers (Schmidt, 2019; Vater et al., 2013). In a study by Caligor evaluating the structure of narcissistic personality using object relations theory, characteristics such as a sense of weakness in self-integration, engaging with others based on transactional and self-serving motives lacking empathy, emphasizing immature personal values like wealth, power, or fame, and a tendency to deny aspects of reality that challenge the individual's sense of specialness were identified (Caligor & Stern, 2020).

A study examining object relations as a mediator between quality of life and narcissistic symptoms found that the quality of individuals' object relations was related to their quality of life. Disturbed and poor-quality object relations led to distress and medical symptoms, highlighting the importance of problematic relational patterns for low quality of life associated with narcissism. Regarding self-concept, according to self-psychology theory on narcissistic personality disorder, unstable and self-centered parents cannot help the child achieve a stable sense of self-worth (Ellison et al., 2020). Additionally, existing literature has shown that individuals with narcissism struggle with self-compassion, as any perceived failure or weakness threatens their grandiosity. This lack of self-compassion may intensify self-criticism and feelings of insecurity (Demirci et al., 2019). A study examining the self-esteem of patients with narcissistic personality disorder found that narcissistic individuals scored low in self-esteem and self-concept

(Vater et al., 2013). Another study indicated a positive correlation between narcissistic personality disorder with grandiosity and an unrealistic optimism (Tamborski et al., 2012). Narcissistic patients find it challenging to experience a realistic self in relation to others, as their grandiose and idealized self-structure, experienced as part of themselves, protects them from severe anxieties stemming from a fragmented inner world (such as vulnerability, envy, weakness, and fear). They tend to project these harsh negative feelings onto others by devaluing and dismissing them, reflecting the patient's own pathological inability to invest in a relationship with an object (Diamond & Hersh, 2020).

Early attachment relationships undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping self-concept and subsequent social and emotional development. Insecure attachment can lead to a negative self-concept and feelings of worthlessness and incompetence (Cameranesi, 2016; Robenzadeh et al., 2016). Insecurely attached individuals may develop distrust or fear towards close and intimate relationships, leading to withdrawal or an inability to form deep connections with others, a hallmark of narcissistic personality disorder (Afek, 2019; Caligor & Stern, 2020; Rustin, 2017).

Various studies have been conducted on the psychopathology of narcissistic personality disorder, but replicating these studies in different populations can provide a better and more precise understanding of the disorder's psychopathology. Psychodynamic theories have primarily explained this personality theoretically and mostly through correlational studies with limited variables. However, empirical examination of psychodynamic constructs requires integrating their meanings into measurable frameworks. Despite the theoretical richness of psychodynamic perspectives in explaining the fundamental constructs of psychopathology, empirical evidence supporting their validity is scarce. Additionally, few studies have used structural equation modeling to practically address the etiological questions of narcissistic personality. Therefore, the present study aims to answer the question: Does the structural model of narcissistic personality psychopathology, based on object relations with the mediating role of self-concept, fit well?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research employed a correlational design and structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The

statistical population included all students enrolled in public, private, Payam Noor, and non-profit universities in Qom during the 2020-2021 academic year. The sample was selected through non-random convenience sampling, using the formula $5Q < n < 15Q$; $2 < n < 10$, resulting in 397 students from associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels.

Initially, a researcher-made questionnaire was distributed among students to assess the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study. The inclusion criteria were: age between 18 to 35 years, being a university student at the time of the study, and no substance or alcohol addiction. The exclusion criteria included specific illnesses such as diabetes, thyroid disorders, cardiovascular diseases, various cancers, central nervous system diseases, and MS. The ethical criteria for the study were the willingness of participants to participate, and no need to record identifying information, ensuring participants that their information would be used solely for the doctoral dissertation. Completing the questionnaire required 30 to 40 minutes.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissistic Personality

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is a shortened version of the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory developed by Ames et al. (2006) to assess traits related to narcissistic personality. This questionnaire lacks subscales and evaluates narcissism based on a unidimensional approach. The NPI-16 consists of paired items where respondents choose one. Scores range from 0 to 16, with a cutoff score of 8 and above indicating a narcissistic personality. The test-retest reliability reported by the original test creators is 0.85 over 5 weeks. Convergent validity was assessed by calculating the correlation coefficient between NPI-16 scores and extraversion and openness to experience from the Big Five personality traits, yielding coefficients of 0.32 and 0.41, respectively. This test was standardized in Iran by Mohammadzadeh (2009), who reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79 and a correlation coefficient of 0.77 between this questionnaire and the Narcissistic Scale of the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this tool was 0.74 (Zabeti & Jafari, 2018).

2.2.2. Object Relations

The Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory (BORI) was developed by Bell et al. in 2005 and is part of

the 90-item Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory (BORRTI). This questionnaire is standardized for both clinical and non-clinical populations and has been used in many studies on interpersonal relationships and the diagnosis and prediction of psychological disorders. It is a self-report tool with four subscales to assess different dimensions of object relations: Alienation (ALN), Insecure Attachment (IA), Egocentricity (EGC), and Social Incompetence (SI). High scores on any of these subscales indicate deficiencies in that dimension of object relations (Ruben Zadeh, Kazem Zadeh Tabatabai, Ghorbani, & Abedin, 2016). Bell reported test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.58 to 0.90 over 2 weeks and from 0.65 to 0.81 over 13 weeks (Monajem et al., 2018). Internal consistency estimates using Cronbach's alpha and the Spearman-Brown split-half coefficient for the four subscales of object relations ranged from 0.78 to 0.90. This questionnaire was translated into Persian by Rezagholizadeh (2009), who confirmed its face and content validity through several experts and reported test-retest reliability coefficients between 0.60 and 0.80 for different subscales (Monajem et al., 2018).

2.2.3. Self-Concept

The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS), developed by Fitts and Warren (1996), consists of 100 items based on a five-point Likert scale. This questionnaire assesses nine elements, eight of which form the basis of the individual's self-concept, with the ninth being self-criticism. The elements forming the self-concept include physical, moral, personal, familial, social, emotional, self-criticism, behavioral, and self-satisfaction. Each participant receives a total score representing their self-concept and a score for each element. In a study by Jamaluddin et al. (2009), factor analysis yielded validity coefficients ranging from 0.41 to 0.85 for the nine elements of the scale. Houshmand (1997) reported a reliability coefficient of 0.80 using the odd-even method. Mahmoodi (1998) obtained a reliability coefficient of 0.74 using the split-half method. In a study by Pourabdoli, Kadivar, and Homayouni (2008), the reliability coefficient for this test was 0.88 using Cronbach's alpha and 0.84 using the split-half method (Safaie et al., 2012).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and LISREL software with SEM method.

3. Findings and Results

Of the 397 participants, 213 (53.7%) were male, and 184 (46.3%) were female. Among them, 257 (64.7%) were single, 123 (31%) were married, and 17 (4.3%) were divorced. Regarding age, 126 (31.7%) were under 21 years, 117 (29.5%) were between 21 to 25 years, 36 (9.1%) were between 26 to 30 years, and 118 (29.7%) were over 30 years old.

Before conducting the measurement and structural model, it is essential to confirm the key assumptions of structural equation modeling, including the normality of the

data and the correlations between variables. Various goodness-of-fit indices were used to evaluate the model's fitness. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), along with the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (Chi/df), are reported as the most commonly used absolute fit indices. Values above 0.90 for GFI and AGFI, a Chi/df ratio of 3 or less, SRMR values close to zero, and a comparative fit index (CFI) of at least 0.90, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of less than 0.05 for well-fitting models are recommended.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Narcissistic Personality	-	4.92	2.88	0.59	0.26
Object Relations	Alienation	7.66	3.49	0.56	-0.38
	Insecure Attachment	7.17	3.19	0.22	-0.59
	Egocentricity	3.59	2.18	0.48	-0.52
	Social Incompetence	2.48	1.29	0.27	-0.58
Self-Concept	Physical	56.70	4.44	-0.29	-0.14
	Moral/Religious	57.98	4.53	-0.12	0.75
	Personal/Identity	56.24	4.03	-0.12	0.50
	Familial	55.50	4.56	-0.52	1.61
	Social	62.34	6.33	-0.16	-0.15
	Emotional	29.02	4.59	-0.28	-0.11
	Self-Criticism	44.06	5.54	-0.04	0.38
	Behavioral	64.83	7.21	-0.20	0.72
	Self-Satisfaction	43.15	5.25	0.16	0.18

Table 1 shows the statistical characteristics of the research variables. Calculating skewness and kurtosis is a standard method for assessing data normality. According to Chou and Bentler (1995), cut-off points of ± 3 for skewness and ± 10 for kurtosis are considered appropriate. As shown in Table 1, the skewness and kurtosis values within the range of (-1.96, +1.96) suggest that the data are likely to be normally distributed. This was further verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. In this test, the null hypothesis is

that the data are normally distributed; for all variables in this study, the significance level of this test was greater than 0.05, suggesting that the null hypothesis is accepted. In other words, the data are normally distributed. This issue was also examined through skewness and kurtosis in the previous section. After confirming the data's normality, the correlations between the research variables were evaluated. Therefore, a correlation test was used, and the results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variable	Indicator	Narcissistic Personality	Object Relations	Self-Concept
Narcissistic Personality	Correlation	1		
	Sig.	0.000		
Object Relations	Correlation	0.367	1	
	Sig.	0.000		
Self-Concept	Correlation	-0.429	0.612	1
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	

As shown in the matrix in Table 2, the results indicate a significant correlation between the research variables at the 0.01 level. Examination of this matrix indicates no multicollinearity between them. The correlation coefficients range from 0.36 to 0.61. Correlation coefficients above 0.85 can cause problems in the correct estimation of the model.

Therefore, the assumption of no multicollinearity was also met.

To examine the relationship between the variables in a model, confirmatory structural equation modeling was used. After drawing the structure in the LISREL software, adding the model constraints, and selecting the maximum likelihood method, the model was executed (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Path Coefficients and Factor Loadings of the Model

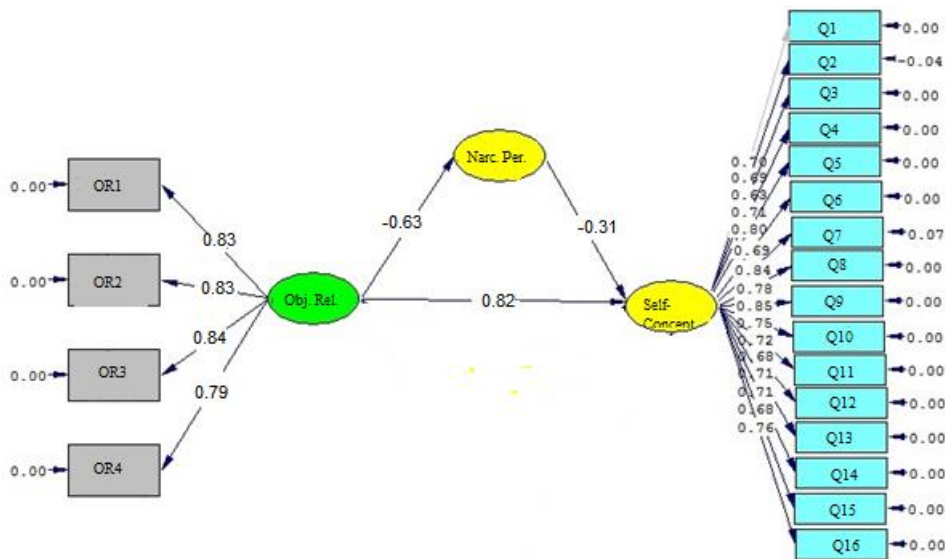


Table 3 presents the most important and common goodness-of-fit indices. As shown, all indices have statistical adequacy. Therefore, it can be confidently inferred that the

researcher achieved a relatively complete fit for these indices.

Table 3

Summary of Important Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Proposed Model

Index	Name	Abbreviation	Value	Acceptable Fit
Absolute Fit Indices	Covered Area (Chi-Square)	-	863.96	-
	Goodness-of-Fit Index	GFI	0.93	> 0.8
Comparative Fit Indices	Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index	AGFI	0.91	> 0.8
	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	0.97	> 0.9
Parsimonious Fit Indices	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	0.061	< 0.1

To examine the direct and indirect effects of independent variables on the dependent variable, the total, direct, and

indirect effects for the endogenous variable in the model need to be presented. These effects are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Path Coefficients to Measure the Significance of Direct and Indirect Paths

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Effect
		Direct
Object Relations	Self-Concept	-0.82
Self-Concept	Narcissistic Personality	-0.31
Object Relations	Narcissistic Personality	0.63

As shown in [Table 4](#), the direct effect of object relations on narcissistic personality disorder is 0.63, which is significant. When examining the mediating role of self-concept, the indirect effect of object relations through self-concept on narcissistic personality is 0.88, which is significant at the level of $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of the present study was to provide a scientific model through the variables of object relations and self-concept in predicting narcissistic personality. The research hypothesis was based on explaining the components of object relations, namely: alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence, in forming self-concept, which ultimately can lead to the development of narcissistic personality. To test the research hypotheses, the direct relationships and the mediating role of self-concept in the relationship between object relations and narcissistic personality were examined. The results indicated that narcissistic personality could be explained and predicted both directly through object relations and indirectly through the mediating variable of self-concept.

The findings of this study are consistent with Gurol Isik's (2016) research, showing that these four components of object relations have a significant positive correlation with narcissistic personality disorder ([Gürol Işık, 2016](#)). Narcissistic personality disorder is associated with high levels of alienation and low levels of secure attachment. Individuals with narcissism may have early experiences that make them feel isolated and distrustful of close relationships. Based on existing research ([Cameranesi, 2016](#)), it can be argued that these experiences may lead to feelings of grandiosity and a need for admiration as a way to compensate for feelings of isolation and disconnection. Grandiosity is also related to the egocentricity component, as it is characterized by self-preoccupation and lack of consideration for others. Narcissistic individuals may fulfill their needs and desires at the expense of ignoring the feelings of others and using them as tools to enhance their self-image ([Mawdsley, 2018](#); [Miller et al., 2021](#)).

Overall, the relationship between the components of object relations and narcissistic personality disorder indicates that difficulties in forming and maintaining close relationships are a key aspect of narcissistic personality disorder.

Furthermore, self-concept is defined as an individual's perception of themselves, encompassing various domains

such as physical, moral, identity, familial, social, academic, emotional, and behavioral ([Fitts & Warren, 1996](#)). In the present study, the predictive role of object relations components in predicting self-concept was also examined, and the findings showed that all components of object relations negatively predicted self-concept. Research has indicated that individuals with narcissistic personality disorder often have a distorted self-concept, contributing to the severity and maintenance of the disorder's symptoms. This distorted self-concept may be related to the inability to empathize and issues with self-reflection, characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder ([Jacoby, 2016](#)).

The results of this study align with the existing literature ([Farah Bidjari et al., 2013](#); [Mawdsley, 2018](#); [West, 2020](#)). Generally, the relationship between the components of object relations and narcissistic personality disorder indicates that difficulties in forming and maintaining close relationships are a key aspect of narcissistic personality disorder.

Research has shown that individuals with narcissistic personality disorder have higher self-esteem than those without the disorder ([Krizan & Herlache, 2017](#)); however, their self-esteem is often fragile and highly dependent on external validation, which can lead to insecurity and vulnerability in their self-concept. This explains why individuals with narcissistic personality disorder have a distorted self-concept that is not based on an accurate assessment of their abilities and achievements ([Campbell et al., 2005](#)). Additionally, individuals with narcissistic personality disorder may have a highly critical self-concept, leading to unrealistic expectations of themselves and others, ultimately resulting in a fear of failure and criticism ([Werner et al., 2019](#)).

Research findings indicate that self-criticism plays a role in the development of narcissistic personality disorder, as these individuals may use grandiosity to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and insecurity ([Ronningstam, 2022](#)). In explaining the relationship between self-concept and narcissistic personality disorder, it can be stated that the correlation between the two is complex and paradoxical. Research suggests that this complexity may be because individuals with narcissistic personality disorder have a highly unstable self-concept vulnerable to external influences ([Miller et al., 2021](#)). For example, they may focus on a specific aspect of their self-concept, such as their physical and appearance-related self-concept, but be highly sensitive to any criticism or threat to their appearance ([Farah Bidjari et al., 2013](#)).

This finding can also be explained by noting that individuals with narcissistic personality disorder may have a strong social self-concept, seeking social status and recognition, while having a weaker emotional self-concept due to difficulties empathizing with others and regulating their emotions. Moreover, the relationship between self-concept and narcissistic personality disorder may be bidirectional, with the distorted self-concept contributing to the severity and maintenance of the disorder, and narcissism leading to further distortions in self-concept (Miller & Campbell, 2008).

An individual with low-quality object relations has a relatively unstable self-structure, problematic interpersonal relationships, immature defense mechanisms, and issues with self-esteem regulation and emotions (Flanagan, 2008). On the other hand, the representation of the self or self-concept is a construct referring to an individual's perception and evaluation of themselves, including their abilities, traits, and values.

Overall, after confirming the significant relationship between self-concept (mediating variable) with object relations (predictor variable) and narcissistic personality (criterion variable), structural equation modeling was used to assess the model's fit indices and examine the mediating role of self-concept. The findings showed that the narcissistic personality model has a good fit across all indices. Additionally, object relations predicted narcissistic personality both directly and indirectly through self-concept. In other words, the components of object relations, alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence can contribute to forming a defective self-concept, leading to the development of narcissistic personality symptoms.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to university students in Qom, which may not represent the broader population, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study restricts the ability to infer causality between the examined variables. Third, self-report questionnaires were used for data collection, which may introduce response biases, including social desirability and inaccurate self-assessment. Finally, the study did not account for potential confounding variables such as cultural differences, socioeconomic status, or other personality disorders that might influence the relationship

between object relations, self-concept, and narcissistic personality.

Future research should consider a longitudinal design to better understand the causal relationships between object relations, self-concept, and narcissistic personality. Expanding the sample to include diverse populations from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds could enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, employing multi-method approaches, including qualitative interviews and observational studies, could provide deeper insights into the complexities of these relationships. Future studies could also explore the role of specific therapeutic interventions in modifying object relations and self-concept to mitigate symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder, and investigate the impact of comorbid conditions on these dynamics.

The findings of this study have important implications for clinical practice and psychological interventions. Therapists working with individuals with narcissistic personality disorder should consider focusing on improving object relations and self-concept as part of their treatment plans. Interventions aimed at fostering secure attachment, enhancing empathy, and developing a more accurate and stable self-concept may be particularly beneficial. Moreover, educational programs and workshops for parents and caregivers on the importance of early attachment and its impact on personality development could help prevent the emergence of narcissistic traits. Integrating these insights into clinical practice could contribute to more effective treatment outcomes and overall better mental health in the population.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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