Modeling Narcissistic Personality and Object Relations with the Mediating Role of Defense Mechanisms

Morteza. Gholami Zarch[1] , Davoud. Taghvaei[2]* , Zabihollah. Pirani[2]

[1] PhD student, Department of Psychology, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: Davodtaghvaei@yahoo.com

A r t i c l e I n f o	A B S T R A C T
Article type: *Original Research*	**Objective:** Narcissistic personality disorder is conceptualized by Kernberg as one of the levels of personality, characterized by an unstable identity and primitive defense mechanisms such as splitting. The present study aimed to explain narcissistic personality disorder based on primary object relations with the mediating role of defense mechanisms.
	Methods and Materials: This descriptive study was conducted using a correlational design. The statistical population included all students enrolled in universities in Qom city during the 2020-2021 academic year, from which 397 individuals were selected using a convenience sampling method. Participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Questionnaire, Object Relations Questionnaire, and Self-Concept Scale. Structural equation modeling was conducted using data obtained from the questionnaires. **Findings:** The results showed that object relations directly explained 63% and indirectly through defense mechanisms explained 25% of the narcissistic personality. In total, the estimation of the structural model, where object relations were the predictor variable and defense mechanisms were included as the mediating variable, indicated that this model explained 88% of the narcissistic personality. **Conclusion:** Therefore, it can be concluded that narcissistic personality is explained both directly and indirectly through defense mechanisms by object relations. *Keywords: Narcissistic personality, Object relations, Defense mechanisms.*

1. Introduction

According to the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a personality disorder is defined as enduring patterns of perception, relating to, and thinking about oneself and the environment that are exhibited in a wide range of personal and social contexts. These traits are inflexible and maladaptive, causing significant impairment in functioning or personal distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). This pattern is stable and long-lasting, with its onset traceable to at least adolescence or early adulthood. Among personality disorders, narcissistic personality disorder is characterized by grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy (Sadock et al., 2015; Sadock et al., 2009). Individuals with this disorder typically overestimate their

abilities, exaggerate their achievements, and often appear boastful and pretentious. Their self-esteem is fragile and prone to depression. Their behavior is arrogant and domineering, considering themselves superior to others and expecting respect and admiration. When their unrealistic and unattainable expectations are unmet by themselves or their surroundings, they commonly experience disappointment. This disorder has a prevalence of 2 to 16 percent in clinical populations and less than one percent in the general population (Lenzenweger, 2022).

In the etiology of this personality disorder, several theoretical analyses have been provided by cognitive-behavioral, psychoanalytic, and psychotic theorists to identify the causes of narcissistic structure development. Given the need for pathology in early developmental stages, analytic theories have significantly contributed to its explanation (Perry & Perry, 2004; Robins et al., 2001; Rustin, 2017).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud described narcissism based on the drive and libido model, stating that an infant's psychic energy is initially self-focused. This initial state, devoid of any distinguishable object representation, is termed primary narcissism (Monajem et al., 2018; Perry et al., 2013). According to Freud (1957), narcissism results from the withdrawal of energy from external objects and its investment in the ego, meaning the individual cannot love and connect with others and becomes self-absorbed (Cramer, 1999; Di Giuseppe et al., 2020; Gürol Işık, 2016). Thus, in Freud's model, internal objects were not explicitly discussed. The lack of a clear link between drive and object led post-Freudian psychotic theorists to abandon the concept of drive and focus more on internalized objects. The object relations school, derived from the psychoanalytic approach, can be considered in the etiology of narcissistic personality disorder (Summers, 2024).

Object relations is a fundamental construct that plays a crucial role in explaining health, various pathological forms, and even personality structures. Object relations refer to interpersonal relationships and are defined as the individual's representations of themselves and others, along with the accompanying emotions. These representations, formed in early years, shape current interactions and remain relatively stable patterns throughout life. Thus, pathology is explained based on this internalized object relations model (Kampe et al., 2021). Klein also suggests that narcissism is a defense against failed object relations (Rustin, 2017). According to Kernberg (1970), the object precedes the drive, and

narcissistic personality disorder results from a weakness in internalized object relations. Although the development of narcissism in childhood is necessary for healthy growth, this stage occurs before the Oedipal phase. However, the primary person's attitudes and behaviors (the object) in a relationship, due to the lack of integration of the ideal self-image and the ideal object image, lead to narcissistic damage (Ruszczynski, 2018; Summers, 2024).

Kohut (1977) also believes that narcissism stems from unreflected childhood deficits in the self-structure, which seek an ideal object, resulting in the formation of compensatory or secondary defense structures. He posits that the narcissistic person is vulnerable and fragile, living in a threatening world where security is achievable only by splitting various aspects of the self to preserve delicate and fragile feelings (Afek, 2019). The mentioned psychotic theories agree that the etiology and pathology of disorders often emphasize the latent meaning of symptoms, unconscious conflicts, defense mechanisms, and object relations (Faraji et al., 2020; Gürol Işık, 2016). Defense mechanisms, due to their specific role in conceptualizing and treating psychological disorders in the psychotic view, have attracted researchers' attention. Therefore, one of the variables that can mediate the emergence of personality disorders through its impact on personality organization is defense mechanisms. Zanarini's research showed that individuals' psychological health is closely related to the defense mechanisms they use (Zanarini et al., 2009).

Imamoglu and Batigun (2020) worked on the relationship between narcissistic personality, parenting style, and defense mechanisms. They found that high scores on narcissistic personality could be predicted from high scores on paternal rejection, maternal overprotection, and immature and neurotic defense styles (Imamoglu & DURAK BATIGÜN, 2020). Additionally, assessing defense mechanisms in youth with personality disorder symptoms showed that pathological personality styles use more rigid and maladaptive mechanisms (Di Giuseppe et al., 2020). Based on psychotic concepts, it can be stated that defense mechanisms protect self-confidence against shame and the threat of narcissism and provide a sense of security during abandonment and threats, keeping the individual safe from external dangers (Gabbard, 2014). Narcissism has been a recurring topic in psychoanalysis from the beginning. However, there are still gaps and limitations in our knowledge of narcissistic personality disorder, necessitating better integration of existing theoretical concepts in this disorder. Providing an etiological model based on

psychodynamic theories with an integrated approach to explain this personality is essential. Additionally, this study aims to compare and match the pathology theory in the Iranian community, and its results can be used to further develop and apply this theory in subsequent internal pathology research. Therefore, the present study seeks to answer whether the design of a pathological model of narcissistic personality based on object relations with the mediating role of defense mechanisms fits within a structural model.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method was correlational, employing a structural equation modeling (SEM) design. The statistical population included all students enrolled in public, Azad, Payame Noor, and non-profit universities in Qom city during the 2020-2021 academic year. The sample consisted of 397 students selected through non-random convenience sampling using the formula $5Q<n<15Q$; $2<n<10$. The sample included 213 (53.7%) men and 184 (46.3%) women. 257 (64.7%) were single, 123 (31%) were married, and 17 (4.3%) were divorced. Age-wise, 126 (31.7%) were under 21 years, 117 (29.5%) were 21 to 25 years, 36 (9.1%) were 26 to 30 years, and 118 (29.7%) were over 30 years old.

Initially, a researcher-constructed questionnaire was distributed among students to assess the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were age between 18 and 35 years, being a university student during the study period, and not being addicted to substances and alcohol. Exclusion criteria included having specific diseases such as diabetes, thyroid disorders, cardiovascular diseases, various cancers, central nervous system diseases, and multiple sclerosis. Ethical criteria included participants' willingness to participate in the study and no need to record identity information, with assurances given to participants that their information would only be used for the doctoral dissertation and would require 30 to 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Narcissistic Personality

The NPI is a shortened version of the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory, designed by Ames et al. (2006) to measure traits related to narcissistic personality. This questionnaire lacks subscales and assesses narcissism based on a unidimensional approach. The NPI-16 consists of paired items, with respondents choosing one of each pair. Scores range from 0 to 16, with a cut-off score of 8 or higher indicating 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 the extroversion and openness to new experiences indices of the Big Five Personality Scale, with coefficients of 0.32 for extroversion and 0.41 for openness to new experiences. This test was standardized in Iran by Mohammadzadeh (2009), who reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 and a correlation coefficient of 0.77 between this questionnaire and the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (MCMI) narcissism scale (Imamoglu & DURAK BATIGÜN, 2020).

2.2.2. Defense Style

This 40-item questionnaire measures twenty defense mechanisms on a 9-point Likert scale (ranging from completely agree to completely disagree) based on three defense mechanisms: mature, neurotic, and immature. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 9-point scale. Scores for each defense mechanism range from 2 to 18, with scores above 10 indicating the use of that mechanism. Overall defense mechanism scores are compared with other mechanisms' scores. Andrews et al. (1993) reported test-retest correlations between 0.46 and 0.86, and Cronbach's alpha for mature, neurotic, and immature mechanisms were 0.68, 0.58, and 0.80, respectively. The DSQ was examined and standardized in Iran by Heydari Nasab and Shairi (2006). The standardization process involved translating the questionnaire into Persian, addressing linguistic deficiencies, and following validation and reliability steps. Content validity was evaluated by presenting the questionnaire to a group of psychology experts, who rated each statement's relevance to defense mechanisms definitions from reliable sources on a 5-point scale adjusted to a Likert scale. Concurrent validity was assessed by studying the correlation between defense mechanisms and personality traits based on the NEO Five-Factor Inventory. The reliability of the DSQ was determined through test-retest methods and calculating Cronbach's alpha, with the highest alpha observed in male students (0.81) and the lowest in female high school students (0.69) (Heidarinasab & Shaeiri, 2011; Saeed et al., 2019).

2.2.3. Object Relations

Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI), developed by Bell and colleagues (2005), is part of the 90-item Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory (BORRTI). This questionnaire is standardized for clinical and non-clinical populations and used in numerous studies in the field of interpersonal relationships and the diagnosis and prediction of psychological disorders. It is a self-report tool with four subscales measuring different dimensions of object relations: Alienation (ALN), Insecure Attachment (IA), Egocentricity (EGC), and Social Incompetence (SI) (Bell, 2007). High scores on any of these subscales indicate deficiencies in that dimension of object relations (Roubenzadeh, Kazemzadeh Tabatabaei, Ghorbani, & Abedin, 2016). Bell reported the reliability of the object relations scale with a two-week interval between 0.58 and 0.90, and with a 13-week interval between 0.65 and 0.81 (Monajem, Monirpoor, & Mirza Hosseini, 2018). In Iran, Reza Qolizadeh (2009) translated this questionnaire into Persian, confirming its face and content validity through several specialists and reporting test-retest reliability for various subscales between 0.60 and 0.80 (Taghavi et al., 2021; Taghipour et al., 2019).

2.3. Data analysis

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

3. Findings and Results

The results of the demographic characteristics of this Initially, the normality of the data related to the research variables and their correlations was tested. Then, the hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling. To present the goodness-of-fit of various models, multiple goodness-of-fit indices were used. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), and the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (Chi/df) were reported as the most commonly used absolute fit indices. Additionally, values above 0.90 for GFI and AGFI, a value of 3 or less for the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio, and values close to zero for SRMR, with 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 models with good fit, were suggested as models with acceptable goodness-of-fit.

Table 1

Descriptive Characteristics of Research Variables

Variable	Dimension	Component	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
Defense Mechanisms	Mature	Sublimation	9.26	3.58	0.09	-0.38
		Humor	12.34	3.89	-0.52	-0.27
		Anticipation	13.50	3.02	-0.55	0.30
		Suppression	9.91	3.71	-0.14	-0.42
	Neurotic	Undoing	9.71	3.74	0.05	-0.35
		Pseudo-Altruism	12.39	3.33	-0.45	0.18
		Rationalization	10.83	4.02	-0.15	-0.48
		Reaction Formation	9.72	3.83	-0.06	-0.44
	Immature	Projection	7.29	3.98	0.46	-0.48
		Passive Aggression	8.59	3.98	0.27	-0.32
		Acting Out	10.20	3.80	-0.01	-0.34
		Splitting	8.70	4.18	0.22	-0.69
		Devaluation	9.15	3.81	0.18	-0.42
		Fantasy	11.20	4.83	-0.27	-0.92
		Denial	8.50	3.78	0.28	-0.37
		Displacement	8.32	3.99	0.35	0.17
		Omnipotence	10.18	3.65	-0.06	-0.27
		Splitting	8.51	4.12	0.28	-0.50
		Rationalization	13.13	2.93	-0.24	-0.41
		Somatization	8.33	3.55	0.38	0.24

Given the skewness and kurtosis values within the range of (-1.96, +1.96), the assumption of normality is strengthened. Therefore, the assumption of normality of the data can be proposed and accepted. Normality of the data was also assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which showed a significance level greater than 0.05 for all subscales (p > 0.05). After confirming the normality of the data, the correlation (relationship) between the research variables was assessed. Thus, Pearson's test was used, and the results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix between Research Variables

Variable	Narcissistic Personality	Mature Defense Mechanisms	Neurotic Defense Mechanisms	Immature Defense Mechanisms	Object Relations
Narcissistic Personality	1				
Mature Defense Mechanisms	-0.644**	1			
Neurotic Defense Mechanisms	0.476**	-0.518**	1		
Immature Defense Mechanisms	0.581**	-0.601**	0.435**	1	
Object Relations	-0.367**	-0.342**	0.442**	0.418**	1

*p < .05. **p < .01

Based on the data in Table 2, all research variables had strong correlations at a significance level of less than 0.01. Mature defense mechanisms had a significant negative correlation with object relations and narcissistic personality, while neurotic and immature defense mechanisms showed a significant positive correlation with object relations and narcissistic personality. Object relations and narcissistic personality also showed a significant positive correlation. To evaluate the model, confirmatory structural equation modeling was used. Therefore, after drawing the structure in LISREL software, adding model constraints, and selecting the maximum likelihood method, the model was executed.

Given that the mediator variable (defense mechanisms) showed a significant relationship with the predictor variable (object relations) and the criterion variable (narcissistic personality), after assessing the fit indices of the research model, the mediating role of defense mechanisms in the relationship between object relations and narcissistic personality was evaluated. The most important and common fit indices are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Selected Fit Indices for the Path Model

Index Type	Index Name	Abbreviation	Value	Acceptable Fit
Absolute Fit	Covered Area (Chi-Square)	χ^2	1715.45, p = 0.052	P > 0.05
	Goodness-of-Fit Index	GFI	0.91	> 0.8
Comparative Fit	Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index	AGFI	0.97	> 0.8
	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	0.95	> 0.9
Parsimonious Fit	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	0.064	< 0.1

As can be seen in Table 3, all indices have statistical adequacy. Therefore, it can be confidently concluded that the model has a very good fit.

To evaluate the direct and indirect effects of independent variables on the dependent variable, it is necessary to present the total, direct, and indirect effects for the endogenous variable in the model. These effects are shown in Table 4.
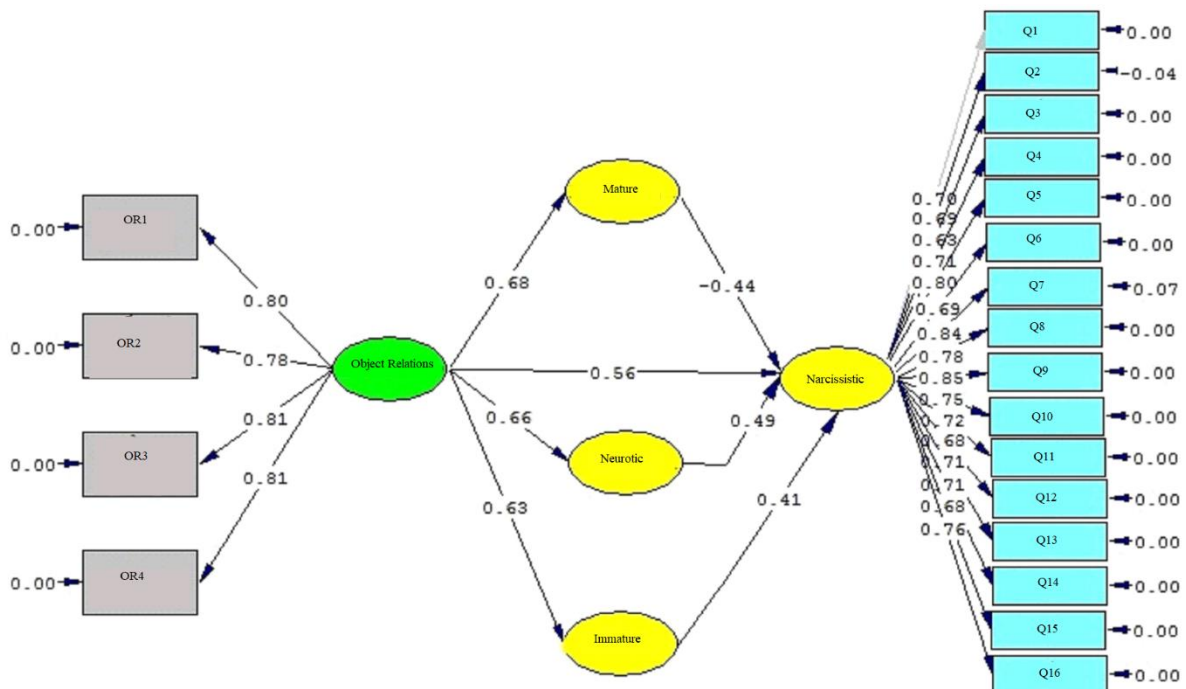
Table 4

Path Coefficients to Assess the Significance of Direct and Indirect Paths

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect
Object Relations	Mature Defense Mechanism	-0.68	----
Mature Defense Mechanism	Narcissistic Personality	-0.44	----
Object Relations	Narcissistic Personality	0.56	0.30 = -0.44 * -0.68
Object Relations	Neurotic Defense Mechanism	0.66	----
Neurotic Defense Mechanism	Narcissistic Personality	0.49	----
Object Relations	Narcissistic Personality	0.56	0.32 = 0.49 * 0.66
Object Relations	Immature Defense Mechanism	0.63	----
Immature Defense Mechanism	Narcissistic Personality	0.41	----
Object Relations	Narcissistic Personality	0.56	0.26 = 0.41 * 0.63

*$p < .01$

Figure 1

Model with Beta Values

As shown in Table 4, the direct effect of object relations on narcissistic personality disorder is 0.56, which is significant. In examining the mediating roles of defense mechanisms, the indirect effect of object relations through mature defense mechanisms on narcissistic personality disorder is 0.86. The indirect effect of object relations through neurotic defense mechanisms on narcissistic personality disorder is 0.88. Finally, the indirect effect of object relations through immature defense mechanisms on narcissistic personality disorder is 0.82. Therefore, all mediating roles are confirmed at the significance level of $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to provide a causal model for narcissistic personality through object relations and defense mechanisms. In this model, the predictive role of object relations and defense mechanisms in predicting narcissistic personality was examined. The main hypothesis was based on the premise that experiencing dysfunctional and unhealthy object relations, including components of alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence, leads to the formation of immature and

neurotic defense mechanisms, which can ultimately lead to the development of narcissistic personality.

To assess the hypotheses, the direct relationships and the mediating role of defense mechanisms in the relationship between object relations and narcissistic personality were examined. Research indicates that the development of narcissistic personality disorder, in addition to genetic and environmental factors, may also be related to early childhood experiences, particularly disruptions in object relations (Rustin, 2017). One way to understand the process of developing narcissistic personality disorder is through object relations theory. According to this theory, early experiences with caregivers shape an individual's internal representations of self and others (Summers, 2024).

The findings, consistent with Gurol Isik's (2016) research, showed that these four components have a significant positive correlation with narcissistic personality disorder (Gürol Işık, 2016).

In summary, alienation leads to feelings of disconnection and isolation. Insecure attachment is manifested as distrust of others and difficulty in forming close relationships. Egocentricity refers to self-absorption and lack of attention to others, and social incompetence refers to difficulty in understanding social cues and forming appropriate social relationships (Monajem et al., 2018; Robenzadeh et al., 2016). After defining all these concepts, it can be explained that all components of the BORI are related to difficulties in forming and maintaining close relationships, which is a hallmark of narcissistic personality disorder (Bell, 2007; Faraji et al., 2020).

In explaining the relationship between the components of object relations and narcissistic personality disorder, it can be noted that problems in critical areas of object relations may lead to the development of psychological disorders (Summers, 2024). Kernberg suggested that individuals with narcissistic personality disorder create a false self in response to early experiences of neglect or emotional rejection. This false self is an exaggerated and idealized image used to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and to gain validation and admiration from others (Kampe et al., 2021; Monajem et al., 2018).

Grandiosity is undoubtedly related to egocentricity as its main feature is self-absorption and lack of concern for others. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder may meet their needs and desires at the expense of ignoring others' feelings, using others as tools to enhance their self-image (Lenzenweger, 2022).

On the other hand, according to the findings, mature defense mechanisms showed a significant negative correlation, while neurotic and immature defense mechanisms showed significant positive correlations with narcissistic personality. This finding is supported by the existing theoretical and research literature and is consistent with prior studies (Afek, 2019; Kampe et al., 2021; Lenzenweger, 2022; Rustin, 2017; Ruszczynski, 2018).

Psychoanalytic theory refers to empirical evidence and clinical manifestations of narcissism that reveal specific insecurities beneath the surface of narcissism (Miller et al., 2013; Weiss & Miller, 2018). Following this evidence, grandiose narcissism is understood as a defense mechanism that is persistently and unconsciously constructed to defend the self-concept and ego (Kernberg, 1975; Kernberg, 1985; Kernberg, 2015; Kernberg, 1989). This theoretical conceptualization leads to the explanation that narcissism is, in fact, a defense mechanism to hide its vulnerable aspect; thus, examining the underlying mechanism of vulnerable narcissism, which is the focus of this research, is crucial in understanding its relationships with various defense mechanisms.

In explaining the positive prediction of neurotic and immature defense mechanisms and the negative prediction of mature defense mechanisms from narcissistic personality, it can be stated that defense mechanisms can be hierarchically categorized based on their functioning (Cramer, 1999; Imamoglu & DURAK BATIGÜN, 2020). Mature defense mechanisms such as humor, anticipation, and suppression help individuals cope efficiently with unpleasant emotional experiences such as distressing realities. They can be used flexibly and successfully reduce negative emotional responses. However, given that the underlying vulnerabilities in narcissistic disorder are related to severe anxieties (Kampe et al., 2021; Kernberg, 2015) and deep shame (Robins et al., 2001), a narcissistic individual is likely unable to modulate or regulate them with mature defense mechanisms.

The significant negative correlation between mature defense mechanisms and psychological disorders (Andrews et al., 1993; Imamoglu & DURAK BATIGÜN, 2020) further supports this explanation. After confirming the significant relationship between defense mechanisms (mediator variable) with object relations (predictor variable) and narcissistic personality (criterion variable), structural equation modeling was used to assess model fit indices and examine the mediating role of defense mechanisms. The findings showed that the narcissistic personality model had

a good fit in all indices. Object relations predicted narcissistic personality both directly and indirectly through defense styles (mature, neurotic, and immature). More precisely, the components of object relations, including alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence, can contribute to the formation of immature and neurotic defense mechanisms, which can then lead to the development of narcissistic personality symptoms.

5.   Limitations & Suggestions

According to the existing research literature, in explaining the mediating role of defense mechanisms in the relationship between object relations and narcissistic personality, it can also be added that psychoanalytic theory posits that narcissistic, histrionic, and antisocial personalities all derive from primitive or immature personality structures (Summers, 2024). Consequently, object-related factors such as alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence can influence the development of immature and neurotic defense mechanisms. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder may use these defense mechanisms to protect their fragile self-esteem, avoid confronting their flaws and shortcomings, and maintain a sense of grandiosity. This can result in a lack of empathy for others, preoccupation with power and success, and an inability to form healthy relationships with others. Therefore, all these concepts are interrelated in that they involve difficulties in forming deep and healthy relationships with others, which can lead to the use of maladaptive defense mechanisms. These defense mechanisms can perpetuate negative thoughts and behaviors, ultimately resulting in the development of narcissistic personality disorder symptoms. It is essential to recognize that the development of these defense mechanisms is complex and multifaceted and may involve a combination of genetic, environmental, and cultural factors.

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Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics 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 contributed equally.

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