

The Mediating Role of Moral Development and Religious Orientation in the Relationship of Narcissism and Bullying with Academic Cheating among Upper Secondary School Students

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the participants paragraph, the manuscript states: "In predictive models, a sample size between 300 and 500 participants can be considered sufficient." This statement is too general and requires a methodological citation or a model-specific justification. Sample size adequacy in path analysis depends on the number of observed variables, estimated parameters, anticipated effect sizes, model complexity, missing data, and estimation method. The authors should report whether a priori power analysis, rules of thumb for SEM/path analysis, or Monte Carlo simulation considerations were used to justify the final sample size of 311.

The sampling procedure paragraph states: "From each educational district of Zanjan, eight schools were randomly selected, including four girls' schools and four boys' schools, and from each school, three classes were randomly selected." This needs greater procedural detail. The manuscript should report the number of educational districts in Zanjan, the total number of schools in the sampling frame, whether schools were stratified by gender and type, and whether all students in selected classes were invited. These details are necessary to assess the quality of the multistage cluster sampling design.

The Religious Orientation Scale paragraph also states: “statements 1 to 12 receive a score of three according to the response level,” which is unclear and likely mistranslated or methodologically incorrect. The scoring procedure for items 1–12 and 13–21 must be rewritten in a transparent manner. The authors should clearly explain whether any items are reverse scored and how subscale scores are computed.

The data analysis section states that “the Durbin–Watson test” was used to assess independence of observations. However, the Durbin–Watson statistic is primarily used to detect autocorrelation in regression residuals, especially in ordered or time-series data. Since the data are clustered within classes and schools, independence of observations may be violated at the school/classroom level. The authors should either justify the use of Durbin–Watson in this context or consider the clustering structure statistically, for example through intraclass correlation or multilevel modeling considerations.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The manuscript reports that “50 questionnaires were excluded from the analysis because they had been completed incompletely by the participants.” This is a relatively large exclusion rate, and the authors should provide additional information about missing data. Specifically, they should report whether excluded participants differed from retained participants in gender, age, grade, or school type. If this information is not provided, the possibility of systematic attrition or nonresponse bias remains unresolved.

In the inclusion criteria, the authors state that participants were excluded if they had used “psychiatric medications during the previous three months” or had attended “counseling or psychotherapy sessions during the previous three months.” The rationale for these criteria should be explained. Since the study examines academic cheating, narcissism, bullying, moral development, and religious orientation in a nonclinical student population, excluding students receiving mental health support may reduce generalizability and may also raise ethical concerns if not justified clearly.

In the ethical procedure paragraph, the manuscript states that “written informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents.” This is appropriate, but the manuscript should distinguish between parental consent and student assent. Since the participants were adolescents aged 14 to 18, the ethical procedure should explicitly state that parental informed consent and adolescent informed assent were both obtained, and that students were informed that nonparticipation would not affect their grades or school standing.

In the description of the Academic Cheating Questionnaire, the manuscript states that the instrument has “20 items and includes four components: perceived peer cheating, belief in cheating, neutralization of responsibility, and cheating behavior.” The scoring system described afterward is complex and uses different response formats across subscales. The authors should explain how the total academic cheating score was calculated from subscales with different scoring ranges. Without this information, interpretation of the reported mean score of 94.43 is difficult.

In the description of the NPI-16, the manuscript states that the instrument was “developed by Mohammadzadeh in 2009,” while also stating that it is the short version of the questionnaire developed by Ames, Rose, and Anderson. This wording is conceptually inaccurate. Mohammadzadeh likely adapted, translated, or validated the scale in Persian rather than developed the original NPI-16. The authors should revise this sentence to distinguish between original development and Persian adaptation/validation.

In the description of the Illinois Bullying Scale, the manuscript states: “In the present study, the victimization subscale was used.” This is inconsistent with the conceptual model and tables, which refer to “bullying” as the predictor variable rather than victimization. The authors must resolve this inconsistency. If the victimization subscale was used, the variable should be labeled “bullying victimization,” not “bullying.” If the bullying subscale was used, the instrument description should be corrected accordingly. This is a major conceptual and measurement issue.

In the Religious Orientation Scale paragraph, the text reports two inconsistent scoring systems: first, it says the scale is scored on “a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 4,” but later states that scores range

“from one to five.” This contradiction must be corrected. The authors should specify the exact version used, the exact number of response options, the direction of scoring, and which items correspond to intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.