

Relationship Between Narcissism, Religiosity, Spirituality and Moral Identity Among Adults

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Abstract

One of the most pervasive issues in today's world is narcissism. With the rise of social media platforms which often promotes self-centered behaviours, both societies and individuals are becoming narcissistic. The present research focused on examining the relationship between narcissism, religiosity, spirituality and moral identity among males and females in Pakistan. The study sample consisted of 300 adults with varying degree of education providing and ensuring a diverse and representative population. Results indicated inverse relationship between narcissism and other study variables which suggests that individuals with the higher levels of spirituality, religiosity and moral identity exhibits lower levels of narcissism. These results imply that before mentioned variables could act as potential buffers against narcissism. It was further found that males have higher narcissistic tendencies while females have greater propensity toward religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity. These gender differences may exist due to cultural-specific norms that inculcates and promotes self-centric tendencies among men. Furthermore, while marital status had no statistically significant impact on narcissism and spirituality, it did have a statistically significant impact on religiosity and moral identity, with married individuals exhibiting having greater levels of both as compared to their counterparts. From these findings it could be concluded that religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity could be employed to counteract the negative effects of narcissism in adults. These findings could be valuable for mental health interventions and policymakers in addressing narcissism. They provide a basis for designing programs aimed at reducing narcissistic behaviors by promoting and fostering religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity to enhance overall social harmony.

Keywords. Narcissism, Religiosity, Spirituality, Moral Identity

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Introduction

Since the beginning of human civilization, the world has witnessed a plethora of people, who strive to be at the top of their game. Several legends, ranging from Greek mythology's Narcissus to Snow White's Queen Grimhilde (main villain in Walt Disney Productions' first animated feature film), illustrate the plight of persons plagued by narcissism. People's love for themselves is mentioned as narcissism in personality and psychiatric literature which actually refers to a collection of personality traits (Crowe et al., 2019) such as “inhibited, shame-ridden, and hypersensitive shy type, whose low tolerance for attention from others and hypervigilant readiness for criticism or failure makes him/her more socially passive” (Ronningstam, 2009, p. 113), considered themselves as superior to others, worthy, special, and unmatched, are frequently self-absorbed and lack empathy; they are lousy listeners and have difficulty seeing things from other people's viewpoints, they use several strategies for maintaining inflated self-views and inclined to sniff out self-enhancement understandings from the surroundings to satisfy needs for regard, praise and recognition (Cooper et al., 2016). Narcissism lies on a continuum, and it ranges from healthy narcissism to pathological narcissism along with individuals vary (Buzdar et al., 2019). As a more reactive and emotionally unstable kind of narcissism pathological narcissism comprises an inability to regulate and satisfy cravings for admiration (Miller & Campbell, 2008). This pathological narcissism is classified as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in the DSM and is characterized by an unreasonably optimistic self-image that get in the way of one's life, along with maladaptive compensatory coping mechanisms to deal with deal with setbacks and failed attempts at self-enhancement (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). Healthy narcissism is considered as adaptive narcissism that entails realistic self-esteem and has been regarded as advantageous for wellbeing (Ackerman et al., 2011). However, both healthy and unhealthy narcissism are driven by the desire for praise and attention but are sensitive and unhelpful coping mechanisms to deal with unmet self-enhancement desires (Roche et al., 2013).

As per literature, unhealthy narcissism is further divided into grandiose and vulnerable Narcissism (Pincus et al., 2014). Grandiose narcissism (also known as overt or centrifugal narcissism) includes many of the NPD-specific DSM criteria, including inflated self-image, exploitativeness, domineering behavior, exhibitionism, neurotic, aggression, dominance, and unempathetic and frequently contains more explicit display of dominance and entitlement (Sandage et al., 2017). Indecency, malevolent spitefulness, self-promotional actions, and being

indifferent are all signs of narcissistic grandiosity (Miller et al., [2017](#)). Vulnerable narcissism (also called covert or centripetal) includes feelings of shame, anxiety, insecurity, tendency to idealize others, low self-esteem, shyness, social withdrawal and is the supersensitive side of narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019; Sandage et al., 2017). Narcissistic tendencies are frequently linked to difficulties and restraints in daily life in a range of contexts. For instance, narcissistic individuals often have borderline personality pathology, suicide attempts, self-promotional content via social media, strained personal and social bonds, struggling with workplace because of their behavioral reactions and responses to disapproval, risk taking, and decomposition (Kapidzic, 2013). Additionally, it has been discovered that narcissism is related with poor ethical judgement (Cooper et al., 2016). For instance, narcissism is a determinant white-collar crime in business (Blickle et al., 2006), gambling (Trombly & Zeigler-Hill, 2017), and academic dishonesty (as cited in Grijalva et al., (2015). Moreover, such attitudes have serious consequences concerning one's wellbeing including psychological maladjustment, depression, anxiety, shame and affect regulation (Kaufman et al., 2020). In recent times, collective narcissism, national narcissism and organizational narcissism also caught the attention of researchers (Cichocka et al., 2021); hence, it is very necessary to study this construct and to study the ways that could keep the unhealthy narcissistic tendencies under control.

The vast majority of people around the world regard religion which is manifold determinative experience to be an important orientation, behavioral set, and way of life (Sedikides, 2009). It is described as "the extent to which [an individual's] beliefs in particular religious principles and aspirations are held and expressed (Delener, 1990). The relationship between religiosity, psychopathology, and mental health has also been the subject of an expanding corpus of research during recent decades (Szałachowski et al., 2021). Several health benefits are experienced by those who say they have a stronger relationship with God, including reduced depression, lower suicide rates, less anxiety, less substance abuse, lower blood cholesterol, fewer cases of heart disease or better cardiac outcomes, reduced cancer mortality rates, and better health practices (see Abdel-Khalek, 2010). Additionally, research shows a link between religious convictions and adaptive personality traits, such as better agreeableness, conscientiousness, and lower psychoticism (e.g. [Huesmann et al., 2011](#)).

Closely related yet absolutely different construct with religiosity is spirituality. Since the emergence of humanity, spiritual healing methods have been a significant part of the healing rituals of almost all

communities. Although it goes beyond organized religion, spirituality is closely related to the paranormal, the mystical, and organized religion (Koenig, 2012). Nonetheless, spirituality affects individual's psychological health or psychopathology and individuals' quality of life. Spirituality can assist us in leading healthy lives and in coping with unpleasant emotions like stress, worry, fear, rage, and frustration (Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018). People who have a close personal contact with God have reduced loneliness, despair, and stress in their life and enjoy many other health benefits (Vanderweele et al., 2017).

Moral identity is a crucial self-regulatory system that has recently attracted the interest of scholars. The importance of morality to someone's identity is typically referred to as their moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity constitutes the moral self-schema as central part of an individual's self-definition. It has two dimensions, internalization, and symbolization, respectively (Aquino & Reed, 2002). The degree to which a set of moral qualities are internalized into one's self-concept is measured by internalization, whilst the degree to which same qualities are publicly displayed through one's behavior in the outside world is measured by symbolization. Moral identity perhaps is a significant cause of moral motivation and obligations (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). In fact, it might be the most excellent indicator of moral operations such as charitable behavior and altruistic helping, and moral sentiments like as remorse after engaging in conduct that goes against one's sense of morality (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Higher levels of moral identity less moral disengagement and lower levels of deceitful behavior such as to tell an untruth and academic misconduct and fail to excel with integrity and (Detert et al., 2008). Hence, it could be hypothesized that moral identity could also prove to be effective in reducing narcissism.

Previous studies found that narcissism correlated with religiosity (Daghighi et al., 2019; Hermann & Fuller, 2017). Literature further demonstrates that religiosity, spirituality, and religious coping were linked with covert and overt narcissistic personality disorder among young adults (Simpson et al., 2016). Narcissism further demonstrates an association with spirituality (Clot-Garrell & Giera, 2019; Lata & Chaudhary, 2021). Sandage and Moe (2011) said that the transformational mechanism that led people from narcissism to humility and psychological maturity might include spirituality. Similarly, Moral identity is also found to be a closely related with previous mentioned constructs. According to Vitell et al. (2009), intrinsic religiosity is a strong predictor of moral identity, and moral identity may be one way that religiosity promotes positive connections and moral development (Hardy et al., 2017). In the same way, significant positive correlation between moral identity and spiritual well-being was discovered by

Rodriguez-Rad and Ramos-Hidalgo (2018). Higher spirituality is thought to be associated with greater levels of moral and ethical commitment and a tendency for people to value ethics highly in their life (Vitell et al., 2016).

Rationale of the Study

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the research of narcissism as a personality trait. The obvious growth in narcissism levels throughout generations could be one of the explanations for this research expansion (Delic et al., 2011). Similar to this, few studies have previously examined the connection between narcissism, religiosity, and spirituality (see Khan & Farooqi 2014; Simpson et al., 2016). However, none of the study as per researchers' knowledge explore the relationship of narcissism with moral identity. In this context, Delic et al. (2011) stated that one of the possible directions for future research may be to look at the relationship between narcissism and other dimensions associated with religion. Likewise, current study could also be beneficial in clinical context as many researchers recommend the incorporation of religiosity and spirituality in the approach to psychiatric procedures as a potential buffer against unhealthy behaviors (Bohmer, 2016) to promote positive health outcomes and good personality functioning (Daghigh et al., 2019). Since narcissism is seen as the core of all pathology and the foundation of numerous issues (Symington, 2018); it is very much necessary to stimulate defensive mechanisms among individuals with narcissistic personality in order to protect them. Religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity could serve as this mechanism. However, before jumping to conclusions it is very much necessary to investigate the potential associations between these constructs. Present study will fill this identified gap in literature. Findings of this study will help us to understand whether callous effect of narcissism could be controlled down by religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity.

Objectives

1. To look into the relationship between Narcissism, Spirituality, Religiosity and Moral Identity among adults.
2. To investigate the predictive role of religiosity, spirituality and moral identity predicting narcissism among adults.
3. To study demographic differences (age, gender, and marital status) on Narcissism, Religiosity, Spirituality, and Moral Identity.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the present study are:

- H₁. Narcissism is negatively related with religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity among adults.
- H₂. Religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity negatively predicts narcissism among adults.
- H₃. Age of adults is negatively related with narcissism and positively related with spirituality, religiosity, and moral identity.
- H₄. Females score higher on spirituality, religiosity, and moral identity while males score higher on narcissism as compared to women.
- H₅. Married adults score higher on spirituality, religiosity, and moral identity while single adults scores higher on narcissism.

Research Methodology

This study used quantitative approach and is based on correlational design.

Sample

The current study's sample includes 300 people from various organizations in the districts of Abbottabad and Manshera. To ascertain the relationship between the variables under consideration, a correlation survey was carried out. This study included both men (n=150) and women (n=150). While approaching the sample convenient sampling strategy has been used. The study's objectives were explained to participants, and only willing participants were invited to participate. They signed informed consent forms and were told of their right to withdraw at any moment. Additionally, they received reassurance that the information they provided would only be utilized for research, and they received appreciation for their significant contribution to the study at the end.

Instruments

Four self-report measures were utilized to gather data for the study's aforementioned goals. These instruments were Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16), Spiritual Experience Index-Revised (SEI-R), Santa Clara Religiosity Scale (SCRS) and Moral Identity Measure (MIM). Descriptions of these scales are given below.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16). The instrument was created by (Ames et al., 2006) and has 16 items with two pairs of statements one of which must be selected from by the individual. Scale

scores were calculated using mean scores. The reliability of the scale is .72 (Ames et al., 2006). In the current study reliability of this scale is .83.

Santa Clara Religiosity Scale (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997). The Santa Clara Religiosity scale is a 4-point Likert scale and has 10 self-report items that are designed to gauge the depth of one's religious commitment. Higher total scores indicate stronger levels of belief in Religion. The reliability of the scale is ranging between .94 and .97 (Plante, 2010). This scale's reliability in the current study was .93.

Spiritual Experience Index -Revised (SEI-R; Genia, 1997). This scale contains 23 items with 6-point Likert scale that measure spiritual support and Spiritual Openness. Item Number 1, 3, 7, and 10 were reverse coded. High scores indicate high level of Spirituality. The SEI-R Cronbach's alpha reliability of scale is .89 (Genia, 1997). This scale's reliability in the current study was .93.

Moral Identity Measure (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral Identity Measure was developed to assess moral self and moral integrity on a five-point Likert scale. This scale consists of 10 items which measure two dimensions titled Internalization and Symbolization of moral identity. alpha reliability of this scale was .85 (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and in the current study reliability is .86.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using SPSS-26 to look into the study's objectives. Prior to the investigation, the assumption of normality was examined by evaluating the skewness and kurtosis values as well as the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the Shapiro-Wilk test. The link between the study variables was ascertained using regression analysis, correlation analysis, and the t test.

Results

In this study, data was investigated into two steps. Two steps of data analysis were used in this investigation. In order to assess the study's stated hypotheses, descriptive statistics were computed in the first phase and other relevant analysis in the second phase.

Table 1

Alpha Coefficients, Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (N = 300)

Scales	<i>k</i>	α	<i>M(S.D)</i>	Skewness	1	2	3	4	5
NPI-16	16	.83	6.21(4.10)	.66	-	-.58**	-.51**	-.47**	.00
SCRS	10	.93	33.50(7.12)	-1.47		-	.76**	.72**	.00
SEI-R	23	.88	98.11 (18.53)	-1.69			-	.79**	.05
MIM	10	.86	37.41(8.40)	-1.08				-	.10
Age									-

Note. NPI-16 = Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16; SCRS = Santa Clara Religiosity Scale; SEI-R = Spiritual Experience Index-Revised; MIM = Moral Identity Measure.

As depicted in Table 1, all the scales used in this study showed sufficient reliability. Value of skewness also falls within acceptable range. Moreover, this table reveals the correlation among all the study variables and age. Narcissism is significantly negatively related with religiosity, spirituality, and narcissism. However, none of the variable is associated with age.

Table 2

Predictors of Narcissism (N = 300)

Predictors Variables	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Religiosity	-.33***	-.58	.02	.33
Spirituality	-.11***	-.51	.01	.26
Moral Identity	-.23***	-.47	.02	.22

The findings of a linear regression analysis are shown in Table 2, which highlights the effects of three independent variables that were calculated individually to predict narcissism. Religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity significantly negatively predict narcissism; however, religiosity is the strongest predictor among them.

Table 3
Gender Difference on Study Scale (N = 300)

Subscales	Men (n =150)		Women (n = 150)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95 % CI		Cohen's d
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
NPI-16	8.03	4.28	4.38	2.95	8.58	.00	2.81	4.48	0.9
SCRS	30.98	8.27	36.02	4.55	-6.35	.00	-6.55	-3.52	0.7
SEI-R	92.28	22.73	103.93	10.19	-5.72	.00	-15.65	-7.64	0.6
MIM	34.96	9.81	39.85	5.79	-5.25	.00	-6.71	-3.05	

Table 3 reveals that there exist significant gender differences among study variables that explored using independent sample t test. Results revealed that male score higher on narcissism while female score higher on religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity.

Table 4
Marital Difference on Study Scale (N = 300)

Subscales	Single (n =155)		Married (n = 145)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95 % CI		Cohen's d
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
NPI-16	6.50	4.01	5.88	4.18	1.31	.19	-	-	-
SCRS	32.52	7.39	34.53	6.69	-2.46	.01	-3.61	-.40	0.2
SEI-R	96.90	19.43	99.39	17.49	-1.16	.24	-	-	-
MIM	36.36	8.60	38.52	8.07	-2.23	.02	-4.05	-.25	0.2

Table 4 shows marital status differences on study variables. It demonstrates that significant differences exist only among religiosity and moral identity. However, mean differences show that married persons score higher on the other three factors whereas single adults score higher on narcissism.

Discussion

Although psychology has been widely regarded as a subject which has its foundation in liberal dogma; Psychology of religion and spirituality has been extensively explored from the past few decades (Kaur, 2020). Religion and spirituality have been associated with health care (see Abdel-Khalek, 2019) and this tradition is not new but dates back to the beginning of human history. More recently, moral psychology has also been

considered in this context and self-regulatory mechanisms such as moral identity is given special attention in this regard. Religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity can be served as mechanism that could control unhealthy and destructive behaviors. Narcissism is one of such damaging behaviors that has been on continuous rise in times of economic growth and development. Therefore, finding potential ways to buffer its impact on functioning is an important avenue within research. Current study aimed at exploring the link between narcissism, religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity among adults.

The findings supported the study's initial hypothesis by demonstrating that narcissism has a negative relationship with spirituality, moral identity, and religion. These results are compatible with some of the earlier empirical reports given that the literature presents contradictory themes regarding the direction of the link between research variables (see Cooper et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2004). Similarly, current study further revealed religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity as significant negative predictors of narcissism. Watson et al. (2004) discovered a negative or inverse relationship between narcissism and intrinsic religious orientation. In a Pakistani sample, spirituality was likewise found to be inversely related to narcissism (Khan et al., 2016). Correspondingly, Hart et al. (2019) found that narcissism is inversely (negatively) associated to moral identity internalization, and that more narcissism promotes immoral rather than moral attributes in people. From all the three predictors, religiosity is found to be the strongest predictor of the studies' outcome variable. The current study's empirical findings indicate that by boosting levels of religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity, we can reduce the greater levels of narcissism among adults.

This study further analyses the demographic differences in addition to examining the relationship between study factors. Age is an important variable to consider when we study psychological constructs. Findings of this study are inconsistent with earlier research (Bengtson et al., 2015; Krettenauer et al., 2016) and revealed that age is not related to any of the study variable. These findings highlight a fundamental conclusion of earlier research which is that the ageing process is exceedingly variable and context dependent. (Ayalon et al., 2020). This study further established gender differences on study variables. It was found that man score higher on narcissism and lower on religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity. These finding are consistent with previous studies (Grijalva et al., 2015; Mirkovic et al., 2021). Modern empirical study into the genesis of narcissism has discovered that narcissistic personality traits begin at a young age and these gender differences on narcissism could be associated with gender socialization tactics in child raising that aided the

development of a child's initial narcissistic inclinations into adult narcissism (Grijalva et al., 2015). In this regard, Imamoglu and Batigun (2020) argued that cultural institutions allowed men to express themselves in a magnificent and splendid manner, whereas women were more harmoniously veiled within these cultural structures, results in a greater level of narcissism among men. The existence of a higher level of religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity among women could be explained by their increased opportunities to participate in such activities. Schnabel (2018) stated that these disparities could be related to a variety of factors, including personality, vulnerability, socialization factors and, most notably, the existence of women's lower risk proneness than men.

This study also explores the marital differences on the study variables. It was found that only on spirituality and moral identity significant results were obtained. However, mean differences reflect that married adults showed higher level of religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity and lower levels of narcissism. These results are in line with earlier research, which indicated a reduced degree of narcissism among married people in their study (Ha et al., 2018). This could be because self-absorbed people are less prone to get involved in romantic relationships. This association was explained by Altinok and Kılç (2020), who linked narcissism to infidelity intents. As a result, it is argued that the married participants in this study had a lower level of narcissism, because a higher level of narcissism damages such relationship in the first place. These findings can be helpful for relationship counselors particularly when they are engaging with their clients in couple therapy.

Limitations and Suggestions

The findings of the current study were generalizable to Muslim sample only as study variables particularly religiosity and spirituality are largely under the influence of the cultural forces, are complicated and may require further exploration. Future research should confirm this connection between various cultural clusters, as the results may be influenced by the prevalent cultural factors. The reproducibility of these findings will be a crucial area of future research, particularly in examining how these relationships hold across cultures and religions, it is further noted. A second limitation of the study was the use of cross-sectional data. Given that both religiosity and narcissism are conceptualized as individual differences, a longitudinal design may be beneficial in examining change over time. Lastly, it is recommended that other demographic variables particularly sect wise differences (such as Shia, Sunni, and Deobandi etc.) need to investigate in future research.

Implications of the study

The current study adds to the body of prior literature by demonstrating that religiosity, spirituality, and moral identity can mitigate the impacts of narcissism. To combat the dangers of narcissism, policymakers could start initiatives to encourage religious, spiritual, and moral values among individuals and communities. Considering the results of this study, I advocate that religious, spiritual, or moral-based treatment modules should be incorporated into narcissistic treatment plans as needed.

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Citation of this Article:

Naz, N, R., Bibi, H, Naz, S., (2024). Relationship Between Narcissism, Religiosity, Spirituality and Moral Identity Among Adults. *Pakistan Journal of Education*, 42(1), 1-18.