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ASSOCIATION OF EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY AND PSYCHOPATHY-LINKED NARCISSISM WITH SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT
Emotional reactivity and social competence are central to healthy psychological functioning, particularly in the transitional period of early adulthood. Psychopathy-linked narcissism, characterized by emotional detachment, grandiosity, and impulsivity, may negatively influence emotional regulation and interpersonal effectiveness, thereby undermining social development. In the current study, the connection between the psychopathy-linked narcissism and the tendency to either react to emotional stimuli or subjectively evaluate social competence in a group of young adults was evaluated. Participants were 300 university students (aged 19–25), recruited from both private and public institutions using a convenience sampling method. As a correlational cross-sectional study, the current research used the Anti-Social Process Screening Device (APSD), the short version of the Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale (PERS), and the Perceived Social Competence Scale II (PSCS II). Results indicated that psychopathy-linked narcissism was significantly negatively associated with both emotional reactivity and social competence ($r=-.16$ to $-.20$, $p<0.01$). Further, emotional reactivity mediated the relationship between narcissistic traits and social competence, suggesting that emotional disengagement may serve as a mechanism through which narcissism impairs interpersonal functioning ($\chi2 = 2.4$, $p > .05$). Gender differences were also explored, with male participants reporting higher levels of narcissistic traits and lower emotional reactivity compared to females. These findings underscore the importance of addressing emotional and personality-based factors in promoting social and emotional well-being among young adults. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions that enhance emotional awareness and interpersonal sensitivity, especially in educational and counseling settings.

Keywords: *emotional reactivity, psychopathy linked narcissism, social competence, young adults*

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the world has become more interdependent than ever before, prompting people to pay closer attention to the challenges young adults face in navigating a complex world and the potential consequences. The move to adulthood (around 19 to 25 years) is a period that is characterized by independence pursuing, self-discovery, as well as gaining emotional and social competence (Wright et al., 2017). At this stage of life, people face increasing demands from academics, professionals, and social interactions, making the ability to manage their emotions and navigate relationships with others particularly significant. Emotional reactivity, narcissism, and social competence represent some of the psychological traits that have

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become central elements to be studied in terms of their impact on these dynamics (Abbas et al., 2019; Jonason et al., 2015).

Emotional reactivity is a difference among individuals concerning arousal threshold, intensity, and durability of emotion in reaction to emotion-evoking stimuli. It shows the duration and the degree of rapidity of emotional reaction (Nock et al., 2008). People who are low on emotional reactivity are better placed to cope with stress but usually have a problem with expressing emotions and establishing strong bonds (Deckers et al., 2015). Emotion regulation skills, in turn, are fundamental in the context of social competence of an individual and their well-being (Shapero et al., 2019).

Superimposed on these frameworks is the work of psychopathy-linked narcissism, a form of narcissism characterized by an inability to empathize, manipulation, and grandiosity, which disables social connection. Adults with a strong sense of this trait tend to be self-confident and socially dominant, although their behavior is usually considered based on self-interest and their inability to empathize with others (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Weiss et al., 2020). These individuals are often portrayed as outwardly attractive but inwardly emotionally unemotional, and they tend to be self-enhancing rather than socially beneficial. This dimension can be a major obstacle to their establishment of genuine interpersonal relationships as well as creation of prosocial behaviors (Muris et al., 2022).

Narcissism is not a unitary concept; rather, literature has, in the recent past, distinguished between maladaptive (linked with psychopathy) and adaptive types of narcissism. Narcissism, which is adaptive and characterized by leadership, self-confidence, and assertiveness, can positively impact the social sphere when combined with empathy and prosocial behavior. Such a type of narcissism, commonly referred to as narcissistic self-assurance, has a higher chance of making these people strong, powerful, and successful leaders (Back et al., 2013; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013).

The term social competence, which is broadly defined as the aptitude used to interact with others in an appropriate and successful way, is regarded as critical to personal, academic as well as business success. It involves a variety of interpersonal competencies such as communicating, being flexible, empathizing, and resolving conflicts (Ang, 2016; Lin et al., 2024). Research indicates that more socially competent people tend to learn to deal better with their stress, develop more supportive relationships, and keep themselves emotionally stable (Romppanen et al., 2021; Schoon et al., 2021). On the contrary, lack of social competence has been correlated with loneliness, depression, and mal-adaptive behavior.

Moreover, culture is a leading method of determining how emotional qualities are expressed and perceived. As an illustration, culturally, collectivist cultures such as Pakistan encourage their members to be self-controlled and focused on peacekeeping. These expectations tend to influence emotional reactivity and narcissistic tendencies, which result in dissimilar social outcomes than in more individualistic cultures (Cordaro et al., 2018; Kashima et al., 2019). Rapid urbanization, family change, and variation of societal requirements particularly expose the Pakistani youth to emotional and social stress, since they comprise a large section of the population (Abbas et al., 2019).

Although their application is well-known in various circumstances, there is not much in the way of empirical work investigating the effect of emotional reactivity and narcissism associated with psychopathy in combination with affecting the social competence of non-Western civilizations, especially in the non-Western Pakistani young adults. Since emotional and

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social competences are increasingly seen as main indicators of lifetime well-being and prosperity, knowledge about these processes is becoming paramount to research as well as the development of interventions (Beesdo-Baum et al., 2019).

The purpose of the research will be to fill the research gap to determine how various aspects of emotional reactivity, narcissistic features of psychopathy, and social competence interact in a population consisting of young adults. In particular, it will be a way to evaluate the interrelationship between these variables in the Pakistani environment and whether emotional reactivity mediates the connection between emotional reactivity and social competence. Since it pays attention to a culturally and developmentally appropriate sample, such research can be used to develop purposeful psychological and educational interventions to promote healthier emotional and social development.

METHOD

Design

The method adopted by this research was a quantitative correlational cross-sectional model of viewing natural relationships among emotional reactivity and narcissism associated with psychopathy and social competence. The investigation aimed to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between different factors, and since there was no experimental control over the variables, data were collected at one specific time (Judd & Kenny, 1981).

Participants

The sample size was made up of 300 undergraduate students (M = 21.71, SD = 1.82) aged between 19 and 25 years, with 153 females and 147 males (M = 21.64, SD = 1.79; M = 21.78, SD = 1.85, respectively). Two universities in Lahore (one public and one private), were conveniently sampled to include both types of institutions. The subjects were undergraduate students, and they had informed consent to take part in the research.

Instruments

- **Emotional reactivity:** Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale-Short (PERS-S; Becerra et al., 2019) is made up of 18 items that measure three key dimensions of emotional reactivity (threshold, magnitude, and duration), assessing how easy emotions are triggered; how intense emotional experiences are; and how long emotional responses last. Participants responded from 1 (Very unlike me) to 5 (Very like me) using a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate higher emotional reactivity, characterized by stronger and longer emotional experiences. Internal consistency of the scale was demonstrated by a range of 0.84 to 0.94, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha (α), which indicates excellent reliability across different samples. Additionally, test-retest reliability was observed with a correlation coefficient of r=0.70.
- **Psychopathy-linked narcissism:** In estimating the three subcomponents, i.e., narcissism, impulsivity, and callous-unemotional traits, the study utilized the Self-Report version of the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD-SR; Frick & Hare, 2001). This self-report scale of 20 items contains questions that are recorded using a 3-point Likert scale with 0 to 2, i.e., Not at all true to definitely true. The instrument had reasonable internal consistency (alpha = .83), as well as acceptable test-retest reliability (r = .79).
- **Social competence:** When testing self-perceived functioning of students, Perceived Social Competence Scale II (PSCS-II; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014) was used. The questionnaire has 5 items, subjected to a five-point Likert scale ranging between 1

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(Strongly disagree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Internal consistency of the scale is reported to be fair (Cronbach alpha =.86), whereas test-retest reliability was average (r = .75).

Procedure

Initial administrative permission was obtained from both public and private universities of Lahore. Informed consent and ethical clearance based on the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (2017) were obtained prior to the start of any data collection activity involving human subjects. All the participants were also presented with an information sheet that indicated the objectives of the study, the type of measurement tools involved, and the confidentiality of their responses. The recording of data was made anonymously in class hours, and the researcher was present in order to supervise the procedure. Questionnaires were administered once in a group setting within each university's designated classroom or lab environment. Participants completed a digital or paper version of the demographic sheet, the PERS-S, the APSD-SR, and the PSCS-II. Completion time was approximately 30 minutes. Any incomplete responses or questionnaires with inconsistent data patterns were excluded from the final dataset.

Data Analysis

The analysis was initiated with the calculation of descriptive statistics, i.e., standard deviations and mean values of all study variables. The reactions to the emotional stimuli, narcissistic traits related to psychopathy, and social competence were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients to find the correlation between them. To investigate variations among demographic variables, one-way ANOVA and independent samples t-tests were employed. The degree to which emotional reactivity and psychopathy-linked narcissism could be predictive of social competence was then tested in terms of multiple regressions. Moreover, mediation analysis was applied to find whether the emotional reactivity acted as a mediator in the correlation between narcissistic traits and social competence, providing an idea of the indirect and direct effects through which the outcome factor is affected by independent variables. All analyses were carried out using SPSS statistical software, version 26.0.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows a detailed description of sociodemographic variables with the help of mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages. The sample comprises 300 participants with a mean age of 21.05 years (SD = 1.86), 68% women and 32% men who were enrolled in government universities (51.3%) and private universities (48.7%).

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N=300).

Characteristics		*f (%)*	*M (SD)*
Age			21.05 (1.86)
Gender			
	Male	96 (32%)	
	Female	204(68%)	
Family System			
	Joint	90 (30%)	
	Nuclear	210 (70%)	
Birth order			

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	1	104 (34.7%)	
	2	97 (32.3%)	
	3	63 (21%)	
	4	15 (5%)	
	5 or more	21(7%)	
Marital status			
	Single	275 (91.7%)	
	Married	8 (2.7%)	
	Committed	17 (5.7%)	
University Sector			
	Government	154 (51.3%)	
	Private	146 (48.7%)	

Note. f=Frequency, %=Percentage, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation.

Reliability Index of scales

Internal consistency of the scales used in this study was obtained by computing the Alpha Coefficient. It was checked on every factor of the scales, which are listed below.

Table 2

Reliability Analysis of Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale, Anti-Social Process Screening Device, and Social Competence in Young Adults (N=300).

Scale	***k***	***α***
ASPD	20	.65
PERS	18	.81
PSCS	5	.82

Note. k=no. of items, α=Cronbach's alpha, APSD= Antisocial Process Screening Device, PERS=Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale, PSCS=Perceived Social Competence Scale

The above table shows that all scales had satisfactory to excellent reliability indexes, i.e., above the cut-off 0.70.

Correlational Analysis

Table 2 shows the bivariate correlations among the main study variables. Psychopathy-linked narcissism traits (including CU and impulsivity traits) were significantly negatively correlated with social competence and emotional reactivity. Emotional reactivity, in turn, displayed significant associations with its positive and negative dimensions, and social competence showed a weak but positive relationship with positive emotional reactivity.

Table 3

Intercorrelations among psychopathy-linked narcissism, emotional reactivity, and social competence.

Variables	***M***	***SD***	***1***	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***	***6***	***7***
1. APSD	13.84	5.04	-						
2. CU traits	2.99	1.87	.74***	-					
3. Impulsivity traits	6.81	2.69	.74**	.40**	-				

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				*					
4. Narcissism Traits	4.03	1.89	.79**	.38***	.36***	-			
5. Emotional Reactivity	63.31	10.90	-.16**	-.25***	-.16**	-.003	-		
6. Negative reactivity	33.54	6.35	-.07	-.21***	-.03	.04	.83***	-	
7. Positive reactivity	29.77	7.27	-.19**	-.19**	-.23***	-.04	.77***	.28***	-
8. Social Competence	19.44	4.13	-.20***	-.22***	-.22***	-.07	.37***	.23***	.38***

Note. **p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive power of psychopathy-linked narcissism and emotional reactivity on social competence. Results are presented in Table 3. Positive and negative emotional reactivity significantly predicted social competence, while CU and impulsivity traits showed limited direct predictive power.

Table 4

Regression Analysis (N=300).

Variables	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	95% CI (B)	
						LL	**UL**
Constant	12.35	1.58		7.82	.00***	9.24	15.46
CU Traits	-.21	.14	-.10	-1.55	.12	-.48	.06
Impulsivity Traits	-.26*	.13	-.12	-1.94	.05*	-.52	.004
Narcissism Traits	.04	.10	.02	.37	.72	-.17	.24
Negative Reactivity	.07*	.03	.12	2.14	.03*	.01	.13
Positive Reactivity	.19***	.04	.30	5.28	.00***	.12	.27

Note. B=Unstandardized Regression Coefficient, SE=Standard Error, β=Standardized Regression Coefficient, LL=Lower Limit, UL=Upper Limit

Mediation Analysis

Table 5

Model Fit Indices of Psychopathy linked Narcissism, Emotional Reactivity, and Social Competence (N=300)

Model	χ^2	*df*	*p*	*CFI*	*TLI*	*RMSEA*
Model 1	2.4	2	.30	.99	.99	.03

Note. N=300, Changes in the chi-square statistic are run in reference to the model, χ2=Chi-square, RMSEA=Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, CFI= Comparative Fit Index, TLI=Tucker Lewis Index, χ2>0.05

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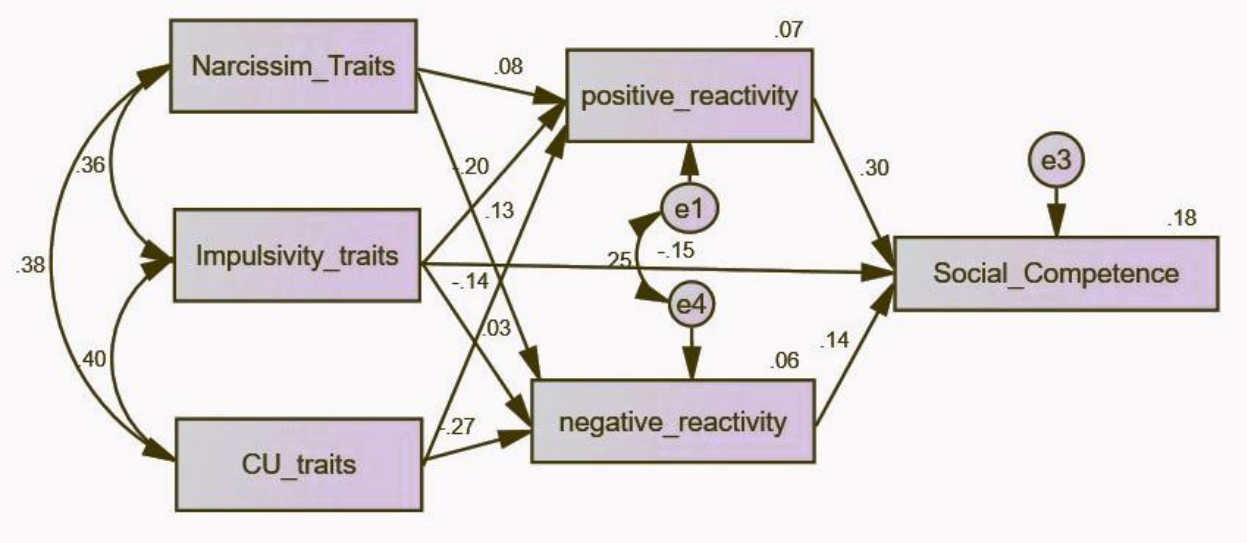
Figure I

Figural Representation of Mediating Role of Emotional Reactivity between Psychopathy linked Narcissism, and Social Competence in Young Adults (N=300).



Further, mediation was tested using the Standard Equation Model (SEM). The model demonstrated good fit (χ^2 = 2.4, df = 2, p = .30; CFI = .99; TLI = .99; RMSEA = .03). Emotional reactivity significantly mediated the relationship between social competence and CU traits (β = -.08, SE = .03), and partially mediated the effect of impulsivity (β = -.06, SE = .03).

Table 6

Direct Effect of CU Traits, Impulsivity Traits, Narcissism Traits, Positive Reactivity, and Negative Reactivity for Young Adults (N=300)

	Mediators				**Outcomes**	
	Positive Reactivity		**Negative Reactivity**		**Social Competence**	
Predictors	***β***	***SE***	***β***	***SE***	***β***	***SE***
CU Traits	-.14*	.06	-.27 **	.06		
Impulsivity Traits	-.20	.07	.03	.07	-.15*	.06
Narcissism Traits	.08	.07	.13	.06		
Positive Reactivity					.30*	.06
Negative Reactivity					.14**	.05
Covariates						
Total R^2	.06		.07		.18*	

Note. β=Standardized Regression Coefficient, SE=Standard Error

Table 6 shows the direct effect of independent variables (CU traits, Impulsivity traits, Narcissism traits) on mediator (Positive reactivity and negative reactivity), and the direct effect of mediator (negative and positive reactivity) on dependent variable (social competence). The results showed that Callous-unemotional (CU) traits significantly negatively predicted positive reactivity and negative reactivity, and both of these in turn significantly predicted social competence. Impulsive traits also have a significant negative direct effect on social competence. Impulsivity traits and Narcissism traits did not significantly predict either type of emotional reactivity.

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Table 7

Indirect Effect of CU Traits, Impulsivity Traits, and Narcissism Traits for Young Adults (N=300)

Predictors	Outcomes (Social Competence)	
	β	***SE***
CU traits	-.08*	.03
Impulsivity Traits	-.06*	.03
Narcissism Traits	.04	.03

Note. β=Standardized Regression Coefficient, SE=Standard Error

Table 7 shows that CU traits and Impulsive traits have a significant negative indirect effect on social competence. From the above table (6, 7), it is inferred that emotional reactivity acts as a full mediator in the relation between CU traits and social competence and as a partial mediator in the link between Impulsivity traits and competence. Therefore, the above findings strongly supported the hypothesis.

Gender Differences

Independent t-tests were conducted to assess gender-based differences. Summarization of results is available in table 4. Females scored significantly higher in emotional reactivity and social competence, while males reported significantly higher CU traits. No significant gender differences were found for impulsivity or narcissism traits.

Table 8

Independent t-test for Psychopathy linked Narcissism, Emotional Reactivity, and Social Competence across Genders in Young Adults (N=300)

Variables	Men (n=96)		Women (n=204)			95% *CI*		
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***t* (298)**	***LL***	***UL***	***η***
APSD	14.8	5.08	13.37	4.97	2.34	0.23	2.67	5.01
CU traits	3.33	1.90	2.82	1.84	2.19	0.05	0.96	1.86
Imp_traits	4.27	1.99	3.92	1.83	1.50	-0.11	0.81	1.88
Nar_Traits	6.43	2.50	5.99	2.30	1.55	-0.12	1.03	2.36
Emo_Reactivity	58.6	10.5	65.50	10.3	-5.30	-9.39	-4.30	10.43
-ve Reac	26.2	7.07	31.43	6.76	-6.11	-6.86	-3.52	6.86
+ve Reac	32.4	6.40	34.07	6.28	-2.11	-3.19	-0.11	6.31
Social Competence	18.7	4.07	19.77	4.13	-2.03	-2.03	-0.03	4.11

Note. M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower Limit, UL=Upper Limit

DISCUSSION

The present research aimed at determining the correlations between emotional reactivity, narcissistic traits, which are psychopathy related, and social competence among young adults. Hypotheses presupposed the higher levels of narcissistic traits, especially callous-unemotional characteristics, and the levels of impulsivity were significantly and negatively linked to emotional reactivity and perceived social competence. On top of this, the main goal of the study was to explore the relationships between emotional reactivity, narcissistic traits associated with

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psychopathy, and social competence among young adults. The findings partially supported these hypotheses, helping them in both theoretical and practical applications.

A negative relationship was noted to be highly strong between psychopathy-linked narcissism and emotional reactivity, particularly for CU traits, which showed the strongest inverse association. This is consistent with previous literature suggesting that emotional coldness and reduced affective responsiveness are hallmarks of CU traits (Centifanti et al., 2013; Reene, 2025). Interestingly, general narcissism traits did not significantly predict emotional reactivity, supporting previous distinctions made between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Lambe et al., 2018). Vulnerable narcissists, who are more emotionally sensitive, were likely underrepresented in the sample, possibly explaining the lack of a significant relationship.

In terms of social competence, a strong negative correlation was found with both CU traits and impulsivity, suggesting that affective detachment and poor self-regulation significantly hinder young adults' social effectiveness. This result is in line with previous work by Zeigler-Hill et al. (2010) and Wurst et al. (2017), who emphasized that maladaptive narcissism, characterized by antagonism and emotional disengagement, correlates with poorer interpersonal functioning.

Crucially, emotional reactivity was positively and significantly linked to social competence ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$), with positive reactivity emerging as a key predictor ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.05$). These findings extend the “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2001) by demonstrating that emotional awareness and expressiveness can enhance social skill development. These results are further supported by Keltner and Kring’s (1998) framework on the social functions of emotion and by Geiger et al. (2023), who reported a strong relation between regulated emotional expression and improved peer relationships.

Lastly, mediation analysis, which further affirmed the findings, showed that emotional reactivity is an important mediator in the association between narcissism of psychopath tendency and social competence. This mediation plays a crucial role in emotional responsiveness as a mediator or barrier in the translation of personality traits into social behaviors. In this way, although the impairment in social competence caused by the concept of psychopathy aggravates narcissism, the increase of emotional reactivity, especially of a positive kind, can somewhat overcome these difficulties Moreover, mediation analysis confirmed that emotional reactivity serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between psychopathy-linked narcissism and social competence. This mediation highlights the critical role of emotional responsiveness as a buffer or conduit in translating personality traits into social behaviors. Thus, while psychopathy-related narcissism impairs social competence, higher emotional reactivity, especially of a positive nature, can partially mitigate these effects.

Emotional reactivity also displayed differences by gender. Women showed great emotional reactivity compared to men ($M = 65.50$ vs. $M = 58.65$; $t(298) = -5.30$, $p < .001$), as is also the case according to Bradley et al. (2018) and Okray et al. (2018). This difference may reflect both biological and sociocultural factors that promote emotional expressiveness among women, which may in turn enhance their social competence. In contrast, men displayed significantly higher CU traits ($M = 3.33$) compared to women ($M = 2.82$; $t (298) = 2.19$, $p < 0.05$), echoing previous findings by Kjærvik and Bushman (2021). These traits, associated with reduced empathy and emotional indifference, contribute to diminished interpersonal functioning and align with the psychopathy-related dimension of narcissism discussed by Hare (1999) and Cleckley’s earlier descriptions of psychopathy.

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Limitations and Implications

Firstly, the research relied entirely on self-reported questionnaires, which can be subject to related bias, including social desirability and flawed self-evaluation. Moreover, the study was conducted in a single urban center using non-random convenience sampling, which limits the findings of the study to the broader population. The absence of clinical diagnostic tools also restricts the ability to make inferences about psychopathology based on trait measures alone.

Forthcoming studies would profit from employing longitudinal designs to capture developmental trajectories of narcissism and social functioning. Including multi-informant reports (e.g., peers, teachers, or family members) could enhance the validity of personality assessments. Incorporating objective behavioral tasks or physiological measures (e.g., skin conductance, EEG) could provide more robust insights into emotional reactivity patterns.

It is also recommended to examine the role of teacher-student dynamics, classroom context, and extracurricular factors (e.g., family life, media exposure) as moderators in the relationship between narcissistic traits and social competence. Exploring cultural variations and conducting cross-national comparisons could further clarify the interplay between personality and social functioning in different sociocultural environments.

The study itself, complicated by its limitations, still provides valuable information on how narcissistic personality traits of psychopathology and the level of responsiveness to emotions influence the social competence of young adults. The results stress the point that it is essential to target interventions towards improving the management of emotions, self-development, and responsiveness to other people, especially in individuals with callous-unemotional traits or low emotional sensitivity. Interventions such as social skills training and interventions that concern emotion may prove to be very helpful to such groups.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the complex link between emotional processing and interpersonal functioning during a crucial developmental period by focusing on emotional reactivity in concordance with psychopathic narcissism and social functioning in young adults. As per the results, those with pronounced narcissistic characteristics, especially those linked to impulsive and callous-unemotional tendencies, also have lower levels of social competence and emotional reactivity.

On the other hand, improved social skills were linked to higher emotional reactivity, especially positive emotional reactivity, indicating that the ability to feel and control emotions adaptively is a critical predictor of successful social interaction.

Similar patterns have been observed in earlier research, suggesting that prosocial behavior growth depends on emotional reactivity and that maladaptive narcissism may impede this process (Back et al., 2013). The significance of emotional awareness and regulation as processes through which personality traits influence social outcomes is further highlighted by the mediating function of the contribution of emotional reactivity to the connection between narcissistic traits and social competence.

Additionally, the results highlight the significance of developing educational and psychological programs that focus on helping young adults, especially those with narcissistic tendencies, develop their social skills and emotional control. Such initiatives have to focus on developing empathy, lowering interpersonal animosity, and encouraging adaptive self-awareness, skills that are becoming more and more important in the social, professional, and academic sectors.

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This study advances to a more sophisticated knowledge of the variables influencing interpersonal development in emerging adulthood by illuminating how particular emotional and personality qualities impact social functioning. Cultivating emotionally resilient, socially competent people is essential for both individual well-being and the development of inclusive, compassionate, and cooperative communities in today's demanding and interconnected world.

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