



The Role of Narcissistic Traits and Emotional Coldness in Predicting Marital Empathy

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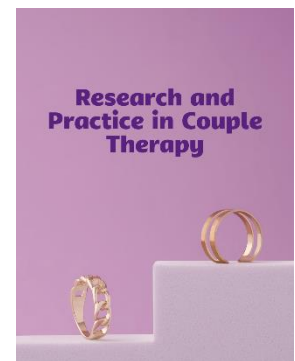
ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the predictive roles of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness in determining levels of marital empathy among married adults. A correlational descriptive design was employed using a sample of 393 married individuals from Tunisia, selected based on Morgan and Krejcie's sample size determination table. Participants completed standardized self-report questionnaires measuring narcissistic traits, emotional coldness, and marital empathy. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were calculated, followed by Pearson correlation to examine bivariate associations and multiple linear regression to assess the predictive power of independent variables on marital empathy. Assumptions for regression analysis were tested and confirmed prior to analysis. Pearson correlation results revealed significant negative relationships between marital empathy and both narcissistic traits ($r = -0.42, p < .01$) and emotional coldness ($r = -0.58, p < .01$). A moderate positive correlation was also found between narcissistic traits and emotional coldness ($r = 0.46, p < .01$). The regression model was significant, $F(2, 390) = 126.45, p < .001$, accounting for 40% of the variance in marital empathy ($R^2 = 0.40$). Both narcissistic traits ($\beta = -0.29, p < .001$) and emotional coldness ($\beta = -0.45, p < .001$) emerged as significant negative predictors, with emotional coldness having a stronger effect. The findings underscore the detrimental effects of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness on marital empathy. Emotional coldness, in particular, is a stronger predictor of empathic deficits in marital relationships. These results highlight the need for interventions that target emotional responsiveness and personality-driven barriers to empathy in couples therapy and relationship counseling.

Keywords: Marital empathy; narcissistic traits; emotional coldness; personality; intimacy; emotional detachment; relationship quality

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Introduction

Empathy serves as a cornerstone of marital relationships, facilitating emotional closeness, understanding, and mutual responsiveness. Marital empathy enables partners to perceive and respond to one another's emotions in supportive ways, thus playing a crucial role in relationship satisfaction and long-term relational stability. In contrast, personality traits such as narcissism and emotional coldness—marked by self-centeredness, low emotional sensitivity, and interpersonal indifference—pose significant risks to marital empathy and harmony. Given the increasing prevalence of narcissistic traits in contemporary populations, particularly among younger adults (Pereira, 2025; Shah et al., 2025), it is imperative to investigate how these traits undermine or predict empathic processes within intimate relationships.

Narcissism is a multifaceted construct that encompasses both grandiose and vulnerable dimensions. Grandiose narcissism is typified by inflated self-importance, dominance, and lack of empathy, while vulnerable narcissism includes hypersensitivity, emotional fragility, and hidden self-centeredness (Fontana et al., 2023; Schmidt et al., 2023). Both forms have been shown to



impair social and emotional functioning, particularly in close relationships (Finch & Kealy, 2024; Giacomo et al., 2023). Although some narcissists may superficially exhibit charm and attentiveness during the early stages of intimacy, these behaviors often mask a deeper emotional detachment and a lack of genuine concern for the partner's needs (Brunell & Hermann, 2024). Research suggests that narcissistic individuals struggle with cognitive and affective components of empathy, leading to diminished emotional attunement in dyadic interactions (Alcorta-Garza et al., 2025; Eddy, 2021).

Importantly, the relationship between narcissism and empathy is complex and may vary across types of narcissism and contextual factors. For instance, covert narcissism, marked by insecurity and hypersensitivity, may display different empathic capacities than overt grandiosity (Alcorta-Garza et al., 2025). Likewise, the social and cultural context plays a mediating role; in collectivist cultures, narcissistic tendencies may be perceived differently and manifest with unique interpersonal consequences (Brook et al., 2023; Pereira, 2025). The dual nature of narcissism—its capacity to mask emotional deficits with superficial social skills—renders it particularly insidious within intimate partnerships (Virk & Kumari, 2024).

Emotional coldness, though conceptually related to narcissism, is a distinct construct often characterized by emotional disengagement, indifference, and limited capacity for affective resonance with others. Individuals high in emotional coldness tend to maintain psychological distance in relationships, minimizing vulnerability and intimacy. This trait may stem from early attachment disruptions or maladaptive interpersonal schemas and often correlates with personality disorders such as schizoid or narcissistic types (Alguliyev, 2024). In marital contexts, emotional coldness is especially detrimental as it directly inhibits key components of empathy—emotional sharing, warmth, and responsiveness (Han, 2024). Moreover, research indicates that emotional coldness can serve as a mediator in the relationship between narcissism and relational dissatisfaction (Kahraman & Aktan, 2024).

Several empirical studies have explored how narcissistic traits influence relational satisfaction, commitment, and conflict management. For example, Bigdeli et al. (2024) found that communication skills partially mediate the relationship between narcissistic tendencies and marital satisfaction, suggesting that narcissism not only disrupts affective empathy but also impairs relational communication (Bigdeli et al., 2024). Similarly, Ogwuche et al. (2024) highlighted the role of narcissistic personality traits in explaining marital infidelity, particularly among individuals with low emotional intelligence and diminished empathic engagement (Ogwuche et al., 2024). These findings underscore the relevance of narcissism and related personality constructs in undermining the foundations of healthy marital functioning.

A growing body of literature also highlights the neurological and psychological underpinnings of narcissism and its effects on empathy. Schmidt et al. (2023) used neuroimaging to demonstrate distinct patterns of brain connectivity in individuals with grandiose versus vulnerable narcissism, particularly in brain areas involved in social cognition and emotion processing (Schmidt et al., 2023). These structural differences may account for the observed deficits in empathy and emotional engagement in narcissistic individuals. Moreover, Giacomini et al. (2023) showed that narcissistic traits negatively correlated with both human- and animal-directed empathy, suggesting that the empathy deficit in narcissistic individuals is pervasive rather than relationship-specific (Giacomini et al., 2023).

Another layer of complexity is introduced by gender, as gender differences in narcissism may moderate its relationship with marital empathy. For instance, Wülfing et al. (2025) found that antagonistic narcissism is particularly salient among women with borderline personality disorder, contributing to impaired relational dynamics and emotional coldness (Wülfing et al., 2025). Additionally, Zahra et al. (2025) demonstrated that narcissistic traits mediate the relationship between problematic social media use and reduced empathy in young adults, highlighting the contemporary relevance of narcissism in digital relational contexts (Zahra et al., 2025). These findings point to the intersection of personality traits, digital behavior, and emotional capacities, especially among younger populations.

The emerging field of narcissism research has also witnessed the development of new assessment tools and taxonomies. Alpay and Aydın (2022) introduced the Perceived Maternal Narcissism Scale, indicating how early relational experiences may shape the development of narcissistic traits in adulthood (Alpay & Aydın, 2022). Furthermore, Puri et al. (2024) developed and standardized the Narcissistic Personality Patterns Test (NPPT), offering a more nuanced categorization of narcissistic styles that may better predict empathic deficits in romantic relationships (Puri, 2024; Puri, Bhatt, et al., 2024; Puri, Nayar, et al., 2024). These innovations contribute to more accurate measurement of narcissism and a deeper understanding of its interpersonal consequences.

Despite these advances, relatively few studies have explored the joint impact of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness on marital empathy within non-Western populations. Most existing literature stems from Western cultural contexts, where individualistic values and autonomy may influence the expression and impact of narcissism. In contrast, this study focuses on a Tunisian sample, offering a culturally grounded examination of how these traits predict empathy in marriage. By doing so, it addresses an important gap in the literature concerning cross-cultural applicability and universality of narcissism-empathy dynamics (Alquliyev, 2024).

Moreover, this study builds on the theoretical framework that positions empathy not merely as an emotional capacity but as a dyadic, contextual, and culturally embedded phenomenon. Brunell and Hermann (2024) emphasized the role of empathy in navigating narcissistic relationships and noted that the absence of empathy can be both a symptom and a cause of dysfunctional relational cycles (Brunell & Hermann, 2024). Similarly, Giacomo et al. (2023) argued that in narcissistic personality disorder, empathy is often instrumentalized or suppressed altogether, particularly in high-conflict marital scenarios (Giacomo et al., 2023). Therefore, examining marital empathy through the dual lenses of narcissism and emotional coldness provides a comprehensive view of how personality dynamics shape relational health.

In summary, existing research has underscored the detrimental role of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness in undermining empathic responsiveness in marital relationships. However, the interactive and predictive mechanisms linking these personality dimensions to marital empathy remain underexplored, particularly in Middle Eastern and North African cultural contexts. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the extent to which narcissistic traits and emotional coldness predict marital empathy in a sample of Tunisian adults.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational descriptive design to examine the predictive role of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness in marital empathy. The target population included married individuals residing in Tunisia. Based on Morgan and Krejcie's sample size determination table, a total of 393 participants were selected through a simple random sampling method to ensure adequate statistical power and generalizability. Participants were eligible if they were married for at least one year and aged between 25 and 60. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

To assess marital empathy, the study employed the Marital Empathy Questionnaire developed by Zhang and Liao (2012). This standardized instrument is specifically designed to measure the degree of empathy within marital relationships. The questionnaire consists of 28 items distributed across three subscales: emotional empathy (e.g., understanding a spouse's feelings), cognitive empathy (e.g., perspective-taking), and behavioral empathy (e.g., empathic responses in interactions). Each

item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), with higher scores indicating greater marital empathy. Previous research has demonstrated the questionnaire's robust psychometric properties; internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's α) for the subscales range from 0.78 to 0.85, and the total scale shows excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$). Construct and convergent validity have been confirmed in both Chinese and cross-cultural studies, making it a reliable and valid measure of marital empathy in diverse populations.

Narcissistic traits were measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) developed by Raskin and Hall (1979) and later revised by Raskin and Terry (1988). The NPI is one of the most widely used tools for assessing subclinical narcissism in non-clinical populations. This version includes 40 forced-choice items covering seven subscales: Authority, Self-sufficiency, Superiority, Exhibitionism, Exploitativeness, Vanity, and Entitlement. Participants are asked to choose between two statements for each item—one narcissistic and one non-narcissistic. The total score is calculated by summing the number of narcissistic choices, with higher scores indicating a higher level of narcissistic traits. The NPI has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in numerous studies. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) range from 0.83 to 0.91, and its validity has been confirmed through correlations with self-esteem, interpersonal functioning, and aggression measures, making it a reliable tool for psychological and relational research.

To measure emotional coldness, the study utilized the Schizoid Personality Disorder Scale (SPDS) subscale from the Coolidge Axis II Inventory (CATI), developed by Coolidge in 1993. The emotional coldness subscale specifically targets interpersonal detachment, lack of affective response, and limited emotional expression—core features of emotional coldness. The subscale includes 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly false") to 5 ("strongly true"). Higher scores indicate higher levels of emotional coldness. The CATI-SPDS subscale has shown high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$) and good test-retest reliability over time. Several studies have supported its convergent and discriminant validity, especially in distinguishing emotional coldness from related constructs such as introversion or depression, making it suitable for both clinical and research settings focused on relational dynamics.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were calculated for demographic variables. To assess relationships between variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the bivariate associations between marital empathy (dependent variable) and the two independent variables: narcissistic traits and emotional coldness. Furthermore, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive power of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness on marital empathy. Assumptions of regression analysis—including linearity, normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity—were tested and met prior to conducting the analysis.

Findings and Results

Among the 393 participants, 201 (51.1%) were female and 192 (48.9%) were male. Regarding age distribution, 116 participants (29.5%) were between 25 and 34 years, 143 (36.4%) were between 35 and 44 years, and 134 (34.1%) were aged 45 to 60. In terms of education level, 84 participants (21.4%) held a high school diploma, 181 (46.1%) had a bachelor's degree, and 128 (32.6%) possessed a postgraduate degree. The majority of participants, 226 (57.5%), reported being married for 5–15 years, while 167 (42.5%) had been married for over 15 years.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 393)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Empathy	91.42	11.36
Narcissistic Traits	84.78	10.94
Emotional Coldness	76.35	9.62

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for marital empathy was 91.42 (SD = 11.36), indicating moderately high levels of empathic behavior among participants. Narcissistic traits had a mean score of 84.78 (SD = 10.94), while emotional coldness had a slightly lower mean of 76.35 (SD = 9.62), suggesting that participants generally reported lower emotional distance compared to narcissistic tendencies.

Prior to conducting the regression analysis, all necessary assumptions were evaluated and confirmed. The normality of residuals was verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = 0.091$), indicating no significant deviation from normality. Linearity was confirmed through scatterplot visualization, showing a linear pattern between independent and dependent variables. Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with all VIF values below 2.10 and Tolerance values above 0.48, suggesting no multicollinearity issues. Homoscedasticity was confirmed by plotting standardized residuals against predicted values, which displayed a random and uniform distribution. These results indicated that the data met the assumptions required for valid regression analysis.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Marital Empathy	—		
2. Narcissistic Traits	-0.42**	—	
3. Emotional Coldness	-0.58**	0.46**	—

Table 2 reveals significant negative correlations between marital empathy and both independent variables. Narcissistic traits were negatively correlated with marital empathy ($r = -0.42, p < .01$), while emotional coldness showed a stronger negative correlation ($r = -0.58, p < .01$). Additionally, narcissistic traits and emotional coldness were moderately positively correlated ($r = 0.46, p < .01$), suggesting shared variance between these two constructs.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Model Predicting Marital Empathy

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	5113.87	2	2556.93	0.63	0.40	0.39	126.45	< .001
Residual	7619.24	390	19.53					
Total	12733.11	392						

As presented in Table 3, the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 390) = 126.45, p < .001$. The model explained 40% of the variance in marital empathy ($R^2 = .40$), with an adjusted R^2 of .39, indicating a strong model fit. The multiple correlation coefficient was $R = .63$, suggesting a moderate-to-strong association between the set of predictors and marital empathy.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predicting Marital Empathy

Predictor	B	Standard Error	β	t	p
Constant	112.87	3.46	—	32.62	< .001
Narcissistic Traits	-0.34	0.06	-0.29	-5.84	< .001
Emotional Coldness	-0.51	0.05	-0.45	-10.13	< .001

Table 4 displays the coefficients for the multiple regression model. Emotional coldness emerged as the strongest predictor of marital empathy ($\beta = -0.45, p < .001$), followed by narcissistic traits ($\beta = -0.29, p < .001$). Both variables made unique,

statistically significant contributions to the model. The unstandardized coefficients indicate that for each one-unit increase in emotional coldness, marital empathy decreases by 0.51 units, holding other variables constant.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the predictive role of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness on marital empathy in a sample of married adults from Tunisia. Based on the results of Pearson correlation analysis, both narcissistic traits and emotional coldness showed significant negative relationships with marital empathy. Furthermore, the findings from multiple linear regression analysis indicated that both predictors significantly contributed to the variance in marital empathy, with emotional coldness demonstrating a stronger predictive power than narcissistic traits.

These results reinforce the conceptual and empirical link between narcissistic tendencies and diminished empathic responsiveness in intimate relationships. Individuals with elevated narcissistic traits tend to exhibit impaired affective and cognitive empathy, which inhibits their capacity to attune to their partners' emotional states (Eddy, 2021; Giacomo et al., 2023). This aligns with previous studies showing that narcissists are more likely to view relational interactions as opportunities for self-enhancement, often disregarding the needs and emotional experiences of their spouses (Brunell & Hermann, 2024; Finch & Kealy, 2024). Narcissism's central features—such as entitlement, superiority, and exploitative tendencies—are incompatible with the attunement and responsiveness required for empathy in marriage (Brook et al., 2023). Our results support this view by demonstrating a clear inverse relationship between narcissistic traits and marital empathy in a non-Western context.

Moreover, the present findings are consistent with the notion that narcissism impairs relational functioning through mechanisms such as emotional detachment, interpersonal manipulation, and defensiveness (Algulyev, 2024; Fontana et al., 2023). These mechanisms often erode trust and reduce the opportunity for open emotional sharing within couples. This is particularly problematic in collectivist cultures like Tunisia, where relational interdependence and emotional closeness are highly valued. The findings, therefore, indicate that narcissistic traits may be especially discordant within relational systems that rely heavily on emotional reciprocity.

More notably, emotional coldness emerged as a stronger predictor of reduced marital empathy. Emotional coldness, often characterized by limited affective expression, psychological distance, and interpersonal withdrawal, appears to undermine the emotional foundations necessary for empathy to flourish. This is in line with earlier research identifying emotional coldness as a key component of maladaptive relational styles, particularly in individuals with avoidant or schizoid personality traits (Algulyev, 2024; Han, 2024). In the context of marriage, such individuals may struggle to validate their partners' emotions, respond supportively, or engage in mutual emotional regulation, leading to lower levels of experienced empathy.

The dominance of emotional coldness over narcissistic traits in predicting marital empathy also has theoretical implications. While narcissism may manifest through overt behaviors such as manipulation or dominance, emotional coldness directly inhibits the affective processes that give rise to empathic engagement. As such, emotional coldness may have a more pervasive and insidious effect on marital dynamics. This is supported by Kahraman and Aktan (2024), who showed that emotional detachment mediates the relationship between narcissistic personality traits and marital dissatisfaction (Kahraman & Aktan, 2024). Additionally, research by Ogwuche et al. (2024) on marital infidelity highlights the role of emotional disengagement in explaining relational dysfunction, further substantiating the findings of the present study (Ogwuche et al., 2024).

The results also extend the empirical literature by demonstrating that both narcissistic traits and emotional coldness are relevant constructs for understanding empathy-related deficits in marital relationships within a Tunisian cultural setting. Much of the existing research in this field has been conducted in Western contexts. However, as suggested by Zahra et al. (2025), the intersection of narcissism with social and emotional outcomes may manifest differently depending on sociocultural norms

(Zahra et al., 2025). In collectivist cultures, for instance, the emotional demands of marriage may intensify the negative effects of personality traits such as narcissism and emotional coldness, leading to more pronounced empathic breakdowns.

Moreover, the findings provide indirect support for the developmental origins of empathy deficits in narcissistic individuals. Several researchers have noted that narcissistic traits often stem from early relational experiences marked by conditional acceptance or neglect, which in turn inhibit the development of emotional attunement (Alpay & Aydın, 2022; Puri, Bhatt, et al., 2024). Emotional coldness, too, is often rooted in early attachment disruptions, leading to habitual emotional distancing in adult relationships. As such, both constructs may reflect deeper intrapsychic defenses that shield individuals from emotional vulnerability, albeit at the expense of empathic connection with others (Finch & Kealy, 2024; Wülfing et al., 2025).

The negative associations found in this study between narcissistic traits and empathy also echo findings by Giacomini et al. (2023), who reported that narcissistic individuals showed consistently lower levels of empathy across both human- and animal-related scenarios (Giacomini et al., 2023). Likewise, Giacomo et al. (2023) described how narcissistic personality disorder involves an instrumental approach to relationships, where empathy is selectively suppressed or exploited depending on the context (Giacomo et al., 2023). This strategic modulation of empathy further compromises authentic emotional engagement in marital contexts.

Neuroscientific evidence also supports these findings. Schmidt et al. (2023) found structural and functional differences in brain regions related to social cognition in narcissistic individuals, including deficits in the default mode network associated with self-other integration and emotional resonance (Schmidt et al., 2023). These biological findings may help explain why narcissistic individuals, despite possessing theoretical knowledge of empathy, fail to enact it consistently in interpersonal relationships.

It is also worth noting that narcissistic traits may interact with gender, cultural norms, and relational roles in complex ways. As Wülfing et al. (2025) noted, certain narcissistic traits—especially antagonistic narcissism—may be more prevalent or differently expressed in women with personality pathology, which can further complicate marital dynamics (Wülfing et al., 2025). Similarly, research by Brook et al. (2023) has emphasized gendered pathways to narcissism and empathy, suggesting that interventions must be culturally and gender-sensitive (Brook et al., 2023).

Altogether, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the personality-empathy relationship in marital contexts by highlighting the distinct but overlapping roles of narcissistic traits and emotional coldness. It also emphasizes the need for relational education and intervention programs that target emotional awareness, vulnerability, and affective responsiveness in couples with high levels of narcissistic traits or emotional distancing behaviors. Given the dynamic interplay between personality traits and relational processes, therapeutic approaches that integrate cognitive-behavioral and emotionally focused interventions may be particularly beneficial in enhancing marital empathy and overall relational quality.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces the potential for social desirability bias, especially in measuring sensitive traits like narcissism and emotional coldness. Participants may underreport undesirable characteristics or overreport empathic behaviors to conform to socially acceptable norms. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes any causal inference. While narcissistic traits and emotional coldness were found to predict lower levels of marital empathy, the directionality of these associations cannot be conclusively determined. Third, the study was limited to married individuals in Tunisia, which, while valuable for cultural insight, limits generalizability to other populations. Cultural and gender-specific expressions of narcissism and empathy may vary considerably in other societies.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to better capture the developmental and reciprocal nature of narcissistic traits, emotional coldness, and marital empathy over time. Exploring how these traits evolve during different phases of marriage (e.g., newlyweds vs. long-term marriages) would yield richer insights. Additionally, incorporating partner-reported data or

dyadic designs would provide a more balanced and accurate portrayal of marital empathy and interpersonal functioning. Experimental or quasi-experimental interventions that target emotional regulation and empathy enhancement in couples with high levels of narcissistic tendencies would also be valuable. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could illuminate the universality or culture-specific nature of these personality-empathy dynamics.

Practitioners working with couples should consider assessing personality traits such as narcissism and emotional coldness as part of their intake and diagnostic procedures. Early identification of these traits can help therapists tailor interventions that promote empathic listening, emotional responsiveness, and relational accountability. Psychoeducational programs that teach partners about the impact of personality traits on empathy could foster greater self-awareness and mutual understanding. Moreover, emotion-focused therapeutic approaches that address defensive emotional distancing and promote vulnerability may be particularly effective in enhancing marital empathy in couples experiencing relational difficulties rooted in personality-based barriers.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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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