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Entrapment Through the Lens of Escape Theory: Predictive Roles of Narcissism, Social Isolation, and Dysfunctional Attitudes in Adults

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Entrapment, the subjective experience of being stuck in inescapable and aversive psychological states, is increasingly recognized as a core component of emotional suffering and a precursor to suicidal ideation. This study aimed to examine whether narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes significantly predict levels of entrapment in adults.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive-correlational research design was adopted. A total of 317 adult residents of Isfahan, Iran, were selected through convenience sampling. Participants completed four self-report instruments: the Entrapment Scale (Gilbert & Allan, 1998), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (Ames et al., 2006), the Social Isolation Scale (Chalabi & Amir Kafi, 2004), and the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (Weissman & Beck, 1978). Stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted in SPSS version 27 to identify the most significant predictors of entrapment.

Findings: Stepwise regression indicated substantial incremental validity (ΔR^2=.562/.086/.037 across Steps 1–3; total R^2=.685). All predictors were significant (β=.471 for narcissism, β=.267 for social isolation, β=.247 for dysfunctional attitudes; all ps<.001). Model diagnostics supported assumptions (Durbin–Watson = 1.952). Ninety-five percent confidence intervals for the unstandardized coefficients were: narcissism b=1.77 [1.47, 2.06], social isolation b=0.30 [0.21, 0.38], dysfunctional attitudes b=0.15 [0.10, 0.19].

Conclusion: The results support the predictive roles of narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes within the framework of Escape Theory. Although the data are correlational and drawn from a non-clinical urban sample, the study offers culturally grounded evidence for Escape Theory and points to possible directions for preventive and psychoeducational approaches that address feelings of entrapment in everyday life.

Keywords: Entrapment, Narcissism, Social isolation, Dysfunctional attitudes, Escape theory.

Introduction

Entrapment, the subjective feeling of being stuck in aversive psychological or situational states from which escape seems impossible, has emerged as a central construct in contemporary models of emotional distress and suicidality (Choi & Shin, 2023; Gilbert & Allan, 1998). According to Baumeister (1990), Escape Theory, individuals experience entrapment when repeated failures to reduce painful self-awareness lead to cognitive narrowing, loss of control, and a sense of being trapped within their own distress. This framework emphasizes that entrapment represents not only a reaction to external barriers but also an inward collapse of self-regulatory processes and perceived agency (Yöyen & Keleş, 2024).

Although Escape Theory has been extensively studied in Western contexts, its applicability in non-Western, collectivist societies remains underexplored. In the Iranian cultural milieu—where family interdependence, social expectations, and emotional restraint are highly valued—psychological "escape" often intersects with cultural scripts surrounding honor, conformity, and relational duty. As such, the experience of entrapment may stem not only from internal conflict but also from the tension between personal autonomy and social obligation (Arab & Emadian, 2022; Vatandoost et al., 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, multiple psychological mechanisms may converge to foster entrapment. Social isolation—defined as the objective absence or perceived lack of supportive social ties—limits emotional buffering and exacerbates self-focused rumination, reinforcing the perception of being "cornered" with one's distress (Motillon-Toudic et al., 2022; Vida et al., 2024). Narcissistic traits, particularly the vulnerable subtype, further amplify this vulnerability. When individuals with fragile self-esteem fail to receive anticipated admiration, they confront intense self-discrepancy and shame, which heighten the urge to escape from an unfulfilled self-image (Monéger et al., 2023; Musetti et al., 2022; Şen & Barişkin, 2024). Likewise, dysfunctional attitudes—rigid, perfectionistic, and approval-seeking beliefs—create unrealistic self-standards that magnify the perceived gap between actual and ideal selves (Yang et al., 2025). When repeated self-evaluation leads to perceived failure, a state of cognitive entrapment emerges, characterized by hopelessness and emotional paralysis (Dobos et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

Despite these theoretical connections, prior research has mostly examined narcissism, isolation, or dysfunctional cognition in isolation rather than as integrated predictors within a single model of entrapment. Moreover, few empirical studies have tested these mechanisms in Middle Eastern populations, where interpersonal and cultural pressures may uniquely shape the pathways to emotional suffering (Bagci et al., 2023; Golec de Zavala et al., 2020) .The lack of integrated, culturally grounded models represents a critical gap in the literature.

Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate whether narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes jointly predict psychological entrapment among Iranian adults. Grounded in Baumeister (1990) Escape Theory, the study proposes that personality traits, interpersonal disconnection, and maladaptive cognitive schemas act as converging pathways that heighten the sense of being trapped. By addressing this gap, the research contributes to both the cross-cultural validation of Escape Theory and the development of culturally sensitive preventive interventions.

Methods and Materials

Study Design

The present study employed a descriptive–correlational design using stepwise multiple regression analysis to identify the most significant predictors of psychological entrapment. This design was selected to examine the predictive roles of narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes, grounded in Baumeister's (1990) Escape Theory. Although cross-sectional in nature, the design allows for an exploratory understanding of the interrelationships among these constructs within a non-clinical Iranian adult sample.

Participants and Procedure

The statistical population consisted of adult residents of Isfahan, Iran, during the summer of 2024. The city is divided into six administrative districts, of which three districts were randomly selected for sampling. Within each selected district, several main streets were chosen using a convenience approach, and data were collected in public gathering places such as parks, shopping centers, public libraries, and healthcare centers.

Participants were approached at these locations and invited to participate in the study voluntarily.

A total of 320 individuals were initially recruited, and after screening for multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance ($p < .001$), 317 valid cases remained for final analysis. Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of results, recruitment across multiple public sites and districts increased the diversity and representativeness of the urban population.

Given that the broader research was designed within a structural equation modeling framework, the recommended minimum sample size of 270 participants was used as a guideline. To enhance the precision of parameter estimation and reduce sampling error, the final sample size was increased to 317 participants.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 years (M = 29.7, SD = 6.4). The sample included 134 men (42.3%) and 183 women (57.7%). Regarding education, 21.8% held a diploma, 12.0% an associate degree, 61.9% a bachelor's degree, and 4.3% a master's or doctoral degree. In terms of marital status, 71.9% were single, and 28.1% were married.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) having at least a high school diploma, (2) residing in Isfahan, (3) no history of psychological disorders, (4) not currently participating in psychotherapy or family therapy, and (5) providing complete responses to the questionnaires. Prior to completing the questionnaire, each participant underwent an initial interview in which the study's general objectives were explained.

Instruments

All variables were measured using standardized psychometric instruments previously validated in Iranian samples. In the present study, the internal consistency, construct validity, and factorial structure of each measure were examined. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted using AMOS-24 to verify model fit, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess reliability.

The Entrapment Scale (ES): Developed by Gilbert and Allan (1998), this 16-item scale assesses internal and external entrapment using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Total scores range from 16 to 80, with higher scores indicating greater entrapment. Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 for students and 0.93 for depressed individuals in the original study. In Iran, Tarsafi et al. (2015) reported alphas of 0.94 for women and 0.93 for men. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.81. A CFA confirmed the two-factor structure: $\chi^2/df = 2.41$, CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .048, SRMR = .043. Standardized loadings ranged from .62 to .81 ($p < .001$), and the AVE = .59, CR = .88, supporting convergent validity.

Social Isolation Scale (SIS): Designed by Chalabi and Amir Kafi (2004), this 19-item scale assesses dimensions of social isolation (e.g., social loneliness, helplessness, social despair) using a 5-point Likert scale. Scores range from 19 to 95, with higher scores reflecting greater isolation. Modarresi Yazdi et al. (2017) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.72. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.78. The three-factor CFA model fit the data well: $\chi^2/df = 2.67$, CFI = .92, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .052, SRMR = .049. Factor loadings ranged from .55 to .79 ($p < .001$). The AVE = .54 and CR = .84 confirmed convergent validity.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16): Developed by Ames et al. (2006), the NPI-16 is a 16-item instrument designed to assess narcissistic personality traits. Each item presents a pair of contrasting statements, and respondents are required to select the one that best describes them. Selecting the narcissistic option is scored as 1, while the alternative option is scored as 0. Total scores range from 0 to 16, with higher scores indicating higher levels of narcissism. A cut-off score of 8 or above is commonly used to suggest the presence of narcissistic traits. In Iran, Mohammadzadeh (2009) administered the scale to a sample of 342 university students and reported a significant correlation of 0.77 with the narcissism subscale of the MCMI-II. The test-retest reliability, split-half reliability, and Cronbach's alpha were reported as 0.84, 0.74, and 0.79, respectively. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.86. CFA results supported a one-factor model: $\chi^2/df = 1.98$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .042, SRMR = .040. Standardized loadings ranged from .57 to .76 ($p < .001$), with AVE = .56, CR = .86, confirming strong construct validity in the Iranian context.

Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (Meyer et al.): The DAS is a 40-item self-report instrument developed by Weissman and Beck (1978) to assess individuals' maladaptive beliefs and negative attitudes. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, reflecting the degree to which the respondent endorses dysfunctional beliefs (e.g.,

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perfectionism, need for approval, conditional self-worth). Higher scores indicate more rigid and negative cognitive patterns. A study in Iran reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 (Hair Jr et al., 2019). The four-factor CFA model (Perfectionism/Performance, Approval by Others, Need for Control, Dependency) showed satisfactory fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.59$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .050, SRMR = .047. Factor loadings ranged from .49 to .77 ($p < .001$), AVE = .51, CR = .82, confirming acceptable convergent validity despite modest internal consistency.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS-27. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients, were calculated. To examine the predictive power of social isolation, narcissism, and dysfunctional attitudes on the feeling of entrapment, stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed. This method was selected for its exploratory utility in identifying the strongest predictors among intercorrelated variables. Although stepwise procedures have limitations, such as potential capitalization on chance, conservative entry ($p < .05$) and removal ($p > .10$) criteria were applied to minimize bias and enhance model stability. Prior to conducting the regression analysis, assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were tested to ensure the validity of the results. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated acceptable levels, with all Tolerance values above .45 and Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) below 2.20, suggesting that the predictors were not excessively correlated. All tests used a two-tailed significance level of $\alpha = .05$.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to participation, all individuals were informed about the study objectives and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Isfahan (Code: IR.UI.REC.1403.092) and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013).

Findings and Results

The present study investigated the relationships among narcissism, social isolation, dysfunctional attitudes, and entrapment. Descriptive statistics were first computed for all major study variables. As presented in Table 1, the mean score for entrapment was 46.08 (SD = 7.66), indicating a moderate level of perceived entrapment among participants. Narcissism had a mean of 7.97 (SD = 2.04), social isolation averaged 72.02 (SD = 6.94), and dysfunctional attitudes yielded the highest mean (M = 102.14, SD = 12.80), suggesting a relatively elevated presence of maladaptive beliefs across the sample.

These descriptive values provide a preliminary overview of the central tendencies and dispersion within the data and set the stage for subsequent inferential analyses. All variables were measured on validated psychometric scales, and the internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's α) for each measure exceeded acceptable thresholds, ensuring measurement reliability (αs > .80).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 317)

Variable	M	SD
Entrapment	46.08	7.66
Narcissism	7.97	2.04
Social Isolation	72.02	6.94
Dysfunctional Attitudes	102.14	12.80

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were then calculated to explore the bivariate associations among variables. The results revealed statistically significant positive correlations between entrapment and all three independent variables. Specifically, entrapment showed a strong correlation with narcissism ($r = .750$, $p < .001$), a substantial correlation with social isolation ($r = .639$, $p < .001$), and a similarly strong correlation with dysfunctional attitudes ($r = .654$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that

individuals reporting higher levels of narcissistic traits, perceived social isolation, and dysfunctional cognitive patterns are also more likely to experience psychological entrapment.

Moreover, intercorrelations among the independent variables were also significant. Narcissism was positively correlated with social isolation (r = .517, p < .001) and dysfunctional attitudes (r = .570, p < .001), while social isolation showed a moderate positive correlation with dysfunctional attitudes (r = .520, p < .001). These interrelationships indicate potential shared variance and conceptual overlap among predictors, which warranted further investigation through multivariate regression.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 317)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Entrapment	—			
2. Narcissism	.750**	—		
3. Social Isolation	.639**	.517**	—	
4. Dysfunctional Attitudes	.654**	.570**	.520**	—

Note. All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Multiple Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

To test the primary hypothesis—whether narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes significantly predict levels of entrapment—a stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted. Entrapment was entered as the dependent variable, while the three psychological variables were treated as independent predictors.

Model 1.

In the first step, narcissism alone was entered into the model. This model was statistically significant (F(1, 315) = 404.52, p < .001) and explained 56.2% of the variance in entrapment scores (R^2 = .562). Change in R^2 = .562, indicating that narcissistic traits independently accounted for more than half of the variability in perceived entrapment. The 95% confidence interval (CI) for the unstandardized coefficient of narcissism was [1.47, 2.06].

Model 2.

In the second step, social isolation was added to the model. The inclusion of this variable significantly improved the model, *F*-change(1, 314) = 77.06, $p < .001$, increasing the explained variance to 64.8% (R^2 = .648; ΔR^2 = .086). The 95% CI for the unstandardized coefficient of social isolation was [0.21, 0.38]. This suggests that, beyond narcissism, perceived isolation plays an additional and meaningful role in predicting entrapment.

Model 3.

In the final step, dysfunctional attitudes were included, resulting in a further significant improvement, *F*-change (1, 313) = 36.73, $p < .001$. The full model accounted for 68.5% of the variance in entrapment (R^2 = .685; ΔR^2 = .037), indicating a strong predictive capacity. The 95% CI for the unstandardized coefficient of dysfunctional attitudes was [0.10, 0.19].

All three predictors remained statistically significant in the final model. As shown in Table 3, narcissism emerged as the strongest predictor (β = .471), followed by social isolation (β = .267) and dysfunctional attitudes (β = .247). Although the standardized β values for social isolation and dysfunctional attitudes were close, their unique contributions were confirmed by the change in R^2 and non-overlapping confidence intervals, indicating that both factors independently enhance the prediction of entrapment.

The Durbin–Watson statistic (1.952) indicated no serious autocorrelation in the residuals. Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed acceptable levels (Tolerance values > .45; VIFs < 2.20), confirming the absence of collinearity among predictors. Inspection of standardized residual plots showed no violation of homoscedasticity or linearity assumptions, and no outliers with standardized residuals greater than ±3.0 were detected.

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Entrapment (N = 317)

Predictor	b	95% CI for b	SE b	β	t	p
Narcissism	1.768	[1.47, 2.06]	0.153	.471	11.580	< .001
Social Isolation	0.295	[0.21, 0.38]	0.043	.267	6.836	< .001
Dysfunctional Attitudes	0.148	[0.10, 0.19]	0.024	.247	6.060	< .001
Constant	−4.338	[−9.74, 1.06]	2.751	—	−1.577	.116

Model Summary: R^2 = .685, Adjusted R^2 = .682, $F(3, 313) = 227.29$, $p < .001$, Durbin–Watson = 1.952.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined whether narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes predict the experience of entrapment. Using stepwise multiple regression, the findings showed that all three predictors significantly and positively contributed to perceived entrapment. This indicates that personality, interpersonal, and cognitive factors jointly account for differences in individuals' sense of psychological entrapment. These findings are consistent with previous research that has demonstrated strong associations between maladaptive personality characteristics and experiences of emotional distress and entrapment. Studies by Rasmussen (2016), Cheng et al. (2013), Evans et al. (2019), Van Tilburg and de Jong Gierveld (2023), Meyer et al. (2003), and Wang et al. (2022) similarly highlight the roles of cognitive distortions, interpersonal withdrawal, and narcissistic vulnerability in amplifying emotional dysregulation and chronic psychological strain.

The prominent predictive role of narcissism can be understood through the lens of Baumeister's (1990) Escape Theory and subsequent self-regulatory models. Narcissistic individuals often rely heavily on external validation to sustain a fragile sense of self-worth. When admiration or success is withheld, the resulting discrepancy between the idealized and actual self may lead to internal conflict, helplessness, and rumination—central features of entrapment. These findings also resonate with Golec de Zavala et al. (2020), who emphasize that the narcissistic struggle to preserve control and superiority paradoxically reinforces feelings of emotional confinement. In the Iranian cultural context, where social approval and collective reputation are salient, such dynamics may be further intensified.

Social isolation also predicted greater entrapment. A lack of supportive relationships undermines emotion regulation and heightens negative self-appraisal, consistent with the interpersonal models proposed by Bagci et al. (2023). Isolated individuals are deprived of alternative perspectives and adaptive coping resources, which over time can deepen feelings of mental stuckness and helplessness. This relational void reinforces internal experiences of entrapment and may increase vulnerability to despair or suicidal ideation.

Finally, dysfunctional attitudes—such as perfectionism, approval-seeking, and rigid self-evaluation—were found to be significant cognitive contributors to entrapment. Individuals endorsing these beliefs struggle to adapt to setbacks or unmet expectations, interpreting failure as evidence of personal inadequacy. Such cognitive rigidity limits flexibility and sustains the perception of being psychologically trapped, in line with schema-based models of maladaptive cognition.

Interpretations should be made cautiously. The present study employed a non-clinical, urban convenience sample and a cross-sectional design; thus, causal conclusions and clinical generalizations are not warranted. Future research using longitudinal designs and diverse populations could clarify the causal directions of these relationships. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the potential value of addressing narcissistic vulnerability, social disconnection, and rigid cognitive schemas in preventive interventions and psychoeducational contexts rather than prescriptive clinical applications.

The present study examined the extent to which narcissism, social isolation, and dysfunctional attitudes predict the subjective experience of entrapment. The findings revealed that all three variables significantly explained individual differences in perceived entrapment, underscoring the intertwined roles of personality traits, interpersonal disconnection, and maladaptive cognitive patterns in emotional distress.

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Among the predictors, narcissism emerged as the most influential factor, reflecting how self-evaluative vulnerability and dependence on external validation can heighten the sense of psychological confinement when expectations are unmet. Social isolation also played a critical role, suggesting that limited emotional support and social connectedness may exacerbate self-focused rumination and feelings of helplessness. Dysfunctional attitudes, characterized by perfectionism and approval-seeking, contributed to entrapment by reinforcing rigid self-standards and diminishing adaptive coping.

These results emphasize that the experience of entrapment is multifaceted, arising from the interaction of personality dynamics, interpersonal factors, and cognitive beliefs. Given the non-clinical and urban nature of the sample, conclusions should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the findings provide valuable insight into potential cognitive and relational mechanisms underlying emotional suffering, which may inform future prevention and psychoeducation efforts aimed at reducing feelings of entrapment in everyday populations.

This study used a cross-sectional design and convenience sampling, limiting generalizability and causal inference. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs, include diverse populations, and explore other mediating variables such as resilience and emotion regulation.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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