

## THE METHI CHURI PARADOX: MEDIATING ROLE OF COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL BETWEEN EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION AND COVERT NARCISSISM IN PAKISTANI MOTHERS-IN-LAWS

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### Abstract

Suppressing one's emotions is typical in a society like Pakistan in which families tend to prioritize group harmony. The present paper investigates the association between emotional suppression and covert narcissism in Pakistani mothers-in-law who have important family roles and also are emotionally suppressed. From a psychological and sociocultural standpoint, the study aims to understand how emotional suppression operates to overly sensitive, manipulative, and passive-aggressive covert narcissistic traits. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design, data were collected from 128 Pakistani mothers-in-law through the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ). Using Pearson's correlation, emotional suppression and covert narcissism were significantly positively correlated, which means, those who suppress their emotions tend to develop covert narcissistic traits. The correlation was looked into regarding the possible mediation. The findings suggested cognitive reappraisal did not have a significant mediating effect. Nonetheless, emotional suppression affected specifically the covert narcissism related to the cultural norms that govern emotional expression. These results point out the importance of addressing emotion regulation issues such as suppression and its mental health consequences in a culturally appropriate manner. Relational conflicts in the context of an authoritarian family may be alleviated by techniques of assertiveness and emotion-focused interventions. More mediators like social support and family discord need to be studied to further enhance the understanding of these relationships. This study examines an understudied relationship between emotion regulation, personality, and mental health in countries with collectivist cultures.

### INTRODUCTION

Pakistani society is characterized by emotional repression, where the collective way of thinking gives priority to the smooth functioning of a family over the need for an individual to freely express his/her emotions. Mothers-in-law, who are the basic building

blocks of families, usually suffer emotional neglect in their families. These women are expected to include the family members, and they are the ones who are the sole carriers of the load, which in exchange leads to them not informing anyone of the problems, and

therefore, the problems are never solved. Their sensitivity and yet too much of it to handle can raise extremely high emotions that easily lead them to get upset when criticized and become manipulative and passive-aggressive, particularly in their relationship with their daughters-in-law. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017; Weiss et al., 2021).

Indeed, the dominance of patriarchal circumstances further triggers these problems because the initiation of impaired emotional regulation is the cause of the conflicts in the relationship (Hansen, 2023; Macey, 2017). This text critically examines the issue from the psychological and cultural perspectives to uncover the painful emotions and the connection between them and the narcissists. The psychology and cultural background are the aspects of the problems that receive emphasis, and the paper thus approaches them from both the psychological and cultural transparency aspects (Gross, 2015; Ramzan & Amjad, 2017).

Research proves that cultural values are the major players, which determine the ways of emotion regulation. In collectivist societies, suppression of negative feelings is a widely used technique to keep social peace. However, it turns out that this strategy is related to the increase in mental health issues and it is a catalyst for the development of some dysfunctional personality traits, for example, covert narcissism (Weiss et al., 2021; Ramzan & Amjad, 2017). The investigation also reports that those folks who suppress emotions more tend to be more easily affected by the criticism and use such manipulative tactics, especially, within the family unit (Walker et al., 2021; Hansen, 2023). It is significant to note that in societies that are largely dominated by the patriarchal system such as Pakistan, the mothers-in-law bear the responsibility of supervising the interpersonal dynamics, in addition to following the norm of being emotionally detached. This intergenerational norm highlights the centrality of discussing the role of emotional restraint in the mental health of these women and their households (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2016; Macey, 2017).

The previous studies mention the connection between emotion regulation and personality traits, but they leave many gaps concerning the excessive pride and selfishness in the hidden forms in Asian society. The primary focus of past studies was

grandiose narcissism and or emotion regulation in an individualistic culture, whereas the subtle and culturally constructed traits of covert narcissism as well as the appearance in the hierarchy in the family were not taken into account (Walker et al., 2021; Hansen, 2023). This research is to fill those gaps by studying the role of emotional suppression in the collective of Pakistani mothers. The researchers have adopted the quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design, and 128 respondents were part of the sample to review the connections. The study has used the standard Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) to measure the tendencies of covert narcissism, and the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) to scale emotional suppression. The used instruments are trustworthy and appropriate for detecting these negative parts in them which are not disorder-related in the non-clinical population (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Gross & John, 2003).

This study has been written on the premise that emotional suppression in fact, is the most important predictor of covert narcissistic traits in Pakistani mothers-in-law. At first, researchers supposed that cognitive reappraisal would act as a mediator of this relationship and support the development of the types of emotional problems such as hypersensitivity, as well as passive-aggressiveness. Research shows how cultural values bring to life emotional regulation strategies. In collectivist societies, avoiding to express negative emotions contributes to the preservation of social harmony, but it might also be a factor that causes mental health issues, such as covert narcissistic traits. These findings are consistent with; people who stifle their emotions are more prone to being overly sensitive to criticisms and manipulative towards family members. (Blay et al., 2024; Ramzan & Amjad, 2017). The absence of the mediating role of the cognitive reappraisal means that other psychological disorders may be the ones that driving it, such as interpersonal stress or society's expectations (Han et al., 2020; Kampe et al., 2021).

The study underlines the significance of emotional expression in collectivist cultures without mediation. Suppression of emotions is connected with the greater regularity of emotional disarray and the presence of a covert narcissism disorder especially in the vertically arranged family setting in which the emotions are controlled and obedience is strongly

induced (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2016; Cheshure et al., 2019). The findings of the study revealed that suffocating the family tension by Pakistani mothers-in-law has a direct bearing on their pathological behaviors and that suffocation itself is in fact the problem that they have (Akyin & Mutlu, 2015). The conclusions are adding to a better understanding of the effect of personality skills and relational dynamics on the emotional well-being issues from a cultural perspective, implying the requirement for culturally sensitive interventions to decrease the emotional conflicts of the person and make him/her feel good (Arabi, 2022; Given-Wilson et al., 2011).

By its cross-sectional approach and focus on a culturally relevant sample, the study aims to create the discussion about emotion regulation and personality traits wider. Research pinpoints how the cultural specifics of societies encourage the display of one's true emotions and involvement in interpersonal relationships are closely related to narcissism and emotional aspects of suppression, and these are the connections we need to learn to work through, because this is an internal body affair. Among these mental health, family dynamics and cultural psychology are considered this study which underscores that culturally informed interventions not only make one emotionally strong but also promote healthy relationships (Gross, 2015; Ramzan & Amjad, 2017).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational mediation model to investigate the relationship between covert narcissism and emotional suppression in Pakistani mothers-in-law. A correlational approach was used to examine the relationship between the two constructs without imposing causation, focusing on getting knowledge about their relationship in a cultural context.

### **Participants**

A sample of 128 mothers-in-law, who lived in Pakistan, were participated in the study. Subjects were selected via purposive sampling, ensuring that all age groups were represented. Individuals of different age groups were part of the sample, which allowed the capturing of different perspectives on

how emotional regulation and narcissistic tendencies can affect the cultural framework. This expanded sample size enhances the generalizability of the findings and provides a more comprehensive analysis of the studied relationships.

### **Instruments**

Two objective assessment tools were completed to further the research variables. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was utilized to investigate covert narcissistic traits, such as hypersensitivity and a low-grade demand for admiration, which are generally manifested (Raskin & Terry, 1988). In addition, the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) was used to identify how skillful the participants were in regulating their emotions by minimizing them (Gross & John, 2003). The two tools were chosen as the result of their well-established validity and reliability in addition to their relevance to the study's specific goals.

### **Procedure**

For questionnaire administration, the volunteers were interviewed as well as the web-based Google Forms were used. Younger family members, who know the language better, were also identified as a helpline, side by side with the other participants in the case of a language barrier, for their native language, interpreting and making translation also a doublespeak simultaneously. The adopted strategy facilitated the clear use of language for the participants that resulted in better-quality answers. Besides, they also helped determine if there is a genuine program to protect the data published, and whether or not this program is confidential or not. During its implementation phase all ethical concerns were adhered to without fail which consisted of the following actions; the researchers made thorough attempts at telling the participants about the study so that all could easily make their decisions voluntarily, of course, with the possibility of them getting out at any moment, and the remaining data was processed secretly. The face-to-face participants had to be orally agree, while the consent section in Google Forms had filled out before the questionnaire could filled in. Information collected did not have any personal identifiers and hence were completely anonymous.

**Rationale for Method Selection**

A correlational design was selected to investigate the relationship between covert narcissism and emotional suppression without assuming causation. Given the participants' limited familiarity with technology and potential language challenges, in-person data collection was deemed necessary. Involving younger family members as mediators ensured accurate responses while maintaining participants' autonomy and comfort.

**Analysis**

Statistical analysis of the gathered information was conducted using SPSS software. The study information was summarized and the details of the demographic data were presented using descriptive statistics. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between covert narcissism and

emotional suppression. Mediation, analysis was performed to see whether cognitive reappraisal was involved in the relationship between emotional suppression and covert narcissism. However, the results indicated no significant mediation effect, which means that cognitive reappraisal does not affect the relationship between the two. Instead, the emotional suppression of covert narcissism is influenced obviously. As a result, the current study necessitates rethinking the theory and moving toward the finding of possible mediators that more accurately explain this connection.

**Results**

**Section I: Sample Description**

In this section the demographic characteristics of the sample population are analyzed and reported. Discrete variables such as, gender, education and family system were analyzed, and their frequencies and percentages were analyzed.

**Table 1**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 128)*

Variable's	f	%
Education		
With no formal education	25	19.5
with formal education	75	58.6
Employment status		
Non-working	87	68.0
Working	13	10.2

Note. n= Frequency, %= Percentage

measures the internal consistency of the items of the scales.

**Section II: Psychometric Properties**

The reliability of the scales was evaluated by using coefficient of reliability (Cronbach Alpha), which

**Table 1**

*Psychometric Properties of study variables (N=128)*

Scales	M	SD	Range	Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
Cover Narcissism	9.15	3.39	1 - 14	.88
Emotional Suppression	19.75	6.29	5 - 33	.78
Cognitive Reappraisal	19.18	7.09	5 - 34	.77

The table showed the internal consistency of the scales, used in the study, with the help of coefficient of reliability (Cronbach alpha). Results of the

analysis showed that alpha values for all the scales and subscales are highly reliable

**Section III: Testing Main Hypothesis**

The main hypothesis testing was done to check out the relationship between

Covert narcissism, emotional suppression and cognitive reappraisal in mother In laws.

**Table 1**

*Correlational analysis for study variables (N = 128)*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Education Level	.75	.435	-	.22*	-.07	.02	.08
Employment Status	.13	.338		-	-.03	-.02	.09
Emotional Suppression	19.75	6.29			-	.85**	.28**
Cognitive Reappraisal	19.18	7.09				-	.23*
Cover Narcissism	9.15	3.39					-

The results of the correlational analysis revealed several significant relationships between the variables under consideration. First, Education Level showed a small positive correlation with Emotional Suppression ( $r = 0.22, p < 0.05$ ), indicating that individuals with higher levels of education tend to report slightly higher levels of emotional suppression. In terms of Employment Status, no significant correlations were found with any of the other variables, suggesting that employment status does not play a strong role in influencing emotional suppression, cognitive reappraisal, or narcissism in this sample.

Emotional Suppression exhibited a strong positive correlation with Cognitive Reappraisal ( $r = 0.85, p < 0.01$ ),

suggesting that individuals who tend to suppress their emotions are also more likely to engage in cognitive reappraisal. Additionally, Emotional Suppression was moderately positively correlated with covert narcissism ( $r = 0.28, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that individuals with higher levels of emotional suppression may exhibit higher levels of narcissistic traits. Finally, Cognitive Reappraisal was weakly negatively correlated with covert narcissism ( $r = -0.23, p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that those who engage more in cognitive reappraisal tend to report slightly lower levels of narcissism. These findings highlight some interesting connections between emotional regulation strategies and narcissistic traits, although the strength of these relationships varies.

**Regression Analysis**

**Table 2**

*Mediation analysis for the mediating role of cognitive reappraisal between covert narcissism emotional suppression (N=128)*

Path	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (CI)
Path a (X → M) (Emotional suppression → Cognitive reappraisal)	0.96	0.06	15.94	0.00	[0.84, 1.08]
Path b (M → Y) (Cognitive reappraisal → Covert Narcissism)	-0.07	0.08	-0.85	0.40	[-0.23, 0.09]
Path c' (X → Y, direct effect) (Emotional suppression → covert narcissism,)	0.19	0.09	2.06	0.04	[0.01, 0.37]
Indirect Effect (a * b) (Emotional suppression → Cognitive reappraisal → covert narcissism)	-0.07	0.08	-	-	[-0.23, 0.09]

The relationship between Emotional Suppression and the mediator Cognitive Reappraisal is significant ( $B = 0.96, p < 0.01$ ). The relationship between

Cognitive Reappraisal and the dependent variable Covert Narcissism is not significant ( $B = -0.07, p = 0.40$ ), meaning cognitive reappraisal does not



significantly mediate the effect of emotional suppression on covert narcissism. The direct effect of Emotional Suppression on Covert Narcissism is significant ( $B = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ), indicating that emotional suppression has a direct impact on covert narcissism. The product of Path a and Path b (i.e., the mediation effect) is not significant ( $B = -0.07$ ,  $BootSE = 0.08$ ,  $BootLLCI = -0.23$ ,  $BootULCI = 0.09$ ), meaning cognitive reappraisal does not mediate the relationship between emotional suppression and covert narcissism.

### Discussion

The discoveries of this study uphold the idea that a high degree of emotional suppression is a big contributor to the development of hidden narcissism among women-in-law in Pakistan. The results displayed fair percentages of the participants showing the hidden narcissistic traits and it was correlated positively with the emotional suppression. This tends to align with the existing research that participants have this emotional suppression as the main causative factor (Gross, 2015). The findings emphasize that expression inhibition, which is a deeply rooted cultural norm, could potentially result in mental health issues and negative interpersonal processes (Ramzan & Amjad, 2017).

The research unveils the fact that suppression of emotional expressions as is the case in Pakistani culture can make one become a covert narcissist due to hypersensitive behavior, passive aggression, and often develop resentment (Blay et al., 2024). These discoveries are similar to findings from Given-Wilson et al. (2011) who pointed out that people who are trying to constantly repress their emotions are those who are more likely to develop hidden narcissism as an attempt to defend themselves and manage their emotions. The data also reveals that emotional suppression is a deeply ingrained practice among older women, particularly in hierarchical family structures where in-laws are expected to maintain control while appearing self-sacrificial (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2016).

Covert narcissism of the Pakistani mother-in-law is a psychological phenomenon that researchers have found to occur due to her emotional reticence which she adopted as a daughter-in-law. Psychologists also have negative personality disorders like narcissism

and other things resulting from long time emotional suppression as self-defensive behavior (Gross, 2014; Ramzan & Amjad, 2017). Social learning theory of (Bandura, 1977) also is related to this idea and argues that the offspring will tend to behave like their parents did in the past. The girls who once were deprived of the opportunity to express their emotions during their formative years might as well develop latent hostility through the mechanism" to keep the peace" (Given-Wilson et al., 2011). This concept is in harmony with studies having the investigation of the circular relation that links emotional dysregulation from one generation to another with later maladaptive interpersonal relationships (Han et al., 2020).

Rather than focusing on direct displays of power and respect in the traditional family unit, Pakistani cultural avenues are largely centered on the compliance affected by the emotional veiling, leading the mother-in-law to stealthy behavior. They might show passive-aggressive traits, hypersensitivity to criticism, and a high need for validation—key signs of covert narcissism, which eventually become typical traits of these mothers-in-law (Arabi, 2022; Khan et al., 2023). These results can be understood in connection with previous research revealing that emotion regulation would be closely related to the existence of narcissistic traits (Blay et al., 2024; Loeffler et al., 2020). It is, therefore, possible that the usual dynamic of women as daughters-in-law reveals that they are bound to emerge as narcissistic mothers-in-law, which in turn reiterates the existing family inequalities present in collectivistic (blended) households. Breaking these deeply rooted patterns implies the deployment of interventions that advocate for emotional expression among women in collectivistic societies to arrest the existence and the power imbalance of the intergenerational cycle (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2016; Weiss et al., 2021).

The results of this study are in agreement with Bhamani et al. (2022), who found that the expectation of self-restraint and emotional composure among women in collectivist societies leads to long-term psychological distress. Furthermore, Heiphetz & Oishi (2021) argue that collectivist cultures reinforce emotional suppression as a means of preserving social harmony, despite its association with adverse mental health outcomes.

The study's results further indicate that this pattern of emotional suppression and covert narcissism may serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with the lack of autonomy and unfulfilled personal needs in such family structures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Additionally, the study scrutinized cognitive reappraisal function as a principal mediator between emotional suppression and covert narcissism. Noteworthy, the data show that cognitive reappraisal is not an essential mediator of this relationship, which means that individuals, who undergo continuous emotional suppression, do not use cognitive reappraisal as a compensatory strategy. This is inline with the conclusions reached by Loeffler et al. (2020), who suggested that covert narcissistic behavior is caused by unsuccessful attempts of emotional regulation and thus they resort to manipulative or passive-aggressive ways. Besides, Ponzoni et al. (2021) depicted the fact that people with covert narcissism were more likely to avoid cognitive restructuring which consequently will concentrate their emotional suppression harmfully.

A critical cultural factor, which considered is the influence of patriarchal family structures in making older women severely suppress their emotions. In general Pakistani families, the mothers-in-law are supposed to play the role of the authority and at the same time they must keep silent about their personal issues to ensure the family unity (Arabi, 2022). This makes them vulnerable to high levels of emotional frustration, which could result in covert narcissistic tendencies like jealousy, victimhood, and passive-aggression (Gould, 2024). However, Khan et al. (2023) reveal that when people are socially pressured to suppress emotions, they could also make use of silent hostility or indirect control as the major compensatory behaviors for sustaining harmony in the family. These findings also explore the idea that hidden malignancy in a person might reflect the outcome of the established norm of the culture about gender roles and emotional expression that may not be possible to avoid.

In addition to, such study outcomes seem to be of utmost importance to the mental health practitioners who are involved in the field of collectivistic culture. A striking relationship between emotional suppression and covert narcissism necessitates an emphasis on interventions that help cultivate

healthier emotional regulation strategies (Macey, 2017). Psychological treatments like assertiveness training, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and emotion-focused therapy are very likely to be appropriate options for patients to handle cultural norms and not go through their emotions (Gross, 2014). Other than this, the assertion of Bhamani and collaborators (2022) stands as a testament to the pertinence of culturally sensitive, family-based programs that facilitate an open dialogue about issues pertaining to emotional suppression.

Another principal relevance of this very analysis is that of viewing oppression against women of a specific culture from the lens of cultural stories that unconsciously support emotional containment. In what regards the Rees and Garcia (2017) document, it should be pointed out that though emotions are crucial for mental health, all discussions related to this are a taboo in a lot of cultures, particularly conservative ones. Accordingly, community programs for the sensitization of families to the virtues of emotional expression and good relationships, if expended to engage more citizens, will hold a higher degree of the chance to succeed in the aim of preventing the continuation of emotional suppression. Training on emotional intelligence in family situations might as well be an ideal way of intervening in both the cases by developing empathic behaviors and reducing the frequency of hidden narcissistic personality disorders (Ramzan & Amjad, 2017).

However, the study is not perfect, and it has its limitations. One of the main weak points is that the questionnaire data of the study is the only source, which are sometimes self-reported, and these types of measurements are inevitably subject to social desirability bias, mainly in the societies where personal emotions are not open to discussion (Han et al., 2020). The quantification of the future work should take into account the use of techniques of a qualitative nature, for example, in-depth interviews, the aim of which is to gain a better picture of how mothers-in-law might cope emotionally within their familial roles (Ponzoni et al., 2021). Moreover, besides, enlarging the sample and involving women from various socio-economic backgrounds might also provide more insight into children's independence and the child-parent relationship as cultural

expectations change and personality development occurs (Weiss et al., 2021).

Moreover, the study has not considered other potential mediating factors such as the perception of social support and familial conflict, which ever be the culprits that trigger the growth of concealed narcissistic behavior. Forthcoming research should delve into these issues rather than staying on the surface to find better ways to explain the mechanisms of the relationship between covert narcissism and the study variable (Khan et al., 2023). Finally, studies that examine cross-cultural differences might be another method useful in shedding light on if comparably as in emotional suppression, so is the case in collectivist societies, whether covert narcissism is to be found (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2016).

In conclusion, the findings of this study are great additions to the existing literature of emotion regulation and personality development topics as it displays a significant connection between emotional sublimation and covert narcissism among mothers-in-law in Pakistan. The results are synonymous with the culturally adaptive justifications, which aim to lay the groundwork for change after defining and challenging the social norms. According to this research, the special attention of various technologies in connection with the learning of the art of emotion regulation by people of various cultural backgrounds is the key point. Procedures that contain the components of the social skills training, assertiveness training, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and emotional intelligence training could be used as a tool to improve the positive aspects of the process. It can ultimately help to deal with the issue of the mental distressing caused by covert narcissistic traits, and therefore improve the psychological well-being of the individuals and the relationships within the family (Bhamani et al., 2022; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Future studies should deal with the analysis of other mechanisms of mediation like social aid and domestic disputes for their being the point of reference for these behaviors.

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