

Relationship between attachment to parent and peer and psychological distance: the mediating effect of spiritual identity

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Abstract

Introduction: Spiritual identity, defined as self-identification based on spirituality and spiritual experiences, has gained increasing attention during the past few years. The aim of this study was to assess several predictors and outcomes of spiritual identity based on a causal model.

Methods: For this purpose, parent and peer attachment were considered as exogenous variables, spiritual identity was considered as a mediating variable, and psychological distance was considered as an endogenous variable. The statistical population of this study consisted of all bachelor students of the Shiraz University, Shiraz, southern Iran, during the 2012-2013 academic year. Thus, 398 students consisting of 255 women and 143 men were selected using the stratified cluster sampling method. The data collection tools consisted of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, the Social Dominance Orientation questionnaire, the Circle of Moral Regard questionnaire and the Spiritual Identity questionnaire. The reliability and validity of the instruments were measured using Cronbach's alpha and factor analysis, respectively.

Results: Results of factor analysis showed the two main factors of metaphysical and moral beliefs for spiritual identity questionnaire. Overall, results yield a desirable reliability and validity for scales. For analyzing the research model, Amos software was used. We found that moral beliefs had a mediating role with respect to the relationship between peer attachment and psychological distance, while parent attachment was not a direct or indirect predictor of psychological distance.

Conclusion: Conclusively, close relationships and attachment to peers reduces psychological distance through the mediating role of moral beliefs.

Keywords: Spiritual Identity, Psychological Distance, Circle of Moral Regard, Social Dominance Orientation

Introduction

The spiritual dimension of identity has recently gained increasing attention among researchers [1]. Theoreticians such as *James* [2], *Allport* [3], *Jung* [4], and *Maslow* [5] had previously acknowledged the relationship between the constructs of spirituality and identity. However, considering the phenomenological nature of spirituality and the difficulties in its measurement, the scientific study of spiritual identity as a unified construct began about 30 years ago [1].

In this regard, previous studies aiming to conceptualize spiritual identity can be differentiated based on their definition of identity and spirituality. In one classification, MacDonald [1] divided the existing approaches regarding spiritual identity based on the presented concept of identity to conventional (psychosocial) and transpersonal approaches. In the conventional psychosocial approach, identity is defined as ego with predefined and limited boundaries, and accordingly, spiritual identity is defined as the way individuals integrate spirituality and spiritual experiences into their ego self [6]

Wink and Dillon [7], *Kiesling* [8], *Poll and Smith* [9], and *MacDonald* [1] are among the researchers who have assessed spiritual identity based on the conventional approach. On the other hand, in transpersonal approaches, identity is not restricted to the ego and its function, rather it is basically spiritual in essence and spirituality and identity are considered similarly. In this approach, spiritual identity does not simply mean that the content of identity is made with spirituality. Actually, the structures as well as the processes through which identity is created are spiritual. This approach which is mostly seen in philosophical and ecstatic literature is also evident in the "self-expansiveness" model proposed by *Friedman* [10] and the "self-transcendence" model proposed by *Cloninger et al.* [11]

Moreover, in another classification, existing approaches about spiritual identity can be divided to personal and contextual approaches based on the emphasis they put on context or person in forming and creating spirituality. In the personal approach, spirituality is defined on the basis of a completely personal level and spiritual experiences are mostly defined as the individual's experiences in relation to a higher power and the role of the outside world and other individuals in forming identity is ignored. On the other hand, in the contextual approach, spiritual growth is the product of the interactional effect of inner (inner experiences or connection to an unlimited source) and outer (daily activities and relationships) processes [12].

Considering the above mentioned approaches towards spiritual identity, in this study, the conventional psychosocial approach has been adopted in which spirituality is considered on a contextual basis. According to this approach, spiritual identity consists of defining and identifying the self-based on spirituality and spiritual experiences that include the connection to a higher power as well as experiences related to others. Hence, what is meant by spiritual identity in this study is defining self-based relations with others and a higher power.

As mentioned previously, spiritual identity is a newly introduced construct in psychology with little experimental research background due to the difficulties in measurement and novelty. Although the constructs of spirituality and identity have been separately studied, their combination as a single construct has not been widely studied. We aimed to present a causal model on the construct of spiritual identity in order to gain a deeper and more objective insight on the construct considering its function and outcomes as well as determining its predictors.

With respect to the outcomes and functions of spiritual identity, it should be mentioned that spiritual identity plays an essential role in regulating moral and social behavior. In his definition of the concept of "self-consistency", *Blasi* [13] stated that when individuals form their identity based on an internal psychological content such as values and goals, they tend to be more consistent with their identity content. Therefore, when people form their identity based on a sublime and transcendent concept such as connecting with a metaphysical being or

moral values, it is expected that they act and behave according to such values. Previous studies on the relationship between moral identity and moral actions are also confirmative [14, 15, 16, 17]. Therefore, in this study, psychological distance, as an index of social-behavioral commitment [17] has been considered as the outcome of spiritual identity.

Psychological distance depicts the way we direct individuals in our psychological space. In fact, we do not treat people as external or objective beings, rather the type of behavior we have towards others is influenced by how we perceive them in our psychological space (near or distant) [18]. Hence, psychological distance is comprised of two dimensions namely circle of moral regards and social dominance orientation. The circle of moral regard shows the perception of others in the psychological space as close and depicts the domain in which people and groups are defined so that the individual tends to pay moral attention to and acknowledge their welfare and prosperity [16]. In contrast, the social dominance orientation represents the perception of others as distant in the psychological space and depicts the individual's belief in and tendency towards the inequality and dominance of a person or group over others [19]. When we perceive people as close within our psychological space, we would probably treat them more morally than when they are perceived as distant [17].

Apart from the spiritual aspects of identity, emotional relationship in the family is another important predictor for determining attitudes and interactions with others [20, 21]. Therefore, in this study and in line with previous research [22], emotional relationships and attachment to significant others was considered as the predictor for psychological distance. On the other hand, researchers have stated that family [23] and attachment to significant others affects attaining an integrated identity through providing a secure base for the discovery and exploration of the environment [24]. Although many studies have been done on the relationship between attachment and identity status [25, 26], identity styles [27, 28] and identity content [29, 30] to the best of our knowledge, no study has assessed the relationship between attachment and spiritual identity. Therefore, we have considered parent and peer attachment as predictors of spiritual identity.

Attachment, as the inherent tendency to have a deep emotional connection to specific people, is formed based on the person's initial experiences with attachment figures. According to these experiences, the method of peoples' interactions and their expectations of those interactions are formed. Such representations of self and others are gradually internalized as mental representations called the "internal working model" [31]. Representations of self and others are complementary and develop through mutual interactions. However, each one can act independently as well. Therefore, an individual can have a positive schema of others but a negative schema of oneself and vice versa [32]. Moreover, *Bowlby* [31] considered the internal working model as a factor that connects primary attachment to later attachment and relationships. Therefore, the theory of attachment extends

beyond infancy and childhood and is used as a theoretical framework for studying the relationship with others in adulthood [33, 34]. It has been assumed that in later life, adults react to attachment figures similar to how they reacted to their primary attachment figures. Moreover, people create new attachment bonds with others as long as they have similar functions to those of their primary attachment style (security and emotional support) [35]. Peer relations are among the relationships and emotional bonds that are important for adolescents and adults. As people enter adulthood and gain independence, they turn towards peers and creating supportive and emotional relationships with them becomes highly important [36]. Therefore, adults become attached to their peers while maintaining their attachment to parents.

As mentioned, the main aim of this study was to present a causal model in which spiritual identity is a mediator variable in relation to attachment with significant others and psychological distance. In other words, in this model parent and peer attachment are exogenous variables, spiritual identity is a process or mediating variable, and psychological distance is the endogenous variable.

Methods

This study is a correlational one. The statistical population of this study consisted of all the bachelor students of the Shiraz University, Shiraz, southern Iran, during the 2012-2013 academic year. Thus, based on *Krejcie* and *Morgan's* formula, 398 students consisting of 255 women and 143 men were selected using the stratified cluster sampling method. Initially 5 faculties were chosen of which four majors were randomly selected. Among each major, one class was randomly selected and all students in that class were evaluated.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA): This questionnaire was devised by *Armesden & Greenberg* [33] and consists of 24 items scored on a 5-point scale (completely disagree to completely agree). The creators of this inventory have reported a desirable validity and reliability for this instrument. In this study, we used factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha for determining its validity and reliability, respectively. The obtained Cronbach's alpha for parent and peer attachment were 0.86 and 0.82, respectively.

The results of the factor analysis using the main components method with a varimax rotation showed the two main factors of parent and peer attachment. The criterion for factor extraction was the scree plot slope and an Eigen value of more than 1. The KMO coefficient was 0.84 and the Bartlett sphericity index was 3060.001 ($P < 0.0001$), indicating the adequacy of sampling and the items' correlation matrix. It should be noted that items 4, 21, 23, and 24 were omitted due to weak factor loads.

Spiritual identity scale: Due to the lack of a scale that could specifically measure spiritual identity, we developed the spiritual identity scale through rigorous studies on identity and spirituality. After evaluating the presented definitions on spirituality, despite various mentioned definitions, spirituality was considered as the connection

and bond with a supernatural or transcendental being and others in our study. Then, by adapting several existing instruments in this regard [37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42], the items related to spirituality were designed and in order to formulate items in the form of spiritual identity, *Cheek* et al.'s [43] model in designing the Aspect of Identity Questionnaire was used. A five-point scale was used for each item ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Then, extracted items were judged by several experts and ultimately 34 items were selected based on their opinions.

The validity and reliability of this scale has been previously assessed by *Rahpeima, Rostami* and *Jowkar* [44]. The obtained Cronbach's alpha for metaphysical beliefs, moral beliefs and the total spiritual identity score was 0.96, 0.86, and 0.95, respectively. The validity of this questionnaire was assessed using exploratory factor analysis on half of the data and confirmatory factor analysis on the other half. The obtained results in both stages confirmed the existence of two factors (metaphysical and moral beliefs).

In the present study, for determining the reliability and validity, Cronbach's alpha and factor analysis were used respectively. The obtained Cronbach's alpha for metaphysical beliefs, moral beliefs and the total spiritual identity score was 0.95, 0.87, and 0.96, respectively. The results of the factor analysis using the main components confirmed the existence of the two factors. The criteria for factor extraction were the slope of the scree plot and Eigen value more than 1. The KMO coefficient was 0.95 and the Bartlett sphericity index was 9658.428 ($P < 0.0001$), indicating the adequacy of sampling and the items' correlation matrix. It should be noted that items 17, 18, 19, 24, and 30 were omitted due to item interference and inappropriate content.

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO): This questionnaire was devised by *Sidanius* and *Pratto* [45] and consists of 16 items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. The mentioned researchers stated a reliability of 0.83 for this scale and based on their claims, this scale has good construct validity. In this study, factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha were used for evaluating its validity and reliability, respectively. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 was obtained for SDO. Factor analysis with a varimax rotation revealed two factors of tendency to dominate and tendency towards inequality in the items. The criterion for factor extraction was the scree plot slope and an Eigen value of more than 1. The KMO coefficient was 0.85 and Bartlett sphericity index was 2095.473 ($P < 0.0001$), indicating the adequacy of sampling and the items' correlation matrix. It should be noted that item 5 was omitted due to weak factor loads. Since the inventors of this scale had considered the total score of this scale due to the high correlation between the two dimensions of tendency to dominate and tendency towards inequality, we also considered a total score for SDO.

Circle of Moral Regard (CMR): This scale was devised by *Reed* and *Aquino* [16] and consists of 4 questions aimed to measure the extent to which people obliged to be moral towards four different groups: people from other countries, foreigners, people from other religious groups, and people

from other ethnic groups. The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (absolutely no obligation) to 5 (very obligation). The reliability coefficient of this scale has been reported to be 0.88. In this study, we also obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 for the scale.

Results

The study findings are presented in two sections. In the first section, the descriptive data of the assessed variables have been presented and the second section focuses on path analysis results. Table 1 shows the descriptive indices of the studied variables.

The correlation coefficients of the studied variables are presented in table 2.

As shown in table 2, the correlation coefficients of the model's dependent variables (social dominance orientation and circle of moral regard) were significantly related to most of the other variables, thus allowing further analyses.

In order to evaluate the model, the Amos software was used. Direct, indirect and total effects of the variables are illustrated in table 3.

As shown in table 3, the direct effect of parent and peer attachment on social dominance orientation and circle of moral regard were not significant. Results also showed that parent attachment positively and significantly predicted metaphysical beliefs ($\beta=0.13, P<0.009$) and peer attachment significantly predicted moral beliefs ($\beta=0.20, P<0.0001$).

Table 1. Descriptive indices of the study variables

Variable		Total		Girls		Boys	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Attachment	Parent attachment	19.08	7.14	19.48	7.10	18.37	7.19
	Peer Attachment	24.39	5.78	24.76	5.97	23.71	5.39
Spiritual Identity	Metaphysical Beliefs	66.74	15.83	68.98	14.56	62.74	17.22
	Moral Beliefs	41.73	6.79	41.49	7.21	42.16	5.95
	Total Score	108.47	20.21	110.47	19.82	104.90	20.48
Psychological Distance	Social Dominance Orientation	38.72	9.54	37.42	8.90	41.05	10.22
	Circle of Moral Regard	13.93	3.31	13.78	3.23	14.18	3.45

Table 2. The correlation matrix of the study variables

Variable		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Attachment	1-Parent attachment	1						
	2-Peer attachment	**0.22	1					
Spiritual Identity	3-Metaphysical beliefs	**0.15	*0.11	1				
	4-Moral beliefs	**0.13	**0.21	**0.51	1			
	5-Total score	**0.16	**0.16	**0.95	**0.74	1		
Psychological Distance	6-Social dominance orientation	-0.06	-0.02	-**0.16	-**0.2	-**0.20	1	
	7-Circle of moral regard	*0.11	*0.10	**0.18	**0.33	**0.26	-**0.20	1

**p < 0.01

* p < 0.05

Table 3. Direct, indirect and total effects of the variables

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
From parent attachment to			
Metaphysical beliefs	.13**	----	----
Moral beliefs	.08	----	----
Social dominance orientation	-.03	-.02	-.06
Circle of moral regard	.06	.02	.09
From peer attachment to			
Metaphysical beliefs	.08	----	----
Moral beliefs	.20***	----	----
Social dominance orientation	.03	.06**	-.007
Circle of moral regard	.01	-.04***	.07
From metaphysical beliefs to			
Social dominance orientation	-.07	----	----
Circle of moral regard	.01	----	----
From moral beliefs to			
Social dominance orientation	-.17**	----	----
Circle of moral regard	.31***	----	----

**p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

But, metaphysical beliefs, parent and peer attachment could not significantly predict social dominance orientation and circle of moral regard. Moreover, among the dimensions of spiritual identity, only moral beliefs could significantly predict circle of moral regard ($\beta = 0.31$, $P < 0.02$) and social dominance orientation ($\beta = -0.17$, $P < 0.009$). Figure 1 illustrates the model assessed in this study.

To assess the mediator role, we used the Bootstrap command in the Amos software. Table 4 shows the standard indirect effects of the variables as well as the mediating share of the mediator variables (metaphysical and moral beliefs) in each of the model's paths.

Model fit indices (GFI = 0.99, AGFI = 0.86 & CFI = 0.97) show that the presented model has a good fit.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to present a causal model for spiritual identity as well as to assess its mediating effect

on the relationship between parent/peer attachment and psychological distance.

We found that parent attachment could not directly or indirectly predict factors related to psychological distance. Moreover, peer attachment was able to indirectly reduce psychological distance by affecting moral beliefs. In fact, peer attachment reduced social dominance orientation and increased circle of moral regard by positively affecting moral beliefs. This shows that in the Iranian culture, emotional bonds with and attachment to peers plays a more important role in forming individuals' opinions towards others and morality compared with parent attachment. This issue is evident in the relationship between peer attachment and moral beliefs as well as its indirect relationship with dimensions of psychological distance. However, we did not observe such a relationship with respect to parent attachment. In explanation of this finding, based on Bowlby's internal working model [31] of self and others could be stated that parent and peer attachment has dual functions in Iranian culture.

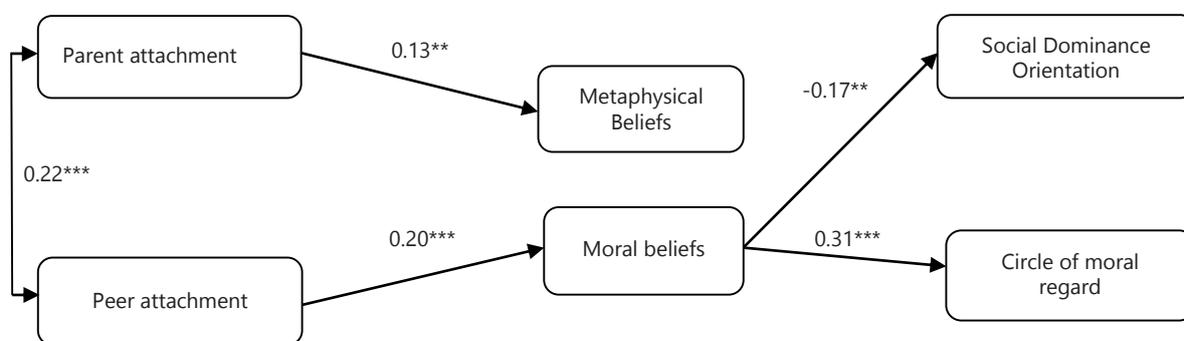


Figure 1. The study model

**p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

Table 4. Standard indirect effects of the variables

Path			Indirect effect	
			Ind	Sig
Metaphysical beliefs				
Parent attachment		Social dominance orientation	-.025	.14
Moral beliefs				
Parent attachment		Circle of moral regard	.029	.16
Metaphysical beliefs				
Peer attachment		Social dominance orientation	-.041	.01
Moral beliefs				
Peer attachment		Circle of moral regard	.063	.008
Metaphysical beliefs				
Parent attachment		Social dominance orientation	-.010	.151
Parent attachment		Social dominance orientation	-.015	.085
Parent attachment		Circle of moral regard	.002	.635
Parent attachment		Circle of moral regard	.027	.177
Peer attachment		Social dominance orientation	-.007	.272
Peer attachment		Social dominance orientation	.034-	.009
Peer attachment		Circle of moral regard	.001	.578
Peer attachment		Circle of moral regard	.062	.010

Emotional relationships and attachment to peers creates a positive internal working model and mental representations of others. Therefore, others are individually perceived as trustworthy, valuable, and eligible to receive aid and attention. In such a context, individuals become sensitive towards others' needs and provide necessary support for their welfare and prosperity. Moreover, being in peer groups and creating and maintaining emotional bonds with peers paves the way for communicating with a larger society. In such relationships, individuals become sensitive towards each other's' needs and opinions and experience sympathy, altruism, affection, and attention towards others. In this way the people's attention and focus extends beyond themselves to include others and their needs. Peer attachment enhances and highlights moral beliefs in an individual's identity. As *Blasi* [13] states in his "self-consistence" concept, the importance and centrality of these principles in people's identity is motivating and people are encouraged to consistently act with their identity content. When individuals form their identity based on moral values, they tend to implement and integrate those values in their actions and behavior. Therefore, such individuals not only have a lower tendency towards inequality, dominance, and group preferences, but also perceive all people and groups worthy of receiving attention and social welfare. Moral beliefs reduce people's psychological distance by reducing social dominance orientations and increasing the circle of moral regard. This finding is consistent with *Hardy and colleagues'* study [17] on the relationship between moral identity and psychological distance.

As mentioned, despite our expectations, parent attachment was not a predictor of moral beliefs and psychological distance. This finding is not consistent with previous studies such as *Mikulincer and Shaver* [46] and *Mikulincer et al.* [47, 48]. Although peer attachment formed positive internal working models of others, it seems that in the studied population, parent attachment does not facilitate positive mental representation of others. This could be due to the type of attachment and emotional bonds parents have with their children. Considering the excess attention parents give their children, parent attachment and their emotional relationship with their children had only led to positive mental representations of self instead leading to positive mental representations of others which in turn could lead to narcissism and selfishness. Moreover, it seems that the type of relationship parents have with their children are what *Beavers & Hampson* [49] mention for centripetal families in which close relationships are directed only towards family members and not others. For this reason, this type of closeness and emotional relationship parents have with children does not affect their moral beliefs and psychological distance.

We found that parent and peer attachments were predictors of metaphysical and moral beliefs, respectively. This finding confirms the dual function of parent and peer attachment in the studied population. This finding could be justified by relations with others at the same or higher

levels. Peer attachment is actually considered to be the relations with others at the same level and therefore it was able to predict moral beliefs that reflect our beliefs about same level others. However, parent attachment is regarded as a powerful and decisive relationship. Therefore, the relationship between parent attachment and metaphysical beliefs that depict the belief of a higher more powerful force seems logical. Moreover, with respect to parent attachment and metaphysical beliefs, we can refer to the concept of "attachment to god" which was initially presented by *Kirkpatrick* [50]. He stated that primary attachment to parents could be a basis for later attachment to god. He also believed that over time parent attachment continues in the form of other systems such as attachment to god with the same behavioral characteristics as parent attachment. In fact, connection to god or a metaphysical power has similar functions as parent attachment in which people are in search of maintaining their closeness and affection with attachment figures that are perceived as a secure base and become anxious when separated [51]. Hence, metaphysical connections become important for people to the extent that they define themselves accordingly.

We found that peer attachment could not predict metaphysical beliefs. Such a finding is not far from expectation since it has been suggested that an individual's relationship with a metaphysical being such as god is more related to parent attachment than attachment to other figures and emotional experiences that are often stated in relation to god are qualitatively different from the other emotional adult relationships. The experience of the love of god is exactly similar to mother-child attachment [52]. Therefore, the image of god is rooted in mental representations of primary caregivers and images of parents [53]. In Jewish-Christian faith, the person's image of god is consistent with parents such as the father who is considered as a lover, supporter, and guardian [54, 55, 56].

One of the other unexpected findings of this study was the lack of any significant relationship between metaphysical beliefs and psychological distance. This shows that connection with a metaphysical being and defining oneself accordingly is static and superficial and does not enter the realms of moral attitudes and beliefs. In other words, connections with a metaphysical being like god did not have a self-regulatory role on the individual on the basis of which he/she could regulate his/her attitudes. It seems that people perceived this relationship separate from other areas and their self-function. At the end, it should be noted that this study was a correlational one and causal inferences should be made with caution.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this study has specific theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, considering the novelty of the construct of spiritual identity and the presented model, this study could help develop and expand this construct. Practically, our study conveys an important message for educators as well as parents with

respect to their ineffective emotional relationships and attachments with their children since such relationships did not lead to moral beliefs. This matter revealed the importance of revision in the emotional relationship of parents with their children.

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