



**Research Paper: Examining the Mediating Role of Emotional Self-Awareness in the Relationship between Moral Identity and Self-Defeating Behavior and Cognition**



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**Abstract**

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the mediating role of emotional self-awareness in the relationship between moral identity and self-defeating behavior and cognition. This research was descriptive-correlation based on structural equation modeling. 200 female students of the first secondary school in the villages of Roudbane city in the academic year 2022-2023 were selected using convenience sampling method and the research tools included the moral identity questionnaire (MIQ), self-defeating behaviors & cognitions scale (SDBCS) and self-awareness outcomes questionnaire (SAOQ). Data analysis was done using Pearson correlation and structural equations with the help of SPSS-26 and AMOS-24 software. The obtained findings showed that moral identity and emotional self-awareness have a direct effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition ( $p > 0.001$ ). Also, moral identity had an indirect effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition with the mediating role of emotional self-awareness ( $p > 0.001$ ). According to the results of the present research, more attention should be paid to the role of moral identity and emotional self-awareness in reducing students' self-defeating behaviors and cognitions.

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## 1. Introduction

Among the important topics in the evaluation of psychological and educational problems of people in educational environments is academic self-defeating behavior. Academic self-defeating behaviors are a type of behavior that people do intentionally and by their own will, the results of which are usually failure and destruction in the academic field. The reason for people's tendency towards these behaviors is usually receiving reinforcement for themselves and extreme attention to the positive results that such behaviors bring to the individual (Baumiester, 1997). Different types of academic self-defeating behaviors have been identified to date, including procrastination, self-handicapping, intensifying commitment, invalid and inaccurate self-evaluations, inability to delay reinforcement sources or rewards, and delaying decision-making (Cunningham, 2007).

People with self-defeating behaviors usually try to solve any responsibility on their part with various behaviors such as making excuses due to their worry and fear of failure (Usman et al., 2023). Such behaviors have been seen in more than half of the students. Self-defeating behaviors are often a means to deal with or cope with stressful and frustrating academic conditions. Based on the anxiety-avoidance evaluation model, when dealing with a situation, people first evaluate it, if they do not have enough resources to effectively deal with it, they react with anxiety and try to escape from the situation or show behaviors let their anxiety decrease (Koscheka, 2021).

Students with self-defeating behaviors often doubt their abilities to do things. Researchers believe that self-defeating behaviors as a set of negative characteristics have a negative impact on student performance. They state that examples of common self-defeating behavioral characteristics include poor time management, lack of motivation, and a tendency to settle for average performance (Curtis, 2013).

One of the variables that can be effective in the emergence of academic self-defeating behaviors is adherence to ethics and specifically moral identity, which has been shown to have a negative relationship with self-defeating behaviors in previous researches (Shadjoo et al., 2022). Moral identity has been defined as thinking about self-knowledge and perception, which is focused on a number of moral traits such as kindness, justice and generosity (Patrik et al., 2018).

Moral identity, which involves moral behavior in different situations, evolves over time and during developmental stages. Although the development of the early stages of moral behavior is subject to external and social factors, at older ages it seems that the control of a person's behavior is increasingly dependent on internalized standards of behavior, which leads to self-restraint in the absence of external skills. The centrality of one's moral tendencies to self-perception (i.e., moral identity) best predicts commitment to ethical behavior. A person's moral identity includes his commitment to belonging to moral goals. Moral identity defines two things: the action that is

considered right and moral by the person and why the person decides that “I should do this action”. For example, many people believe that ignoring the suffering of human hunger is unethical, but only a few people come to the conclusion that they should do something to solve this problem (Wang et al., 2017).

People with moral identity behave in accordance with their personal and social values and are not willing to engage in selfish behaviors such as procrastination. When a person fails, he tries to remove responsibility from himself through self-defeating behaviors with excuses and vague handshakes. In other words, students who have rooted honesty as a special behavior deep in their soul, do not delay their work and assignments without any logical reason, and are always orderly and honest in their words and actions (Wu and He, 2022).

Another important factor in avoiding self-defeating behaviors is emotional self-awareness. The first step in controlling emotions such as anger, sadness, and anger is to become aware of that state. In order to be aware of one's feelings, it is necessary to

know emotions when facing unpleasant situations, to know thoughts and beliefs, to know how to interpret events and to be aware of one's desires and expectations (Mahdian and Sheikholeslami, 2022).

Emotional self-awareness improves the ability to control and deal with unfavorable life conditions in a person. The ability to cope with life's obstacles and find a solution for them provides health and well-being conditions for people. When students enter school, if they cannot use these psychological resources in the right way, they may engage in academic maladaptive behaviors such as dishonesty (Mohammadi et al., 2021).

According to the stated content and considering the importance of the role of moral identity and emotional self-awareness in reducing the occurrence of self-defeating behaviors, the present study seeks to investigate the mediating role of emotional self-awareness in the relationship between moral identity and self-defeating behavior and cognition. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the research.

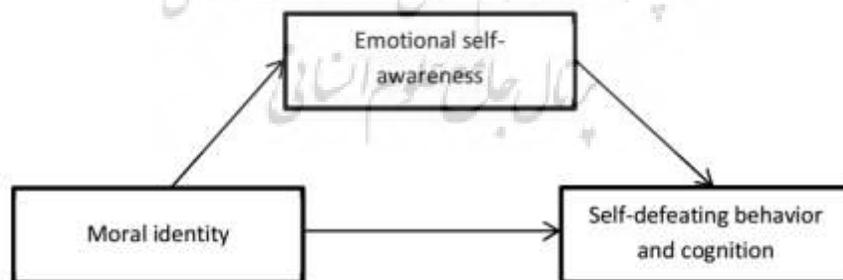


Figure 1. Relational model of the mediating role of emotional self-awareness in the relationship between emotional self-awareness and self-defeating behavior and cognition.

## 2. Method

The present research was carried out by descriptive-correlation and structural equation modeling method. The statistical population of this research includes first secondary school girls in the villages of Roudbane city in the academic year 2022-2023. Although there is no general agreement about the required sample size for factor analysis and structural models, according to many researchers, the minimum required sample size is 200 (Musil et al., 1998). Therefore, in this research, a minimum sample size of 200 people was considered, who were selected by convenience sampling method.

### 2.1. Instruments

**Moral Identity Questionnaire (MIQ):** This 20-item questionnaire was designed and developed by Black & Reynolds (2016) and has two dimensions: moral self with 8 items (1 to 8) and moral integrity with 12 items (9 to 20), and the participants answer the items on a 6-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to completely agree (6). therefore the minimum score is 20 and the maximum score is 120. A higher score indicates a stronger moral identity. The scoring of all the items of the moral self dimension is direct and the scoring of all the items of the moral integrity dimension is reversed. Black and Reynolds (2016) created the moral identity questionnaire with two sample groups of 561 and 324 people and during two stages. Using the results obtained from the first study, they reported favorable convergent validity and divergent validity of the questionnaire. The obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.84 for the

dimension of moral self, 0.87 for the dimension of moral integrity, and 0.90 for the whole scale. In the second study, Black and Reynolds (2016) obtained a test-retest reliability of 0.87, which indicated the strong stability of the scale. In the research of Abbasi-Asl et al. (2020), the validity and reliability of this questionnaire in the Iranian society has been investigated. The results of their research have confirmed the two-factor structure of this questionnaire. However, in their research, the number of questionnaire items was reduced to 15 items and questions 1, 11, 17, 18 and 20 were removed in the final analysis. In their research, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the dimensions of moral self and moral integrity were equal to 0.82 and 0.80, and for the total score of the scale was 0.85.

**Self-Defeating Behaviors & Cognitions Scale (SDBCS):** Self-defeating behavior and cognition scale was designed by Cunningham (2007). This scale has 21 items and is designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale to evaluate 6 types of self-defeating behavior: procrastination (items 1-3), self-handicapping (items 4-6), increased commitment (items 7-10), irrational evaluation (items 11-14), impulsive behavior (inability to delay reward) (items 15-18), delay and inability to make decisions (items 19-21). A higher score indicates a higher level of self-defeating behavior and cognition. Cunningham (2007) reported the Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire as 0.87. Convergent validity with self-handicapping questionnaire is reported to be 0.54. In the research of Hadadranjbar (2018), Cronbach's alpha was obtained in the three stages of pre-

test, post-test and follow-up, respectively 0.84 and 0.92. In the study of [Rashidi \(2021\)](#), Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.71. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.85.

**Self-Awareness Outcomes Questionnaire (SAOQ):** This questionnaire has 33 items and was created by [Grant et al. \(2002\)](#). Its subscales include recognition (with 6 items from 1 to 6), identification (with 5 items from 7 to 11), conversion (with 7 items from 12 to 18), environmentalism (with 10 items from 19 to 28) and problem solving (with 5 items from 29 to 33) were measured with a five-point Likert scale (from never to very much).

A higher score indicates higher emotional self-awareness. In [Mohanna & Talepasand \(2016\)](#), the validity of the emotional self-awareness scale based on Cronbach's alpha was 0.79. In his research, [Sutton \(2016\)](#) examined the construct validity of this scale and showed that 4 factors of self-reflection, insight, rumination, and mindfulness explain 44.4% of the data variance.

### 3. Results

The frequency and percentage of students' age are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1  
*Demographic data of the subjects*

Variable	Level	Number	Percentage
Age (year)	12	120	60
	13	35	17.5
	14	45	22.5
Total		200	100

Most of the studied students were in the age range of 12 years (60 percent), and the least of them were in the age range of 13 years (17.5 percent). [Table 2](#) shows the

descriptive information (mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis) related to the research variables.

Table 2  
*Descriptive indices of research variables*

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	skewness	kurtosis
Moral identity	89.93	23.19	-1.05	0.71
Self-defeating behavior and cognition	55.95	13.42	-0.65	0.11
Emotional self-awareness	61.65	11.09	-0.54	0.12

As can be seen, the mean and standard deviation of moral identity variable are 89.93 and 23.19, self-defeating behavior and cognition is 55.35 and 13.42, and emotional self-awareness is 61.65 and 11.09

respectively. [Table 3](#) shows the information related to Pearson's correlation between moral identity, self-defeating behavior and cognition, and emotional self-awareness.

Table 3  
Correlation matrix of research variables

Variable	1	2	3
Moral identity	1		
Self-defeating behavior and cognition	-0.68**	1	
Emotional self-awareness	0.45**	-0.43**	1

P < 0.001

According to the results of the correlation matrix, there is a negative and significant relationship between moral identity and emotional self-awareness with self-defeating

behavior and cognition. Also, a positive and significant relationship is observed between moral identity and emotional self-awareness. Path coefficients are presented in Figure 2.

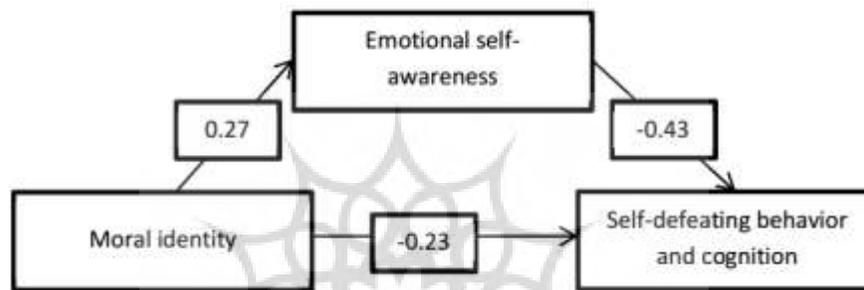


Figure 2. Path coefficients of the relational model of the mediating role of emotional self-awareness in the relationship between moral identity and self-defeating behavior and cognition.

In Table 4, can see the standard coefficients of all paths and critical values in the proposed model.

Table 4  
Standard coefficients of the paths of the proposed model

Path	Standard coefficients	Standard error	Critical ratio	P
Moral identity → Self-defeating behavior and cognition	-0.23	0.41	9.41	0.00
Emotional self-awareness → Self-defeating behavior and cognition	-0.43	0.32	3.21	0.00

The results of the direct relationships of research variables in the proposed model show that in the entire sample, all path coefficients were statistically significant. In the proposed model of the current research, there is an indirect or intermediate path. The bootstrap method was used to determine the

significance of the mediating relationship and the indirect effect of the exogenous variable on the endogenous variable through mediators. The bootstrap results for the intermediate paths of the proposed model of the current research can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Bootstrap results for the indirect path of the proposed model*

Path	Data	Boot	Bias	Error	Lower limit	upper limit	p
Moral identity to Self-defeating behavior and cognition through emotional self-awareness	0.24	0.17	0.00	0.03	0.24	0.23	0.00

Based on the results listed in [Table 4](#), the coefficient of the path of moral identity and self-defeating behavior and cognition has a negative and significant effect ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $\beta = -0.23$ ). Therefore, moral identity has a direct effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition. Also, the path coefficient of emotional self-awareness and self-defeating behavior and cognition has a negative and significant effect ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $\beta = -0.430$ ). Therefore, emotional self-awareness has a direct effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition. As can be seen in [Table 5](#), the lower limit of the confidence interval for emotional self-awareness as a mediating variable between moral identity is 0.24 and its upper limit is 0.23. The confidence level for this confidence interval is 95% and the bootstrap resampling number is 5000. Considering that zero is outside this confidence interval and is statistically significant. Therefore, moral identity has an indirect effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition through emotional self-awareness.

#### 4. Discussion

This research was conducted with the aim of investigating the mediating role of emotional self-awareness in the relationship between moral identity and self-defeating behavior and cognition. The findings showed that

moral identity and emotional self-awareness have a direct effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition. Also, moral identity had an indirect effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition with the mediating role of emotional self-awareness. This finding is in line with domestic and foreign research conducted in this field ([Shadjoo et al., 2022](#); [Zeng et al., 2020](#); [Kaur et al., 2019](#); [Gotowiec, 2019](#); [Wowra, 2007](#)).

[Shadjoo et al. \(2022\)](#) showed in their research that there is a negative and significant relationship between moral identity and self-defeating behaviors. In their research on 790 university students, [Zeng et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that moral identity is related to perfectionism (as one of the forms of self-defeating behaviors) and after controlling for gender, age and daily use of the Internet, moral identity is partially mediated the link between perfectionism and online social behavior. [Kaur et al. \(2019\)](#) in their research on 33 adolescents with a history of suicide (as one form of self-defeating behavior) showed that moral identity was a significant predictor of suicide prevention and peer support. It was also observed that moral identity can help people to participate in social and voluntary actions. In his research, [Gotowiec \(2019\)](#) investigated individual differences in moral self-

regulation and perceived differences in moral-political values as predictors of helpful and harmful behavior. The findings showed that the perceived differences in moral values predicted the increase of harmful behaviors and the decrease of helping behavior. Perceived differences in moral values interacted with moral identity to strengthen the relationship between moral disengagement and harmful behaviors. [Wowra \(2007\)](#) also investigated the relationship between students' academic cheating and their moral identity and sensitivity to social evaluation. 70 university students completed a series of surveys. The findings showed that compared to the students who gave less importance to their moral identity, the students who gave more importance to their moral identity remembered fewer cases of cheating. Also, the findings show that when students emphasize more on their moral identity and they are less sensitive to social evaluation, they cheat less on their education.

In explaining these findings, it should be said that adherence to moral principles and moral identity is one of the obstacles to the emergence of self-defeating and self-harming behaviors. In fact, a person who is committed to a series of moral dos and don'ts, when tempted or committing behaviors that can harm him, restrains himself and does not engage in such behaviors through self-control. On the other hand, conscience is a special type of self-regulation that indicates the centrality of ethics in human experience ([Mikulincer et al., 2012](#)). Therefore, moral dos and don'ts cause guilt and shame in people when they commit harmful behaviors

and these emotions as moral emotions prevent a person from doing such behaviors.

Another way is that negative emotions cause negative and distorted thoughts ([Zibrínová et al., 2014](#)). A person may turn to catastrophizing, personalizing, or seeing things in black and white, and as a result, these distorted and negative thoughts lead to self-defeating behaviors. For example, an anxious student who catastrophizes failing an exam may turn to self-handicapping behaviors as one of the self-defeating behaviors and not prepare himself for the exam.

In explaining the mediating role of emotional self-awareness in the relationship between moral identity and self-defeating behavior and cognition, it can be said that one of the possibilities that moral identity affects self-defeating behaviors and cognitions through emotional self-awareness is the experience of moral or self-conscious emotions such as shame and guilt. . When people go beyond their mental do's and don'ts, experiencing these emotions helps them to think about what they have done and the harm they have done to themselves and others. Therefore, prevent harm or correct and compensate for selfish behavior. Another path that is possible is that a person with a moral identity, by overcoming moral challenges and adopting a moral principle, can probably manage and regulate his emotions, especially negative emotions, better and has a higher emotional self-awareness. Therefore, these people will be less likely to engage in self-defeating behaviors to avoid experiencing intense negative emotions.

The limitations of this research included the lack of similar domestic and foreign researches in the field of the research subject, the use of self-report tools, the use of convenience sampling method, and the use of correlation design, which does not show the causal relationship between the research variables. Therefore, it is suggested that other research projects such as experiments be used to understand the causal relationship between variables. Also, considering the direct effect of moral identity on self-defeating behaviors and cognitions, it is suggested to pay attention to the issue of moral education and strengthening the moral principles and beliefs of students. In addition, due to the indirect effect of moral identity on self-defeating behaviors and cognitions through emotional self-awareness, it is suggested that more attention be paid to the process of acquiring moral identity and educating and informing students in this field, so that by strengthening moral identity prepare the context for more correct management of negative emotions and as a result reducing self-defeating behaviors.

## 5. Conclusion

In this research, it was observed that moral identity and emotional self-awareness had a direct effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition, and moral identity had an indirect effect on self-defeating behavior and cognition through emotional self-awareness. Therefore, it can be concluded that by cultivating moral standards and consolidating moral identity, as well as training and giving awareness in the field of emotional self-awareness skills, can be reduced the

occurrence of self-defeating behaviors and cognitions.

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## Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any organization. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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