



An Analysis of Hypersensitive (Covert) Narcissism as a Predictor of Internalised Guilt and Shame in Indian University Students.

Sampada Pathak

Date of Submission: 26-05-2024

Date of Acceptance: 07-06-2024

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between covert narcissism and internalized guilt and shame among Indian university students ($N = 171$). The findings revealed a complex interplay between these constructs. Higher levels of covert narcissism were associated with decreased overall guilt and a reduced tendency to engage in guilt-repair behaviors. However, no significant association was found between covert narcissism and overall shame. Cultural factors, such as collectivism and the emphasis on social harmony in India, may offer protection against feelings of shame, even for individuals with high levels of covert narcissism. The discussion integrates these findings with existing literature on narcissism, guilt, and shame. The study concludes by highlighting the need for further research, including longitudinal designs, exploration of cultural variables, and the use of shame subscales to gain a more nuanced understanding of emotional experiences in individuals with covert narcissism. This research has implications for developing culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions that promote emotional well-being and healthy coping mechanisms.

Keywords: covert narcissism, internalized guilt, internalized shame, Indian university students

I. INTRODUCTION

Narcissism, originating from the Greek tale of Narcissus, involves an intricate interaction between one's self-image, interpersonal relationships, and emotional control. Narcissism is characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a strong desire for praise, and a lack of empathy. It can manifest in different ways, ranging from overt displays of grandiosity to more subtle covert behaviors. Both scholars and doctors extensively explore this complex concept to understand its mechanics and its impact on well-being and social functioning. Overt narcissists embody the archetypal representation of narcissism, marked by incessant self-promotion and arrogant conduct. They actively

pursue continuous adoration, frequently amplifying their accomplishments and monopolizing talks to establish their dominance. Although they appear confident on the surface, they possess delicate self-esteem, responding defensively to criticism and facing difficulties in interpersonal connections because of their lack of empathy.

Covert narcissism refers to the act of concealing one's vulnerability behind a facade. Conversely, covert narcissists function in a secretive manner, concealing their fragility behind a reserved and timid outward appearance. They have a strong desire for validation, yet when they feel inadequate, they tend to display passive-aggressive behavior or engage in manipulation. When they are looking for emotional support, they find it difficult to deal with feelings of entitlement and being overly sensitive to criticism, which makes their relationships more complicated.

Shame and guilt, while frequently confused, evoke separate emotional reactions. Guilt is centered around particular actions, driving the need to make reparations, but shame targets the fundamental sense of one's own value, impeding the process of redemption. It is essential to acknowledge this distinction to comprehend human behavior and its consequences. Covert narcissism refers to a form of narcissism when individuals possess an inflated sense of self-importance but hide it behind a facade of humility. Internalized shame and guilt, on the other hand, refer to the process of internalizing feelings of shame and guilt, often stemming from societal or cultural expectations. Covert narcissism and internalized shame and guilt are closely connected, creating a recurring pattern of negative emotions. Their excessive sensitivity to criticism and deep-seated dread of not measuring up combine to a tendency to experience shame, which is seen in feelings of jealousy, harbouring resentments, and withdrawing from social interactions. Understanding this interaction is crucial for creating successful therapies. Examining the Dichotomy of Individualism and Collectivism in the Indian



Context

India's distinctive combination of individualism and collectivism creates a complex socio-cultural environment. Indian society is deeply rooted in collectivism, which places a strong emphasis on duty and connection. However, the process of economic liberalization has led to the rise of individualistic desires. Understanding this interaction is crucial for tackling social issues and promoting economic vitality.

In India, the concepts of collectivism, narcissism, shame, and guilt intertwine in intricate ways. Collectivistic principles often inhibit narcissism, but communal narcissism arises when there is a strong emphasis on the glory and success of the group. Shame and guilt are influenced by society conventions and familial duties, and they impact emotional reactions. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is essential for effectively navigating the intricate socio-cultural complexity of India.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The research study offers an in-depth comprehension of the intricate correlation between covert narcissism and several psychological characteristics, including shame, guilt, anxiety, attachment, self-esteem, and emotional responses to rejection. In their study, Malkin, Barry, and Zeigler-Hill (2011) explore the correlation between covert narcissism and internalizing symptoms in teenagers. They discover surprising connections between covert narcissism and heightened feelings of shame after receiving favorable feedback. Besser and Priel (2008) further explore this concept by investigating emotional responses to romantic rejection, emphasizing the influence of attachment anxiety and covert narcissism. Brookes (2015) examines the influence of explicit and hidden narcissism on one's self-esteem and self-efficacy, uncovering intricate connections between various types of narcissism and self-perception. Hill and Lapsley (2011) take a developmental approach, connecting teenage narcissism with the processes of separating from and forming one's own identity, as well as impulses towards generating ideas. The 2022 edition of the Korean Journal of Health Psychology examines how self-focused attention and experience avoidance mediate the connection between covert narcissism and social anxiety. among their study, Jalali, Borjali, and Hosseinsabet (2015) investigate the connections between self-esteem, shame, and overt and covert narcissism among Iranian college students. The study focuses

on identifying both the similarities and differences between genders. Mathur et al. (2021) investigate the correlation between hidden narcissism and the tendency to feel shame and guilt, with a focus on gender disparities and particular aspects of shame. Montebanocci et al. (2004) examine the connections between narcissistic characteristics and susceptibility to shame and guilt, uncovering unfavorable relationships that align with earlier studies. In their study, Giammarco and Vernon (2015) examine the connections between the Dark Triad qualities and interpersonal guilt, revealing specific links to various aspects of guilt and rumination. In their study, Gramzow and Tangney (1992) investigate the correlation between the tendency to feel shame and narcissistic personality traits. They uncover intricate connections between pathological and harmless components of narcissism, emphasizing the significance of differentiating between sentiments of shame and guilt. These studies provide a detailed explanation of covert narcissism and its psychological associations, revealing both the beneficial and detrimental features of narcissistic personality traits.

III. METHODOLOGY

Aim:

The aim is to conduct a comparative analysis of how hypersensitive (covert) narcissism predicts internalized shame and guilt in Indian university students, with a particular focus on the cultural context of Indian academia.

Objectives:

- To investigate the prevalence and characteristics of covert narcissism among Indian university students.
- To explore whether hypersensitive narcissism predicts the experience of internalised shame and guilt.
- To understand how individuals with covert narcissistic traits react emotionally when facing negative feedback or challenges to their ego.

Hypothesis:

- Indian university students with high levels of hypersensitive narcissism will report lower levels of internalised shame and guilt compared to those with low levels of narcissism after facing criticism.
- There is a significant relationship between the level of hypersensitive narcissism and the level



of internalised shame experienced by Indian university students after facing criticism.

- There is a significant linear relationship between the level of hypersensitive narcissism and the level of internalised shame experienced by Indian university students after facing criticism.

Procedure:

The target demographic for this study comprised university students currently enrolled in accredited institutions across India. Participants had to be Indian citizens and identify as male, female, or queer. The final sample size of 171 participants exceeded this target, providing sufficient statistical power to detect even relatively weak effects in the hypothesised relationships. The researcher created an online version of the questionnaire for wider accessibility and offered paper-based versions for student convenience.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection. All participants provided informed consent by completing a consent form at the

beginning of the questionnaire. The consent form clearly explained the study's purpose, participant rights, and confidentiality measures. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous, and they could use initials or pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Tools:

The study employed the Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale (MCNS) to quantify covert narcissism, where scores between 23 and 115 indicate different levels. Additionally, the Guilt and Shame Proneness (GASP) Scale was used to evaluate internalized guilt and shame proneness. The GASP Scale consists of four subscales, providing a comprehensive assessment of individual inclinations towards guilt and shame.

1. ANALYSIS OF RESULT

Descriptive statistics were computed for the study variables: Maladaptive covert narcissism, Overall guilt, and Overall shame. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of study variables

	N	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Maladaptive Covert Narcissism	171	78.16	19.52
Overall Guilt Proneness	171	40.21	8.48
Overall Shame Proneness	171	35.26	7.75

Note. Correlation is Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The mean score for Maladaptive covert narcissism was 78.16 (SD = 19.52), indicating a relatively high level of narcissistic tendencies among the participants. For Overall guilt, the mean score was 40.21 (SD = 8.48), suggesting a

moderate level of guilt experienced by the participants. Similarly, for Overall shame, the mean score was 35.26 (SD = 7.75), indicating a moderate level of shame reported by the participants.

Table 2
T-Test between Low (1) and High (2) Maladaptive Covert Narcissism across Study Variables

Variables	Group	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Result
MCNS	Low	64.13	10.70	20.72	.00	S
	High	97.45	10.14			
Overall Guilt	Low	43.26	7.81	6.09	.00	S



	High	36.02	7.56			
Overall Shame	Low	35.46	8.05	.40	.68	NS
	High	34.98	7.36			

Note. NS = Not significant, S = Significant.

Table 2 depicts the results of the t-test comparing low (1) and high (2) levels of Maladaptive Covert Narcissism across Overall guilt and Overall shame. The analysis demonstrates a significant difference in both Maladaptive covert narcissism and Overall guilt between the two sample groups. Specifically, the mean score of high Maladaptive covert narcissism (M = 97.45) was significantly greater than that of low Maladaptive covert narcissism (M = 64.13), indicating higher levels of covert narcissism in the high group.

Conversely, the mean score of low Overall guilt (M = 43.26) was significantly greater than that of high Overall guilt (M = 36.02), suggesting lower guilt levels in the high Maladaptive covert narcissism group.

However, there was no significant difference in Overall shame between low and high levels of Maladaptive covert narcissism, as indicated by the nonsignificant t-value (t = .40, p = .68). This suggests that levels of covert narcissism did not significantly impact

Table 3

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient between Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale and Guilt-Shame Dimensions among Indian University Students.

	MCNS	Guilt_NBE	Guilt-Repair	Overall Guilt	Shame-NSE	Shame Withdrawal	Overall Shame
MCNS	-						
Guilt NBE	.04	-					
Guilt Repair	-.45**	.25**	-				
Overall Guilt	-.30**	.72**	.85**	-			
Shame - NSE	-.07	.62**	.25**	.51**	-		
Shame Withdrawal	.11	.24**	.43**	.44**	.15	-	
Overall Shame	.04	.54**	.46**	.62**	.69**	.82**	-

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 presents Pearson's correlation coefficients between Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale (MCNS), Overall guilt, Guilt NBE (Negative Behaviour Evaluations), Guilt-repair, Overall shame, Shame-NSE (Negative Self Evaluation), and Shame withdrawn among Indian university students. The correlation between MCNS and Overall guilt was significant and negative (r = -.30, p < .01), indicating that as levels of covert narcissism increase, overall feelings of guilt decrease. The correlation between MCNS and Guilt NBE was not significant and negative (r =

.04, p > .05). However, there was a significant and negative correlation between MCNS and Guilt-repair (r = -.45, p < .01), suggesting that higher levels of covert narcissism are associated with lower tendencies to repair feelings of guilt.

Shame-related variables showed various relationships with narcissism and guilt. MCNS was not significantly correlated with Overall shame (r = .04, p > .05). Additionally, MCNS was not significantly correlated with Shame-NSE (r = -.07, p > .05) or Shame withdrawn (r = .11, p > .05). However, Shame-NSE was positively correlated



with Overall guilt ($r = .51, p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of negative self evaluation shame are associated with increased feelings of guilt. Similarly, Shame withdrawn was positively correlated with Overall guilt ($r = .44, p < .01$), suggesting that withdrawing shame is associated with higher levels of guilt. Furthermore, there were significant positive correlations between Guilt NBE

and Overall shame ($r = .54, p < .01$), Guilt-repair and Overall shame ($r = .46, p < .01$), and Overall shame and Overall guilt ($r = .62, p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of guilt, particularly those related to externalization and guilt repair, are associated with increased feelings of shame among Indian university students.

Table 4
Linear Regression Analysis with Maladaptive Covert Narcissism (MCNS) as Predictor of Guilt and Shame Proneness.

	Predictor	B	S.E.	β	T	R	R2	Adj. R2	α	F
Guilt NBE	MCNS	.01	.01	.04	.55	.04	.00	-.00	20.47	.30
Guilt Repair	MCNS	-.14	.02	-.45**	6.69**	.45	.21	.20	30.06	44.84**
Overall Guilt	MCNS	-.13	.03	-.30**	4.15**	.30	.09	.08	50.54	17.22**
Shame NSE	MCNS	-.01	.01	-.07	.96	.07	.00	.00	22.06	.93
Shame Withdrawal	MCNS	.03	.02	.11	1.49	.11	.01	.00	11.94	2.24
Overall Shame	MCNS	.01	.03	.04	.52	.04	.00	-.00	34.00	.27

Note. Significance at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$)

Table 4 displays the outcomes of the linear regression analysis investigating the predictive relationship between Maladaptive Covert Narcissism (MCNS) and various shame and guilt variables among Indian university students.

MCNS significantly predicted Guilt-repair ($\beta = -.45, p < .01$) and Overall guilt ($\beta = -.30, p < .01$), explaining approximately 21% and 9% of the negative variance, respectively. These results suggest that higher levels of MCNS are associated with decreased tendencies to repair feelings of guilt and lower overall guilt levels among Indian university students.

However, MCNS did not significantly impact Guilt NBE, Overall shame, shame-NSE, and Shame withdrawal. This indicates that while MCNS plays a role in predicting specific aspects of guilt, such as guilt-repair and overall guilt levels, it may not influence other shame-related variables, such as externalization, overall shame, negative self evaluation shame, and shame withdrawal among Indian university students.

IV. DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter thoroughly examines the complex connections between hidden narcissism, internalized shame, and guilt among Indian university students, taking into account the distinct cultural environment of Indian academia. The study's objectives, hypotheses, and statistical analyses offer a thorough framework for comprehending these processes. The study's findings indicate an intricate interaction between hidden narcissism, shame, and guilt. The study revealed that covert narcissism is linked to reduced feelings of guilt and a decreased inclination to participate in acts aimed at healing guilt. This is consistent with previous research, such as the studies conducted by Reardon et al. (2006), which indicate that persons with high levels of covert narcissism prioritize the preservation of a positive self-image and the avoidance of taking responsibility for their actions. Individuals may utilize tactics such as denial or reasoning to evade accepting accountability, which could result in a diminished feeling of guilt. In persons with covert



narcissism, there is a persistent desire for external validation. This desire leads them to prioritize maintaining a positive public image, which in turn reduces the internal impulse to participate in guilt-repairing actions (Mitra & Fluyau, 2023). Nevertheless, the influence of covert narcissism on the susceptibility to shame was determined to be less substantial. Shame is a negative self-evaluation that occurs when someone feels they have failed or have faults. However, those with high levels of covert narcissism may not necessarily feel more prone to experiencing shame. This discovery is moderately unexpected and justifies additional examination. The study proposes that cultural elements, such as collectivism and social harmony in Indian society (Hofstede, 1980), may help protect against feelings of guilt. Even students with high levels of covert narcissism may prioritize preserving their social status within the group, which can help alleviate feelings of shame that may otherwise result in social isolation. The study's discussion is enhanced by including previous literature, which contributes to a comprehensive comprehension of the connections between covert narcissism, shame, and guilt among Indian university students. The discussion situates the findings within the wider theoretical framework of narcissism and its psychological ramifications by citing studies conducted by Reardon et al. (2006), Miller (2009), and Mitra & Fluyau (2023). Thus, the study provides valuable insights into the emotional experiences of Indian university students. However, it also emphasizes the necessity for additional research to thoroughly investigate these relationships, especially regarding the impact of cultural factors on shame experiences among individuals with high levels of covert narcissism.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the correlation between Maladaptive Covert Narcissism (MCNS) and the propensity for guilt and shame among university students in India. The findings suggest that increased levels of MCNS are linked to decreased overall guilt and diminished willingness to engage in guilt repair. Nevertheless, there is no notable correlation observed between MCNS and the general feeling of guilt. This implies that the relationship between the two can be complex and could be influenced by cultural factors that prioritize social cohesion. Potential areas for future research encompass the use of longitudinal study designs, integration of cultural variables, and employment of shame subscales to gain a more

comprehensive understanding of emotional experiences in persons exhibiting covert narcissism. By addressing these issues, we can develop therapies that promote emotional well-being and appropriate coping skills in many cultural situations.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Besser, A., & Priel, B. (2009). Emotional responses to a romantic partner's imaginary rejection: The roles of attachment anxiety, covert narcissism, and self-evaluation. *Journal of personality*, 77(1), 287-325.
- [2]. Besser, A., & Priel, B. (2009). Emotional responses to a romantic partner's imaginary rejection: The roles of attachment anxiety, covert narcissism, and self-evaluation. *Journal of personality*, 77(1), 287-325.
- [3]. Gramzow, R., & Tangney, J. P. (1992). Proneness to shame and the narcissistic personality. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18(3), 369-376.
- [4]. Hill, P. L., & Lapsley, D. K. (2011). Adaptive and maladaptive narcissism in adolescent development. In C. T. Barry, P. K. Kerig, K. K. Stellwagen, & T. D. Barry (Eds.), *Narcissism and Machiavellianism in youth: Implications for the development of adaptive and maladaptive behavior* (pp. 89–105). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/12352-005>
- [5]. Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values* (Vol. 5). Sage.
- [6]. JALALI, A. P., Borjali, A., & Hosseinsabet, F. (2015). Overt and covert narcissism in Iranian students: the role of self-esteem and shame. *PCP* 2015; 3 (2) :79-88.
- [7]. Malkin, M. L., Barry, C. T., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2011). Covert narcissism as a predictor of internalizing symptoms after performance feedback in adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(5), 623-628.
- [8]. Mathur, M., Khandelwal, P., Jain, S., & Jain, V. (2021). Guilt and shame proneness in relations to covert narcissism among emerging adults. *Indian Journal of Psychological Science* Vol, 14(2).
- [9]. Miller, R. S. (2009). *Narcissistic personality disorder: The fragile self*. Guilford Publications.
- [10]. Montebanocci, O., Surcinelli, P., Baldaro, B., Trombini, E., & Rossi, N. (2004). Narcissism versus proneness to shame and



- guilt. *Psychological reports*, 94(3), 883-887.
DOI:10.2466/pr0.94.3.883-887
- [11]. Reardon, K. W., Herzhoff, K., Smack, A. J., & Tackett, J. L. (2020). Relational aggression and narcissistic traits: How youth personality pathology informs aggressive behavior. *Journal of personality disorders*, 34(Supplement B), 46-63.
- [12]. Reardon, K. W., Herzhoff, K., Smack, A. J., & Tackett, J. L. (2020). Relational aggression and narcissistic traits: How youth personality pathology informs aggressive behavior. *Journal of personality disorders*, 34(Supplement B), 46-63