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Guilt and Shame Proneness in Relations to Covert Narcissism among Emerging Adults

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Abstract

It was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between Covert Narcissism and Shame and Guilt Proneness. Also, Guilt and Shame proneness would predict Covert Narcissism. This study comprised 180 emerging adults, in the age group of 18 to 23 years. The measure of the study included the Maladaptive Covert Narcissism and Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale. The study also investigated gender differences in covert narcissism. The results of the study indicated that there was a positive correlation between covert narcissism and the two dimensions of shame proneness namely negative self-evaluation and shame withdrawal. Additionally, no significant relationship was found between guilt-proneness and covert narcissism. The results further revealed that Shame Withdrawal, a single variable regression test was used. The findings suggested that Shame Withdrawal contribute 9% variance in Covert Narcissism which is statistical significance and negative self-evaluation also significantly predicted covert narcissism accounting. Furthermore, the average score of men on covert narcissism was significantly more than that of females which means males have significantly higher tendencies to develop covert narcissism.

Introduction:

Narcissism is the conviction that one is fundamentally superior to and commendable of more than others; a belief that, practically, relies on others for validation. (Krizan & Herlache, 2017). Narcissism is a personality disorder characterised by a focus on and covet for self-enhancing interactions in social settings in order to fulfil a need or desire for respect and acceptance, as well as a lack of affinity for others (Pincus & Roche, 2011). Narcissism can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including unstable behaviour and interpersonal relationships (Lukowitsky & Pincus, 2013). The most severe type of unstable narcissism, in which people display narcissistic behaviours through several domains is Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The essential feature of NPD is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts. Narcissistic traits may be particularly common in adolescents and do not necessarily indicate that the individual will go on to have a narcissistic personality disorder.

Overt narcissism (i.e., Grandiosity-Exhibitionism) and covert narcissism (i.e., Vulnerability-Sensitivity) are the two types of dysfunctional characteristics or maladaptive forms of narcissism (Wink, 1991). The existing information on narcissistic personality disorder focuses on various aspects of grandiose narcissism but very little has been explored on covert narcissism although both kinds share similar features such as conceit, disinterest in others, impulsiveness, risk-taking, and self-indulgence.

Some of the dissimilarities between both the forms of narcissism are as follows:

Grandiose/Overt Narcissism	Vulnerable/Covert Narcissism
Pincus and Roche (2011) described grandiose narcissism as "deeply felt desires for recognition and appreciation "increased sensitivity to ego-giving rise to urgent reasons to seek out self-enhancement experiences".	Pincus and Roche (2011) described a socially avoidant style of self-regulation as "increased sensitivity to threat and subsequent self-emotion-, and behavioural-dysregulation.
They are confident, outgoing, and charming, but are also vain,	They are socially inhibited, insecure, defensive, and

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manipulative, and aggressive (Wink, 1991).	vindictive (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Wink, 1991).
They have an inflated sense of self, viewing themselves as superior to others (Krizan & Bushman, 2011), overestimating their intelligence and cognitive ability and preferring the company of powerful and popular people (Campbell & Foster, 2002).	They experience heightened negative emotional reactivity, including envy, shame, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Besser & Priel, 2010; Wink, 1991).
They are people who grant themselves both status and self-love.	They are the ones who grant themselves status but not love.
They display substantial and consistent correlations with extraversion (Wink, 1991).	They are consistently associated with introversion (Wink, 1991).

Vulnerable/covert narcissism is defined by social psychology as “a defensive and insecure grandiosity that obscures feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and negative affect” (Miller *et al.*, 2012). Over the years, this second subtype of narcissism has gone by many names, including covert, closet, shy, or vulnerable narcissism. Vulnerable narcissists are unclear about their internal experiences, such as their self-evaluations, attitudes, and beliefs leading them to extensively rely on feedback from others (Kealy & Rasmussen, 2012). The paradox of vulnerable narcissism is this: They believe “I deserve more!” because of their sense of entitlement, yet they are sceptical. Their lofty ambitions aren't matched by a belief in their own power. Because of this avoidance incentive, susceptible narcissists presented modestly and avoid numerous situations where their self-beliefs might be challenged (Foster & Trimm, 2008). As a result of skill limitations in attaining the outcomes they believe they deserve, as well as the discrepancy between internal emotions of entitlement and external modesty and shyness, identifying a susceptible narcissist can be challenging (Miller *et al.*, 2011; Wink, 1991). Even though identifying a vulnerable narcissist and the problems he is feeling may be difficult for an outsider, the psychological stress vulnerable narcissists face is real. hypersensitive, apprehensive, timid, and insecure; yet, close interaction reveals their grandiose fantasies, which contradict those initial perceptions (Wink, 1991). Grandiose imagination, self-sacrificing self-improvement, contingent self-esteem, and uniqueness are all signs of intrapersonal covert narcissism. Devaluing others, entitled fury, and hiding the ego are all signs of interpersonal covert narcissism. Interpersonally impaired narcissism is the phenotype of covert narcissism. These individuals have low self-esteem (Rose, 2002), high shame (Cain *et al.*, 2008), and internalising symptoms (Krizan & Johar, 2012). Shame also intermediates the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and a more negative model of others (Schie *et al.*, 2021). A positive correlation was

reported between covert narcissism and shame (Ghim *et al.*, 2015). Participants with NPD had a higher level of shame than non-clinical controls, according to the literature. They also identified a link between covert narcissism and shame (Ritter, 2014).

Shame is another emergent consequence of the innate human desire to be perceived as attractive (Gilbert, 1997) Internalized Shame as ‘shame bound personality’ or ‘shame-based identity’ (Kaufman, 1989). High-shame individuals have been categorized in three ways: i) more shame-prone than others in regularly shame-eliciting situations; ii) frequently or constantly experiencing generalized or global shame, also known as internalized shame, or; iii) particularly ashamed of some aspect of their behaviour or personal qualities (Andrews, 1998). Shame-prone people feel angrier, are more likely to interpret the actions of others negatively, and express anger in more destructive ways than primarily guilty people. Shame-proneness was found to be substantially linked to psychological maladjustment. Gramzow & Tanqney (1992) revealed that proneness to shame was negatively correlated with narcissism, a positive association between shame and narcissism emerged when maladaptive factors were isolated and shame proneness was also positively correlated with splitting, a pathological narcissistic defence. Toxic shame is a feeling that you're worthless. It happens when other people treat you poorly and you turn that treatment into a belief about yourself. Schurman (2000) found that people suffering from social anxiety and social phobia exhibit both high levels of shame and behaviour characteristic of the hypersensitive type of narcissism and there is a positive relationship between social phobia and shame. Shame is an emotion that is understudied because it is so clearly absorbed by guilt in our society (Levin, 1967). Shame is an emotion that is understudied because it is so clearly absorbed by guilt in our society (Levin, 1967). There are a variety of causes for shame's neglect, but Sigmund Freud's emphasis on guilt in his structural theory (<https://blogs.uoregon.edu/autismhistoryproject/archive/sigmund-freud-on-narcissism-1914>) had a key impact. Piers & Singer (1953) were the first to establish a clear concept of shame within the psychoanalytic approach. According to Adler (1918) shame has both an isolating and an interfacing effect, emphasizing its immense importance in human civilization. Shame is a byproduct of human connectedness, and as such, it is impossible to exclude it from the human soul's life. Without this effect, human society would be unthinkable. Another factor that the present study investigates is guilt-proneness. Guilt is a cognitive or an emotional experience that occurs when an individual comprehends or believes that one has comprised one's own standards of conduct or has violated a moral standard and bears significant responsibility for that violation. It is closely related to the notion of shame,

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remorse, and regret. Guilt proneness is the unreasonable guilt that an individual experiences for matters which are past one's control. It is normally the legacy of a demanding childhood because of which psychologists name it self-referencing. People who have unresolved guilt may be unpleasant or strained all the time and could be clingy or apologetic to an unhealthy degree. The feelings of guilt are frequently manifested as bodily symptoms such as insomnia or trouble sleeping, an upset stomach, nausea, muscle tension, head pain and tearfulness. Research connecting psychology and guilt do not agree always as some say that guilt may help protect people from emotional distress whereas other suggests that guilt, especially excessive guilt, adds to mental and emotional distress. According to Cohen (2012), Guilt proneness is a personality attribute indicative of a susceptibility to experiencing negative feelings about personal wrongdoing, even when the wrongdoing is private. It is identified by the apprehension of feeling bad about committing transgressions rather than by guilty feelings in a particular moment or generalized guilty feelings that occur without an eliciting event. A guilt-prone person would strive to deal with a problem that they've caused and undo the harm to others or avoid committing another transgression.

Some researchers also observed that there were negative relations between narcissism and guilt and also talked about the role played by these factors in males and females. One of the researches revealed that shame plays an important aspect in both narcissism as well as depression and that its role in depression is stronger than that of guilt. It also observed that men are more prone to narcissism and women to depression, and sex differences associated with shame and guilt are linked to self-image and specific situations (Wright *et al.*, 1989). High Guilt Proneness trait guides the behaviour of people with high consciousness and makes them think twice before any action. According to a study done by Harder & Greenwald (1999) revealed that shame was expected to show stronger relationships than guilt with openness, sensation seeking and extraversion. So far only a few research have been published that explore the relationship between covert narcissism and its expression in guilt and shame proneness and none has been published examining the gender differences in the expression of covert narcissism experienced by young adults in India. Thus, on this basis we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1 There will be a significant relationship between Shame Proneness and covert narcissism
- H2 There will be a significant relationship between Guilt Proneness and covert narcissism
- H3 Shame Proneness will predict Covert Narcissism
- H4 Guilt Proneness will predict Covert Narcissism
- H5 There will be a significant difference in Covert Narcissism between males and females

Methodology:

Researchers agree that there are two narcissism expressions

Overt/grandiose and Covert/ vulnerable narcissism. The existing information on narcissistic personality disorder focuses on various aspects of grandiose narcissism but very little has been explored on covert narcissism. The present research examines the experience of negative emotions such as guilt-proneness and shame proneness that impact covert narcissists' entitled perceptions of their own performance that has been overlooked. The main purpose behind conducting this study was the exploration of covert narcissism and its expression in the guilt and shame proneness experienced by young adults in India. The study aims to analyse more about the relationship between young adults' shame proneness, guilt-proneness with covert narcissism. Research also lacks to highlight gender differences in the expression of covert narcissism. As the literature suggests not many studies have focused on the gender difference and expression of negative emotions such as guilt and shame proneness and their relationship with covert narcissism in context to the Indian population in young adults.

The sample of the study consisted of 180 emerging adults. These emerging adults were selected with the following criteria of inclusion and exclusion:

Criteria of Inclusion:

- 1. University Students within the age group of 18 to 23 years.
- 2. Both Male and Female students.
- 3. Students residing in India
- 4. Students with Proficiency in the English language

Criteria of Exclusion:

- 1. College Dropouts or students repeating a year of the degree course.
- 2. Students with a physical disability or with a history of psychological illness.

In the present study, a purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample.

Research Design

A causal research design was used for the present study to investigate the relationship between the above-mentioned variables.

- 1. Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale, an updated version of the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale, was developed by Cheek *et al.* (2013). It has 23 items measuring covert narcissism. Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale (MCNS) had an alpha reliability of .89 compared to .75 for the original HSNS; it correlated .65 with the MMPI measure of covert narcissism compared to .30 with the maladaptive overt narcissism factor of the NPI and -.16 with the Adaptive Overt Narcissism Scale.
- 2. The Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP) was developed by Taya *et al.* (2010). It has 16 items measuring individual differences in the propensity to experience guilt and shame across a range of personal transgressions. The GASP contains 2 guilt subscales that assess negative behaviour-evaluations (NBEs) and repair action tendencies following private

transgressions and 2 shame subscales that assess negative self-evaluations (NSEs) and withdrawal action tendencies following publically-exposed transgressions. Alpha coefficients of .60 or higher would ensure that the reliability of the GASP is similar to the reliability of other guilt- and shame-proneness scales. It provides evidence for construct validity.

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, based on the criteria of inclusion and exclusion, the study population of university students was contacted and a sample of 180 students was drawn. In the second phase, students selected in the sample were administered the tests of the study through Google Forms. Thereafter, results were compiled and trends were analyzed.

Statistical analysis was done using an IBM SPSS, including Descriptive Statistics using Mean, Standard Deviation, coefficient of correlation, Regression analysis and Independent sample T-test.

Result & Discussion

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations (N=180)

Covert Narcissism	62.5±13.0662	Shame Proneness	8.31±2.1469
Guilt Proneness	10.28±2.4487		

Table-2: Coefficients of Correlations of Covert Narcissism (A) with Negative Behaviour Evaluation (B), Guilt Repair (C), Negative Self Evaluation (D) and Shame Withdrawal (E).

	A	B	C	D	E
Covert Narcissism (A)	1	-.040	-.006	.236**	.312**

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

A significant positive correlation between Negative Self Evaluation and Shame Withdrawal with Covert Narcissism among the emerging adults ($p < 0.01$). Hence, H₁ was accepted. Further, an insignificant negative correlation between Negative Behavior Evaluation and Guilt repair with Covert Narcissism was revealed, hence, H₂ was rejected.

Table- 3: Regression analysis showing prediction of Covert Narcissism by Shame Withdrawal

Table-3.1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjust R square	Std. Error (estimate)
1	.312 ^a	.097	.092	12.871

a. Predictors: (Constant), SW

Table- 3.2 Coefficient

Model	Unstandard. Coeff. B	Std. Error	Standard. Coeff. Beta	T	Sig.
1 (Constant)	48.414	3.611		13.406	.000
SW	4.387	1.004	.312	4.369	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Covert Narcissim

Table suggested that Shame Withdrawal contribute 9% variance in predicting Covert Narcissism which is statistical significance ($p < 0.01$ & $F = 19.084$, $\beta = .312$). Hence, H₃ was accepted.

Table-4: Regression analysis showing prediction on covert narcissism by shame Negative Self Evaluation .

Table-4.1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjust R square	Std. Error (estimate)
1	.236 ^a	.055	.050	13.166

a. Predictors :Constant) NSE

Table- 3.2 Coefficient

Model	Unstandard. Coeff. B	Std. Error	Standard. Coeff. Beta	T	Sig.
1 Constant	50.670	4.135		12.254	.000
NSE	2.554	.792	.236	3.225	.002

a. Dependent Variable :Covert Narcissim

The findings suggested that Negative Self Evaluation contribute a 5% variance in predicting Covert Narcissism which is the statistical significance ($p < 0.01$ & $F = 10.398$, $\beta = .236$) Hence, H₃ was accepted.

Table-5: The table shows the Independent sample t test between males and females respondents on the variable Covert Narcissism

Male (n=56)	Female (n=23)	T	df	P
67.77±12.904	61.73±13.405	2.826	177	$P < 0.05$

The above table shows significant differences between males and females on Covert Narcissism. ($P < 0.05$) hence, H₅ was accepted.

The current study's findings show that distinct subtypes of shame and guilt-proneness have diverse reactions among both aspects of narcissism. The findings of the study revealed that covert narcissism and shame NSE (negative self-evaluation) have a substantial positive association. According to the findings, there is a link between vulnerable narcissism and shame withdrawal. According to the study's findings, there is a link between shame proneness (negative self-evaluation and shame withdrawal) and covert narcissism. This relationship is found to be significant at 0.01 level. This means that the higher shame indicates a higher degree of development of covert narcissistic traits. The results of the study can be supported by a study conducted by (Ghim *et al.*, 2015) showing a positive correlation between covert narcissism and shame. Another study by Poles *et al.* (2018) also found that the vulnerable feature of narcissism is positively connected with shame.

The results also showed that shame withdrawal and negative self-evaluation predict and lead to covert narcissism tendencies. Feelings of shame are essential to understanding vulnerable narcissism and also interventions for at-risk young adults. Shame served as a bridge between vulnerable narcissism and a more negative self-and another model (Bilevicius *et al.*, 2019). Another study supporting the hypothesis by Hibbard (1992) stated shame was found to be positively correlated with vulnerable

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style. Covert narcissism has been identified as “a pattern where shame feelings are more conscious and narcissistic feelings are dissociated” (Wright *et al.*, 1989). Gramzow & Tanqney (1992) from their study showed a positive association between shame and narcissism emerged when maladaptive factors were isolated. (Schie *et al.*, 2021) concluded that more shame was reported in those young people who tended to have traits of vulnerable narcissism and struggled to be close to others. Also, a more insecure attachment style may develop when there is a discrepancy between the ideal and actual self-produced by shame experiences.

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between covert narcissism and guilt-proneness. According to the findings, covert narcissism and guilt repair have a negative correlation. Covert narcissism and negative behaviour evaluation also have a negative relationship. This relationship was not found to be meaningful. According to similar studies, the negative association between narcissism and guilt-proneness could be explained by narcissism's lack of empathy and an excessive sense of entitlement (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Another study in which they differentiated the two types of narcissism (overt and covert) through the disposition of shame and guilt-proneness confirmed that both the dimensions of narcissism were negatively correlated with guilt (Kingston, 2005). Another study found that narcissistic people have a strong sense of entitlement, which manifests itself as an unjustified expectation of favourable treatment. They expect to be catered to, and if this does not happen, they may become violent (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As a result, it could be one of the reasons why they are unable to consider the wants and desires of their people. Individuals with high guilt NBE (negative behaviour evaluation) ratings are more empathetic, modest, loyal, agreeable, and generous than those with low guilt NBE scores in terms of personality. Furthermore, those with a high level of guilt NBE are more likely to want to change their behaviour and prevent future harmful behaviour (Cohen *et al.*, 2012).

Freud (1914) originally felt that women were more narcissistic than men, based on the premise that women are more concerned with their physical appearance and are more likely to engage in self-centred behaviour “make object choices in reference to qualities desired for the self” (Wink & Gough, 1990). However, empirical evidence suggests the opposite pattern of findings, with men having higher levels of narcissism than women (Tschanz *et al.*, 1998). Other research, on the other hand, has revealed that the difference in narcissism between men and women is almost non-existent (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2008). The findings from the study indicate that the average score of men on covert narcissism was significantly more than that of females. This is because males have scored higher on the

covert narcissism variables than females. Further study by Wright *et al.* (1989) also revealed men to be more prone to narcissism and women to depression. Sex differences related to shame and guilt are linked to specific situations and self-images. Males have higher levels of narcissism and competitiveness as compared to females (Chan & Cheung, 2020).

Sex differences have also been found in the relationships between hypersensitivity and the Exploitativeness/Entitlement factor of narcissism (Ryan *et al.*, 2008) the study showed that hypersensitivity was positively correlated with the frequency of physical assault, such that more hypersensitive men actually reported greater physical assault toward their partners than their partners actually reported. In males, vulnerable narcissism was a significant positive predictor of physical/sexual abuse perpetration and in females; vulnerable narcissism emerged as a significant positive predictor of physical/sexual and psychological abuse perpetration (Valashjardi *et al.*, 2020). The gender difference in narcissism is crucial to highlight since it implies actual disparities in the latent characteristic, driven by men's heightened sense of entitlement and authority. The etiology of covert narcissism must be studied further, as well as the effect of gender stereotypes on the emergence of covert narcissistic features.

Finally, this study aimed at exploring the relationship of guilt-proneness and shame proneness with covert narcissism and its expression in young adults in India. The sample consisted of 180 young adults from the age range of 18-23 years. Findings from the current study indicate that shame proneness significantly positively relates to covert narcissism and predicts covert narcissism. It further concludes that males have significantly higher tendencies of the development of covert narcissism as compared to females.

Implication:

- The present study will serve as useful literature both for the academic and students for insight in the understanding of covert narcissism.
- It'll help in throwing more light on the covert and vulnerable types of narcissism.
- It will also help in devising early intervention programmes to eliminate shame and guilt to lessen its impact on the development of maladaptive personality patterns.

Limitations of the study

- In the following study Questionnaire as the tool is used for data collection and it is prone to have a socially desirable response.
- Non responded Questions affect the results of the study.
- There was a low participation rate
- Lesser literature was available in context to Covert Narcissism.
- Different perceptions of the items in the study could have led to subjectivity in the results.
- Quantitative measures of data collection were used.

Qualitative measures like an interview, case study method was not used for data collection.

- The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the availability of the responses.

Future directions

- It can be explored in other age groups, specifically adolescents in their developmental age.
- It can be conducted on a larger sample to generalize the results.
- Other types of narcissism and their relationship with guilt and shame proneness can be studied.
- Other variables in context to clinical psychology can be explored with covert narcissism to get deeper insights.

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