

## Narcissism and Forgiveness : an association study

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** People with narcissistic traits show a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration & lack of empathy which causes them a lot of difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Forgiveness is antithesis of Narcissism. Forgiveness is freeing from negative attachment to the source that has transgressed against a person. Research has shown that people with narcissistic personality are less likely to forgive others or life situations and they are more likely to easily forgive their own selves.

**Methodology:** This was empirically tested through a survey of 103 undergraduate college students. Forgiveness was measured through the Heartland Forgiveness Scale. Narcissistic Personality was measured through Narcissistic Personality Inventory.

**Results:** As expected, a negative but low correlation was found between narcissism and forgiveness [ $r_{(101)} = -0.14$ ]. A positive but very weak correlation was found out between Self-forgiveness and Narcissism [ $r_{(101)} = 0.04$ ]. As expected, a negative weak but statistically significant correlation was found out between granting forgiveness to others and Narcissistic Personality [ $r_{(101)} = -0.25, p < 0.01$ ]. As expected, a negative low correlation was found out between granting forgiveness to situations and narcissistic personality [ $r_{(101)} = -0.11$ ].

**Conclusion:** Further large scale studies are needed to elucidate the relationship between narcissism and forgiveness. Implications of this study lie in enhancing relationships through forgiveness.

**Key words:** narcissism, forgiveness, college students.

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### INTRODUCTION

It may be beneficial and easy to forgive a stranger as in this context the perpetrator is a stranger and the perpetrator and the victim do not share a past. The perpetrator may not have any impact on the victim's future too. But if perpetrator is a family member, or a co – worker, forgiving will pose a question as they both share a past and will influence each other's future. Forgiving a stranger may not be difficult but if the perpetrator is a spouse, or a friend or a colleague, the dynamics of forgiving him or her changes. Our interactions with significant people in our life have impact on our health and psychological well being. If a family member or a significant person in our life betrays us or offends us, it becomes a challenge to decide whether to forgive him or her. Above all, if the perpetrator has narcissistic personality traits, then research shows that such person will have difficulty granting or seeking forgiveness but s/he will easily forgive herself or himself [1-2].

Forgiveness is a freeing from a negative attachment to the source that has transgressed against a person [3]. Of all forgiveness theories, Thompson's is the most inclusive in that the source of any eventual forgiveness

may be oneself, another person, or a situation that is viewed as out of one's control. According to McCullough and his colleagues, forgiveness is defined as a redirection in negative motivations along with increase in pro-social motivation toward another in an interpersonal context [4]. Researchers have suggested that forgiveness reflected cognitive-affective transformation following a transgression in which the victim freely chooses not to take any revenge and makes a realistic assessment of the harm done [5]. They suggested that the giving up of the negative emotions is the crux of the forgiving process. Fincham and Kashdan [6] argued that "at the centre of various approaches to forgiveness is the idea of a freely chosen motivational transformation in which the desire to seek revenge and to avoid contact with the transgressor is lessened". According to Worthington [7] Trait forgiveness involves a tendency to offer, feel, or seek changes from negative to positive cognitions, behaviours, and affect pertaining to offenders that include oneself, others, and God. Whereas State forgiveness involves a process of offering, feeling, or seeking a change from negative to positive cognitions, behaviours, and affect pertaining to specific offenses that are perceived to be perpetrated by oneself, others, or life situations.

Personality has generally been used as a universal explanatory label for a person's noticeable conduct and his/her subjectively reportable inner experience. Persons with personality disorders are far more likely to reject psychological help and to deny their problems than persons with other mental disorders. Persons with personality disorder do not feel concerned about their maladaptive behavior. Because they do not normally recognize pain from what others observe as their symptoms, they often do not show interest in taking treatment. Persons with Narcissistic personality disorder are characterized by a heightened sense of self-importance [8-9]. They consider themselves as special and handle criticism poorly. Persons with narcissistic personality disorder often expect fame and fortune and they can make others furious by their refusal to obey conventional rules of behavior. They can't show empathy and they fake sympathy only to achieve their egocentric wants. Because of their brittle self-esteem, they are vulnerable to depression. Interpersonal difficulties, occupational problems, rejection, and loss are among the problems that narcissists usually generate by their behavior [10].

### **Narcissism**

Narcissism is usually associated with the legend from Greek mythology depicting excessive and obsessive self-love. The term has been used as synonymous with self-centeredness. Raskin and Terry [11] defined narcissism as "self-admiration that is characterized by tendencies toward grandiose ideas, exhibitionism, and defensiveness in response to criticism; interpersonal relationships that are characterized by feelings of entitlement, exploitativeness, and a lack of empathy".

Until the 1980s, not much was known about the empirical basis of narcissism. However, the development of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) allowed the practitioners to empirically study "narcissism" as a normal personality trait. The NPI is based on the diagnostic criteria of the DSM IV narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). The NPD is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity in either behavior or fantasy, as well as a lack of empathy and a hypersensitivity to others' criticism.

Raskin and Terry [11] using different analytic procedures, discovered seven-factors to understand narcissism clearly. The seven factors are - Authority, Superiority, Exhibitionism, Vanity, Exploitiveness, Entitlement, and Self-Sufficiency. Narcissism is theoretically relevant to understand forgiveness. Narcissistic tendencies can be used to understand forgiveness-related traits such as humility, empathy, and grandiosity.

### **Narcissism and Forgiveness**

The narcissistic personality appears to be opposite of the forgiving personality. Narcissistic individuals may have great difficulty in both granting and seeking forgiveness. Worthington [7] has developed an empathy-humility-commitment model of forgiveness. In this three-part model, forgiveness includes –

1. Empathy for the offender,
2. Humility in the offende
3. A public commitment to forgive the offender.

Narcissists have difficulty empathizing with others and therefore have difficulty forgiving others. Narcissists show inability to remain humble also. Narcissism is the natural enemy to empathy and

humility. Davidson [13] investigated the relationship between levels of narcissism and forgiveness. Those who scored high on narcissism showed significantly less scores on forgiveness in response to both hypothetical and real-life hurtful situations. Davidson suggested that a relatively mature level of ego development is required to forgive which may not have developed among narcissistic individuals.

Brandsma [14] outlined the general context in which forgiveness occurs; especially for the narcissistic individual. When a person is offended, s/he experiences a loss of esteem, anger and threat to one's ego. Three possible reactions to the wrongdoer follow: 1. vengeance, 2. a neutral stance, or 3. forgiveness. In order to forgive, it is desirable to re-experience the wrong done, empathize with the offender and decide not to take a revenge. All of these steps may not be possible for narcissistic individuals.

Narcissistic persons may have difficulty granting forgiveness because of the psychological strengths required in the forgiveness process. A reasonably mature level of ego development is necessary to forgive the offender. Narcissistic individuals lack the very capacities necessary for forgiveness. For example: one must have the capacity to empathize with others, a strong eagerness to admit a personal responsibility in relationship dysfunctions, and legitimate concern for understanding others to be able to grant forgiveness. The process of compensation, in which a relationship is restored, is facilitated when a transgressor admits one's fault and is willing to apologize [15].

Narcissists are unlikely to recognize guilt [16]; they do not apologize. McWilliams and Lependorf [17] discussed that the narcissistic individuals do not feel remorseful also. The major focus in narcissistic individuals is internal self cohesiveness rather than quality of relationship with others. Narcissists wish to be perfect always. If they apologize, it reflects that they are less than perfect and they are at fault. Therefore they cannot express remorse. Even if situations arise such that they have to apologize, they may indulge in self-justifications or may offer guarded defensive answers to ward off blame. All of these intended to show the world that despite the transgressions, narcissists are perfect always. From the point of view of helping them, may be a counselor can indulge in exposing the wrong doing from the point of view of 'shame' rather than 'guilt' which may be an effective strategy to elicit forgiveness from narcissists [18].

## METHODOLOGY

### Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, participants were given demographic details form which included their age, gender and educational qualification. Then they completed questionnaires which included Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) and Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI).

### Sample

The sample size was 103 (47 females and 56 males) undergraduate college students from Mumbai and Mumbai suburban between the age range of 18-20 years.

### Tools used –

**Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS)** – The scale is invented by Thompson and others [19]. This is an 18-item dispositional measure that assesses forgiveness in three areas: forgiveness of self, others and situations. Concurrent validity for the scale has been demonstrated [19]. The scale also has adequate internal consistency, with alpha coefficients for the subscales ranging from 0.72 to 0.82.

**Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-40)** – The Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40 (NPI-40) is a 40-item measure of narcissism. The alpha composite reliability scores of 0.83, 0.74, 0.80, and 0.90 were calculated for the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. NPI-40 also shows adequate construct validity [20].

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

A Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was done to find out the relationship between variables.

## RESULTS

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics of the variables

N = 103	NPI	HFS total	HFS self	HFS others	HFS situations
Mean	15.98	84.29	28.22	29.15	27.11
SD	5.45	10.34	4.94	4.76	5.11

Note: NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory, HFS = Heartland Forgiveness Scale

Table 2 - Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient between variables

N = 103	HFS total	HFS self	HFS others	HFS situations
NPI	-0.14	0.04	-0.25**	-0.11
Significance	ns	ns	p<0.01	ns

(Note = \*\*p<0.01)

As seen in table 1, on an average, participants reported to be lower on narcissism; whereas, on an average, participants reported to be highly forgiving of themselves, others, situations. But overall forgiveness scores revealed that participants were as forgiving as unforgiving.

Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient between Narcissistic Personality and Self forgiveness was found out to be [ $r_{(101)} = 0.04$ , NS] which was positive, very weak but not significant. This indicated that people with high traits of Narcissistic Personality easily forgive themselves thus a positive correlation was found even in this study. However, the strength of correlation was very weak and not statistically significant.

The correlation between narcissistic personality and forgiving others [ $r_{(101)} = -0.25$ , p<0.01] was negative, weak but statistically significant at 0.01 level. This showed that people high in narcissistic traits have difficulty forgiving others. However, the strength of the relationship was weak but statistically significant.

The correlation between narcissistic personality and forgiving situations [ $r_{(101)} = -0.11$ , NS] was negative, very weak but statistically not significant. This indicated that the more one is narcissistic, lesser chances of forgiving unjust situations in life. However, the strength of the relationship was too weak and not statistically significant.

The correlation between narcissistic personality and overall forgiveness [ $r_{(101)} = -0.14$ , NS] was negative, weak and not statistically significant. This showed that higher the traits of narcissistic personality, lower are the chances for individuals to forgive others, situations or forgive overall. This revealed that people with high on narcissistic traits have difficulty forgiving in general, forgiving others, forgiving situations in their life. The size of all the three correlation being low suggested that there may be other factors affecting one's ability forgive overall, forgive others and forgive situations apart from one's personality (Narcissistic). Factors like seriousness of the offence, offender apologized or not, quality of relationship with the offender could be influencing whether one would be forgiven or not.

## DISCUSSION

The obtained results were consistent with the past research. Researchers have demonstrated in their 6 studies that narcissistic entitlement (expecting special treatment and preoccupation with defending one's rights) is a robust, distinct predictor of unforgiveness [21]. That is, it obstructs forgiveness even if other robust predictors like offense severity, apology, relationship closeness, religiosity, and Big Five personality factors exist. Brown investigated what differentiated forgiving people from unforgiving people. He found that forgiving people were less in vengeance and unforgiving people were more likely to indulge in vengeance. However, those unforgiving who were high in vengeance were also high in narcissism. Thus, most vengeful people were low in forgiveness and high in narcissism independent of gender differences and healthy self esteem [22]. Others [23] investigated two distinct dimensions of narcissism – admiration

and rivalry – on two facets of un-forgiveness – vengeance and avoidance. They found that admiration was negatively associated with vengeance and avoidance whereas rivalry was positively associated with vengeance and avoidance. This revealed that we can better understand narcissists' unforgiving motivations if we separate admiration and rivalry facets of narcissists.

### Limitations and Implications

A stronger and significant correlation would have been obtained if the sample size was large. The limitation of correlation coefficient is that it only describes whether the two variables are related or not. Another causal study with larger and more representative sample can be done to find out causal connection between the variables. The rural youth also can be part of the sample to increase further the applicability of the research findings. The research showed clear association between narcissistic personality and tendency to grant forgiveness. This can be used in personal counseling where clients showing narcissistic personality traits can be made aware of the factors facilitating and obstructing forgiveness and can be trained to grant or seek forgiveness which will in turn help them to enhance the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

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