

# Assessing Narcissism in Students of Psychology: An Administered Study

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**Abstract---**Narcissistic Personality is a condition that causes individuals to have an inflated perception of self, giving themselves higher self-importance. It is necessary and interesting to study narcissistic traits in students of different majors. This can be a crucial environmental or psychosocial marker/ indicator of narcissism which can also be of substantial importance in the field of education. This study focuses on identifying narcissism in students of psychology background. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory was administered to 114 psychology students, of different universities (public and private) in India. The results of our study provided evidence of the fact that narcissistic traits are higher in male psychology students as compared to female psychology students. Further this paper has provided evidence that narcissistic traits are higher in leaders, as compared to non-leaders.

**Keywords---** College students, Disorder, Gender, Leadership, Narcissistic Personality, Personality, Students, Traits

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Narcissistic Personality Disorder, is a type of Antisocial Personality Disorder, in Cluster B which requires for potential narcissists to have the following characteristics- a) A pattern of grandiose self-importance and an exaggerated sense of talent and achievements b) Fantasies of unlimited sex, power, money, brilliance and beauty c) An exhibitionistic need for attention and admiration d) Cool indifference or feelings of rage, anger, humiliation or emptiness as a response to criticism, defeat or indifference e) Various interpersonal disturbances such as feeling entitled to special favors, taking advantage of others and inability to empathize with others. (American Psychological Association). [1]

Narcissists have little to no empathy, hold an extremely positive sense of self, believe that they are special, and thus expect special treatment from others, all the while believing that they do not owe others anything. (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Although narcissists have few close relationships, they have a strong desire for social contact, social relationships. (Campbell, Rudich & Sedikides, 2002) Due to their inability to regulate self-esteem, they rely on extramural affiliations.[2]

The term 'narcissism' was chosen by Paul Nacke (1899), to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way the body of a sexual object is usually treated. Sigmund Freud, in his book "On Narcissism" proposes that narcissism has a lot to do with an interaction between ego-libido and object-libido, and further states that the extent of narcissism can be explained through an individual's predisposition to auto-erotism. However, the concept of

Narcissism is extremely confusing and it is a well-known fact that Freud himself was dissatisfied with his theories (Jones, 1955).

In a few studies, narcissism is explained as a defensive or deficit-driven psychological structure, in response to fear of abandonment (childhood) (Kernberg, 1970). Different studies have shown that, on a broader perspective there are specifically two types of narcissism- Grandiose and Vulnerable narcissism (Miller & Campbell, 2008 ; Miller, Hoffman, Campbell, Gaughan, Gentile & Maples, 2011). Grandiose narcissism focuses on social-personality conceptualization of narcissism, whereas Vulnerable narcissism focuses on clinical conceptualization. [3]

There is a severe lack of scales that are available to measure Narcissism. The Big Five personality Inventory (Goldberg, 1993), Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & Briggs, 1962) are common examples of personality tests. The need to humanize narcissism, brought upon the creation of Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979). This study uses the NPI.

Narcissism in students has been of a major interest over the past few years. Different studies compared the scope of narcissism in different students of universities in accordance to their educational background. (Brown, Akers & Giacomino, 2013 ; Foster, Twenge, Konrath, Campbell & Bushman, 2008 ; Bergman, Westerman & Daly, 2010 ; Carroll, 1989). Different studies analyse the personality variations in psychology students. Understanding personality traits and characteristics of students of different majors, can help in producing better teaching strategies, to suit a particular student group. Understanding the personality traits of students, can also help to develop

different learning approaches with reference to the specific subject as well (Ball & Pelco, 2006).[4]

Some studies have shown that personality dimensions are predominant predictors of performance, i.e., understanding personality traits have remarkable impacts on academic achievements. However, only 'positive' personality dimensions were related to course performance (Pawlowska, Westerman, Bergman & Huelsman, 2014).

The objective of analysing personality traits of leaders and non-leaders is also a much researched topic. Studies that analysed character traits of leaders generally depict that the participants have excellent insight and judgement, extroverted, expansive, social and well-balanced (Bowden, 1926). Overall, it is evident that it is important to analyse personality traits of students of various backgrounds, for educational purposes, as well as to predict a generalised statement regarding particular groups of students.

Students of psychology have previously been studied for narcissism (Westerman et al., 2012). The comparative study indicated that business students have significantly higher narcissistic traits as compared to psychology students.[5]

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Our review of prior literature focuses primarily on studies on narcissism, relationship of narcissism with college students, narcissism personality and how it influences behavior and relationships, as well as studies on gender difference and leadership aspects of narcissism.

### Gender disparity

Gender differences, is a commonly metastasized area of study, for any focus of research. Understanding gender differences in narcissism, similarly, is a widely spoken about topic. Tay, Donnellan, Grijalva, Newman, Harms, Robins & Yan, 2015 conducted a meta analysis on their study and subsequently proved that men are more narcissistic than women. The study further investigated gender differences, in three facets of the NPI, which revealed that narcissism gender difference is prominent in exploitative / entitlement facets and leadership/authority facets. Further, the study also went on to measure if there is a gender difference between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Results showed that men and women do not differ in vulnerable narcissism. [6]

Another study, by Philipson, 1985 suggests that the development of narcissism in men is characterised by a particular form of an underlying family structure, which cultivates asymmetrical yet converging problems in women. This study predominantly explains that gender differences in narcissistic personality must be recognized and diagnosis, explanations and relevance of the disorder must reflect this recognition. On a rather broader understanding, grandiose

narcissism is often represented by men.

Another study, Foster, Campbell & Twenge, 2003 examined narcissism associations among age, gender, ethnicity and world region across a very large sample ( $n=3445$ ), and the results provided evidence that males were more narcissistic than females.

### Leaders of tomorrow : Extent of narcissism

Narcissism in young people is extremely important to analyse. Getting a fore picture of the people of tomorrow, can help educational institutions, employment organisations, etc provide a better platform that caters to individual needs of the youth population. Schie, Jarman, Reis & Grenyer, 2021 conducted a study, where 348 young people, who were reported on pathological narcissism, the experience of shame, and their model of self and others. A path model was used to mediate their experience of between vulnerable and grandiose narcissism on the one hand and secure, dismissive, preoccupied and fearful attachment on the other hand. Results showed that higher grandiose narcissism traits were related to a more positive model of self and others, whereas there was evidence to show a relationship between vulnerable narcissism and negative model of self and others. A longitudinal study by Reijntjes, Vermande, Thomaes, Goossens, Olthof, Aleva & Van der Meulen, 2015, where children were followed during the last 3 years of their primary school. The study aimed to find narcissism, bullying and social dominance. Person-centred analyses were used to examine whether groups with distinct developmental trajectories for narcissism and two bullying forms (direct and indirect) can be identified, and how these trajectories are related. Results showed that higher narcissism in girls was neither related to intense bullying nor social dominance. Highly narcissistic boys, on the other hand, were more likely than their peers to show elevated bullying. This proved that high narcissism is a risk factor of bullying in boys but not girls. [7]

Lau, Marsee, Kunimatsu & Fassnacht, 2010 conducted a study to examine associations between narcissism, self-esteem and externalizing and internalizing problems in 157 adolescents (14-18). Results showed that narcissism was positively associated with self-reported delinquency, overt aggression and relational aggression. Further, the study also showed that high levels of self-esteem narcissism was significantly associated with overt aggression, whereas it was not at low levels of self-esteem. [8]

### Academic Narcissism

To conduct this study, it is extremely important to understand previous research of narcissism and its effects on particular groups of students (university or college level). Brown, Akers & Giacomino, 2013 conducted a study to

examine narcissism in students of accounting majors. They used the NPI scale to identify disparities in accounting students on the pretext of gender, leadership, university (public or private) and systematically compared their results with that of business students in the Westerman et al. 2012 study. Results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between private and public schools, however leaders had higher narcissism levels as compared to non-leaders. Females scored higher levels in the vanity section, while males scored higher in the entitlement section. The focus of our paper, much relies on the study conducted by Brown, Akers & Giacomino, 2013.[9]

Vanity and entitlement specific studies have also proven that females usually have higher levels of vanity (Workman & Lee, 2010). Males have reportedly predicted higher entitlement across various studies. It is a common understanding that evolution and patriarchy have placed this significant difference in gender disparities. Males reportedly have higher levels of academic entitlement, where they believed that they “deserve success” come what may (Sohr-Preston & Boswell, 2015).

A study by Pinsky & Young, 2009 showed that narcissistic tendencies are adequately on the growth. A study conducted by Miller, 2013 suggests that prior to the emergence of academic entitlement, there is evidential support of general entitlement present in the individual. Individuals higher in narcissism often exhibit hypersensitivity to evaluation and potential criticism (Beck, Freeman & Associates, 1990; Bushman and Baumeister, 1998) [10]

Individuals higher in narcissism (Beck, Davis & Freeman, 1993- Cognitive therapy of Personality Disorders), are poor team players, blame others for failures but take credit for success.

Westerman, Bergman, Bergman & Daly, 2012 conducted a study, where they collected data from millennial students ( $n=536$ ) and faculty from a comprehensive state university. The results showed that current graduate students have higher narcissistic traits than graduate students of the past. The study also details that business students have higher narcissism as compared to psychology students. It was also suggested here, that narcissists expected to have more career success, with respect to finding a job, salary, etc. A two-way ANOVA test concluded that, after controlling for gender, there was a statistically significant difference in narcissistic levels of business students (higher) and psychology students (lower). [11]

### III. HYPOTHESES

There is a lack of research in relation to Narcissism specifically in psychology students. The concept of “God complex” has been analysed in individuals before, however this study has clear precisioned hypotheses. Our study

closely follows prior research of the topic, and much of the framework has been in similar accordance.

**H<sub>0</sub> : Null Hypothesis-** There are no statistically significant differences for male or female psychology students in individual narcissistic traits or categories of narcissism.

From our literature review of prior research, there has been increasing evidence that males tend to be more narcissistic than females. However Irvine (2009) concluded that during the period of 2002-2007, women were four times more narcissistic than men. Thus, due to the inconclusive results, we did not hypothesize gender difference.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Student leaders will have significantly higher narcissistic traits as compared to non-leaders.

As seen from prior studies, Twenge et al, 2008 there has been significant evidence to support the fact that student leaders are far more narcissistic when compared to their non-leader peers.

It is also important to note that narcissistic traits do not necessarily mean that the individual is a bad person or that they require any sort of guidance, therapy, etc. In some cases, it could simply mean that the individual holds an above-average level of self-esteem. This study does not contemplate diagnosing individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

Our study consisted of **114** psychology students, who were administered the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979). 51.8% of individuals identified as Male, while 48.2% identified as Female. The study also aimed to identify the extent of narcissistic traits in accordance to domicile (urban/ rural). However due to insufficient and unbalanced results [Urban-89.5% and Rural-10.5%], this variable is not being evaluated, nor is its relation to other variables being evaluated. Another critical variable was to identify leaders and non-leaders. Responses indicate that there are 74.6% leaders and 25.4% non-leaders.[12]

The NPI-40 (1984) has been heavily administered by researchers and clinicians for studies on narcissism. However, the NPI does not diagnose individuals with NPD, rather is used to measure “normal” or “borderline” narcissism. This means that people who score very high on the test, do not necessarily meet the criteria to be diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder. The NPI is considered to be of high quality to measure the Dark Triad traits, however this study focuses extensively on narcissism. Since the NPI is the most common Inventory used in current research, this study has also decided to employ the same inventory.

The reliability and validity of the NPI has been tested in prior research (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and has a Cronbach’s alpha .83. [13]

The scoring of the NPI relies on the choices the respondent makes. There are 40 questions, for which there are two options-A and B. While one option is considered narcissistic, the other is considered non-narcissistic. The sum of the total is added accordingly where 1 point is given to the narcissistic answer and 0 is awarded to the non-narcissistic answer for each question. Higher scores on the summed responses, indicate higher levels of narcissism. It is important to analyse which trait is dominant, after measuring scores holistically. (Young & Pinsky, 2009)

The responses are then grouped into particular traits, in accordance to the question.[14]

Trait Questions (answered according to key, 1 point for each question)

- Authority 1, 8, 10, 11, 12, 32, 33, 36
- Self-sufficiency 17, 21, 22, 31, 34, 39
- Superiority 4, 9, 26, 37, 40
- Exhibitionism 2, 3, 7, 20, 28, 30, 38
- Exploitativeness 6, 13, 16, 23, 35
- Vanity 15, 19, 29
- Entitlement 5, 14, 18, 24, 25, 27

**V. RESULTS**

Table 1 presents the results of the study. The table clearly shows the depiction of averages of overall score, score for each of the seven traits all in response to gender differences and leadership stance as well.

**TABLE 1: NPI RESULTS**

	Total Score	Authority	Self-sufficiency	Superiority	Exhibitionism	Exploitativeness	Vanity	Entitlement
<b>Total</b>	15.929	4.333	2.842	2.052	1.938	1.456	1.473	2.087
<b>Male</b>	19.796	5.237	3.271	2.661	2.644	1.762	1.661	1.796
<b>Female</b>	11.781	3.363	2.381	1.4	1.181	1.127	1.272	2.4
<b>Leader</b>	16.129	4.564	2.811	1.941	1.941	1.482	1.447	2.152
<b>Non-Leader</b>	15.344	3.655	2.931	2.379	1.931	1.379	1.551	1.896

\*Significant at .10

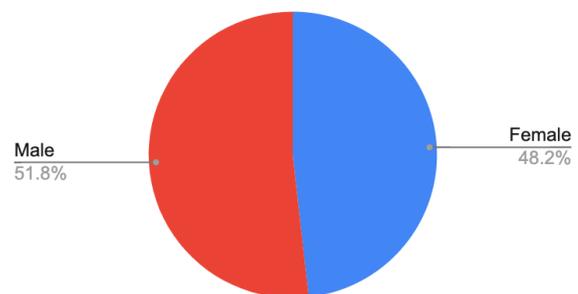
There is a significant difference in the average scores of male and female responses. The difference is significant at 5%. Thus, it is evident that the null hypothesis is rejected. Males have a marginally higher score overall, when compared to females. Hence, it is safe to assume that Male psychology students have higher narcissism levels than female psychology students (In India). It is important to assume that identifying heightened narcissistic traits in individuals can help open up possibilities of discussing measures that aim to enhance healthier forms of narcissism (Avelino et al, 2017).

Under the entitlement traits however, females (2.4) have a higher score than males (1.796). This is contradictory to prior studies which have indicated that male students of psychology are far more susceptible to entitlement than female students of psychology. However, females only scored higher under Question no. 18 (I want to amount to something in the eyes of the world).[15]

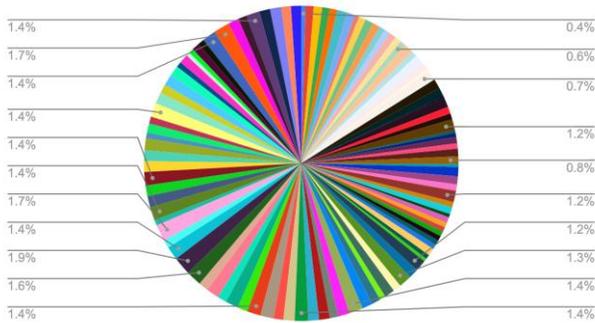
Males have a large disparity indicated under authority. Their higher score could mean that men are more dominant and

like being in statuses of power. This is also indicated in traits of Superiority, particularly for Question no. 4 (I know that I am good because everyone keeps telling me so.) While studies in Fashion research have shown that women tend to have higher scores of vanity, vanity self-consciousness and public image, the results of this study indicate that male psychology students are slightly higher in terms of vanity with respect to female psychology students.

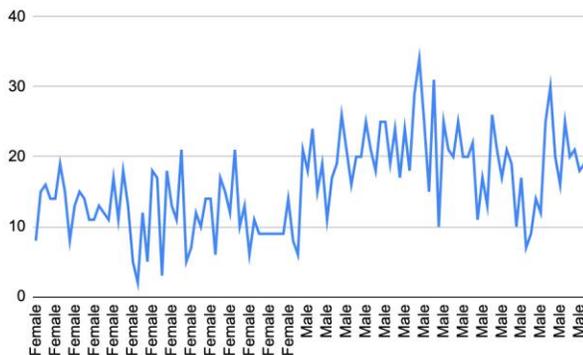
**Count of Gender**



Gender scores



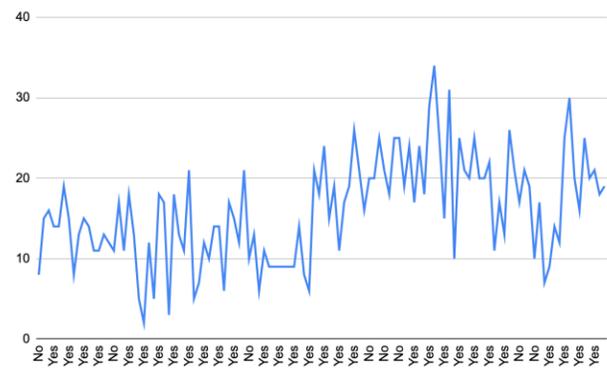
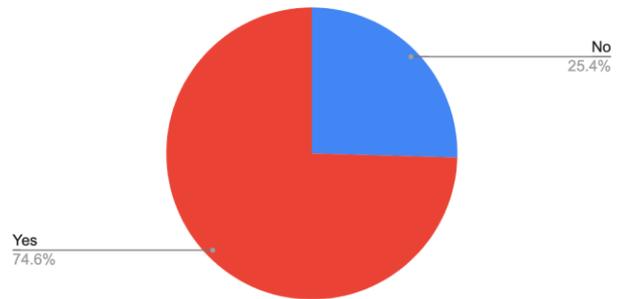
The pie chart above depicts the overall scores of each respondent. Each slice is deemed in order of weightage of their scores.



The average (picture not to scale) scores in accordance to gender are depicted in this graph.

As per prior studies, this study has also proven that Leaders have higher narcissistic scores than non-leaders. Leaders have an average score of 16.129 on the NPI, whereas individuals not holding leadership positions have an average score of 15.334. Thus, as hypothesised psychology students holding leadership positions score higher on the NPI as compared to psychology students who have not or do not hold any leadership positions. In particular, for Authority, leaders have a score of 4.564 whereas non-leaders stand at 3.655. This difference is highly significant, at 1% level. Leaders have a score of 2.152 in Entitlement as compared to non-leaders who have a score of 1.896, which is a highly significant difference. [16]

Count of Have you ever been a leader?( eg: college sports captain , any club leader, etc)



The above graphs depict the average scores of psychology students in accordance to their stance on leadership positions. (Each individual score is not indicated, the overall average is depicted in the graph).

Leadership scores



The overall scores of each respondent is depicted here. Comparing these results to the study conducted by Westerman et al., 2012- The average score for psychology students in their study was 15.19, which is lower than results obtained in this study 15.929. However, female psychology students in this study had a score of 11.781, which is significantly lower than results obtained in the comparative study where female psychology students score 16.04. Male psychology students in this study have a score of 19.796, which is significantly higher than scores of male students in

Westerman's study- 16.48.

The Twenge et al., 2008 study had an overall score of 17.29 for college students, which is significantly higher than the average total score of this study- 15.929.

While the results of this study are not entirely the same when compared to other studies, the results do not fall far. The outcomes were expected, and predicted as well. While there were disparities, they were negligible. It would be interesting to compare the level of narcissism in the same participants of this study after they graduate or retain a successful career, in order to analyse whether their narcissism levels have increased or decreased. Longitudinal studies in understanding narcissism in students is seemingly very important and can be considered in the future.[17]

## VI. IMPLICATIONS

This study has provided evidence of different statistical data to understand Narcissism in Psychology students, both in terms of gender and leadership positions. The most important method of use for this study is in direct relationship with the field of education. Teachers and Professors are usually trained to handle students with different personalities. It is of maximal importance, especially in India, that the educational system trains not just teachers but their curriculum as well in order to pertain to particular student personalities. Teachers can develop specific teaching styles, Institutions can acknowledge curriculums that are designed for students with respect to their personality traits. Understanding each student can provide a smooth relationship for teachers-students as well as help the student's performance. [21]

This study focuses on Narcissism in particular. While this study can help generate an increase in positive narcissists in the field of education, it can also help education systems understand how to develop and be of guidance for a non-leader or an individual with low narcissism, and further can help prioritize which particular trait needs more attention, in the case of non-narcissists. Studies (Feltz, 2012) have shown that narcissistic individuals require extensive training in order to make them better team players. However, having a narcissistic individual on a team can increase group performance as well. Understanding the consequences of being in regulation with a narcissistic individual can greatly simplify the perception of supervisors and reduce their difficulties in working with narcissistic employees, or group members.[18]

Further, understanding narcissism in leaders and non-leaders can help authorities guide, train, mentor and develop efficient leaders. Recognising the behavioral functions and traits of a narcissistic individual can be of great importance in developing fool-proof methods that help in moulding them and using their narcissism positively. This study and

future research can provide methods that can help turn the traits of a narcissist and put them for better use, to garner appropriate retention and accomplishments. Mentors can work on shaping the individual's authority and exhibitionism traits in the most beneficial manner. There is no doubt that individuals with higher levels of narcissism can make better leaders, but understanding this personality trait can ensure that the leaders are in no way a threat or harm to other individuals.

Finally, gender differences in narcissistic levels can be of great use to Industries and organisations. Making appropriate use of an individual's personality traits can be very beneficial for companies looking to make profits. Understanding the level of vanity or superiority a person holds, for example, can help company representatives, in order to please the customer and ensure a guaranteed profit. For example, complimenting a female narcissist in terms of looks can appease them more, whereas complimenting a male narcissist in terms of their behavior, or actions can please them more.[19]

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study has assessed 114 Psychology students in terms of narcissism. The results of the study have depicted higher narcissism levels in male students as compared to female students. The results also imply that psychology students with leadership positions have higher narcissism levels than psychology students without leadership positions. The total results of this study have also been compared with results of past studies, and the analysis concludes that results scored by participants in this study are lower when compared to other studies. It is also important to note the number of responses accumulated from each study vary significantly, which can thus affect average scores. [22]

As stated in the implications, the results of this study are particularly useful in the field of education, to train teaching professionals on how to respond to different personality traits, as well as to develop modules that can be useful in training narcissistic students as well. Another implication of the study is in terms of organisational psychology as well, on how to understand specific customers better. The findings of this study can surely increase efficiency of educators in classrooms as well as to create better leaders in narcissists.[20]

This study adds onto research ongoing in the field of narcissism in college students and also provides scope for further research in understanding the behavior of narcissistic psychology students.[23]

## VIII. LIMITATIONS

This study is not without limitations. First, due to a minimal source of literature review the count of variables and their

correlation had to be minimised. Further, while there is a need to understand narcissism in students in accordance with their domicile, the study failed to get adequate responses pertaining to each domain, which thus restricted the variable comparisons. Further, the study only addresses narcissism on account of two genders. There is however great scope for research in this study and particularly in this domain, to understand the extent of narcissism in different levels of education for Psychology students as well as practitioners.

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