

## AGGRESSION AND NARCISSISM: VALIDATING RELATIONSHIP IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Researches in Psychology have been attempting to understand associations between personality and aggressive behaviour to develop some interventional strategies to reduce aggression. Among personality factors, narcissism is considered a potential variable that plays an important role in aggressive behaviour. Narcissists seem to be overly reactive when their grandiose views are not confirmed or threatened by others, and they often become overtly aggressive. The aim of present study was to see if there are any differences in the levels of narcissism among individuals high and low on aggression. It was hypothesized that highly aggressive individuals exhibit more narcissistic features as compared to less aggressive individuals and males would be higher on narcissism as compared to females. For this purpose, 136 individuals with equal number of males and females in the age range of 18-21 years were randomly selected from various colleges of three cities of the state of Punjab (Patiala, Ludhiana and Chandigarh), India who were given Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) and Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Two-way ANOVA showed that highly aggressive individuals were more narcissistic as compared to low aggressive individuals.

*Key words:* aggression, narcissism, gender, India

Reducing dysfunctional aggression has been a focus of all psychologists regardless of their different specializations. Researches have been conducted to understand factors associated with aggression, knowledge of which would enable practitioner to devise interventional programs to reduce aggression. Studies in existing literature have shown significant association between personality and aggressive behaviour (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 1993; Caprara, Regalia, & Bandura, 2002; Coie & Dodge, 2000; Crick & Dodge,

1994; Geen, 1990).

The researchers suggest a set of underlying variables that may influence aggressive behaviour. These variables include cognitive processing, negative affect, self-regulation, and social-information processing etc. Individual's personality may further bias the ways he or she perceives and interprets information, which may provoke aggressive behaviour. Among other factors, narcissism can play a significant role in initiating aggressive behaviour. Individuals with high narcissism react aggressively when their grandiose views are not conformed or threatened by others (Sturman, 2000)

According to psychoanalysis point of view (Freud, 1914; Kernberg, 1970, 1975; Kohut, 1966; White, 1980), narcissism is a kind of syndrome cha-

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racterized by poor ego development, lack of integration of the self, and an inability to empathize. Narcissist individual presents himself/herself as self-confident and self-secure, but actually he/she feels quite fragile and insecure. Results of other empirical investigations considered narcissism as a "personality trait" (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Wink & Gough, 1990). Those who are high on narcissism are characterized by high levels of leadership, authority, self-absorption, and self-admiration, sense of superiority/arrogance, and exploitiveness/entitlement. Highly self-focused individual tends to have little concern for others and to be less empathetic. It might be the reason that narcissism has been found to be correlated with dominance and aggression (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Sturman, 2000). To protect an unstable self-image, narcissists may exhibit extreme retaliation when their grandiose self-concept is threatened (Baumeister, Bushman & Campbell, 2000). Narcissists have been found to have a predisposition to show hostility (e.g., Brown, 2004; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). They show more anger and aggression in response to insult (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Another reason of such aggression in response to negative interpersonal feedback may be their inability to control the impulse to retaliate when faced with a threat to their self-esteem which is unstable and fragile (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Narcissism is also characterized by a vulnerability to threats to the self-concept, thus, when ego-threatening situations occur, narcissistic individuals tend to behave

aggressively (Baumeister et al., 2000; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Emmons (1987) linked narcissism to extreme emotional liability and strong reactions, which could include anger and rage (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Emmons (1984) noted that factors that restrain aggressive behaviour seem to be deficient in narcissists.

Effect of gender has been found significant in the expression of narcissism (e.g., Philipson, 1985; Richman & Flaherty, 1990). For example, male participants were more likely than women to express overt narcissism. In contrast, women tend to conform to expectations of their sex role and meet their narcissistic goals through more subtle, indirect, and affiliative means (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Richman and Flaherty (1990) found that men scored higher than women on several items in the Narcissistic Traits Scale, including items reflecting exploitativeness, entitlement, and a lack of empathy. In addition, Tschanz, Morf, and Turner (1998) found that exploitativeness/entitlement showed lower correlations with the other narcissism factors in women than in men.

There are numerous studies describing relationship between aggression and narcissism, as mentioned earlier, but in Indian context there is no research work that assesses whether aggressive and non-aggressive individuals differ in narcissistic features and whether there are any gender differences in narcissism. The present study was thus an attempt to explore whether any such differences exist thereby providing groundwork for intervention techniques. The main

objective of this research was to study narcissistic features among individuals high and low on aggression. Gender difference among individuals in narcissism was also explored. It was hypothesized that individuals high on aggression would exhibit more narcissistic features as compared to those who are low on aggression and males would be higher on narcissism as compared to females.

## Method

### *Sample*

Sample of this study comprised 136 individuals with equal number of males and females with the age range of 18-21 years ( $M = 19.70$ ,  $SD = .92$ ), selected randomly from various colleges of three cities of Punjab state (Patiala, Ludhiana and Chandigarh), India. All participants were in their final year of graduation and belonged to urban areas. Prior consent of college principals was taken for data collection.

### *Instruments*

#### *1. Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992)*

AQ is a revised version of Buss and Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957). It consists of 29 items, distributed unequally among Anger (7 items- item number 1, 9, 12, 18, 19, 23, & 28), Physical Aggression (9 items-item number 2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 16, 22, 25, & 29), Hostility (8 items- item number 3, 7, 10, 15, 17, 20, 24, & 26) and Verbal Aggression (5 items- item number 4, 6, 14, 21, & 27). Subjects have to respond to each item on 5 point Likert-type scale rang-

ing from extremely uncharacteristic of me (1) to extremely characteristic of me (5). Given responses i.e. one to five, were then added for each subscale, total of which constituted total aggression score. High score depicts high aggression. For the total score, internal consistency (alpha) was .89 and 9-week test-retest reliability was .80 (Buss & Perry, 1992; Harris, 1997). Validity is supported by acceptable correlations with other self-report measures of aggression and with peer nominations of aggressive behaviour (Buss & Perry, 1992; Harris, 1997).

#### *2. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988)*

The Revised Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) was used to assess narcissistic features in present research work. The NPI is by far the most commonly used measure by social and personality researchers to assess narcissism in normal populations. The most recent review on narcissism, for example, focused almost exclusively on empirical data collected with the NPI (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). NPI is a 40- items forced choice self-report questionnaire that requires respondents to select one statement out of two statements in one item, which is true about them or which they feel more suitable to themselves. Out of two options, one is measuring narcissistic feature and other is either neutral or measuring something other than narcissism. Score of one is awarded when narcissism loaded item is selected by the subject and zero is given to other responses. In present research, only total score was calculated to assess the ex-

tent of narcissistic features present in participants. Total score comprised of the total number of narcissism-loaded items selected by participants. It evolved through a 54-item, four-factor version to its current 40-items, seven-factor version. The factors were named Authority, Exhibitionism, Superiority, Entitlement, Exploitativeness, Self-sufficiency, and Vanity. NPI has been validated extensively in normal populations (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The internal consistency estimate for the revised total scale is .83 (Raskin and Terry, 1988). The reliability, when tested for alternate forms eight weeks apart, was .72 (Raskin & Hall, 1981).

### *Procedure*

Various colleges were approached in three cities to seek permissions to conduct our study and times to administer the questionnaires were taken from respective principals. At the given time, students of final year of graduation were randomly selected from each section of their classes with equal number of males and females. For random selection, slips were prepared representing students' roll number, then out of these slips required number of males and females were drawn out. They were briefed about the objectives of the study and their consent to participate in study was taken after ensuring confidentiality. The participants were then given Aggression Questionnaire and Narcissistic Personality Inventory along with instructions to fill these questionnaires. After collecting data, scoring and analysis was done. The participants were divided into two groups,

i.e., high on aggression and low on aggression, based upon their scores on aggression questionnaire, using median split half technique separately on males and females. Median scores for males and females on Aggression Questionnaire were found to be 84 and 82, respectively. Males who scored higher than 84 on aggression questionnaire were considered as high on aggression and below 84 were taken as low on aggression. Same procedure was applied for females with their median score on aggression i.e. 82. A two-way ANOVA (2x2) was calculated for two levels of aggression and two levels of gender.

### **Results**

Table 1 shows the demographic details of the sample under study. From Table 2, it is evident that individuals who were highly aggressive scored more on narcissism,  $M = 22.08$ ,  $SD = 2.74$ , as compared to those who were low on aggression,  $M = 18.25$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ . Table 2 also presents that males scored more on narcissism  $M = 20.55$ ,  $SD = 3.4$ , as compared to females  $M = 19.79$ ,  $SD = 3.8$ , but difference between the levels of narcissism between males and females did not reach the significance level,  $F(1,132) = 1.54$ ,  $p = ns$ .

The difference between highly aggressive individuals and low aggressive individuals was found to be significant as shown in Table 3,  $F(1,132) = 34.90$ ,  $p < .01$ . It indicates that aggressive individuals exhibited more narcissistic features as compared to non-aggressive individuals. Table 3 also shows that interactive effect of

**Table 1***Demographic Characteristics of Sample*

Gender	Males = 68 Females = 68
Cities	Patiala (Punjab) 48 Ludhiana (Punjab) 54 Chandigarh (Punjab) 34
Age (years)	M = 19.70 years SD = 0.92 years
Living area	Urban
Educational qualification	Final Year of Graduation

**Table 2***Means and Standard Deviations of Narcissism Scores as Related to Aggression and Gender*

Groups	Narcissism Scores	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High on Aggression	22.08	2.74
Low on Aggression	18.25	4.5
Men	20.55	3.4
Women	19.79	3.8

*Note:* Values are means scores of narcissism obtained by individuals high on aggression and those low on aggression, and by men and women.

aggression and gender on narcissism was not found to be statistically significant,  $F(1,132) = 1.65, p = ns$ .

Table 4 depicts detailed analysis that is showing mean scores of narcissism obtained separately by males who were high on aggression and those of low on aggression, and females who were high on aggression and those of low on aggression. Both males and females who were high on aggression were found to be high on

narcissism as compared to those who were low on aggression. Figure 1 also shows mean scores for narcissism with relation to gender.

The present findings throw light on the fact that aggressive individuals tend to have more narcissistic features as compared to non-aggressive individuals. Neither main effect of gender nor interactive effect of gender and aggression on narcissism was found to be significant.

**Table 3**

*ANOVA Summary for the Effect of Aggression (high on Aggression & Low on Aggression) and Gender on Narcissism*

Variables	SS	df	MS	F
Aggression (A)	496.00	1	496.00	34.90*
Gender (B)	21.94	1	21.94	1.54
AXB	23.50	1	23.50	1.65
Error	1875.80	132	14.21	

\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 4**

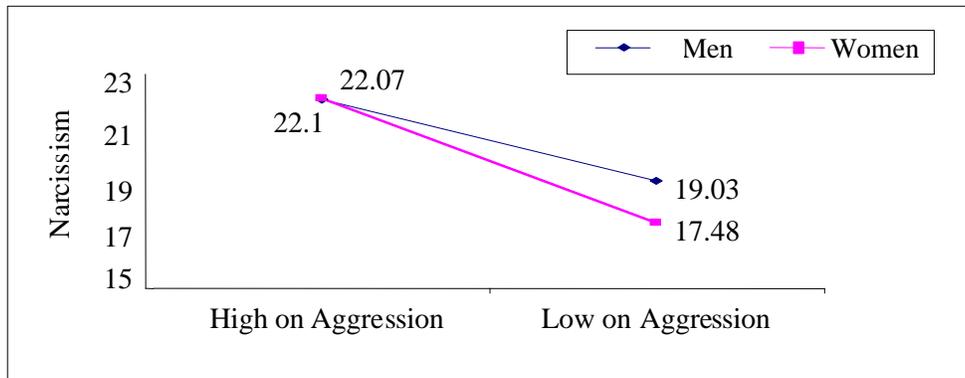
*Mean Scores of Narcissism obtained separately by Men and Women High on Aggression and Low on Aggression.*

Groups	High Aggression	Low Aggression
	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>
Men	22.07	19.03
Women	22.1	17.48

*Note:* Values are mean scores of Narcissism, bifurcated for gender in each group, i.e., high on aggression and low on aggression groups.

**Figure 1**

*Mean Scores of Narcissism, bifurcated for Gender in each Group (High on Aggression and Low on Aggression)*



## Discussion

Narcissists have unstable self-esteem; they are extremely sensitive to insult and criticism (Emmons, 1984). Do aggressive and non-aggressive individuals differ in the level of narcissism was the basic question that the present research attempted to answer.

In present study, aggressive individuals have been found to have more narcissistic feelings as compared to their less aggressive counterparts. The explanation for the finding comes from the fact that unrealistic, unstable and fragile high self-esteem leads individuals to behave aggressively in situation wherein they perceive any threat to their sense of grandiose self (Baumeister et al., 2000). They retaliate in such situation to keep their inflated self-esteem at same level (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Such individuals are more vulnerable or prone to experience aggressive encounter because unrealistic expectations may not be fulfilled every time they interact with others that leads to perception of threat which ultimately results in aggressive behaviour. The findings can also be explained with the help of threatened egotism theory (Baumeister et al., 1996). According to this theory, aggression is more likely among people with exceptionally high self-esteem than people with low self-esteem, particularly, if faced with a threat to their overly unreal positive self-view. The threatened egotism theory does not apply to all people with high self-esteem, but is specific to individuals with fragile and unstable self-esteem, such as people with narcissism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In the self-regulatory model

Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) state that while the narcissistic sense of self is clearly inflated, it is also highly vulnerable. According to this model, people with narcissism are constantly concerned and motivated to maintain their inflated self-esteem through a variety of mechanisms. When faced with a threat to their self-esteem, an individual with narcissism may use aggression as a mechanism to re-establish their self-esteem. (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

In recent years, due to seriousness of aggression problem, there has been renewed interest in learning why humans sometimes behave aggressively. The ultimate motive of all such researches is to find out what are the significant factors associated with aggression so that by manipulating these factors, aggression among individuals can be controlled (Kazdin, 1987; Loeber, 1990). The present study also had the same purpose in which one factor has been found significant, i.e., Narcissism. It is implicated here that to reduce aggression, there is dire need to focus on individuals' over-inflated self-esteem. If individuals have inflated sense of self-esteem that is not realistic, then some intervention must be planned to make them aware about optimal and stable self-esteem that cannot be threatened by situational factors.

Gender differences were not found significant in this study. Though males were found more narcissistic than females as it was hypothesized, but the difference was not found to be statistically significant. The support for the finding comes from a study done by Raskin and Terry (1988) who found negligible corre-

lations between each of components of Narcissistic Personality Inventory and gender. In another study, males scored more on NPI as compared to females (Kansi, 2003) but this difference was very small.

To conclude, it can be stated that aggression is a key problem among individuals that further leads to many other related interpersonal and intrapersonal problems. There may be many situational and personality factors that predispose individuals to behave aggressively. In present study, narcissism is found to be significant factor in aggression, i.e., individuals with inflated sense of self-esteem tend to retaliate in situations which threaten their self-esteem. It is implicated here to plan some intervention for aggressive individuals to make their self-esteem realistic and optimal so that aggressive retaliation can be prevented. The present finding has serious implications for intervention work because it may be more effective if focus of interventions is to modify individuals' irrational and unreal self-appraisals rather than focusing on enhancing their self-esteem further (Baumeister et al., 1996; Hughes, Cavell, & Grossman, 1997).

#### *Limitations and Suggestions*

As this study was conducted on a particular age group, i.e., 18-21 years in which aggression is found to be on its peak, thus findings of the study should be generalized with caution to age groups other than 18-21 years. Secondly, the present study focuses only on one variable among manifold potential factors associated with aggression, thus others factors must also be

considered during developing some intervention plan to reduce aggression. Cross cultural differences should also be kept in mind while generalizing the findings to other cultures.

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