

## Research Paper

## Relationship Between Narcissism and Unforgiveness Among Indian Adults: A Mixed Methods Investigation

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**Background and Purpose:** Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity and is associated with various psychological challenges. Narcissists often avoid forgiveness and cling to emotions that reinforce their self-image. This study examined the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness in Indian adults.

**Materials and Methods:** Using an explanatory mixed-methods design, 197 participants aged 20 to 40 completed the narcissism personality inventory and unforgiveness measure in the quantitative phase. The data were analyzed using the Pearson product-moment method. Using percentile ranks, 36 extreme scorers on the narcissism measure (18 higher than above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile and 18 lower than below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile) were chosen from Doctor Harisingh Gour University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India, for a telephone interview in the qualitative phase to examine differences in unforgiveness. The interview questions were related to the causes of unforgiveness.

**Results:** A total of 197 participants aged 19 to 39 years (Mean±SD: 28.43±6.28 y) participated in the first study phase, while 36 participants (Mean±SD: 29.67±5.78 y) were chosen for the second phase. The results showed a weak positive correlation ( $r=0.041$ ,  $P=0.570$ ) between narcissism and unforgiveness. In the qualitative phase, differences emerged in how people with high and low narcissism scorers described the causes of unforgiveness. People with high narcissism scores cited ignorance, betrayal, and breach of trust as the leading causes. In contrast, people with low narcissism scores tended to forgive most offenses. Still, they cited serious crimes such as harassment, sexual assault, and physical or verbal abuse as significant reasons for their unforgiveness.

**Conclusion:** The study found a positive correlation between narcissism and unforgiveness among Indian adults, indicating a minimal association. However, qualitative data showed that high-level narcissists often cited betrayal and breaches of trust as significant causes of unforgiveness. In contrast, low-level narcissists cited serious offenses such as harassment and abuse.

**Keywords:** Grandiosity, Narcissism, Personality, Telephone interview, Holding forgiveness

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## Introduction

**N**arcissism is a personality trait characterized by excessive self-importance, a need for admiration and a lack of empathy. It exists on a spectrum, from healthy self-confidence to pathological narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Narcissistic individuals often seek validation, have a grandiose self-image and may exploit others to maintain their self-worth [1]. The study of personality traits and associated symptoms has long been a primary focus of psychological research. Researchers have explored how these traits influence social interactions, emotional responses and psychological outcomes. Narcissism, characterized by grandiosity, a requirement for admiration and interpersonal exploitation, is a complex personality trait that has gained significant research attention in recent years [2, 3]. Evidence suggests that narcissists are very sensitive to criticism and negative feedback, often responding with aggression [4]. While seeking attention and admiration is a defining trait of narcissism, narcissists typically show little concern for others and avoid attending to their needs [5]. Narcissism is linked with self-enhancement and an inflated sense of self-worth; it also contributes to interpersonal difficulties, including conflicts and difficulties in maintaining relationships [6].

It has been evident that narcissists are more likely to become aggressive toward people who they believe have insulted them [7]. The feeling of being personally betrayed also makes them more offensive than others [8]. Some studies suggest that narcissists find forgiving harder than others when faced with transgression [9, 10]. Although some researchers have shown that people with high levels of narcissism are less forgiving of others [11], researchers lack consensus on the narcissism-forgiveness association [12]. For example, Exline et al. found a moderate negative association between forgiveness and narcissism [13], while Eaton et al. found a weak negative correlation between the two [14]. Brown found no relationship between forgiveness and narcissism at all [15]. Unforgiveness, a relatively newer construct, is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by negative emotions towards the transgressors.

Unforgiveness refers to the persistent state of resentment, bitterness and hostility toward a transgressor. Studying unforgiveness is crucial as it impacts psychological well-being, fostering stress, anxiety and depression while hindering emotional healing and interpersonal relationships. Understanding its mechanisms helps develop interventions promoting forgiveness, enhancing

mental health and fostering social harmony. Research on unforgiveness also informs clinical and counseling practices, aiding individuals in managing unresolved anger and mitigating its detrimental impacts on overall well-being [16, 17]. Although Worthington and Wade highlighted the relationship between unforgiveness narcissism and other personality traits, the relationship is still vague [18]. While the association between narcissism and forgiveness may seem counterintuitive, current research has begun to shed light on the nuanced relationships between the two. According to Twenge and Campbell, narcissists' egocentricity and lack of empathy can limit their willingness to forgive because they have difficulty understanding others' perspectives and feelings [19]. Additionally, narcissists are more inclined to regard themselves as victims, heightening sentiments of resentment and rage [13]. Thus, the prevalence of narcissistic features may indicate a lower proclivity to forgive, particularly when actions are seen as challenges to their inflated self-image.

The relationship between narcissism and forgiveness remains a complex puzzle in the field of understanding human behavior and relationships. Although research has made significant strides in identifying possible associations and mechanisms between these traits, many concerns remain unresolved. Substantial progress has been made in the study of narcissism in terms of conceptualization, assessment and methodology. However, there is still much to know about the link between unforgiveness and narcissism. Additionally, there is a lack of research, and to our knowledge, to date, there is no research examining the association between narcissism and unforgiveness. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the association between narcissism and unforgiveness. This study seeks to understand the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness and to explore the causes of unforgiveness in low and high-narcissistic adults. Studying the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness among adults is valuable for comprehending how narcissistic traits influence interpersonal conflicts, resentment, and emotional well-being. Insights can aid in developing interventions to promote forgiveness, reduce hostility, and enhance relational harmony, particularly in clinical and counseling settings focused on personality and conflict resolution.

## Materials and Methods

### Research design

Explanatory research design, a variant of mixed methods design, was used to investigate the relationship

between narcissism and unforgiveness. Explanatory research design involves a quantitative study followed by a qualitative study. Since we aimed to understand the role of narcissism in shaping the unforgiveness behaviors of adults, this research design suited our study goals the most.

### Study sample

A total of 197 participants aged 19 to 39 years (Mean $\pm$ SD: 28.43 $\pm$ 6.28 y) participated in the study's first phase using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In phase two, 36 participants aged 19 to 39 (Mean $\pm$ SD: 29.67 $\pm$ 5.78 y) were selected through purposive sampling. These participants were regular students of the various academic departments of Doctor [Harisingh Gour University](#), Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India. A priori power analysis was performed to estimate the sample size and understand the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness. A medium effect size of 0.30 was chosen per the criteria that Cohen [20] suggested with  $\alpha=0.05$  and power=0.95. The projected sample size required to achieve this effect size was  $n=111$ . Power analysis was done with the help of G\*Power software, version 3 [21]. We used a sample size of 197 to attain the study objectives. The sample size in the qualitative phase was determined by the saturation method [22] among the participants scoring above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile and below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the narcissism scale. The Pearson product-moment method was used to compute the correlation between narcissism and unforgiveness, while percentile ranks were used to identify extreme scorers on narcissism measures. The researchers Singh et al. [16] played key roles in designing and conducting the study on "narcissism" and "unforgiveness" using a mixed methods approach. They contributed equally to conceptualizing the research framework, developing quantitative and qualitative measures, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the association between these constructs.

### Inclusion criteria

The study included Indian males and females who lacked any physical and or psychological illness presently and were over 18 and under 40 years of age.

### Study procedure

The study was divided into phases: Quantitative and qualitative. In phase one (quantitative analysis), a Google Form was created with some basic demographic

information (age, gender, education, domicile, perceived physical and mental health status, etc.), the narcissism personality inventory (NPI) [23] and the unforgiveness measure [24]. The scale consists of 13 items. NPI is a brief measure of grandiose narcissism derived from the NPI-40. It demonstrates good internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.70-0.80$ ), test re-test reliability, and construct validity. Factor analysis supports its three-dimensional structure: Leadership/authority, grandiose exhibitionism, entitlement/exploitativeness. The internal consistency for three subcomponents of the unforgiveness measure [24], namely cognitive-evaluative ( $\alpha=0.84$ ), emotional-ruminative ( $\alpha=0.87$ ) and offender reconstrual ( $\alpha=0.79$ ), have been reported to be adequate for the three components [24]. The narcissism scale, unforgiveness scale, and interview for unforgiveness were suitable for the target population as they measure key constructs relevant to the study. Their appropriateness was confirmed through prior validation in similar cultural contexts, pilot testing for clarity and expert reviews to ensure content validity. In the qualitative phase, the interview was refined based on participant feedback and thematic saturation, ensuring it effectively captured the nuances of narcissism and unforgiveness within the population.

The Google Form was circulated online via social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, G-mail, LinkedIn, etc. One hundred ninety-seven males and females filled out the Google Form. The Pearson correlation was calculated to see the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness. In phase two (qualitative study), participants with high and low scores on the NPI [23] were consulted telephonically and asked to participate in phase two.

The qualitative interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing participants to share their experiences related to narcissistic traits and unforgiveness in depth. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Coding was performed inductively, with initial open coding followed by axial coding to identify patterns and themes. Two independent coders ensured reliability, and inconsistencies were resolved through discussion. Careful data collection and analysis facilitated data management, and member checking enhanced credibility and trustworthiness. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol based on previous literature to see the difference in the level of unforgiveness among high scorers and low scorers on narcissism. The interview contents were analyzed using the thematic analysis method [25]. The thematic analysis method follows six steps: 1) Familiarization with data through tran-

scription and reading, 2) Generating initial codes by identifying meaningful segments, 3) Searching for themes by clustering codes, 4) Reviewing themes for coherence, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Producing the final report. To enhance credibility and rigor, triangulation, member checking, inter-coder reliability, audit trails, reflexivity and rich descriptions [25]. Careful and systematic manual coding ensures systematic theme identification, strengthening validity and transparency.

## Results

In the first phase of the study, 197 participants aged 19 to 39 years (Mean±SD: 28.43±6.28 y) participated, while 36 participants aged 19 to 39 years (Mean±SD: 29.67±5.78 y) were chosen for the second phase.

### Study phase 1 (quantitative study)

Phase 1 of the study was conducted to examine the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness. A total of 197 males and females participated in phase 1 of the study. These participants aged 19 to 39 years represented both rural and urban domiciles. All participants had received university education and reflected diverse educational backgrounds. This demographic distribution ensured a balanced representation of young adults across different residential and academic contexts. Descriptive statistics and correlation (Table 1) analyses examined the relationships between narcissism and unforgiveness.

Keeping in mind the positive correlation between narcissism and unforgiveness ( $r=0.041$ ,  $P=0.570$ ), it was planned to conduct a qualitative study to understand the dynamics of this relationship among high and low scorers of narcissism.

### Study phase 2 (qualitative study)

In the second phase, the sample comprised 36 males and women aged 19 to 39, representing rural and urban backgrounds. All participants had a university education, ensuring diverse perspectives. Their educational experiences and domicile differences contributed to qualitatively exploring the studied phenomenon. It

was found that there are differences in the causes of unforgiveness for high and low scorers of narcissism. People who scored high on narcissism reported causes of unforgiveness differently as compared to people who scored low on narcissism.

### Causes of unforgiveness (high narcissism)

Participants with high scores on narcissism reported ignorance, betrayal, and breach of trust as the leading cause of unforgiveness. They explained that the offender has either done something that violated their trust or ignored them, which is the primary cause of their unforgiveness. Further, participants emphasized that they were unforgiving toward their offenders and that this unforgiving tendency had nothing to do with their perception of people. The instances of the unforgiving tendency of high scorers of unforgiveness were reflected in the following quotes of the participants.

She cheated on me, and I can't forgive her for that. (Participant [P] 1)

We were good friends, but suddenly, he started ignoring me, which hurt me, and I have decided that I will not forgive him for that (P 9).

When you do not expect from people, and they cheat on you, it makes the situation unforgivable (P 14).

It was hard for me to believe that she spread the rumor about me, and I am not going to forgive her (P 17).

The results show that individuals with high narcissism scores attribute their unforgiveness primarily to experiences of ignorance, betrayal and breaches of trust. Participants expressed that violations of their expectations, such as being ignored or deceived, were central to their unwillingness to forgive. Notably, they asserted that their unforgiving stance was not a generalized perception of people but rather a reaction to specific incidents. The qualitative accounts highlight a deep sense of personal hurt and perceived injustice. Statements such as "She cheated on me, I can't forgive her," and "He started ignoring me, which hurt me" underscore the emotional weight of perceived betrayal. These results suggest that

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean±SD	No.	r	P
Narcissism	5.081±2.12	197	0.041	0.570
Unforgiveness	39.60±7.07	197		

narcissistic individuals may link forgiveness to self-worth and relational expectations, reinforcing their challenge in letting go of grievances.

### Causes of unforgiveness (low narcissism)

In contrast to high scorers of narcissism, participants who scored low on narcissism reported that they forgive the person in most of the cases. Still, some severe offenses such as sexual assault and or verbal and physical abuse are some of the transgressions for which they are not forgiving. They reported that molestation, sexual assault, verbal and physical abuse and humiliation are unbearable to them and that they are not willing to forgive offenders in such instances.

I generally try to forgive people until it is not a severe crime (P 3).

There are only a few cases where I have not forgiven the person. I only do not forgive some people who wronged me so badly (P 5).

Yes, there are some instances where I am unforgiving of them, but this is for only severe offenses (P 11).

I learned this thing (forgiveness) from my parents, and I usually forgive people unless it is not a severe crime (P 18).

The results suggest that participants with lower narcissism scores generally exhibit a forgiving disposition, but their readiness to forgive is conditional. They make a clear division between minor transgressions, which they tend to forgive and severe offenses, such as sexual assault, verbal and physical abuse, molestation and humiliation, which they consider unforgivable. Their narratives highlight that forgiveness is guided by moral boundaries and personal values, often shaped by upbringing and social influences. While minor wrongdoings are met with leniency, severe transgressions elicit an unwavering stance of unforgiveness, indicating that forgiveness is not absolute but context-dependent. These results align with existing literature on moral and conditional forgiveness, reinforcing that individuals may adopt a selective approach when confronted with grave personal dignity and safety violations.

### Differences in unforgiveness of extreme scorers on narcissism measure

Individuals with high and low narcissism scores differ in their reasons for unforgiveness based on the nature

of the perceived transgression. High-narcissism individuals tend to be unforgiving when they experience personal betrayal, breach of trust, or social exclusion. Their unforgiveness is driven by perceived harm to their self-image and relational expectations, often unrelated to broader moral judgments. In contrast, low-narcissism individuals demonstrate a more general propensity to forgive but remain unforgiving in response to severe transgressions, such as sexual assault, abuse, or humiliation. Their unforgiveness is based on moral and ethical concerns rather than personal ego threats. While high-narcissism individuals emphasize interpersonal slights as intolerable, low-narcissism individuals view only extreme moral violations as unforgivable, reflecting self-focus and moral reasoning variations.

## Discussion

The present study attempted to understand the link between narcissism and unforgiveness, which is an untouched area of study till now. To our knowledge, limited research has been conducted to investigate this relationship explicitly. Thus, exploring the nexus between narcissism and unforgiveness has remained relatively underexplored [26]. While some studies have begun to uncover associations between narcissistic traits and tendencies toward holding grudges or challenges in forgiving, the overall body of research is still limited, indicating a requirement for more comprehensive studies into this complex relationship [27]. The study used an explanatory mixed methods design, including a quantitative study followed by a qualitative one. The quantitative study involved 197 participants and examined the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness. A positive correlation was found between narcissism and unforgiveness. The obtained correlation suggests that narcissism does not significantly influence unforgiveness. To our knowledge, no study has been conducted to examine this relationship explicitly, but certain studies have suggested a negative correlation between narcissism and forgiveness [9, 10, 18]. The present finding contradicts previous findings, indicating a negative correlation between narcissism and forgiveness. We conducted a second phase (qualitative study) to investigate this relationship further. In a qualitative study, 18 high scorers and 18 low scorers on narcissism were interviewed further by using a semi-structured interview schedule.

The results of the qualitative study showed differences in the description of the causes of unforgiveness between high and low scorers on narcissism. Participants with high narcissism scores reported that ignorance,



betrayal, and breach of trust were the leading causes of unforgiveness. This finding is similar to the previous findings suggesting the relationship between narcissism and forgiveness [10, 18]. Narcissists value themselves the most; in this situation, breach of trust and betrayal are the most common situations for them. That is why high scorers of narcissism reported ignorance, betrayal, and breach of trust as the main causes of unforgiveness.

On the other hand, participants who scored low on narcissism reported that in most situations, they try to forgive the offender. Still, there are some instances, such as harassment, sexual assault, physical and verbal assault, etc. which they are not forgiving. These findings are mirrored in some previous studies [28, 29]. There may also be many other explanations for this behavior. For example, not forgiving the offender of severe offenses can serve as the adoptive function and prevent future victimization [16, 30].

Overall, the results of the study provided nuanced insights into the link between narcissism and unforgiveness. Despite a previous assumption that narcissistic tendencies would be associated with higher levels of unforgiveness, we found a weak positive correlation between narcissism and unforgiveness, but this correlation was not statistically significant. These findings require a more in-depth investigation of the potential complexity of the relationship between these two variables. This, in turn, resulted in phase two of the study (qualitative study). The results of the qualitative study highlighted that participants with high narcissism scores tended to differ from participants with low scores. Still, no specific tendency toward unforgiveness was found in those with high narcissism scores.

One possible explanation for these results could be that, although narcissism is often characterized by self-centeredness and an exaggerated sense of self-importance, it does not always transfer immediately into heightened unforgiveness. Because narcissists are concerned with preserving a favorable self-image, they may engage in forgiving to retain their perceived moral superiority, even if this forgiveness does not align with their interests. Additionally, their desire for admiration and approval may push them to avoid confrontations that could harm their public image, promoting a proclivity for forgiveness. The lack of a significant correlation could be related to our measures. Unforgiveness is a complex emotional response influenced by various personal and social factors, and it is not easy to understand the dynamics of unforgiveness without investigating the

impact of environmental variables, personal experiences, and cultural influences.

### Study implications

The study findings have significant implications for theory and practice. The implications of this study include psychological, therapeutic, interpersonal and research domains. This study provides valuable insights for developing healthy interpersonal interactions, improving emotional well-being and guiding future research endeavors by shedding light on the intricate linkages between narcissism and unforgiveness. The research adds to our understanding of how personality factors, particularly narcissism, influence the way we interpret and respond to transgressions. The study sheds light on the complex interplay between narcissism and unforgiveness by uncovering different causes of unforgiveness among persons with varying levels of narcissism. Understanding the various causes of unforgiveness reported by individuals high and low in narcissism could inform therapeutic interventions. Interventions for individuals with high narcissism may focus on reducing ego sensitivity and building empathetic understanding to promote forgiveness in instances with perceived ego threats. Interventions could specifically aim to address the underlying trauma of serious offenses and may offer strategies for coping and managing the emotional distress associated with unforgiveness for persons with low narcissism. The research contributes to our understanding of the intricacies of unforgiveness by examining how it interacts with different personality factors.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the non-significant correlation between narcissism and unforgiveness challenges traditional notions and requires further research to understand this relationship in depth. These findings highlight the complexity of human behavior and the need for a better understanding of the relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness.

### Limitation and future direction

While this study is the first study to investigate the link between narcissism and unforgiveness and provides significant insights into the link between the two, it has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. The study's small sample size may limit the generalizability of the results. Participants were recruited from a limited demography, which may limit the results' generalizability. Using self-report measures to

assess narcissism and unforgiveness carries the risk of response bias and social desirability, which could have influenced the reported associations. Memory biases or emotional states at the time of interviews may have altered participants' recall of prior events, affecting the accuracy of reported experiences. The study does not thoroughly investigate cultural variations in the experience and understanding of unforgiveness, which may restrict its applicability to different cultural groups. Future research could explore the following directions to address these limitations and further deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between narcissism and unforgiveness.

Longitudinal studies can be conducted to examine how unforgiveness shapes over time and whether specific patterns emerge among people with varying levels of narcissism. Future studies could broaden the sample to include a more diverse range of demographics, ethnicities, and backgrounds to improve the generalizability of the results. Future studies could also examine cultural influences on unforgiveness and narcissism through cross-cultural comparisons to better understand these dynamics in different cultures. In conclusion, while this study makes important contributions to the field, overcoming the limitations identified and following these future directions may pave the way for a better understanding of how narcissism impacts unforgiveness.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

The study was approved by Ethics Committee of Doctor [Harisingh Gour University](#), Sagar, India (Code: DHS-GV/IEC/2022/04). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their inclusion in the study.

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### Authors contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the results and drafting of the manuscript. Each author approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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