Self-expression and Entitlement among Individuals with High Narcissistic Traits

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is one among the most disregarded personality trait. However, it is important to acknowledge that narcissism need not be always negative in nature. The study attempts to explore the facets of self-expression and entitlement among individuals who are characterized by high narcissistic traits in a culture where self-importance and sense of entitlement is regarded with contempt. Though narcissism is one among the most researched personality characteristic, most of the studies have not attempted to explore the self-expression and entitlement among individuals with high narcissistic traits especially from the oriental point of view where overt narcissism or self-importance is looked down upon by the societies as collectivism is the rule rather than exception. The specific objectives of the study are to explore the recurring themes in the self –expression and expression of self-views, the expression of agentic and communal self-views and to understand the expression of entitlement, how each individual feel about their own earnestness.

The study followed a qualitative research design with a social constructivist worldview as it was believed that realties are molded by social forces. The work was many a times rhetoric and relativistic in nature. The researcher explored the constructs of self-expression and entitlement using a validated semi-structured interview. The sample included young adults within the age range of 18-25 and were selected into the study based on their scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16). The consent participants was sort and they were recruited for a semi structured personal interview. Since the study employed the paradigm of qualitative approach and the constructs were hard to be quantified, the method of thematic analysis was used. The recurring themes that emerged from the data were grouped and analyzed with respect to the constructs studied. The three global themes perceived sense of desirable self, apprehensions in perception of self and dilemmas in expression of self, encompasses the organizing themes and the basic themes. The study concludes that the narcissistic structure is often expressed in relation to a communal self-view and the self-sacrificing behavior was more common than expected in the sample especially among female

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participants. It was also found that the entitlement was often related to moral supremacy and upholding morale rather than preferential benefits in social or interpersonal domains.

"Love seeketh only Self to please, / To bind another to its delight, /Joys in another's loss of ease, /And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite." (Poetry Foundation, 2017). In these lines, William Blakes encompasses the common notions we share on narcissism. Derived from the Greek mythological story of Narcissus, the word Narcissism has attained much popularity in the recent times (Twenge, 2009). The expression of narcissism has become more explicit and socially acceptable with the technological advancements and increased need for differentiation of self to reaffirm one's own uniqueness. Social media platforms, popularizing plastic surgeries, present day song lyrics are all considered to be the manifestations of the cultural acceptance of the trait (Crappell, 2013).

Narcissism in a globalized world.

Narcissism or rather defining one's strengths and achievements is no longer considered flamboyant or pathological but a minimal necessity in the current socio-political scenario. The fission ideology of the west, where each individual thrives to fission away from the other to create a unique identity for oneself and the fusion ideology of the oriental, where each strives to mirror the majority, had more or less fused with each other forming novel combinations of self- concept and self-expression (Rousell, 2016). Thereby though autoerotic and rhetoric in quality, narcissism has become an essential quality to espouse.

Theorists vary in their approach to conceptualizing narcissism from libidinal component for self-preservation (Freud, 1914) to deficient maternal relations (Cherick,1985) to parental interactions (Kernberg, 1967) to essential quality that enhance development of self, creativity and individuality (Kohut, 1968). Contemporary approaches had been mostly emphasizing on the early childhood experiences and interpersonal interactions arising from the same. Research suggests that narcissism and feelings of entitlement have increased significantly in the recent times (Twenge, 2009). Crappell (2013) also analyses the possibility of current narcissism as an expression of a shame based fear- a fear of not being unique or a fear of not being able to stand out in a crowd.

Self-expression and Entitlement.

Self-expression is a product of the interplay between the self-image, self-esteem, social toleration, life satisfaction and public expression of oneself. Campbell et al (2007) suggests that self-views can be of two types- agentic and communal. Agentic self-view refers to the emphasis on personal achievements and is highly correlated with narcissism whereas a communal self-view accentuates more on the standards of morality and qualities of social harmony. Contemporary research also seeks differences in cultural expression of narcissism (Rousell, 2016) as social values differ across the globe. In cultures where conformity is the rule rather than exception, the crude expression of narcissism can be pruned at the early stages. Psychological entitlement refers to individuals consistently believing that they deserve

preferential rewards and treatment without considering the actual performance or quality of a trait and it is highly correlated with the construct of narcissism. (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). The equifinality of the narcissistic aetiologia combined with the societal need for self-exhibition of one's achievements lay a seamless ground for a qualitative enquiry into the expression and entitlement in narcissism. This research therefore attempts to delve into the expressions of narcissism and entitlement from a social constructivist viewpoint with an impression that all values are biased and are thus relativistic. The varied facets of self-expression and entitlement are analyzed and thematically represented.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of eight individuals within the age brackets of 20 to 35 years (75% female) who were found to have high scores in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory- 16 (Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006).The participants hailed from different parts of South India and were predominantly from decent socioeconomic status and had a minimum of undergraduate level education. The participants were recruited using the purposive sampling principles due to the skimpy availability of the population and declined consent for cooperation in research proceedings**.**

Instruments

1.   **Narcissistic Personality Inventory- 16 (NPI-16).** NPI-16 is a short measure of narcissism which is found to be highly correlated with Raskin and Terry NPI-40 questionnaire. It yielded satisfactory internal consistency and was significantly correlated with NPI-40, big five personality constructs and self-esteem. A satisfactory convergent validity also obtained in comparison with 1988, NPI-40. The test-retest reliability α was 0.69 at time 1 and 0.78 at time 2 (Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006).

2.   **Self-descriptive narrative and Semi Structured Interview.**Participants completed a self-descriptive narrative, a 150-200 worded essay on what think about themselves and what they think others think about them. This was followed by the semi-structured interview. Major domains that were covered in the schedule and corresponding sample questions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Showing the lines of enquiry and sample questions of the interview schedule.

Domain	Lines of enquiry	Sample Questions
Initial questions	Self-description, self-view, role of significant others	What do you consider is your biggest achievement in life? How did you feel about it when you were recognized? How do you deal with situations where people criticize your moral standards or value systems? Is there anyone who had contributed selflessly for your achievement?
Self-expression	Emotional expression, self-	How do you express yourself when you achieve something?

Domain	Lines of enquiry	Sample Questions
	presentation	What do you think about expression of one's own ideas and achievements on social media
Entitlement	Regarding the question of what each deserves, response to criticisms, perception of entitlement of others.	Do you think you earn enough respect in your professional or personal relationships? Why do you think others feel or do so? What do you feel at that instances?
		How would you feel like when your boss or partner criticizes you on your capability? How do you express yourself then?
		Have you ever thought about how you would respond if your partner leaves you?
		How important is fortunes for you? Is everyone equally entitled to it?

Probing was done to elicit rich information for certain domains. Interviews were recorded in a mobile audio recording application and are documented in the field notes.

Procedure

The consent for participation was sort from the identified population. The screening tool, the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory, NPI-16 (Raskin & Terry, 1988) was administered to consenting individuals. An average score in the NPI scale was considered appropriate for further inclusion in the study. The selected participants were approached in person, further briefed about the study and their consent for participation was confirmed. Participants then completed a self-descriptive narrative, a 150-200 worded essay on what think about themselves and what they think others think about them. This was followed by the semi-structured interview. The data obtained from the self-descriptive narrative and the interview were audio recorded, transcribed and coded manually. Equal attention was paid to the entire data during the coding procedure to contain all patterns in the data. A rigorous and thorough analysis of the coded data was then done to identify the emerging themes apposite to the objectives of the study. Codes that appeared similar were grouped together and outliers were redefined or discarded. The resulting clusters were then organized to form a thematic framework. The emerging themes were then named and briefly defined by the researcher. Themes were then systematized into three levels- basic, organizing and global themes and a pictorial illustration of the same was prepared. Relevant excerpts from the data were then quoted alongside the themes to complement the definitions of the same.
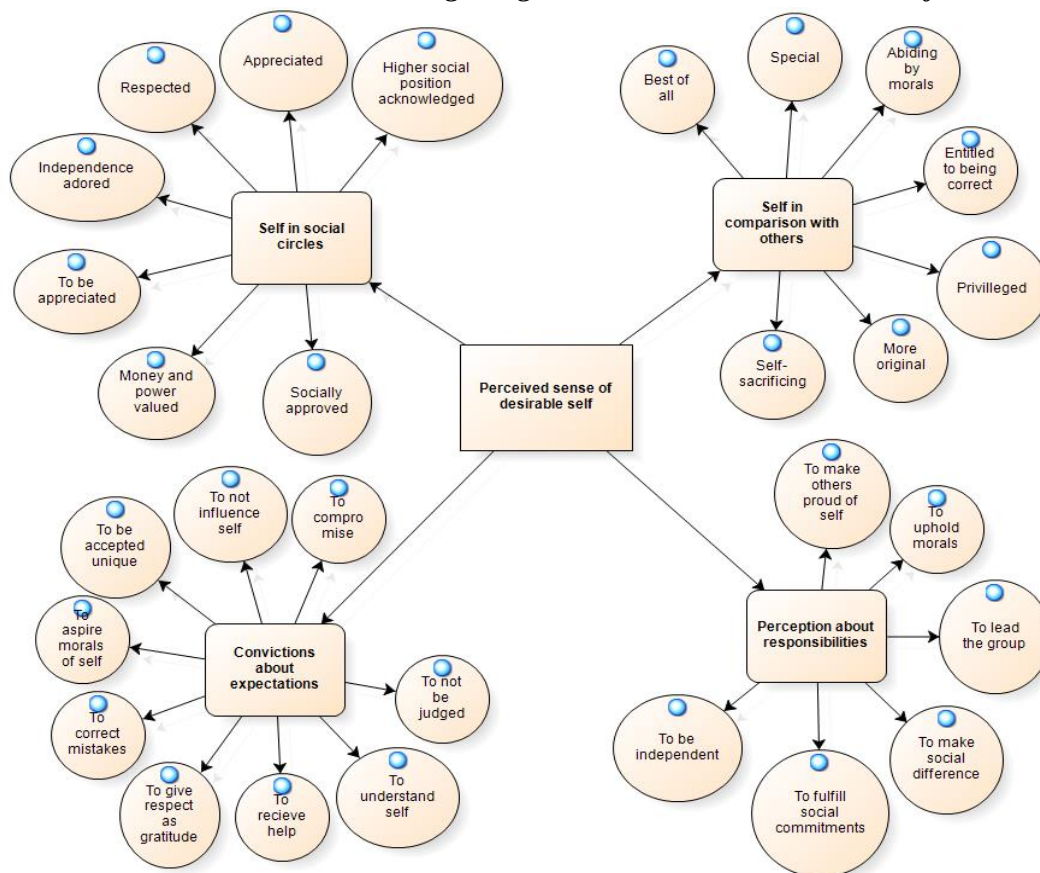
RESULTS

This qualitative study explores the various facets of self- expression and entitlement among individuals with high narcissistic traits by identifying relevant themes from the data. It further attempts to elucidate the recurring themes of expression of self-views, the nature of agentic and communal view of self in a collectivistic culture and to understand the expression of entitlement in a socially appropriate manner. From the data obtained, three overarching

themes- perceived sense of desirable self, apprehensions in perception of self and dilemmas in expression of self were identified. These global themes were derived from a pool of organizing themes which are resultants from the basic themes.

Perceived Sense of desirable self
Figure 1. Thematic network illustrating the global theme Perceived sense of desirable self.

The theme encompasses the four organising themes the perception of self in social circles, perception of self in comparison to others, convictions about expectations about self and perception about responsibilities and duties of self. There is an increased tendency to emphasis one's uniqueness as in the comment of Sangeetha. "I am a person who do things differently and I like doing things differently." (Sangeetha, Personal Communication, 14 November 2016). In social circles, individual perceives that the society or people acknowledge their greater social position and approves of them in all their endeavours. Sometimes this approval is perceived as the consequent of perceived domination they have over the others. "Some would have seen my potential or some would have seen me not doing something to them like not harming them or so. Even when I can harm them, I am not harming them. It depends on their point of view" (George, Personal Communication, 24 October 2016)

Others are perceived to be respectful of their independence, power and economic status. In comparison with others, they perceive themselves to be special, best in their groups, more original, self-sacrificing, and more abiding of morals. They also consider themselves to be

right at everything they undertake as in the following excerpt. "I am good at taking decisions. I am good in problem solving. I am very good in considering different impacts of implementing a decision. I can juxtapose and contrast the possible solutions and select the feasible one. So, I think that is what a good leader does." (James, Personal Communication, 13 December 2016).
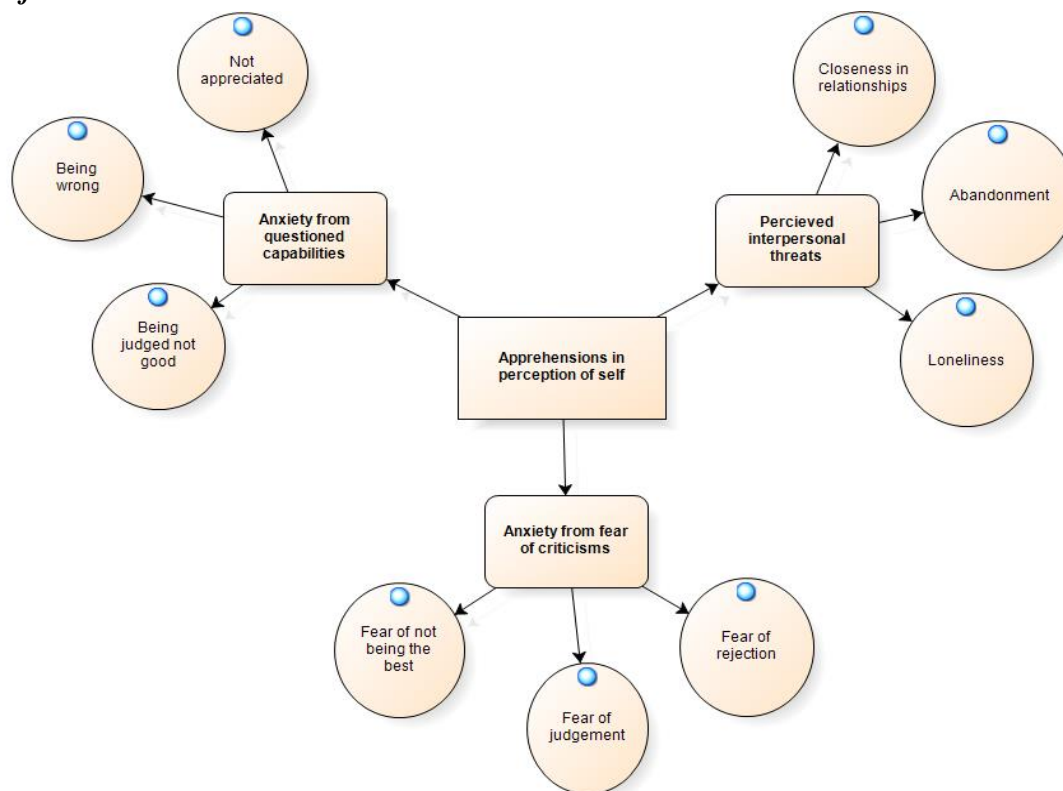
The data suggests that they often have a one-sided approach to expectations. They are likely to expect others to be more compromising, understanding and non- judgmental. The others are also expected to value their greater moral values and uniqueness. About perception of duties and responsibilities, self is regarded as the change maker, and the major responsibility of self is to lead the group, fulfil social commitments and to make others proud of self.

The attribution of another's emotion as one's own and ignorance of one's own feelings of hurt was also not very uncommon among the data. "if something hurts him, it hurts me double. If something hurts both of the them, the hurt that I will get will be more because of the dad. I can't see him in pain." (Emie, Personal Communication, 29 September 2016). Another typical example "I have given them the opportunity to make fun of me that's why they are making fun of me." I don't know…I…I don't know how… I don't know what… the answer for this question. I…I… As I told I… it's all because of me…because I am too friendly to them too like… I can't take stand for myself so if they say anything to me I will just stand here… I will just hear." (Saniya, Personal Communication, 4 October 2016). These quotes suggest an inner fear of being taken advantage of but at the same time they want to sacrifice their pleasures for the benefit of others. This phenomenon according to Rousell (2016) is associated with narcissism in collectivist cultures and is interpreted as an attempt to regard oneself as extremely good and suffering and therefore is more deserving of sympathy and praise.

Apprehensions in Perception of self
In apprehensions about perception of self, there is a significant anxiety with regard to instances where one's capability is questioned. This becomes more evident in situations where the actions of self are judged by others, or are proved to be wrong or did not warrant for appreciation as expected by the self. Emie reacts to criticizing instances with terror "I will find it very irritating to myself. Why… why is that person thinking about me like that like, I can't do it." (Emie, Personal Communication, 29 September 2016) whereas George thinks "People tend to the see the wrong messages in the achievements.… they just negate your achievements more and more" (George, Personal Communication, 24 October 2016). The tendency of self to either negate oneself or the other as a coping mechanism to criticism is well exemplified.

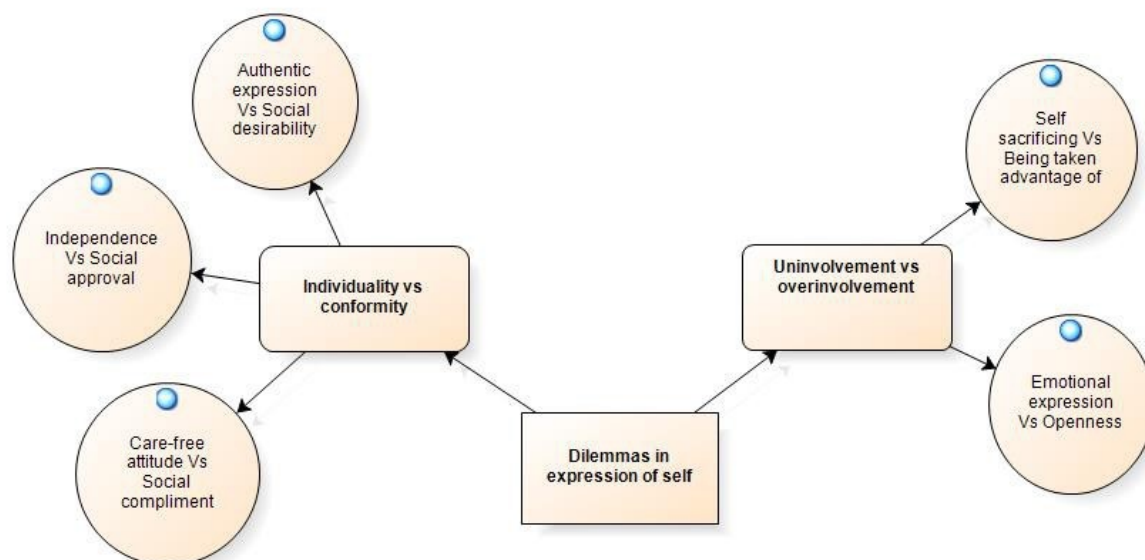*Figure 2. Thematic network illustrating the global theme Apprehensions in Perception of Self.*

Even if they try to accept mistakes, the acceptance is superficial and they themselves rigidly believe in their capability. They might also try to rationalize the questioning and set higher aspirations for themselves as in the opinion of George. "Only the tree with fruits are thrown at. When they criticize me, they understand that I have a greater, higher potential to achieve. They understand that this is not my best. Their criticisms are telling me I could go further if I wanted to" (George, Personal Communication, 24 October 2016).

In perceiving one's self, there is a perceived threat with regard to interpersonal relationships which is escalated by fears of abandonment and loneliness. Often this leads to the dilemma of determining the closeness in relationships arise as in this case. "I always anticipate personal dangers and I don't think people around me are as truthful as I am. And because of this they are not likely to respond to me in the same spirit as I do. So, I don't see the point of expecting something from them or my spouse" (James, Personal Communication, 13 December 2016). Criticizing situations are also a depot that lead to apprehensions in self-perception. Fear of criticism and judgement and the fear of not being the best in any of the activities escalate these apprehensions. However, as Emie mentions, "I don't want that to be inside but then at the end of the day, relationship matters. I need people around. I can't see someone going away from me because I did something wrong." (Emie, Personal Communication, 29 September 2016), there is a constant need to have people around.

Dilemmas in expression of self

Figure 3. Thematic network illustrating the global theme Dilemmas in expression of Self.

The two major dilemmas in expression of one's self are the dilemma regarding individuality or conformity and the dilemma with regard to what one should give or should not give in a relationship. The individuals have conflicting needs for independence as well as for social approval and social desirability leading to the dilemma between independence and conformity. The mixed notions of ideological stance with respect to cultural standards is assumed to play a pivotal role in the development of this dilemma. The dilemma between expression of the authentic self and a need for social desirability is evident in the following quotes from the same interview. "If I strongly believe in something, and if I have my own subjective justification, I will put it up, no matter what. It is not like, ten people are putting their views, and I have to also put my view." (Surabi, Personal Communication, 6 December 2016). The same individual on another instance notes that "I had felt like I had won because I could prove" (Surabi, Personal Communication, 6 December 2016). Similarly, James mentions "I can't blindly follow someone. I don't like that idea that much." (James, Personal Communication, 13 December 2016), but later makes a remark that "I think it's important to have people's acknowledgement" (James, Personal Communication, 13 December 2016).

The dilemma with regard to self-expression in relationships is influenced by one's fears of being abandoned or rejected at giving too less or giving too much more in any relationships. As a result, the emotional expressions are very minimal as expressed in the excerpt below "Usually I don't express anything especially my emotions" .This minimalistic expression of emotions is substantiated with a reason that "I don't think people around me are as truthful as I am. And because of this they are not likely to respond to me in the same spirit as I do. So, I don't see the point of expecting something" (James, Personal Communication, 13 December 2016) or are extreme as in "my relationship is not like everyone's relationship. We are more like some mature like we are more of a husband wife, we fight a lot, we slap each other. It's not a normal relationship, so I am not like I am not totally happy with my relationship." (Saniya, Personal Communication, 4 October 2016).

DISCUSSION

The current study attempted to explore the self- expression and entitlement among individuals with high narcissistic traits. The themes derived suggest that the self-expression and expression of entitlement of individuals with high narcissistic traits are diversified across many aspects of one's life. The perceived sense of desirable self attributes to one's expression of self. The apprehensions are self-expression and dilemmas also contribute to the way an individual express oneself. Entitlement as evidenced from the data is found mostly in relation to morale.

Narcissism was found to be correlated with agentic self-views (Campbell et al, 2007). Individuals with narcissism are therefore more attuned towards self-empowerment and satisfaction through status, money, intelligence etc. Contrary to what Campbell and his colleagues (2007) postulated, the present study found that there was a clear distinction in the expression of self-view among the sample when compared to existing literature. Most of the participants expressed a communal self-view, elucidating the importance of morale and commitments to society rather than status, beauty or intelligence. This suggest that expression of self-importance might be different according to the cultural values of the region. Considering the collectivistic background of the participants and their notion of identifying with the community, this finding suggests that the expression of narcissism is slightly covert and is channelled in accordance with expectations of the culture. When the western world view focuses on independence and self-sufficiency, an oriental approach propels the need to identify with one another and engage in a collectivistic good. This distinction might have been the reason behind the key distinction in the expression of narcissism. Therefore, the study falls in line with the literature that suggests that expression of narcissism is different in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Rousell, 2016).

The data also suggests that the expression of entitlement is more in relation with morale and value systems. The individuals with an affinity towards narcissism as observed in the data had more feelings of entitlement with their supremacy in moral values and being unique and correct in varied situations. Twenge (2009) and Trzeniewski et al (2008) suggested that there is an increase in the expression of entitlement regarding the worth of their performance was high among young adults. The entitlement was often found to be related with preferential treatments and rewards in social and interpersonal circles. The data suggests the expression of entitlement in performance but it also finds that the construct of entitlement in a more crystallized form when it is in relation to the morale. The rigidity of moral systems and expectation that others should recognize and work towards the moral supremacy of the individual was found in most of the data signifying of a strong privilege to morale. Thereby it might be concluded that the expression of narcissistic structure is highly influenced by the various cultural and ethnic factors.

The expression of covert narcissism by overly self-sacrificing behaviour is one among the key findings derived from the study. Individuals tend to put the needs of others over their own needs and try to maintain a position of 'poor me' (Sine et al, 2008) to gain sympathy

from others and thereby satisfy their need for external validation of the self-image. This also points to the difference in expression of narcissistic structure among cultures. Interestingly the self-sacrificing behaviour was found to be more common among women than in men in the data. These self-sacrificing behaviour is akin with the 'masochist wife' phenomenon where women tend to be overly submissive and submitting to the needs of the other. This consequently results in idolizing the woman as being self-sacrificing and extremely good which further enhances their notion of self-importance although in an indirect means (Rousell, 2016). This finding also supports the literature that suggest of the two varied narcissistic structures, the narcissistic pedagogy and the narcissistically abused personality. The self- sacrificing behaviour can be understood as the narcissistic abused personality structure where there is an identification of self with the martyrdom. However, the prevalence of this structure among the collectivistic or in a cosmopolitan culture where ideologies are assorted within, is yet to be pondered.

As Rousell (2016) suggests narcissistic structures might be similar across cultures but the expression of the same differs in accordance with the chronosystems. The narcissistic structure might be sublimed in collectivistic cultures with more socially desirable qualities like high morals, social harmony and entitlement to values. Therefore, the shared conviction that narcissism is a construct of the individualistic cultures could be erroneous. The expression of entitlement could also be varying among the different cultures, as an entitlement to performance in independent communities and an entitlement to values in interdependent communities. As the ideologies of the occidental and the oriental fuse with each other in the globalized world, the differences in expression of narcissism might diffuse within the different world-views creating mixed expression of the narcissistic structure. Narcissism need not be a negative trait that debases another to pursue self-importance but might be a functional and healthy strategy for dealing with the modern world (Campbell, 2001).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The sample who withdrew their consent from the study before and during the interview would have led to a dearth in the richness in the data. Since the population for the study was too less and the proportion of genders are not appropriate, the gender differences in expression of narcissism was not found. The population for the study although was generally collectivistic, had many inner cultural specificities which were ignored in the study leading to only a general understanding of the expression of narcissism. The expression might possibly vary in accordance with the cultural practices, family dynamics and often the present living conditions of a person.

The notion of self-sacrificing behaviour and its relationship with satisfying a narcissistic structure needs further exploration. Since this was most commonly found in the women participants in the current study, the gender differences in expression might also help in unveiling this relationship. A quantitative approach to understand the prevalence of self-sacrificing behaviours would also be beneficial in understanding the difference in expression

of narcissism in different cultural viewpoints. If the expression of narcissism is more through self-sacrificing behaviours, then the possibility of pathological narcissism likely to be high in the population would be increased. In such a case, it might be important to look into the incidence of narcissistic emotional abuses that might be occurring in interpersonal relationships of people with high narcissistic tendencies.

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