

## Covert Narcissism and Moral Disengagement among Emerging Adults

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The present study seeks to examine the relationship between covert narcissism and the propensity to morally disengage among emerging adults. Data was collected from 120 participants aged between 18 and 25 years (62.5% female) through an online survey. Covert narcissism was assessed using the Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale (MCNS) (Cheek, Hendin & Wink, 2013), while moral disengagement was measured using the 16-item Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (Moore et al., 2012). The results indicated a significant relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement among emerging adults. The variables share a weak positive correlation. This study opens doors for researchers to examine the nature of this relationship, including mediators and moderators.

**Keywords:** covert narcissism, narcissism, moral disengagement, propensity to morally disengage, emerging adults

Many previous studies have investigated the relationship between the traits, narcissism and moral disengagement, with varied results. Some studies find a positive correlation between narcissism and moral disengagement (Jones et al., 2017; Jabeen & Haq, 2021), while others find no relationship (Egan et al., 2015). Moreover, few (if any) studies have examined how covert narcissism or overt narcissism, taken separately, relate to moral disengagement. This creates a gap in knowledge, preventing us from understanding whether the different manifestations of narcissism are related to moral disengagement in different ways. The present study seeks to examine the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement among emerging adults.

Raskin and Hall (1979) introduced the idea of normal or sub-clinical narcissism. It is characterised by the presence of narcissistic traits to a subclinical extent, that does not warrant a clinical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. It involves

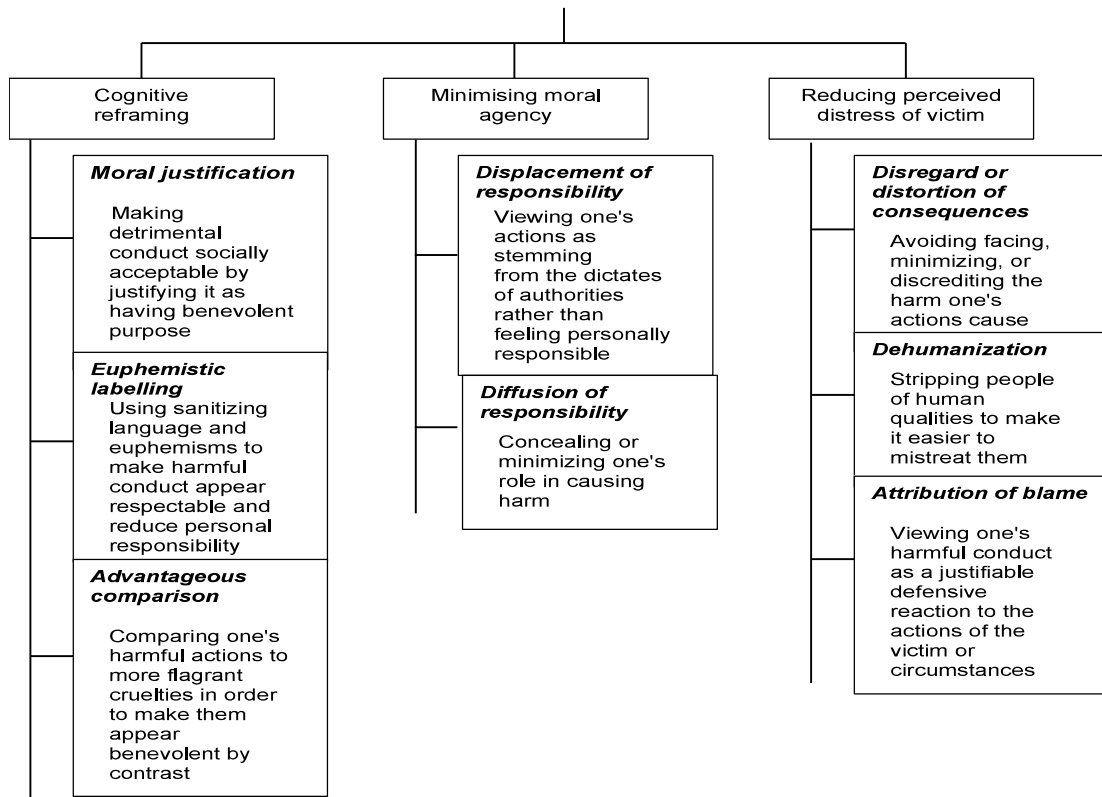
traits like psychological entitlement, dominance, self-inflation and lack of empathy for others. Certain researchers proposed that there exist two distinct manifestations of narcissism. In *overt* narcissism, grandiosity is the most prominent trait. Grandiosity is overtly expressed through the individual's intense seeking of admiration, self-importance and braggadocio. The second form, *covert narcissism*, is marked by "largely unconscious feelings of grandeur and openly displayed lack of self-confidence and initiative, vague feelings of depression, and an absence of zest for work (narcissistic deficiency)" (Wink, 1991). Individuals with covert narcissism often seem hypersensitive, anxious, timid, and insecure, yet may still harbour undisclosed grandiose fantasies (Kernberg, 1986). They share traits like exploitativeness and a sense of entitlement with overt narcissists (Wink, 1991). Compared to overt narcissism, covert narcissism may be related to more indirect and passive forms of aggression (Fan et al., 2016). Vulnerable narcissism predicts anger

and hostility but does not predict physical or verbal aggression (Okada, 2010). Moreover, covert narcissism is associated exclusively with reactive aggression, which is often driven by emotional and impulsive reactions to perceived threats or provocations (Fossati et al., 2009). Covertly narcissistic individuals may perceive themselves as inferior, or disadvantaged. Brookes (2015) found that covert narcissism negatively predicts self-esteem and self-efficacy beyond self-esteem, indicating a tendency towards self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Some studies also show that covert narcissists may view themselves as victims. For instance, it is true that both covert and overt narcissists possess a sense of entitlement. Freis and Hansen-Brown (2021) showed that vulnerable narcissists justify their sense of entitlement through concerns of injustice, feeling they have been unfairly dis-

advantaged compared to others, while grandiose narcissists justify their entitlement through ideas of superiority, thinking that they deserve special treatment because they are naturally better than others. Covert narcissism is associated with difficulties in emotion regulation (Zhang et al., 2015) and motivation (Wink & Donahue, 1997).

The concept of moral disengagement was introduced by Albert Bandura as part of his social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), to explain the process by which individuals disengage from the self-regulatory mechanisms that prevent them from acting against their moral code, thereby allowing them to perform reprehensible acts with little guilt (Moore, 2015). Bandura (1999) described 8 mechanisms of moral disengagement that can broadly be classified under 3 categories. They are given in the flowchart below.

**Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement**



Moore et al. (2012) define the propensity to morally disengage as an “individual difference in the way that people cognitively process decisions and behaviour with ethical import that allows those inclined to morally disengage to behave unethically without feeling distress”. Dispositional moral disengagement tends to increase the likelihood of unethical behaviour in contexts that facilitate it (Moore, 2015). High moral disengagement may also serve as a stable predictor of unethical behaviour, irrespective of situational factors, whereas those lower in moral disengagement may be more susceptible to situational influences. In addition, dispositional moral disengagement reduces an individual’s susceptibility to positive moral influences (Bonner et al., 2014).

The relationship between narcissism and moral disengagement has been studied by various researchers, but the results have been contradictory. Many studies have found a significant relationship between narcissism and moral disengagement. Jones et al. (2017) investigated narcissism as a predictor of moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour in sports. The study found that narcissism predicted antisocial behaviour through the mediating role of moral disengagement. The effect remained significant even after controlling for motivational climate, social desirability, sex, and sport type. Jabeen and Haq (2021) investigated the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between narcissism and knowledge hiding among banking employees in Pakistan. The results indicated that narcissism is positively linked to knowledge hiding behaviour, while moral disengagement mechanisms mediate this relationship. Erzi (2020) examined the mediating roles of moral disengagement and relational aggression in the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and schadenfreude among an adult population.

Results showed that higher levels of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism were associated with increased levels of schadenfreude, moral disengagement, and relational aggression. Additionally, moral disengagement and relational aggression mediated the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and schadenfreude. These findings suggest that individuals with “dark” personality traits are more likely to morally disengage and exhibit relational aggression, which in turn heightens their experience of schadenfreude. Sijtsma et al. (2019) hypothesized positive bidirectional links between the dark triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) and antisocial behaviour, mediated by moral disengagement. They found that antisocial behaviour predicted increases in moral disengagement, a general dark personality factor, and Machiavellianism, but not vice versa. While most studies have established a significant relationship between narcissism and moral disengagement, some studies find no relationship between these variables (Egan et al., 2015).

There is a lack of research that specifically focusses on the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement. However, Matherne, III et al. (2019) examined the relationship between covert narcissism and amorality, and explored the role of several potentially mediating variables on a sample of working adults. The results showed that self-efficacy and psychological entitlement mediated the relationship between covert narcissism and higher amorality.

Since covert and overt narcissism are two distinct constructs, it may sometimes be necessary to study them separately. Such study may reveal unforeseen differences in their characteristics. For instance, a study by Fan et al. (2016) examined how the two types of narcissism relate to the perpetration and victimisation of cyberbullying, with self-

esteem as a potential mediator. Here, covert narcissism positively predicted both cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, while overt narcissism was not significantly related to either.

Several studies have been conducted on covert narcissism among the young adult population. Previous research has also examined the role of moral disengagement as both a mediator and a moderator in a host of unethical behaviours. While many studies have examined the relationship between narcissism and moral disengagement, studies exploring the relationship between trait-based covert narcissism and the propensity to morally disengage (as an individual difference factor) are limited. Furthermore, most of these studies have not been conducted in an Indian context. Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps in research, by examining the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement, as traits, among a young adult Indian sample (18-25 years).

### **Objective**

To determine whether the traits of covert narcissism and the propensity to morally disengage are correlated

### **Hypothesis**

H<sub>0</sub>: There will be no significant relationship between Covert Narcissism and the Propensity to Morally Disengage among emerging adults.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The study uses a correlational design to study the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement among emerging adults. This design allows the study to determine whether covert narcissism and moral disengagement are related, and to understand the strength and direction of this relationship without assuming causation.

### **Sample**

The sample was composed of 120 individuals aged between 18 and 25 years. Mean age is 21.33 years (SD = 2.283). Convenience sampling (purposive sampling design) was used.

### **Tools**

*Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale (MCNS)*: This scale is an expanded version of the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS) constructed by Hendin and Cheek (1997) from Murray's Narcissism Scale (Murray, 1938). The Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale consists of 23 items measuring covert narcissism, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale has an alpha reliability of .89; it correlated .65 with the MMPI measure of covert narcissism, .30 with the maladaptive overt narcissism factor of the NPI and -.16 with the Adaptive Overt Narcissism Scale (Mathur, 2022).

*Propensity to Morally Disengage (PMD) Scale*: This scale was constructed by Moore et al. (2012). The 16-item version of this scale was used. This scale measures PMD as a unidimensional factor, with 2 items pertaining to each of the 8 moral disengagement mechanisms. This scale's alpha reliability is .80. Convergent validity was established by finding that the scale correlates positively with Machiavellianism ( $r = -.52, p < .01$ ). Discriminant validity was established by finding that the scale negatively correlates with Moral Identity ( $r = -.54, p < .01$ ), and two measures of Empathy: perspective taking ( $r = -.36, p < .01$ ), and empathetic concern ( $r = -.46, p < .01$ ). Thapar and Brar (2022) have used this scale in an Indian context.

### **Procedure**

All participants provided their informed consent at the onset of the study. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point.

The participants were required to complete two self-report questionnaires: Maladaptive Covert Narcissism Scale (MCNS) by Cheek, Hendin and Wink (2013) and 16-item Propensity to Morally Disengage (PMD) Scale by Moore et al. (2012). A survey form consisting of both scales was created using Google Forms, and circulated online. Following data collection, the data was subjected to statistical analysis. The results have been interpreted and discussed.

### Results

Table 1. Shows the sample size, mean and standard deviation of the variables

Variables	N	Mean	SD
Covert Narcissism	120	67.64	12.242
Propensity to Morally Disengage	120	2.9198	0.9176

The table mentioned above indicates the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the variables in this study. Hence, this sample seems to have moderate levels of covert narcissism, and relatively low levels of moral disengagement.

Table 2. Shows Tests of Normality for Covert Narcissism and Propensity to Morally Disengage

	Statistic	dF	Significance
Covert Narcissism	.986	120	.229
Propensity to Morally Disengage	.984	120	.164

The table shows the significance values from the Shapiro-Wilk test, assessing the normality of the data for Covert Narcissism and Propensity to Morally Disengage. Since the significance values for both variables (Covert Narcissism and Propensity to Morally Disengage) are greater than 0.05, both variables are distributed normally among the sample.

Table 3. Shows the Pearson's correlation (two-tailed) between Covert Narcissism and Propensity to Morally Disengage among emerging adults

Variables	Covert Narcissism	Propensity to Morally Disengage
Covert Narcissism	1	0.243**
Propensity to Morally Disengage	0.243**	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This table shows the Pearson's correlation coefficient (two-tailed) between covert narcissism and the propensity to morally disengage among emerging adults. The Pearson's correlation coefficient between covert narcissism and the propensity to morally disengage among emerging adults is 0.243, and it is significant at the 0.01 level. The results indicate that the variables share a weak positive relationship, which is statistically significant ( $r = 0.243$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that there exists a significant relationship between covert narcissism and propensity to morally disengage among emerging adults. Hence, the null hypothesis can be rejected. Several studies examine the relationship between narcissism and moral disengagement, but there is a lack of research that specifically focusses on the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement. In terms of the relationship between narcissism and moral disengagement, different studies show different results. Some studies find a positive correlation between narcissism and moral disengagement (Jones et al., 2017), while others find no relationship (Egan et al., 2015). The present study supports the idea that covert narcissism and moral disengagement are related.

Covert narcissists, like grandiose narcissists possess a sense of entitlement (Wink, 1991; Matherne, III et al., 2019). Studies have shown that psychological entitlement is related to moral disengagement (Sharma et al., 2023). Hence, covert narcissists may be prone to morally disengage through their sense of psychological entitlement. In essence, covert narcissists, who believe that they are entitled to receive more favourable treatment than others without reciprocating the same, may resort to moral disengagement mechanisms to justify their special treatment. For instance, a covertly narcissistic individual may justify their aggressive behaviour towards another person using dehumanisation (Locke, 2009). In addition, since covert narcissists tend to pity themselves and shy away from taking responsibility for their actions (Baskin-Sommers, Krusemark & Ronningstam, 2014), they may be more likely to engage in moral disengagement (Jones et al., 2017).

Research shows that covert narcissists tend to perceive themselves as victims in peer interactions. In general, narcissists tend to report higher levels of peer victimisation (Fanti & Henrich, 2015; Fanti & Kimonis, 2012, as cited in Fan et al., 2016). Covert narcissists may show higher levels of victimisation than overt narcissists (Fan et al., 2016). In situations where they perceive themselves to be the victims, it is possible that covert narcissists commit antisocial acts and use moral disengagement mechanisms to justify their behaviour as being done to protect themselves or as a response to perceived injustice. For example, covert narcissists are known to be hypersensitive to criticism. When they receive criticism, they may morally disengage and act aggressively (such as being verbally abusive) towards their critics. Here, the mechanism of attribution of blame may be at play. Further research can be conducted to narrow down on the moral disengagement mechanisms that covert narcissists are most likely to use.

Some studies show that low self-esteem is positively related to aggression (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; D'Zurilla, Chang, & Sanna, 2003, as cited in Fan et al., 2016). Since covert narcissists have a low self-esteem (Brookes, 2015), they may be more likely to engage in aggressive behaviours, and use moral disengagement to justify them. Moral disengagement may play a role in allowing them to maintain a sufficiently positive self-image despite committing immoral acts.

Covert narcissists also tend to have difficulties in regulating their emotions and controlling their impulses (Zhang et al., 2015). This might imply that covert narcissists may act impulsively, and later justify their behaviour using moral disengagement. Further research is required to investigate this link.

The weak correlation between the variables may indicate that the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement may be influenced by other mediating or moderating variables. Previous studies show that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between narcissism and other outcomes, such as antisocial behaviour (Jones et al., 2017; Erzi, 2020). Further research can examine the influence of other variables on the relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement.

### **Implications**

1. This study lays the groundwork for further investigating the nature of the relationship between these two variables, and the possible presence of mediators and moderators.
2. This study serves as a reference for experimental studies that may hypothesise a causal relationship between these two variables.
3. Further, this study can be used to compare the relationships that covert

(vulnerable) and overt (grandiose) narcissism each have with moral disengagement.

### Limitations

1. Since the survey was conducted online, there was no way to control the authenticity of responses received.
2. The sample consisted of only 120 participants—more trustworthy results may be attained from a larger sample size.
3. The study only covered emerging adults in India, excluding middle-aged and old adults, and individuals from other cultures. This implies that the findings of this study cannot be generalised to middle-aged and old adults, and to other countries.

### Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the potential positive relationship between covert narcissism and moral disengagement among emerging adults. The findings revealed a significant correlation between covert narcissism and moral disengagement, thereby rejecting the null hypothesis. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between covert narcissism and the propensity to morally disengage among emerging adults.

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