Navigating the Nexus: Childhood Trauma, Sexually Coercive Behaviour, Dark Tetrad Personality Traits, and Sexual Fantasy

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ABSTRACT

This review examines research on childhood trauma, personality traits, sexual fantasy, and sexually coercive behaviour. While each of these areas has been extensively studied in isolation, there is a notable lack of comprehensive research that investigates these variables collectively. This review aims to investigate these relationships, seeking to shed light on critical aspects of human behaviour and contribute to a deeper understanding of factors that may influence sexually coercive behaviours. This work is of import, as it may contribute to informing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Keywords: Childhood Trauma, Dark Tetrad Personality Traits, Sexual Fantasy and Sexually Coercive Behaviour

Substantial evidence exists demonstrating the relationships between childhood trauma, sexually coercive behaviour, and the potential influence of Dark Tetrad personality traits and sexual fantasy. However, a literature gap exists in exploring the complex dynamic interaction among these variables. This literature review aims to investigate these relationships, seeking to shed light on critical aspects of human behaviour and contribute to a deeper understanding of factors that may influence sexually coercive behaviours. This work is of import, as it may contribute to informing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma, including abuse, domestic violence exposure, and parental loss, is strongly linked to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. It also correlates with physical health problems like chronic pain and heart disease [1]. Substance abuse and addiction the brain undergoes structural changes, especially in areas controlling emotions and stress responses due to childhood trauma leading to heightened stress reactions and emotional difficulties. Childhood trauma is associated with the risk of later sexual offenses, particularly child sexual abuse (CSA) [2,3]. Males with a history of CSA are at a significantly higher risk of committing sexual offenses as adults [4]. CSA is also linked to sexually coercive behavior in early adulthood, independent of genetic and family factors [5]. Some individuals who experience childhood maltreatment may engage in sexually coercive or violent behaviour [6-11]. However, not all those who experience childhood trauma suffer negative consequences, as resilience factors and early intervention can help mitigate negative effects [12]. In summary, childhood trauma has far-reaching impacts, but evidence-based interventions can aid individuals in managing and recovering from its adverse effects.

Sexually Coercive Behaviour

Sexual coercion, defined as non-consensual sexual contact involving pressure, force, or substances, affects people within and outside of relationships [13,14]. Key determinants include male gender, impulsivity, promiscuity, aggression traits, and low empathy [14]. Research reveals it is more common than thought, affecting up to 30% of women and 13% of men. Risk factors encompass childhood abuse, substance abuse, and beliefs supporting rape myths, interpersonal factors like partner violence and controlling behaviours contribute [15, 16, 17]. Additionally, societal factors like hyperactive masculinity and rape culture also play an import role [18,19]. Effective prevention and intervention target these factors and promote healthy relationships and communication skills.

Dark Tetrad Personality Traits

The Dark Tetrad composed of psychopathy, sadism, narcissism, and Machiavellianism, represents a cluster of socially undesirable traits characterized by disagreeableness, callousness, dishonesty, and self-promotion [20-22]. Based on empirical evidence, researchers have determined that these personality traits are likely connected by a shared underlying core. However, there are varying perspectives on what this core entails, with suggestions including disagreeableness, interpersonal antagonism, exploitative tendencies, callousness, manipulative behaviour, and low levels of honesty and humility [20-23]. The Dark Tetrad is now recognized as non-clinical variations present within the general population [24]. While narcissism and psychopathy are discussed in the clinical literature, substantial evidence supports the existence of...
non-clinical variations of these traits [23]. Therefore, psychopathy, narcissism, and sadism are now investigated as subclinical personality traits found in the general population [24].

Sexual Fantasy
Sexual fantasies, mentally stimulating images or scenarios that arouse sexual interest, are nearly universal, with 97-98% of people acknowledging their presence and occurrence [25,26]. These imaginative experiences hold significance in sexual life, reflecting past experiences and influencing future sexual activities. While they can be pleasurable, they also carry potential risks, particularly concerning sexual offenses [27]. Sexual fantasies provide reliable indicators of sexual orientation and paraphilic tendencies [28,29,30] and play a crucial role in sexual desire, arousal, and overall sexual functioning [26,31]. These fantasies encompass a wide range of scenarios and individuals, including strangers, partners, celebrities, and even fictional characters.

Gender differences exist in the prevalence and content of sexual fantasies. Men tend to have more during masturbation, but not necessarily during intercourse or daydreaming [25]. Men’s fantasy often involve graphic imagery and impersonal connections, while women’s fantasies may include submissive roles [32,33]. However, these differences vary and do not always align with established sexual scripts [34]. Men often fantasize about multiple partners, orgies, and consensual non-monogamy, while women may focus on enhancing their attractiveness to partners [25,35,36]. Some individuals entertain non-consensual or coercive scenarios in their fantasies, which may increase the likelihood of engaging in sexually coercive behaviour [37]. Those with more frequent and intense coercive fantasies are more likely to engage in sexual aggression [38].

Review
Childhood Trauma and Sexually Coercive Behaviour
Numerous recent studies have diligently examined the intricate relationship between childhood trauma and sexually coercive behaviour. Individuals who had endured childhood sexual abuse demonstrated an increased propensity for engaging in sexual aggression during adulthood [9]. Similarly there is a higher likelihood of perpetrating sexual coercion in men with a history of childhood sexual abuse [5].

In addition to behavioural patterns, research has also focused on the attitudes held by individuals who have experienced childhood trauma. For example, men with a history of childhood maltreatment were more inclined to endorse rape myths and attitudes supportive of sexual aggression [39]. Likewise, there exists a correlation between childhood sexual abuse and the endorsement of attitudes normalizing sexual aggression, such as the troubling belief that “women who dress provocatively are asking to be raped” [40]. Women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse did not exhibit a higher likelihood of engaging in sexual aggression compared to those who had not experienced such abuse [41]. Nonetheless, it is crucial to emphasize that not all individuals who have suffered childhood trauma exhibit sexually coercive behaviour.

Furthermore, research has delved into the impact of childhood trauma on specific facets of sexual behaviour. For instance, men with a history of childhood sexual abuse were more prone to compulsive sexual behaviour, which, in turn, was associated with an elevated risk of sexually coercive behaviour. In summary, while research suggests a potential link between childhood trauma and sexually coercive behaviour, this relationship is multifaceted and may be influenced by various individual and contextual factors, as well as the specific type of childhood trauma endured.

Childhood Trauma and Dark Tetrad Personality Traits
Recent research has examined the correlation between childhood trauma and dark tetrad personality traits. Studies have revealed that individuals reporting childhood trauma experiences were more likely to exhibit narcissistic and psychopathic traits [145]. Additionally, identified a positive association between childhood sexual trauma and sadomasochistic tendencies, noting gender differences wherein males exhibited sadistic behaviour’s while females displayed more masochistic tendencies [144]. Specifically focusing on the relationship between childhood trauma and psychopathy, found that a harsh parental style and punitive upbringing were associated with heightened psychopathic traits, particularly in the domain of callous-unemotional traits [146]. Relatedly, established a link between extensive interpersonal childhood trauma and both primary and secondary psychopathy in adults [38,142].

Further studies have examined the association between childhood physical abuse and reactive aggression in violent offenders with high psychopathy scores notably; explored the interplay among parenting, dark tetrad traits, and violence in German adolescents. Their findings indicated a positive relationship between parental rejection, punishment, control, overprotection, and the dark triad traits [146]. Moreover, they suggested that parental rearing practices contribute to the development of dark triad traits, thereby increasing the propensity for violent behaviour, these studies underscore the intricate interplay between childhood trauma and dark tetrad personality traits, highlighting how early life experiences may contribute to the development of maladaptive personality profiles that elevate the risk of antisocial and criminal behavior [91]. Subsequent research is imperative to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of these associations and to identify effective interventions for individuals who have experienced childhood trauma and exhibit dark tetrad traits.

Childhood Trauma and Sexual Fantasy
Recent research has extensively explored the connection between childhood trauma and sexual fantasies, revealing multifaceted insights. Found that individuals who were victims of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to engage in sexual fantasies involving elements of force, dominance, submission, and sadomasochism [42,57]. Similarly, a significant association between childhood trauma and both dissociation and sexual fantasy among adult women. Furthermore, their study suggested that dissociation partially mediated the relationship between childhood trauma and sexual fantasy [2]. Studies have highlighted that the potential long-term consequences of early traumatic experiences, particularly those related to childhood sexual abuse, which can lead to the development of future psychiatric disorders or emotional distress [2]. In the absence of effective coping mechanisms, individuals may turn to deviant sexual fantasies as a means of temporarily alleviating or avoiding the psychological pain and symptoms associated with the abuse. Moreover, research indicates that experiencing childhood abuse can result in an excessive focus on sexuality, potentially increasing the likelihood of developing unconventional sexual interests or behaviour’s earlier research by Briere and colleagues suggested that individuals who have experienced sexual abuse tend to have a higher frequency of sexual fantasies compared to those who have not been subjected to such abuse. Additionally, women who have been sexually abused reported a higher number of fantasies related to sexual coercion compared to women without abuse histories. Sexually abused women also
reported a greater frequency of sexual coercion fantasies as related to men, irrespective of the males’ own abuse experiences. In some instances, the experienced fantasies were associated with early and prolonged experiences of abuse. It is essential to acknowledge that research on this topic is intricate, contentious, and constrained. There is a clear need for additional studies that delve into the relationship between childhood trauma, sexual fantasy, and specific personality traits. Furthermore, it is vital to approach this subject with sensitivity, avoiding any stigmatization or pathologization of sexual fantasies that may be linked to such experiences [57,91].

**Dark Tetrad Personality Traits and Sexual Fantasy**

Research indicates that individuals with high dark tetrad personality traits may exhibit a heightened likelihood of engaging in specific categories of sexual fantasies. For instance, individuals high in sadism displayed greater interest in sexually coercive fantasies, such as rape and sexual assault [43]. Similarly, individuals with elevated levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy reported increased interest in sexual fantasies characterized by dominance and control [44]. More recently, it was found that higher narcissism levels were linked to a preference for sexual fantasies involving power, status, and more frequent engagement in such fantasies among women [45, 46]. Additionally, psychopathy was associated with a higher frequency of sexual fantasies; this connection was not mediated by specific fantasy themes [46].

Overall, studies suggest that individuals high in dark tetrad traits may be inclined towards specific types of sexual fantasies. However, it is important to note that the relationship between dark tetrad traits and sexual fantasy is intricate and multifaceted, and there are varying perspectives within the research community. Some argue that there is limited evidence supporting the notion that individuals with these traits are more prone to engage in fantasies involving aggression or dominance [43]. Conversely, others propose that the relationship is nuanced and contingent on individual and contextual factors. Consequently, further research is required to elucidate the nature of this relationship and to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay among personality variables, sexual fantasy, and other factors influencing sexual behaviour.

**Dark Tetrad Personality Traits and Sexually Coercive Behaviour**

Research has extensively investigated the nexus between sexually coercive behaviour and dark tetrad personality traits, yielding valuable insights. Psychopathy exhibited a positive correlation with both perpetration and victimization of sexual aggression, whereas Machiavellianism demonstrated a positive association with perpetration but not victimization [47]. Another study found that individuals with higher levels of psychopathy and sadism were more prone to engaging in sexual coercion [48]. Furthermore, research has illuminated that individuals with elevated levels of these personality traits often harbour hostile attitudes toward aggression or pathologization of sexual fantasies that may be linked to such conduct [43,49].

Fedina and colleagues discovered that men with higher levels of dark personality traits were more inclined to endorse victim-blaming attitudes and beliefs suggesting that women lie about rape. The role of gender in the interplay between dark tetrad personality traits and sexually coercive behaviour has also undergone scrutiny. Studies have revealed that men typically score higher on measures of psychopathy and Machiavellianism than women, and men are more likely to engage in sexually coercive behaviour [49,50]. However, other research has disclosed that women scoring high on measures of dark tetrad traits are more prone to engage in sexually aggressive behaviour [51]. These findings imply that the association between dark tetrad traits and sexually coercive behaviour may not be confined to one gender; both men and women with elevated levels of these traits may be susceptible to such conduct. Thus, the expanding body of research on the connection between dark tetrad personality traits and sexually coercive behaviour suggests that individuals with heightened levels of these traits may indeed be at an elevated risk of engaging in deviant sexual behaviours.

**Sexual Fantasy and Sexually Coercive Behaviour**

Recent studies have undertaken a comprehensive examination of the intricate connection between sexual fantasy and sexually coercive behaviour, shedding light on this complex relationship. It is noteworthy that fantasizing about deviant sexual conduct has demonstrated associations with engaging in such acts, involving both non-offending community members and individuals with prior sexual offense convictions [52,53]. Recent community-based research has also indicated that fantasy-behaviour connections tend to have content that is less deviant in nature compared to non-deviant content [54]. In a study involving minor-attracted men, it was found that sexual fantasizing about children did not exhibit a significant relationship with sexual offending [55]. Additionally, individuals with a history of sexual offending were more inclined to report fantasies involving sexual aggression [56]. Notably, individuals who reported higher levels of sexual fantasies were also more likely to engage in sexually coercive behaviour [57]. However, it is crucial to emphasize that not all sexual fantasies should be viewed as problematic or indicative of potential sexually coercive behaviour. Research on this topic is limited and still evolving, necessitating further exploration and understanding of the nuanced relationship between sexual fantasy and sexually coercive behaviour.

**Influence of Dark Tetrad Traits and Sexual Fantasy**

Previous research has illuminated the role of personality disorders as potential mediators in the intricate relationship between childhood experiences of family violence, such as abuse and neglect, and subsequent violent behaviour’s [58,59]. These studies emphasize the importance of considering the circumstances under which victimized children may later manifest violent tendencies. For instance, Brennan’s 2014 study found that childhood trauma, specifically exposure to violence, partially mediated the link between subsequent perpetration of general violence and pathological narcissism, irrespective of gender. However, the examination of personality disorders as mediators in these associations remains limited, and there is a dearth of research on the mediating effect of subclinical-level personality traits. The Dark Tetrad of personality represents a specific constellation of personality traits that have demonstrated an enhanced capacity to predict relevant antisocial outcomes [43,60]. Numerous investigations have established correlations between formative childhood experiences and the subsequent development of dark personality traits [61-64]. Studies have revealed childhood trauma as a significant predictor of psychopathy facet scores. Notably, this exposure continued to predict the behavioural components of psychopathy even after accounting for exposure to community violence [61-64]. Furthermore clinical association between the sadistic personality and childhood physical abuse and Neglect exists [65]. Recent research by Dugal and associates unveiled that a significant proportion of individuals in their sample reported childhood traumas and subsequent perpetration or experience of psychological intimate partner violence, providing
additional insights into the relationship between early trauma and later maladaptive interpersonal behaviour’s.

Empirical evidence suggests that specific personality traits are more prevalent among individuals who engage in sexual fantasies involving deviant content. Psychopathy, for instance, has been identified as a common trait among both non-offending community members [66] and individuals with convictions for sexual offenses [67]. Given the inherent low inhibition associated with psychopathy, it is plausible that psychopathic traits influence the regulation of sexual desire and the motivational objectives stemming from sexual fantasies, thereby elevating the likelihood of engaging in sexual misconduct. Research has indicated that psychopathy acts as a moderator in the correlation between engaging in deviant sexual fantasies and translating them into corresponding real-life behaviour. Another potentially moderating personality trait is fantasy proneness, characterized by a deep engagement in fantasy and imaginative experiences [68]. Research has indicated that individuals with high scores on measures of fantasy proneness tend to engage more frequently in sexual fantasizing, including those involving deviant content [69]. Further exploration is warranted to establish the link between fantasy proneness and engagement in criminal conduct.

Of note, limited research has sought to comprehend the processes underlying the emergence and development of sexual fantasies. The consensus among these studies is that early negative experiences, particularly childhood sexual abuse, may give rise to deviant sexual fantasies in sexual offenders [48,70,71]. Additionally, it has been hypothesized that offenders’ inability to cope with psychological issues may lead to the emergence of deviant sexual fantasies, subsequently prompting the use of deviant sexual activity as a means of coping with psychological distress [38,74,72,73]. Nonetheless, the interconnections between sexual coercion, sexual fantasy, and subclinical personality traits remain largely unexplored. Building upon existing findings and prior research highlighting positive correlations between Dark Tetrad personality traits, sexual fantasy, and childhood trauma, it is plausible to hypothesize that the relationships between childhood trauma and sexually coercive behaviour in adulthood may be mediated by variations in Dark Tetrad personality traits and sexual fantasy. Further investigation in this domain is warranted to unravel the nuanced dynamics at play [74-90].

Conclusion
In conclusion, this comprehensive literature review has illuminated the multifaceted relationships among childhood trauma, personality traits, sexual fantasy, and sexually coercive behaviour. While a substantial body of research exists on each of these components individually, the integration of these variables has received limited attention in empirical studies. The findings from existing research suggest that childhood trauma, particularly exposure to violence, may act as a precursor to violent behaviour’s, partially mediated by personality disorders and subclinical personality traits such as the Dark Tetrad. Additionally, the influence of sexual fantasy, including deviant content, on sexual behaviour is emerging as a significant area of inquiry, with psychopathy and fantasy proneness potentially serving as moderators in this complex relationship. This review underscores the necessity of considering these variables in concert to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their Interplay. It highlights the need for future research to explore these variables collectively, thus providing a more holistic perspective on the intricate dynamics that shape human behaviour. Ultimately, this synthesis of existing literature contributes to our knowledge base and calls for a more integrated approach in both research and intervention strategies, emphasizing the importance of comprehensively examining these variables to enhance our understanding of their collective impact [91-146].

Disclosure statement
The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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