

Review Article

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

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ABSTRACT

This critical 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 bridge this gap by synthesizing existing knowledge and emphasizing the need for a more integrated approach. Studies have uncovered intriguing links between childhood trauma, the influence of personality traits on sexual fantasies, and the potential connection between sexual fantasies and sexually coercive behaviour. However, the intricate interplay among these variables remains largely investigated in empirical research. By consolidating the research on these various relationships, this review underscores the importance of gaining a more holistic and nuanced understanding of existing complex dynamics. This work serves as a foundational step towards encouraging future research exploring these variables, assisting in elucidating their collective influence on human behaviour.

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Received: September 24, 2023; **Accepted:** September 28, 2023; **Published:** October 08, 2023

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 effectual prevention and intervention strategies.

Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma has been extensively studied and has shown significant associations with various negative outcomes. It has been found that individuals who experienced childhood trauma, such as abuse, domestic violence exposure, or parental loss, are at higher risk for developing mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [1-3]. Moreover, these traumatic experiences have been linked to adverse physical health outcomes, such as chronic pain and cardiovascular disease [4,5]. The impact of childhood trauma extends beyond psychological well-being and is also associated with increased rates of substance abuse and addiction [6]. Research also suggests that childhood trauma can lead to structural and functional changes in the brain, particularly in regions involved in emotion regulation and stress responses [7]. Childhood trauma has enduring effects on stress responses and emotion regulation, leading to exaggerated physiological reactions to stressors and difficulties in managing emotions and behaviors [8,9]. Furthermore,

childhood trauma has been found to play a significant role in the development of later sex offenses. Studies indicate that childhood trauma, particularly child abuse, is a commonly reported and well-documented risk factor for sexual offending [10,11]. Among different types of childhood trauma, child sexual abuse (CSA) is particularly associated with a range of later problems for its victims [12]. Longitudinal studies have found that males with a history of CSA are at significantly higher risk of committing sexual offenses as adults [13]. The link between CSA and sexually coercive behavior in early adulthood has been observed, independent of genetic and family factors [14]. While a minority of male CSA victims go on to commit sexual crimes, there is empirical evidence linking childhood maltreatment with sexually coercive and non-sexually violent behaviour [15-20]. It is important to acknowledge that not all individuals who experience childhood trauma will develop negative outcomes, as resilience factors and early intervention can mitigate its effects [21,22]. Overall, childhood trauma has profound and wide-ranging consequences, but evidence-based interventions can help individuals manage and recover from its negative impact.

Sexually Coercive Behaviour

Sexual coercion can be defined as “the act of utilizing pressure, alcohol or drugs, or force to have sexual contact against someone’s will” [23]. It is a serious global issue that occurs both within and outside of established relationships and has a variety of detrimental effects on people involved [24,25]. Numerous individual determinants of sexual coercion perpetration have been discovered, including gender, impulsivity, sexual promiscuity, trait aggression, and low empathy [26-28]. Research has shown that sexually coercive behaviour is more common than previously thought, with up to 19% of women and 2% of men reporting experiencing sexual coercion

at some point in their lives [29]. Research has identified several risk factors for sexually coercive behaviour. Risk factors include childhood abuse or neglect, substance abuse and beliefs that support rape myths and violence against women [30]. found that men who reported a history of sexual aggression were more likely to have a history of childhood sexual abuse, lower levels of empathy, and traditional gender role attitudes. In addition to individual factors, sexual coercion is also associated with interpersonal dynamics, such as a history of partner violence or controlling behaviors [31]. Finally, societal factors such as a culture of hypermasculinity and rape culture have also been linked to higher rates of sexual coercion [32,33]. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) found that sexual coercion was positively correlated with attitudes that support rape myths, such as the belief that women secretly want to be forced into sex. Prevention and intervention strategies for sexually coercive behaviour should target these risk factors and promote healthy relationships and communication skills. A meta-analysis by [34]. found that prevention programs that address these risk factors can be effective in reducing sexually coercive behaviour. These programs can also help individuals recognize and challenge beliefs that support rape myths and violence against women. In conclusion, sexually coercive behaviour is a serious problem that affects individuals of all genders and ages. It is important to understand the risk factors for sexually coercive behaviour and develop effective prevention and intervention strategies. These strategies should target the underlying causes of sexually coercive behaviour, promote healthy relationships and communication skills, and provide support and resources to victims. Raising awareness and promoting a culture of consent is also an important aspect of addressing sexually coercive behaviour.

Dark Tetrad Personality Traits

The Dark Triad composed of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism, represents a cluster of socially undesirable traits characterized by disagreeability, callousness, dishonesty, and self-promotion [35-38]. Based on empirical evidence, researchers have determined that the three personality traits within the Dark Triad 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 [36-39]. The Dark Triad are now recognized as non-clinical variations present within the general population [40]. While narcissism and psychopathy are discussed in the clinical literature, substantial evidence supports the existence of non-clinical variations of these traits [41]. Therefore, psychopathy, narcissism, and sadism are now investigated as subclinical personality traits found in the general population [42].

Sexual Fantasy

Sexual fantasies encompass mentally stimulating images or scenarios that are sexually arousing and can arise spontaneously (i.e., sexual daydreaming) or be intentionally and consciously elicited. Nearly everyone (97-98%) acknowledges having sexual fantasies, and they occur frequently [43,44]. These imaginative experiences hold significance in sexual life as they may reflect past experiences and influence future sexual activities. While sexual fantasies can be pleasurable, they also carry a potential risk of playing a significant role in the commission of sexual offenses. Individuals engaging in sexual misconduct are more likely to have fantasies involving other people [45]. Sexual fantasies provide more reliable indicators of an individual's conventional sexual orientation and paraphilic tendencies compared to measures of sexual activity or self-identification alone [46,47]. They are a common phenomenon experienced by many individuals, serving

as a source of pleasure and sexual arousal.

Research suggests that sexual fantasies play a crucial role in sexual desire, arousal, and overall sexual functioning [48,49]. Sexual fantasies can vary from relatively mild to extreme and involve a wide range of scenarios and individuals, including strangers, partners, celebrities, and even fictional characters. The literature indicates gender disparities in the prevalence and content of sexual fantasies. Men tend to have more fantasies than women during masturbation, but this difference is not observed during intercourse or daydreaming [50,51]. Men's fantasies often involve graphic imagery and impersonal connections, while women's fantasies typically include submissive and passive roles as their partner's desired object. However, it is important to note that these differences are not always consistent or universally applicable, highlighting that even established sexual scripts may not always align with fantasies and can vary [52,53]. Men frequently fantasize about multiple sexual partners, orgies, group sex, and consensual nonmonogamy [54,55]. They often imagine their partners as physically attractive, while women may fantasize about enhancing their attractiveness to their partners through clothing or gestures. Individuals may also entertain non-consensual or coercive sexual scenarios in their fantasies, which may increase the likelihood of engaging in sexually coercive behavior in real-life situations [56-60]. Overall, sexual fantasies are a complex and multifaceted aspect of human sexuality that can serve both positive and negative.

Review

Childhood Trauma and Sexually Coercive Behaviour

Several recent studies have investigated the relationship between childhood trauma and sexually coercive behaviours. found that individuals who had experienced childhood sexual abuse were more likely to engage in sexual aggression as adults. Other research has focused on attitudes endorsed by individuals who have a history of childhood trauma. For instance, a study by Krahe and colleagues (2015) found that men who reported a history of childhood maltreatment were more likely to endorse rape myths and attitudes supporting sexual aggression [61].

Systematic reviews, drawing extensively from retrospective studies predominantly situated within forensic contexts, as well as incorporating findings from population-based and prospective studies, consistently underscore a significant link between experiences of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and the subsequent engagement in sexually coercive behaviour during adulthood [62-65]. To illustrate, a longitudinal study spanning 45 years revealed a notable eight-fold increase in the odds of sexual offending in adulthood among males with documented cases of CSA (N = 558), as compared to their counterparts without a history of CSA [66]. Additionally, a comprehensive population-based study utilizing a co-twin control design (N = 6,255) conducted by Forsman et al. (2015) not only confirmed the association between CSA and sexually coercive behaviour in early adulthood (33 years of age) but also indicated that genetic and familial factors offer only partial explanations for this observed correlation. In their 2019 study, Pedneault et al. explored links between childhood sexual abuse (CSA), childhood physical abuse (CPA), sexual variables, antisocial tendencies, and sexually coercive behaviour in 173 heterosexual men. They found CSA correlated with paraphilic interests, an extensive sexual history, and early antisocial tendencies. CPA was associated with paraphilic interests, self-reported delinquency, higher sensation seeking, and early antisocial tendencies. Sexual variables, not antisocial ones, mediated the link between CSA and sexually coercive behaviour, suggesting an association between CSA, an extensive sexual history, and later coercive behaviour.

Overall, while research suggests that childhood trauma may be a risk factor for sexually coercive behaviour, the nature of this relationship is complex and may depend on various individual and contextual factors, as well as the specific subtype of childhood trauma experienced.

Childhood Trauma and Dark Tetrad Personality Traits

There have been several recent research studies that examine the relationship between childhood trauma and dark tetrad personality traits. Studies have found that individuals who reported experiencing childhood trauma were more likely to exhibit narcissistic and psychopathic traits [67,68]. Similarly, a study by Abrams and colleagues (2022) indicated that sexual childhood trauma was positively associated with sadomasochistic tendencies. Their study also reported gender differences in sadistic tendencies in which the males exhibited sadistic behaviours and females exhibited more masochistic tendencies. Other research has focused specifically on the relationship between childhood trauma and psychopathy. A study by McDonald and colleagues (2011) found that harsh parental style and punishments was associated with increased psychopathic traits, particularly in the areas of callous-unemotional traits. A study by Yendell and colleagues (2011) found that extensive interpersonal childhood trauma was associated with both primary and secondary psychopathy in adults. A study by Park (2011) found that childhood physical abuse was associated with reactive aggression among a sample of violent offenders with high psychopathy scores [69,70]. The authors suggested that reactive aggression is linked to overly reactive threat system which leads to hyper-responsive amygdala, thereby altering the lack of responsive in individuals with high callous-unemotional traits. Finally, a study by Yendell and colleagues examined the interplay of parenting, dark tetrad traits and violence in a sample of German adolescents. The authors found that parental rejection, punishment, control, and overprotection was positively related to the dark triad. Additionally, parental rearing and development of dark triads increases the propensity of violence [71].

Taken together, these studies highlight the complex interplay between childhood trauma and dark tetrad personality traits and suggest that early life experiences may contribute to the development of maladaptive personality profiles that increase the risk of antisocial and criminal behaviour. Further research is needed to clarify the underlying mechanism of these association and to identify effective interventions for individuals who have experienced childhood trauma and exhibit dark tetrad traits.

Childhood Trauma and Sexual Fantasy

There are limited studies which have investigated the relationship between childhood trauma and sexual fantasies. An extensive review by Gewirtz-Meydan and Opuda found that being a victim of childhood sexual abuse was associated with sexual fantasy involving force that includes elements of dominance and submission, and sadomasochism [72]. According to Moyano & Sierra, individuals who survived Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) reported a greater occurrence of positive sexual fantasies compared to non-survivors [73]. This trend was particularly pronounced when survivors had experienced both CSA and adult sexual assault, with greater severity in the sexual contact. Those with a history of CSA, regardless of gender, reported a higher frequency of exploratory fantasies. Notably, male survivors exhibited more sexual fantasies of submission, while female survivors demonstrated a preference for fantasies of dominance, deviating from traditional gender roles. Intriguingly, only sexual fantasies involving intimacy were perceived as negative by male survivors. A study by Maniglio [74], suggest that early traumatic experiences, particularly those related to sexual abuse during childhood, can lead to the development

of psychiatric disorders or emotional distress in the future. 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. Research indicates that experiencing abuse during childhood can lead to an excessive focus on sexuality, which may increase the chances of developing unconventional sexual interests or behaviours [75].

However, there are multiple studies that presents mixed results. Per a recent systematic review by Bigras et al. examining the link between Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and sexual wellbeing in adulthood, findings indicate that post-CSA sexual fantasies may exhibit both positive and negative aspects [76]. The study suggests that inconsistent literature on sexual fantasies post-CSA underscores the challenges in comprehensively understanding the long-term effects of CSA on sex-related cognitions. In a study involving 60 women with a history of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and 120 without such history, found that a history of CSA had no impact on adult sexual fantasies. Another study by Park (2011) reported mixed findings, suggesting that CSA was associated with an increase in sexual cognitions but not with the specific content of these cognitions. A study by Park (2011) reported a unique finding, indicating that CSA was significantly correlated with having no sexual fantasies [77,78].

However, it is important to note that research on this topic is complex, controversial and limited. There is a need for more studies that examine the relationship between childhood trauma and sexual fantasy with specific personality traits. Additionally, it is important to avoid stigmatizing or pathologizing sexual fantasies that may be related to such experiences.

Dark Tetrad Personality Traits and Sexual Fantasy

Research has shown that individuals high in dark tetrad personality traits may be more likely to engage in certain types of sexual fantasies. For example, a study by Jonason and colleagues (2009), individuals with high scores in psychopathy, tend to have sexual fantasies indicative of an exploitative and self-serving mating strategy. Research by Baughman et al., 2014 conducted on Canadian undergraduates (N = 643) indicated that psychopathy within the Dark Triad was significantly correlated with overall sex drive, including exploratory, impersonal, and sadomasochistic fantasies. High narcissism scores were linked to more frequent engagement in intimate sexual fantasies. In men, psychopathy facilitated overall sexual desire, suggesting alignment with an exploitative, short-term mating strategy. Furthermore, another study by Visser et al. results indicate that psychopathic traits were linked to non-romantic sexual themes and self-reported engagement in various sexual behaviours. These associations held regardless of participant sex and fantasizing levels. Notably, individuals with high psychopathic traits were more likely to act on their sexual fantasies, particularly involving unrestricted and deviant behaviour. Similarly, previous research reveals a link between Machiavellianism and unrestricted sociosexuality, promiscuity, and infidelity and a connection between narcissism and sadomasochistic fantasies [79-81].

Studies suggest that individuals with high dark tetrad traits may lean towards certain sexual fantasies, but opinions vary on their correlation with aggression or dominance in these fantasies. More research is needed to understand this relationship, considering individual and contextual factors. Importantly, there is currently no literature on the connection between sadistic traits and sexual fantasy. It's crucial to approach this topic with sensitivity, especially concerning individuals with dark tetrad traits or those

who may have experienced trauma related to sexual fantasy or behaviour.

Dark Tetrad Personality Traits and Sexually Coercive Behaviour

Research has explored the association between sexually coercive behaviour and dark tetrad personality traits. A study of the Japanese undergraduates (N = 344) by Kiire (2017) showed psychopathy uniquely predicted intimate partner violence (IPV), while Machiavellianism had an indirect negative effect on IPV in males. Life history strategy (LHS) partially mediated the link between psychopathy and IPV in males, suggesting LHS may explain the impact of dark triad traits on male IPV perpetration. Another study found that individuals with higher levels of psychopathy and sadism were more likely to engage in sexual coercion and as well as to non-sexual violence [82,83].

In nonclinical and no forensic samples, research has indicated associations between psychopathy and varying degrees of sexual coercion. Similarly, narcissism has been linked to sexual coercion [84-87]. Additionally, the Dark Triad traits have shown connections to cognitions and attitudes associated with the perpetration of sexual violence. Notably, higher levels of the Dark Triad in both men and women are correlated with a proclivity for sexual harassment. It is evident that psychopathy, in particular, has notable associations with acceptance of rape myths and low victim empathy in both genders. Furthermore, psychopathy is linked to victim blame, as demonstrated in a sample consisting exclusively of women. These findings highlight the intricate connections between dark personality traits and attitudes or behaviours related to sexual coercion and violence. Research found that Dark Triad traits had consistent positive correlations with rape-supportive attitudes, victim blame, and hostile masculinity in both sexist and neutral tweet conditions. Psychopathy emerged as the strongest predictor for increased rape cognitions in regression analyses, suggesting that dispositional factors, rather than short exposure to sexist social media, play a more significant role [88-92].

Overall, the growing body of research on the association between dark tetrad personality traits and sexually coercive behaviour suggests that individuals with high levels of these traits may be at a higher risk for engaging in such behaviour. Moreover, the findings suggest that prevention and intervention efforts should focus on addressing the underlying personality traits and attitudes that contribute to sexually coercive behaviour, rather than solely focusing on addressing the behaviour itself. Such efforts could include interventions aimed at increasing empathy, reducing hostile attitudes towards women, and promoting healthy gender role beliefs.

Sexual Fantasy and Sexually Coercive Behaviour

In understanding the relationship between sexual fantasy and sexually coercive behaviour, research shows that fantasizing about a deviant sexual conduct is associated with engaging in the act by both non-offending members of the community and previously convicted sexual offenders. Recent research in the community sample has indicated that fantasy-behaviour connections have less deviant content than for non-deviant content. Research found that individuals with a history of sexual offending were more likely to report fantasies involving sexual aggression. However, in a sample of minor-attracted men, sexual fantasizing about children was unrelated to sexual offending. Study by Ronis et al. explored sexual fantasies and coercive behaviours in adult men with (n = 159) and without (n = 219) criminal records. Criminal history correlated with lower sexual preoccupation. Regardless of criminal

background, sexually coercive men exhibited higher levels of appetitive fantasies and deviant behaviours. It is important to note that not all sexual fantasies are problematic or indicative of sexually coercive behaviour. There is limited research which focuses on understanding the relationship between sexual fantasy and sexually coercive behaviour [93-98].

Influence of Dark Tetrad Traits and Sexual Fantasy

Previous studies have indicated that personality disorders such as psychopathy act as a mediator in the link between different childhood experiences of family violence, such as abuse and neglect, and subsequent violent behaviours. The findings of these studies underscore the significance of taking into account the circumstances under which children who have been victimized subsequently exhibit violent behaviour. Furthermore, studies indicate that Psychopathy is a personal trait that is closely linked to adverse life events and, subsequently, an increased likelihood of engaging in violent behaviour. The study conducted by Schraft et al. revealed that childhood trauma was a significant predictor of psychopathy facet scores. The study also found that such exposure also had a predictive effect on the behavioural components of psychopathy, even after accounting for exposure to violence in the community [99-102].

Numerous investigations have established correlations between formative experiences during childhood and subsequent manifestation of dark personality traits. The sadistic personality has been found to have a clinical association with childhood physical abuse and neglect, as reported by Bernstein et al. showed that 70% of individuals out of 241 sample reported at least two childhood traumas, and 80% reported perpetrating or experiencing psychological IPV in the past year. A sequential mediation model showed that emotion dysregulation, maladaptive personality traits, and negative urgency explain cumulative childhood trauma and intimate partner violence. Empirical evidence suggests that certain personality traits are more prevalent among individuals who engage in sexual fantasies involving deviant content. Previous studies have identified psychopathy as a common trait among both non-offending members of the community and individuals who have been convicted of sexual offenses. Given that low inhibition is a fundamental characteristic of psychopathy, it is plausible that psychopathic traits impact the regulation of sexual desire and associated motivational objectives stemming from sexual fantasies, thereby elevating the likelihood of engaging in sexual misconduct [103-108].

Another study found a positive link between psychopathic traits and deviant sexual interests. Additionally, stronger positive links were observed among women for the antisocial facet, while men showed stronger associations for the interpersonal facet and sadistic interests. These results highlight gender-specific nuances in the manifestation of psychopathic traits in deviant sexual interests, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive considerations in understanding and assessing sexual deviance. Research discovered that psychopathy serves as a moderator in the correlation between engaging in deviant sexual fantasies and engaging in corresponding behaviour in reality [109,110].

It is astonishing that so few authors have tried to comprehend the processes by which sexual fantasies emerge and grow. Most of these authors concur that early negative experiences, particularly sexual abuse as a child, can give rise to deviant sexual behaviours [111]. Additionally, it has been hypothesized that, in offenders, an inability to cope with psychological issues may result in the emergence of deviant sexual fantasies, which may then prompt

the use of deviant sexual activity as a means of coping with psychological distress [112].

Nevertheless, the associations between sexual coercion, sexual fantasy, and subclinical levels of personality have not been investigated yet. Drawing upon the results and previous research indicating positive correlations between Dark Tetrad personality traits, sexual fantasy and childhood experiences of trauma, it is reasonable to posit that the linkages between childhood trauma and sexually coercive conduct during adulthood may be mediated by variances in Dark Tetrad personality traits and sexual fantasy [113-125].

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.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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