



# Anxious, hostile, and sadistic: Maternal attachment and everyday sadism predict hostile masculine beliefs and male sexual violence



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined everyday sadism and childhood parental attachment as predictors of male sexual aggression and coercion against women. A nationwide sample of adult men ( $N = 489$ ) completed two common hostile masculinity measures, Rape Myth Acceptance and Hostility towards Women, which were tested as mediators in a path analysis. Physical sadism was expected to have a direct path to sexual violence, and vicarious and verbal sadism were expected to have indirect effects on sexual violence by increasing hostile masculinity. Anxious maternal attachment was also predicted to indirectly increase sexual assault behavior through these same mediators. These hypotheses had mixed support. Hostility towards Women did not directly predict sexual violence; however, it had a strong association with Rape Myth Acceptance, which had a direct path to sexual assault. Physical sadism directly predicted the outcomes, and vicarious sadism and anxious maternal attachment predicted Hostility towards Women. Verbal sadism did not have significant paths in the model. This model accounted for 33% and 27% of sexual aggression and coercion, respectively. A cross-validation procedure was conducted to assure consistency and invariance of the path model.

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## 1. Introduction

Although males and females can be both perpetrators and victims, men assaulting women is the most common form of sexual violence (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Two types of sexual assault exist in the literature. The first, termed *sexual aggression*, involves physical tactics (e.g., force, substance-induced incapacitation) to gain unwanted sexual contact. The second type, *sexual coercion*, includes non-physical means (e.g., lies, guilt, false promises) to gain unwanted sexual contact (DeGue, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2010). Empirical investigation suggests aggressors and coercers are more similar than different, and they have common etiological factors (DeGue & DiLillo, 2004).

One etiological model of sexual violence is the Confluence Model (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). The Confluence Model is a multifactorial model of sexual assault with two proximal, latent constructs—hostile masculinity and unrestricted sociosexuality—predicting sexual assault. There is considerable evidence supporting hypotheses derived from the Confluence Model; however, unrestricted sociosexuality has been challenged as a sexual violence factor (Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003), and others have

found null results (e.g., Baer, Kohut, & Fisher, 2015). Conversely, hostile masculinity has been consistently associated with sexual violence (e.g., Debowska, Boduszek, Dhingra, Kola, & Meller-Pruniska, 2015; Parkhill & Abbey, 2008). Two common hostile masculinity components are Hostility towards Women (HTW) and Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA). HTW involves distrustful and aggressive response patterns related to females (e.g., most women lie to get ahead), and RMA consists of persistent rape beliefs that are usually inaccurate (e.g., women's clothing causes rape; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995).

### 1.1. Attachment theory

Childhood factors have been associated with sexual aggression and coercion (e.g., Malamuth et al., 1991), but one factor less commonly considered is attachment. Attachment theory is an evolutionary approach to explaining lasting, affectionate relationships in humans (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973). According to attachment theory, infants develop either a secure attachment, or an anxious or avoidant insecure attachment when interacting with primary caregivers. The attachment style developed in childhood is relatively stable over time (Bretherton, 1985), and it often continues to impact many relationships in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This is due to attachment's influence on affective and cognitive components of interpersonal perception (Alexander, 1992; Bretherton, 1985). Individuals attend to and perceive others through a lens colored by

Abbreviations: HTW, Hostility towards Women Scale; RMA, Rape Myth Acceptance Scale.

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childhood attachment relationships, and insecurely attached individuals are prone to cognitive distortions thanks to this lens (Alexander, 1992). Maternal attachment predicts social interactions more than paternal attachment, but a secure attachment to both parents relates to the most optimal life outcomes (Main & Weston, 1981).

Both unspecified insecure attachment and anxious attachment have been associated with sexual aggression. For example, a non-specific insecure attachment indirectly predicted sexual violence, mediated by hostile masculinity (Nguyen & Parkhill, 2014). An overall anxious attachment style, as well as an anxious attachment towards a specific female, predicted college men's perpetration of sexual assault against that woman (Barbaro, Parkhill, & Nguyen, 2016). These findings suggest attachment styles relate to sexual violence.

### 1.2. Everyday sadism

Narcissism- and psychopathy-related traits have been extensively linked to sexual aggression, and both of these personalities have overlapping malevolent traits (e.g. Malamuth, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, & Essa, 2013). This group of clinical and subclinical personality types, which includes Machiavellianism, is called the Dark Triad (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Investigation of the triad revealed intercorrelated traits (the *dark core*) were callousness and manipulateness (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). While the Dark Triad personalities have commonalities like callousness, each personality also expresses a distinct trait cluster (e.g., grandiosity in narcissism). Understanding these features resulted in other findings, such as possibly expanding the group.

Everyday sadism has been proposed as a fourth personality deserving inclusion in the dark cluster, as it has the same dark core (Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009). Its distinct contribution to the group is enjoyment of others' humiliation, pain, and suffering (Paulhus, 2014). Behaviors like watching or participating in violent sports, brutalizing prisoners and helpless others, and bullying are consistent with everyday sadism (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013). Support for including everyday sadism in the dark cluster is growing (e.g., Buckels et al., 2013), and some now call the group the Dark Tetrad (e.g., Paulhus, 2014).

Because everyday sadism is a relatively new construct, no known study has investigated its relationship to sexual assault; however, most everyday sadism studies find it predicts an impulsive type of violence. For example, everyday sadism was the only dark personality positively associated with time and energy spent aggressing against an innocent person (Buckels et al., 2013). It is also related to violent video game preferences (Greitemeyer, 2015), seeking conflict with other social media users (i.e., *trolling*; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), and using personal resources to punish cooperative individuals (i.e., *antisocial punishment*; Pfattheicher & Schindler, 2015).

## 2. Planned analyses and predictions

A path analysis is planned for these data; however, because no known studies have analyzed differential parental attachment and everyday sadism in sexual assault, regression analyses will guide the model. In the path analysis, the attachment scales will be entered as exogenous variables, as their temporal order can be established in adult participants. Additionally, everyday sadism scales will be exogenous, consistent with empirical findings of psychopathy- and narcissism-related traits being distal predictors of sexual violence (e.g., Malamuth, 2003). Moreover, placing sadism exogenously is supportive of a Confluence Model premise that a general antisocial attitude contributes to more specific characteristics (e.g., HTW or RMA) disinhibiting sexual violence (Malamuth et al., 1995). In this way, the antisocial behavior is similar to an antisocial G factor (or *p* factor in general psychopathology; Caspi et al., 2013), which interacts with specific proximal sexual violence constructs (Malamuth, 2003). In the present conceptualization,

the antisocial G is everyday sadism. Rather than combine HTW and RMA into one hostile masculinity variable as is common in Confluence Model research (e.g., Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011), each will be analyzed individually to determine if both predict sexual violence. It is expected both HTW and RMA will have direct associations with sexual assault and mediate the attachment and sadism scales' relationships with sexual aggression and coercion.

Past research established attachment's indirect association with sexual violence, mediated by similar hostile masculinity variables (Nguyen & Parkhill, 2014), and Barbaro et al. (2016) demonstrated anxious attachment specifically relates to sexual aggression. Nguyen and Parkhill (2014) is most consistent with the present research variables, and an indirect relationship between anxious attachment and sexual violence is hypothesized. Moreover, maternal attachment is a better predictor of social interaction than paternal attachment (Main & Weston, 1981); thus, paternal attachment is not expected to be significant, and anxious maternal attachment is expected to emerge as a significant exogenous predictor.

No known empirical findings can guide the everyday sadism hypotheses. Anecdotally, individuals with high levels of physical sadism seem likely to take an active role in others' humiliation and pain, whereas vicarious sadism seems to be a non-active, non-physical role, and verbal sadism seems to be an active, but non-physical role. Thus, physical sadism is expected to have a direct relationship with sexual violence. Vicarious and verbal sadism are also expected to be included, but it is anticipated they will be mediated by RMA and HTW.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

The adult males in this national sample ( $N = 489$ ) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). These participants also completed additional measures and were included in another study. The participants were predominantly Caucasian (82%), and the remaining ethnicities were roughly equally distributed (Latino 5%, African American 5%, Asian 3%, Native American 2%, Bi-racial, 2%, Other 1%). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 66 years ( $M = 33.98$ ,  $SD = 11.07$ ).

### 3.2. Materials

#### 3.2.1. Revised Hostility towards Women Scale (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995)

This instrument assesses mistrust of, and aggression towards, women specifically. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*), and there was strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

#### 3.2.2. Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995)

This instrument assesses beliefs about rape that are widely held, but usually false. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*), and there was strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

#### 3.2.3. Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale (Limke & Mayfield, 2011)

This instrument assesses anxious and avoidant parental attachment. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree Strongly*, 4 = *Neutral/mixed*, 7 = *Agree Strongly*), and the scale was included twice to capture ratings for each parent. Maternal and paternal indices had strong internal consistency (maternal avoidance  $\alpha = .88$ ; maternal anxiousness  $\alpha = .92$ ; paternal avoidance  $\alpha = .87$ ; paternal anxiousness  $\alpha = .93$ ).

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