



## Personality and sexually deviant behavior



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### ABSTRACT

The present research expands on the relationship between subclinical paraphilia and Big Five and Dark Triad personality traits in an online sample of 585 adults. In this sample, sexually deviant courtship behaviors such as exhibitionism and voyeurism were related to high levels of narcissism while transvestism related to greater openness to experience. Further, there were gender differences in the relationship between sadomasochism and personality with sadomasochism reflecting greater openness in men and Machiavellianism in women. These findings suggest that deviant sexual behaviors represent both a degree of antisocial personality functioning and a degree of personal openness that depends on the specific behavior being examined and that more research is needed in this area.

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### 1. Personality and subclinical paraphilia

Personality traits are quickly coming to be recognized as important predictors of sexual behavior. For example, personality traits are related to sexual promiscuity (e.g. Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012; Markey & Markey, 2007), risky sexual behavior (e.g. Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Kastner & Sellbom, 2012; Schmitt, 2004; Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010), sexual fantasies (e.g. Baughman, Jonason, Veselka, & Vernon, *in press*), and with general sexuality (e.g. Bourdage, Lee, Ashton, & Perry, 2007; Lee et al., 2013; Visser et al., 2010). In addition, preliminary evidence suggests that personality traits may be indicative of deviant as well as normative sexuality (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, & Paulhus, 2009; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). However, within this literature, the relationship between personality traits and sexually deviant behavior is inconsistent with some research suggesting sexually deviant behavior may be related to antisocial personality traits and anxiety (Williams et al., 2009) while other research suggests that certain sexually deviant behaviors are unrelated to personality traits (Brown et al., 1996) and still other research suggests that sexually deviant behaviors may actually be related to greater emotional stability (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013) as well as a high degree of personal openness (Williams et al., 2009). The present research attempts to address these inconsistencies through assessing a breadth of both personality traits and sexual deviant behaviors in adults.

#### 1.1. What is sexual deviance?

The term sexual deviance characterizes any arousal or sexual preference directed towards objects or activities outside of societal norms. At the most extreme, interest in such behavior is labeled as paraphilia by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The DSM groups paraphilia in two broad organizing frameworks: (1) anomalous activity preferences include the courtship disorders of voyeurism and exhibitionism as well as the atypical disorders of masochism and sadism and (2) anomalous target preferences include preferences directed at other humans such as pedophilia and preferences directed elsewhere such as fetishes and transvestism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

#### 1.2. The relationship between personality traits and sexual deviance

The evidence regarding the relationship between personality traits and sexually deviant behavior in the literature to date is not clear cut with multiple different and sometimes contrasting relationships between personality traits and sexually deviant behavior present in the literature.

First, some research suggests that subclinical deviant sexuality may be linked to antisocial personality traits. Specifically, a broad assessment of paraphilia fantasies and behaviors in college men suggests that sadistic fantasies, sadistic behavior, and sexual assault behaviors are related to narcissism and masochistic fantasies, sadistic fantasies, sadistic behaviors, and sexual assault behaviors are related to psychopathy (Williams et al., 2009). However, recent research on a large sample of Dutch individuals who

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engage in sadomasochistic behaviors provides contradictory evidence regarding the supposition that deviant sexuality may be linked to antisocial personality traits. Specifically, participants who engaged in sadomasochistic behaviors reported higher levels of conscientiousness but lower levels of agreeableness relative to control participants, a finding that is intriguing given that the blend of conscientiousness and agreeableness is thought to reflect psychoticism (McCrae & Costa, 1985).

Next, subclinical deviant sexuality is inconclusively linked to emotional stability. In college men, masochistic fantasies are correlated with low emotional stability (Williams et al., 2009) while Dutch sadomasochists report higher levels of emotional stability relative to control participants with the authors suggesting that these findings, along with higher levels of subjective well-being and lower levels of rejection sensitivity, need for approval, and anxious attachment, are evidence that “BDSM practitioners are characterized by greater psychological and interpersonal strength and autonomy, rather than by psychological maladaptive characteristics” (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013, p. 1949).

Finally, sexually deviant behaviors may be linked to a more curious, exploratory personality. In college men, transvestic fantasies and behaviors were related to extraversion while pedophilic fantasies were related to openness (Williams et al., 2009). Further, in Dutch sadomasochists, individuals who engage in sadomasochistic behaviors were higher in extraversion and openness when compared to control participants (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). However, in 188 male transvestites, variability in types of cross-dressing behavior related only to minor differences in the Big Five trait of openness to experience and when the sample was reduced to the 139 individuals who had never received treatment for psychological dysfunction, these differences were attenuated and the remaining men were “virtually indistinguishable” (Brown et al., 1996, p. 265) from non-cross-dressing men in their personality traits (Brown et al., 1996).

Thus, the literature to date is inconclusive regarding the relationship between personality traits and sexually deviant behavior. As with any psychological dysfunction, in order to receive a diagnosis of a paraphilic disorder, an individual must clinically present not just with a paraphilic interest but also with a concern that these interests cause significant clinical impairment at some level. In the case of paraphilia, the distress accompanying the diagnosis may be due to the socially deviant nature of the sexual interest. If this is the case, subclinical deviant sexual interests may correspond to variations in personality indicative of antisocial personality traits such as low conscientiousness and agreeableness and high levels of all three Dark Triad traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Further, the presence of deviant sexual interests may, across the board, create some degree of anxiety in the individual and thus be linked to lower levels of emotional stability. On the other hand, engaging in sexually deviant behaviors may be related to higher levels of emotional stability if it is affirming one’s sexual identity. Subclinical deviant sexual interests may also be behavioral markers of an underlying curious, explorative personality as characterized by higher levels of openness and extraversion. Indeed, a combination of these trait profiles is possible and the relationships may vary based on the specific sexual behavior being considered.

### 1.3. The current research

The present study extends the research into the relationship between personality and subclinical paraphilia by examining the covariance between a variety of different sexually deviant behaviors and both Big Five and Dark Triad personality traits within a large sample of adults. In doing so, we address three ways personality traits may relate to deviant sexual behavior. First, more

antisocial behaviors characterized by anomalous courtship behaviors, algolagnic behaviors, and anomalous target preferences directed at human targets may relate to an antisocial personality as evidenced by low conscientiousness and agreeableness and high scores on all three Dark Triad Traits. Next, subclinical paraphilia may be related to low emotional stability reflecting underlying anxiety about holding sexually deviant fantasies or may be related to high emotional stability reflecting comfort with one’s sexual preferences and identity. Finally, subclinical paraphilia may be related to a more exploratory personality as evidenced by higher openness and extraversion.

We anticipate that these patterns may vary within the type of sexual behavior being examined. Specifically, we do not include anomalous target preferences directed elsewhere (fetishism and transvestism) in the hypothesized relationship with antisocial personality traits as the direction of such behaviors is not necessarily antisocial. Further, given the recent evidence that individuals who engage in sadomasochistic behavior may actually be better adjusted than control individuals (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013), algolagnic behaviors may not correspond to antisocial personality or anxiety and instead may be negatively related to such traits.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

595 participants (244 male, 334 female, and 17 individuals who described their gender fluidly) completed the online survey. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (87.9%) and ranged in age from 18 to 59 years ( $M = 23.64$ ,  $SD = 5.92$ ).

### 2.2. Personality measures

Big Five personality traits were assessed with the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). Dark Triad personality traits were assessed with the Dirty Dozen, a short index of the Dark Triad (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Table 1 displays statistics and reliabilities for all personality measures.

### 2.3. Subclinical paraphilia measures

Nine subscales of sexually deviant behavior were adapted from the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex, and Aggression (MIDSA; Augur Enterprises, 2011). Participants reported the frequency (from 0 = never to 5 = almost every day) with which they engaged in each of the following sexual behaviors: voyeurism, exhibitionism, transvestism, scatologia (obscene phone calls), fetishism, sadistic fantasies and behaviors, child sexual arousal, and child sexual sadism. In addition, four subscales of sexually deviant behavior not tapped by the MIDSA (masochism, urophilia, biastophilia, and bestiality) were developed by the authors for the

**Table 1**  
Descriptive and reliability statistics for personality trait measures.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
Big Five Traits			
Openness	3.90	.57	.77
Conscientiousness	3.30	.66	.81
Extraversion	3.00	.91	.89
Agreeableness	3.50	.65	.77
Emotional stability	3.20	.84	.86
Dark Triad			
Narcissism	5.10	1.65	.73
Psychopathy	3.66	1.61	.82
Machiavellianism	4.60	1.77	.82

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