

Unpacking Dark Desires: The Role of the Dark Tetrad and Schadenfreude in Sexual Fantasies

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ABSTRACT

Background: The topic of dark personality traits and the emotional construct of schadenfreude have attained the spotlight over the last decade and gained popularity in terms of understanding their characteristics, behaviours and mindset. Sexual fantasies have also garnered relating interest, and a bridge between these constructs hypothetically began to take form.

Methodology: In line with prior research and ideations, this study aimed to establish a meaningful and strong correlation between the constructs of the Dark Tetrad personality traits, schadenfreude and the types of sexual fantasies, while also finding significant predictors of sexual fantasies. It also attempts to add to the lack of literature on gender differentiations between such dark traits and fantasies and put an evolutionary outlook in the same.

Results: The data was obtained from 124 young adults (Females = 64, Males = 60) using standardised measures of The Short Dark Triad Scale, The Short Sadistic Impulse Scale, The Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire, and 3 scenarios to assess Schadenfreude.

Conclusion: The study provides a major insight into how dark personality traits, emotions and fantasies manifest in subclinical populations with accounted gender differentiation, and puts forth a case of the vastness and depth of the dark tetrad and schadenfreude, accounting for their influential roles in manifesting specific sexual fantasies.

Keywords: Dark Tetrad, Schadenfreude, Sexual Fantasies, Gender Differences

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INTRODUCTION

“Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires.”

William Shakespeare

Mankind, like the Moon, always had two sides to their personality, a lighter acceptable side showcased to humanity, and a hidden darker side, playing in the mind amongst the thoughts. These personality traits have shown to influence not only behaviours but also thoughts and fantasies, especially those of sexual nature. These fantasies can be of varying themes and styles, some on the darker aggressive side, others on the lighter intimate side [1]. Like a gate into an unknown realm, researchers have begun gathering at the entrance to this vast domain, trying to shed light as to what they see in the dark and as a result, the number of researches has slowly begun to take a rise.

This growing interest in the dark side of people and achieving an understanding of the same led to the conceptualization of the Dark Tetrad, known for its arsenal of prominent and socially aversive traits and behaviours, making it the bedrock upon which the toxic, dysfunctional and so-called “dark” thoughts

crystallize [2]. To say that these traits are the underlying factors in shaping one's thoughts, feelings and actions is only the tip of the iceberg. The traits of machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism, and sadism, especially in terms of the HEXACO model [3], showing that all the 4 traits had commonalities in terms of low agreeableness, empathy and emotionality, which accounts for the overlapping constructs in the Dark Tetrad, thus gaining popularity on the front of measuring not only antisocial behaviours but a wide array of disruptive and emotionally callous behaviour as well [4].

The German-born *schadenfreude*, having a great deal of similarity with the Dark Tetrad, in terms of the overall emotional coldness and derivation of pleasure at watching someone in pain, also plays an important role in fueling fantasies and thoughts [5]. The callous enjoyment characterising this dark emotion combined with manipulation have been identified as the core factors of a dark personality [6]. In falling hand-in-hand with the Dark Tetrad, the emotional enjoyment associated with dark sexual fantasies seemingly have an explanation with this concept.

Another less-tapped area of research in this very dimension has been that of gender differences for, be it for traits exhibited, actions or behaviours engaged in, or fantasies experienced. The very selected that have ventured in this direction, take up an evolutionary perspective on mating strategies, that men and women possess different emotional mechanisms that govern their thoughts of selecting a mate, thus engaging in required mating strategies to acquire mates, has broken the surface in the research world [7]. The biological variations causing natural increased aggression and strength in men have always been thought of as the prime reason for them engaging in those actions, underlining masculinity by the themes of dominance control and aggression, citing a vast connection that the more aggressive kind of fantasies would be held by men [8].

The heart of the present study, thus, is to attempt to explore a possible positive relationship between the Dark Tetrad, *schadenfreude* and sexual fantasies and find, if any, gender differences that may be present in the type of fantasies experienced by males and females in an Indian population. With dark traits facilitating aggressive and exploitative sexual behaviours and actions, an insight into the mind as to the extent of influence of personality traits on fantasies is proposed and thus a relationship to be found. The framework for this research paper aiming to provide a more concrete walkway to test new theories, make new assumptions and find more empirical evidence, assessing the dark constructs with a hue of emotionality with *schadenfreude* and sexual fantasies, and a gender battle, in terms of differences seen in the constructs and themes of fantasies measured.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was approved by the mentors at the Department of Clinical Psychology, R.D National College affiliated to the University of Mumbai. This was a small-scale study conducted among a sample of 124 young adults (Females = 64, Males = 60) who fall in the age group of 18-27 years old in Mumbai, India. The study aimed to study the relationship between the Dark Tetrad, *Schadenfreude*, and Sexual Fantasies in Indian young adults, and to highlight any gender differences seen in the same. The participants were recruited by convenience sampling, as well as the Snowball method in asking those participants to share the survey with their contacts.

A survey was prepared as a Google form containing the necessary instructions, consent form, withdrawal information, relevant information about the study, a debriefing, and the scales used to measure the facets. The participants were sent the link to the google form via social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook or Emails, making it easier for distribution and data collection. On giving their consent to participate in the study, the participants filled the Short Dark Triad Scale, the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale, opinions on scenarios, and the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire. Once done, the debriefing page educated the participants about the study.

Measures

The Short Dark Triad Scale: Developed by Jones and Paulhus (2014), the Short Dark Triad was used to assess psychopathy, narcissism and machiavellianism, containing 27 items (9 items per facet). The items

were scored on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from “ 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.” Higher scores on the scale are indicative of darker personality traits and behaviours. Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy showed good reliability scores, with alpha values of 0.76, 0.73 and 0.78 respectively [9].

The Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS): Developed by O’Meara, Davies, and Hammond, the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale was used to assess the trait of sadism, containing 10 items. The items were scored on a 2-point Likert Scale with the options “0 = Unlike Me” or “1 = Like Me.” A high score on the scale is representative of a sadistic personality trait. A Cronbach’s alpha of 0.81 showed high reliability [10].

Scenarios

Schadenfreude was assessed using vignettes or scenarios that instruct participants to rate their response in terms of amusement, satisfaction, pleasure/happiness, and/or sympathy that the scenario made them feel.

Scenario 1: “You have a meeting with your group of friends. Your classmate who doesn’t know your friends wants to come with you. During the meeting, your classmate fuses with your friends very quickly, talks to them more than you do, interacts with them. After a while, you feel they forgot your presence. You see that your classmate is pleased with the condition but is also drinking a lot of alcohol and you warn your classmate about it. But your classmate is making fun of you in front of your friends. After a while, your classmate’s stomach starts to nauseous and it results in vomiting on the table before reaching the toilet. This gave you feelings of amusement, pleasure, satisfaction or happiness.”

Scenario 2: “You have a classmate who has an equal GPA in your class. The grade you will take in the last assignment of the semester can put one of you forward. The final assignment of the semester is a presentation with you. You both work equally and prepare for the presentation. The day before the presentation, your classmate says that she/he will do the presentation better than you because he/she is a more successful student than you. He/she thus makes fun of you in the process. On the day of the presentation, your teacher evaluating your performance gives you an A while giving C to your classmate. This gave you feelings of amusement, pleasure, satisfaction or happiness.”

Scenario 3: “There is a wealthy businessperson driving the latest model sports car tailgating you while you are driving home. After a while, he overtakes you, zooming past you and through the traffic lights up ahead. On driving ahead you see that he has been pulled over by the cops and is being fined for speeding. This gave you feelings of amusement, pleasure, satisfaction or happiness.” The scenarios were scored on a 7 point Likert scale ranging from “ 1 = Strongly Disagree” to “ 7 = Strongly Agree.” Higher scores on the scenarios represent a higher level of schadenfreude. Scenario 1 achieved an alpha value of 0.94, Scenario 2 achieved a value of 0.96 and Scenario 3 a value of 0.74, all showing excellent to good reliability.

The Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ): Developed by Wilson (1988), the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire was used to assess sexual fantasies and its types, and gender differences in the same. It contains 40 items, 10 items per subscale, i.e., for intimate, exploratory, impersonal, and sadomasochistic fantasies. To obtain scores for these factors, the item scores of between 0 and 5 are summed over the 10 items in each factor to produce scores on the four scales, each ranging from 0 to 50. In addition to these four “primaries”, a total fantasy score may be obtained by simply summing the scores on the four primaries, for it is a fairly good measure of overall sex drive. The higher the scores, the more the fantasies of the particular type are experienced. The fantasies also each showed alpha values of 0.90, 0.76, 0.69, and 0.86 respectively, and overall sex drive achieved an alpha value of 0.92, thus showing very good reliability for all facets [11].

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Using the SPSS Version 25.0 software, descriptive and inferential statistics were computed on the data gathered from the participants. Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient analysis and multiple regression analysis were conducted to determine the relationship between the variables and the influence of the dark tetrad traits and schadenfreude on the types of sexual fantasies.

RESULTS

Gender Differences

An independent sample t-test was computed to ascertain gender differences between the variables of the Dark Tetrad, schadenfreude and various sexual fantasies and to see on which specific variables does the most difference arise. A large difference was seen between the genders, with the males scoring high on all the variables present in the study. The largest difference was seen for the trait of psychopathy yielding a significant t-score of -10.864, $p < 0.01$ ($df = 122$), however, a reasonable difference was seen for machiavellianism, sadism and narcissism as well. In considering the emotionality trait of schadenfreude, the male sample (16.48) just about scored higher than the females (12.02).

A larger difference was seen within the sexual fantasies, with the males having an exceptionally high mean on overall sex drive (77.43) as compared to the females (33.02) significant with a t-value of -9.105 at $p < 0.01$ ($df = 122$). Exploratory, impersonal and sadomasochistic fantasies all saw vast gender differences characterised by t-values of -8.373, -9.022, and -7.478 significant at $p < 0.01$ ($df = 122$) level of significance. The intimate fantasies had the least differentiation, with males and females having almost the same scores.

Correlates of Sexual Fantasies

Table 1: Correlations between Dark Tetrad, Schadenfreude and Sexual Fantasies

Sexual Fantasies	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Psychopathy	Sadism	Schadenfreude
Intimate	0.22**	0.27**	0.25**	0.19*	0.19*
Exploratory	0.57**	0.47**	0.67**	0.68**	0.57**
Impersonal	0.57**	0.43**	0.63**	0.66**	0.61**
Sadomasochistic	0.58**	0.47**	0.62**	0.78**	0.59**
Sex Drive	0.59**	0.51**	0.67**	0.72**	0.61**

** $p < 0.01$ (1-tailed); * $p < 0.05$ (1-tailed)

A Pearson's correlation coefficient test was computed to find relationships between the Dark tetrad traits, schadenfreude and the types of sexual fantasies, showing that all the variables have a significant relationship with one another (Table 1). The strongest of these relationships was that between sadism and the sadomasochistic fantasies ($r = 0.77$, $p < 0.01$) and psychopathy with sadomasochistic fantasies ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). Narcissism was also seen as having a relationship with intimate sexual fantasies ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$). Exploratory fantasies saw the strongest correlation with sadism ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) closely followed by psychopathy ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.01$). Schadenfreude saw the strongest correlation with impersonal fantasies ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) which was theoretically expected.

Predictors of Sexual Fantasies

Table 2: Regression analysis of predictors of Intimate Sexual Fantasies

Model Variables	B	SE B	β	R ²	F
	0.08	10.78			
Narcissism			0.57	0.17	0.28***

*** $p < .001$ (1-tailed) ** $p < .05$ (1-tailed) * $p < 0.1$ (1-tailed)

A backward stepwise regression analysis was conducted that found several predictors for each type of sexual fantasy. For the intimate sexual fantasies, Narcissism ($\beta = .28$, $P < .001$) accounted for only 8% of the total variance (Table 2). Sadism ($\beta = .44$, $P < .001$) and psychopathy ($\beta = .33$, $P < .001$), meanwhile, accounted for 51% of the total variance in exploratory sexual fantasies, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression analysis of predictors of Exploratory Sexual Fantasies

Model Variables	B	SE B	β	R ²	F
	0.51	65.17			
Psychopathy			0.40	0.11	0.33***
Sadism			1.06	0.23	0.44***

*** $p < .001$ (1-tailed); ** $p < .05$ (1-tailed); * $p < .1$ (1-tailed)

Schadenfreude ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$), along with sadism ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$) and psychopathy ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$), all accounted for over 50% of the total variance in impersonal sexual fantasies (Table 2.3). For sadomasochistic sexual fantasies, however, only schadenfreude ($\beta = .13$, $p < .1$), and sadism ($\beta = .69$, $p < .001$) accounted for over 60% of the total variance (Table 2.4). For overall sex drive, psychopathy ($\beta = .25$, $p < .05$), sadism ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), and schadenfreude ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$), all accounted for 56% of the total variance.

DISCUSSION

It has long been in the realm of interest, curiosity and advancing mindsets to understand truly the relationship between personalities, emotions and thoughts or fantasies. Entering into a specific branch of study with the Dark Tetrad traits, schadenfreude and sexual fantasies have been the core of this research and also briefly incorporated by past researchers in their trek into the dark realm. Thus sees a few striking resemblances are seen, both in form of structure as well as a line of results when put side by side with prior research.

A strong relationship was seen between the constructs, with high correlations especially between sadism, psychopathy, sadomasochistic, impersonal fantasies as well as overall sex drive, [1, 12-13], in which results of the same nature specifically in terms of males having a higher sexual motivation and desire [13], sadistic characteristics making it the truest part of the Dark Tetrad and forming strong correlational relationships [3], and the major sociosexual orientation or motives and attitudes in the minds that lead to a more striking fantasy choice and interest [8], all correlate with the results of previous studies.

The rather weak correlation between narcissism and intimate sexual fantasies was unlike the findings of previous research wherein vulnerable or fragile narcissism is brought to light, where self-image is tied to external feedback [14], instills close ties with intimacy, with feelings that the other person desires them over all others, passion being the centre of gratifying the self-image [1].

A whole array of gender differences on every variable postulated in the study, in some cases very large differences that were seen in the types of sexual fantasies. Previous studies [1, 5, 13-15], all showed similar findings in their research, with sexual fantasies attributed to mating strategies and the evolutionary theory, with males leaning more towards a short-term mating strategy and scoring high on all branches relating to the same. Researchers [14] also posited correlations with short term relationships and its subtypes, with findings of more male preferences for one-night stands and booty-call relationships correlating strongly with psychopathy.

These evolutionary findings from previous researches also provide an explanation to the predictors of the sexual fantasies as seen in this study. With impersonal and sadomasochistic fantasies having traits like psychopathy, sadism and schadenfreude as their predictors, the characteristically impersonal, callous enjoyment and antisocial behaviour makes it hard to refute or challenge the prediction, making their influence stand out, if not concrete.

The study had a few limitations, the first being a small sample that was used to gain the findings of this study, a sample total of only 124 participants, out of which 60 were male and 64 female. The usage of self-report measures also requires a mention, for although all the scales had good reliability alpha values, issues of response biases, social desirability and misunderstanding of questionnaire items could have seeped in.

This is especially a hindrance given the nature of characteristics of people high on machiavellianism, psychopathy and sadism. Another limitation of the study is its use of concise measures like the Short Dark Triad (SD3) and Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS) which have been criticised as being too simple to reflect the true “richness” of the dark personality traits.

However, the study provides an immense scope for future research, for being a “pure research” at heart, it essentially attempts to expand on the literature on the vague constructs of dark personality, schadenfreude and sexual fantasies, and provides an understanding into the same. It may also help researchers, psychologists, readers and other professionals gain an insight into the mindset of individuals high on these traits and the characteristic behaviours associated with the same, allowing future research to negate the limitations of this study and expand upon the degree of influence these dark personality traits and schadenfreude have over thoughts and fantasies, especially those sexual in nature.

CONCLUSION

Marcus Aurelius recites the colour of our thoughts is what dyes the soul, and indeed it is dyed, soaking the colour, the content of the mind both dark and bright, a large spectrum to scale. Personalities, emotions and fantasies all having constructs on either end of the spectrum, and this current study explored the dark end, to put forth a case of the vastness and depth, and all related constructs hand-in-hand. The Dark Tetrad and schadenfreude showed strong correlations with the sexual fantasies, with specific traits standing out as effective predictors of certain sexual fantasies, fueling the motivation to engage in such interests. The study climbs to a peak by letting researchers and readers understand the mindset, motives and generalised ideation behind the closed doors of an individual high on the dark facets, and it also allows knowledge as to the fueling of the same and a major insight into how these traits, emotions and fantasies manifest in subclinical populations with accounted gender differentiation. In a nutshell, a bucket being lowered into the deep depths of dark constructs and research, with only a pail of water sized knowledge acquired, an ocean full left to explore and discover. The pail provides insightful knowledge and a further push from past findings, gearing future research into the same and shining a flashlight into the vastness of personality, emotion and sexual fantasies.

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