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## Childhood trauma experiences and dark triad traits in women: the mediating role of social support

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### Abstract

The current research aimed to determine the role of childhood trauma experiences with dark triad traits with the mediation of social support. The statistical population was women referred to Tehran counseling centers in the period of 2020-2021. After conducting the initial interview, 250 eligible women were selected purposefully and responded to the questionnaires about childhood injuries, dark personality traits, and perceived social support. The collected data were analyzed using correlation coefficients and structural equations. The correlation coefficients showed a negative correlation between social support with the total score of dark triad traits and the components of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and antisociality. There is a negative correlation between emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect with the total score of dark triad traits and the components of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and antisociality. Also, with perceived support and the components of perceived support from the family, perceived support from important people, and perceived support from others, there is a negative correlation at a significant  $\alpha=0.01$  level. The path coefficients model results showed a significant direct relationship between the components of childhood trauma (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect) with dark triad traits and social support. Also, there is a significant negative direct relationship between social support and dark triad traits. The experiences of childhood traumas are influenced by the vulnerability of the personality and the long-term experiences of the growth period, and these factors add to the complexity of personality traits over time.

**Keywords:** *Childhood trauma, dark personality traits, social support.*

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## Introduction

Child abuse is one of the major social problems that affects all societies, both advanced and developing (Nazari et al., 2017). Mills, Friend, Conroy, Ann, Krug et al. (2010) defined child abuse as doing or allowing others to cause physical, sexual, and emotional harm to a child and cause physical and emotional pain. Harassment generally takes four forms according to different definitions, which include: neglect or neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse (Marvasti, 2012; Walker, Kaufman, Bonner, 2018). Educational neglect includes allowing a child to skip school continuously and not enrolling in school. Emotional neglect includes the lack of emotional provision, exposing the child to abuse by the spouse, allowing the child to use drugs and alcohol, or not taking psychological care of the child (Marvasti, 2012). Emotional abuse includes many verbal threats, ridicule, humiliating opinions, shielding the child, refusing to provide food, shelter, sleep and other necessities of life intentionally and economic exploitation of the child. Physical abuse includes injuries such as trauma, burns, head trauma, fractures, internal injuries, wounds, and other forms of physical injury that last for at least 48 hours (Walker et al., 2018). Sexual abuse is considered as sexual violence against a child, which can include any interaction or contact between a child and an adult in which the child is used for the sexual gratification of the adult (Pritchard, 2014).

One of the variables that can play a role in predicting childhood injuries is dark triad traits; These three undesirable social traits are related to Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and subclinical narcissism, and they are also related to some negative traits such as unpleasantness, dishonesty,

aggressiveness, and a number of predictive indicators of self-regulation (Najafipour Zazatari and Jafari, 2017). Machiavellian personality has the characteristics of ambition, divisiveness, hypocrisy, destructiveness, enslaving others, practical intelligence, high emotion control, encouraging others and soft anger. The main characteristic of a psychopath is high impulsivity and excitement along with low empathy and anxiety. Narcissism is correlated with aggression, impulsivity, leaving or cheating in economic games and having multiple sexual partners (Bashrepour, 2016).

One of the important components that affects the mental health of people with childhood trauma experience is social support. In perceived social support, the individual's evaluations of the availability of support when necessary and needed are examined (Gülaçt, 2010). The perception of support is more important than receiving it, in other words, the perception and attitude of the person towards the support received is more important than the amount of support provided to the person.

The aim of the current research is to determine the structural equation modeling of the relationship between childhood injuries and dark personality traits and with the mediating role of social support.

## Method

The current research has an applied purpose and in terms of methodology, the method it follows is descriptive-correlational. The statistical population of the present study was made up of all the working women of Neiriz city who were employed in government and non-government offices of Neiriz city in 1400 and their population consisted of 440 working women. Sampling in this research was done using single-stage cluster sampling

and 200 people were selected as the sample group based on Morgan's table.

### Materials

**1. Childhood Trauma Questionnaire:** It was developed by Bernstein, Stein, Newcomb, Walker, Pogge, Ahluvalia, & Zule (2003) in order to measure childhood injuries and trauma. This questionnaire is a screening tool to reveal individuals with experiences of childhood abuse and neglect. This questionnaire can be used for both adults and teenagers. This questionnaire measures five types of childhood abuse, which include sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. This questionnaire has 28 questions, 25 of which are used to measure the main components of the questionnaire and 3 of which are used to identify people who deny their childhood problems.

**2. dark triad traits questionnaire:** Jenison and Webster (2010) created a short version of this questionnaire to measure dark triad traits, which has 12 items and the respondents are asked to rate the suitability of the items with their situation on a seven-point scale. In this scale, each of the three dark triad traits is measured with four items.

**3. Perceived social support questionnaire:** To measure social support, the multidimensional scale of perceived social support by Zimet et al. (1988) was used. This scale consists of 12 items that measure the three components of perceived support from family, perceived support from important people, and perceived support from friends. All items of this scale are graded on a five-point Likert scale. The minimum and maximum score of the individual in the whole scale is calculated as 12 and 84, respectively, and in each of the family, social and friend support subscales, 4

and 28 respectively. A higher score indicates greater perceived social support.

### Findings

There is a significant negative correlation between social support with the total score of dark triad traits and the components of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and antisociality at  $\alpha=0.01$  level. Also, the results showed that there is a significant relationship between emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect and physical neglect with the total score of dark triad traits. The components of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and antisocialism have a negative correlation with perceived support and the components of perceived support from the family, perceived support from important people, and perceived support from others at a significant  $\alpha=0.01$  level.

The results of the path coefficients model showed that there was a significant direct relationship between the components of childhood trauma (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect) with dark triad traits and social support. Also, there is a significant negative direct relationship between social support and dark triad traits.

All fit indices support the fit of the structural model of the research with the collected data, thus it was concluded that the structural model of the research fits the collected data.

### Discussion

The present study aimed to determine the mediating role of social support in the relationship between childhood trauma and dark triad traits in women. The results showed that there is a significant negative correlation between social support with the total score of dark triad traits and the components of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and antisociality at the level of  $\alpha=0.01$ . Also, the results showed that there is a significant relationship between emotional abuse, physical abuse,

sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect with the total score of dark triad traits and the components of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and antisociality. With perceived support and the components of perceived support from the family, perceived support from important people and perceived support from others, there is a negative correlation at a significant  $\alpha=0.01$  level. Also, the results of the path coefficients model showed that there was a significant direct relationship between the components of childhood trauma with dark triad traits and social support. Also, there is a significant negative direct relationship between social support and dark triad traits.

One of the consequences of frequent fear and anger that plagues children who have been mistreated is that a large number of neuronal connections are created in the brain to experience these emotions, and as a result, the brain becomes more sensitive to these emotions. These emotions are easily invoked in many and varied situations. When boys who have been abused are asked to describe their experiences of abuse, there is a general increase in their autonomic nervous system functioning that is very similar to that seen during emotional aggression. On the other hand, girls who have been mistreated, when describing their experiences, often show the opposite reaction to boys, and the function of their autonomic nervous system decreases. Therefore, when they are in these situations, they act more aggressively, and aggressive behavior is also a manifestation of dark triad traits.

Social support is considered a coping force for successful and easy coping when facing challenges and stress. When a person is sure that he is not alone in facing problems, he will be safe from weakness and despair and he will direct his energy to solve the problem together with others. In connection with others and their support, a new structure of relationships and bonds is formed, which is effective in creating satisfactory conditions of life. In other

words, people facilitate the possibility of improving psychological well-being by establishing proper relationships with others. On the other hand, social support leads to the strengthening of people's knowledge, which in turn improves the quality of life (Haqshenas et al., 2017). In fact, social support creates a positive self-image, self-acceptance, hope, feeling of love and satisfaction, and reduces anxiety, and all of this gives the affected person the opportunity for self-fulfillment and growth. Based on such a view, it can be expected that there is a high correlation between the quality of interpersonal relationships and people's well-being.

### **Ethics**

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

### **Acknowledgement**

The cooperation of all participants in the research is thanked and appreciated.

### **Conflict of Interest**

According to the authors, this article has no financial sponsor or conflict of interest.

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