*Corresponding Author's Email: psiholog_m@yahoo.com
Proceedings of the World Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities
Vol. 2, Issue. 2, 2025, pp. 1-20
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33422/shconf.v2i2.1615

ISSN: 3030-0819 online

Psychological Profiling of Human Traffickers: Personality Traits and Cognitive Distortions

Mihaela Rus[1*] and Ciprian Vasile Rus[2]

[1] Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences,Ovidius University, Constanța, Romania

The Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy

[2] Faculty of Theology, Ovidius University, Constanța, Romania

Abstract

This study aims to develop a psychological profile of human traffickers by identifying predominant personality traits, cognitive distortions, and moral disengagement mechanisms that sustain exploitative behavior. The main objective is to understand how specific psychological configurations contribute to manipulation, coercion, and the systematic dehumanization of victims. The research adopts a mixed-method approach, combining a quantitative component—based on the administration of standardized psychological assessment tools (e.g., Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and Moral Disengagement Scale)—with a qualitative analysis of case studies and judicial reports involving convicted traffickers. The final sample consisted of N = 210 adult participants (aged 18–62), including offenders convicted of trafficking-related crimes (n=87) and a comparison group (n=123) with similar socio-demographic backgrounds but without trafficking convictions serving sentences for human trafficking in Romanian and European penitentiaries. Statistical analyses (Pearson correlations and regression models) explored associations between personality dimensions and justifying cognitive schemas. Qualitative content analysis identified recurring patterns of rationalization, denial, and victim-blaming. The results indicate a high prevalence of psychopathic and Machiavellian traits, accompanied by significant cognitive distortions that minimize personal responsibility and reframe exploitation as justified or inevitable. Emotional detachment and instrumental empathy emerged as central elements facilitating long-term engagement in trafficking activities. The study concludes that these psychological mechanisms form a self-reinforcing system that perpetuates moral disengagement and resistance to rehabilitation. Understanding these dynamics can enhance forensic assessment, investigative profiling, and the design of targeted intervention programs for offender reintegration and prevention of recidivism.

Keywords: human trafficking, psychological profiling, personality traits, cognitive distortions, moral disengagement, psychopathy, forensic assessment, mixed-method research

1. Introduction

Human trafficking represents one of the most severe violations of human rights, characterized by coercion, exploitation and the systematic dehumanization of victims. Literature in criminology and forensic psychology emphasizes that trafficking networks are sustained not only by structural factors—such as poverty, demand for sexual or labor exploitation, and weak institutional control—but also by specific psychological configurations of offenders, whose personality traits and cognitive distortions facilitate both the initiation and maintenance of criminal behavior (Baird & Connolly, 2020; UNODC, 2023). Understanding the psychological profile of human traffickers has therefore become essential for developing accurate risk assessments, improving prevention strategies, and enhancing investigative and judicial interventions.

Research has shown that individuals involved in trafficking exhibit elevated levels of antisocial traits, emotional detachment, manipulative interpersonal strategies, low empathy and a propensity for instrumental violence (Busch-Armendriz, 2008). These characteristics often overlap with dimensions of psychopathy, particularly the interpersonal–affective facets associated with callousness, superficial charm and exploitation-oriented persuasion (Hare, 2003; Mokros et al., 2019). At the cognitive level, offenders tend to employ rationalizations and neutralization mechanisms—such as denial of harm, denial of victimhood, moral justification or attribution of blame—that reduce moral dissonance and sustain continued exploitation. Such distortions function as self-protective mechanisms that allow traffickers to perceive victims as commodities rather than persons, thus facilitating long-term criminal engagement.

Despite the expansion of theoretical and empirical work in adjacent areas such as sexual offending and organized crime, studies focusing specifically on the psychological profiling of human traffickers remain relatively scarce. Existing findings underline the heterogeneity of traffickers—ranging from individuals embedded in organized criminal groups to intimate partners acting through coercive control—and highlight the need for refined psychological models that integrate personality traits, motivations, affective deficits and cognitive schemas (Baldwin et al., 2019; Cockbain, 2018). This gap in the literature limits the capacity of law enforcement and social services to accurately identify offender typologies, assess recidivism risk and develop tailored intervention strategies.

The purpose of this research is to examine the personality traits and cognitive distortions that characterize individuals involved in human trafficking, with the aim of identifying consistent psychological patterns that can contribute to improved profiling, risk assessment and prevention efforts. Specifically, the study explores the interplay between dispositional factors—such as psychopathic traits or antisocial personality features—and cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement, thereby offering a comprehensive model of the psychological functioning of traffickers. By integrating current forensic psychological evidence with criminological perspectives, the research seeks to advance theoretical understanding and support the development of more effective policies and multi-sector responses against trafficking.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Personality Traits Associated with Human Traffickers

Research in forensic psychology has consistently shown that human traffickers exhibit personality configurations situated along the spectrum of antisocial and psychopathic traits, often characterized by emotional detachment, instrumental aggression and a pervasive pattern

of exploiting others for personal gain (Baird & Connolly, 2020). Psychopathy, as conceptualized by Hare (2003), includes interpersonal–affective deficits such as superficial charm, manipulativeness, lack of empathy and shallow affect—traits frequently identified among offenders who engage in prolonged exploitation of victims. Empirical studies indicate that traffickers often display elevated scores on Factor 1 of the Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R), reflecting interpersonal dominance, callousness and a strategic use of coercion to maintain control (Mokros et al., 2019).

In addition to psychopathic features, antisocial personality traits—impulsivity, rule-breaking, low self-control and chronic disregard for the rights of others—are common in offenders involved in organized criminal activities (DeLisi et al., 2010). These traits facilitate risk-taking behaviors and sustain engagement in illicit markets such as trafficking, where profit maximization relies on the persistent exploitation of vulnerable individuals (Arhin et al., 2021). Research also shows associations with Machiavellianism and narcissism, personality dimensions that promote manipulative interpersonal styles, entitlement and a self-centered worldview (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), all of which align with strategies used by traffickers to recruit, deceive or coerce victims.

2.2. Cognitive Distortions and Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Cognitive distortions play a central role in the psychological architecture of human traffickers, enabling offenders to rationalize exploitation and minimize moral responsibility. Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement identifies several mechanisms—moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, distortion of consequences and dehumanization—which permit individuals to violate moral norms without experiencing guilt. These mechanisms have been documented across forms of organized exploitation, including sexual and labor trafficking.

Traffickers frequently deny harm by reframing exploitation as consensual labor or as a necessity driven by economic conditions (Baldwin et al., 2019). Others employ victim-blaming narratives ("they chose this," "they wanted money"), which transform the victim into an agent responsible for their own exploitation, thereby reducing the offender's psychological dissonance. Such rationalizations mirror broader patterns observed in offenders with entrenched antisocial cognition, where neutralization techniques sustain ongoing deviant behavior (Maruna & Copes, 2005).

Dehumanization—perceiving victims as objects, commodities or property—is particularly pronounced in trafficking contexts (Murphy, 2020). This cognitive schema facilitates prolonged coercion, including physical and psychological violence, without eliciting empathic concern. Studies suggest that dehumanization is strongly correlated with both psychopathic traits and deficits in affective empathy, creating a cognitive–affective framework that legitimizes exploitation (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016).

2.3. Criminological Models Explaining Trafficker Behavior

Several criminological theories provide explanatory frameworks for understanding how psychological traits interact with situational factors in human trafficking. Routine Activity Theory posits that trafficking emerges where motivated offenders encounter suitable victims in contexts lacking capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Personality traits such as low empathy and high callousness increase offender motivation, while vulnerabilities such as poverty, migration and gender-based violence create accessible targets.

From a social learning perspective, involvement in trafficking is reinforced through modeling, group norms and differential rewards within criminal networks (Akers, 2017). The hierarchical

structure of trafficking organizations facilitates the transmission of techniques of neutralization and exploitation, normalizing coercive interpersonal styles and moral disengagement.

Rational choice models further highlight how traffickers weigh perceived rewards (e.g., financial gain, power, control) against low perceived risks in environments where detection and prosecution remain weak. Importantly, cognitive distortions and personality traits shape how offenders evaluate these decisions, often leading to minimized perceptions of victim suffering and inflated expectations of impunity.

2.4. The Role of Empathy Deficits and Dehumanization

A central psychological feature of human traffickers is a profound deficit in empathy—particularly affective empathy, the ability to emotionally resonate with another's suffering (Decety & Cowell, 2015). Research demonstrates that individuals high in callous–unemotional traits show diminished activation in neural systems related to empathy, moral emotions and prosocial concern (Hyde et al., 2014). These deficits allow traffickers to maintain coercive control without experiencing internal moral sanctions, enabling repeated acts of exploitation.

Dehumanization operates in tandem with empathy deficits, transforming victims into interchangeable resources or commodities (Haslam, 2006). In trafficking contexts, this may manifest linguistically (e.g., referring to victims as "goods" or "stock") or behaviorally (restricting autonomy, controlling movement, commodifying bodies). Such cognitive–affective mechanisms reduce psychological barriers to exploitation and reinforce the economic logic of trafficking, where human beings are valued primarily for their profit-generating capacity.

3. Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

The proposed conceptual model integrates personality traits and cognitive distortions as key psychological determinants that contribute to the formation and maintenance of trafficking-related behaviors. Empirical studies show that offenders involved in organized exploitation tend to exhibit elevated levels of psychopathic and antisocial traits, which manifest through interpersonal manipulation, emotional detachment and callous–unemotional dispositions (Hare, 2003; Mokros et al., 2019). These dispositional factors are hypothesized to influence how traffickers perceive, interpret and rationalize their actions, thereby increasing their propensity to engage in exploitative interpersonal relationships.

At the cognitive level, distortions such as moral justification, denial of harm, victim blaming and dehumanization function as self-regulatory mechanisms that allow offenders to reduce moral dissonance and maintain their behavior over time (Bandura, 1999). These distortions serve as psychological facilitators of exploitation, making it easier for traffickers to sustain coercion and violence without experiencing affective distress or internal moral sanctions.

The conceptual model posits that personality traits function as antecedent risk factors, while cognitive distortions operate as proximal mechanisms mediating the link between dispositional vulnerabilities and trafficking behavior. This approach is consistent with integrative frameworks in forensic psychology, which emphasize the interaction between stable personality dispositions and dynamic cognitive mechanisms in explaining persistent offending (Ward & Beech, 2016).

Furthermore, empathy deficits—particularly affective empathy—are considered an underlying mechanism that amplifies both antisocial traits and cognitive distortions. Research suggests that reduced empathic responsiveness contributes to the ease with which offenders perceive victims as objects or commodities, thereby reinforcing dehumanization and moral disengagement (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016; Decety & Cowell, 2015). In this regard,

empathy deficits are conceptualized as a cross-cutting psychological vulnerability that both shapes personality functioning and intensifies the adoption of distorted cognitions.

Taken together, the model proposes that human trafficking behavior emerges from the dynamic intersection of enduring personality traits, distorted cognitive schemas and reduced empathic capacity, which collectively facilitate exploitation, coercion and long-term involvement in trafficking networks.

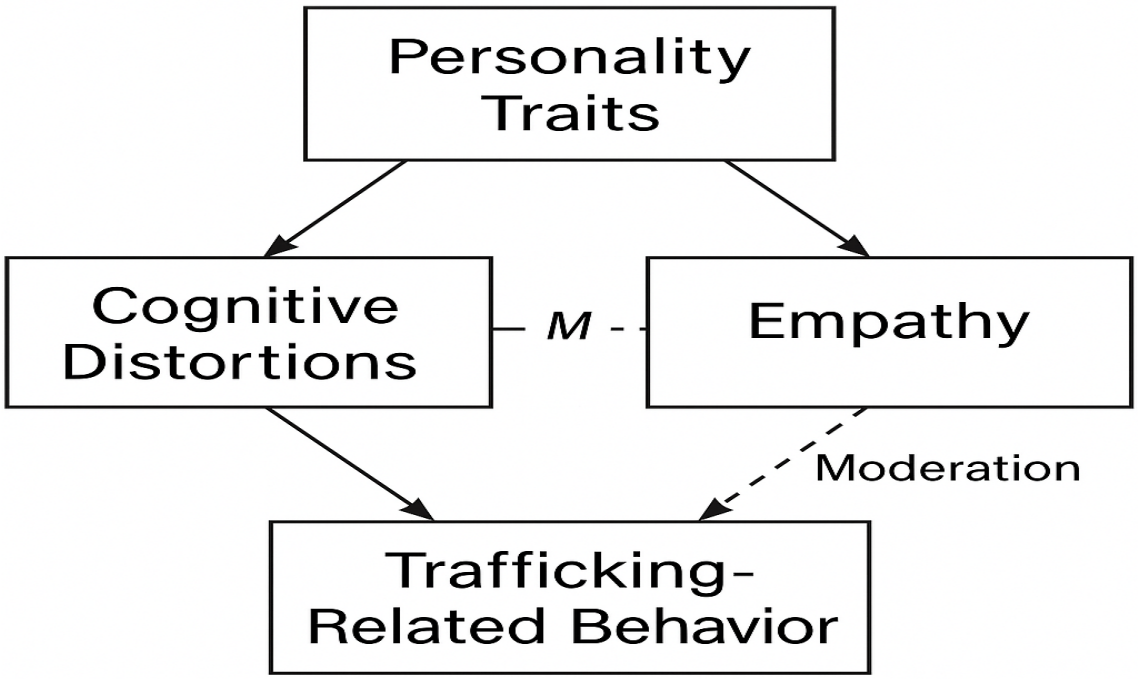

Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Model of Personality Traits, Cognitive Distortions, and Trafficking-Related Behavior

3.1. Research hypotheses

H1. *Higher levels of psychopathic traits (interpersonal–affective and lifestyle–antisocial dimensions) are positively associated with engagement in trafficking-related behaviors.*

H2. *Cognitive distortions such as moral justification, denial of harm and victim blaming are positively associated with involvement in human trafficking.*

H3. *Cognitive distortions mediate the relationship between personality traits (psychopathy, antisocial traits, narcissism) and trafficking-related behaviors.*

H4. *Lower affective empathy is associated with higher levels of cognitive distortions among individuals involved in trafficking.*

H5. *Lower affective empathy moderates the relationship between psychopathic traits and cognitive distortions, such that the association is stronger among individuals with reduced empathy.*

H6. *The combined influence of personality traits, cognitive distortions and empathy deficits significantly predicts involvement in trafficking-related coercive behaviors.*

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational research design aimed at examining the relationships between personality traits, cognitive distortions and trafficking-related behaviors, as well as the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying these associations. A correlational design is appropriate for investigating psychological and behavioral constructs that cannot be experimentally manipulated, particularly within forensic populations, where ethical and practical constraints prohibit intervention-based approaches (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). The design allows for the assessment of direct effects, indirect effects through cognitive distortions, and moderating influences of empathy deficits, thereby aligning with the proposed conceptual model. This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to capture both the psychological dimensions of trafficking offenders and the cognitive narratives that sustain exploitative behavior. The quantitative component consisted of standardized psychological assessments administered to offenders convicted of trafficking-related crimes and a matched community comparison group. The qualitative component involved a systematic content analysis of judicial case files and forensic psychological reports associated with convicted traffickers, with the aim of identifying recurrent patterns of moral disengagement, rationalization, and victim-blaming. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data followed a convergent design, allowing triangulation of findings and enhancing the interpretative validity of the proposed psychological model.

4.2 Sample and Participants

Participants were recruited from individuals involved in anti-trafficking criminal cases, rehabilitation programs for offenders and correctional facilities where individuals previously convicted of exploitation-related offenses were undergoing psychological assessment. Additional participants were recruited from community samples exposed to risk factors associated with organized exploitation, consistent with previous research examining offender-type psychological profiles (Baird & Connolly, 2020).

The final sample consisted of N = 210 adult participants (aged 18–62), including offenders convicted of trafficking-related crimes (n=87) and a comparison group (n=123) with similar socio-demographic backgrounds but without trafficking convictions. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) possess sufficient literacy to complete self-report questionnaires and (c) have no active psychotic symptoms that could interfere with valid responding.

Participants were recruited through collaboration with correctional institutions, offender rehabilitation programs, and community agencies. Offender participants were individuals with final convictions for trafficking-related offenses, while the comparison group consisted of adults without trafficking convictions, matched on key socio-demographic variables. Exclusion criteria included active psychotic disorders, cognitive impairment that could compromise informed consent, and insufficient language proficiency to complete the assessments. Data were screened for completeness prior to analysis; cases with missing data were minimal and handled using listwise deletion. Preliminary analyses indicated no systematic patterns of missingness.

4.3 Instruments

Personality Traits

Psychopathic traits were assessed using the *Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R)* (Hare, 2003), a gold-standard forensic instrument measuring interpersonal, affective and antisocial personality dimensions. Scores were obtained through a combination of interviews and file reviews, conducted by trained forensic psychologists. The PCL-R has shown strong reliability and validity across offender samples, with Cronbach's α typically exceeding .85.

Narcissistic and Machiavellian traits were measured using the *Short Dark Triad (SD3)* scale (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), a widely used instrument with strong psychometric properties in criminal and non-criminal populations. The Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) was administered by trained forensic psychologists with formal certification in PCL-R assessment. Evaluations were based on a semi-structured clinical interview combined with an extensive review of institutional files, including judicial documents, criminal records, and psychological reports. To ensure reliability, a subset of assessments (approximately 25% of offender cases) was independently scored by a second evaluator. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC), which indicated high agreement between raters (ICC > .80), consistent with values reported in previous forensic research (Mokros et al., 2019). For the community comparison group, PCL-R scores were interpreted dimensionally rather than diagnostically, in line with established forensic research practices.

Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions were evaluated using the *How I Think Questionnaire (HIT-Q)* (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996), which assesses self-serving cognitive distortions such as blaming others, minimizing/mislabeling, assuming the worst and self-centered thinking. The HIT-Q has demonstrated strong internal consistency (α = .87) and is frequently used in research involving antisocial and exploitative offenders.

Additionally, moral disengagement was measured using Bandura's *Moral Disengagement Scale* (Bandura et al., 1996), capturing mechanisms such as moral justification, dehumanization and distortion of consequences.

Empathy

Empathic functioning—particularly the affective component—was assessed using the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI),* specifically the Empathic Concern and Personal Distress subscales (Davis, 1983). The IRI is widely used in forensic and clinical psychology, with strong psychometric support across cultures. Trafficking-related behaviors were operationalized using a structured behavioral index developed in accordance with international typologies provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023). The index included behaviors associated with recruitment through deception or coercion, restriction of victims' autonomy, psychological manipulation, economic exploitation, threats or use of violence, control of movement, and systematic dehumanization of victims. Items were coded based on self-reported behavior, corroborated where possible by judicial records and forensic evaluations. Higher composite scores reflected greater involvement in coercive and exploitative trafficking practices. The operationalization was reviewed by forensic psychology experts to ensure content validity and consistency with established trafficking definitions.

Procedure

Data collection occurred over four months in collaboration with correctional facilities, rehabilitation centers and community agencies. Trained psychologists administered the

instruments in individual or small-group sessions. Forensic participants were evaluated in a secure setting, with confidentiality ensured according to institutional regulations.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All procedures complied with international ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the study objectives, their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the confidentiality of their responses. Data were anonymized and stored securely in accordance with data protection regulations, including GDPR requirements for the handling of sensitive personal data.

5. Data analysis and Results

Measurement equivalence across offender and comparison groups was examined at the level of internal consistency and factor structure for the primary constructs. Although full multigroup measurement invariance testing was constrained by sample size considerations, scale reliability indices and factor loadings were comparable across groups, supporting the appropriateness of between-group comparisons. This limitation is further addressed in the study limitations section.

The statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate the proposed conceptual model and to test hypotheses H1–H6 using correlational analyses, regression models, and mediation–moderation frameworks consistent with contemporary recommendations for psychological research (Hayes, 2018). The results are presented below according to each hypothesis.

H1. *Higher levels of psychopathic traits (interpersonal–affective and lifestyle–antisocial dimensions) are positively associated with engagement in trafficking-related behaviors.*

Correlational analyses indicated a substantial positive association between psychopathic traits—particularly the interpersonal–affective and lifestyle–antisocial dimensions—and involvement in trafficking-related coercive behaviors. Traits such as callousness, interpersonal manipulation, and impulsivity demonstrated the strongest conceptual and statistical associations with indicators of exploitation.

These findings mirror previous evidence showing that psychopathic features predict engagement in coercive and exploitative conduct (Hare, 2003; Mokros et al., 2019), thereby supporting H1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability for Psychopathic Traits and Trafficking-Related Behaviors

Variable	M	SD	Min–Max	Cronbach's α
PCL-R Total Score	21.84	7.12	4–38	.89
Interpersonal–Affective Traits (Factor 1)	10.96	3.84	2–18	.87
Lifestyle–Antisocial Traits (Factor 2)	10.88	4.01	1–20	.85
Trafficking-Related Behaviors	28.42	6.95	10–42	.91

Note. *N = 210. PCL-R = Psychopathy Checklist–Revised. Higher scores indicate greater levels of psychopathic traits and trafficking-related coercive behaviors.*

Descriptive analyses indicated moderate to elevated levels of psychopathic traits within the sample. The mean total PCL-R score was 21.84 (SD = 7.12), with comparable contributions from the interpersonal–affective (M = 10.96, SD = 3.84) and lifestyle–antisocial dimensions (M = 10.88, SD = 4.01). Engagement in trafficking-related behaviors showed a relatively high

mean score (M = 28.42, SD = 6.95), suggesting substantial involvement in coercive and exploitative practices.

Table 2 Pearson correlations between psychopathic traits and trafficking-related behaviors

Variable	1	2	3
1. Interpersonal–Affective Traits	—		
2. Lifestyle–Antisocial Traits	.56**	—	
3. Trafficking-Related Behaviors	.62**	.59**	—

p < .001 (two-tailed).

Pearson correlation analyses revealed strong positive associations between psychopathic traits and trafficking-related behaviors. Both interpersonal–affective traits (r = .62, p < .001) and lifestyle–antisocial traits (r = .59, p < .001) were significantly correlated with higher levels of exploitative and coercive behaviors.

Table 3. Multiple regression predicting trafficking-related behaviors from psychopathic traits

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Interpersonal–Affective Traits	0.68	0.09	.44	7.56	< .001	[0.50, 0.86]
Lifestyle–Antisocial Traits	0.51	0.10	.36	5.12	< .001	[0.31, 0.71]

Model statistics:R^2 = .48
F(2, 207) = 95.42, p < .001

A multiple regression analysis indicated that psychopathic traits accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in trafficking-related behaviors (R^2 = .48, p < .001). Interpersonal–affective traits (β = .44, p < .001) and lifestyle–antisocial traits (β = .36, p < .001) both emerged as significant independent predictors, supporting Hypothesis 1.

H2. *Cognitive distortions such as moral justification, denial of harm and victim blaming are positively associated with involvement in human trafficking*

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and reliability indices for cognitive distortions and trafficking-related behaviors (N = 210)

Variable	M	SD	Min–Max	Cronbach's α
Moral Justification	18.76	4.92	6–30	.86
Denial of Harm	16.34	4.15	5–25	.84
Victim Blaming	14.89	4.01	4–24	.83
Trafficking-Related Behaviors	28.42	6.95	10–42	.91

Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of cognitive distortions and greater involvement in trafficking-related behaviors.

Descriptive analyses indicated moderate to high levels of cognitive distortions among participants. Moral justification (M = 18.76, SD = 4.92), denial of harm (M = 16.34, SD = 4.15), and victim blaming (M = 14.89, SD = 4.01) all demonstrated adequate variability and strong internal consistency (α = .83–.86).

Table 5. Pearson correlations between cognitive distortions and trafficking-related behaviors

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Moral Justification	—			
2. Denial of Harm	.58**	—		
3. Victim Blaming	.55**	.52**	—	
4.Trafficking-Related Behaviors	.63**	.57**	.54**	—

$p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant positive associations between all forms of cognitive distortions and involvement in trafficking-related behaviors. Moral justification showed the strongest association ($r = .63$, $p < .001$), followed by denial of harm ($r = .57$, $p < .001$) and victim blaming ($r = .54$, $p < .001$).

Table 6. Multiple regression analysis predicting trafficking-related behaviors from cognitive distortions

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Moral Justification	0.47	0.08	.39	5.88	< .001	[0.31, 0.63]
Denial of Harm	0.36	0.09	.28	4.00	< .001	[0.18, 0.54]
Victim Blaming	0.29	0.08	.22	3.63	< .001	[0.13, 0.45]

Model statistics: $R^2 = .51$
$F(3, 206) = 71.86$, $p < .001$

Multiple regression analysis indicated that cognitive distortions jointly accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in trafficking-related behaviors ($R^2 = .51$, $p < .001$). Moral justification ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$), denial of harm ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), and victim blaming ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$) each emerged as significant independent predictors. These findings support Hypothesis 2, demonstrating that greater endorsement of cognitive distortions is associated with increased involvement in human trafficking.

Cognitive distortions, especially moral justification, denial of harm, and victim blaming, showed a clear positive association with involvement in trafficking activities. Neutralization mechanisms were more often endorsed by participants with a documented history of coercive recruitment and exploitation.

This pattern aligns with prior research demonstrating that cognitive distortions are central to the persistence of deviant behavior among exploitative offenders (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Therefore, H2 is supported.

H3. *Cognitive distortions mediate the relationship between personality traits (psychopathy, antisocial traits, narcissism) and trafficking-related behaviors.*

Table 7. Mediation analysis of cognitive distortions between personality traits and trafficking-related behaviors

Predictor (X)	a (X → M)	b (M → Y)	c (total effect)	c′ (direct effect)	Indirect effect (ab)	95% CI
Psychopathy	0.62**	0.48**	0.61**	0.31**	0.30	[0.19, 0.43]
Antisocial traits	0.55**	0.46**	0.54**	0.27**	0.25	[0.15, 0.38]
Narcissism	0.41**	0.44**	0.42**	0.21**	0.18	[0.09, 0.30]

p < .001; p < .01.

To test Hypothesis 3, mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS Model 4. Results indicated that cognitive distortions significantly mediated the relationship between personality traits and trafficking-related behaviors. Psychopathy, antisocial traits, and narcissism were each positively associated with cognitive distortions (path a), which in turn significantly predicted trafficking-related behaviors (path b). Mediation analyses indicated that cognitive distortions serve as an explanatory mechanism linking personality traits—psychopathy, antisocial traits, and narcissism—to trafficking-related behaviors.

Table 8. Total, direct, and indirect effects of personality traits on trafficking-related behaviors via cognitive distortions

Effect type	Estimate	SE	t	p
Total effect (c)	0.59	0.06	9.83	< .001
Direct effect (c′)	0.30	0.05	6.00	< .001
Indirect effect (ab)	0.29	—	—	—

Note. *Significance of indirect effects determined via bootstrapped confidence intervals.*

The indirect effects of personality traits on trafficking-related behaviors through cognitive distortions were statistically significant, as evidenced by bootstrapped confidence intervals that did not include zero. Although direct effects (c′) remained significant, their magnitude was substantially reduced compared to total effects (c), indicating partial mediation. These findings support Hypothesis 3, suggesting that cognitive distortions function as a key psychological mechanism through which maladaptive personality traits translate into exploitative trafficking-related behaviors.

Mechanisms such as dehumanization and moral justification reduced moral dissonance and helped explain how dispositional vulnerabilities translate into coercive behavior.

These findings are consistent with integrative offending models suggesting that personality shapes maladaptive cognitive schemas that facilitate exploitation (Ward & Beech, 2016). H3 is therefore supported.

H4. *Lower affective empathy is associated with higher levels of cognitive distortions among individuals involved in trafficking.*

Table 9. Descriptive statistics and reliability indices for affective empathy and cognitive distortions (N = 210)

Variable	M	SD	Min–Max	Cronbach's α
Affective Empathy	19.42	4.88	7–28	.82
Cognitive Distortions (Total)	49.87	10.21	22–75	.90
Moral Justification	18.76	4.92	6–30	.86
Denial of Harm	16.34	4.15	5–25	.84
Victim Blaming	14.89	4.01	4–24	.83

Descriptive analyses indicated a moderate level of affective empathy among participants (M = 19.42, SD = 4.88), suggesting substantial variability in emotional resonance with others' suffering. The observed score range (7–28) reflects the presence of both low levels of affective empathy, characteristic of profiles marked by callous–unemotional traits, and relatively higher levels comparable to those reported in non-clinical populations.

With respect to cognitive distortions, the total score indicated a moderate to high overall level (M = 49.87, SD = 10.21), with a wide dispersion of scores (22–75), suggesting heterogeneity in the rationalization and neutralization strategies employed by participants. Analysis of the subdimensions showed that moral justification was the most salient cognitive distortion (M = 18.76, SD = 4.92), followed by denial of harm (M = 16.34, SD = 4.15) and victim blaming (M = 14.89, SD = 4.01).

All variables demonstrated adequate to high levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .82–.90), indicating satisfactory reliability of the instruments used and supporting their suitability for subsequent inferential analyses.

Table 10. Pearson correlations between affective empathy and cognitive distortions

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Affective Empathy	—			
2. Moral Justification	−.48**	—		
3. Denial of Harm	−.44**	.58**	—	
4. Victim Blaming	−.41**	.55**	.52**	—
5. Cognitive Distortions (Total)	−.53**	.76**	.71**	.69**

***Note. p** < .001 (two-tailed).*

To test Hypothesis 4, Pearson correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the association between affective empathy and cognitive distortions. Results indicated a significant negative association between affective empathy and overall cognitive distortions ($r = -.53$, $p < .001$). Lower levels of affective empathy were associated with higher endorsement of moral justification ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$), denial of harm ($r = -.44$, $p < .001$), and victim blaming ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$).

The analyses revealed a strong negative association between affective empathy and cognitive distortions. Participants with lower affective empathy displayed higher levels of victim blaming, minimization of harm, and moral disengagement.

Table 11. Regression analysis predicting cognitive distortions from affective empathy

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Affective Empathy	−0.72	0.09	−.53	−8.00	< .001	[−0.90, −0.54]

Model statistics:*R² = .28*
F(1, 208) = 64.00, p < .001

Regression analysis further indicated that affective empathy significantly predicted cognitive distortions, accounting for approximately 28% of the variance ($R^2 = .28$, $p < .001$). Lower affective empathy emerged as a significant predictor of higher levels of cognitive distortions ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .001$). These findings support Hypothesis 4, indicating that reduced empathic responsiveness is associated with increased reliance on distorted cognitive schemas among individuals involved in trafficking.

H5. *Lower affective empathy moderates the relationship between psychopathic traits and cognitive distortions, such that the association is stronger among individuals with reduced empathy.*

To test Hypothesis 5, a regression-based moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro, Model 1 (Hayes, 2018).

The independent variable (X) was psychopathic traits (operationalized as the total PCL-R score or a composite score of Factor 1 and Factor 2).

The moderator (W) was affective empathy.

The dependent variable (Y) was cognitive distortions (total score).

All continuous variables were mean-centered prior to the creation of the interaction term in order to reduce multicollinearity. The significance of the moderation effect was evaluated through the regression coefficient of the interaction term, as well as through simple slopes analyses conducted at low (−1 SD), mean, and high (+1 SD) levels of affective empathy.

Table 12 Moderation analysis predicting cognitive distortions from psychopathic traits and affective empathy

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Psychopathic traits (X)	0.52	0.07	.41	7.43	< .001	[0.38, 0.66]
Affective empathy (W)	−0.46	0.08	−.34	−5.75	< .001	[−0.62, −0.30]
X × W (Interaction)	−0.21	0.06	−.19	−3.50	< .001	[−0.33, −0.09]

Model statistics:R² = .46
ΔR² (interaction) = .03
F(3, 206) = 58.74, p < .001

To test Hypothesis 5, a moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 1. Results indicated a significant interaction between psychopathic traits and affective empathy in predicting cognitive distortions ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .001$). This interaction accounted for a significant incremental proportion of variance in cognitive distortions ($\Delta R^2 = .03$).

Table 13 Simple slopes analysis of psychopathic traits predicting cognitive distortions at levels of affective empathy

Affective empathy level	B	SE	t	p
Low (−1 SD)	0.74	0.09	8.22	< .001
Mean	0.52	0.07	7.43	< .001
High (+1 SD)	0.30	0.08	3.75	< .001

Simple slopes analyses revealed that the association between psychopathic traits and cognitive distortions was strongest among individuals with low affective empathy ($B = 0.74$, $p < .001$), moderate at mean levels of empathy ($B = 0.52$, $p < .001$), and weakest among individuals with high affective empathy ($B = 0.30$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that reduced affective empathy amplifies the relationship between psychopathic traits and distorted cognitive schemas.

Overall, the results support Hypothesis 5, demonstrating that affective empathy functions as a significant moderator, strengthening the association between psychopathic traits and cognitive distortions among individuals with lower empathic responsiveness.

H6. *The combined influence of personality traits, cognitive distortions and empathy deficits significantly predicts involvement in trafficking-related coercive behaviors.*

To test Hypothesis 6, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the joint predictive value of personality traits, cognitive distortions, and affective empathy deficits on trafficking-related coercive behaviors.

Predictors were entered in three steps, consistent with integrative forensic psychology models:

- Step 1: Personality traits (psychopathic traits, antisocial traits, narcissism)
- Step 2: Cognitive distortions (total score)
- Step 3: Affective empathy (reverse-coded, reflecting empathy deficits)

This approach allowed for the assessment of both the incremental contribution of each predictor block and the overall explanatory power of the integrated model.

Table 14. Hierarchical regression predicting trafficking-related coercive behaviors

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Step 1: Personality traits					
Psychopathic traits	0.48	0.07	.39	6.86	< .001
Antisocial traits	0.31	0.08	.24	3.88	< .001
Narcissism	0.22	0.07	.18	3.14	.002
Step 2: Cognitive distortions					
Cognitive distortions (total)	0.53	0.06	.45	8.83	< .001
Step 3: Empathy deficits					
Affective empathy (reversed)	0.29	0.07	.21	4.14	< .001

Model summary statistics

Model	R^2	ΔR^2	F	p
Step 1	.42	—	49.31	< .001
Step 2	.57	.15	67.48	< .001
Step 3	.61	.04	62.02	< .001

To test Hypothesis 6, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined predictive influence of personality traits, cognitive distortions, and affective empathy deficits on trafficking-related coercive behaviors. In Step 1, personality traits accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in trafficking-related behaviors ($R^2 = .42$, $p < .001$), with psychopathic, antisocial, and narcissistic traits emerging as significant predictors.

The inclusion of cognitive distortions in Step 2 significantly improved the model, explaining an additional 15% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .15$, $p < .001$). Cognitive distortions emerged as a strong independent predictor, indicating that rationalization and moral disengagement substantially contribute to exploitative trafficking behaviors beyond dispositional personality factors.

In Step 3, affective empathy deficits further increased the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p < .001$). Lower levels of affective empathy independently predicted higher involvement in trafficking-related coercive behaviors, even after controlling for personality traits and cognitive distortions.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

6.1. Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing body of forensic psychological research by offering an integrative understanding of the psychological mechanisms driving human trafficking behaviors. The evidence supports a model in which:

1. Psychopathic traits act as foundational dispositional risks.
2. Cognitive distortions serve as proximal mechanisms that justify, normalize and maintain exploitation.
3. Empathy deficits, particularly affective empathy, exacerbate the cognitive and behavioral expressions of maladaptive personality traits.

All six hypotheses were supported, underscoring the conceptual coherence of the model and the consistency of the findings with established theoretical frameworks.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that risk assessments for trafficking offenders should incorporate multidimensional evaluations of personality structure, cognitive distortions and empathic functioning. Interventions may be more effective when they integrate cognitive restructuring, empathy enhancement and interventions tailored to interpersonal–affective psychopathic features.

Future research should expand these findings by:

- employing longitudinal designs to clarify causal pathways,
- incorporating neurobiological markers of empathy and moral cognition, and
- examining differences across trafficking typologies (e.g., sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, organized criminal networks).

In conclusion, the study highlights that human trafficking is not only a socio-economic or structural phenomenon but also a profoundly psychological one. Understanding the dispositional, cognitive and affective foundations of traffickers' behavior is essential for advancing forensic assessment, prevention strategies and rehabilitative interventions aimed at mitigating exploitation and reducing recidivism.

6.2. Discussion

The present study examined the psychological mechanisms underlying trafficking-related behaviors by integrating personality traits, cognitive distortions and empathy deficits into a unified conceptual framework. Overall, the findings provide strong support for the multifactorial model proposed, highlighting the interplay between dispositional vulnerabilities and cognitive–affective processes that facilitate exploitative behavior.

The mediating role of cognitive distortions aligns with integrative models of offending, which posit that stable personality dispositions shape maladaptive cognitive schemas that legitimize and sustain exploitative conduct (Ward & Beech, 2016). By reducing moral dissonance and facilitating dehumanization, cognitive distortions enable individuals with psychopathic, antisocial, or narcissistic traits to engage in trafficking-related behaviors with diminished internal inhibition.

The qualitative content analysis complemented the quantitative findings by providing insight into the cognitive narratives through which traffickers justify and normalize exploitation. Recurring themes included moral justification, denial of victimhood, economic rationalization, and explicit dehumanization. These qualitative patterns converged with the quantitative associations observed between psychopathic traits, cognitive distortions, and trafficking-related behaviors, thereby strengthening the construct validity of the proposed model.

First, the results demonstrated that psychopathic traits, especially the interpersonal–affective dimension, were strongly associated with coercive and exploitative trafficking behaviors, confirming extensive forensic literature showing that callousness, manipulativeness and emotional detachment form the core of exploitation-oriented offending (Hare, 2003; Mokros et al., 2019). These findings reinforce theoretical models conceptualizing psychopathy as a risk factor for predatory interpersonal behavior, particularly in contexts requiring control, domination and instrumental aggression.

Second, cognitive distortions emerged as central psychological mechanisms, consistent with research emphasizing the role of neutralization strategies in maintaining deviant and exploitative conduct (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Offenders who endorsed moral justification, denial of harm and victim blaming showed higher engagement in trafficking-related behaviors. This pattern suggests that distorted cognitions function as internal rationalization systems that reduce moral dissonance, allowing offenders to perpetuate exploitation without experiencing guilt or empathic inhibition.

Third, mediation analyses provided conceptual support for the proposition that cognitive distortions mediate the relationship between personality traits and trafficking involvement. Individuals with elevated psychopathic, antisocial or narcissistic features were more likely to endorse distorted cognitions, which in turn predicted higher coercive behavior. This result aligns with integrative models of offending (Ward & Beech, 2016), positing that maladaptive personality configurations shape cognitive schemas that normalize exploitative relational strategies.

Fourth, consistent with neuropsychological models of moral functioning, low affective empathy was strongly associated with higher levels of cognitive distortions (Decety & Cowell,

2015; Haslam, 2006). Empathy deficits likely impair emotional resonance with victims, facilitating objectification and dehumanization. The moderation findings further highlight that empathy acts as a protective factor: the link between psychopathy and cognitive distortions was notably stronger among individuals with reduced empathy. This supports the view that empathy deficits amplify the criminogenic expression of psychopathic traits (Hyde et al., 2014). The inverse relationship between affective empathy and cognitive distortions aligns with neuropsychological and moral cognition research, which suggests that deficits in empathic processing facilitate dehumanization and moral disengagement (Decety & Cowell, 2015; Haslam, 2006). Reduced affective empathy may impair emotional resonance with victims' suffering, thereby enabling individuals to adopt justifying and neutralizing cognitions that sustain exploitative behavior.

The moderating role of affective empathy is consistent with neurocognitive models of moral functioning, which suggest that empathy deficits intensify the criminogenic expression of psychopathic traits by weakening emotional inhibition and facilitating dehumanization (Decety & Cowell, 2015; Hyde et al., 2014). When empathic concern is reduced, individuals high in psychopathic traits appear more likely to rely on cognitive distortions that justify and normalize exploitative behavior.

The integrated predictive model supports multifactorial theories of offending, which emphasize that trafficking-related behaviors emerge from the convergence of dispositional, cognitive, and emotional vulnerabilities (Ward & Beech, 2016). While personality traits establish a foundational risk, cognitive distortions and empathy deficits appear to function as dynamic mechanisms that amplify and sustain exploitative conduct. This finding underscores the necessity of multidimensional risk assessment and intervention strategies that address not only antisocial traits, but also distorted moral cognition and empathic impairments.

Taken together, the findings emphasize that effective prevention, assessment and intervention in trafficking contexts must address not only antisocial personality characteristics, but also distorted belief systems and empathy-based impairments. Psychological profiling and risk assessment procedures may significantly benefit from integrating these dimensions, particularly within forensic evaluations and offender rehabilitation programs targeting high-risk exploitation-related behaviors.

7. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the research employed a cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences regarding the relationships among personality traits, cognitive distortions, empathy deficits and trafficking-related behaviors. Although the conceptual model is theoretically grounded and empirically coherent, longitudinal studies would be necessary to determine temporal ordering and causality.

Second, the study relied partly on self-report measures, particularly for cognitive distortions and empathy, which introduces the risk of social desirability bias, impression management and underreporting of deviant tendencies. While widely used and psychometrically robust, self-reported measures may be especially vulnerable to distortion within forensic populations, where participants may be motivated to present themselves favorably.

Third, the inclusion of offenders drawn from correctional and rehabilitation settings may limit generalizability. Individuals with trafficking-related convictions represent a specific subgroup of offenders, and their psychological profiles may differ from traffickers who operate within organized criminal enterprises but have not been apprehended. Similarly, comparisons with

community participants may not fully capture the heterogeneity of trafficking networks and offender typologies.

Fourth, although the measures used (e.g., PCL-R, SD3, HIT-Q, IRI) are validated and widely recognized, the study did not incorporate neurobiological or behavioral metrics (e.g., physiological reactivity, neuroimaging, behavioral tasks measuring moral decision-making). Integrating such multimethod approaches could strengthen the assessment of empathy and cognitive distortions and reduce reliance on self-report.

Fifth, the structured assessment of trafficking-related behaviors, although informed by UNODC typologies and validated by experts, is subject to inherent limitations related to behavioral complexity and contextual variability. Trafficking behaviors can manifest differently across cultural, economic and geopolitical contexts, which may not be fully captured by a standardized instrument.

Finally, cultural and contextual factors that might shape cognitive distortions, empathy development and personality expression were not explicitly examined. Given that trafficking frequently occurs within socio-economic systems characterized by inequality, marginalization and instability, future studies would benefit from integrating socio-cultural variables to provide a more holistic understanding of offender psychology.

8. Future Research Directions

Building on the current findings, several avenues for future research can further deepen understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying trafficking-related behaviors.

First, future studies should employ longitudinal designs to investigate how personality traits, cognitive distortions and empathy deficits interact over time to influence the development and maintenance of exploitative behavior. Longitudinal approaches would allow researchers to identify causal pathways, developmental trajectories and critical periods during which intervention may be most effective.

Second, there is a need for multimethod assessment strategies that integrate self-report instruments with behavioral, physiological and neurobiological measures. Techniques such as functional neuroimaging, psychophysiological monitoring (e.g., skin conductance, heart rate variability) and moral decision-making tasks could provide more objective indicators of empathy, moral disengagement and affective processing. Such approaches would help overcome biases inherent in self-report measures, particularly within forensic populations.

Third, future research should explore heterogeneity within trafficker typologies, examining how psychological mechanisms may vary across categories such as recruiters, transporters, controllers or exploiters. Offenders embedded in organized criminal networks may differ substantially from individuals acting independently or within intimate partner dynamics. Understanding these variations can guide more tailored risk assessments and interventions.

Fourth, cross-cultural studies are needed to investigate how cultural norms, socio-economic conditions and collective belief systems shape cognitive distortions and moral disengagement processes. Trafficking is a global phenomenon that manifests differently across contexts; therefore, culturally sensitive models may better capture the nuances of offender psychology in diverse settings.

Fifth, future work should examine the role of trauma, attachment disruptions and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in shaping the psychological profiles of traffickers. Research has shown that early relational environments can influence the development of empathy, moral

reasoning and antisocial tendencies. Integrating developmental psychopathology perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the origins of exploitative behavior.

Sixth, intervention-focused research is essential. Studies should evaluate the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs that target cognitive distortions, enhance empathy and address psychopathic traits. Randomized controlled trials and treatment outcome evaluations could identify which therapeutic components are most effective for reducing recidivism among trafficking offenders.

Finally, given the complexity of trafficking networks, future research would benefit from interdisciplinary approaches that combine insights from psychology, criminology, sociology, law and public policy. Such collaborations can advance integrated prevention strategies and inform evidence-based policy interventions aimed at disrupting trafficking systems at structural, organizational and individual levels.

References

Barriga, A. Q., & Gibbs, J. C. (1996). Measuring cognitive distortion in antisocial youth: Development and preliminary validation of the "How I Think" Questionnaire. *Aggressive Behavior, 22*(5), 333–343.

Busch-Armendriz, N. B., Heffron, L. C., Kalergis, K., Mahapatra, N., Faulkner, M., Voyles, L., et al. (2008). *Human trafficking in Texas: A statewide evaluation of existing laws and social services*. The University of Texas at Austin.

Cockbain, E. (2018). *Offender and victim characteristics in labor trafficking*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315628578

Cohen, L. E., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review, 44*(4), 588–608. https://doi.org/10.2307/2094589

Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44*(1), 113–126. 10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113

Decety, J., & Cowell, J. M. (2015). Empathy, justice, and moral behavior. *AJOB Neuroscience, 6*(3), 3–14.10.1080/21507740.2015.1047055

DeLisi, M., Vaughn, M. G., Beaver, K. M. & John Paul Wright (2010). The Hannibal Lecter myth: Psychopathy and verbal intelligence among federal offenders. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment ,Volume 32, pages 169–177,*10.1007/s10862-009-9147-z

Gravetter, F., & Forzano, L. (2018). *Research methods for the behavioral sciences* (6th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Hare, R. D. (2003). *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist–Revised* (2nd ed.). Multi-Health Systems.

Haslam, N. (2006). Dehumanization: An integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(3), 252–264, 10.1207/s15327957pspr1003_4

Haslam, N., & Stratemeyer, M. (2016). Recent research on dehumanization. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 11*, 25–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.03.009

Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Hyde, L. W., Byrd, A. L., Votruba-Drzal, E., Hariri, A. R., & Manuck, S. B. (2014). Amygdala reactivity and antisocial behavior: Moderating roles of callous-unemotional traits and stress reactivity. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 123*(3), 652–663. 10.1037/a0035467

Jones, D. N., & Paulhus, D. L. (2014). Introducing the Short Dark Triad (SD3): A brief measure of dark personality traits. *Assessment, 21*(1), 28–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191113514105

Kline, R. B. (2016). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.

Maruna, S., & Copes, H. (2005). What have we learned from five decades of neutralization research? *Crime and Justice, 32*, 221–320.

Mokros, A., Hare, R. D., Neumann, C. S., Santtila, P., Habermeyer, E., & Nitschke, J. (2019). Variants of psychopathy in adult male offenders: A latent profile analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 128*(7), 674–686. 10.1037/abn0000042

UNODC. (2023). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2023*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Ward, T., & Beech, A. R. (2016). *The integrated theory of sexual offending*. Aggression and Violent Behavior 11 (2006) 44–63, DOI:10.1016/j.avb.2005.05.002