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Intimate Life Experiences and Leadership Behaviour: A Theoretical and Empirical Review

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ABSTRACT

Leadership behaviour is shaped not only by organisational structures and professional training but also by personal and relational experiences across the life course. This paper examines the role of sexual experiences and sexual relationship transitions in influencing leadership behaviour and competencies. Drawing on leadership theory, attachment theory, and life-course perspectives, the study conceptualises sexual experience broadly to include intimacy, attachment, power negotiation, and relational change. A narrative literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed sources from psychology, leadership studies, and social science, focusing on emotional regulation, identity formation, ethical reasoning, and interpersonal competence. The findings indicate that healthy, consensual, and emotionally supportive sexual relationships can enhance leadership-relevant competencies such as emotional intelligence, empathy, confidence, and transformational leadership behaviour. Conversely, relational instability or unresolved relational trauma may temporarily constrain leadership effectiveness, though such experiences can also foster long-term growth and adaptive leadership capacity. Relationship transitions, including partnership formation and dissolution, are shown to influence leadership behaviour through their impact on self-concept, resilience, and decision-making processes. The analysis challenges compartmentalised models of leadership that separate professional competence from personal relational development. Instead, it advances a holistic framework recognising sexual and relational experiences as developmental influences on leadership behaviour. Implications are discussed for leadership development, organisational support, and future research, particularly the need for longitudinal and intersectional approaches that integrate personal life experiences into leadership theory and practice.

Keywords: Leadership Behaviour, Sexual Experience, Attachment Theory, Emotional Intelligence, Transformational Leadership, Life-Course Development

Introduction

Leadership behaviour does not emerge in isolation but is shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, social, and relational experiences across the life course. Traditional leadership research has focused predominantly on individual traits, cognitive abilities, and organisational structures as determinants of leadership effectiveness (Avolio et al., 2009; Bass & Bass, 2008; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Çapçioğlu et al., 2012; Dickson, 2023; Northouse, 2021; Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2021; Yukl, 2008; Zhang & Fjermestad, 2006). More recent perspectives have shifted towards relational and developmental models, recognising leadership as a socially embedded and evolving process. These models acknowledge that leaders' behaviours are influenced by experiences beyond the workplace, including family dynamics, socialisation, and interpersonal relationships. However, the private and intimate dimensions of leaders' lives remain largely excluded from empirical and theoretical analyses. This omission reflects a broader tendency within leadership studies to compartmentalise personal and professional domains. As a result, the developmental origins of leadership behaviour may be only partially understood.

Among the life-course experiences shaping adult behaviour, sexual development and sexual relationship transitions represent significant yet underexplored influences on leadership behaviour and competencies. Sexual experiences, broadly defined to include intimacy, attachment, partnership formation, and relationship change, are central to identity formation and emotional development (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). These experiences influence self-concept, emotional regulation, confidence, and interpersonal communication, all of which are core leadership competencies. Research in psychology suggests that intimate relationships serve as key contexts in which individuals learn negotiation, boundary-setting, and emotional responsiveness (Bowlby, 1988). Such skills are directly transferable to leadership roles that require influence, trust-building, and ethical decision-making. Despite this relevance, leadership scholarship has rarely examined sexual or intimate experiences as developmental inputs into leadership behaviour. This gap limits the field's capacity to fully explain variation in leadership styles and effectiveness.

Leadership studies have instead prioritised variables such as gender, personality traits, emotional intelligence, socioeconomic background, and organisational culture. Extensive research has examined how these factors shape leadership emergence and performance across contexts (Judge et al., 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002). While these contributions have advanced understanding of leadership behaviour, they often treat leaders as contextually neutral individuals whose development occurs primarily through formal

education and professional experience. This perspective overlooks the formative role of intimate and relational experiences that precede and accompany leadership trajectories. Sexual and relational experiences are often relegated to the private sphere and deemed analytically irrelevant to leadership research. However, emerging interdisciplinary evidence suggests that this separation may be artificial. Ignoring these experiences risks producing incomplete models of leadership development.

Psychological and sociological research indicates that intimate relationships significantly influence emotional intelligence, attachment orientation, and ethical reasoning. Attachment theory demonstrates that relational experiences shape trust, responsiveness, and authority management across adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Secure attachment is associated with empathy, confidence, and effective interpersonal influence, all of which underpin transformational and relational leadership styles (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Conversely, relational instability or unresolved attachment insecurity may manifest in avoidant, authoritarian, or emotionally detached leadership behaviours. Sexual and romantic relationships also involve power negotiation, consent, and mutual influence, mirroring core leadership dynamics. These findings suggest that leadership behaviour may reflect relational scripts developed within intimate contexts. Yet, such insights remain largely disconnected from mainstream leadership theory.

Life-course theory further supports the inclusion of sexual and relational experiences in leadership research. This perspective emphasises that behavioural trajectories are shaped by key transitions and turning points, including partnership formation, marriage, separation, and divorce (Elder, 1998). These transitions often involve significant emotional, cognitive, and identity adjustments that can influence leadership behaviour and decision-making. Leadership effectiveness may fluctuate during periods of relational change, reflecting shifts in emotional regulation and social support. Over time, such experiences may foster resilience, reflexivity, and adaptive leadership capacities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Despite this, leadership research rarely adopts a longitudinal or life-course lens that integrates intimate relational experiences. This represents a significant gap in the literature.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the role of sexual experiences and sexual relationship transitions in shaping leadership behaviour and competencies. It integrates leadership theory, attachment theory, and life-course perspectives to provide a holistic and developmentally informed framework. Rather than pathologising or idealising sexual experience, the analysis conceptualises it as a socially embedded and context-dependent influence on leadership behaviour. By synthesising evidence from psychology, sociology, and leadership studies, the paper advances a more comprehensive understanding of leadership development. This approach challenges narrow, compartmentalised models of leadership that separate personal and professional domains. The study contributes to leadership scholarship by

foregrounding relational life experiences as legitimate and influential developmental factors. In doing so, it opens new avenues for research, theory-building, and leadership development practice.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership Theory, Attachment, and Sexual Development

Leadership theory has progressively shifted from static, trait-based explanations toward relational and developmental frameworks that emphasise interaction, emotional processes, and social context. Early trait theories conceptualised leadership as the result of stable individual characteristics such as confidence, dominance, and decisiveness, often neglecting the social and relational processes through which these traits are formed and expressed (Judge et al., 2004). Contemporary leadership models, including transformational, relational, and ethical leadership, reconceptualise leadership as a dynamic process grounded in influence, trust, and emotional engagement with followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These models highlight competencies such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity as central to leadership effectiveness. Importantly, such competencies are not innate but are shaped through repeated social and relational experiences across the life course. Leadership behaviour is therefore increasingly understood as a product of developmental experiences rather than fixed personal attributes. This theoretical evolution creates space for examining how intimate and sexual relationships contribute to leadership development.

Attachment theory provides a critical psychological framework for understanding how relational experiences shape leadership behaviour. According to attachment theory, early and later-life relationships influence emotional regulation, trust, responsiveness, and comfort with authority—qualities directly relevant to leadership (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Secure attachment is associated with higher emotional intelligence, effective communication, and adaptive influence strategies, all of which underpin transformational and relational leadership styles. In contrast, insecure attachment patterns may manifest in avoidant, controlling, or emotionally detached leadership behaviours. Sexual relationships in adulthood serve as powerful contexts in which attachment orientations are reinforced, challenged, or transformed, shaping confidence, interpersonal sensitivity, and risk-taking. These relational dynamics mirror leadership processes involving power, dependency, and mutual influence. Consequently, attachment theory offers a robust explanatory lens for linking sexual and relational experiences to leadership behaviour.

Life-course theory further strengthens this framework by situating leadership development within broader trajectories of relational change and social transition. This perspective emphasises that behavioural

patterns and identities evolve through critical life events and transitions, including partnership formation, sexual maturation, relationship dissolution, and re-partnering (Elder, 1998). Such transitions often prompt identity re-evaluation, emotional adjustment, and behavioural adaptation, with potential implications for leadership behaviour and decision-making. Leadership identity may be reshaped as individuals navigate shifts in intimacy, autonomy, and responsibility across the life span. Experiences of relational stability may enhance confidence and emotional regulation, while relational disruption may initially challenge leadership functioning but foster long-term resilience and reflexivity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Integrating life-course theory highlights leadership as an evolving process influenced by intimate life experiences rather than a static professional role. Together, leadership theory, attachment theory, and life-course perspectives position sexual experience as a legitimate and developmental influence on leadership behaviour.

Literature Review

Sexual Experience, Identity, and Leadership Behaviour

Empirical research across psychology and sociology demonstrates that intimate and sexual relationships are central to identity development, self-efficacy, and emotional maturity. Sexual experiences contribute to how individuals understand themselves in relation to others, shaping confidence, autonomy, and perceptions of personal agency (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Positive relational and sexual encounters are associated with higher self-esteem, emotional stability, and interpersonal confidence—attributes that facilitate leadership behaviours such as assertive communication, boundary-setting, and adaptive decision-making. These experiences often reinforce a coherent self-concept, enabling leaders to act with clarity and consistency in complex social environments. Leadership scholars consistently identify self-efficacy and identity clarity as foundational to effective leadership performance (Northouse, 2021). From this perspective, sexual and relational experiences represent formative social contexts in which leadership-relevant identities are developed and refined. Leadership behaviour thus reflects broader identity processes shaped beyond formal organisational settings.

Conversely, empirical evidence suggests that relational conflict, instability, or coercive sexual experiences can disrupt emotional regulation and interpersonal trust, with implications for leadership behaviour. Attachment-related insecurity arising from adverse intimate experiences may manifest in leadership as emotional withdrawal, hyper-control, or heightened sensitivity to threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Such patterns can undermine relational leadership processes that depend on trust, openness, and mutual influence. However, the relationship is not deterministic; reflective processing and supportive relational contexts can transform adverse experiences into sources of resilience and emotional insight. Leadership

behaviour in this sense is shaped not only by the occurrence of sexual experiences but by how individuals interpret, integrate, and learn from them over time. This aligns with developmental leadership models that emphasise growth through challenge and relational feedback. Sexual and relational experiences, therefore, function as both potential resources and stressors in leadership development.

A key mechanism linking sexual experience and leadership behaviour is emotional intelligence, which is strongly shaped through intimate relational interactions. Emotional intelligence encompasses self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and social sensitivity—capacities cultivated through navigating intimacy, vulnerability, and relational negotiation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership research consistently identifies emotional intelligence as a critical predictor of leader effectiveness, particularly in motivating followers and managing complex interpersonal dynamics. Sexual and intimate relationships provide repeated opportunities to practise emotional attunement, conflict resolution, and ethical responsibility, all of which translate into leadership contexts. This suggests that leadership behaviour reflects accumulated relational learning rather than isolated professional training alone. The literature, therefore, supports the inclusion of sexual and relational experiences as legitimate, though often overlooked, influences in leadership development research.

Power, Intimacy, and Authority

Sexual and intimate relationships are inherently embedded in negotiations of power, boundaries, consent, and mutual influence—processes that closely parallel leadership dynamics within organisations. Social psychological research highlights that individuals learn to navigate authority and influence not only through formal roles but also through intimate relational experiences where power must be exercised ethically and responsively (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). In healthy sexual relationships, power is negotiated through communication, reciprocity, and respect for boundaries, reinforcing skills that are directly transferable to leadership contexts. These experiences can foster an understanding of influence as relational rather than coercive, aligning with contemporary leadership models that emphasise shared power and follower empowerment. Leaders who internalise such relational scripts may be better equipped to balance authority with accountability and care. Thus, sexual and intimate experiences can function as informal arenas for practising leadership-relevant power dynamics. Leadership behaviour, in this sense, reflects learned approaches to influence developed across both private and public domains.

Empirical evidence suggests that individuals who establish healthy relational boundaries in intimate contexts demonstrate greater capacity for ethical decision-making, conflict management, and authority regulation in leadership roles. Experiences of mutual consent and emotional safety can enhance empathy, perspective-taking, and moral sensitivity—qualities central to ethical and relational leadership

(Northouse, 2021). Leaders shaped by such experiences may be more attuned to power asymmetries and more cautious in their use of authority, particularly in high-stakes or vulnerable situations. Conversely, unresolved power imbalances, coercive sexual experiences, or relational trauma may distort perceptions of authority and control. Attachment-based research indicates that such experiences can contribute to either authoritarian leadership styles characterised by dominance and rigidity, or avoidant styles marked by emotional disengagement (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These patterns underscore how intimate power dynamics can spill over into organisational leadership behaviour.

From a leadership theory perspective, effectiveness depends not merely on the possession of authority but on the ethical and contextually appropriate use of power. Transformational and ethical leadership models emphasise moral stewardship, trust-building, and responsible influence rather than command-and-control approaches (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Sexual and intimate relationships provide repeated, emotionally salient opportunities to rehearse these competencies, particularly in navigating vulnerability, consent, and responsibility. Over time, these experiences may crystallise into stable leadership orientations toward power and authority. This suggests that leadership behaviour may reflect deeply internalised relational scripts developed through intimate experiences rather than solely formal leadership training. Recognising sexual experience as a developmental context for power socialisation expands existing leadership frameworks and highlights an important, yet underexplored, pathway in leadership development research.

Relationship Transitions and Leadership Adaptation

Major sexual and relational transitions—such as entering long-term partnerships, marriage, separation, or divorce—represent critical life events that can meaningfully influence leadership behaviour and competencies. Life-course theory emphasises that such transitions often prompt identity reassessment, emotional recalibration, and behavioural adaptation, particularly when they alter an individual's roles, responsibilities, and support systems (Elder, 1998). For individuals in leadership positions, these changes may shape self-perception, interpersonal engagement, and decision-making processes. Relationship transitions are rarely neutral experiences; rather, they are emotionally salient events that can heighten self-awareness and alter relational expectations. Leadership behaviour, therefore, should be understood as embedded within broader biographical trajectories rather than isolated from private life experiences. This perspective challenges static conceptions of leadership capacity. Instead, it frames leadership as an evolving set of behaviours responsive to relational change.

Empirical research suggests that positive relational transitions, such as stable partnerships or supportive marital relationships, can enhance emotional stability, psychological well-being, and perceived social support. These factors are associated with greater leadership confidence, resilience, and interpersonal

effectiveness, particularly under organisational stress (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Leaders experiencing relational stability may demonstrate improved emotional regulation, patience, and collaborative decision-making, all of which are central to transformational and relational leadership styles. Social support derived from intimate partnerships has also been linked to reduced burnout and increased adaptive coping, further strengthening leadership performance. In this context, sexual and relational fulfilment can function as a protective resource that buffers workplace demands. Such findings highlight how leadership effectiveness is indirectly shaped by relational well-being. Leadership competencies, therefore, cannot be fully understood without reference to the leader's relational environment.

Conversely, relational disruption, such as separation, divorce, or the dissolution of intimate partnerships, may temporarily impair leadership functioning through heightened stress, emotional dysregulation, or cognitive distraction. However, research on post-traumatic growth indicates that adversity associated with significant relational transitions can also foster long-term developmental gains, including increased empathy, humility, and reflective capacity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Leaders who successfully process relational loss may develop deeper emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity, enhancing their capacity for inclusive and compassionate leadership. Over time, such experiences may encourage adaptive leadership behaviours rooted in perspective-taking and resilience. These dynamics underscore the importance of viewing leadership development as a longitudinal process shaped by lived experiences. Ultimately, relational transitions serve as both challenges and catalysts in the ongoing evolution of leadership behaviour.

Methods

This study employs a narrative literature review to examine the relationship between sexual experience, relational development, and leadership behaviour. A narrative approach is appropriate given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic and the absence of a single, unified empirical tradition directly linking sexual experience to leadership competencies. Peer-reviewed research was drawn from psychology, leadership studies, sociology, and behavioural science to ensure conceptual breadth and theoretical integration. Key databases searched included PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, and PubMed, which collectively index leading journals across the relevant disciplines. Search terms combined constructs related to leadership (e.g. leadership behaviour, emotional intelligence, transformational leadership) with those related to sexual and relational experience (e.g. sexual development, attachment, intimacy, relationship transitions). This strategy ensured systematic coverage while allowing for conceptual flexibility. The narrative design supports synthesis across diverse methodological traditions.

Inclusion criteria prioritised studies that explicitly examined sexual development, intimate relationships, attachment patterns, emotional regulation, power negotiation, or identity formation in ways relevant to leadership behaviour. Both theoretical and empirical studies were included to capture foundational frameworks as well as applied findings. Empirical studies published within the past 30 years were prioritised to reflect contemporary understandings of leadership and sexuality, although seminal works in attachment theory and leadership theory were included for theoretical grounding (Bowlby, 1988; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that focused solely on clinical sexual pathology without relevance to relational functioning or leadership competencies. Studies were not restricted by geographic region, recognising the cultural variability of both leadership and sexual norms. However, contextual factors were considered when interpreting findings. This approach balances inclusivity with analytical relevance.

Data synthesis followed a thematic analytic strategy, identifying recurring mechanisms linking sexual experience to leadership behaviour and competencies. Particular attention was paid to emotional intelligence, self-concept, relational learning, power dynamics, and ethical decision-making. Themes were compared across disciplines to identify convergence and divergence in explanatory mechanisms. Rather than treating sexual experience as a direct predictor of leadership effectiveness, the analysis focused on indirect pathways through psychological and relational competencies. This integrative method allows for a nuanced understanding of leadership development as embedded within broader life experiences. The approach also addresses a notable gap in leadership research by systematically incorporating intimate relational processes. Overall, the methodology supports an interdisciplinary and developmental analysis of leadership behaviour.

Leadership Behaviour and Competency Analysis

Sexual experience influences leadership behaviour primarily through its effects on emotional intelligence, self-concept, and relational competence. Research in attachment and social psychology indicates that individuals with secure attachment orientations, often reinforced through healthy, supportive intimate relationships, demonstrate higher levels of empathy, trust, and emotional regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These attributes are strongly associated with transformational and relational leadership behaviours, including inspirational motivation and individualised consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Sexual and relational experiences characterised by mutual respect and emotional atonement can enhance communication skills, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution abilities. Such competencies are essential for effective leadership in collaborative and complex organisational environments. Leadership

behaviour, therefore, reflects accumulated relational learning rather than isolated professional training. This perspective situates leadership development within broader psychosocial processes.

Conversely, sexual experiences marked by instability, coercion, or unresolved relational trauma may negatively affect leadership behaviour by undermining emotional regulation and interpersonal trust. Attachment research suggests that insecure attachment patterns, avoidant or anxious, can manifest in leadership as emotional distance, micromanagement, or authoritarian control (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Leaders shaped by such relational histories may struggle with delegation, feedback, or ethical boundary-setting. These patterns do not imply determinism but highlight risk pathways through which relational experiences influence professional behaviour. Importantly, leadership behaviour is mediated by reflective capacity, coping strategies, and organisational context. Individuals are not confined to relational scripts formed through sexual experience alone. Instead, leadership outcomes depend on how such experiences are processed and integrated over time.

Relationship transitions further illustrate the dynamic nature of leadership behaviour. Entering or exiting sexual partnerships can temporarily destabilise emotional equilibrium, influencing focus, decision-making, and interpersonal engagement. However, life-course and post-traumatic growth research indicates that such transitions may also foster resilience, empathy, and reflective leadership capacities in the long term (Elder, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Leaders who engage in adaptive meaning-making following relational change may demonstrate enhanced ethical sensitivity and emotional maturity. These developmental gains can strengthen leadership authenticity and relational effectiveness. Consequently, sexual experience shapes leadership behaviour indirectly and developmentally rather than linearly or causally. Leadership effectiveness ultimately emerges from the interaction between relational experience, self-reflection, and organisational opportunity.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the influence of sexual experiences on leadership behaviour, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on a narrative literature review, rather than a systematic meta-analysis, limits the ability to quantify the strength or consistency of observed relationships. Although this approach allows for interdisciplinary integration, it may be subject to selection bias in the sources reviewed. Second, much of the existing research on sexual experience, attachment, and leadership is correlational, making causal inferences tentative. Third, cultural and contextual factors may moderate the impact of sexual and relational experiences on leadership behaviour, yet few studies explicitly account for these variables. Fourth, the literature disproportionately focuses on heterosexual relationships, leaving non-heteronormative experiences underexplored. Fifth,

studies often rely on self-reported leadership behaviour, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias. Finally, longitudinal research connecting sexual relational development to leadership trajectories over time is largely absent.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are particularly needed to examine how sexual and relational experiences shape leadership behaviour across developmental stages and career transitions. Such research could clarify the temporal sequence of relational influences and leadership adaptation. Cross-cultural studies would illuminate how normative, institutional, and cultural contexts moderate the effects of intimacy and sexual experience on leadership competencies. Future research should also include diverse relational and sexual identities to enhance inclusivity and theoretical generalisability. Mixed-methods approaches integrating qualitative accounts of lived relational experiences with quantitative measures of leadership outcomes could provide a more nuanced understanding of mechanisms. In addition, experimental or intervention-based research could assess whether targeted relational or emotional training mediates the influence of past sexual experiences on leadership effectiveness. Overall, these directions would strengthen the empirical grounding of the theoretical framework developed here.

Furthermore, the integration of sexual and relational experiences into leadership development frameworks presents practical research opportunities. Scholars could investigate the efficacy of leadership development programmes that explicitly incorporate relational awareness, emotional regulation, and ethical power negotiation skills. Research might also explore organisational policies that support leaders navigating relational transitions, such as flexible work arrangements, counselling, and mentorship. Comparative studies could examine whether leaders with differing relational histories exhibit distinct leadership styles, resilience, or ethical decision-making approaches. It is also scoped to explore interactions between sexual experience, attachment style, and other demographic variables such as gender, age, or socioeconomic status. Such research could inform the design of more holistic leadership training and support programmes. In sum, while this study identifies important conceptual links, robust empirical research is required to validate and extend these insights. Addressing these gaps would enhance both theoretical understanding and practical applications of leadership development.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this study indicates that sexual experiences and relationship transitions play a meaningful role in shaping leadership behaviour and leadership-related competencies. Far from being peripheral to professional life, intimate relational experiences influence emotional intelligence, self-regulation, ethical reasoning, and power negotiation, all of which are central to effective leadership. These

findings challenge traditional leadership models that treat leaders as detached from their private lives and emotional histories. Instead, leadership behaviour emerges as the product of accumulated psychological and relational development across the life course. Sexual experience contributes to leadership development by shaping self-concept, confidence, and interpersonal sensitivity. Such competencies are repeatedly identified as predictors of leadership effectiveness across organisational contexts. This analysis, therefore, reframes sexual experience as a developmental rather than incidental influence on leadership behaviour.

The findings align closely with relational and transformational leadership theories, which emphasise emotional awareness, empathy, and follower engagement over command-and-control approaches. Transformational leadership theory highlights individualised consideration and ethical influence as key leadership dimensions (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These competencies are strongly shaped through intimate relational interactions, where individuals practise trust-building, emotional atonements, and conflict resolution. Sexual and relational experiences thus function as informal learning contexts for leadership-relevant skills. This perspective expands leadership theory by incorporating relational learning processes typically examined outside organisational research. It also supports calls for more integrative leadership models that acknowledge emotional and relational development. Consequently, leadership effectiveness cannot be fully explained without reference to leaders' lived relational experiences.

Importantly, the influence of sexual experience on leadership behaviour is not uniform or deterministic. Attachment orientation, relational quality, cultural context, and individual reflective capacity significantly moderate this relationship (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Secure attachment, often reinforced through supportive sexual relationships, is associated with higher empathy, trust, and emotional regulation in leadership roles. In contrast, unresolved relational trauma or instability may contribute to avoidant, authoritarian, or emotionally detached leadership styles. However, such outcomes are not inevitable and may be mitigated through self-awareness and organisational support. This complexity cautions against simplistic causal interpretations. Leadership behaviour reflects interaction between relational experience and broader psychological and institutional factors.

Relationship transitions represent particularly salient periods for leadership adaptation and development. Entering or exiting sexual partnerships often triggers emotional reorganisation and identity reassessment, which can temporarily affect leadership focus and decision-making (Elder, 1998). While such transitions may initially destabilise leadership behaviour, they can also foster long-term growth through reflection and emotional learning. Research on post-traumatic growth suggests that adversity associated with relational disruption may enhance empathy, ethical sensitivity, and leadership maturity over time

(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Leaders who engage constructively with these transitions may develop more authentic and relational leadership styles. These dynamic underscores the developmental nature of leadership behaviour. Leadership competencies evolve in response to life experiences rather than remaining static traits.

These findings also highlight the importance of organisational context in shaping how relational experiences affect leadership effectiveness. Organisational cultures that recognise leaders as whole individuals, rather than solely as role occupants, may better support leadership performance during relational transitions. Supportive policies, flexible work arrangements, and psychologically safe environments can mitigate the short-term challenges associated with relational change. Conversely, rigid or emotionally dismissive organisational cultures may exacerbate stress and hinder adaptive leadership behaviour. Leadership development programmes that ignore relational and emotional dimensions risk being incomplete. Integrating relational awareness into leadership training may enhance long-term effectiveness. This perspective aligns leadership development with contemporary understandings of wellbeing and sustainable performance.

Despite these insights, a significant gap remains in the leadership literature regarding the systematic examination of sexual experience and intimate relational development. Leadership research has traditionally focused on workplace behaviours, demographic variables, and personality traits, often neglecting private relational influences. Sexuality and intimacy remain under-theorised within organisational scholarship, partly due to disciplinary boundaries and normative discomfort. As a result, leadership theory lacks a comprehensive developmental account that integrates relational life experiences. This omission limits the explanatory power of existing models. Addressing this gap requires interdisciplinary research drawing from psychology, sociology, and leadership studies. Such integration would enrich theoretical and empirical understandings of leadership behaviour.

Overall, the findings of this study challenge compartmentalised conceptions of leadership development that separate professional competence from personal experience. Leadership behaviour emerges as a dynamic, relational, and developmental phenomenon shaped by intimate life experiences as well as organisational contexts. Sexual experience influences leadership not through direct causation but through its impact on emotional, relational, and ethical competencies. Recognising this complexity allows for more humane and realistic models of leadership effectiveness. Future leadership research and practice would benefit from embracing leaders as whole persons embedded in social and relational worlds. This approach supports more inclusive, reflective, and adaptive leadership development frameworks.

Ultimately, leadership effectiveness is best understood through the integration of personal development and professional practice.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study demonstrates that sexual experiences and intimate relational transitions are meaningful, though often overlooked, influences on leadership behaviour and competencies. Leadership effectiveness emerges not only from professional training, personality, or organisational factors but also from relational learning, emotional development, and identity formation shaped through intimate experiences. Positive sexual and relational experiences, particularly those reinforcing secure attachment and mutual respect, enhance emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and relational competence, all central to effective leadership (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Conversely, relational instability or trauma can temporarily challenge leadership behaviour, highlighting the importance of adaptive processing and organisational support. Life-course theory reinforces that leadership is developmental, dynamic, and sensitive to relational transitions over time (Elder, 1998). These insights challenge traditional compartmentalised models that isolate professional skills from personal experiences. Consequently, leadership research and practice must consider leaders as whole individuals embedded in relational and emotional contexts.

From a practical standpoint, organisations can enhance leadership effectiveness by recognising the developmental influence of relational experiences and supporting leaders accordingly. Policies and programmes that encourage emotional awareness, relational skills, and reflective practice may help leaders integrate personal relational learning into professional contexts. Mentorship, coaching, and leadership development workshops can incorporate training in ethical power negotiation, conflict resolution, and empathy, reflecting competencies learned through intimate relational experiences. Additionally, organisational support for leaders navigating relationship transitions, such as flexible work arrangements, counselling, and wellbeing programmes, can mitigate short-term disruption while fostering long-term growth. Emphasising relational and emotional competencies in leadership selection and evaluation processes may also encourage more inclusive and adaptive leadership cultures. By acknowledging the intersection of personal and professional development, organisations can cultivate leaders who are both competent and emotionally attuned. This approach aligns leadership practice with contemporary understandings of holistic employee wellbeing and sustainable organisational performance.

Future research should continue to investigate the complex pathways linking sexual experience, relational development, and leadership behaviour. Longitudinal studies, cross-cultural analyses, and mixed-methods approaches are particularly important to validate theoretical insights and capture the nuanced influence of

relational transitions. Attention to diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and cultural norms will enhance inclusivity and theoretical generalisability. Integrating these findings into leadership theory can refine developmental and relational models, emphasising the interplay of personal experience, emotional competence, and organisational context. Ultimately, recognising sexual and intimate relational experiences as legitimate influences on leadership behaviour contributes to a more comprehensive, humane, and realistic understanding of leadership. Such insights have implications not only for scholarly research but also for leadership education, organisational policy, and the cultivation of ethical, emotionally intelligent leaders. By bridging private relational experience with public leadership practice, this study advances a holistic framework for leadership development.

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