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# Male sub-threshold psychopathic traits and couple distress

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## Abstract

Drawing on a representative sample of 152 couples, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the cross-lagged relationships between sub-threshold psychopathic traits in men and couple distress in both men and women over a twelve-month period. Path analyses showed that couple distress in men was related to an exacerbation of their primary psychopathic traits. There was a bidirectional relation between both global and secondary psychopathy in men and their dyadic adjustment. Couple distress in women also predicted an aggravation of secondary psychopathic traits in men.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a growing consensus, both theoretically and empirically-driven, attesting to the significance of stable personality characteristics in the development of close relationships (Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). Maladaptive levels of specific personality traits are viewed as contributing to the emergence and regulation of negative interpersonal behaviors which either disrupt the union formation process or impose a lower bound to expected dyadic adjustment (Donnellan,

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Conger, & Bryant, 2004). Psychopathy rests on a constellation of personality traits which are thought to prompt repeated relational crises and to severely hamper the evolution of couple relationships. Selfishness, impulsivity, lack of remorse or empathy, shallowness, manipulateness, and callousness are negative attributes which potentially limit the capacity to form and sustain love relations. However, the relational outcomes of psychopathic traits are not restricted to acute or chronic criminal offenders. Psychopathic traits are well distributed in various segments of the general population. In fact, cross-sectional studies have revealed that subclinical levels of psychopathic traits are associated with couple distress and dissolution (Han, Weed, & Butcher, 2003; Snyder & Regts, 1990). It has also been shown that infidelity (Egan & Angus, 2004) and couple violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2003) are dysregulative behaviors frequently observed in men evidencing psychopathic traits.

Despite the appeal of a conceptual model hypothesizing a unidirectional causal relation from psychopathy to relationship quality, to our knowledge there are no longitudinal studies supporting this assumption. The demonstration of a cross-lagged effect from psychopathic traits to couple distress is necessary because there are plausible alternatives to the specific directionality hypothesis. First, controlling baseline levels of couple distress in a panel study may well reduce the causal importance of psychopathic traits to nonsignificant levels. Thus, the covariance of these two variables could be strictly cross-sectional. Second, the patterns of change in psychopathic traits and couple distress could also be reciprocal. Couple distress may provide a stressful interpersonal context facilitating the expression, or intensification, of psychopathic traits. The first objective of the present study was to examine the validity of these alternatives in a representative community sample of couples tested twice over a twelve-month period. The comparison of these causal models in a community sample where elevated levels of psychopathic traits should not be the norm also constitutes a conservative first test of the notion that psychopathic traits are deleterious to couple outcomes at all levels of this latent variable and not only when its value is clinically elevated. The decision to study psychopathic traits in men only was made because this is a relatively new field of inquiry in couple research. The study of psychopathic traits in men represents an important first step in determining the relevance of future studies examining gender differences in psychopathic traits in intimate relationships.

Past studies of the covariance between psychopathic traits and couple distress relied mainly on unidimensional global measures of psychopathy. This is an important point because contemporary theoretical analyses of psychopathy generally refer to two distinct but interrelated facets (Brinkley, Newman, Widiger, & Lynam, 2004). The first of these dimensions, primary psychopathy, consists of emotional-interpersonal tendencies emphasizing narcissism and social dominance (grandiosity, entitlement, shallowness, manipulateness, lack of remorse, low anxiety, etc.), whereas the second dimension, secondary psychopathy, refers mostly to social deviance (impulsiveness, aggressiveness, low tolerance to frustration, anxiety, irresponsibility, antisocial behaviors, etc.). Thus, if there are longitudinal associations between psychopathic traits and couple distress, it would be interesting to determine if both facets contribute equally to dissatisfaction. In addition, given significant paths, it would also be important to examine the directionality of effects. For example, the causal relation from primary psychopathy to couple distress may be unidirectional. Theoretically, primary psychopathy develops and stabilizes quite early and as such should be relatively unaffected by stressful couple life events. In fact, because primary psychopathy implies emotional detachment and low negative affectivity, its consequences on dyadic adjust-

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