



Psychopathy, sexual behavior, and esteem: It's different for girls

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ABSTRACT

We examined the relations of psychopathy with physical attractiveness, several aspects of sexual behavior, and appearance-related self-esteem. In a mixed-sex sample of 198 undergraduate students, we found substantial sex differences in the correlates of psychopathy. Consistent with previous research, psychopathy was associated with early and promiscuous sexual behavior and affairs in both men and women. However, there was a marked sex difference in the esteem correlates of psychopathy: Among men, psychopathy was associated with high self- (and other) rated attractiveness, low appearance anxiety, and low body shame, whereas psychopathy in women was associated with low self-esteem and high body shame. The differences between men and women in the links between psychopathy and body esteem variables were not attributable to any sex differences in the effect of promiscuous sexual behavior on esteem, as sexual behavior was roughly uncorrelated with the esteem variables in both sexes. Further research is required to investigate the nature of this puzzling sex difference.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a construct defined by such traits as callousness, grandiosity, lack of empathy, parasitic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior (Hare, 2003). Promiscuity is generally considered a defining feature of psychopathy (Cleckley 1941/1988; Hare, 2003) and research has shown a positive association between psychopathy and early and promiscuous sexual behavior in both forensic (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 2007) and community (Seto, Khattar, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 1997) samples. In addition, self-report primary psychopathy was associated with self-reports of infidelity in a workplace sample of men and women (Egan & Angus, 2004).

Previous research has also shown that psychopathy is positively associated with narcissism (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), a construct encompassing entitlement, grandiosity, superiority, and dominance. In non-clinical samples, self-report narcissism scores and self-esteem scores are substantially correlated (see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), with Baumeister et al. noting that not all people with high self-esteem are narcissistic, but very few narcissists do not have high self-esteem. This research would seem to suggest that highly psychopathic individuals are likely to possess high self-esteem and to have generally positive views of themselves, their bodies, and their own physical and sexual attractiveness. There is a literature on sex differences in

the loadings and importance of various characteristics of psychopathy (Dolan & Völlm, 2009); however, there has been little empirical research on whether psychopathic traits and behaviors are associated with different evaluations of one's own appearance and worth for women than for men.

1.1. Self-esteem (and body shame and appearance anxiety) and psychopathy

Although we are aware of no studies in which body shame and appearance anxiety have been investigated in relation to psychopathy, there are studies which have included both self-esteem and psychopathy as study variables. For example, in their investigation of body modification correlates, Nathanson, Paulhus, and Williams (2006) found that self-esteem was negatively but non-significantly correlated with self-report psychopathy III (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press) ($r = -.10$) in a predominantly female (70%) sample of undergraduates. Cale and Lilienfeld (2006), on the other hand, reported that total self-report psychopathy was positively and significantly correlated ($r = .23$) with self-esteem in a sample of male inmates. However, the two psychopathy factors related to self-esteem quite differently: Factor 1 (affective and interpersonal aspects of psychopathy) was positively correlated with self-esteem ($r = .48$), whereas Factor 2 (social deviance) was negatively but non-significantly ($r = -.10$) correlated with self-esteem. These studies suggest that Factors 1 and 2 might relate differently to self-esteem; in addition, the fact that Nathanson et al.'s sample was predominantly female, whereas Cale and

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Lilienfeld's sample was male, suggests that the difference in findings could be due to sex differences in the relationship between self-esteem and psychopathy.

1.2. Self-esteem and sexual behavior

With respect to the association between self-esteem and sexual behavior, Goodson, Buhi, and Dunsmore (2006) reviewed studies that included the relations of self-esteem and adolescent sexual behaviors (e.g., ever had sex, number of partners), and concluded that most studies found no significant associations. In their review of self-esteem research, Baumeister et al. (2003) concluded that the relationships between self-esteem and various sexual variables was likely complex, and that the accumulation of evidence suggested that individuals with high self-esteem may engage in more sexual activity and take more risks, whereas bad sexual experiences and unwanted pregnancy might lower self-esteem.

1.3. Self-esteem and attractiveness

Baumeister et al. (2003) noted that the literature suggests that individuals with high self-esteem tend to describe themselves as more attractive than do individuals with low self-esteem, but that the same relationship might not exist between self-esteem and more objective measures of attractiveness. For example, Diener, Wolsic, and Fujita (1995) reported that self-esteem was highly positively correlated with self-rated attractiveness ($r = .59$), but generally uncorrelated with judges' ratings of attractiveness.

1.4. Physical attractiveness and psychopathy

The hallmarks of psychopathy include superficial charm and a deceitful interpersonal style. Therefore, physical attractiveness might be a useful tool to psychopathic individuals to the extent that it facilitates success in the manipulation of others. However, given that psychopathic individuals tend to be highly narcissistic, their self-reports of physical attractiveness might be substantially inflated relative to their actual levels of attractiveness as rated by others. That is, individuals who are high in psychopathy might over-estimate their own attractiveness to a greater extent than would individuals who are low in psychopathy. Gabriel, Critelli, and Ee (1994), for example, reported that narcissism predicted participants' enhancement of their own attractiveness. The relationship between self-estimated and other rated attractiveness is not strong (e.g., Diener et al., 1995; Gabriel et al., 1994), suggesting that these two ratings might be differentially related to psychopathy.

1.5. The current study

The current study was part of a larger investigation related to attractiveness, sexuality, and sexual fantasies. To address the substantial gap in the current literature with regard to the appearance-related self-esteem correlates of psychopathy and any associated sex differences, we undertook an investigation of the sexual behavior and esteem correlates of psychopathy in a sample of undergraduate students. Although we would not expect any participants in our sample to meet the criteria for a diagnosis of "psychopath", there are nevertheless wide individual differences in the underlying psychopathy construct, and considerable variability has been observed in non-clinical samples (e.g., Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996). This investigation provides novel information about sub-clinical psychopathy by exploring sex differences in the relationships between psychopathy and sexual behavior, self- and other rated attractiveness, and esteem variables. We expected that psychopathy scores would be associated with early sexual activity

and a greater number of sexual partners in both sexes; however, the esteem variables were included to determine whether their relations with psychopathy would differ between the sexes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two hundred individuals (100 men, 100 women) were recruited from a medium-sized university in Ontario, Canada, and participated for course credit or \$20. Data from two male participants were excluded, due to responses that appeared inconsistent and likely fabricated. The final sample of 98 men and 100 women ranged in age from 18 to 32 years ($M = 19.80$, $SD = 2.17$). Of the 188 participants who indicated their ethnic/racial background, 164 (82.8%) indicated they were Caucasian, 9 (4.5%) Asian, 8 (4.0%) East Indian, and 7 (3.5%) Black. The majority of participants indicated that they were heterosexual, with 10 (nine female) participants (5.1%) indicating that they had sex with a same-sex partner. Only one participant (male) rated himself as being exclusively homosexual, whereas 176 (88.0%) participants identified themselves as being exclusively heterosexual in terms of behavior.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographic information

Participants responded to demographic items, such as age, sex, education, and ethnicity.

2.2.2. Psychopathy

The SRP-III (Paulhus et al., in press) is a 64-item questionnaire yielding a total psychopathy score and four correlated subscales: interpersonal manipulation, callous affect, erratic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior. The SRP has been shown to have good construct validity (e.g., Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). Interpersonal manipulation and callous affect were averaged to create a Factor 1 score, and erratic lifestyle and antisocial behavior were averaged to create a Factor 2 score. Participants responded on a five-point scale from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 5 (*Agree strongly*). Total SRP and Factors 1 and 2 scores were calculated by taking the means of constituent items, such that possible scores ranged from 1 to 5.

2.2.3. Self-rated and other rated attractiveness

A mean self-attractiveness rating was calculated by taking the arithmetic average of ratings on three highly correlated items ($r_s = .71$ to $.78$): *How physically attractive do you think you are?* *How sexually appealing do you think you are?* and *How do you think a stranger would rate your physical attractiveness?* Responses to each attractiveness item were indicated on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*well below average*) to 7 (*well above average*). For researcher rated attractiveness, participants were individually evaluated on one item that used a seven-point scale from 1 (*well below average*) to 7 (*well above average*). All participants were evaluated for attractiveness by at least one female researcher. For 142 participants, there were evaluations from two female researchers; the inter-rater reliability was .83.

2.2.4. Sexuality

Participants responded to items related to their sexual development and behavior. For the purposes of the current study, we examined number of sexual partners and affairs (lifetime and over the past year), and age of first intercourse as well as ages of first giving and receiving oral sex.

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