



## Hypersexuality in college students: The role of psychopathy

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### ABSTRACT

Psychopathy is a maladaptive personality style that is marked by hypersexual activity that may put the individual or others at risk for unintended consequences such as pregnancy, STDs, pain, and emotional distress. The current study examined associations between psychopathic personality traits and normative sexual risk taking behaviors. In a sample of undergraduate students ( $n = 393$ ), we examined psychopathy, with an emphasis on the two facets of Fearless-Dominance and Impulsive-Antisociality, and various aspects of hypersexuality (e.g., sexual sensation seeking, compulsivity, excitation, and disinhibition), including risky sexual behavior. Both psychopathy facets, particularly Impulsive-Antisociality, were distinctly associated with all forms of hypersexuality. An interaction effect for the two psychopathy facets was found for predicting risky sexual behavior, indicating that scoring high on both facets was a stronger predictor of hypersexuality than scoring high on either facet in isolation. The psychopathy effects were present even when controlling for general sensation seeking, impulsivity, and antisociality.

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### 1. Introduction

The psychopathic personality is generally understood as a constellation of traits, such as callousness, lack of remorse, deceitfulness, manipulateness, superficial charm, impulsivity, and inability to learn from consequences (Cleckley, 1976). Psychopathy is effectively captured in the self-report domain by the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). The current study will focus on its two distinct facets, Fearless-Dominance and Impulsive-Antisociality, and their associations with normative hypersexuality, including risky sexual behavior.

#### 1.1. Measuring psychopathy

The PPI was initially developed for use with non-incarcerated populations. In addition to a total score, it yields two well-validated factor scores labeled Fearless Dominance (FD) and Impulsive Antisociality (IA) (Benning, Patrick, Blonigen, Hicks, & Iacono, 2005a; Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003) and eight specific PPI content scales. The FD facet describes a person who appears charming, grandiose, and eager to take risks with little regard for consequences and absence of anxiety. Those high on IA typically have a reckless disregard for safety for self or others, are aggressive and impulsive, blame others for their misfortunes, and use others ruthlessly for their own gain. The PPI scale scores

are associated with good convergent and discriminant validity in a variety of samples, including criminal (e.g., Poythress, Edens, & Lilienfeld, 1998), community, and college (e.g., Benning, Patrick, Salekin, & Leistico, 2005b) settings. Several studies have shown that PPI FD and IA scores can be estimated using several omnibus personality measures, including the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire, Revised NEO Personality Inventory, and other five factor model measures (Benning et al., 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Ross, Benning, Patrick, Thompson, & Thurston, 2009; Witt, Donnellan, Blonigen, Krueger, & Conger, 2009), and the current study will use the MMPI-2-RF to estimate PPI total, FD, and IA scores (see Sellbom et al., 2012). Overall, the PPI is well-suited to assess psychopathy in non-incarcerated settings and its two-factor structure maps well onto normative hypersexual behavior (cf. Fulton, Marcus, & Payne, 2010), which is the focus of the current study.

#### 1.2. Hypersexuality and psychopathy

Hypersexuality has long been a defining feature of psychopathy and is associated with antisocial behavior (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Llumière, & Quinsey, 2007). Cleckley (1976) included a trivial or impersonal sex life as one of the original 16 traits of psychopathy and the widely used Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) assesses promiscuous sexual behavior as one of its 20 items. Many studies have investigated the relationship between psychopathy and sexual offenders with a focus on violence, aggression, and coercion as antisocial risk factors (Harris et al., 2007; Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996), but less is known about non-criminal, normative sexual behaviors. Such sexual processes include promiscuity, unprotected sex, fantasies, seeking out exciting sexual experiences,

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and preoccupations with sexual encounters, which may be combined with general risky behavior and little concern for potential consequences (e.g. venereal disease, unintended pregnancy, pain; Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000). One of the most studied impacts of risky sexual behavior is the spread of HIV infection through sexual transmission (Hoyle et al., 2000), which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates accounted for roughly 93% of new HIV infections in 2009 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Theoretical underpinnings for the link between psychopathy and hypersexuality include an underactive behavior inhibition system (BIS), which would lead to a failure of behavior regulation, including inhibiting sexual behavior in potential threatening contexts (e.g., Hughes, Moore, Morris, & Corr, 2012). Furthermore, individuals who tend to be impulsive and sensation seeking are prone to risky sexual endeavors such as multiple sexual partners, unprotected sex, high risk encounters (i.e. intoxication, casual partner; Hoyle et al., 2000), which would generally be consistent with an overactive behavioral activation system also linked to psychopathy (Hughes et al., 2012), but little is known whether the constellation of psychopathic traits adds predictive utility beyond these personality traits.

Psychopathy has been associated with promiscuous sexual relations at a young age for both men and women (Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010) and impulsivity/irresponsibility were significant predictors of risky sexual behavior in adolescents, particularly girls (Ručević, 2010). In a sample of college students, Jonason, Li, Webster, and Schmitt (2009) found that psychopathy was related to an exploitative social style measured by several aspects of hypersexuality including sociosexuality, number of sex partners, seeking a short-term mate, and short-term mating. Primary psychopathy (callousness, charm, egocentrism) in both men and women is associated with coercion to gain short-term sexual partners (Fulton et al., 2010; Muñoz, Khan, & Cordwell, 2011).

Furthermore, little is known about the relative associations for specific psychopathy facets and hypersexuality. Hudek-Knežević, Kardum, and Krapić (2007) found some components of psychopathy (i.e., antisociality in men and impulsive thrill seeking in women) were correlated with risky sexual behaviors, but they did not extend this investigation to any recognized psychopathy facets. Gender differences on indicators of social dominance (high social dominance in men; low social dominance in women) have been shown to predict infidelity in a community sample (Egan & Angus, 2004). Another study indicated IA was a stronger predictor of risky sexual behavior than FD above and beyond general sensation seeking (Fulton et al., 2010), but this study did not extend to other forms of hypersexuality.

### 1.3. The current study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the association between psychopathy and hypersexuality in a non-incarcerated sample, including an examination of the additive and non-additive associations for the FD and IA facets. In addition, we aimed to examine the unique contribution of psychopathy and its facets above and beyond other personality traits (i.e., impulsivity, sensation seeking, antisociality) directly relevant to psychopathy that have been predictive of hypersexuality in previous research. Specifically, we expected FD and IA to be predictive of hypersexuality individually, but that the additive effects would contribute further incremental predictive variance to hypersexuality. We also hypothesized that psychopathy would add incremental validity to predicting hypersexuality above and beyond sensation seeking, antisociality, and impulsivity (Fulton et al., 2010; Hoyle et al., 2000). IA was further expected to be more strongly correlated with hypersexuality than FD because the former is also more strongly

correlated with other traits associated with risky sexual behavior such as sensation seeking (Fulton et al., 2010). Finally, we explored the interaction effect of FD and IA on hypersexuality to determine if there was additional predictive power for considering the two factors in conjunction.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were 482 undergraduate students who completed several self-report questionnaires in groups to obtain credit in their general psychology courses. To eliminate invalid test profiles based on inconsistent non-responding, the following MMPI-2-RF exclusion criteria were employed: Cannot Say-revised  $\geq 18$ , and VRIN-r or TRIN-r T  $\geq 80$ . This procedure excluded 89 (18.4%) participants, leaving 193 (49.1%) men and 200 (50.9%) women. The final sample ranged in age from 17 to 56 years ( $M = 19.35$ ,  $SD = 3.41$ ), and approximately 88% of the participants were under 21 years old. In terms of ethnic background, most were Caucasian (89%) with about 6% African-American and the remaining 5% of other ethnic backgrounds.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Minnesota multiphasic personality inventory-2-restructured form (MMPI-2-RF)

The MMPI-2-RF (Ben-Porath & Tellegen, 2008) is a 338 item global measure of personality and psychopathology that has shown compelling psychometric properties. We scored a select set of MMPI-2-RF scales that have been found to provide accurate estimates of PPI psychopathy as documented earlier, including a total psychopathy score, as well as facets of Fearless Dominance and Impulsive Antisociality (see Sellbom et al., 2012, for more details). Sellbom et al. (2012) found substantial evidence for both convergent and discriminant validity for the estimated PPI scores using a conceptually selected set of MMPI-2-RF scales across three large samples of correctional inmates, forensic pre-trial defendants, and college students. For instance, the estimated PPI total score evidenced a large correlation with the Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version (PCL:SV; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995) total score ( $r = .55$ ), Fearless Dominance with PCL:SV Part 1 ( $r = .45$ ), and Impulsive-Antisociality with Part 2 ( $r = .57$ ), indicating good convergent validity.

#### 2.2.2. Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire (ABQ)

The ABQ is a 16-item version of a self-report delinquency questionnaire (e.g., Hirschi, Hindelang, & Weis, 1980; Sellbom et al., 2012) that sampled from a variety of criminal and reckless behaviors, including stealing, assault, vandalism, drunk-driving, fraud, drug-related offenses, and intimate partner violence. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was .81 in the present study.

#### 2.2.3. Sensation-Seeking Scale (SSS)

The SSS (Zuckerman, 1979) is a 40-item measure of a person's level of behavioral disinhibition and tendency to engage in thrilling, novel, or dangerous activities. The SSS yields a total score and four subscale scores: Disinhibition, Boredom Susceptibility, Thrill and Adventure Seeking, and Experience Seeking. In the present study, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was .78 for the total score.

#### 2.2.4. Emotionality-Activity-Sociability-Impulsivity Temperament Survey (EASI)

The EASI is a 25-item inventory developed by Buss and Plomin (1984) to measure their model of temperament traits. In this study,

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