



The utility of the Five Factor Model in understanding risky sexual behavior

Joshua D. Miller^{*}, Donald Lynam, Rick S. Zimmerman, T.K. Logan, Carl Leukefeld, Richard Clayton

University of Kentucky, USA

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Abstract

The physical, emotional, and financial consequences of engaging in risky sexual behavior can be extremely high. This paper explores the relations between the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality and a variety of risky sexual behaviors using a community sample of 481 individuals who are part of an ongoing longitudinal study. More specifically, we examined the relations between the five major personality domains, as well as the 30 specific facets, and six risky sexual behaviors including number of partners, the use of drugs or alcohol before or during sex, number of sexual acts without using a condom, giving birth at an early age, sex outside one's primary relationship, and early sexual initiation. The results suggest that personality can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of several risky sexual behaviors. In particular, the domains of low Agreeableness, low Openness to Experience, and high Extraversion were significantly related to multiple high risk sexual behaviors. In addition, several specific personality traits made significant contributions (e.g., high gregariousness, high excitement seeking, low openness to fantasy, low trust, and low straightforwardness).

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Risky sexual behavior, such as unprotected vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse, sex with multiple partners, and sex with high risk partners (i.e., intravenous drug users) can result in substantial negative outcomes. The cost of these behaviors to both the individual and society can be

^{*} Corresponding author. Address: Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 3811 O'Hara, St. Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA. Tel.: +1-412-624-0871; fax: +1-412-624-4326.

E-mail address: millerjd2@msx.upmc.edu (J.D. Miller).

staggering. Individuals who engage in risky sexual behaviors run the risk of becoming pregnant (or getting someone else pregnant) and having an unplanned child or an abortion. An unplanned, early birth can make academic success, school completion, and employment extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the mother (Hayes, 1987). Furthermore, children born to teenage mothers without adequate prenatal care are at an increased risk of being born prematurely with a variety of physical and psychological deficits, such as mental retardation (Aber, Brooks-Gunn, & Maynard, 1995). Engaging in risky sexual behavior also increases the likelihood of contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Currently, there are an estimated 15 million cases of STDs reported every year in the United States (Aral, 2001). Clearly, there are benefits to be gained from increasing our understanding of what contributes to and maintains engagement in these behaviors.

Although the study of personality and sexual behavior has a long history (e.g., Eysenck, 1976), most of the previous research examining the correlates of risky sexual behavior has focused on family, peer, and community variables (e.g., Brewster, 1994; Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Resnick et al., 1997). More recently, research based on Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1987), which posits the importance of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control, and behavioral intentions, has become a major focal point (e.g., Reinecke, Schmidt, & Ajzen, 1996). Although research on specific proximal mechanisms such as attitudes and intentions is important, we believe that personality has much to offer the study of risky sexual behavior. First, unlike attitudes and intentions which are behavior specific, personality refers to broad dispositions and may help explain why the same individuals engage in risky sex, criminal behavior, and substance use. Second, although attitudes and intentions change over relatively short periods of time, personality is quite stable over long periods of time (e.g., Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) which makes the early identification of at-risk individuals possible. Third, an understanding of which dimensions of personality are most strongly related to antisocial behavior may suggest not only who to target but how to target these interventions. Finally, knowing which personality traits are most strongly related to risky sexual behavior suggests what to target. If Constraint, a dimension concerned with self-control, is strongly related to risky sexual practices it may be important to develop interventions that teach at-risk children specific techniques for increasing their self-control.

A recent meta-analysis (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000) on personality and risky sexual behavior underscores our argument for the importance of personality. Hoyle et al. (2000) summarized the relations between both psychobiological and taxonomic models of personality and three risky sex variables. Several findings emerged from this review: (1) sensation seeking was significantly related to a number of risky sexual behaviors; (2) measures of impulsivity and low Conscientiousness were significantly related to risky sex, especially having unprotected sex; and (3) there was a consistent relation between low Agreeableness and several risky sex behaviors.

Hoyle et al. (2000) offered several suggestions for future research directions. The authors argue that "personality processes are conspicuously absent from models of sexual risk taking, which are dominated by attitude and peer influence variables" (p. 1224). In addition, the authors note that most of the empirical examinations of the relations between personality and sexual behavior have used a psychobiological model of personality, such as sensation seeking, and have ignored taxonomic models such as the Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Finally, Hoyle

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