



Psychopathic personality traits and risky sexual behavior in college students

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ABSTRACT

Risky sexual behavior (RSB) is associated with a variety of negative health and social consequences including STDs and unplanned pregnancies. The present study focused on the association between psychopathic personality traits and RSB. College students ($N = 511$) completed self-report measures of RSB, psychopathic personality traits, and sensation seeking. When sensation seeking, Fearless Dominance psychopathic traits, and Impulsive Antisociality psychopathic traits were entered as predictors of RSB, only Impulsive Antisociality significantly contributed to the regression. These main effects were qualified by a gender by psychopathic traits interaction: (a) Impulsive Antisociality predicted RSB in both men and women, with a stronger association between Impulsive Antisociality and RSB in men, and (b) Fearless Dominance only predicted RSB in men. Thus, RSB may require both opportunity (associated with Fearless Dominance in men) and a combination of poor judgment and impulsive behavior (associated with Impulsive Antisociality in both men and women).

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1. Introduction

Risky sexual behavior (RSB) refers to “any behavior that increases the probability of negative consequences associated with sexual contact, including AIDS, or other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unplanned pregnancy” (Cooper, 2002, p. 101, 102). Specifically, RSB includes behaviors such as having multiple partners, having casual sex with unknown partners, having sex without a condom, and using alcohol or drugs prior to or during sex (Turchik & Garske, 2009). In addition to putting the individual at risk for adverse health outcomes, RSB imposes a substantial burden on healthcare systems (e.g., Schackman et al., 2006). Despite health promotion and education programs to prevent the transmission of STDs, the prevalence of STDs in the United States remains high with approximately 19 million new infections annually, half of which occur among individuals aged 15–24 (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004). A variety of situational/contextual factors (e.g., cultural norms, availability of condoms, availability of drugs and alcohol) and individual difference variables (e.g., personality traits, attitudes, knowledge about the transmission of STDs) may contribute to the extent to which individuals engage in RSB. The present study focused on the association between psychopathic personality traits and RSB.

1.1. Personality and RSB

Although contextual variables such as family and peers are important when trying to predict and understand RSB, Miller and

colleagues (2004) made a compelling case for examining the role of personality traits in RSB. They noted that among the advantages of focusing on personality traits, are that (a) personality traits are relatively stable (unlike, for example, intentions), and (b) an understanding of these personality variables may guide interventions to reduce RSB. In fact, a number of personality variables are associated with RSB (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000).

Sensation seeking has been the most extensively studied personality trait associated with RSB (e.g., Kalichman, Cain, Knetch, & Hill, 2005). Sensation seeking is “defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). Of the 53 studies examining the relation between personality traits and RSB that Hoyle et al. (2000) identified in their meta-analysis, sensation seeking accounted for 64% of the associations reported. Furthermore, sensation seeking predicted all forms of RSB (number of sexual partners, unprotected sex, and high-risk encounters), with an average effect size of .19. Furthermore, three of the Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) personality traits have yielded consistent correlations with RSB. Extraversion is positively associated with RSB (Barnes, Malamuth, & Cheek, 1984; Miller et al., 2004), whereas conscientiousness and agreeableness are negatively associated with RSB (e.g., Miller et al., 2004; Vollrath, Knock, & Cassano, 1999).

1.2. Psychopathic personality traits

High sensation seeking, high extraversion, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness (all associated with RSB) are also components of the higher-order personality construct of psychopathy.

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Psychopathy is characterized by superficial charm, egocentricity, impulsivity, irresponsibility, shallow emotions, pathological lying, manipulation, persistent violation of social norms, and a lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse (Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1996). Additionally, psychopathy has been associated with sexual coercion (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 2007; Knight & Guay, 2006), which is likely to increase the risk of unwanted pregnancy and the transmission of STDs (e.g., Kalichman, Williams, Cherry, Belcher, & Nachimson, 1998), as individuals who coerce their sexual partners may be less likely to use protection during sex or to know the STD-status of their victims. Although psychopathy has traditionally been studied with forensic populations, there has been a growing interest in studying psychopathic personality traits in non-forensic populations (e.g., Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Furthermore, taxometric evidence indicates that psychopathy is most likely a dimensional construct that varies in degree across the general population (e.g., Marcus, John, & Edens, 2004; Walters, Brinkley, Magaletta, & Diamond, 2008).

Psychopathy has been characterized as having two components (e.g., Fowles & Dindo, 2006), and many commonly used measures of psychopathy appear to have a two factor structure (e.g., Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Although the exact nature of the two factors varies depending on the specific measure of psychopathy, the first factor is generally characterized by affective and interpersonal aspects (e.g., fearlessness, manipulativeness, social dominance, narcissism), whereas the second factor is characterized by antisocial features, including impulsivity, irresponsibility, and aggression. This second factor is also positively associated with sensation seeking (Uzieblo, Verschuere, & Crombez, 2007). Thus, each of these factors may uniquely contribute to an individual's tendency to engage in RSB.

Few studies have examined the association between RSB and psychopathic personality traits. In a sample of incarcerated female drug users, the affective-interpersonal factor (F1) of the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) was negatively correlated with having engaged in unprotected vaginal sex, whereas the antisocial lifestyle factor (F2) was positively correlated with both having had sex with a drug-using partner and having had sex with a partner known to be HIV positive (Richards, Casey, Lucente, & Kafami, 2003). Self-reported psychopathy was positively correlated with number of sex partners in a sample of college students (Jonason et al., 2009). Furthermore, in a community sample of young adults, the FFM prototype of antisocial personality (which overlaps considerably with the FFM prototype of psychopathy) was positively associated with both the number of sex partners during the past three months and with drug use before sex (Gudonis, Miller, Miller, & Lynam, 2008).

1.3. Gender

Men report having more sexual partners than women (e.g., Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). For example, college men were more likely than women to engage in RSB over a 12-month period (Gil, 2005). According to parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972), women tend to be more conservative and discriminating about sex than men because their investment in potential offspring is greater. Men, in contrast, have a smaller investment and tend to vigorously pursue sexual opportunities to maximize their reproductive success. Consequently, men compete for sexual opportunities with women, whereas women have more liberty to choose with whom they will have sex.

Given these differences, the two psychopathy factors may be differentially associated with RSB for men and women. Specifically, the affective-interpersonal psychopathy factor may be more strongly associated with RSB in men than in women. Although

the term psychopathy generally has a negative connotation and is often associated with criminal behavior, when psychopathy is conceptualized as a constellation of personality traits, some of those traits have positive associations. In fact, on one measure of psychopathy, the affective-interpersonal factor is positively correlated with work ethic, heroism, well-being, and achievement (Benning et al., 2003; Patrick, Edens, Poythress, Lilienfeld, & Benning, 2006), all characteristics that women value in a partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In contrast, women high in this factor are likely to be assertive and capable of greater sexual selectivity, which is consistent with Richards et al.'s (2003) finding that F1 of the PCL-R was negatively associated with number of sex partners. In contrast, the antisocial behavior factor is likely to be associated with RSB in both men and women. This factor is associated with rebellious, impulsive, and thrill-seeking behavior, and impulsivity and sensation seeking are established correlates of RSB in both men and women (Hoyle et al., 2000; McCoul & Haslam, 2001). Therefore, this factor may operate similarly for men and women. Furthermore, this antisocial factor has been associated with a variety of social and psychological difficulties (Patrick et al., 2006). In sum, the first factor is likely to be associated with greater opportunities to engage in RSB (especially for men), whereas the second factor should be associated with a lack of constraint when these opportunities arise.

1.4. Present study

The present study examined the associations between self-reported RSB and psychopathic personality traits in a sample of college undergraduates. Because sensation seeking has had the strongest associations with RSB of the personality variables that have been studied, a goal of the current study was to determine whether psychopathic personality traits predict RSB beyond the contribution of sensation seeking.

Approximately 75% to 90% of college students are sexually active (LaBrie, Earleywine, Schiffman, Pedersen, & Marriot, 2005), and roughly half of all new HIV infections occur among people between the ages of 15 and 24 (Weinstock et al., 2004). Thus, given that the college years are particularly high-risk times for young adults, they may provide an optimal timeframe in which to examine factors that contribute to the extent to which individuals engage in RSB.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 511 college students (389 female) drawn from psychology classes who received course credit for participation. Most participants reported being Caucasian (59%), followed by African-American (37%), and 4% reported being from another racial/ethnic background. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 ($M = 20.24$; $SD = 3.67$). The participants reported a mean of 3.5 sexual partners.

2.2. Materials and procedures

The participants completed the study online. Participation lasted approximately 1 h.

Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). The PPI is a 187-item self-report scale that was initially validated with college students. The scale measures the major personality characteristics of psychopathy without overtly referring to antisocial or criminal behaviors. The PPI total score has excellent internal consistency, with alphas ranging from .90 to .93, and

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