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## Negative urgency and risky sexual behaviors: A clarification of the relationship between impulsivity and risky sexual behavior <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

How does impulsivity relate to risky sexual behavior? Whereas some research has attempted to answer this question in terms of global impulsivity, past research has demonstrated the need to conceptualize impulsivity as a multifaceted trait (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Research has been mixed as to which facets of impulsivity predict risky sexual behavior. The major aim of this project was to further the understanding between the five facets of impulsivity (positive urgency, negative urgency, lack of premeditation, sensation-seeking, and lack of perseverance) and risky sexual behavior. This study used a longitudinal design and showed that risky sex was highest among people who act rashly on the basis of negative emotion (negative urgency) and who crave novel, exciting situations (sensation seeking). These findings add to a growing body of literature on the importance of different facets of impulsivity in predicting risky sexual behavior.

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Sex is an exciting, but sometimes risky behavior. Who is most prone to engage in risky sexual behavior? Current research suggests that personality traits, such as impulsivity, are one piece of this puzzle (Sher & Trull, 1994). Whereas some people might engage in risky sex because they crave excitement, others may engage in risky sex when they are overwhelmed with negative emotion. We propose that impulsivity should be broken down into individual facets (Cyders & Smith, 2008; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001) when exploring the link between impulsivity and risky sexual behavior. Various research projects have shown a relationship between all five of these facets and risky sexual behavior. For example, one line of research showed that people engage in more risky sexual behavior if they are the kind of people who act rashly when they are especially happy (Zapolski, Cyders, & Smith, 2009). People also make irrational decisions when experiencing strong negative emotions (Jackson, 1984; Wallace, Newman, & Bachorowski, 1991). But there is not a clear consensus regarding the relationship between separate facets of impulsivity and risky sexual behavior.

This project aims to resolve these inconsistencies in the literature by investigating how the separate facets of impulsivity predict risky sexual behaviors. Our hypothesis is that people who are prone to making rash decisions on the basis of strong negative emotions and people who desire novel and exciting activities will engage in heightened levels of risky sexual behaviors.

### 1. Impulsivity

Humans, unlike many non-human animals, have a remarkably sophisticated ability to control their impulses. Yet, people frequently fail to adequately control their impulses. Perhaps as a result, impulsivity has received considerable theoretical and empirical attention throughout the history of psychology. To resolve some of the dispute of how to define impulsivity, Whiteside and Lynam (2001) factor analyzed several widely used self-report measures of impulsivity in order to decipher the factor structure of this broad construct. Their analysis yielded four separate facets of impulsivity: sensation seeking, urgency, perseverance, and premeditation. Sensation seeking refers to a tendency to engage in exciting and arousing activities. Urgency is defined as a tendency to make rash decisions when one is experiencing intense affect. (Lack of) perseverance represents a person who has difficulty following a task through from beginning to end. (Lack of) premeditation indicates a lack of forethought and planning skills. This work laid the groundwork for considering impulsivity as a multifaceted, as opposed to a unitary, construct.

Because people may act rashly on the basis of different types of emotion, recent research demonstrated the utility of splitting urgency into both positive and negative facets (Cyders & Smith, 2008). Whereas positive urgency refers to making rash decisions while experiencing acute positive affect, negative urgency refers to making rash decisions while experiencing acute negative affect. Indeed, positive and negative urgency predict different types of risky behavior (Cyders & Smith, 2008). For example, negative urgency is linked to drinking to cope (Anestis, Selby, & Joiner, 2007), whereas positive urgency is linked to drinking quantity and

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problems associated with drinking during the first year of college (Cyders, Flory, Rainer, & Smith, 2007; Cyders, Smith, et al., 2007). Just as both positive and negative urgency predict different types of problem drinking behavior it is also possible that they may differentially predict other types of risky behavior – such as risky sex.

## 2. Risky sexual behavior

The relationship between facets of impulsivity and risky sexual behavior has implications for students' sexual health. Sexually transmitted diseases are a pervasive threat on college campuses today. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that 20,000,000 people are infected with sexually transmitted diseases (including AIDS) every year in the United States. Further, it is estimated that 20,000 people die every year due to sexual activity mainly from HIV and also the hepatitis B and C viruses, and cervical cancer (Mokdad, Marks, Stroup, & Gerberding, 2004). Also, LaBrie and Earleywine (2000) found that 65% of a sample of college students reported having sex without a condom. Thus, college campuses may be an especially useful environment to investigate the relationship between impulsivity and risky sexual behavior. Risky behavior has traditionally been operationalized as behavior that increases one's vulnerability to contracting any kind of sexually transmitted disease. This study will also use this framework for conceptualizing risky sexual behavior.

## 3. Different facets of impulsivity and risky sexual behavior

Risky sex constitutes a form of impulsive behavior because people fail to override their urge to refrain from behavior that may threaten their health. A growing body of research has examined which facets of impulsivity prove useful in predicting risky sexual behavior. But this research has yielded somewhat mixed results.

It may not come as a surprise that sensation seeking was one of the first facets of impulsivity that was examined in searching for links with risky sexual behavior. This relationship may exist because sensation seekers are more sensitive to reward and less sensitive to the potential long-term costs of risky behavior (Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993; Zuckerman, 1994). Numerous studies have already documented the relationship between sensation seeking and risky sexual behavior (Donohew et al., 2000; Kalichman, Heckman, & Kelly, 1996; Zapolski et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2007). Because of these consistent findings we should expect to find a relationship between sensation seeking and risky sexual behavior in our study as well.

Negative urgency may also prove useful in predicting risky sexual behavior. College students are prone to engage in impulsive behaviors on the basis of experiencing strong negative emotions. For example, bulimic college students high in negative urgency are especially prone to engage in bingeing and purging behavior in response to feelings of loneliness and rejection (Jeppson, Richards, Hardman, & Granley, 2003). Many people have experiences of heartbreak during late adolescence. In a survey of college students, 95% of students reported rejecting someone who was deeply in love with them and 93% of students reported having been rejected by someone they adored (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). This gives theoretical reason to suspect that those who are high in negative urgency would be especially prone to make rash decisions about sexual health after having been rejected. There is another reason why we may expect negative urgency to predict risky sexual behavior. Research suggests that the experience of frequent or acute negative affect increases chances of engaging in avoidant coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms are thought to work directly on emotions and function immediately (Westen, 1994). Further research has shown a link

from avoidant coping styles and risky sexual behavior (Folkman, Chesney, Pollack, & Phillips, 1992; Semple, Patterson, & Grant, 2000). Thus, the theoretical link for why negative urgency may predict risky sexual behavior is strong.

Negative urgency has only limited empirical support though. One recent study has found that negative urgency is associated with unprotected sex for both men and women (Simons, Maisto, & Wray, 2010). This study controlled for alcohol and marijuana use when predicting risky sexual behavior, which is not done in every study looking at risky sexual behavior. This study also found that positive urgency was related to unprotected sex for women, but not men. Further, this study did not include the sensation seeking subscale from the UPPS-P, a scale which correlates with other facets from the UPPS-P and has predicted risky sexual behavior in previous research (Donohew et al., 2000; Kalichman et al., 1996; Zapolski et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2007). Moreover, Simons et al. (2010) also found a previously undocumented relationship between (lack of) premeditation and risky sexual behavior. While this study uses a distinct methodology, it offers preliminary support that negative urgency may also predict risky sexual behavior.

The link between positive urgency and risky sexual behavior also has theoretical and empirical precedent. For example, college students respond to events that produce strong positive emotion (e.g., celebrating sporting victories) with increased alcohol consumption in order to enhance their current mood (Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000). This offers some theoretical support for the link between positive urgency and risky sexual behavior.

Just as with negative urgency though, only one study has found an empirical relationship between positive urgency and risky sexual behavior. In this study, positive urgency was associated with increases in risky sexual behavior during students' first year in college (Zapolski et al., 2009). One note about this study is that it looked at risky sexual behavior and drug use as concurrent outcomes using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). However, the analytic strategy used in the Zapolski et al. (2009) study was aimed at looking at increases in risky sexual behavior over time (e.g., time-2 risky sexual behavior controlling for time-1 risky sexual behavior). The results indicate that positive urgency predicts increases over time in both drug use and risky sexual behavior during the first year of college. This study also found relationships between sensation seeking as well as (lack of) perseverance and increases in risky sexual behavior. This study shows preliminary support for positive urgency predicting risky sexual behavior.

The disagreement in this literature suggests that research should continue so that a clearer relationship between facets of impulsivity and risky sexual behavior can be established. As of now, there is not a clear consensus on which facets of impulsivity are associated with risky sexual behavior among college students (with the exception of sensation seeking). Our hypothesis is that there is more theoretical support for negative urgency predicting risky sexual behavior. Thus, we expect a stronger relationship between negative urgency and risky sexual behavior than between positive urgency and risky sexual behavior.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Students were recruited from undergraduate psychology 100 classes. There were 172 total students (138 females, 32 males, two did not indicate gender) who participated in this study. Participants' age ( $M = 19.04$ ,  $SD = 3.97$ ) and race (White/Caucasian 76.2%, Black/African-American = 12.4%, Asian = 4.9%, More Than One Race = 3.9%, and Other = 1.6%) demographics were both typical of large mid-western universities.

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