



Perceived risk of female infidelity moderates the relationship between men's personality and partner-directed violence

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ABSTRACT

We hypothesized that men's personality traits interact with men's perceived risk of partner's infidelity to predict men's partner-directed violence. Moderation analyses of data provided by 467 men in a committed relationship indicated that: (1) men with lower emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and men who perceived greater risk of partner infidelity perpetrated more partner-directed violence, and (2) the relationship between men's personality traits and partner-directed violence depends on their perceptions of the risk of partner infidelity. Simple slope analyses indicated that: (a) men's emotional stability and agreeableness predict partner-directed violence only when perceived risk of partner infidelity is low, and (b) men's conscientiousness predicts partner-directed violence only when perceived risk of partner infidelity is high.

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1. Introduction

In response to the tragically high incidence and negative consequences of female-directed violence in intimate relationships, a large literature has investigated the predictors of female-directed partner violence. Previous research has identified several proximate predictors of female-directed partner violence, such as family history of aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981), culture and social roles (e.g., Archer, 2006; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006), and ultimate or evolutionary causes such as paternity uncertainty (e.g., Goetz, Shackelford, Romero, Kaighobadi, & Miner, 2008; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005). The current research is guided broadly by a person-situation interaction approach to female-directed violence in intimate relationships. This approach is informed by research on the personality characteristics of men who inflict violence on their intimate partners and also considers the situational contexts in which intimate partner violence occurs.

1.1. Personality and intimate partner violence

Previous research also has investigated men's personality traits as predictors of men's perpetration of violence in intimate relationships, such as antisocial tendencies, self-centeredness, and impulsivity (see White, McMullin, Swartout, Sechrist, & Gollehon, 2008, for review). However, only a few studies (e.g., Busby, Holman, &

Walker, 2008; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; Hines & Saudino, 2008) have investigated the relationships between men's personality traits, as assessed by the Five Factor Model (FFM), and men's partner-directed violence. Hines and Saudino (2008) emphasize the importance of using the FFM to study interpersonal relationships, in general, and interpersonal conflict, in particular. Hellmuth and McNulty (2008) note that most previous research addressing links between men's partner-directed violence and men's personality traits has investigated personality disorders as predictors of partner-directed violence.

The FFM is a comprehensive descriptive organization of personality traits that is applicable to the general population and generalizable cross-culturally (Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & John, 1992). According to the FFM, most personality traits can be categorized in terms of five broad factors: *emotional stability*, which describes the ability to cope with stress; *extraversion*, which describes positive emotionality with the axes of dominance and affiliation; *agreeableness*, which describes characteristics such as altruism and emotional support at one end of the dimension, and hostility, self-centeredness, and jealousy at the other; *conscientiousness*, which describes diligence and thoroughness; and *openness*, which describes creativity, intellect, and a need for variety (Digman, 1990; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992).

Buss (1991) investigated the links between personality factors as assessed by the FFM and conflict in marriage. He documented positive associations between husband's low emotional stability and low agreeableness, assessed by husband's self-reports and by wife's partner-reports, and female-directed neglect and abuse. A number of studies have found a positive relationship between

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low emotional stability in men and physical aggression in intimate relationships (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Busby et al., 2008; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; Hines & Saudino, 2008).

These findings fit well with Digman's (1997) taxonomy of alpha-linked personality traits and with higher-order negative emotionality traits (see Krueger, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000, for review) and their links with violence. Digman categorized the major personality factors into two higher-order factors: *alpha-linked traits*, including agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness, and *beta-linked traits*, including openness and extraversion. Men's higher-order alpha-linked traits and negative emotionality, in turn, has been identified as a predictor of both men's general violence and partner-directed violence (Krueger et al., 2000; Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan, 2000). Thus, according to the results of previous research, men's emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness is expected to correlate with men's partner-directed violence in intimate relationships.

1.2. Personality and intimate partner violence in context

Personality often affects behavior differently in different interpersonal contexts (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Thus, it is important to consider interactions between stable features of personality and features of the interpersonal context or situational factors when investigating predictors of behavior (Buss, 1987, 2009; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Hellmuth and McNulty (2008), for example, documented that husband's and wife's emotional stability interacts with levels of chronic stress to influence the frequency with which violence is inflicted against spouses. Lower emotional stability scores predicted more frequent partner-directed violence, especially for spouses with high levels of stress. Previous studies also have found that the relationship between men's stable personality features and performance of partner-directed violence varies with men's substance abuse (Leonard & Blane, 1992; Stuart & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005). Consideration of the situational factors and interpersonal context may be important for accurately identifying relationships between men's personality and men's partner-directed violence.

1.3. The context of perceived partner infidelity risk

The adaptive problem of paternity uncertainty over human evolutionary history might have caused the evolution of male anti-cuckoldry tactics, such as non-violent and violent mate retention behaviors, to prevent or punish female sexual infidelity (see Goetz et al., 2008). Thus, the risk of partner-directed violence may increase as men's perceptions of the risk of partner infidelity increases. Previous research has indeed shown that men's suspicion of their partner's infidelity predicts men's partner-directed sexual coercion (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006; Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, & Stewart-Williams, 2008) and partner-directed violence (Kaighobadi, Starratt, Shackelford, & Popp, 2008). Thus, men's perceptions of partner infidelity may act as a situational context in which personality affects partner-directed violence differently.

Given (a) previous research findings and the importance of situational contexts in determining the relationship between personality and behavior, and (b) the links between higher-order personality factors (emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) and female-directed violence, we generated three hypotheses:

1.3.1. Hypothesis 1

Men's emotional stability interacts with men's perceptions of partner infidelity to predict female-directed violence, such that low emotional stability will predict violence in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

1.3.2. Hypothesis 2

Men's agreeableness interacts with men's perceptions of partner infidelity to predict female-directed violence, such that low agreeableness will predict violence in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

1.3.3. Hypothesis 3

Men's conscientiousness interacts with men's perceptions of partner infidelity to predict female-directed violence, such that low emotional stability will predict violence in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four hundred sixty-seven men, each in a self-defined committed, heterosexual sexual relationship, participated in this study. Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding communities of southeastern United States. The mean age of the participants was 24.2 years ($SD = 7.9$), ranging between 18 and 63. The mean age of the participants' partners was 23.0 years ($SD = 7.3$), ranging between 14 and 59. The mean relationship length was 37.1 months ($SD = 59.7$), ranging between 0.5 and 475 months. About half the participants drawn from universities received nominal extra credit toward one of several social science courses in exchange for their participation. The remaining half of participants drawn from universities received credit toward a required research participation component of an introductory psychology course. Researchers solicited participants from these courses at the beginning of a class session, noting only that the research was a "study on romantic relationships." Participants drawn from the surrounding community were recruited by word of mouth and via flyers posted in public locations. These flyers stated only that volunteers were needed for a "study on romantic relationships." The researchers contact information was provided on the flyers. We estimate that 20% of participants in both studies were nonstudents drawn from the community. We did not code for method of data collection, so we are unable to include this as a variable in the statistical analyses. Different subsets of this database have been used to conduct different analyses designed to test different hypotheses investigating men's non-violent and violent mate retention behaviors (e.g., Shackelford, Goetz, Guta, & Schmitt, 2006; Shackelford, Goetz, McKibbin, & Starratt, 2007) and sexual coercion in intimate relationships (e.g., Goetz & Shackelford, 2009; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). None of the previous studies using this dataset have investigated the relationships between men's personality and men's partner-directed non-violent or violent behaviors in intimate relationships.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed a survey that included several sections. The first section solicited demographic information, including the participant's age, his partner's age, and the duration of his current relationship. Participants then completed a measure assessing their own standing along the five major factors of personality (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). This measure includes 40 bipolar adjective scales, eight for each five personality factors. For each bipolar scale, the participant circled a number between 1 and 7 that describes himself "generally." The five personality factors were scored by averaging scores on the relevant scales for each factor. The alpha reliabilities for the three personality factors included in this study, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, were .52, .65, and .64, respectively.

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