



Are infidelity tolerance and rape myth acceptance related constructs? An association moderated by psychopathy and narcissism



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ABSTRACT

Infidelity and rape are sexual transgressions that embody self-centeredness and disregard for others. The attitudinal frameworks related to each of these sexual malfeasances—infidelity tolerance and rape myth acceptance (RMA), respectively—may both result from sexual scripts that lack empathy. We proposed that infidelity tolerance and RMA are associated constructs and that their relationship is moderated by psychopathy and narcissism, both of which are characterized by a lack of empathy. In our cross-sectional study of 262 undergraduates, the relationship between infidelity tolerance and RMA was significantly moderated by both psychopathy ($\beta = 0.125, p = 0.029$) and narcissism ($\beta = 0.133, p = 0.025$). Specifically, the positive relationship between infidelity tolerance and RMA was strengthened as psychopathic or narcissistic traits increased. Further, in an exploratory set of analyses, we found that the self-centered impulsivity factor of psychopathy and the exhibitionism/entitlement factor of narcissism were driving their respective interactions with RMA. Infidelity tolerance and RMA are associated, especially in people that are more likely to lack empathy. The sexual scripts of people with psychopathic and narcissistic traits should be further examined. Other sexual scripts (e.g., hostile masculinity) may also result in a positive relationship between infidelity tolerance and RMA.

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1. Introduction

Romantic relationships, with all of their ups and downs, are central to the human experience (e.g., Gable & Impett, 2012; Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998). Indeed, these relationships are what many people schedule their time around and are a contingency upon which they plan their futures (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Healthy romantic relationships contribute to overall well-being (e.g., Gable & Impett, 2012), but relationships can be destructive when one or both partners endorse attitudes tolerant of infidelity (e.g., Previti & Amato, 2004). Infidelity has consistently been associated with poor romantic relationship outcomes such as decreased relationship quality (Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001) and relationship dissolution (Hall & Fincham, 2006). The present study conceptualized infidelity as “being unfaithful in a committed monogamous relationship” (Whatley, Little, & Knox, 2006). While cultural attitudes are becoming more permissive of premarital sex, this has not extended to extramarital sex. Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun’s (2002) cross-cultural study found that British and Chinese college students alike were against having extramarital affairs. And although college students in the United States appear to be increasingly engaging in casual,

non-committed sexual relationships (Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009), many college students do engage in committed relationships and so do most people as they get older (Wang & Parker, 2014). This trajectory makes infidelity research quite relevant for developing young adults. Thus, how tolerant people are of infidelity remains an important issue to understand and address. To better comprehend infidelity tolerance, it may be prudent to consider how these attitudes relate to other sexual attitudes.

Research suggests that sexual scripts—conceptualizations of how people are supposed to act sexually—play a key role in how people understand and engage in sexual interactions (Littleton & Axsom, 2003). For example, cheating on a partner may result from an instrumental sexual script, which emphasized self-centeredness and disregards the sexual experience of others (Hunyady, Josephs, & Jost, 2008). Attitudes toward rape—another sexual malfeasance—also embody an instrumental sexual script. Rape myth acceptance (RMA) is defined as the endorsement of false beliefs about rape that typically place blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator (Burt, 1980). These attitudes toward sexual violence disregard the experience of other people. Specifically, blaming rape victims, downplaying rape, or claiming victim is lying all represent a certain lack of empathy (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Recently, Ryan (2011) argued that RMA can indeed influence sexual scripts that determine sexual attitudes and behavior. Specifically,

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she suggested that people who endorse rape myths may hold erroneous sexual scripts for rape, resulting in perpetrators denying their own actions as rape and also in victims not labeling their experiences as rape. Both infidelity tolerance and RMA are characterized by a lack of empathy toward others (e.g., Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; Watts, Bowes, Latzman, & Lilienfeld, 2017). And empathy is vital within the context of romantic relationships; a lack of empathy affects one's ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others. Similar sexual scripts inherent to both infidelity tolerance and RMA support the possibility that these two attitudinal constructs are associated.

Because the underlying sexual script that might tie together infidelity tolerance and RMA stems from self-centeredness and disregard for others, this proposed relationship may be especially prominent in subpopulations that are less empathic toward others (e.g., people with psychopathic or narcissistic personality traits). Psychopathy is a multidimensional personality trait (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009) with factors reflecting fearless dominance, self-centered impulsivity, and coldheartedness (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). On the other hand, narcissism is a self-absorbed personality trait that reflects exhibitionism/entitlement and leadership/authority (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Psychopathy and narcissism may be distinct, but they both exude a lack of empathy. Unsurprisingly, past studies have reported that both infidelity tolerance and RMA are significantly related to each of these personality traits.

First, many of the traits associated with psychopathy (e.g., lack of remorse and callousness) are counterproductive to the success of romantic relationships (Ullrich, Farrington, & Coid, 2008). Indeed, these personality traits are associated with frequency of affairs and infidelity tolerance (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Egan & Angus, 2004). Similarly, infidelity correlated with individual factors of psychopathy: callousness, antisocial dispositions, and lack of empathy (Schmitt, 2004). And people who are callous and lack remorse may not show shame or guilt if they do cheat on their partner, in turn allowing them to easily move on to other partners (Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, & Vernon, 2014). Therefore, people higher in psychopathic traits may endorse attitudes tolerant of infidelity, because they have both the ability to get new partners and the ability to do so without being burdened by the feelings of their current partner. Psychopathy is also significantly correlated RMA (Hersh & Gray-Little, 1998; Watts et al., 2017). Watts et al. noted this association is driven by callousness and lacking empathy. Debowska, Boduszek, Dhingra, Kola, and Meller-Prunski (2014) also found that the callous aspect of psychopathy was correlated with RMA. It is evident from previous research that lack of empathy is an aspect of psychopathy that relates to both infidelity tolerance and RMA.

Second, empirical data also indicate that narcissism, which involves a defensive, egocentric lack of empathy for others (Hunyady et al., 2008), is positively associated with unfaithful behavior in romantic relationships (Brewer et al., 2015; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). For example, Atkins, Yi, Baucom, and Christensen (2005) found that people who were more focused on themselves and their own needs and desires were more likely to have an affair. Further, people higher in narcissistic traits are significantly more likely to notice and focus on alternative romantic options (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Narcissistic traits are also correlated with RMA, especially a lack of empathy toward rape victims (Bushman et al., 2003). Additionally, the self-centeredness and inflated sense of entitlement inherent to narcissism even predict sexual aggression (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2015). Again, we see that lack of empathy consistently appears as the mechanism for which a personality trait is associated with infidelity tolerance and RMA.

1.1. Present study

Past studies have found that a lack of empathy is important in how infidelity tolerance and rape myth acceptance (RMA) are individually associated with psychopathy and narcissism (e.g., Atkins et al., 2005;

Watts et al., 2017). We sought to bring these constructs together and examine the relationship between infidelity tolerance and RMA. Because the theoretical sexual script that may connect infidelity tolerance and RMA stems from self-centeredness and disregard for others, we hypothesized that this association would be moderated by psychopathy and narcissism. Specifically, we predicted that higher endorsement of these personality traits would increase the magnitude of the association between infidelity tolerance and RMA. We did not predict any differences in the interaction effects of these two types of personality traits, since both are characterized by a lack of empathy. Finally, we conducted exploratory analyses to elucidate whether any particular factor of the personality traits drove the proposed interactions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants included 308 undergraduates from a large, public university in the southeastern United States (74.8% female). Using the Psychopathic Personality Inventory–Revised, we excluded 46 people for Inconsistent Responding >44, Deviant Responding >25, or Virtuous Responding >38 on (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). Our final sample ($n = 262$) was racially diverse: 39.7% Caucasian, 33.8% African American, 17.6% Asian, 3.4% Hispanic, and 6.5% biracial. Age data for this sample were not available, but a recent study using students from the same university found a mean age of 20.71 years ($SD = 4.65$; Hecht, Berg, Lilienfeld, & Latzman, 2016).

2.2. Procedure and measures

Consent was obtained electronically prior to the administration of the survey. Participants then completed a battery of online questionnaires that included measures assessing infidelity tolerance, RMA, psychopathic traits, and narcissistic traits.

2.2.1. Attitudes toward Infidelity Scale

This 12-item scale assesses how tolerant people are of unfaithful behaviors in a committed monogamous relationship (Whatley, 2012). Participants rate on a seven-point Likert scale how much they agree with each item (e.g., *Being unfaithful never hurt anyone*). In Whatley et al.'s (2006) sample ($\alpha = 0.91$), male participants reported more tolerant attitudes toward infidelity ($M = 31.53, SD = 11.86$) than did female participants ($M = 23.78, SD = 10.86; p < 0.05$). Higher scores indicate more tolerance of infidelity (sample $\alpha = 0.84$).

2.2.2. Attitudes toward Rape Victims Scale

This 25-item scale measures rape myth acceptance (Ward, 1988). Participants rate on a five-point Likert scale how much they agree with each item (e.g., *Women who have had prior sexual relationships should not complain about rape*). Mean score for Ward's undergraduate

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for infidelity tolerance, rape myth acceptance, psychopathy, and narcissism, by gender ($N = 262$).

Variable	Women ($n = 196$)		Men ($n = 66$)		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
ATIS	24.37	11.55	33.52	12.58	5.442***
RMA	51.87	13.70	59.74	15.13	3.932***
PPI-R	284.27	33.55	304.45	35.43	4.169***
NPI	16.48	7.08	19.03	7.06	2.535*

Note. ATIS = Attitudes toward Infidelity Scale; RMA = Attitudes to Rape Victims Scale; PPI-R = Psychopathic Personality Inventory–Revised; NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory.

Levene's tests: $ps > 0.218$.

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

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