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Personality and Individual Differences 38 (2005) 1035–1045

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Mating effort correlates with self-reported delinquency in a normal adolescent sample

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Received 27 February 2004; received in revised form 28 May 2004; accepted 30 June 2004

Available online 11 September 2004

Abstract

Previous research on males, undergraduates and delinquents has shown that high mating effort is significantly correlated with delinquency, promiscuity and coercive sexual behaviour. Mating effort is defined in terms of the r/K trade-off with parental effort, such that persons at the r -end of the continuum seek to produce many offspring without great investment in their welfare, whereas the K -end of the continuum involves the production of fewer offspring and greater nurturing. A priority to gain and guard short-term mates potentially provides an evolutionary basis to offending. The Mating Effort Scale (MES) was administered to 564 (M:F 308:256; mean age = 14.1 years (SD 0.92)) unselected adolescents in mainstream education. Delinquency was measured using Moffitt's Self-Report Early Delinquency Instrument (SRED). Results show that MES and the SRED correlated at $r = 0.5$ ($p < 0.001$), and at a similar magnitude for the SRED's subscales. Even with the highly restricted range, age correlated positively with mating effort and delinquency. Correlations were found to be of equal magnitude in both males and females. These results suggest high mating effort in both sexes is strongly related to delinquency in a normal population confirming the putative use of concepts from evolutionary psychology to understand forensic issues.

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Keywords: Mating effort; Delinquency; Adolescence; Gender

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1. Introduction

The positive correlation between delinquent and criminal behaviour and mating effort in males has been established for some years (Ellis, 1988), and recently reaffirmed by Rowe, Vazsonyi, and Figueredo (1997) and Lalumière and Quinsey (1996). Mating effort is defined as “energy expenditure allocated to locating, courting, and sexually interacting with individuals of the preferred sex and age” (Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996, p. 34). Sexually interacting need not necessarily mean sexual intercourse, it may refer to any sexual contact. What Lalumière and Quinsey describe as mating effort can also be understood in terms of the *r*-end of the *r/K* continuum. Individuals towards the *r*-end of this continuum show rapid development of sexual functioning, non-bonded copulations, little effort in rearing their young and high fertility (Ellis, 1988).

Wilson and Daly (1985) studied homicide and other violent crimes in Detroit. One of the most striking aspects of their research was the apparently trivial reasons that young men gave for committing violent and often fatal acts. Examples included a murder resulting from a man being embarrassed and another murder that followed name calling in the street (p. 65). These acts of violence seem to stem from an individual feeling the need to save face in the light of an insult (be it perceived or actual).

Wilson and Daly (1985) postulated that the reason so much violent crime is perpetrated by, and against, young males is because they are in competition with one another for resources. These resources include political influence, social status, access to material wealth, and females. In most human societies females are a contested resource and it is routinely seen that males who have achieved high status have more access to females. This has been demonstrated repeatedly through studies during the last 70 years which showed no change in the female preference for high status males (Buss, 1999, p. 106). At the other end of the continuum there are males who may suffer complete reproductive failure. Complete reproductive failure is the worst possible evolutionary outcome, so a male may engage in a variety of behaviours (however socially unacceptable) that he believes will reduce the likelihood of him experiencing this complete failure. These socially unacceptable behaviours may take the form of risky and/or violent competition, success in which may give reasonable prospects of improving status. Improved status results from successful risk taking often evoking admiration. It is assumed that those who succeed have some special quality which facilitated their success and which will ensure success in the future (Wilson & Daly, 1985). Those who fail in their risk taking may be expected to fail again and consequently lose status and face.

The need to save face and improve status is thus established as a powerful motivator for reckless male behaviour. This motivation is considered by Bogaert and Rushton (1989). They examined the gene-based *r/K* theory as an approach to mating effort and delinquency. Essentially the *r/K* relationship represents the trade off between mating effort and parental effort. Extreme *r* represents maximum egg production and no parental care whereas extreme *K* represents minimum birth rate and maximum parental care. According to Bogaert and Rushton this relationship is responsible for many aspects of a person's physiology and personality. “Individuals . . . higher in *K*, relative to those lower, should be larger in size, maturationally delayed, longer lived, intelligent, altruistic, sexually restrained, and come from smaller more stable families. . .” (p. 1017). Earlier research by Rushton (1987) found that women who produced dizygotic twins (greater egg production) experienced earlier menarche and menopause, more pregnancies and shorter menstrual cycles. The results of their study found that although the correlations between *r/K* fac-

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