

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—PSYCHOLOGY

Personality among Sexually Compulsive Men Who Practice Intentional Unsafe Sex in São Paulo, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. There is evidence of an association between the practice of intentional unsafe sex among men who have sex with men (MSM) and *sensation seeking* and *impulsivity*. However, other aspects of personality have been less frequently investigated.

Aims. This study aims to investigate the association between the practice of intentional unsafe sex and personality traits in individuals who sought treatment and met the criteria for compulsive sexual behavior in São Paulo, Brazil.

Methods. The sample consisted of 69 sexually compulsive MSM. The participants underwent psychiatric evaluation and an interview to define intentional condomless sex and completed self-report instruments.

Main Outcome Measures. The participants completed the following measures: the Temperament and Character Inventory and the Sexual Compulsivity Scale.

Results. Twenty-five participants (36%) reported intentional unsafe sex with casual partners, of whom 84% were gay and 16% bisexual ($P < 0.05$). Fifteen (22%) individuals reported being HIV positive, and 11 (73%) of them practiced intentional unprotected anal intercourse ($P < 0.05$). The mean of sexual compulsivity was associated with men who engaged in intentional unsafe sex ($P = 0.01$). Men who reported intentional unsafe sex scored significantly higher on the *novelty seeking* temperament dimension ($P < 0.05$) and scored significantly lower on the *self-directedness* character dimension ($P < 0.001$). However, *self-directedness* predicted intentional unsafe sex in the multiple logistic regression ($P = 0.001$).

Conclusions. Sexually compulsive individuals who practiced intentional unsafe sex presented lower *self-directedness* than the group who did not engage in intentional unsafe sex, which suggests less autonomy regarding life itself. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to consider intentional unsafe sex in sexually compulsive men. **Amaral MLS, Abdo CHN, Tavares H, and Scanavino MdeT. Personality among sexually compulsive men who practice intentional unsafe sex in São Paulo, Brazil. J Sex Med 2015;12:557–566.**

Key Words. Intentional Unsafe Sex; Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM); Compulsive Sexual Behavior (CSB); Personality; Novelty Seeking; Self-Directedness

Introduction

Intentional unprotected anal intercourse, or unsafe sex, is reported among gay and bisexual

men who choose not to use condoms in the context of HIV risk but who do not necessarily have the intention of transmitting or acquiring the virus [1–3]. Compulsive sexual behavior (CSB) is characterized by sexual fantasies or behaviors that are intrusive, recurrent, and directed, and that increase in frequency and intensity, causing personal, social, and professional distress or impairment [4,5]. CSB has

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been described as a factor that influences intentional unsafe sex [6,7]. It is associated with impaired quality of life of the individual due to a lack of control over the sexual drive [4,5,8–11] and with greater risk of HIV transmission [8,12–14].

Several studies investigating CSB and the practice of intentional unsafe sex in men who have sex with men (MSM) demonstrate that sexually compulsive gay and bisexual men experience high rates of unprotected anal intercourse [15–17], have a large number of sexual partners [18], perform more sexual intercourse under the influence of drugs [18,19], exhibit a high incidence of HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) [20], describe less compromise with condom use [21], express lower intentions to reduce risk [19,22], and are more likely to identify as barebackers [14,19–26] compared with nonsexually compulsive MSM.

The syndemic model of HIV risk transmission is based on the premise that the risk is a result of co-occurring psychosocial health issues, such as CSB, depression, childhood sexual abuse, and substance use. These factors interact and increase the risk of acquiring and transmitting HIV [27–29]. Other subfactors can influence each of these syndemic factors (e.g., the prevalence of personality traits such as *sensation seeking* and *impulsivity*) [29].

According to Cloninger et al., personality is a system composed of temperament and character, which interact with one another. Four dimensions of temperament are manifested early in life according to individual differences in response to (i) novelty—*novelty seeking* (NS); (ii) danger and punishment—*harm avoidance* (HA); (iii) reinforcing and reward—*reward dependence* (RD); and (iv) determination—*persistence* (P). The three dimensions of the character traits are related to self-conceptions and perceptions to new adaptive responses. These perceptions are differentiated; a person may identify as (i) an autonomous individual—*self-directedness* (SDT); (ii) part of humanity and society—*cooperativeness* (C); and (iii) part of the universe—*self-transcendence* (ST) [30]. Character perfects the adaptation of temperament to the environment by reducing the maladaptive impact of raw temperament traits [31]. The occurrence of risky behaviors can be favored due to impairments in each of the temperament and character dimensions. A recent review of personality as a predictor of unprotected sexual behavior among people living with HIV found a greater association with sexual compulsivity than with *sensation seeking* and *impulsivity* [32], but data are still lacking on the influence of other dimensions.

Regarding the few studies that have addressed other domains of personality, a study of 1,666 young adults found an association between risky sexual behavior and attempts to avoid or escape negative emotional states [33], which is related to the HA dimension. Another study of 201 HIV seronegatives (men and women) found high *neuroticism*, low *agreeableness*, and low *conscientiousness* associated with sexual risk behavior, which seems to relate to SDT in terms of being less organized, persistent, and motivated [34]. In accordance with the latter finding, a study that investigated sexual compulsivity and personality traits in male college students found *neuroticism* and *agreeableness* to be the greatest predictors of CSB [35].

In this study, we investigate the association between the practice of intentional unsafe sex and personality traits in a sample of sexually compulsive, treatment-seeking MSM. This group is likely to present extreme traits of temperament and inadequate development of character because treatment-seeking samples often present higher severity of psychopathology. The psychobiological model proposed by Cloninger et al. is useful to assess the personality of individuals with more severe psychopathology because it considers the main mental functions (thought, emotion, and behavior) and measures the personality through neurobiological and psychosocial determinants [30].

We hypothesized that sexually compulsive MSM who practice intentional unsafe sex would have lower scores on the HA dimension of temperament and the SDT dimension of character and higher scores on the NS dimension of temperament compared with sexually compulsive MSM who do not engage in intentional unsafe sex.

Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate the association between the practice of intentional unsafe sex and personality aspects: a positive association with NS and a negative association with HA and SDT in MSM seeking treatment for sexual compulsivity at the Institute of Psychiatry of the Clinicas' Hospital of the University of São Paulo Medical School (IPq-HCFMUSP).

Methods

Participants

The participants naturally sought the IPq-HCFMUSP because it is a reference center for

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