



# Students, sex, and psychopathy: Borderline and psychopathy personality traits are differently related to women and men's use of sexual coercion, partner poaching, and promiscuity



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## ABSTRACT

Primary psychopathy traits correlate with sexual coercion, mate poaching, and lack of relationship exclusivity, reflecting instrumental use of others to fulfill personal desires. These sexual behaviors can also be explained by sexual thrill-seeking/impulsivity, or striving for relationship intimacy through fear of abandonment. Given that impulsive thrill-seeking and rejection-avoidance are related to secondary psychopathy and borderline personality disorder, respectively, this study is the first to consider the independent effects of psychopathic traits versus borderline personality disorder traits on sexual behaviors in a non-clinical mixed sex university student ( $N = 187$ ) sample. Results broadly support our sexual behavior dissociation hypothesis: Unique relationships were identified between primary psychopathy traits and use of non-violent sexual coercive tactics (for women), reduced relationship exclusivity terms, and increased likelihood of mate poaching, whereas borderline personality disorder traits showed an independent relationship with increased likelihood of sexual coercion (for men) and having lost a partner through poaching. These opposite experiences of mate poaching, along with the unique association between psychologically manipulative sexual coercion and primary psychopathy, are considered here in terms of their 'fit' with clinical equivalents.

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## 1. Introduction

Substantial individual variation occurs with regard to interest in sexual relationships and the behaviors men and women may employ in order to obtain sexual partners. For example, men and women may employ sexually coercive behaviors such as taking advantage of a person who is intoxicated, verbal pressure, and physical force (Koss & Oros, 1982). Mate poaching (i.e., behaviors intended to attract a person who is already in a romantic relationship for either short or long-term relationships) is also prevalent (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). For those in romantic relationships, sexual opportunities may be further increased by low relationship exclusivity (i.e. willingness to engage in extra-pair relationships) (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000). Previous studies have related personality to the tendency to engage in sexual coercion (Blinkhorn, Lyons, & Almond, 2015), mate poaching experience (Kardum, Hudek-Knezevic, Schmitt, & Grundler, 2015), and the preference for relationship exclusivity (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008). The current study extends these findings and considers each aspect of

sexual behavior in relation to psychopathy and borderline personality disorder traits.

Psychopathy is characterized by callous, self-centered, impulsive, and egotistical behavior, together with a lack of empathy (Hare, 1996). Psychopathy measures typically identify two correlated though distinct factors (Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989), yet some single factor or multiple factor instruments are available (e.g., Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). According to the Hare Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R, Hare, 2003), Factor 1 centers on the affective and interpersonal aspects of psychopathy and is related to manipulative, deceitful, and immoral behavior, whereas Factor 2 centers on social deviance and is associated with higher levels of impulsiveness and sensation-seeking. Hence, these are sometimes termed fearless dominance or impulsive-antisocial traits (e.g., Fulton, Marcus, & Payne, 2010). Other measures refer to primary and secondary psychopathy (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), reflecting the different developmental trajectories for each psychopathy type proposed by Karpman (1941).

With respect to sexual behavior, psychopathy is associated with sexual harassment (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Morag, & Campbell, 2016), sexual aggression (Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997), sexual coercion (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 2007), and positive attitudes towards sexually predatory behavior (O'Connell & Marcus, 2016). Although both

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psychopathic trait dimensions are associated with risk of committing sexual crimes, important differences occur. For example, primary psychopathy is related to manipulative, deceitful, and immoral behavior (Hare, 1996); hence, people with primary psychopathy use manipulative tactics to obtain sex without recourse to violence or threats (DeGue & DiLillo, 2004). In contrast, secondary psychopathy involves higher levels of impulsiveness and sensation-seeking. Existing evidence for inter-relationships between sexual behavior and psychopathy has often been generated from prison samples (MacDonald & Iacono, 2006); it is important to investigate such associations outside forensic populations.

Much of the extant research on sexual manipulation has focused on the perpetration of such acts against women; however both violence and manipulation are also used by women. Atypical sexual behaviors have been related to disorders that are often diagnosed more frequently in women than men. In particular, borderline personality disorder (BPD) may be more frequent amongst women than men (Lieb, Zanarini, Schmahl, Linehan, & Bohus, 2004), though this has been disputed (Johnson et al., 2003). Furthermore, men and women with BPD may differ with regard to symptom expression (Hoertel, Peyre, Wall, Limosin, & Blanco, 2014). BPD is associated with higher levels of sexual assertiveness, sexual esteem, and sexual preoccupation (Hurlbert, Apt, & White, 1992). Furthermore, borderline traits are associated with a preference for novel rather than familiar relationships (Cheavens, Lazarus, & Herr, 2014). Individuals with BPD, however, tend to alternate between extremes of idealization and vilification of partners. Intimacy for an individual with BPD, therefore, engenders an implicit threat of abandonment, which may lead to coercion in order to reduce the discomfort this fear generates. Therefore, the sexual behaviors of individuals with BPD may be motivated by sexual impulses and/or a need to achieve emotional security to counteract their disjointed interpersonal style (Agrawal, Gunderson, Holmes, & Lyons-Ruth, 2004).

Attempts to understand the trait factors behind sexual coercion use and related partner-orientated behaviors should test for *unique influences* of psychopathy and borderline traits, because the presence of BPD may drive a compulsive need for intimacy which produces behavior that looks like (but actually differs from) that arising from the desire to dominate a partner (Cheavens et al., 2014). Although BPD has been more strongly associated with secondary, rather than primary, psychopathy (Miller et al., 2010) these relationships vary by sex. For instance, Sprague, Javdani, Sadeh, Newman, and Verona (2012) reported that primary and secondary psychopathic traits interact in women in relation to BPD traits, but not in men. In women, primary psychopathy traits in BPD were, therefore, interpreted as behavioral *sequelae* of impulsivity and emotional dysregulation related to secondary psychopathy. Review of male and female BPD conditions indicates that men with this diagnosis are more likely to have psychopathy-related comorbidities, specifically antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders (Silberschmidt, Lee, Zanarini, & Schulz, 2015). Hence, research should consider whether sex moderates the influence of psychopathy and BPD on sexual behavior.

We first explored the relationships between BPD traits and the two psychopathy personality dimensions, hypothesizing that the association would be stronger with secondary than primary psychopathic traits. With respect to sexual coercion, we hypothesized that primary psychopathy associations would remain after partialling out variance for BPD. Furthermore, as both BPD and psychopathy are associated with promiscuity (Kastner & Sellbom, 2012), we examined the proclivity to 'mate-poach', anticipating that independent associations would be evidenced for each dimension examined. Since BPD is also related to an elevated frequency of neglect and abandonment reports, we also explored having had a mate poached ('mate-pinching'), hypothesizing that high BPD trait expression would elevate odds of reporting this experience. Finally, relationship exclusivity was investigated in relation to BPD and psychopathy personality dimensions, with the expectation that women would be more inclined to describe themselves using

more exclusivity terms than men, although we predicted that this association would be tempered in those women with either high primary psychopathic or BPD trait expression (reflecting elevated promiscuity). Overall, on the basis that psychopathy and BPD show sex differentiation, we hypothesized that all sexual behaviors examined would show sex moderation in terms of traits relating to each of these conditions.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Using opportunity sampling, 187 students were recruited in classes and public areas across a large University in the North-West of England. Respondent age ranged from 16 to 54 years ( $M = 22.6$  years,  $SD = 6.5$  years) with the majority being female (64.2%). This student sample reflected the demographic profile of the University, being mostly White European with a minority of British Asians. Three research assistants distributed questionnaire booklets to students, who were approached randomly on campus and verbally briefed on the study. To provide informed consent, if participants agreed to participate, they were asked to read a detailed briefing sheet before proceeding. Students participate in research as part of their undergraduate study expectations; thus, only one questionnaire by one student was left blank – the Mate Retention Inventory. Only one other item was left blank and the score for psychopathy was calculated on the remaining items.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Predictors

**2.2.1.1. Psychopathy.** The Levenson Self-Report of Psychopathy Scale (LSRP; Levenson et al., 1995) was developed to measure psychopathy in non-institutionalized populations. Unlike other (non-offender) psychopathy measures, the LSRP was based on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R, Hare, 2003), a measure traditionally employed with offenders. Hence, the LSRP adopts the standard two-factor model of psychopathy: Factor 1 represents cold, affective, and interpersonal traits, whereas Factor 2 captures antisocial and impulsive traits. These are termed primary (Factor 1) and Secondary (Factor 2) psychopathy. Previous research has demonstrated correlations between the LSRP and PCL-R (e.g., Brinkley, Schmitt, Smith, & Newman, 2001; Poythress et al., 2010). The LSRP contains 26 items, rated on a 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 4 (*agree strongly*) Likert-scale, such that higher scores indicate higher levels of psychopathy. Example items include "I enjoy manipulating other people's feelings" (primary) and "I don't plan anything very far in advance" (secondary). The reliability and validity of the LSRP has been demonstrated in both student and offender populations (e.g., Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999). In the present study, both primary (16 items) and secondary (10 items) subscales showed adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.74$  and  $0.63$ , respectively).

#### 2.2.2. Borderline personality disorder

**Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4 (PDQ-4, Hyler, 1994):** This inventory is a self-report personality disorder questionnaire used to screen for the presence of personality disorders (e.g., schizoid, schizotypal, and histrionic). The inventory is based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2000) criteria. Participants only completed the BPD section to report on the expression of borderline personality disorder (BPD) traits; this BPD subscale is recognized as robust in terms of reliability and validity (Gardner & Qualter, 2009). Previous research has used this measure of BPD with normative populations (e.g., Chabrol, van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Gibbs, 2011), and to explore BPD and sexual behavior (Sansone & Wiederman, 2009). The BPD items are nine true-false statements, such as "I either love someone or hate them, with nothing in between". Responses are scored 0 (*false*)

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