



Psychopathic traits predict harsh attitudes toward rape victims among undergraduates☆

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ABSTRACT

Sexual aggression is pervasive in American society and affects deleteriously the lives of men and women. Two potential predictors sexual assault are psychopathic personality (psychopathy) traits and rape myth acceptance (RMA), although there is a paucity of research on the relation between RMA and psychopathic traits. We adopted a multi-measure approach to the associations among all three variables in two racially diverse college undergraduate samples (overall $N = 608$). Consistent with our predictions, most psychopathy features significantly predicted RMA, and relations were most pronounced for subdimensions reflecting callousness, antagonism, and lack of empathy (r s ranged from 0.34 to 0.46). In contrast, boldness features were not significant predictors of RMA (r s ranged from 0.01 to 0.12). Gender moderated the relations between coldheartedness and RMA, such that effects were significantly stronger for females. Taken together, our findings demonstrate that the traditional, maladaptive aspects of psychopathy were moderate predictors of RMA, with effects being strongest for cold and guiltless psychopathy features, followed by disinhibition. These findings raise the possibility that RMA may be one mechanism by which psychopathy influences sexual aggression given that RMA is regarded as an attitudinal precursor to these outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy (psychopathic personality) is a constellation of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral personality features, such as superficial charm, grandiosity, lack of empathy, lack of guilt, poor impulse control, and social deviance (e.g., Hare, 2003). Limited research (e.g., Moulso & Calhoun, 2013) suggests that psychopathic traits are associated with the acceptance of rape myths (RMA), which are defined as stereotyped and false beliefs concerning rape, rape victims, and rape perpetrators (Burt, 1980). Given that both psychopathy and RMA appear to predict those who go on to sexually offend (Greendlinger & Byrne, 1987; Seto & Lalumiere, 2010), the extent to which psychopathic traits predict RMA is of theoretical and practical importance. Thus, we sought to expand upon previous research and elucidate the relation between psychopathy subdimensions and RMA among two large, racially diverse college undergraduate samples, using multiple indices of both overarching constructs.

An estimated 84,041 reported rapes, according to the legal definition, occurred in the United States during 2014 alone (FBI Uniform Crime Report, 2014). These numbers probably underestimate the prevalence

of sexual assault given that rape is among the most underreported crimes (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). Compared with other age groups, college-aged individuals are especially likely to become both the victims and perpetrators of rape. For instance, college-aged females consistently represent the demographic most at risk for rape and sexual assault victimization (Sinozich & Langton, 2014), and 13 to 35% of college-aged males reported perpetrating some form of sexual assault while in college (Voller & Long, 2009). These statistics point to undergraduate culture as a potentially crucial point of intervention for sexual assault (e.g., Stewart, 2014). Among a number of widely-studied risk factors associated with the perpetration of sexual assault, individual differences in personality among perpetrators may be of particular importance. Two relevant individual differences may be psychopathy and RMA.

1.1. Psychopathy

Growing data suggest that psychopathy is a combination or even configuration of multiple traits that may give rise to numerous phenotypic presentations (e.g., Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). In their influential triarchic model of psychopathy, Patrick, Fowles, and Krueger (2009) proposed that prototypical psychopathy is composed of three separable traits. According to this model, psychopathy consists of Boldness, conceptually related to the construct of Fearless Dominance;

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Disinhibition, conceptually related to the construct of Self-centered Impulsivity; and Meanness, conceptually related to the construct of Cold-heartedness, although marked by a more pronounced component of antagonism (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). Boldness ostensibly reflects a relative insensitivity to threat signals, and comprises interpersonal dominance, reduced stress reactivity, physical harm avoidance, and thrill seeking. Disinhibition is a predisposition toward deficits in impulse control marked by a lack of planfulness, foresight, and affect regulation. Finally, Meanness is marked by a lack of empathy and social attachment, guiltlessness, disdain toward others, and rebelliousness (Patrick et al., 2009).

Moreover, psychopathy's subdimensions often diverge sharply in terms of their relations with external criteria, including internalizing and externalizing symptomology and normal-range personality (Lilienfeld, Watts, Smith, Berg, & Latzman, 2015). These findings may extend to sexual attitudes and behaviors. For instance, limited research suggests that meanness psychopathy features may best predict the use of violent force in sexual acts (Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997), whereas disinhibition features may best predict broader sexual aggression, such as sexual coercion and attempted rape (e.g., O'Connell & Marcus, 2016). These preliminary findings raise the possibility that psychopathy dimensions relate differentially to RMA and various forms of sexual aggression.

1.2. Rape myth acceptance

RMA is a multidimensional construct comprising implicit and explicit attitudes that blame victims of rape or sexual assault, deny harm to the victim, reject rape as a legitimate crime, or all three (Burt, 1980); high scores on RMA measures typically reflect harsh attitudes toward rape victims. Measures of RMA include content ranging from victim blaming to trivializing the seriousness of rape and include attitudes like "all women secretly want to be raped" and "men cannot control their desire." Undergraduate and community males with higher levels of RMA consistently report more sexual misconduct (e.g., Hersh & Gray-Little, 1998) and sexually deviant practices than those with lower RMA (Malamuth, 1986).

1.3. Psychopathy and RMA

Although a substantial body of research indicates that psychopathy is strongly associated with sexual aggression, less is known psychopathy's relationship with rape attitudes. Three studies have examined this association (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; Debowska, Boduszek, Dhingra, Kola, & Meller-Prunski, 2014; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2013), all of which relied exclusively on the widely-used Hare Self-Report Psychopathy Scale, third version (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, *in press*). In these studies, psychopathy factors related differentially to rape attitudes: the meanness (i.e., callous) features were moderately positively associated with harsh rape attitudes, and the disinhibited features were positively associated with such attitudes to a lesser extent.

Mouilso and Calhoun (2013) found that psychopathy total scores correlated significantly with 6 of the 7 subscales of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999) but that psychopathy subdimensions preferentially predicted different aspects of RMA. Meanness features were positively associated with rape myths that directly blame the victim, whereas the disinhibited features were weakly correlated with these subscales. Additionally, all psychopathy features were positively correlated with myths serving to trivialize rape or depict the victim as dishonest. Collectively, these findings suggest that psychopathy relates broadly to RMA, with some psychopathy factors potentially relating more strongly to RMA than others, especially when specific features of RMA are isolated.

1.4. Current study

The literature on psychopathy and rape myths, although useful, is marked by several limitations. First, although studies point to moderate relations between psychopathy and RMA, it is unclear which features of psychopathy are most related to RMA. Second, the role of gender in these associations requires clarification. Although males typically exhibit higher mean levels of psychopathic traits and RMA than do females (e.g., Chapleau, Oswald, & Russell, 2008), no research has examined the extent to which the relations among these constructs vary by gender. In fact, two of the studies that examined the relations between psychopathy and RMA have used all-male samples, rendering the extent to which their findings extend to females unclear. Although all-male studies benefit from pronounced mean levels of psychopathy and RMA, they do not address the extent to which the correlational finding may differ in males and females. This issue is of theoretical and pragmatic importance given numerous suggestions that at least some psychopathic traits are differentially expressed in males versus females (see Verona & Vitale, 2006, for a review). At the same time, the evidence for such differential manifestations has been mixed and inconsistent (e.g., Miller, Watts, & Jones, 2011).

Herein, we examined these issues using two large undergraduate samples with diverse demographic backgrounds and multiple indices of both psychopathy and RMA to better understand which features of psychopathy are most strongly associated with harsher attitudes toward rape and rape victims. To address the limitations of existing research, we adopted multiple psychopathy measures that differ in their coverage of these traits. Given that a burgeoning literature suggests that psychopathy is a constellation or configuration of several largely distinct features, it is imperative to examine these features' independent correlates.

Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Abbey et al., 2011), we hypothesized that psychopathic traits broadly construed would positively correlate with RMA, suggesting that psychopathic individuals hold looser attitudes toward the permissibility of rape and are more likely to externalize responsibility for rape onto victims. More specifically, we predicted that both the mean (or cold) and disinhibited features would predict RMA, but that relations would be strongest for the mean features, reflecting the strongest relations for the features comprising callous affect and lack of empathy. We did not expect boldness to relate significantly to RMA, as this subdimension is not typically related to maladaptive attitudes and behaviors. Lastly, we predicted that relations between psychopathy and RMA would be consistent across gender given the overall lack of evidence for gender differences in the manifestation of psychopathy among Western samples (Miller et al., 2011).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were undergraduates enrolled in one of two universities in the Southeastern United States, one a large, racially-diverse public university ($n = 308$) and the other a mid-sized private university ($n = 300$). Sample (dummy-coded as a dichotomous variable) did not moderate any of the relations between psychopathy and RMA, suggesting replication in our major findings across the two samples. As such, we combined these two samples for the remaining analyses ($N = 608$). The combined sample largely comprised females (73%; $n_{\text{females}} = 444$, $n_{\text{males}} = 164$) who were mostly freshmen (38%), sophomores (29%), or juniors (22%) in college. Participants from the mid-sized private university were predominantly of Caucasian (47%), Asian (33%), or African American (9%) descent, and participants from the large public university were predominantly of Caucasian (35%), African American (35%), or Asian (20%) descent. The mean age for the former sample was 19.13 years ($SD = 1.20$). Age data for the latter were not available,

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