

# Individual differences in men's misperception of women's sexual intent: Application and extension of the confluence model<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 September 2015

Received in revised form 17 December 2015

Accepted 18 December 2015

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

Misperception

Sexual intent

Narcissism

Impulsivity

Hostile masculinity

Impersonal sex

Alcohol consumption

## ABSTRACT

Men are more likely than women to misperceive a cross-sex companion's degree of sexual interest. The current study extends previous research by using the confluence model (Malamuth et al., 1991) to examine how narcissism and impulsive sensation-seeking are directly and indirectly associated with men's misperception of women's sexual interest. A community sample of young, single men ( $N = 470$ ) completed audio computer-assisted self-interviews. Using path analyses, hostile masculinity and impersonal sexual orientation were proximal predictors of men's misperception of women's sexual intent. Additionally, narcissism was indirectly related to men's misperception through hostile masculinity. Impulsive sensation-seeking was directly and indirectly related to men's misperceptions through impersonal sexual orientation. Although there was a bivariate relationship between alcohol consumption and misperception, this relationship was not significant in the path model. Overall, these findings demonstrate the importance of considering how personality traits increase the risk for misperception.

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## 1. Introduction

Men frequently misperceive women's level of sexual intent, inferring greater sexual interest from women than women report experiencing or conveying (Abbey, 1982). Experimental research has consistently found that men perceive greater sexual intent in opposite sex targets than do women across a wide range of situations and standardized cues (Lindgren, Parkhill, George, & Hendershot, 2008 for a review). Although many misperceptions are resolved quickly and amicably, unresolved misperceptions may escalate into sexual aggression (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Stockdale, 1993). Once a man who is predisposed to sexual aggression has decided that a woman is sexually attracted to him, this expectation is likely to reinforce cognitive distortions that he can use to justify sexually coercive behavior (Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002).

There is tremendous variability in men's self-reported frequency of misperception (Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill, & Zawacki, 2007); however, surprisingly few studies have examined individual difference factors associated with an increased likelihood of misperception (Fisher & Walters, 2003; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, 2012). We are not aware of any studies that have examined the role

of personality. Thus, the study described in this paper adds to the literature by examining the relationships between men's self-reported misperception with narcissism and impulsive sensation-seeking, using the Confluence Model of Sexual Aggression as a theoretical framework (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991).

### 1.1. The confluence model

Malamuth and colleagues hypothesized that hostile masculinity and an impersonal orientation to sex are critical proximal predictors of sexual assault proclivity that exert independent and synergistic effects (Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Malamuth et al., 1991). *Hostile masculinity* is defined as a hypersensitive hostile–distrustful orientation toward women combined with gratification from controlling women. Men who score high on the hostile masculinity construct are uncomfortable with the potential power that women have over them, do not trust women, are suspicious of their motives, and are easily angered by them. *Impersonal sex* is defined as a game-playing orientation to sex and a preference for uncommitted sexual relationships (Malamuth et al., 1991). Men who score high on the impersonal sex construct think of sex in terms of physical gratification, rather than emotional closeness (Malamuth et al., 1995). The confluence model has been replicated by several independent research teams in ethnically diverse college and community samples (Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2006; Hall, Teten, DeGarmo, Sue, & Stephens, 2005; Wheeler, George, & Dahl, 2002).

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported by R01 AA016338 from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

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## 1.2. Application of the confluence model to men's misperception

The small body of research that has examined individual differences in misperception, has focused on hostile masculinity constructs, including negative stereotypes about women, rape victims, and heterosexual relationships (Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Fisher & Walters, 2003; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Kowalski, 1993). In these studies, men with high scores on one of these indicators of hostile masculinity rate ambiguous heterosexual dating behavior and contexts (e.g. woman compliments man, woman stares deeply into man's eyes) as indicating greater sexual desire, attraction and interest on the part of the woman, compared to men low in these characteristics and women high or low in these characteristics (Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Fisher & Walters, 2003; Kowalski, 1993). These studies suggest that men who are suspicious about women's intentions are more likely than other men to misinterpret women's sexual intent (Malamuth & Brown, 1994).

A few recent studies have linked impersonal sex constructs with men's misperception of women's sexual intent (Howell, Etchells, & Penton-Voak, 2012; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Perilloux et al., 2012). Perilloux et al. (2012) asked male and female college students to interact for 3 min with five different opposite sex individuals. On average, men rated their partners as more sexually interested in them than did women, and men's impersonal sexual orientation was positively correlated with the magnitude of their misperception of their female partners' sexual interest. Given their goal of finding many short-term partners, men who highly value impersonal sexual experiences may be less concerned about errors than missed opportunities (Haselton & Buss, 2000).

We are aware of only one study that has applied the confluence model to men's misperception of women's sexual intent. Jacques-Tiura et al. (2007) expanded the confluence model to include alcohol consumption as a proximal predictor. Intoxication impairs higher-order cognitive processing such that drinkers focus on the most salient cues in the situation and miss other cues that sober individuals notice (Fillmore, Dixon, & Schweizer, 2000). Thus, intoxicated men who are attracted to a woman are particularly likely to focus their attention on signs of sexual interest and miss or discount signs of disinterest (Abbey, Zawacki, & Buck, 2005; Farris, Treat, & Viken, 2010). In support of these hypotheses, Jacques-Tiura et al. (2007) found that hostile masculinity, impersonal sex, and alcohol consumption were significantly positively associated with male college students' frequency of misperception.

## 1.3. The role of personality in misperception

### 1.3.1. Narcissism

Most research conducted with nonclinical samples (including this study) examines what is considered normal variation in levels of narcissism, defined as grandiose feelings of self admiration, importance, uniqueness, and entitlement (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Foster & Twenge, 2011; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Many researchers have

emphasized adaptive aspects of nonclinical levels of narcissism, arguing that it encourages self confidence, extraversion, and social competence, which in turn often create positive first impressions (Campbell et al., 2006; Foster & Twenge, 2011).

Given their inflated positive self-image, heterosexual men with high levels of narcissism are likely to believe that most women find them sexually appealing and project these assumptions onto female companions. People usually see what they want to see in others' behavior (Snyder & Stukas, 1999), thus a highly narcissistic man who thinks a woman is sexually attracted to him is likely to interpret her behavior as a sexual invitation, even if that was not her intention. Therefore, we hypothesize that narcissism will be positively associated with men's frequency of misperception.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, we expect this association to be partially mediated by hostile masculinity and impersonal sexual orientation. Keiller (2010) argued that heterosexual highly narcissistic men expect women to gratify their sexual needs and to serve as "trophy" that enhance their status with other men. When women are unwilling to take on these roles, it encourages hostility toward women. Based on this reasoning, Keiller hypothesized and found that heterosexual men's narcissism was positively correlated with their hostility toward women. Past research has also linked increased narcissism with more positive attitudes about casual sexual relationships and more sex partners (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Individuals who are high in narcissism are not usually interested in long-term emotionally close relationships, but instead seek out casual sexual relationships with socially desirable partners who can reinforce their positive self-image (Campbell et al., 2006; Keiller, 2010).

### 1.3.2. Impulsive sensation-seeking

According to Whiteside and Lynam (2001), lack of premeditation and sensation-seeking are the dimensions most commonly included in existing conceptualizations and measures of impulsivity. *Lack of premeditation* is defined as making spur of the moment decisions without regard to consequences and *sensation-seeking* is defined as the enjoyment of exciting and potentially dangerous activities. Men who frequently misperceive women's sexual intentions appear to be acting impulsively. They 'jump to conclusions,' eagerly interpreting friendly responses from women as a sign of sexual interest. They then act immediately rather than gathering further evidence of women's level of interest. Although snap judgments can be accurate, they are more likely to be based on stereotypes or one's own wishes, rather than a careful analysis of the other person's behavior (Eisenkraft, 2013). Thus, these unpremeditated, quick decisions may frequently lead to an overestimation of a woman's sexual interest. Additionally, men with high levels of sensation-seeking are likely to enjoy the excitement of approaching new women and making sexual advances, regardless of the risk of rejection (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001; Zuckerman & Kuhlman, 2000). Thus, we hypothesize that men who are higher in impulsive sensation-seeking will report more frequent misperceptions.

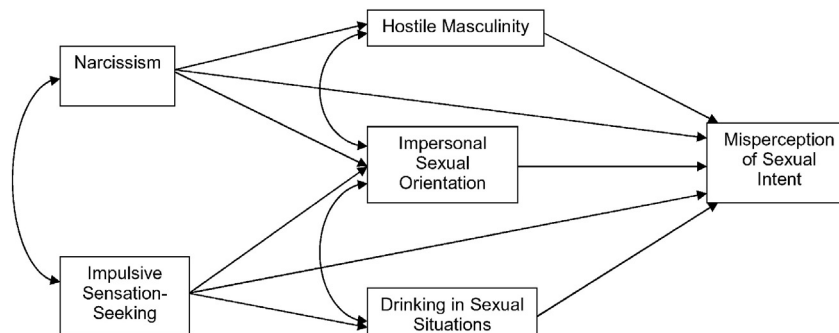


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model predicting men's frequency of misperception of sexual intent.

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