



Psychopathic personality traits predict positive attitudes toward sexually predatory behaviors in college men and women[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Psychopathic personality traits are associated with a wide range of sexually manipulative and coercive behaviors. These associations have been studied mainly in male samples. The current study assessed the association between psychopathy and a measure of attitudes toward sexually predatory behavior in both college men and women. The measure of attitudes toward sexually predatory behavior comprises vignettes describing protagonists engaging in various sexually coercive tactics. Men and women who were higher in self-centered impulsivity rated the behaviors described in the vignettes as more acceptable. Men rated these behaviors as more acceptable than women did. There were also interactions between gender and self-centered impulsivity, gender and fearless dominance, and gender and coldheartedness. Although self-centered impulsivity was a predictor of positive attitudes toward predatory sexual behavior for women, it was a stronger predictor for men. Fearless dominance and coldheartedness were significant predictors for men, but not for women.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy has been linked to sexual coercion in offender and college populations (Knight & Guay, 2006). Psychopathic offenders are more likely to commit sexual assault than offenders who are not psychopathic (Knight & Guay, 2006). Among male college students, psychopathic personality traits predict sexual aggression (Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997) and positive attitudes toward sexually coercive tactics (Marcus & Norris, 2013). Most studies linking psychopathy with sexual coercion have focused on male perpetrators, neglecting sexual coercion perpetrated by women. Yet, 6.1% of college men reported experiencing an attempted or completed sexual assault since entering college and over half of college men have reported being subjected to at least one sexually predatory tactic since the age of 16 (e.g., Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). Consequently, the relation between psychopathic personality traits and sexual coercion in both college men and women merits further examination. The present study examined whether psychopathic personality traits predict positive attitudes toward sexually coercive tactics and whether gender moderates the association between psychopathic personality and attitudes toward predatory sexual behavior. The present study focused on attitudes toward sexually coercive tactics because previous research has found a

robust association between attitudes toward rape and a history of sexual aggression (Nunes, Hermann, & Ratcliffe, 2013), and because respondents with limited sexual experience (who therefore would not report a history of coercive behaviors) may still approve of such tactics and employ such tactics in the future.

2. Gender differences in sexual coercion

Coercive tactics used by perpetrators to obtain sexual contact include a spectrum of behaviors such as verbally pressuring someone, taking advantage of an intoxicated person, and physical restraint (Koss & Oros, 1982). Studies with mixed gender samples have found that men report using sexually coercive tactics more than women. However, there is a question of whether men and women use different tactics when perpetrating sexual coercion. Both Hogben and Waterman (2000) and Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003) found that men endorsed a greater frequency of using all types of sexually coercive behaviors with the exception of physical force. Similarly, Schatzel-Murphy, Harris, Knight, and Milburn (2009) found that more college men than women reported using one or more coercive tactics in the past. The only gender difference in the type of tactic employed was that more men reported the use of seductive tactics to obtain sex from an unwilling partner. In all three studies, few participants reported using force to coerce sexual activity. D'Abreu, Krahé, and Bazon (2013) surveyed first year college students about their experiences as perpetrators of sexually coercive tactics. More men (33.7%) engaged in sexually coercive behaviors than women (3%), but again men and women reported engaging in the same types of tactics. Across all of the studies, fewer women employ sexually coercive tactics compared to men, but when women are

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perpetrators of sexual coercion, they are just as likely as men to verbally manipulate a partner, induce or exploit intoxication, and be physically violent.

3. Psychopathy and gender

Psychopathic personality traits include characteristics such as superficial charm, irresponsibility, fearlessness, and lack of empathy (Hare, 1970). Numerous studies have found that psychopathic personality traits predict the use of sexually coercive tactics, but this research has focused mainly on male perpetrators. There are, however, considerable gender differences in psychopathy (Vitale & Newman, 2001), suggesting that gender may moderate the association between psychopathic personality traits and sexual coercion. In both offender and community samples, men score higher on psychopathy scales than women (Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996; Rutherford, Cacciola, Alterman, & McKay, 1996), and more men meet diagnostic criteria for psychopathy than women (Vitale & Newman, 2001). Additionally, psychopathic women are more likely to develop internalizing disorders, and psychopathic men are more likely to develop externalizing disorders (e.g., Blonigen, Hicks, Krueger, Patrick, & Iacono, 2005; however, see Miller, Watts, & Jones, 2011, who failed to find evidence that many behavioral correlates of psychopathy differ between college men and women.)

Evidence that gender moderates the association between psychopathic personality traits and risky sexual behavior (RSB) may have implications for research on sexual coercion. RSB includes behaviors such as having sex without a condom, having casual sex with unknown or multiple partners, and substance use before sex (Turchik & Garske, 2009). Fulton, Marcus, and Payne (2010) examined whether psychopathic personality traits were associated with RSB in a college sample. Psychopathic personality traits were measured with the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), which yields factor scores for Fearless-Dominance (FD) and Self-Centered Impulsivity (SCI). FD is characterized by a lack of fear and anxiety, the ability to be influential and socially dominant, and stress immunity. FD corresponds to Boldness, one of the three central components in Patrick, Fowles, and Krueger's (2009) triarchic model of psychopathy. SCI, which corresponds to the triarchic component of Disinhibition, involves engaging in selfish, self-serving behaviors, a failure to take responsibility for one's actions, rebelliousness, and a tendency toward impulsivity. FD predicted RSB for men, but not women. SCI was predictive of RSB for both men and women, but it was a better predictor for men. Thus, psychopathic personality traits are a better predictor of problematic sexual behavior for men compared to women. Given that men tend to score higher on measures of psychopathic personality traits compared to women, and that psychopathy better predicts RSB in men, it is likely that psychopathy also better predicts predatory sexual behavior in men.

4. Predatory sexual tactics and psychopathy

Muñoz, Khan, and Cordwell (2011) examined whether primary psychopathy (uncaring, selfish, and manipulative traits) and secondary psychopathy (impulsivity and self-defeating lifestyle) predict self-reported perpetration of sexually coercive behavior. For both men and women, high levels of primary psychopathy were associated with the use of sexual arousal, emotional manipulation, and intoxication to coerce sexual activity. Primary psychopathy was only predictive of the use of physical force for female participants. Secondary psychopathy did not predict the use of sexually coercive tactics for either gender. In a mixed gender sample of community and college participants, Camilleri, Quinsey, and Tapscott (2009) assessed the association between psychopathic personality traits and likelihood of engaging in sexually coercive behaviors. Psychopathy was associated with the entire range of sexually coercive behaviors presented, but the relation was stronger for behaviors on the more severe end of the spectrum (e.g., use of physical restraint). Jones and Olderbak (2014) assessed the association between psychopathic personality traits

and willingness to engage in coercive or coaxing behaviors to obtain sex in two community samples of men. Psychopathy predicted willingness to engage in more severe, sexually coercive behaviors (e.g., physically restrain, block retreat), but not sexually coaxing behaviors (e.g., saying nice things to a partner).

Marcus and Norris (2013) examined the association between psychopathic personality traits and attitudes toward sexually predatory behavior with college men. Psychopathic personality traits were assessed using the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). For the study, Marcus and Norris (2013) developed the Attitudes Toward Sexually Predatory Behavior Scale (ATSPB), which includes 16 vignettes that describe a male protagonist engaging in various manipulative and sometimes criminal behaviors to coerce sexual encounters with women. A principal component analysis (PCA) of the ATSPB resulted in two factors labeled the Manipulative subscale and the Severe-Coercive subscale. The Manipulative subscale includes items such as lying about getting dumped by a partner to garner sympathy, and asserting that oral sex is not sex. The Severe-Coercive subscale vignettes include more severe predatory sexual behaviors like using a date rape drug, and lying about not having genital herpes. One limitation of the measure is that the majority of items contributed to the Manipulative subscale (26-items vs. 6 for the Severe-Coercive). FD, SCI, and Coldheartedness (CH; a lack of empathy and attachment to others) all were associated with higher scores on the Manipulative subscale. There was also an interaction between PPI-R factors FD and SCI in which SCI was a better predictor of scores on the Manipulative subscale of the ATSPB for participants high in FD. Additionally, SCI was uniquely associated with scores on the Severe-Coercive subscale. The study was limited because it only included college men. The current study addressed these limitations by (a) expanding the number of severe-coercive items using a revised ATSPB and (b) examining the associations between psychopathic traits and attitudes toward sexually predatory behavior in both men and women.

5. The present study

Although empirical studies have provided ample evidence of a correlation between psychopathic personality traits and predatory sexual behavior in men, only two studies have examined this association in college women (Camilleri et al., 2009; Muñoz et al., 2011). The present study examined whether psychopathic personality traits predict positive attitudes toward sexually coercive tactics for both college women and men. Furthermore, the study examined whether gender moderates this association in the same way that it does for RSB, with psychopathic traits better predicting attitudes toward predatory sexual behavior in men.

Consistent with research on gender differences in sexual coercion, we hypothesized that men would endorse more positive attitudes toward sexually predatory behavior compared to women. Consistent with previous research on the association between psychopathy and sexual coercion (e.g., Camilleri et al., 2009; Marcus & Norris, 2013; Muñoz et al., 2011), we expected FD, SCI, and CH to be associated with more positive attitudes toward sexually predatory behaviors. With regard to the interaction effects, we hypothesized that gender by FD, gender by SCI, and gender by CH would indicate psychopathic personality traits better predict attitudes toward sexually predatory behavior in college men.

6. Method

6.1. Participants

A total of 565 undergraduate students at a northwestern university completed the study online using survey software (Qualtrics Labs, 2009) in return for course credit. Participants were excluded from the analyses if they exceeded the cut-score of 16 on the Deviant Responding

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