



# Impulsiveness, and trait displaced aggression among drug using female sex traders



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Women who traded sex for both drugs and money used crack, powder cocaine, and alcohol more.
- Women trading sex for both were higher on Impulsiveness Scales.
- Women trading for drugs only injected more and were higher on Displaced Aggression.
- Women trading for money only used marijuana more and more likely to use before sex.

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study compared women who sex trade for drugs, money, or both compared to neither (did not sex trade), and introduced the concept of trait displaced aggression to the literature on sex trading.

**Methods:** Female participants ( $n = 1055$ ) were recruited from a low-income area of southern California. Measures included: the Risk Behavior Assessment (RBA), Barratt Impulsivity Scale (BIS), Eysenck Impulsiveness Scale (EIS), and the Displaced Aggression Questionnaire (DAQ).

**Results:** Women who traded sex for both drugs and money used crack cocaine, powder cocaine, and alcohol significantly more, scored higher on the BIS, and the EIS, and were significantly older. Those who only sex traded for drugs used more amphetamine, heroin, and injected drugs more days. They were also higher on the DAQ and all of the DAQ subscales. Those who traded for money only used marijuana more and were more likely to use marijuana before sex.

**Conclusions:** This study may help address specific issues unique to those who sex trade for different commodities in that the drugs used are different and the underlying personality characteristics are different.

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## 1. Introduction

Women who trade sex for drugs or money, a practice known as sex trading, are at risk for Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (El-Bassel, Simoni, Cooper, Gilbert, & Schilling, 2001). Sex traders who had more than 50 partners in the last 10 years had an HIV prevalence rate of 47.6% versus a prevalence rate of 23.2% for women who reported that they did not sex trade (Astemborski, Vlahov, Warren, & Solomon, 1994). These findings hold true even when controlling for other risk factors such as crack use, duration of injection drug use and history of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Astemborski et al., 1994).

One of the reasons that sex trading transmits disease is because of inconsistent condom use among those who buy sex. For instance, men who reported that they buy sex from women were more likely to report an unwillingness to use a condom (39% versus 5.4%) (Decker, Raj, Gupta, & Silverman, 2008). In addition, some clients will offer more money to their sex trading partners to have unprotected sex versus sex with a condom (Deering et al., 2013).

Furthermore, women who sex trade for drugs or money and who are HIV-positive are more likely to report inconsistent condom use with casual partners than HIV-positive women who do not sex trade for drugs or money (Latka et al., 2006). Additionally, drug using sex traders are more likely to participate in risky types of sex. For example, drug using women who sex trade are more likely to have anal sex, than drug using women who do not sex trade (Reynolds, Latimore, & Fisher, 2008). Women who have unprotected anal sex are at a greater risk for STIs than women who only have unprotected vaginal sex (Jenness et al., 2011). These high-risk sexual behaviors are troublesome,

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given the dangerous nature of HIV and the increased rates of infection among women who sex trade and their sexual partners. The use of drugs within this population further complicate the situation, as injection drug users still account for a large proportion of newly diagnosed HIV cases (Santibanez et al., 2006).

Drug use and abuse has been strongly correlated with sex trading. More specifically, crack cocaine use is often cited in the literature as being highly correlated with sex trading (Ferri & Gossop, 1999a; Latkin, Hua, & Forman, 2003; Risser, Timpson, McCurdy, Ross, & Williams, 2006; Weatherby, Shultz, Chitwood, & McCoy, 1992). Heroin use and risky needle sharing have also been shown to be associated with sex trading for drugs or money (Spittal et al., 2003), and a Mexican study showed that injection drug use was inversely associated with stopping sex work (El-Bassel et al., 2001; Gaines et al., 2015). Methamphetamine use is also associated with sex trading (Kang et al., 2011; Parry, Pluddemann, Myers, Wechsberg, & Flisher, 2011; Semple, Strathdee, Zians, & Patterson, 2011; Shannon et al., 2011; Urada et al., 2014), but the research on the increased level of sexual risk among these populations of sex workers is mixed. For instance, Shannon et al. (2011) recruited 255 female street-based sex workers from Vancouver Canada to better understand risk factors associated with methamphetamine use among those who sex trade. Shannon et al. did not find a relationship between using methamphetamine and an increase in sexual risk. Sexual risk was defined as having sex without a condom with clients, exchanging sex while high, and having experienced client-perpetrated violence. In addition, Urada et al. (2014) conducted a study with 498 female bar/spa sex workers in the Philippines and found that sex work was associated with methamphetamine use and alcohol intoxication during sex, but inversely associated with daily alcohol use. In addition, Parry et al. (2011) reviewed the research on eight Cape Town South African studies and found that there was an increased sexual risk among methamphetamine users. Methamphetamine users were more likely to have sex at an earlier age, to have more casual sex, and less likely to use condoms during sex. Female methamphetamine users were also more likely to have anal intercourse in general (Reynolds, Fisher, Napper, Fremming, & Jansen, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2008). Female methamphetamine users were also more likely to have anal intercourse on the same days on which they also took methamphetamine (Reynolds, Fisher, Laurenceau, & Fortenberry, 2015).

The existing literature on sex trading has yet to show the pattern of sex trading behavior among women who sex trade for drugs, money and both money and drugs, while using a sample of women who do not sex trade as a comparison. This disaggregation may have important implications for intervention development. Furthermore, past studies on sex trading have been limited in showing the psychological underpinnings of sex trading behavior. The present study seeks to address these two gaps in the literature by demonstrating a pattern among different types of sex traders while utilizing psychological measures of impulsivity, and trait displaced aggression to help explain sex trading behavior.

### 1.1. Impulsiveness and sex trading

One psychological factor that is important for understanding sex trading behavior is impulsiveness. Impulsiveness refers to the tendency to have rapid, unplanned reactions toward stimuli without forethought (Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995). Impulsivity is a multifactorial construct and can be separated into three subtraits: cognitive impulsiveness, motor impulsiveness, and non-planning impulsiveness (Stanford et al., 2009). Cognitive impulsiveness is characterized by making quick decisions, motor impulsiveness is characterized by acting without thinking, and non-planning impulsiveness is characterized by a lack of thinking about the future (Patton et al., 1995). A Rhode Island study found an association between impulsivity as measured by the Eysenck I7 Questionnaire and engaging in exchange sex (Hayaki, Anderson, & Stein, 2006).

While there is limited research on the association between impulsivity and sex trading, there is literature on the relationship between impulsivity and risky sexual behavior (Black, Serowik, & Rosen, 2009; Donohew et al., 2000; Hayaki et al., 2006; Hayaki, Anderson, & Stein, 2012; Lejuez, Bornovalova, Daughters, & Curtin, 2005). For example, impulsive decision making has been shown to be associated with risky sexual behavior in adolescence (Donohew et al., 2000). Furthermore, Hayaki et al. found that after controlling for substance use, impulsivity was still a predictor of sexual risk. In addition, Winters, Botzet, Fahnhorst, Baumel, and Lee (2008) assessed the relationship between impulsivity, drug use, and sexual risk. Winters et al. (2008) found that impulsivity, drug use, and sexual risk were significantly associated with each other, and drug use and sexual risk was partly mediated by impulsivity.

### 1.2. Aggression and sex trading

Sex trading has been found to be associated with many types of psychological abuse (Deb, Mukherjee, & Mathews, 2011; El-Bassel et al., 2001; Senn, Carey, & Vanable, 2008). For instance, having a history of childhood sexual abuse has been linked to risky sexual behavior, especially sex trading for money (Gilchrist, Gruer, & Atkinson, 2005; Senn et al., 2008; Wu, Schairer, Dellor, & Grella, 2010). In addition to the link between sex trading and childhood sexual abuse, there appears to be a link between substance use disorders, childhood sexual abuse, childhood physical abuse, and aggression (Banducci, Hoffman, Lejuez, & Koenen, 2014). Those who reported childhood sexual abuse were more likely to be arrested for prostitution, were more likely to report sex trading for cocaine, and were more likely to have been arrested for assault. In addition, Deb et al. (2011) found that sexually abused trafficked girls from Kolkata, India had higher rates of aggression ( $M = 76.39, SD = 19.8$ ) than non-abused trafficked girls ( $M = 66.20, SD = 17.0$ ) from the same town. While these studies link the relationship between abuse, sex trading, and aggression, the specific pattern of behavior is unknown. It is possible that people who suffer from abuse may feel as if they cannot focus their anger on their abuser and may, in turn, displace their feelings on a different target. Displaced aggression is different than direct aggression in that displaced aggression is putting anger on a different target than the source of the anger. For instance, a sex trader may be angry at her pimp, but yells at or mistreats her transactional sex partner, as a result. This type of displaced aggression may be the source of the finding for the Deb et al. study.

Risser et al. (2006) used a sample of 193 female African American crack cocaine smokers to better understand the psychological correlates among those who sex trade for money. Risser et al. assessed the levels of hostility for women who reported current sex trading practices, previous sex trading practices, and those who never sex traded. They found a significant trend, with current sex traders reporting higher levels of hostility (Risser et al., 2006). Very little research has been done on sex trading and aggression (Risser et al., 2006), and no known research has been done on the association between sex trading and trait displaced aggression.

### 1.3. The present study

Previous literature on sex trading for drugs or money has combined these two groups into a single homogeneous group for analysis purposes (Astemborski et al., 1994). The first study to compare sex trading for drugs, money, or both analyzed data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Cooperative Agreement that took place 1991–1998 (Kwiatkowski & Booth, 2000). They found that those who traded for drugs and for both were more likely to smoke crack. They also found that women who exchanged sex for money only were more likely to inject. A second study done in Baltimore found that those who only traded for drugs were more at risk for HIV because of lower condom use (Dunne et al., 2014). Because the sample size was small ( $n = 92$ ),

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