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## Aspects of impulsivity are differentially associated with risky sexual behaviors



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### ABSTRACT

Risky sexual behavior (RSB) greatly increases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, as well as a host of other negative outcomes. Recent advances in personality research have defined multiple and separate dispositions to engagement in impulsive behaviors, including RSB. Little is known concerning the ways in which aspects of impulsivity place individuals at risk for various types of RSB. The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to further clarify the unique ways in which aspects of impulsivity were differentially associated with various forms of RSB within a large, diverse sample of university students ages 18-to-24 years ( $N = 917$ ). Results suggest low self-control confers a general risk while a tendency toward impulsive behavior in the context of intense emotion confers a more specific risk as for various types of RSB. The current study confirms the importance of focusing on both various pathways to impulsive behaviors as well as specific types of RSB.

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### 1. Introduction

Sex is a universal human behavior (Wellings, 2006). Sexual behavior, however, can vary greatly among individuals in terms of risk of harm and related health outcomes. Risky sexual behavior (RSB), or sexual behavior potentially harmful to one's physical or mental health, has been shown to greatly increase the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS (World Health Organization, 2002). Considering the substantive impact of these consequences, it is important to identify risk factors associated with this type of high-risk behavior. Empirical and theoretical findings suggest that one promising avenue for investigation is personality, in general, and impulsivity, in particular (Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993). Advances in personality research have defined multiple and separate dispositions to engagement in risky behavior, including RSB. However, with the exception of Sensation Seeking, findings within the extant literature have yielded no clear consensus as to which pathways to impulsivity provide the most utility in predicting RSB. These varied findings are likely due to methodological differences, as the few existing studies examining this association have utilized varied and often narrowed definitions of RSB (Deckman & DeWall, 2011). As no existing studies have specifically examined the associations

between various impulsivity-related pathways and specific types of RSB among university students – a demographic known to frequently engage in unsafe sexual practices (LaBrie & Earleywine, 2000; Staton et al., 1999), there is a need for further clarification of these relations within this population. The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to address equivocal findings within the extant literature by further clarifying the unique ways in which facets of impulsivity differentially predict RSB as defined both as a broad, unidimensional construct, as well as more narrowly, as specific types of behaviors, within a large sample of university students. Participants were university students because of the heightened likelihood of risky sexual practices within this population (LaBrie & Earleywine, 2000; Staton et al., 1999).

#### 1.1. Risky sexual behaviors (RSB)

High-risk sexual behavior includes behaviors such as having a large number of sexual partners, failure to use birth control or contraceptive devices, and having sex after consuming alcohol or drugs (Aral, 2001; Cook & Clark, 2005), among others. Although not always leading to negative health outcomes, these behaviors have been shown to significantly increase the likelihood of, among other potential outcomes, unplanned pregnancy and contracting or transmitting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (WHO, 2002; Aral, 2001).

With regard to RSB, university students occupy a particularly risky demographic. For example, LaBrie and Earleywine (2000) found that 65% of an undergraduate sample reported engaging in sex without a condom – a common and unsafe sexual behavior.

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Moreover, treatment of STIs for US youth ages 15-to-24 years has increased to more than \$6.5 billion (Chesson, Blandford, Gift, Tao, & Irwin, 2004). This is particularly concerning, as recent estimates indicate that while in the US 15-to-29 year olds account for only 21% of the population, individuals in this age range account for 39% of new HIV/AIDS infections (CDC, 2012). Additionally, of those newly infected young people, nearly 60% of these infections occur in African Americans (CDC, 2012). Considering the prevalence of RSB and related health outcomes within this demographic, diverse university students are a particularly pertinent group within which to examine pathways to RSB.

### 1.2. Impulsivity

Whiteside and Lynam's (2001) UPPS model of impulsivity is one of the most widely-used conceptualizations of the impulsivity construct. This model posits four constructs associated with impulsive behavior: Sensation Seeking, a tendency to engage in rash action; Urgency, a tendency toward rash action during periods of intense affect; (lack of) Premeditation, characterized by a poor ability to think through the consequences of one's actions; and (lack of) Perseverance, characterized by difficulty in following through with tasks from beginning to end. Subsequent research has since demonstrated the importance of separating Urgency into Positive and Negative Urgency, based on differing temperamental tendencies toward rash action during periods of intense positive and negative affect, respectively (Cyders & Smith, 2007, 2008). Various aspects of impulsivity have consistently been found to be associated with various externalizing behaviors, including aggression (Latzman, Vaidya, Watson, & Clark, 2011), substance use and misuse (Whiteside & Lynam, 2003), and risky sexual behavior (Deckman & DeWall, 2011; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003). Taken together, these associations clearly evidence the importance of impulsivity-related behavior in explicating a variety of problematic behavioral outcomes.

### 1.3. Impulsivity and RSB

As alluded to earlier, engaging in RSB may result, at least in part, from a failure to inhibit one's urges during moments of arousal (Cyders & Smith, 2007, 2008). Extant research has identified aspects of impulsivity as differentially predicting RSB; however, there is little empirical data regarding associations with distinct forms of RSB. Various studies, using the UPPS model, have taken together, found all five dimensions of impulsivity to be related to unidimensional assessments of RSB, or aspects of RSB, in both student and community samples of young adults (e.g., Donohew et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2003).

Sensation Seeking is one pathway that has been shown to be associated with risky behavior, including RSB. Deckman and DeWall (2011), for example, recently found Sensation Seeking to be associated with RSB within a sample of undergraduate university students across one semester. They found that, regardless of whether alcohol and drug use were controlled for, Sensation Seeking remained a significant predictor of RSB. Additionally, several other lines of research have shown Sensation Seeking to be related to RSB, underscoring the critical role of this trait in risky sexual activity (e.g., Donohew et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2003).

Further, the facet of Urgency, more recently separated into Positive and Negative Urgency, has also been shown to be associated with RSB (e.g., Deckman & DeWall, 2011; Zapolski, Cyders, & Smith, 2009). For example, two recent studies found Negative Urgency to predict RSB when controlling for alcohol and drug use (Deckman & DeWall, 2011) and alcohol and marijuana use (Simons, Maisto, & Wray, 2010). Less is known concerning associations with Positive Urgency, although the two studies that have been conducted to

date have found Positive Urgency to be associated with RSB (Deckman & DeWall, 2011; Zapolski et al., 2009). Given the large amount of shared variance between these two traits, however, the specificity of these associations remains unclear. Nonetheless, considering these initial findings, as well as documented associations between intense positive affect and risky behaviors such as substance use (Zapolski et al., 2009) and pathological gambling (Cyders et al., 2007), it is likely that the distinction between Positive and Negative Urgency is important to consider in predicting different types of RSB. For example, although some individuals may be likely to engage in various forms of RSB during periods of intense positive affect or elation, or even as a means of seeking excitement, others may be more prone to such behavior when experiencing strong negative affect or distress (Cyders & Smith, 2007; Cyders et al., 2007).

The relation between (lack of) Perseverance and RSB has been more equivocal. Deckman and DeWall (2011), for example, found that, (lack of) Perseverance did not predict lifetime RSB among university students after controlling for alcohol and drug use. Contrastingly, Miller and colleagues (2003) found that (lack of) Perseverance prospectively predicted RSB in young adulthood, predicting age of sexual debut (positively) and number of sexual partners (negatively). Additionally, two studies have found (lack of) Premeditation to be predictive of RSB (Deckman & DeWall, 2011; Miller et al., 2003).

As many types of disparate sexual behaviors may be considered risky, the specificity provided by examining different forms of RSB could provide critical information regarding mechanisms underlying an individual's likelihood of engaging in various forms of RSB. To date, although broad models of personality have been examined in relation to various forms of RSB (for a review see Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000), research has yet to examine associations between various pathways to impulsive behaviors and a factor-analytically-derived, multidimensional conceptualization of RSB within university students. The lack of empirical data regarding these associations (for exceptions, see Deckman & DeWall, 2011; Zapolski et al., 2009) underscores the need for further examination using a multidimensional measure of RSB and the inclusion of Positive Urgency.

### 1.4. Current study

The current study examined cross-sectional data on relations between five pathways to impulsive behavior and various factor-analytically derived presentations of RSB among a large, diverse sample of university students. Given the dearth of research on specific types of RSB within this context, findings from the current study should contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which impulsivity pathways are related to specific types of RSB. In addition to examining associations with RSB as a unitary construct, the current study assessed how various types of risky sexual behavior are uniquely associated with pathways to impulsive behavior. Such an examination provides greater specificity in identifying which pathways are most contributory to high-risk sexual behaviors. Moreover, the inclusion of Positive Urgency provides additional insight into these relations.

Foremost, we expected to find differential associations between aspects of impulsivity and various presentations of RSB. Specifically, because of previous convergent findings of significant associations between RSB, assessed unidimensionally, and Urgency and Sensation Seeking (e.g., Deckman & DeWall, 2011; Donohew et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2003), we expected both Positive and Negative Urgency, as well as Sensation Seeking, to be uniquely associated with overall RSB, in general, and the Risky Sex Acts subscale, in particular. Further, as risky sexual behaviors often involve spontaneity and impulsive action with little thought of

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