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The Relative Importance of Psychopathy-Related Traits in Predicting Impersonal Sex and Hostile Masculinity

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Abstract

This paper reports the relative contributions of several facets of subclinical psychopathy (i.e., callous affect, erratic lifestyle, interpersonal manipulation), subclinical narcissism (i.e., entitlement, exploitation), and trait aggression (i.e., anger) to the prediction of four enduring attitudes towards women and sexual assault (i.e., hostility towards women, negative attitudes regarding women, sexual dominance, impersonal sex) and a behavioral indicator of an impersonal sexual behavior (i.e., number of one-night stands). Survey data were collected from 470 single men living in the Detroit Metropolitan area. The importance of personality traits varied as a function of the outcome with anger most predictive of hostility toward women; erratic lifestyle most predictive of impersonal sexual attitudes and behavior, and entitlement most predictive of sexual dominance and negative attitudes toward women. These outcome-specific findings are interpreted and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Psychopathy; Narcissism; Aggression; Risk Factors; Sexual Aggression; Relative Importance Analyses

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1. Introduction

The prevalence of sexual assault is alarmingly high, with 25% to 50% of women reporting some form of sexual victimization (Black et al., 2011; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Most sexual assaults remain unreported and occur within the context of a relationship. Malamuth's confluence model is the most commonly used etiologic model of sexual aggression in nonincarcerated populations (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995). As described below, Malamuth and colleagues argued that hostile masculinity and impersonal sex are critical, proximal predictors of sexual aggression. Their original model included distal predictors of sexual aggression (e.g., exposure to violence, delinquency); however, it did not emphasize personality traits.

Although there have been some attempts to integrate psychopathy-related traits into the confluence model (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; Malamuth, 2003), this has not been a major focus of research. Thus, the current paper extends prior research by examining a unique set of aversive traits that form the components of a broader psychopathic personality and examining the relative importance of these components in the prediction of specific indicators of impersonal sex and hostile masculinity. Although the goal of this study is to provide new directions for etiologic research, it does not include sexual aggression as an outcome measure.¹ Instead, our focus is on understanding how psychopathy-related traits are differentially related to the critical, proximal predictors of sexual aggression identified by Malamuth and colleagues.

1.1 Impersonal Sex and Hostile Masculinity as Proximal Antecedents of Sexual Assault

Hostile masculinity reflects antagonistic, distrustful, and insecure attitudes towards women (Malamuth et al., 1991; 1995). Individuals characterized by this construct use sex as a means of demonstrating their power and dominance over their partners. *Impersonal sex* reflects a detached, promiscuous, and non-committal orientation towards sexual relations (Malamuth et al., 1991; 1995). Individuals characterized by this construct are more likely "to engage in sexual relationships without closeness or commitment" (p. 354; Malamuth et al., 1995). Empirical research supports the importance of both these constructs individually and in combination as critical predictors of sexual aggression in community and college samples of young men (Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2006; Malamuth et al., 1991; 1995).

1.2 Subclinical Psychopathy and Its Relationship to Impersonal Sex and Hostile Masculinity

Psychopathy refers to a cluster of traits including arrogance, deceitfulness, impulsivity, and deficient affective experiences (Hare, 1993). One popular model of psychopathy focuses on callous affect, erratic lifestyle, interpersonal manipulation, and criminal tendencies (Mahmut, Menictas, Stevenson, & Homewood, 2011). Psychopaths are self-interested and

¹Data used in the current paper were collected as part of a large multi-year study. Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, and LeBreton (2011) reported results based on a subset of those data. The current paper uses a different analytic approach and tests different relationships than the 2011 article.

use their manipulative skills to achieve their own egocentric goals. Although only 1% of the population likely meets the clinical criteria for psychopathy, many exhibit subclinical tendencies (cf. Hare, 1993; LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006). Such individuals may appear charming to potential romantic partners, despite being egocentrically focused on their own needs. Concomitantly, these individuals cannot empathize with others, thus they often act without regard for others' well-being. Psychopathy is also associated with a lack of planning, self-control, or concern for social norms (Hare, 1993; Jonason & Tost, 2010; LeBreton et al., 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that psychopathy-related traits have been linked with attitudes related to hostile masculinity (Hunter, Figueredo, & Malamuth, 2010). In addition, a focus on short-term egocentric interests also predisposes individuals with psychopathy-related traits to prefer short-term, permissive sexual relationships (Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012).

1.3 Narcissism and Its Relationship to Impersonal Sex and Hostile Masculinity

Narcissism refers to feelings of superiority, entitlement, and vanity, coupled with inflated and unstable self-views; the construct has also been linked to the broader psychopathic personality (cf. Hare, 1993; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Elevated levels of narcissism are related to self-enhancement (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), aggressive responses to ego threats (Twenge & Campbell, 2003), seeking to dominate others (Carroll, 1987), and hostility against women who reject sexual advances (Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002).

Previous research has linked global measures of narcissism to rape-supportive beliefs, a lack of empathy for rape victims, sexually coercive behavior, and preferences for short-term relationships (Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; Jonason et al., 2012; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011; Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997). However, two specific dimensions of narcissism, entitlement and exploitation, have been shown to be especially relevant for predicting sexual assault (Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, & Essa, 2013); and thus, we predict they will also emerge as particularly relevant as predictors of hostile masculinity and impersonal sex. *Narcissistic entitlement* reflects pervasive beliefs that one is deserving of (sexual) gratification, and thus may lead some men to feel justified in having impersonal, promiscuous sexual relationships and when necessary, coercing others into sexual activity. Similarly, *narcissistic exploitation* reflects tendencies to manipulate others. Such tendencies may lead some men to be less sensitive to social constraints against such behavior in general, and more specifically, disinhibited with respect to enacting sexually coercive behaviors (Lisak & Roth, 1988). We expect that men with higher levels of entitlement and exploitation will be inclined to depersonalize women, framing them as mere sex objects and thus more likely to engage in short-term and promiscuous relationships. Entitlement and exploitation are also emblematic of the narcissistic tendencies associated with psychopathy (Hare, 1993; LeBreton et al., 2006).

1.4 Trait Anger and Its Relationship to Impersonal Sex and Hostile Masculinity

Buss and Perry (1992) define trait anger as the affective component of aggression that is associated with high arousal which prepares individuals to behave aggressively. They also suggest that anger serves as a bridge between hostile cognitions and aggressive behavior.

Thus, when rejected by a potential sexual partner, men who are high in trait anger may be more likely to experience animosity and suspicion, which may then be used to justify sexual aggression (cf. James & LeBreton, 2010; Ryan, 2004). Like narcissism, trait anger and aggression are often considered important aspects of a broader psychopathic personality (Lynam & Widiger, 2007; Seibert, Miller, Few, Zeichner, & Lynam, 2011).

1.5 Distinctiveness of Psychopathy-Related Traits

Despite subtle differences among these traits, it is not uncommon to group psychopathy, narcissism, and anger together, because they all reflect common components of a broader psychopathic personality (Kosson et al., 1997; Lynam & Widiger, 2007; Malamuth, 2003). Although these traits are moderately correlated, they are not redundant (cf. Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Seibert et al., 2011). Consequently, these traits likely differ in their relative importance for predicting specific aspects of hostile masculinity and impersonal sex.

1.6 Hypotheses

We assessed three facets of hostile masculinity (hostility toward women, negative attitudes regarding women, sexual dominance) and two facets of impersonal sex (impersonal sex attitudes, impersonal sexual behavior). These facets were selected based on prior research demonstrating their relationships with sexual aggression (cf. Abbey et al., 2011; Malamuth, 2003; Malamuth et al., 1995). We generated a set of tentative hypotheses linking the various personality facets to hostile masculinity and impersonal sex.

Given the emotive nature of the hostility towards women outcome, we predicted that trait anger would emerge as the most important predictor of this outcome. With respect to negative attitudes concerning women we anticipated that narcissistic entitlement and to a lesser degree callous affect would emerge as the most important predictors of this outcome. We expected that the predicted variance in sexual dominance would be driven primarily by narcissistic entitlement and to a lesser degree interpersonal manipulation. Finally, the impersonal sexual orientation construct reflects high levels of impulsive and promiscuous behavior. Thus, we predict the erratic lifestyle facet of psychopathy followed by narcissistic exploitation would emerge as the most important predictors of impersonal sex. Stated formally:

- Hypothesis 1** Trait Anger will emerge as the most important predictor of Hostility Towards Women.
- Hypothesis 2** (a) Narcissistic Entitlement and (b) Callous Affect will emerge as the most important predictors of Negative Attitudes Regarding Women.
- Hypothesis 3** (a) Narcissistic Entitlement and (b) Interpersonal Manipulation will emerge as the most important predictors of Sexual Dominance.
- Hypothesis 4** (a) Erratic Lifestyle and (b) Narcissistic Exploitation will emerge as the most important predictors of Impersonal Sex Attitudes.
- Hypothesis 5** (a) Erratic Lifestyle and (b) Narcissistic Exploitation will emerge as the most important predictors of Impersonal Sexual Behavior.

2. Method

2.1 Participants & Procedures

With respect to sexual aggression, men are most likely to be the aggressors and women the victims (Department of Justice, 2010). Consequently, we focused our attention on a sample of 470 single men aged 18 to 35 ($M=23.67$; $SD=4.95$) who had dated a woman during the previous two years. Data were collected in the Detroit Metropolitan area. Participants were mostly White (73%) and most had a high school diploma or equivalent (94%). Of those participants eligible and interested, 89% participated in the study. Interviewers met with participants at a mutually agreeable location, participants completed all of these measures on a laptop, and received \$50 compensation for their time.

2.2 Measures

Unless otherwise noted, items were paired with 5-point Likert-type scales. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and alphas are presented in Table 1.

2.2.1 Subclinical Psychopathy—Subclinical psychopathy was measured using 30 items from the Self Report Psychopathy Questionnaire (Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). This scale is designed for use with nonclinical samples and measures three dominant personality facets of psychopathy (callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, erratic lifestyle).

2.2.2 Subclinical Narcissism—Narcissism was assessed using a modified version of the 6-item Entitlement and 5-item Exploitation subscales from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Pilot testing indicated participants had difficulty with the original forced choice item format. We modified items by only presenting the narcissistic statements and asking participants how well the statement described them.²

2.2.3 Trait Anger—Trait Anger was assessed using the 7-item anger subscale from the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992).

2.2.4 Hostility Towards Women—Hostility Toward Women was assessed using a modified version of the 8-item hostility subscale from the Buss and Perry (1992) Aggression Questionnaire with the items being modified to reflect reactions to women (vs. people in general).

2.2.5 Negative Attitudes Regarding Women—Nine items from Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999) and Bumby (1996) were used to operationalize Negative Attitudes Regarding Women, with a specific focus on rape-supportive beliefs. We used a 7-point Likert-type response scale.

2.2.6 Sexual Dominance—Sexual Dominance was assessed using Nelson's (1979) 8-item measure paired with a 4-point Likert-type response scale.

²Additional information about the items used to measure each construct is available from the authors.

2.2.7 Impersonal Sex attitudes—Impersonal Sex Attitudes were assessed using seven items from Hendrick, Hendrick, and Reich's (2006) scale.

2.2.8 Impersonal Sexual Behavior—Impersonal Sexual Behavior was measured using an open-ended question asking how many women respondents had consensual intercourse with on only one occasion.³

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Assessing the Relative Importance of Correlated Predictors

Relative importance is defined as “the proportionate contribution each predictor makes to R^2 , considering both its direct effect and its effect when combined with other variables in the regression equation” (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004, p. 240). Relative importance analyses have been advocated as supplemental analysis for researchers using regression to test theory and decompose the predicted variance in outcome variables (LeBreton, Hargis, Griepentrog, Oswald, & Ployhart, 2007; Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011) and have been found to yield superior insights concerning variable importance when compared to traditional statistics such as standardized regression coefficients (Tonidandel, LeBreton, & Johnson, 2009). Relative weight analysis (Johnson, 2000) was used to estimate the relative effect sizes indicating the proportion of variance in an outcome variable attributed to each predictor variable.

All of the personality traits were significantly correlated with each of the three components of hostile masculinity and positive attitudes about casual sex (see Table 1). Fewer and weaker associations were found between personality and impersonal sexual behavior (i.e., the number of one-night stands).

3.2 Hypothesis 1 – Supported

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that trait anger would be the most important predictor of hostility towards women, was supported. Trait anger accounted for approximately 56% of the predicted variance in this outcome variable, with narcissistic entitlement accounting for an additional 21% (see Table 2). These results indicate that dispositional tendencies to experience anger were associated with a tendency to be more reactive toward women. Research linking anger to direct and indirect forms of intimate partner aggression is consistent with this view (Archer & Webb, 2006).

3.3 Hypothesis 2 – Partially Supported

Hypothesis 2, which predicted entitlement and callous affect would be the most important predictors of negative attitudes regarding women, received mixed support. Hypothesis 2a was fully supported with narcissistic entitlement emerging as the most important predictor and explaining 30% of the predicted variance in this outcome. Hypothesis 2b was not supported. Although the relative weight corresponding to callous affect was significant, a

³We also assessed lifetime number of consensual sexual partners because it is often included in the impersonal sex construct. We found that the lifetime number of consensual sexual partners was highly correlated with number of one-night stands ($r=.81, p<.001$), and the pattern of results was in line with those for one-night stands.

much larger weight was obtained for interpersonal manipulation. Thus, men holding negative attitudes about women tended to also be characterized by having higher levels of callous affect, but their tendencies toward manipulating others and feelings of entitlement were more important for predicting these negative attitudes.

3.4 Hypothesis 3 – Partially Supported

Hypothesis 3, which predicted entitlement and interpersonal manipulation would be the most important predictors of sexual dominance, also received mixed support. Hypothesis 3a was supported with entitlement being the most important predictor accounting for approximately 56% of the predicted variance in this outcome. The relative weight for interpersonal manipulation was not significant. However, the raw relative weight was .03, corresponding to 13% of the total predicted variance in this outcome and it was the second largest relative effect size. Thus, some limited support was obtained for Hypothesis 3b. However, entitlement was driving the R^2 for sexual dominance. One might speculate that entitled men may vilify women who refuse to meet their sexual demands with this vilification serving an ego protective function. Additional research is certainly needed to tease apart the causal structure of these relationships.

3.5 Hypothesis 4 – Partially Supported

Hypothesis 4, which predicted erratic lifestyle and narcissistic exploitation would be the most important predictors of impersonal sexual attitudes, received mixed support. Hypothesis 4a was fully supported with erratic lifestyle being the most important predictor and explaining 48% of the predicted variance in this outcome. Contrary to Hypothesis 4b, the relative weight for exploitation was non-significant. However, the weights for both interpersonal manipulation and entitlement were significant (explaining 20% and 13% of the predicted variance in this outcome, respectively). Collectively, these results suggest that it is the erratic, impulsive, and sensation-seeking lifestyle which is the dominant predictor of impersonal sexual attitudes with interpersonal manipulation and entitlement being significant yet less important predictors.

3.6 Hypothesis 5 – Partially Supported

Hypothesis 5, which predicted erratic lifestyle and exploitation would be the most important predictors of impersonal sexual behavior, received mixed support. Consistent with Hypothesis 5a, erratic lifestyle was the most important predictor and accounted for 51% of the predicted variance in this outcome. Contrary to Hypothesis 5b, entitlement (not exploitation) was the second most important predictor (explaining 29% of the variance in this outcome). One might speculate that erratic and impulsive tendencies may engender sexual permissiveness and thus fewer reservations about high-risk behaviors, perhaps because one is unable to consider the consequences of such behavior (e.g., STDs; legal ramifications). Consistent with this speculation, research has linked a lack of planning/foresight with a motivation for sexual aggression (Prentky & Knight, 1986). Thus, the impulsive and erratic aspects of psychopathy appear particularly critical for understanding impersonal sexual behaviors.

3.7 Summary – The Importance of Entitlement

Narcissistic entitlement emerged as one of the most important predictors across both the hostile masculinity outcomes and the impersonal sex outcomes. The centrality of entitlement in predicting attitudes towards sexual assault is consistent with the work of Baumeister et al. (2002), suggesting that entitlement may foster expectations for receiving sexual favors and lead to coercion in response to perceived rejection by the victim. Similarly, Scully (1990) noted that many perpetrators attempt to depict victims as promiscuous and permissive, and thus in the perpetrators' minds, generally amenable to sexual relations. Entitlement, then, may engender perceptions that help justify coercion by fostering unrealistic expectations for sexual activity and cultivating a belief that one deserves sexual activity, perhaps despite even repeated rejection.

3.8. Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this study include an assessment of several toxic personality domains, attitudes, and past experiences that have been shown to predict sexual aggression, the use of a large community sample, and the use of a comprehensive approach to data analysis (i.e., relative weight analysis). One potential limitation involves socially desirable responding associated with the use of self-report surveys. However, many experiences pertinent to sexual assault are difficult (if not impossible) to measure using alternative methods. For example, it is unlikely that anyone other than the respondent would be able to recount the number of one-night stands. Similarly, other-reports of hostile attitudes towards women may overly weight behavior in particularly easy-to-observe domains (e.g., work; school). The use of computer-assisted selfinterviews and trained interviewers emphasizing confidentiality likely helped to address the social-desirability concern (Turner et al., 1998).

3.8 Conclusions

Although previous research has examined the role of various toxic personality traits vis-à-vis attitudes towards sexual assault and past sexual experiences, researchers have not focused on the relative contribution these traits make to the prediction of these enduring attitudes and experiences. There are statistical and conceptual advantages to combining personality traits associated with general hostility, impulsivity, and emotional dyscontrol; however, this study's findings demonstrate that there is also value in taking a nuanced approach to understanding the role of aversive traits when examining sexual assault-related outcomes.

Hostile attitudes towards women and impersonal sexual orientation have received substantial support as two of the critical, proximal risk factors for sexual assault perpetration. Our results indicate that researchers interested in studying the personality predictors of such risk factors (while minimizing the length of survey instruments) should focus their efforts on narcissistic entitlement, trait anger, erratic lifestyle, and interpersonal manipulation. By incorporating these traits into causal models of sexual assault perpetration, a more complete understanding of the mechanisms through which personality may contribute to sexual coercion should emerge. In addition, the significant variability in relative importance for the personality dimensions across criteria illustrates that amalgamating distinct, yet related domains of personality into a single antisocial personality

construct may prevent researchers from fully appreciating how the unique aspects of personality contribute to the antecedents of sexual assault. Finally, those interested in developing clinical interventions to reduce proximal antecedents of sexual assault should consider the unique personality-outcome relationships identified in the current paper.

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Highlights

- Toxic personality traits were linked to antecedents of sexual assault.
- The importance of personality traits varied as a function of the outcome.
- Trait anger was most predictive of hostility toward women.
- Erratic lifestyle most predictive of impersonal sexual attitudes and behavior.
- Entitlement most predictive of hostile masculinity.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and coefficient alphas for study variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Callous Affect	1.76	0.45	0.65										
2. Erratic Lifestyle	2.88	0.66	0.33**	0.73									
3. Interpersonal Manipulation	2.36	0.61	0.47**	0.57**	0.71								
4. Entitlement	2.81	0.87	0.20**	0.27**	0.34**	0.75							
5. Exploitation	2.69	0.89	0.17**	0.40**	0.53**	0.59**	0.80						
6. Trait Anger	2.25	0.86	0.42**	0.26**	0.27**	0.21**	0.16**	0.80					
7. Hostility Towards Women	2.21	0.88	0.21**	0.21**	0.25**	0.31**	0.21**	0.42**	0.83				
8. Negative Attitudes Regarding Women	2.36	1.13	0.23**	0.18**	0.33**	0.32**	0.25**	0.24**	0.40**	0.85			
9. Sexual Dominance	1.82	0.63	0.22**	0.23**	0.30**	0.44**	0.28**	0.21**	0.32**	0.42**	0.86		
10. Impersonal Sex Attitudes	2.79	0.93	0.22**	0.41**	0.34**	0.26**	0.27**	0.14**	0.21**	0.25**	0.41**	0.88	
11. Impersonal Sexual Behavior	3.19	4.72	0.01	0.19**	0.09*	0.16**	0.13**	0.02	0.00	0.05	0.20**	0.35**	--

*

p < .05,

**

p < .01

Note. Cronbach's alphas reported along the diagonal.

Relative weight analysis predicting components of hostile masculinity and impersonal sex using psychopathy-related traits

Table 2

	Hostility Toward Women		Negative Attitudes Regarding Women		Sexual Dominance		Impersonal Sex Attitudes		Impersonal Sexual Behavior	
	RW	RS-RW	RW	RS-RW	RW	RS-RW	RW	RS-RW	RW	RS-RW
1. Callous Affect	0.013*	5.33	0.018*	10.12	0.016	6.92	0.015	7.28	0.001	2.45
2. Erratic Lifestyle	0.012*	5.22	0.007	4.01	0.014	6.31	0.096*	47.54	0.030*	51.37
3. Interpersonal Manipulation	0.017*	7.23	0.050*	28.45	0.03	13.36	0.040*	19.89	0.003	5.77
4. Narcissistic Entitlement	0.049*	20.97	0.054*	30.37	0.127*	55.66	0.027*	13.3	0.017*	29.14
5. Narcissistic Exploitation	0.012*	5.27	0.020*	11.15	0.024	10.56	0.02	9.87	0.006	9.82
6. Trait Anger	0.132*	55.96	0.028*	15.9	0.016	7.2	0.004	2.12	0.001	1.45

Note: RW = Relative Weights, which are scaled in the metric of relative effect sizes (i.e., proportion of variance in the criterion attributed to the predictor) and sum to the model R^2 ; RS-RW = Rescaled Relative Weights, which represent the percentage of the predicted criterion space (R^2) that is attributed to each predictor variable and (within rounding error) sum to 100.

* $p < .05$