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Individual Differences in Men's Misperception of Women's Sexual Intent: Application and Extension of the Confluence Model

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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.

Keywords

misperception; sexual intent; narcissism; impulsivity; hostile masculinity; impersonal sex; alcohol consumption

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, 2003). Once a man who is predisposed to sexual aggression has decided that a woman is sexually attracted to him, this

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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 et al., 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).

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 et al., 2012; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Perilloux et al., 2012). Perilloux and colleagues (2012) asked male and female college students to interact

for three minutes 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 and colleagues (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 and colleagues (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 Figure 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 "trophies" 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.

As can be seen in Figure 1, we expect this association to be partially mediated by impersonal sexual orientation and alcohol. Individuals high in impulsive sensation-seeking have positive attitudes toward and seek out situations where they can engage in high risk behaviors, such as risky sex and drinking (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987; Webster & Crysel, 2012). Impulsive sensation-seeking and heavy drinking often co-occur and their co-occurrence has been linked to having a large number of total sex partners, one time only sex partners, and partners that one does not know well (Miller, Flory, Lynam & Leukefeld, 2003; White, Fleming, Catalano, & Bailey, 2009).

1.4 This Study's Goals and Summary of Hypotheses

The primary goal of this study is to integrate personality characteristics into the confluence model and apply it to men's misperception of women's sexual intent. A secondary goal is to increase the generalizability of the findings by using a community sample of single men. Most previous research has been conducted with college samples.

Consistent with Jacques-Tiura and colleagues (2007) findings, we hypothesized that hostile masculinity, impersonal sex, and alcohol consumption in sexual situations would be significant proximal predictors of misperception. As described in previous sections, we also hypothesized that narcissism and impulsive sensation-seeking would be associated with men's frequency of misperception directly, as well as through their relationships to hostile masculinity, impersonal sex, and alcohol consumption in sexual situations. Based on past research, we also expected impulsivity and narcissism to be correlated, as well as hostile masculinity and impersonal sex (Malamuth et al., 1995; Vazire & Funder, 2006).

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants were 470 men between the ages of 18 and 35 ($M = 23.67$, $SD = 4.95$), who dated a woman in the past two years, and who were currently single (i.e., not married, engaged, or cohabitating). Seventy-three percent of participants self-identified as White, 16% as Black, 5% reported mixed ethnicity, 2% were of Middle Eastern descent, and 1% or less identified as the following: Hispanic, Asian, Native American or Alaskan Native, or other.

2.2 Procedures

Participants were recruited by telephone for a study of dating and sexual experiences (see Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, and LeBreton, 2011 for a detailed description of recruitment and sampling procedures). Standard sampling procedures were used to identify a stratified random sample of young men living in the Metropolitan Detroit area (Groves, et al., 2009). In person interviews were conducted by trained interviewers from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center using audio computer-assisted self-interview (ACASI) procedures. Interviews took approximately one hour to complete and participants were given \$50 as compensation for their time.

2.3 Measures

There was very little missing data ($< 0.5\%$), thus mean substitution at the item level was used.

2.3.1 Narcissism—Narcissism was assessed with the 5-item exploitiveness and 6-item entitlement subfactors from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Pilot study results suggested that many participants had trouble with the forced choice response style used in the original instrument; thus, in this study, participants read only the narcissistic statement and rated how well it described them. Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). A sample item is, “I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve.” A mean was calculated for the scale score. Cronbach’s alpha was .85.

2.3.2 Impulsive sensation-seeking—Impulsive sensation-seeking was assessed with Williams, Paulhus and Hare’s (2007) 10-item erratic/impulsive lifestyle scale. A sample item is, “I enjoy taking chances.” Response options ranged from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). A mean was calculated for the scale score. Cronbach’s alpha was .73.

2.3.3 Hostile masculinity—A modified version of Buss and Perry’s (1992) 8-item hostility measure was used to assess hostile masculinity. The term “people” was replaced with the term “women” for each of the items. A sample modified item is, “At times I feel I have gotten a raw deal out of life from women.” Response options ranged from 1 (*very unlike me*) to 5 (*very like me*). A mean was calculated for the scale score. Cronbach’s alpha was .84.

2.3.4 Impersonal sexual orientation—Participants reported the number of women with whom they had (1) consensual sexual intercourse in their lifetime and (2) intercourse on only one occasion in their lifetime (i.e., one night stands). Response options were open-ended. Participants provided a wide range response, 0 to 300 and 0 to 250, which were substantially positively skewed, skewness = 6.59 and 12.93, respectively. Responses were log transformed, standardized and then averaged to form a composite score.

2.3.5 Drinking in sexual situations—Participants reported how often they consumed alcohol and the typical number of drinks that were consumed when they had consensual sexual intercourse (Abbey et al., 1998). Response options for the frequency item ranged from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*nearly every time or every time*). Response options for the quantity item ranged from 0 (*none*) to 7 (*thirteen or more drinks*). These items were standardized and averaged to form a composite score.

2.3.6 Misperception of sexual intent—Four items assessed the number of times participants had misperceived a *woman's* friendliness as a sexual come on, an *acquaintance's* (i.e., someone they hardly know at all) behavior as signaling sexual interest, a *friend's* behavior (i.e., someone they have a nonsexual relationship with) as signaling sexual interest, and a *romantic interest's* (i.e., someone they are dating or romantically involved with) desire to engage in a sexual activity (Abbey, 1987; Abbey et al., 1998). Response options were open ended and ranged from 0 to 99 for having misperceived a woman's behavior, 0 to 50 for an acquaintance, 0 to 36 for a friend, and 0 to 50 for a romantic partner. Each item was positively skewed, ranging from 4.91 to 9.08, so each item was log transformed. The log transformed items were averaged to form a scale score.

3. Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses

Ninety-three percent ($n = 439$) of the 470 participants reported that they had misperceived a woman's sexual intentions on at least one occasion in their lifetime. Among those who misperceived, misperceptions typically occurred in more than one type of relationship; 76.3% ($n = 335$) misperceived an acquaintance, 81.1% ($n = 356$) a friend, and 68.1% ($n = 299$) a romantic interest. When the scores for all items were summed across the different relationships (prior to log transformation), the median number of misperceptions among men who misperceived a woman was 8 ($M = 11.15$, $SD = 13.32$; range from 1 to 118). Table 1 includes the means, standard deviations, and variances, as well as the bivariate correlations between all variables. Misperception of sexual intent was significantly and positively correlated with all study variables. The magnitude of the correlations was moderate, with the largest between misperception and hostile masculinity.

3.2 Path Analysis

Path analyses were conducted using MPlus 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) with maximum likelihood estimation, robust standard errors (MLM) and corrected model test statistics (Byrne, 2012; Kline, 2011). In order to reduce bias in parameter estimates in the path analytic model, error terms were set equal to the variance of the scale score multiplied by 1-

reliability (Loehlin, 1998). The MLM chi-square, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) were used to assess model fit. Nonsignificant MLM chi-square values, RMSEA and SRMR values below .05, and TLI and CFI values above .95 indicate great model fit (Byrne, 2012).

Overall, the conceptual model fit the data well, although there were four nonsignificant pathways, $MLM \chi^2 (4, N = 470) = 6.62, p = .16$, $RMSEA = .04$, $SRMR = .02$, $CFI = .99$, $TLI = .97$. Contrary to hypotheses, narcissism and drinking in sexual situations were not significantly related to men's lifetime number of misperceptions. Narcissism also was not significantly related to impersonal sexual orientation. Finally, men's hostile masculinity and impersonal sexual orientation were not significantly correlated. Nonsignificant pathways were removed from the model and the model was reestimated. The final model fit the data well and accounted for 22.5% of the variance in frequency of men's misperception, $MLM \chi^2 (7, N = 470) = 11.99, p = .10$, $RMSEA = .04$, $SRMR = .03$, $CFI = .99$, $TLI = .97$. As can be seen in Figure 2, all estimated pathways were significant in the final model.

The significance of indirect effects in the final path analysis model were assessed using 95% bias-corrected boot-strapped confidence intervals using 10,000 draws (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Narcissism was indirectly related to misperception through hostile attitudes towards women, $b\text{-weight} = .08$, $CI [.04, .12]$. Impulsive sensation-seeking was indirectly related to misperception through impersonal sexual orientation, $b\text{-weight} = .07$, $CI [.03, .12]$.

4. Discussion

Many of our hypotheses were supported. We replicated Jacques-Tiura et al.'s (2007)'s finding that the confluence model paths of hostile masculinity and impersonal sexual orientation can be used to explain men's misperception of women's sexual intentions and extended it by using a community sample and by including personality characteristics as predictors. Narcissism indirectly increased misperception through hostile masculinity; whereas, impulsive sensation-seeking directly and indirectly increased misperception through impersonal sexual orientation.

Several hypotheses were not supported. Although the bivariate correlations were significant, narcissism was not related directly to misperception or to impersonal sexual orientation in the path model. Because narcissism and impulsive sensation-seeking were correlated, and impulsive sensation-seeking was significantly related to impersonal sexual orientation, some influence could occur through that linkage. Overall, however, these results suggest that it is narcissists' distrust and suspicion toward women, rather than a proclivity toward short-term and casual relationships, which increases their risk for misperception. Malamuth and Brown (1994) argued that some men interpret women's hostility as seduction, assuming that "she protests too much" (p. 708) and is being disingenuous. This argument may explain why narcissism's effects were channeled through hostility toward women. It may be particularly difficult for narcissists to accept rejection. Consequently, misperception experiences might exacerbate their already hostile views of women.

Also, we did not replicate the direct effect of alcohol on misperception found in Jacques-Tiura et al.'s (2007)'s study, although the bivariate correlation was significant. Numerous researchers have found links between impulsivity, sexual behavior, and heavy drinking (White et al., 2009); however, they have not been previously linked to misperception within a single model. Alcohol consumption and sexual activity frequently co-occur, and impulsivity increases the likelihood of engaging in each. Thus, it is possible that after taking into account men's impulsive sensation-seeking, drinking during sexual situations did not account for additional unique variance in men's misperceptions. This highlights the advantage of also considering underlying personality characteristics in the etiology of men's misperceptions of women's sexual intent.

4.1 Limitations

Strengths of this study include the large community sample of young single men and state-of-the-art interviewing procedures designed to enhance honesty. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reports. We only included one indicator of hostile masculinity, which may explain why this construct was unrelated to impersonal sexual orientation. Men who scored high on the misperception measure, recognized that they frequently misjudged a woman's degree of sexual interest. The fact that they recognize their errors, yet keep doing it, demonstrates that this is not simply miscommunication. Additional research is needed to differentiate misperceivers who eventually figure out they were in error compared to those who do not.

4.2 Implications and Future Research Directions

Almost all of the men in the study reported that they had misperceived a woman's degree of sexual interest at least once in their lifetime. Some men do this rarely; some men do it frequently. Some men laugh it off and apologize. Other men feel threatened, challenged and perhaps justified forcing sex because the woman was (from their perspective) playing hard to get or leading them on (Abbey, 1987; Haselton, 2003). Selective prevention programs are needed for men at risk of committing sexual assault because of their distorted cognitions, narcissism, and hostility toward women. Different prevention messages may be needed for men who are impulsive, enjoy casual sex, and are often drinking in casual sex situations. In their rush to fulfill their own sexual desires, these men may cross the line into sexual assault because they did not pay sufficient attention to their partners' cues. More basic research is needed to aid in the development of programs tailored to participants' specific risk profile.

4.3 Conclusion

There is incredible individual variability in men's self-reported rates of misperception of women's sexual intent. Although most of these incidents are resolved without much conflict, for some men, misperception provides justification for sexual violence. Research is sorely needed that enhances our ability to determine for whom and under what conditions violence is likely to emerge from misperception. This study's findings demonstrate the importance of focusing on the interplay of personality, attitudes, and the social environment in future research and prevention programs.

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Highlights

- Hostile masculinity and impersonal sexual orientation were proximal predictors of misperception.
- Men's impulsive sensation-seeking was directly and indirectly related to misperception through impersonal sexual orientation.
- Men's narcissism was indirectly related through hostile masculinity.
- Drinking in sexual situations did not predict misperception after taking into account impulsive sensation-seeking.

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

Figure 2.

Final model predicting men's frequency of misperception of sexual intent.

Note: All pathways are standardized and significant at $p < .01$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations (N = 470)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Narcissism	--					
2 Impulsive Sensation-Seeking	0.37	--				
3 Hostile Masculinity	0.30	0.21	--			
4 Impersonal Sexual Orientation ^a	0.20	0.26	0.02	--		
5 Drinking in Sexual Situations ^a	0.17	0.31	0.08	0.43	--	
6 Misperceptions of Sexual Intent	0.14	0.23	0.28	0.25	0.22	--
Mean	2.76	2.88	2.21	0.00	0.00	0.93
Standard Deviation	0.79	0.66	0.88	0.96	0.04	0.58
Variance	0.62	0.44	0.77	0.92	0.82	0.33

Note. All correlations above .08 are significant at $p < .01$.

^aBased on composite scores created for the path analysis model.