

Psychopathy-related traits predict self-reported sexual aggression among college men

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Abstract:

To examine whether personality traits related to psychopathy predict specific forms of sexual aggression in college men, a sample of 378 men completed the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), the Socialization Scale, and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. Psychopathy Checklist ratings were also available for 63 of these men based on a brief interview. The SES is a self-report measure designed to assess a spectrum of sexually aggressive behavior, ranging from use of argument or a position of power to impel participation in sexual activity, through manipulative intoxication and exploitation of intoxicated persons, to threatening and/or using force. Regression analyses indicated that measures of both dimensions of psychopathy identified in previous research accounted for variance in self-reports of sexual aggression. Moreover, although moderately correlated, the two dimensions predicted different forms of sexual aggression. Implications for studying psychopathic traits in college samples are discussed.

Keywords: psychopathy | sexual aggression | college students | violence

Article:

Recent evidence documents a robust link between psychopathy and violent crime, including rape. Psychopathic offenders are convicted of more violent offenses and use weapons more than other offenders (Hare & McPherson, 1984; Kosson, Smith, & Newman, 1990). Psychopathy ratings predict violent recidivism (Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1991). Psychopaths also constitute a prominent subtype of rapist in contemporary typologies of convicted rapists (Kalichman et al., 1990; Prentky & Knight, 1991), among whom Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) appears to be the modal diagnosis (Groth, 1979; Rada, 1978).

Most recent studies of psychopathy employ the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL; Hare, 1991), a behavioral checklist completed on the basis of interviews and reviews of prison records.

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Substantial empirical evidence attests to the validity of two distinct though moderately correlated underlying factors ($r = .50$): a personality style associated with callous; remorseless exploitation of others (Factor 1); and an impulsive, unstable, antisocial lifestyle (Factor 2; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). Although psychopathy and antisocial personality were once considered synonymous (e.g., Leaff, 1978), the category of APD in the third edition (revised) of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-III-R; APA, 1987) correlates chiefly with only the social deviance (i.e., Factor 2) component of psychopathy. Thus psychopathy characterizes only a subset of those with Antisocial Personality Disorder (Hare, 1991).

Moreover, both the affective, interpersonal core and the impulsive, antisocial-lifestyle components of psychopathy appear to contribute independently and interactively to the prediction of some indices of violence (Harpur & Hare, 1991). In light of correlations between the affective, interpersonal core of psychopathy (Factor 1) and measures of narcissism, dominance, and hostility (Harpur et al., 1989), it seems likely that this dimension also contributes to sexual aggression. However, evidence linking this construct to sexual aggression is lacking.

Contemporary analyses of rape suggest that sexual aggression results from interactions between perpetrator characteristics and specific interpersonal and societal contexts (White & Koss, 1993). Further, some of these contexts (e.g., acquaintanceships) interact with sociolegal factors to mitigate against conviction of rapists (e.g., Estrich, 1987; Feild & Bienen, 1980). Thus studies of convicted rapists provide a limited perspective on relations between personality and sexual aggression.

The Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) is a self-report measure designed to identify a more representative sample of perpetrators of sexual aggression than appears in prison studies. Because sexual aggression is manifest in a variety of different forms, differing in perpetrator tactics and in severity of outcome for the victim, the SES measures a spectrum of sexually aggressive behavior, ranging from the use of argument or a position of power in order to impel participation in sexual activity, through manipulative intoxication and exploitation of intoxicated persons, to threatening and/or using force. Approximately 13% to 25% of college males report having engaged in some form of sexual aggression using this measure (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Gavey, 1991; Koss et al., 1987), and self-reported aggressive actions on the SES correlate with reports of sexual assaults during interviews (Koss & Dinero, 1988).

Although self-report measures may be susceptible to individual differences in social desirability, the chief effect of such biases is likely to be false negatives (i.e., aggressive men who do not acknowledge aggressive behavior). Thus evidence that men identified as sexually aggressive differ in important ways from men not so identified demonstrates construct validity for the SES above and beyond any such biases (see Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). Self-reported sexually aggressive men have been found to be more accepting of traditional sex roles and violence against women than men not so identified (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993). They also differ from other men in their reported emotional responses to sexual conflict scenarios (Bondurant, 1992), the frequency with which they report committing physical and psychological abuse (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993), and in their observed use of domineering language in

conversations with women (Malamuth & Thornhill, 1994). Moreover, studies of the personalities of such men suggest they are impulsive (Calhoun, 1990), antisocial (Malamuth, 1986), and prone to abuse alcohol and drugs (White & Humphrey, 1994; White, Humphrey, & Farmer, 1989), dispositions linked to psychopathy (Hare, 1991; Smith & Newman, 1990).

However, most previous studies have not assessed psychopathic traits per se. The exception is a study by Rapaport and Burkhart (1984), indicating a correlation of $-.27$ between scores on a measure of coercive sexuality and on the Socialization (So) Scale (Gough, 1960), a personality measure based on a role-taking theory of psychopathy and designed to assess a continuum of behavior from asocial to social (Gough, 1948). This finding suggests that less socialized men are more likely to engage in coercive sexual behavior. However, because scores on the coercive sexuality measure reflected a variable mixture of a wide variety of specific behaviors, including both passive and active aggression, the relation between socialization and specific forms of sexual aggression was not clear. Moreover, although So scores correlate negatively with PCL ratings in prison samples (Hare, 1985; Kosson et al., 1990) and predict criminal history and substance abuse among college students (Kosson, Steuerwald, Newman, & Widom, 1994), they correlate primarily with ratings of the antisocial lifestyle component of the disorder (Harpur et al., 1989). Thus whether measures of the personality core of the psychopath also predict sexual aggression remains untested.

The purposes of the present study were twofold: first, to examine the relations between psychopathic traits and several specific forms of self-reported sexual aggression in undergraduate men; second, to address the relations between sexual aggression and both components of psychopathy. Although few measures of the affective, interpersonal core of the disorder have been identified, we have obtained evidence of significant correlations between ratings of inmates' PCL Factor 1 scores and their scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), a measure of individual differences in narcissism as a trait (Kosson, 1994).

In sum, the present study was conducted to examine correlations between psychopathy-related personality traits and specific forms of sexual aggression using more specific and better validated measures than prior studies, and to ascertain the relative importance of both components of psychopathy and their interaction to the prediction of sexual aggression. For a subset of the sample, both PCL ratings and personality inventory scores were available; thus contributions of self-report versus interview-based (i.e., PCL) measures of psychopathic traits to the prediction of sexual aggression were also examined.

METHOD

Participants

During each of five semesters, students completed the So scale, the NPI, and the SES, as part of a large battery of questionnaires administered during group testing sessions, to obtain credit toward the completion of introductory psychology classes. Participants were assured their responses would be confidential and that they could discontinue their participation at any time. Of 624 men completing the So scale, 485 also completed the NPI and 560 completed the SES.

However, data on all three measures were available for only 378 men. Sixty-three of these participants later completed an abbreviated interview used to complete PCL ratings. Subjects whose So scores placed them in the lower or higher third of the sample were invited to be interviewed. Interviewers were blind to So, NPI, and SES scores.

Measures

The Socialization (So) scale from the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1960, 1994) has adequate stability (.65 to .80 over 1 year) and construct validity as indexed by positioning of identified groups along a predicted socialization continuum (Gough, 1960) and discrimination between first and repeat offenders (Gough & Peterson, 1952; see also Gough, 1994). The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) has a stability of .72 over 8 weeks and internal consistency of .87 (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1981). NPI scores correlate positively with objective and projective indices and peer ratings of narcissism (Emmons, 1984, 1987) and correlate negatively with measures of empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984).

Although most evidence for the construct validity of the PCL is based on inmate samples, evidence for its use with college students participating in brief interviews has also been reported (Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1996; Hart & Hare, 1994). In such cases, the measure is often referred to as the Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version (PCL:SV). As for the PCL, PCL:SV scores are correlated with self-reported antisocial behavior, substance use, and observed interpersonal behavior indicating dominance and hostility (Hart et al., 1996). Moreover, Brown (1992) has reported similar patterns of correlations for PCL:SV scores based on interview plus collateral information versus interviews alone. Here, such ratings were based upon the PCL manual (Hare, 1991) rather than the PCL:SV manual (Hart et al., 1996) and are referred to as PCL scores.

The SES assesses six distinct forms of sexually aggressive behavior. However, because some items in the original SES include more than one form of sexual aggression in a single item, the SES was modified for use in the current study. The wording used by Koss et al. (1987) was retained, but each respondent indicated the frequency with which he engaged in each of several behaviors (including flattery, verbal pressure, use of alcohol and/or drugs, threats, and physical force) to achieve each outcome (sexual contact [kissing, fondling], attempted sexual intercourse, completed sexual intercourse, and other sexual acts [oral and anal intercourse]). Scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 reflected reports of 0, 1, 2, 3-5, or more than 5 occurrences of each form of sexual aggression, and a subject's score for each form of aggression was the sum of the scores for the four outcomes. This method yields continuous measures of sexual aggression that correlate highly with measures scored as suggested by Koss et al. (1987; Malamuth, 1986; White, Donat, & Humphrey, in press). Modified SES scores also display adequate test-retest reliability ($r = .65$ after 2 to 6 weeks; White & Hoecker, 1995). Although use of flattery to encourage sexual activity is not central to this study, data on flattery are provided in tables.

In addition, because of a lack of consensus as to how best to measure overall aggressiveness, three composite variables were created, addressing different aspects of sexual aggression. Any aggression was scored dichotomously to indicate reported commission of any of six forms of sexual aggression. Total aggression was a simple sum of the scores across the six forms of sexual

aggression surveyed. Finally, magnitude of aggression was designed to reflect severity of sexual aggression, based on the concept of a continuum of violence (Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, & Giusti, 1992). Reports of force were scored 3; threats, 2; manipulative intoxication and exploitation of intoxicated persons, 1; and absence of such actions, 0.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Correlations between indices of specific forms of sexual aggression ranged from small to moderate. With the exception of correlations between reports of exploitation of intoxicated individuals and reports of manipulative intoxication ($r = .68$) and use of argument ($r = .45$), all correlations were below .40, indicating that most measures of specific forms of sexual aggression provide unique information. Correlations between composite measures of sexual aggression reveal 27% to 36% shared variance between these measures. Because such correlations also indicate substantial unique variance in each measure, all three composite measures were analyzed. However, results for different composite indices were somewhat similar and may be considered identical unless otherwise noted.

The small to moderate correlations between self-report measures and between self-report and interview measures (see Table 1) suggest that the different psychopathy-related predictors also provide relatively independent information about subjects. By contrast, the two PCL factors correlated .71, higher than the .50 typically reported for prison samples (Harpur et al., 1989) but similar to other reports based on college samples (Hart et al., 1996). As reported below, the factors nevertheless correlated differently with criteria examined.

Table 1. Correlations Between Measures of Psychopathy-Related Traits and Self-Reported Sexual Aggression

Measure	1 ($n \geq 485$) ^a	2 ($n \geq 372$) ^a	3 ($n \geq 56$) ^b	4 ($n \geq 56$) ^b
1. So	—	-.17***	-.33**	-.39**
2. NPI		—	.19	-.04
3. PCL F1			—	.71***
4. PCL F2				—
5. Flattery	-.23***	.21***	.22	.19
6. Argument	-.18***	.13**	-.27*	.26*
7. Status	.01	.11*	—	—
8. MINTOX	-.14***	.06	.02	-.05
9. EINTOX	-.17***	.09	.21	.18
10. Threats	-.09*	.09	.33**	.13
11. Force	-.13**	.05	-.30*	.13

Note: Sample size varied. Correlations involving So (Socialization Scale) and NPI (Narcissistic Personality Inventory) reflect the full sample; PCL data were available only for 61 participants interviewed. F1 = Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) Factor 1. F2 = PCL Factor 2. MINTOX = Manipulative intoxication. BINTOX = Exploitation of an intoxicated person.

a. For the full sample, n ranged from 372 for correlation between NPI and MINTOX to 513 for correlation between So and Threats.

b. For participants interviewed, n ranged from 56 for correlations between NPI and PCL scores to 61 for correlation between PCL factors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The percentage of the full sample reporting sexually aggressive behavior ranged from 2.4% for use of threats and 3.7% for use of force, to 21.1 % for exploitation of an intoxicated person and 27.1 % for use of argument (see Table 2). Though most of these behaviors do not meet legal definitions of rape, 40.3% of the sample reported committing at least one form of sexual aggression. These prevalence estimates are comparable to those reported elsewhere, although most reports using the SES have employed composite categories instead of reports of specific forms of violence (White & Koss, 1993).

Table 2. Percentage of Subjects Reporting Different Forms of Sexual Aggression

<i>n</i>	Low So- High NPI (108-111)	Low So- Low NPI (86-89)	High So- High NPI (84-85)	High So- Low NPI (93-94)	Total (372-379)	Pearson χ^2 (<i>df</i> = 3)
Flattery	58.6	38.2	36.9	25.5	40.7	24.35**
Argument	40.0	24.7	22.4	18.3	27.1	14.17*
Status	4.5	0.0	2.4	2.1	2.4	4.36
MINTOX	14.7	4.7	0.0	4.3	6.5	19.19**
EINTOX	37.8	16.9	12.9	12.8	21.1	26.96**
Threats	4.5	1.1	1.2	2.1	2.4	3.32
Force	7.2	2.2	2.4	2.1	3.7	5.45
ANYAGG	62.0	33.3	34.5	26.9	40.3	31.08**

Note: Median splits on the So (Socialization) Scale and NPI (Narcissistic Personality Inventory) formed groups as follows: So scores below 34 were deemed low-So; scores 34 or above, high-So. NPI scores below 20 were deemed low-narcissism; those 20 or above, high-narcissism. MINTOX = Manipulative intoxication; EINTOX = Exploitation of an intoxicated person; ANYAGG = Any Aggression.

* $p < .005$. ** $p < .001$.

The proportions of subjects reporting each form of sexual aggression in subgroups formed by a double median split of So and NPI scores are shown in Table 2. In this table, subjects with low So and high NPI scores constitute the subgroup resembling psychopaths on both dimensions assessed. Although group differences in the proportions reporting sexual aggression achieved statistical significance for only three of six forms of sexual aggression and the composite measure (see Table 2), the absolute frequency of sexual aggression reported is consistently higher in the low So-high NPI subgroup than in any other.

Hierarchical Multiple Regressions

To examine the relations between psychopathy-related traits and specific forms of sexual aggression, separate multiple regressions were conducted based on the full sample and the subset interviewed. Each regression examined the value of one measure of each psychopathy dimension and their interaction in the prediction of sexual aggression. Based on prior research, the measure of impulsive antisocial behavior (So or PCL Factor 2) was always entered prior to the measure of callous exploitation of others (NPI or PCL Factor 1). Thus main effects for the personality core of psychopathy reflect partial correlations controlling for effects of an antisocial, unstable lifestyle. Similarly, interaction effects control for main effects of both measures.

Analyses based on the full sample revealed that measures of both dimensions of psychopathy contribute to the prediction of sexual aggression. Moreover, each measure predicted reports of specific forms of aggression and each measure uniquely predicted at least one form of sexual aggression. Whereas both So and NPI scores predicted the use of argument ($F[1, 372] = 9.25$,

$p < .005$ for So; $F[1, 372] = 4.89, p < .05$ for NPI), only So scores predicted manipulative intoxication ($F[1, 368] = 4.47, p < .05$), and exploitation of intoxicated persons ($F[1, 375] = 8.01, p < .005$). Only NPI scores predicted the abuse of status or a position of authority ($F[1, 375] = 4.40, p < .05$). The So \times NPI interaction contributed uniquely to the prediction of the two forms of sexual aggression involving alcohol and controlled substances ($F[1, 368] = 8.89, p < .005$ for manipulative intoxication; $F[1, 375] = 11.85, p < .001$ for exploitation of intoxicated persons). In addition, although both So and NPI scores predicted variance in all three composite measures,¹ their interaction contributed significantly to the prediction of only total aggression ($F[1, 365] = 9.01, p < .005$) and magnitude of aggression ($F[1, 368] = 4.72, p < .05$). Although neither measure predicted the use of force or threats, the zero-order correlations in Table 1 suggest that the So scale would contribute to prediction of such behaviors given a larger sample.

Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting the Commission of Different Forms of Sexual Aggression on the Basis of Socialization (So) Scale and PCL Factor 1 Scores ($N = 63$)

Form of Sexual Aggression	Predictor Variable					
	So (Step 1)		F1 (Step 2)		So*F1 (Step 3)	
	β	R^2	β	R^2	β	R^2
Flattery	-0.37***	.12	0.10	.12	-0.63	.12
Argument	-0.34**	.10	0.17	.11	-0.21	.10
MINTOX	-0.30*	.07	-0.08	.06	0.02	.04
EINTOX	-0.41***	.15	0.09	.14	-0.44	.13
Threats	-0.13	-.00	0.33*	.08	-1.10 ⁺	.12
Force	-0.14	.00	0.28*	.06	-1.32*	.12
Any Aggression	-0.36**	.11	0.22 ⁺	.14	0.02	.12
Total Aggression	-0.35**	.11	0.16	.11	-0.42	.11
MAGNITUDE	-0.28*	.06	0.37**	.17	-0.47	.16

Note: All R^2 values are adjusted to estimate the variance likely to be accounted for associated with use of different samples. No abuses of status were reported by the subset of participants interviewed. MINTOX = Manipulative intoxication; EINTOX = Exploitation of an intoxicated person; MAGNITUDE = Magnitude of Aggression.

⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .005$.

Regressions based on the 63 subjects interviewed provided additional evidence for both dimensions of psychopathy. These analyses also permitted comparisons between interview-based (i.e., PCL) and self-report measures of each psychopathy-related dimension. In general, these analyses indicated similar contributions of each measure regardless of the measure with which it was paired. Although So scores accounted for significant criterion variance for the same three forms of sexual aggression noted above, NPI scores no longer contributed significantly to the prediction of sexual aggression. By contrast, analyses including PCL Factor 1 ratings indicated that these contributed to the prediction of reported force and threats after controlling for variance due to So scores. Moreover, the So \times Factor 1 interaction accounted for significant variance in reported use of force. Indeed, the combination of the So scale and PCL Factor 1 contributed to the prediction of the largest number of forms of sexual aggression (see Table 3). Despite the correlation between the PCL factor scores, these measures differed substantially in their

¹ For So, $F[1, 370] = 13.84, p < .001$ for any aggression, $F[1, 367] = 10.05, p < .005$ for total aggression, and $F[1, 370] = 12.00, p < .001$, for magnitude of aggression; for NPI, $F[1, 369] = 13.74, p < .001, F[1, 366] = 4.15, p < .05$, and $F[1, 369] = 9.37, p < .005$, respectively.

predictive value: PCL Factor 2 contributed only marginally to the prediction of one form of aggression, use of argument to encourage sexual activity.

Finally, analyses of composite criteria again demonstrate the contribution of an impulsive, antisocial lifestyle to the prediction of sexual aggression. However, as above, one measure of the affective, interpersonal core of psychopathy (PCL Factor 1) contributed to the prediction of one composite variable, in this case, magnitude of aggression, the criterion designed to address severity of violence.

DISCUSSION

Present results corroborate theoretical links between both identified dimensions of psychopathy and sexual aggression. The finding that college men with higher scores on measures of psychopathic traits report committing more sexual aggression than men with lower scores replicates Rapaport and Burkhart (1984). In concert with prior evidence of associations between psychopathy and violence, these data suggest that relations between psychopathy and aggression generalize across several forms of aggressive behavior and disparate populations.

These data contrast with those of Kosson et al. (1994), who reported no contribution for a measure of callous, exploitative personality traits to the prediction of nonviolent delinquent behaviors and substance use. However, they resemble those of Harpur and Hare (1991) for the prediction of violence. Despite using an inmate sample and very different measures of violence (e.g., guards' reports of male-male violence, convictions for weapons offenses), these authors reported unique contributions of both psychopathy dimensions and their interaction. The replicability of relations between psychopathy and violence also contributes to the construct validity of the two-factor conceptualization of psychopathy and argues against reliance on diagnostic categories (e.g., DSM-III-R Antisocial Personality Disorder) and measures (e.g., the Socialization Scale alone) that assess only one of these two dimensions.²

Moreover, the contribution of the affective, interpersonal core of psychopathy was most evident when assessed via the PCL. Indeed, among college students, the combination of low-So and high-PCL Factor 1 scores may provide a better analogy to psychopathy than other combinations of the measures assessed here. Thus various measures of psychopathy-related traits may not be equivalent, nor are interview measures always better than self-report measures (cf. Hare, 1985). On the other hand, because only low-So and high-So subjects were interviewed, this conclusion must be considered tentative pending replication with samples, including subjects with middle-So scores and other criteria related to psychopathy.

Although the present findings suggest that assessing specific forms of aggression may be useful, the links between specific personality traits and particular forms of violence must also be regarded as preliminary. In this study, an impulsive antisocial lifestyle was associated with

² Alternatively, the contribution of NPI to prediction of sexual aggression in the full sample but not the subset interviewed nor that of Kosson et al. (1994) may be ascribed to the greater statistical power associated with the larger sample used here. However, these effect sizes ($r = .11 - .21$) appear somewhat larger than those obtained by Kosson et al. for prediction of nonviolent antisocial behavior ($r = .02 - .07$) and substance use ($r = -.02 - .05$), which argues against such an interpretation.

specific measures of manipulative and exploitative behavior and verbal coercion. By contrast, two measures of self-centered and callous personality traits predicted different forms of sexually aggressive behavior: NPI scores were the only predictor of the abuse of status, and PCL Factor 1 scores predicted uniquely the use of force and threats per se. It is possible that the divergence among the two measures examined for each dimension reflects differences in the validity of the measures for undergraduate samples. Alternatively, given the small correlations between the two measures of callous, exploitative personality traits, it may be that the NPI and the PCL Factor 1 capture relatively distinct aspects of the personality core of psychopathy. If so, then developing more comprehensive measures of such traits might contribute to prediction of a variety of forms of sexually aggressive behavior. On the other hand, the correlations between So scores and six of seven forms of aggression (see Table 1) suggest that the So scale itself may predict most forms of sexual aggression in larger samples. Only further studies can establish whether links between specific dimensions of psychopathy and specific forms of sexual aggression are generalizable across samples and measures.

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