Sex, Lies, and More Lies: Exploring the Intimate Relationships of Subclinical Psychopaths

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Abstract

Although relationship violence is of great interest to researchers and the general public, studies examining connections with personality rarely consider the most destructive personality -- subclinical psychopathy. We examined the influence of subclinical psychopathy on the intimate relationships of 612 undergraduates as measured by self-reported attitudes and behaviors. Subclinical psychopathy was associated with a wide range of risky and violent sexual behaviors, various negative attitudes and cognitions towards their partners and towards relationships in general, and several indicators of infidelity. Overall, these results suggest that the intimate relationships of subclinical psychopaths are extremely abusive and volatile, with respect to both attitudes and behaviors.
Introduction

Problems in intimate relationships are of interest to both researchers and the general public alike: They include relationship violence (i.e., battering), risky or coercive sexual behavior, and infidelity or 'mate-poaching' (i.e., luring away someone who is already in a committed relationship). Among the individual difference variables identified as predictors of relationship problems are borderline personality disorder, substance use and trait anger (Dutton, 1998). However, one important personality variable has been largely neglected within this line of research: subclinical psychopathy. Subclinical psychopathy shares the core features of its forensic counterpart, although they tend to be less extreme.

The link between psychopathy and relationship violence may be gleaned from research involving batterers. Although scholars vary with respect to the labeling of batterer subgroups, there is fair consistency in the personality traits, pathology, and battering patterns that define these subgroups (see Dutton 1998; Tweed & Dutton, 1998; Huss & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000, for reviews). One of these subgroups is known as the generally violent/antisocial. In light of the striking similarities between the generally violent/antisocial batterers and men with psychopathic personality disorder (Spidel et al., in press), it may be that psychopathy is a prime candidate as a correlate of relationship problems.

Method

Participants. Participants included 612 students enrolled in a first-year psychology class at a large northwestern university. The sample was roughly 75% female, with 40% of East Asian
heritage and 33% of European heritage, and a mean age of 19.8 years. Each student received course credit for their participation.

**Measures.** Participants completed a take-home package of self-report questionnaires with instructions. To encourage honesty, they were told to avoid putting any identifying information anywhere on the questionnaires. Data was collected across multiple waves, thus not all participants completed each questionnaire.

Psychopathy was assessed with a 44-item version of the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III: Paulhus et al., in press). Modeled after the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003), it shows an oblique four-facet structure (Williams et al., 2003): Callous Affect, Interpersonal Manipulation, Erratic Lifestyle, and Antisocial Behavior. SRP items are less extreme than PCL-R items and thus more appropriate for subclinical samples. Responses are scored on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale, with example items including "I have shopped", "I find it easy to manipulate people" and "I enjoy taking chances". The validity and psychometric integrity of this version of the SRP have been supported in numerous studies (e.g., Nathanson et al., in press; Williams et al., 2003).

Also included in the take-home package were various self-report scales used to assess relationship problems and associated attitudes and cognitions. Risky and violent behaviors were measured using the Violence Assessment Index (Dobash et al., 1998), the Aggressive Sexual Behavior Inventory (Mosher & Anderson, 1986), and the HIV/AIDS Risk Behavior Form (Huba et al., 2000). Relationship attitudes were assessed via the Rape Supportive Attitudes Scale (Lottes, 1991), the Perceived Relationship Quality Component (Fletcher et al., 2000), and the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Finally, we measured infidelity with the HMP
Attraction Survey (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), the Anonymous Romantic Attraction Survey (Schmitt et al., 2001), and the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991).

Results

Risky and violent behavior. Correlations between the SRP and risky and violent behaviors are displayed in Table 1. All correlations reported are significant at $p < .01$, unless otherwise specified. Total SRP scores correlated strongly with coercive sexual behavior ($r = .38$), risky sexual behavior ($r = .37$) and relationship violence ($r = .32$). Closer analysis of these correlations reveals that each of the four SRP subscales correlated significantly with the various dependent measures, to varying degrees.

Attitudes towards relationships and partner. Correlations between the SRP and the various attitude scales are presented in Table 2. SRP correlated positively with acceptance of rape myths ($r = .33$) and a dismissive attachment style ($r = .10$, $p < .05$). Negative correlations were observed between SRP scores and feelings of commitment ($r = -.32$) and trust ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) towards one's partner. Two SRP subscales, Callous Affect and Antisocial Behavior, showed the strong correlations with lack of commitment, whereas Antisocial Behavior showed the strongest correlation with mistrust. Callous Affect and Interpersonal Manipulation demonstrated the strongest associations with acceptance of rape myths, and Interpersonal Manipulation correlated most strongly with dismissive attachment style.

Infidelity. Correlations between SRP scores and the various measures of infidelity are displayed in Table 3. We found strong correlations between the SRP and cheating fantasies ($r = .42$) and cheating behavior ($r = .39$). Although psychopaths were more likely to attempt mate-
poaching \( (r = .41) \), there was no association with successful poaching \( (r = .11, \ p > .05) \).

Individuals with high subclinical psychopathy scores were also more likely to be seeking short-term partners \( (r = .36) \) and to consider having sex with someone they just met \( (r = .34) \). To varying degrees, all SRP subscales showed significant correlations with the various infidelity measures. Gender differences in any of the aforementioned correlational patterns were minimal.

**Discussion**

Psychopathy demonstrated strong and consistent correlations with a wide range of problematic relationship behaviors. Not only are psychopaths more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, they are more likely to use coercive tactics to obtain sex, including the use of drugs or physical or verbal intimidation. The latter indicates that psychopaths use fear and other manipulative tactics to dominate and control their partners. The violence that pervades psychopaths' lives appears to extend to their intimate relationships.

Psychopathy was also associated with several negative attitudes regarding their partners and relationships in general. It is noteworthy that many of these same attitudes and cognitions have been recognized as risk factors for sexual aggression (e.g., Malamuth, 2003). In particular, psychopaths demonstrate less commitment and trust towards their partner, and have a more dismissive attachment style in general. Even more disturbing is the fact that psychopaths are more accepting of rape myths and hold more pro-rape attitudes. Together, it is possible that these attitudes and cognitions sow the seeds of psychopaths' violence towards relationship partners.

Finally, psychopathy demonstrated consistent links with another fundamental relationship issue -- infidelity. Psychopaths appear to be constantly contemplating or actively pursuing short-
term sexual opportunities, regardless of their relationship status or that of their potential targets. Psychopaths are also unconcerned with getting to know their cheating target, suggesting that the target might as well be an anonymous stranger. This dismissive attachment style and lack of commitment towards their partner are both likely to play a role in their infidelity.

Based on the correlations between subclinical psychopathy and relationship violence, it appears that the link between batterers and forensic psychopathy may be generalized to subclinical psychopathy as well. Aside from actual self-reported behavior, subclinical psychopathy is also associated with several attitudes and cognitions that are considered risk factors for abuse. The intimate relationships of psychopaths appear to be a dangerous environment for their partners – one that is fraught with detachment, mistrust, and abuse.

References


Huba, G.J., et al. (2000). Predicting substance abuse among youth with, or at high risk for, HIV. 

*Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 14*, 197-205.


Table 1. Correlations of psychopathy with risky and violent behaviors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SRP Subscales</th>
<th>Callous Affect</th>
<th>Interpersonal Manipulation</th>
<th>Erratic Lifestyle</th>
<th>Antisocial Behavior</th>
<th>Overall SRP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Violence</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Risky Sexual Behavior</td>
<td>.23</td>
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<td>.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coercive Sexual Behavior</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.38</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total N = 612. All correlations significant at $p < .01$.
Relationship Violence = Violence Assessment Index (Dobash et al., 1998)
Risky Sexual Behavior = HIV/AIDS Risk Behavior Form (Huba et al., 2000)
Coercive Sexual Behavior = Aggressive Sexual Behavior Inventory (Mosher & Anderson, 1986)
SRP = Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hare, et al., in press)
Table 2. Correlations between subclinical psychopathy and relationship attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SRP Subscales</th>
<th>Callous Affect</th>
<th>Interpersonal Manipulation</th>
<th>Erratic Lifestyle</th>
<th>Antisocial Behavior</th>
<th>Overall SRP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment Towards Partner</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.32</td>
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<td>Trust Towards Partner</td>
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<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudes Towards Rape</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.33</td>
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**Attachment styles**

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<tr>
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<th>Secure</th>
<th>Dismissive</th>
<th>Fearful</th>
<th>Preoccupied</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
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<td>-.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dismissive</td>
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<td>.14</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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</table>

Note: Total N = 612. Correlations above .14 significant at p < .01, correlations above .10 significant at p < .05. Commitment and Trust Towards Partner = Perceived Relationship Quality Component (Fletcher et al., 2000) Attitudes Towards Rape = Rape Supportive Attitudes Scale (Lottes, 1991) Attachment Styles = Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)
Table 3. Correlations between subclinical psychopathy and infidelity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SRP Subscales</th>
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<th>SRP Subscales</th>
<th>SRP Subscales</th>
<th>SRP Subscales</th>
<th>Overall SRP</th>
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<td>Interpersonal Manipulation</td>
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<td>Erratic Lifestyle</td>
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<td>.41</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.09</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall SRP</td>
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<td>.25</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total N = 612. Correlations above .19 significant at $p < .01$, correlations above .15 significant at $p < .05$.
Cheating Fantasies = Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991)
Mate-poaching = HMP Attraction Survey (Schmitt & Buss, 2001)
Mate-seeking = Anonymous Romantic Attraction Survey (Schmitt et al., 2001)