Individual Differences in the Propensity for Partner Sexual Coercion

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Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, and Rice (2005) proposed a three-path model (psychopathy, young male syndrome, and competitive disadvantage) of the development of sexually coercive behavior, but none of these individual difference characteristics have been tested among partner rapists. Using a community sample in Study 1, the authors find that psychopathy is the only significant predictor of self-reported propensity for partner sexual coercion. This model is tested in Study 2 by comparing convicted partner rapists, non-sexual partner assaulters, and heterosexual child molesters. One third of partner rapists are psychopaths, and their psychopathy scores are no different from those found in correctional samples. Partner rapists have an average IQ, providing further evidence that competitive disadvantage is less characteristic of partner rapists. There is some indication that partner rapists desist with age. The authors discuss these findings in light of recent findings that implicate cuckoldry risk in partner sexual assault.

Keywords: partner rape; psychopathy; competitive disadvantage; young male syndrome; individual differences

Broadly defined, partner sexual coercion is the use of forceful or manipulative tactics to obtain sex from a nonconsenting partner (Camilleri, Quinsey, & Tapscott, in press). Although the psychological literature addressing sexual coercion in romantic relationships is small, a number of reports have provided prevalence rates, suggesting that a significant number of women have been sexually victimized by their partners. Depending on the definition of sexual coercion,1 prevalence rates of partner sexual

Authors’ Note: The authors would like to thank Grant Harris, Marnie Rice, Ron Holden, Bob Montgomerie, Associate Editor Ray Blanchard, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. We acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Heidi Chan, Nicole Vigneault, Katherine Alexander, Jennifer Tapscott, and Melissa Van Wert for their assistance with data collection and entry. We are also thankful for the support from Grant Harris, Marnie Rice, Zoe Hilton, Carol Lang, Terry Chaplin, Catherine Cormier, and Sonja Dey at the Mental Health Centre Penetanguishene Research Department.
sexual coercion experienced by married women vary from 7% to 34% (Basile, 2002; Bowker, 1983; Costa, Braun, & Birbaumer, 2003; Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Yllo, 1988; Hanneke & Shields, 1985; McFarlane & Malecha, 2005; Russell, 1990). The most common form of partner rape is penile-vaginal (McFarlane et al., 2005; Peacock, 1998), with its attendant risk of unwanted pregnancy (Gottschall & Gottschall, 2003; Krueger, 1988; McFarlane et al., 2005). From a sample of 40 women raped by their husbands, 88% were raped vaginally, whereas anal and oral rapes were less common (40% and 17%, respectively). Physical aggression also poses a serious risk to victims of all forms of sexual coercion (DeMaris, 1997; Kilpatrick, Best, Saunders, & Veronen, 1988; Monson & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1998; Resnick, Kilpatrick, Walsh, & Veronen, 1991). The risk of pregnancy and physical harm posed by partner sexual coercion together with its prevalence suggest that it poses a real public health concern.

Basile (2002) found that a large number of people do not believe that partner sexual coercion occurs. This lack of awareness of the partner sexual coercion problem is also reflected in the paucity of empirical research. Compared to the approximately 2,949 psychological articles published on sexual coercion, only 59 focused exclusively on sexual coercion in the context of intimate relationships. Of these articles, most focused on reviewing the literature (n = 20), identifying attitudes and attributions of sexual coercion perpetrators or victims (n = 14), finding correlates and consequences of victimization (n = 9), reviewing the legal aspects of partner sexual coercion (n = 6), or reporting prevalence and exploratory research on partner sexual coercion (n = 6). Very few studies focused on assessment and treatment (n = 2) or used experimental designs to understand causes (n = 2). Only very recently have a few studies considered the psychological causes. For example, two studies have implicated cuckoldry risk (i.e., risk of partner infidelity) as a unique determinant of partner rape (Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008b; Goetz & Shackelford, 2006). In two recent reviews, Martin, Taft, and Resick (2007) confirmed our observation that no studies have addressed psychological characteristics of men who rape their partner; and Goetz, Shackelford, and Camilleri (2008) described how ultimate and proximate explanations of partner rape could be examined. From this literature search, it is clear that the study of partner sexual coercion has primarily focused on description. Attempts to understand the etiology of partner sexual coercion have been few, and those who have studied etiology have not considered the large literature on individual differences among sex offenders. Although cuckoldry risk may be an important determinant of partner sexual coercion, it does not exclude the possible influence of, or interaction with, antisocial characteristics.

Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, and Rice (2005) provided a comprehensive discussion of the etiology of sexually coercive behavior. The advantage of their synthesis is the incorporation of forensic psychological literature on individual differences in sexually coercive behavior. Lalumière et al. described three major routes to sexual offending: (a) young male syndrome (young men are more willing to engage in risky and violent, competitive behavior), (b) competitive disadvantage (those who in their
development experienced either social adversity or neurodevelopmental insults), and (c) psychopathy. Late adolescent and young adult men are more commonly involved in crime than other individuals are; these findings have been so robust across locations and times that they are referred to as the fundamental data of criminology (e.g., Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffitt, 1993). Sex offending is also more common among late adolescent or young adult males. A Darwinian explanation for the young male syndrome is that fitness benefits were conferred to males who engaged in risky behavior (including sexual coercion) during the time of life that involves the highest competition for mates (Wilson & Daly, 1985).

Adolescent-limited offending or the young male syndrome does not account for all sexual offending, however. There are two other mutually exclusive groups of offenders whose behavior persists throughout the life span (Harris, Rice, & Lalumière, 2001). First are men who are competitively disadvantaged. Certain neurodevelopmental incidents may result in deviant sexual preferences, such as an interest in children (Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008a; Quinsey & Lalumière, 1995), though differences (if any) between competitively disadvantaged men and offenders with pathological sexual deviance have yet to be studied. It is also possible that some behavioral outcomes of competitive disadvantage are not pathological—short-term mating and risk taking may be a facultative response to low-embodied capital (Lalumière et al., 2005). Evidence indicating that neurodevelopmental insults and lower intelligence are forms of competitive disadvantage include fewer sexual experiences among men with lower intelligence (Cantor et al., 2004; Halpern, Joyner, Udry, & Suchindran, 2000), women preferring men with higher intelligence as mating partners (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005; Singh, 1964), and fewer dating and sexual experiences among intellectually disabled than nondisabled persons (McCabe, 1999).³

Psychopaths comprise the other small proportion of men whose antisocial behavior is life persistent. Unlike young male syndrome and competitive disadvantage, there are no known environmental causes of psychopathy—recent findings suggest that psychopathy is an obligate life history strategy that involves antisocial characteristics to manipulate and exploit others for their personal gain. For example, in addition to behavior genetics research showing a genetic influence on psychopathy (Waldman & Rhee, 2006), Harris and colleagues found evidence for psychopathy as a taxon (Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 1994; Skilling, Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 2002; but see Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2006) and confirmed that psychopaths are characterized by coercive and precocious sexual behavior (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 2007).

Sexually assaulting a romantic partner may be explained by each of these general routes to sexual offending. If pair-bonded males are still competing due to risks of mate poaching from age-related rivals, then young male syndrome may account for both domestic and sexual violence as a means of cuckoldry avoidance (following Wilson & Daly, 1985). Partner sexual coercion can therefore be subsumed under the
young male syndrome in one of two ways: (a) as an adaptive form of cuckoldry control to compete against rivals when competition is high or (b) as a byproduct of risky sexual behavior among young males. Our study is not designed to test these alternative hypotheses, because we do not even know if youthfulness is related to such acts. There is some evidence to suggest another relationship: Sexual coercion occurs more frequently among older partnered males, because there is some evidence that the probability of cheating by female partners increases with age until the menopausal years (e.g., Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Partner rapists may also be older than general rapists because men in committed relationships are older. Before we can start to test these specific hypotheses, we first need to know if age is related to sexual offending in relationships. Therefore in Study 1, we tested the relationship between age and self-reported propensity for partner sexual coercion. In Study 2, we compared the age of men who raped their partner to other rapists and child molesters. If the young male syndrome accounts for partner sexual coercion, partner rapists should be just as young as nonpartner rapists.

It is plausible that men who sexually coerce their romantic partner are individuals who, despite being competitively disadvantaged, managed to acquire a mate. Their competition is no longer for partner acquisition; it switches to sperm competition (see Goetz et al., 2008) due to a greater risk of partner infidelity. Researchers consistently find that women prefer characteristics of masculine, dominant, and attractive men during the follicular phase of their cycle (Frost, 1994; Gangestad & Thornhill, 1998; Havlicek, Roberts, & Flegr, 2005; Johnston, Hagel, Franklin, Fink, & Grammer, 2001; Penton-Voak & Perrett, 2000; Penton-Voak et al., 1999; Puts, 2005; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999; Thornhill et al., 2003), in addition to finding that women also show greater attraction for extra-pair males during ovulation (Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver, 2002). For these reasons, men with lower status or phenotypic quality may be at a greater risk of being cuckolded, and so a strategy that involves frequent and possibly coercive sex may have been adaptive to reduce such risks. We tested this hypothesis by using assays of competitive disadvantage: a self-report measure of neurodevelopmental insults in Study 1 and consideration of the IQ of partner rapists and other sexual offenders in Study 2.

Psychopathy has been implicated in nearly all types of violent and sexual offending (for reviews, see Knight & Guay, 2006; Porter & Woodworth, 2006), with some evidence for partner assaulters (Grann & Wedin, 2001; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2001). It is therefore plausible that partner sexual assaulters are psychopathic men in relationships. Sexual refusal is a common aspect of human in-pair sexual behavior (Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008b), and psychopaths may be prone to overcome a partner’s persistent sexual refusal with coercive and violent tactics. In Study 1, we examined the relationship between scores on a self-report measure of psychopathy and sexual coercion propensity, and in Study 2, partner rapists were compared to other sexual offenders on measures of psychopathy. Last, if partner sexual coercion is not accounted for by any of the three paths or antisociality in general, we should
expect these men to have little or no criminal history and should be at low risk of committing another violent offense.

The objective of our two studies was to identify whether individual differences among antisocial men also characterize men who are interested in or used sexual coercion against their romantic partner. In Study 1, we collected data from a community sample to test whether measures of psychopathy, competitive disadvantage, and age were related to self-reported interest in partner sexual coercion. Partner sexual assaulters fall into two offender categories: sexual offenders because the offense was sexual and partner assaulters because the victim of the assault was a romantic partner. Therefore in Study 2, we first compared men convicted of raping their romantic partner with other sexual offenders—nonpartner sexual offenders and heterosexual child molesters—on assays of the three-path model, measures of criminal history, and risk of recidivism. We then compared partner rapists to nonsexual partner assaulters on these measures to see if the psychological characteristics of sexual and violent offenders in relationships are different.

**Study 1: Self-Reported Propensity for Sexual Coercion**

**Method**

*Participants and Procedure*

From a total sample of 229 men who completed the questionnaires, 197 were included in our analyses because they met our eligibility criteria of being sexually active in a heterosexual relationship. Participants were recruited from both the Psychology Department participant pool (n = 101) and from the local community (n = 96) for variability in age (min. = 17 years, max. = 78 years, M = 30.2, SD = 15.9), relationship type (dating or not living together, n = 118; marital or living together, n = 79), and relationship length (min. < 1 year, max. = 47 years, M = 6.2, SD = 10.5). Community participants were recruited by placing an advertisement in the local newspaper. Participants visited our laboratory, provided informed consent, and were given instructions prior to completing the questionnaires in a private room. Upon completion of the questionnaires, participants were debriefed and given $10 if from the community or course credit if from the participant pool. Sample sizes for each analysis varied slightly due to missing data. Data collected for this study was part of a larger survey on sexual conflict in relationships.

*Measures*

*Psychopathy.* To evaluate psychopathy, we used the Self-Report Psychopathy III scale (SRP-III; Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, in press). This measure evaluates psychopathy in nonforensic samples. An earlier version (SRP-II) was correlated with the clinical measures, such as the Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R), r = .54;
and the PCL-R Screening Version, $r = .62$ (Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996; Hare, 1991, 2003); and the SRP-III had adequate internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .79; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

**Competitive disadvantage.** To measure competitive disadvantage, an extension of Lalumière, Harris, and Rice’s (2001) measure of neurodevelopmental insults was used. This measure included items about obstetrical and developmental problems. A higher number of total problems indicate higher developmental instability. Previous research with forensic samples found higher scores on this measure were related to violent behavior (Harris et al., 2001).

**Sexual coercion.** The Tactics to Obtain Sex Scale (Camilleri et al., in press) was used, because it contains a subscale that measures propensity for partner sexual coercion (COERCE). Participants rated 19 coercive acts used to obtain sex from a reluctant sexual partner (e.g., physically restrain, threaten) on a 5-point scale that ranges from definitely not to definitely in terms of the likelihood they would use the act and how effective they think the act would be in obtaining sex. Scores for each item were summed, then total scores for each subscale were calculated. Higher scores indicate a more favorable attitude toward partner sexual coercion. The COERCE subscale is related to actual sexual aggression in relationships and has excellent internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .87) and construct validity.

**Social desirability.** We used the Impression Management subscale of the Paulhus Deception Scale (Paulhus, 1998) to control for social desirability. This scale allows us to identify participants who may be “faking good” (i.e., deliberately giving socially desirable responses) and participants who may be “faking bad” (i.e., deliberately giving socially undesirable responses). Impression management was found to correlate with the Eysenck Personality Inventory Lie scale and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Lie scale, and internal reliability of the Paulhus Deception Scale ranged from .83 to .86 across different samples (Paulhus, 1998).

**Data Management and Analyses**

Multiple regression was used to test the three-path model, and so we followed Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken’s (2003) data-cleaning procedures for regression analyses. Three outliers were identified from checking leverage, discrepancy, and influence, and were therefore excluded from our analyses. Analyses including these outliers yielded the same results. Assumptions of normality and linearity of residuals were met. A violation of the homoscedasticity assumption was corrected by using a square root transformation on COERCE, and so all analyses use the transformation of COERCE. Analyses using uncorrected COERCE scores yielded the same results. We reran our analyses, excluding participants who scored higher than 12 and lower than 1 on the PDS (see Paulhus, 1998), to ensure that effects were not confounded by impression management.
Result

COERCE scores were regressed onto age, psychopathy, and neurodevelopmental instability. Although the overall model was significant, $F(3, 179) = 5.73, p = .001$, only psychopathy was significantly related to COERCE, $\beta = .27, p < .001$, in the expected direction—higher scores on psychopathy indicated higher interest in using coercive behaviors to obtain sex from a reluctant partner. Both age ($\beta = .03, p = .72$) and neurodevelopmental insults ($\beta = .10, p = .15$) were unrelated to COERCE.

It is possible that neurodevelopmental insults and age did not predict COERCE because of impression management. We therefore reran our analyses after excluding participants who are likely faking bad ($n = 8$) or faking good ($n = 7$), as indicated by scores on the Impression Management scale. Even after removing these participants, the overall test was still significant, $F(3, 164) = 3.95, p = .009$, where psychopathy was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .23, p = .003$), not age ($\beta = .03, p = .73$) or neurodevelopmental insults ($\beta = .12, p = .13$).

Discussion

Of the three major paths to sexual offending, the only variable to predict self-reported propensity for partner sexual coercion was psychopathy. In other words, men with psychopathic characteristics reported a greater interest in using multiple tactics to obtain sex from a reluctant sexual partner. Proneness to engage in partner sexual coercion appears to be enhanced in men with psychopathic characteristics. These characteristics include, but are not limited to, impulsivity, lack of remorse and guilt, shallow affect, callousness, and manipulation. Although psychopathic men were successful in attaining a mating partner, it is likely that their parasitic lifestyle likely leads to exploitation rather than pair bonding and investment. It would therefore be interesting to study the relationship characteristics of psychopathic men. In addition to high rates of sexually coercive behavior, it is likely that psychopaths are chronically unfaithful and physically abusive to their partners. We expect that future studies will find these relationships to be brief and conflictual.

To rule out the possibility that competitive disadvantage and age do not correlate with self-reported attitudes toward sexual coercion in general, we reanalyzed a data set (Camilleri, 2004) that included a group of undergraduate men who were sexually active in a heterosexual relationship ($n = 81$) and were measured on age, competitive disadvantage, psychopathy, and their general attitudes toward rape, using the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt, 1980). The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale is a validated scale with good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .88). After regressing Rape Myth Acceptance scores on the same measures of psychopathy, neurodevelopmental insults, and age, the overall model was significant, $F(3, 78) = 7.44, p < .001$, where psychopathy ($\beta = .24, p = .03$) and age ($\beta = -.27, p = .01$) predicted rape myth
acceptance and neurodevelopmental insults were not quite significant ($\beta = .19, p = .06$). The zero-order correlation between neurodevelopmental insults and rape myth acceptance, however, was significant, $r(81) = .22, p = .048$, and each of these results were in the expected direction. Participants who were more psychopathic, competitively disadvantaged, and younger reported more supportive attitudes toward rape. Further research is needed, however, to establish the relationship between our measures of Lalumière et al.’s (2005) three-path model and measures of general sexual coercion.

Results from Study 1 suggest that variability in partner sexual coercion propensity is explained by psychopathy, not by young male syndrome or competitive disadvantage. Although we used a scale designed to maximize construct validity (i.e., adheres to the principle of compatibility, correlates with actual sexual aggression in relationships, and controlled for impression management; Camilleri et al., in press; Eagly & Chaiken, 1998), investigating the characteristics of men who actually commit such offenses would help establish external validity of these effects. Therefore in Study 2, we studied these constructs with a sample of men convicted of sexually assaulting a romantic partner.

**Study 2: Convicted Partner Rapists**

**Method**

*Offender Sample*

Archived files of 115 offenders who were either committed or assessed at a maximum security psychiatric facility were reviewed. Files of heterosexual child molesters ($n = 30$), adult female rapists ($n = 30$), and nonsexual partner assauluters ($n = 30$) were randomly selected from admission records, whereas all available partner rapist files were reviewed ($n = 25$) due to their low base rate of admission. Sample sizes varied across analyses because some participants did not have the same information available in their case files. Heterosexual child molesters were men whose index offense (i.e., offense that led to admission or assessment) was sexual against an unrelated prepubescent female, with no history of sexually offending against adult women. Adult female rapists were men whose index offense was sexual against an adult woman, with no history of sexual or violent offending against a partner. Nonsexual partner assauluters committed a violent index offense (i.e., physical assault or threatened with a weapon) against their dating, cohabiting, or marital partner, and had no history of sexually assaulting their partner. Partner rapists were men who committed a sexual index offense against their dating, cohabiting, or marital partner.

*Measures*

**Young male syndrome and antisociality.** To measure the young male syndrome, offenders’ ages at their index or admission offense were collected from either the crime synopsis or admission record, or were calculated using the date of birth and date of offense. Other information, including the perpetrator’s score on the Violence
Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 2006) and criminal history were also recorded. The VRAG is a 12-item actuarial assessment designed to predict violent and sexual reoffending. This tool has been validated with numerous groups, including women, psychiatric patients, and intellectually disabled persons (Camilleri & Quinsey, in press; Harris, Rice, & Camilleri, 2004; Quinsey et al., 2006). Higher scores on the VRAG indicate a higher probability of committing a violent or sexual reoffense. In other words, higher VRAG scores indicate having more characteristics of men who recidivate. A total criminal history score was calculated using the Cormier-Lang Criminal History scoring system (Quinsey et al., 2006) in which weights are provided for more serious crimes. Higher criminal history scores indicate a more extensive, versatile, and severe criminal background.

**Psychopathy.** Most participants had scores on the most widely used measure of psychopathy, the Revised Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R), available in their case files. The psychometric properties of this scale have been rigorously evaluated and so the reliability and validity of this scale are sound (Hare, 1991, 2003). When using archived information, a score higher than 25 is typically used to identify a psychopath (Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1991; Rice, Harris, & Cormier, 1992). Researchers found that an interest in coercive sex is a primary characteristic of men who rape adult women (Harris et al., 2007).

**Competitive disadvantage.** Although numerous measures of competitive disadvantage exist, such as fluctuating asymmetry and neurodevelopmental insults (Lalumière et al., 2005), we used IQ scores because they were readily available. Lower IQ scores indicate greater competitive disadvantage. If IQ was assessed more than once, an average score was used.

**Data Analysis**

Several one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare partner rapists, rapists, child molesters, and partner assaulters on each of the three paths and on criminal history and recidivism risk. For each significant main effect, post hoc comparisons using Fisher’s least significant difference method were run to test specific predictions. If Lalumière et al.’s (2005) three-path model applies to partner rapists, we expected partner rapists to have age and psychopathy scores similar to rapists, IQ scores similar to child molesters, and criminal history and recidivism risk scores similar to both. If partner rapists and partner assaulters share the same etiology, they should not differ on any of the dependent variables.

**Results**

Main effects were found for IQ, $F(3, 96) = 7.44, p < .001$; psychopathy, $F(3, 78) = 15.80, p < .001$; but not for age, $F(3, 50) = 0.92, p = .44$ (see Figures 1 to 3). Significant main effects were also found on Cormier-Lang criminal history, $F(3, 108) = 5.50, p = .001$; and VRAG scores, $F(3, 91) = 27.60, p < .001$. 

Figure 1
Mean IQ Scores and SE Bars of Partner Rapists, Rapists, and Child Molesters

Figure 2
Mean Psychopathy Checklist–Revised Scores and SE Bars of Partner Rapists, Rapists, and Child Molesters
Partner Rapists Versus Sex Offenders

Follow-up comparisons found that partner rapists (n = 21, M = 100.3, SD = 13.8) were similar to rapists (n = 27, M = 101.8, SD = 13.1) on IQ, p = .72; and that rapists (p = .008) and partner rapists (p = .001) had higher IQ scores than child molesters did (n = 24, M = 88.6, SD = 16.0).

Differences in psychopathy between partner rapists (n = 18, M = 20.32, SD = 8.83) and rapists (n = 24, M = 24.67, SD = 7.25) on psychopathy scores approached significance at p = .06. Using one-sample t tests, we found that partner rapists were also not different from prison norms (M = 23.6), t(17) = −1.58, p = .13, and forensic norms (M = 20.6), t(17) = −0.14, p = .90 (Hare, 2003). Child molesters (n = 10, M = 16.5, SD = 5.1) scored lower than rapists (p = .004) but were not different from partner rapists (p = .19; see Figures 4 and 5). Using a cutoff of age 25 to identify psychopaths, we found no difference in the proportion of partner rapists (33%) and rapists (54%) who were psychopaths (Fisher’s Exact Test, p = .22, two-tailed). None of the child molesters were psychopaths.

Both partner rapists (n = 25, M = 28.9, SD = 26.8) and child molesters (n = 29, M = 23.5, SD = 17.1) had a less extensive criminal history than rapists (n = 28, M = 52.57, SD = 46.02), ps < .006. There were no differences between partner rapists and child molesters, p = .52. These results suggest that partner rapists committed fewer
Figure 4
Mean Cormier-Lang Criminal History Scores and SE bars of Partner Rapists, Rapists, and Child Molesters

Figure 5
Mean Violence Risk Appraisal Guide Scores and SE Bars of Partner Rapists, Rapists, and Child Molesters
and less severe crimes than rapists, despite having more opportunity because they were older.

Follow-up comparisons found partner rapists \((n = 18, M = 6.4, SD = 11.9)\) and child molesters \((n = 27, M = 4.5, SD = 10.0)\) had a lower risk of recidivating than rapists \((n = 20, M = 16.4, SD = 9.4)\), as indicated by their VRAG scores \((p < .003)\), and there were no differences between partner rapists and child molesters \((p = .54)\).

**Partner Rapists Versus Partner Assaulters**

There were no differences between partner rapists and partner assaulters on IQ, \(t(47) = -1.52, p = .16\); or criminal history, \(t(53) = .54, p = .65\). However, partner rapists had higher psychopathy scores, \(t(46) = 3.93, p < .001\); and higher VRAG scores, \(t(46) = 5.10, p < .001\) (see Table 1).

**Discussion**

There were similarities and differences between partner rapists and other offender groups. The forensic sample confirmed psychopathy as a characteristic of sexual aggression in relationships: Thirty-three percent of partner rapists were psychopaths, the average score of psychopathy among partner rapists were not different from rapists, and there was no difference in the proportion of partner rapists and rapists who were psychopaths. Characteristics of rapists that were different among partner rapists included criminal history and risk of recidivating. A characteristic of child molesters that did not apply to partner rapists was lower IQ. It was interesting that partner rapists were more psychopathic and were at greater risk of recidivating than partner assaulters. We discuss the implications of these similarities and differences in our general discussion.

An important component of Study 2 was to ensure that our samples were similar to other crime samples. Finding that child molesters had lower IQ, criminal history,
risk of recidivism, and psychopathy than rapists is consistent with what we know of these groups (e.g., Baxter, Marshall, Barbaree, Davidson, & Malcolm, 1984; Cantor, Blanchard, Robichaud, & Christenson, 2005; Rice & Harris, 1997), ensuring confidence in the validity of our comparison groups. Because the present study is the first to publish these characteristics of partner rapists, we cannot be sure if they are representative of all partner rapists or at least partner rapists in forensic psychiatric settings. Subsequent research with larger samples is therefore required. Although constraints on collecting a representative sample of partner rapists also exist for our other offender groups, there is an obvious issue surrounding the low number of convicted partner rapists. Victimization data we reviewed earlier suggest that there are many partner rapes that do not reach the criminal justice system. The causes of such low base rates may be due, in part, to official rap sheets misclassifying sexual offenses as physical violence (Rice, Harris, Lang, & Cormier, 2006) or to underreporting of partner sexual assaults. It is for this latter reason that our sample may be overrepresented with psychopaths or antisocial men if only the most dangerous and violent partner rapists are charged and convicted. But again, we are unsure whether nonpartner sexual assault is underreported more than partner sexual assault. One solution to this problem is to sample the general population, as we did in Study 1, for converging evidence.

**General Discussion**

Men who rape their romantic partner can be placed in one of two offender groups: partner offenders because of their relationship to the victim and sexual offenders because of the sexual act. In two studies, we found that partner rapists share a few characteristics with these groups, the most notable being psychopathy. Despite the vast research on psychopathy (see Patrick, 2008, for a current review), the present pair of studies is the first to implicate psychopathy as a determinant of sexual offending in relationships. This finding is consistent with our understanding of psychopaths as being parasitic, having many short-term marital relationships, and using sexually coercive behaviors. Psychopathic men appear to direct these parasitic and coercive behaviors toward in-pair mates (“romantic” or “committed” relationships may be a poor characterization as applied to psychopaths). Still, two thirds of partner rapists were not psychopaths, and psychopathy does not account for the less extensive criminal history of partner rapists. A possible explanation for these latter findings is that among nonpsychopaths, intrasexual competition lessens when pair bonds are formed and the primary source of competition is presented by female partner, extra-pair copulations. If true, any additional characteristics or predictors of partner sexual coercion should focus on circumstances and characteristics related to increased partner infidelity, not just measures of male competition.

In both our community and forensic samples, competitive disadvantage did not emerge as a predictor of partner sexual coercion, suggesting that partner rape is a
nonpathological behavior (for a discussion of the relationship between pathology, sexual deviance, and sexual offending, see Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008a). One reason for this finding is that competitive disadvantage accounts for men who are disadvantaged in ways that would make acquiring a mate more difficult, and men in relationships do not have this problem. A problem with this explanation is that it assumes there are no competitively disadvantaged men in relationships, and we have yet to account for other measures of competitive disadvantage, such as social adversity or neurodevelopmental incidents among convicted men. The hypothesis that competitively disadvantaged men are more likely to sexually coerce a romantic partner because they are at greater risk of being cuckolded therefore requires a more extensive investigation.

Youthfulness did not emerge as a primary characteristic of partner rapists. There was no relationship between age and self-reported interest in partner sexual coercion, and although there were no age differences between partner rapists and other sexual offender groups, most partner rapists did not fall within the late adolescent to early adult age group that typifies the young male syndrome. Observing the frequency distribution of partner rapists and rapists on age, however, suggests that the protective effects of age on sexual offending cannot be ruled out entirely among partner rapists. The age–crime curve (i.e., higher frequency of offenders among younger males) was observed in both groups, but partner rapists had a later onset than nonpartner rapists, probably because of the time it takes to establish relationships. This effect requires validation by comparing the age–crime curve from larger samples of partner rapists and rapists in general.

In Study 2, partner rapists were also compared to partner assaulters. The finding that partner rapists were different from partner assaulters on static risk factors (i.e., psychopathy and VRAG scores) is very interesting in light of our recent observation that partner rapists experienced more cuckoldry risk events than partner assaulters did (Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008b); this finding suggests that psychopathy and cuckoldry risk are better predictors of partner sexual assault than partner assault.

Our results also inform other intimate partner violence classifications. For example, Monson and Langhinrichsen-Rohling’s (1998) batterer typology includes men who are generally violent and antisocial. Our findings not only imply that a significant proportion of these men are psychopathic but also that psychopathy is more diagnostic of men who sexually assault a partner than men who physically assault a partner. This finding is also consistent with Monson and Langhinrichsen-Rohling’s suggestion that the generally violent and antisocial batterer type commits both physical and sexual violence within and outside relationships.

Our set of studies provide a first glimpse of individual difference characteristics of men who are interested in or commit sexually coercive acts with their romantic partner. Unfortunately, low base rates of partner rape convictions limits the comparisons and analyses required to test more complex models of partner rape etiology (i.e., to identify mutually exclusive paths and interactions). Although using
nonforensic community samples provides converging evidence, further evidence for external validity is required from studies of offender populations. Future research that can access larger samples should test whether antisocial characteristics interact with cuckoldry risk or if they constitute independent routes to sexual offending in relationships. Although we focused on a few characteristics of sexual offenders that might apply to partner sexual coercion, other characteristics of sexual offenders, partner assailters, and date rapists remain to be tested among partner sexual assaulters.

Notes

1. Definitions of sexual coercion vary in terms of including only hands-on offenses, violent acts, relationship types, and so forth.
2. A PsycINFO title search for (a) rape, sex* coerc*, or sex* assault; and (b) wife, partner, or marital was conducted in May 2007.
3. There is some evidence, however, that the number of head injuries before the age of 13 is unrelated to number of sexual partners (Blanchard et al., 2003).
4. Supporting this hypothesis is the effect that relationship formation has on behavior and physiology. Research has shown that men in relationships have lower testosterone (Burnham et al., 2003), and forming a relationship is a protective factor for violent recidivism (e.g., Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998).
5. Contact the first author for the histograms.

References


