FIFTY SHADES OF RISK

Psychopathy, Gender, and Risky Behaviours

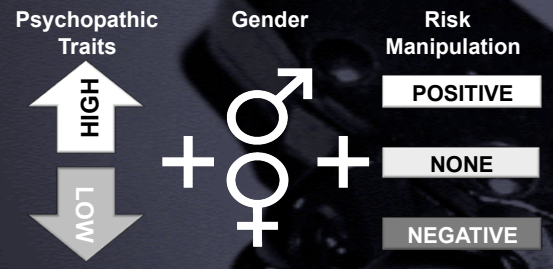
Cassidy Wallis & Kristine A. Peace, Ph.D.

MacEwan UNIVERSITY

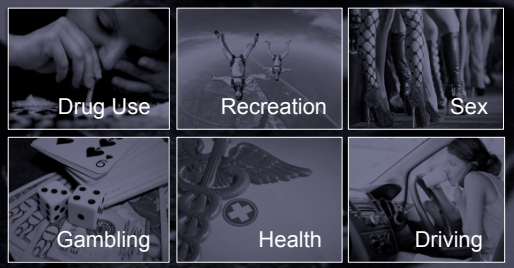
Abstract

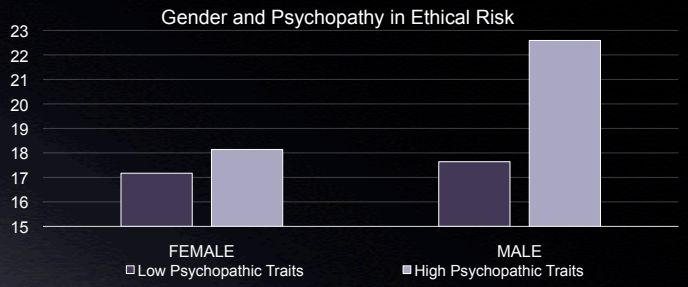
The purpose of this study was to determine what effect psychopathic traits, gender and informed consequences have upon risk-taking behaviours across multiple domains. Although psychopathy has been associated with increased risk for violent and criminal behaviours, few studies have addressed psychopathic traits in relation to different types of risky behaviours outside the criminal realm, as well as whether gender is associated with manifestation of different risk-taking actions. Further, those high in psychopathic traits often disregard the consequences of their risky behaviours relative to those low in such traits who weigh the benefits and risks associated with their actions. Therefore, we examined how risk-consequence information may influence endorsement of risky behaviours across psychopathic trait and gender groups. In this study, participants were assessed on their levels of psychopathic traits, and completed multiple measures evaluating risk-related attitudes and behaviours (i.e., domain-specific, driving, sexual behaviours, and drug use). Participants also were randomly assigned into risk-consequence conditions (positive, negative, none) where information was presented in the form of a fake news release. We anticipate that males and females will endorse different domains of risk-taking and that psychopathic traits will be related to gender-specific patterns of risky behaviours. We also predict that risk-consequence information should only impact low psychopathic trait groups, although this effect may be moderated by gender.

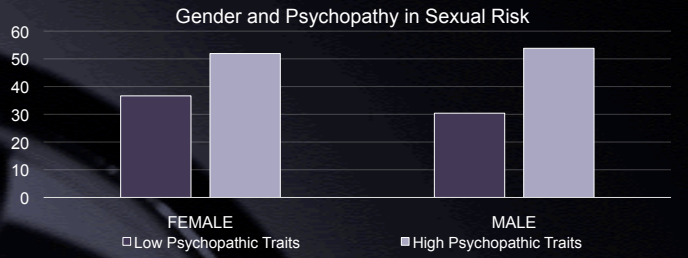
Method (*N* = 397)

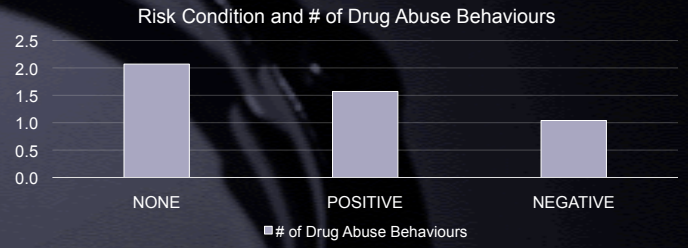


DVs = RISKY BEHAVIOURS









Scale/Subscale	Psychopathy		Gender	
	Low	High	Female	Male
Domain Specific				
Social	28.73 (5.98)	31.24 (6.30)	30.26 (6.13)	31.26 (6.53)
Ethical	17.38 (5.93)	19.88 (7.01)	17.93 (5.91)	21.33 (5.91)
Health/Safety	21.95 (5.45)	24.73 (6.16)	23.32 (5.69)	25.24 (6.55)
Recreational	28.79 (7.91)	31.91 (8.56)	30.51 (8.30)	32.20 (8.73)
Financial	18.78 (5.23)	19.67 (6.18)	17.66 (5.13)	22.13 (6.17)
WHO ASSIST				
Tobacco	6.59 (3.07)	6.86 (3.26)	6.44 (2.90)	7.36 (3.57)
Alcohol	9.38 (2.16)	10.76 (3.40)	11.13 (3.46)	9.99 (2.95)
Cocaine	6.18 (0.86)	6.31 (1.45)	6.08 (0.39)	6.60 (2.04)
Hallucinogens	6.14 (0.67)	6.26 (0.87)	6.10 (0.40)	6.44 (1.21)
DAST	1.44 (2.53)	1.86 (3.10)	1.26 (1.97)	2.5 (3.92)

General Discussion

Our results indicated that males reported higher levels of diverse risk-taking behaviours relative to females. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated that males engage in more risky behaviours, independent of negative consequences (Byrnes, Miller & Schafer, 1999). In our sample, those high in psychopathic traits also exhibited greater risk taking behaviours; likely related to features of psychopathy such as impulsivity, sensation seeking and an inability to understand conventional rules and morals (Ermer & Kiehl, 2010). These traits also applied to findings concerning sexual risk, where males high in psychopathic traits reported the highest levels of risky sexual behaviours among all groups. Given that men high in psychopathic traits also are socially dominant/manipulative while displaying little anxiety/fear, this enables them to create and/or capitalize on sexually risky situations. Females high in psychopathic traits also exhibited risk-taking regarding sexual decisions, suggesting that psychopathy may be more predictive of sexual risk-taking relative to gender per se (e.g., Fulton, Marcus & Payne, 2010). Interestingly, an interaction between gender and psychopathy was revealed where males high in psychopathic traits engaged in the most ethical risk taking behaviours. In regards to the risk manipulation and the drug abuse screening test, those in the positive risk condition reported greater risky drug use and those in the negative risk condition reported the least amount of risky drug use. As evident, the relation between different types of risk taking, psychopathic traits, gender, and perceived consequences is complex and warrants further investigation.

Byrnes, J. P., Miller, D. C., & Schafer, W. D. (1999). Gender differences in risk taking: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *125*, 367-383.
Ermer, E., & Kiehl, K. A. (2010). Psychopaths are impaired in social exchange and precautionary reasoning. *Psychological Science, 21*, 1399-1405.
Fulton, J. J., Marcus, D. K., & Payne, K. T. (2010). Psychopathic personality traits and risky sexual behavior in college students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *49*, 29-33.