

The game of love: Pickup artistry, hookup culture, and the psychopathy of modern courtship

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Abstract

Hookup culture and pickup artistry are two fixtures of modern romance. Predominantly practiced by college-aged males, these two courtship behaviours involve low emotional attachment, an egotistical pursuit of one's own interests, and the use of deception for sexual purposes. Such traits are typical of the psychopathic personality, as per Hare's Psychopathy Checklist Revised (1990). This paper will examine the relationship between hookup culture, pickup artistry, and psychopathic personality traits. Through an examination of sociology and psychopathy literature, there is considerable overlap between psychopathic traits and courtship methods of pickup artistry. The practitioners of these methods tend to embrace psychopathic traits for the purpose of sexual gratification. While these findings may imply that college-aged men are psychopathic, research suggests that traditional gender role scripts of masculinity may endorse these behaviours. Future research could empirically test the connection between psychopathic traits and modern courtship methods.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, our culture often valorizes psychopathic traits that are otherwise regarded as pathological (Holmes, 1991). In fact, the manipulative, charming, and guiltless dispositions inherent in psychopaths are sometimes described in the psychopathy literature as valuable adaptive responses to modern social pressures. These traits facilitate more effective social performance and with them, one can reach personal objectives (Holmes, 1991). One could argue that non-psychopathic individuals might be inclined to adopt psychopathic traits for their utility in achieving particular ends. Such traits are most apparent in popular courtship methods, sexual behaviours, and dating practices of young adult men. These men place an emphasis upon manipulation, coercion, and deceit in the pursuit of frequent sexual conquest. Through an examination of hookup culture and pickup artistry, this essay will explore the parallels between psychopathy and modern modes of dating and mating. The fundamental difference between psychopathic inadequacy and the sexual mindset in question lies in gender scripts of masculinity.

Sex, Lies, and the Psychopathic Personality

Since the earliest clinical observations of psychopathy in the mid-20th century, sexual behaviour has, either overtly or implicitly, been a part of the clinical characterization of psychopaths (Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 2007). In the 1940s, Cleckley re-

garded psychopathic sexuality as casual and unstrained, but poorly integrated and not especially driven (1988). This was one of the earliest theories of sexual behaviour in psychopathy. Modern interest in the sexuality of psychopaths has expanded far beyond Cleckley's beliefs, concluding that psychopaths exhibit a greater interest or tolerance for violent, coercive, and sadistic sex (LeBreton, Baysinger, Abbey, & Jacques-Tiura, 2013; Mokros, Osterheider, Hucker, & Nitschke, 2011). Sexual behaviour is so essential to the psychopathic construct that even Hare's Psychopathic Checklist Revised (PCL-R), one of the most popular tools in the clinical assessment of psychopathy, includes two sexual behaviour items: promiscuous sexual behaviour and many short-term relationships (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Although these two items do not fall within any of the checklist's four facets, they contribute significantly to the total PCL-R score (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

Beneath these sexual behaviour items lay affective and interpersonal deficiencies. The lack of remorse, the lack of empathy, and the overall callousness that plague psychopaths are counterproductive to intimate relationships, which depend upon high intimacy, passion, and commitment (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010). Overall, psychopaths do not fare well in interpersonal domains; this is of little surprise, for psychopaths are predominantly self-interested. What Cleckley described as "pathologic egocentricity and an incapacity for love" is still relevant today (1988; p. 337); psychopaths co-

erce, humiliate, and dominate without regard for the well-being of others, because they are incapable of empathy, they cannot form real attachments with others, and they cannot feel guilt (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; LeBreton et al., 2013).

Psychopaths use their skills of manipulation to further indulge their self-interests and their egocentric goals (LeBreton et al., 2013). This current theory of psychopaths as expert manipulators (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010) is by no means new within the literature on psychopathy. In fact, Cleckley (1988) wrote extensively of psychopaths' tendencies to adopt a mask of sanity to help further their own interests. Despite their incapacity for object love and their inability to establish genuine emotional rapport with others, the particularly shrewd heterosexual male psychopath is skilful in feigning love for women, insofar as these manipulations facilitate the achievement of sexual gratification (Cleckley, 1988). Such gratification is limited to the physical contact of intercourse; their inability to forge meaningful attachments to sexual partners precludes psychopaths from receiving much enjoyment from sexual intimacy beyond genital sensation. Psychopathic sexuality is therefore utterly selfish, and the positive feelings that appear during the psychopath's interpersonal relations resemble self-love (Cleckley, 1988).

The self-centredness and unattached sexuality so essential to psychopathy are just as essential to the clinical construct of narcissism. Previous research has shown that psychopathy is positively associated with narcissism, as both personality types bear many descriptive and phenotypic similarities (Hart & Hare, 1998; LeBreton et al., 2013; Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Ashton, 2010). This positive association between narcissism and psychopathy helps expand our understanding of the self-centred psychopathic worldview. Psychopaths tend to be highly narcissistic, and the clinical construct of narcissism overlaps almost identically with the interpersonal and affective traits outlined in Factor 1 of the PCL-R. Thus, it may be beneficial to use concepts from narcissism to help explain certain behaviours within the broader psychopathic personality (Hart & Hare, 1998).

Narcissism involves an overinflated sense of self-worth and it encompasses traits such as entitlement, grandiosity, superiority, dominance, and high self-esteem (Visser et al., 2010). Research suggests that highly

psychopathic individuals are likely to possess high self-esteem and to have positive views of themselves, which can be employed in their deceitful interpersonal style as a tool to successfully manipulate others (Visser et al., 2010). Furthermore, two dimensions of narcissism, entitlement and exploitation, predict sexually coercive behaviour in psychopaths, and these dimensions corroborate their preferences for short-term relationships (LeBreton et al., 2013). A person has narcissistic entitlement if they believe they deserve sexual gratification. This delusion may lead men to feel justified in having impersonal, promiscuous sexual relationships. Narcissistic exploitation reflects tendencies to manipulate others, and may cause men to be less sensitive to constraints against sexually coercive and deceitful behaviours (LeBreton et al., 2013).

These two modes of narcissism and psychopathy have been positively associated with unrestricted sociosexuality, which is a high willingness to engage in frequent, casual sexual encounters (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2011). Those with narcissistic and psychopathic traits reported higher levels of uncommitted romantic relationships, as well as a higher level of agentic motivation, such as the willingness to pursue physical pleasure and ego enhancement (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2011). Part of what facilitates this unrestricted sociosexuality is the psychopath's callousness and inability to form emotional attachments. Because psychopaths have a callous disregard for others and because they lack the ability to feel guilty for their behaviour, psychopaths are able to maintain an impersonal and active sex life by acting charming, by manipulating potential mates, and by lying without compunction (Muñoz, Khan, & Cordwell, 2011). The promiscuity and deceit that characterize narcissistic entitlement and exploitation fit comfortably within the broader psychopathic personality construct (LeBreton et al., 2013); these traits are also the hallmarks of unrestricted sociosexuality. In other words, narcissistic exploitation inspires psychopaths to be guiltlessly manipulative in pursuit of the uncommitted, self-driven sexual gratification that narcissistic entitlement implies. The following section will explore particular practices in modern dating to show how these methods of courtship valorize the psychopathic traits and behaviours outlined above.

Prelude to a kiss: Modern romance and the “game” of mating

Pickup Artistry and Seduction Techniques

In 2005, journalist Neil Strauss published *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pick-Up Artists*. The book, a New York Times bestseller, chronicled the author’s membership in a community of men whose goal was to engage in sexual activity with as many women as possible using a set of particular seduction techniques. The next year, Tucker Max’s *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*, which braggingly documents a man’s real-life application of manipulative sexual behaviour, sold 1.5 million copies (Marcus & Norris, 2014). Furthermore, *The Pick-Up Artist*, a reality show about training men in the game of seducing women, averaged 1.8 million viewers in its first season (Hall & Canterberry, 2011). The sheer popularity of these books and programs demonstrates that young men are increasingly seeking information about how to seduce women aggressively and successfully (Hall & Canterberry, 2011).

These sources indicate that aggressiveness and intentional manipulation, which are two hallmarks of the psychopath’s sexual mentality, ought to be used for sexual conquests (Hall & Canterberry, 2011). The speed-seduction literature teaches these assertive strategies so its practitioners may secure short-term, uncommitted mating. Men with high levels of unrestricted sociosexuality, a trait already associated with psychopathy (Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2011), were more likely to adopt assertive, persistent, and manipulative courtship strategies (Hall & Canterberry, 2011). Such strategies involve lying to the pursued woman, competing with her potential suitors, teasing her with minor insults, and manipulating her with feigned pleasantries so as to isolate her from her friend group (Hall & Canterberry, 2011).

The callousness and superficial charm in these tactics are analogous to psychopathic personality traits (Muñoz et al., 2011). These psychopathic traits are related to sexual coercion and sexual deception; because of their ability to charm, flatter, guiltlessly mock, and outright lie, psychopaths are able to manipulate other people’s weaknesses to gain access to sex (Muñoz et al., 2011). Thus, these psychopathic seduction practices may be deemed appealing and valuable because of the

obvious sexual advantages these techniques ultimately bestow upon those who practice them. Because these techniques, highly similar to narcissistic exploitation behaviours, are not only popular but also teachable, it appears that non-psychopathic males may be inclined to learn or adopt psychopathy, if only to help them put another notch in their bedposts.

Hookup Culture

Varied and uncommitted sexual behaviour is central to the psychopathy construct (Visser, DeBow, Pozzebon, Bogaert, & Book, 2014). This behaviour is also central to college hookup culture. Many studies have examined hookup culture on college campuses since the beginning of the 21st century (Bogle, 2008; Lambert et al., 2003; Paul and Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000). Dating for courting purposes has decreased, whereas hookups, or brief uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other, have become both socially acceptable and culturally normative (Bogle, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). A large majority (78%) of undergraduate students reported engaging in a hookup, and both men and women reported having nearly double the number of hookups compared to the number of first dates (Bogle, 2008; Garcia et al., 2012). Although the term hookup connotes a range of activities from kissing to intercourse, such variance is of little import: hookups focus on the uncommitted, casual nature of sexual encounters rather than the specific behaviours they entail (Garcia et al., 2012).

When investigating the motivations for hookups, researchers found that 89% of young men reported that physical gratification of the self was the most significant motivator driving them to hook up (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Of 200 Canadian undergraduate students, 72% of men who engaged in uncommitted sex expressed feelings of regret after their hookups (Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012). These young men feel remorse: as psychopaths cannot express remorse, these young men may lack the fundamental affective deficiencies that guide aberrant psychopathic behaviour. However, social forces far greater than the individual likely facilitate hookup behaviour in college-aged males. “There are very few restrictions on sexual behaviour for col-

lege men,” writes Bogle (2008), “[because] there is no stigma for engaging in ‘heavy’ sexual activity” (p. 104). In fact, men’s peers often congratulate them for their sexual conquests. Stigmatization occurs only for men who cannot hook up as frequently as their friends or men who cannot hook up at all (Bogle, 2008).

The script of campus hookup culture is unrestricted sociosexuality writ large. The parallels are clear between the hookup mentality and psychopathic sexuality: both are promiscuous, predominantly driven by self-gratification, and purposely devoid of meaningful emotional attachment. Hookup culture is built upon the foundation of impersonal sex, a detached and non-committal orientation towards sexual relations that arises frequently within the psychopathy literature (Cleckley, 1988; LeBreton et al., 2013). Furthermore, the deep-seated conquest mentality towards sex that is often found amongst hookup-practicing college fraternities implies, by virtue of the word ‘conquest,’ an embracement of hostile masculinity (Bogle, 2008). Characterized by hostile, distrustful, and insecure feelings towards women, hostile masculinity is most apparent when men view women as objects to be dominated and use sex as a means of demonstrating power over partners (LeBreton et al., 2013). Both hostile masculinity and impersonal sex predict sexual aggression in college-aged males, such as fraternity brothers who employ disrespectful, deceitful, and aggressive tactics in pursuit of no-strings-attached hookups with women they do not care about (Boswell & Spade, 1996; LeBreton et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, impersonal sex, hostile masculinity, and hostile masculinity’s dominance-based relationship style are positively associated with the psychopathic personality (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; LeBreton et al., 2013; Mokros et al., 2011; Muñoz et al., 2011).

Fake It Until You Make It

Such parallels raise disconcerting questions: Are young men who practice these techniques psychopathic? Or are they wilfully adopting psychopathic traits (i.e., performing psychopathy) for sexual gain? To avoid psychopathologizing promiscuity and manipulative seduction techniques, we turn to the traditional gender role scripts of masculinity for explanation.

According to the traditional script of masculinity, a) sex is central to male identity, b) men prefer non-

relational sex, and c) men are regarded as active sexual agents, while women are deemed sexual objects (Garcia et al., 2012). Part of masculinity embraced by college-aged males is the view that women are merely a means to sex and thus not worthy of respect (Boswell & Spade, 1996). A double standard exists with respect to college hookups: women who have sex with multiple partners earn a bad reputation, while men who hook up injudiciously with countless partners are congratulated (Boswell & Spade, 1996). According to this conception of masculinity, caring about or forming an emotional attachment to hookup partners is frowned upon, as it is antithetical to a macho identity that champions male authority, dominance, and impersonality in sexual conquest (Hall & Canterbury, 2011). Thus, an implied unrestricted sociosexuality underlies collegiate masculine identity.

This sociosexual mentality, as well as the aggressive and manipulative courtship techniques that accompany it, is culturally reinforced for men in college (Hall & Canterbury, 2011). Men in fraternities, for example, actively discourage serious relationships, routinely degrade women, and reward others’ aggressive participation in the hookup scene (Boswell & Spade, 1996). On college campuses, men face pressures to both conform to the norms of an unrestricted sociosexual gender identity and to abide by a conception of masculinity that valorizes the uncaring domination of women (Boswell & Spade, 1996). In brief, collegiate men sexually exploit women through promiscuous hookups in order to express their manliness (Prohaska & Gailey, 2010), while psychopaths sexually exploit women through promiscuous hookups because their affective and interpersonal deficits compel them to act impulsively, without inhibition.

Thus, men who embrace hookup culture and manipulative courtship techniques may be operating according to social as opposed to biological forces. Masculinity is not an innate characteristic of men, but rather a social construction formed through everyday interaction (Prohaska & Gailey, 2010). Men may use these cunning courtship strategies, not because they are inherently inclined to use them, but because these strategies are instrumental in securing successful and frequent mating. This mating in itself is the most important aspect of traditional male identity (Garcia et

al., 2012). These men stand in contrast to the male psychopath; the psychopath's willingness to guiltlessly manipulate and aggress women to obtain the impersonal sex he desires stems from both his lack of behavioural control and from his empathic deficits (Muñoz et al., 2011). These psychopaths are not performing masculinity; rather, they are acting promiscuously, callously, and manipulatively because of their affective deficiencies. Psychopathy and the masculinity script overlap; this script is rooted in patriarchal values such as "control, power, competition, aggression, the devaluation of emotional attachment, and the oppression of women" (Prohaska & Gailey, 2010, p. 14). Those in the hookup culture may wish to prove their manhood by participating in these normative masculine behaviours (Prohaska & Gailey, 2010). Thus, male collegiate sexual conquest, the assertive courtship strategies that facilitate it, and the hookup culture in which it exists are all ascribed tremendous social value, for they help men in achieving masculinity. There is no indication that this social motive drives psychopaths in their promiscuity and manipulative romance tactics. Rather, the motive is highly personal, and rooted within the makeup of the psychopath's deviant inner workings.

Future Directions

As hookup culture continues to grow all the more prevalent across college campuses in North America and beyond, future research should explore the psychopathic undertones of this practice. Further efforts should empirically test the connection between modern courtship practices and psychopathy as outlined above. While research into psychopathy and sexuality is by no means new, this new angle is underexplored in the current literature. Psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists would benefit from designing studies centred on college students, to assess whether male participants in hookup culture may be deemed psychopathic according to Hare's Psychopathy Checklist, or if male college students merely adopt psychopathic traits for the sexual benefits they may bestow. There is extant research that takes a Darwinian approach to psychopathy, arguing that psychopathy was selected for during human evolution (Harris et al., 2007). According to Harris and colleagues (2007), the coercive and precocious sexuality often associated with psychopathy

afforded psychopaths an evolutionary advantage, granting them the ability to mate frequently and perpetuate their lineage. Future research can assess the intersection between hookup culture, pickup artistry, and psychopathy within the context of evolution.

Conclusion

For men in search of successful sexual encounters, psychopathic traits may be a means to an end. Culture in general, and masculinity in particular, seem to ascribe value to facets of the psychopathic personality for this reason. In fact, the advantages of psychopathic traits for non-psychopathic collegiate men appear two-fold; not only do manipulative and aggressive courtship strategies help men secure multiple sexual partners, but mating with multiple partners help men conform to ideals of masculinity that uphold sex as paramount. The value given to speed seduction and hookup culture in fostering this identity suggests that masculinity may itself be psychopathic, insofar as it encourages promiscuity, emotional detachment, and manipulation for purposes of self-gratification and dominance. Future research should probe this similarity even further, so as to determine where a non-psychopath's adoption of psychopathic traits stops and where clinically diagnosable psychopathy begins.

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