

The psychology of risk and power: Power desires and sexual choices

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Introduction

Every day individuals make decisions be they mundane such as which cereal to eat in the morning to the more complex of which job should they accept. The consequences for making those decisions can be equally complex. Some decisions are more difficult to quantify and understand while others can be relatively easy like choosing what cereal to eat in the morning. However, some are increasingly more difficult to model. For example, two adult males (or a man and a woman) who are intending to have sex must decide whether to have sex with or without a condom. The consequences can have lasting effects depending on what the couple chooses.

Spitefulness These lasting effects can be twofold. For example, deciding not to wear a condom could result in an unplanned pregnancy or exposing one or another person to a sexually transmitted infection. Behaviors/decisions that have negative consequences for both individuals is the original understanding of spite to where psychologically spite is understood as intentionally harming oneself to punish another (Marcus et al., 2014; Critchfield et al., 2008). Spiteful behavior that has often been overlooked in psychological research. Spite has been seen in behavioral economic experiments, preschoolers with ultimatum games, and daily life (Marcus et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2014; Bügelmayer & Katharina Spiess, 2014). Preschool boys tended to be more spiteful than their female counterparts. Younger men followed suit and tended to be more spiteful than their counterparts (Marcus et al., 2014). Age plays a role whereas people age they tend to be less spiteful and more egalitarian (Bügelmayer & Katharina Spiess, 2014).

DoPL

Dominance The dominance motive is one of the more researched methods and well depicted power motives. Individuals with a dominance orientation display the more primal of human behavior. These individuals will seek power through direct methods such as asserting dominance, control over resources, or physically assaulting someone (Johnson et al., 2012; Winter, 1993). Early research in dominance motives has shown that acts of dominance ranging from asserting physical dominance over another to physical displays of violence has been shown in many mammalian species, including humans (Petersen et al., 2018; Witkower et al., 2020). Individuals high in dominance are often high in machiavellianism, narcissism, and often are prone to risky behavior (discussion further in the next section). Continued research has hinted at a possible tendency for males to display these dominant seeking traits more than females (citation needed). When high dominance individuals assert themselves they are doing so to increase their own individual sense of power (citation needed). Asserting ones own sense of dominance over another can be a dangerous task. In the animal kingdom it can often leader to injury. While, in humans asserting dominance can take a multitude of actions such as leering behaviors, physical distance, or other non-verbal methods to display dominance (citation needed). Power from a dominance perspective is often never bestowed upon someone. Often, high dominance individuals will take control and hold onto it. [@]

Prestige Contrary to the dominance motivation of using intimidation and aggression to gain more power, a prestige motivation or prestige in general is bestowed upon an individual from others in the community (citation needed). Differently from the dominance motivation, a prestige motivation is generally unique to the human species (citation needed). Do in part to ancestral human groups being smaller hunter-gatherer societies, individuals that displayed and used important behaviors beneficial to the larger group were often valued and admired by the group. Therein, the social group bestows the authority onto the individual. Generally, this type of behavior can be passively achieved by the prestigious individual. However, this does not remove the intent of the actor in that they too can see prestige from the group, but method of achieving that social status greatly differs from that of dominance seeking individuals. part from dominance motivated individuals that continually

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have to fight for their right to have power over others,¹²⁴ individuals that seek or were given power through a prestige¹²⁵ motivation are not generally challenged in the same sense¹²⁶ as dominant individuals. Displaying behaviors that the¹²⁷ community would see as beneficial would indere them¹²⁸ into the community making the survival of the community¹²⁹ as a whole better (citation needed). Evolutionarily this¹³⁰ would increase viability of the prestigious individual and¹³¹ their genes. Similar to the dominance perspective, the¹³² prestige perspective overall increases the power and future¹³³ survivability of the individual. However, due to the natural¹³⁴ difference between prestige and dominance, dominance¹³⁵ seeking individuals are challenged more often resulting in¹³⁶ more danger to their position (citation).¹³⁷

Leadership Apart from dominance and prestige, leadership¹³⁸ raises some interesting questions on deference and why in¹³⁹ dividuals would defer to others in power. Psychologically,¹⁴⁰ leadership is the deference to authority and working together¹⁴¹ towards a shared common goal (Van Vugt, 2006).¹⁴²

Methods¹⁴³

Participants: Participants were a convenience sample of¹⁴⁴ 82 (Mage = 26.14, SD = 8.65) individuals from Prolific¹⁴⁵ Academic crowdsourcing platform (“www.prolific.co”). Re-¹⁴⁶quirements for participation were: (1) be 18 years of age¹⁴⁷ or older and (2) and as part of Prolific Academics policy,¹⁴⁸ have a prolific rating of 90 or above. Participants received¹⁴⁹ £4 or £8 an hour as compensation for completing the survey.¹⁵⁰ The University of Edinburgh’s Research Ethics Committee¹⁵¹ approved all study procedures (approval reference number:¹⁵² 330-1920/1).¹⁵³

Methodology:¹⁵⁴

Demographic Questionnaire: Prior to the psychometric¹⁵⁵ scales, participants are asked to share their demographic¹⁵⁶ characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, ethnic origin, and¹⁵⁷ educational attainment).¹⁵⁸

Dominance, Prestige, and Leadership Orientation. The 18-¹⁵⁹ item Dominance, Prestige, and Leadership scale [DoPL;¹⁶⁰ Suessenbach et al. (2019)], is used to measure dominance,¹⁶¹ prestige, and leadership orientation. Each question corre-¹⁶² sponds to one of the three domains. Each domain is scored,¹⁶³ across six unique items related to those domains (e.g., “I rel-¹⁶⁴ ish opportunities in which I can lead others” for leadership),¹⁶⁵ rated on a scale from 0 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly,¹⁶⁶ agree). Internal consistency reliability for the current sample,¹⁶⁷ is \$¹⁶⁸

Spitefulness Scale. The Spitefulness scale (Marcus et al.,¹⁶⁹ 2014) is a measure with seventeen one sentence vignettes to¹⁷⁰

assess the spitefulness of participants. The original spite-¹⁷¹ fulness scale has 31-items. In the original Marcus and col-¹⁷² leagues’ paper, fifteen were removed. For the present study¹⁷³ however, 4-items were removed because they did not meet¹⁷⁴ the parameters for the study i.e., needed to be dyadic, more¹⁷⁵ personal. Three reverse scored items from the original thirty-¹⁷⁶ one were added after meeting the requirements. Example¹⁷⁷ questions included, “It might be worth risking my reputa-¹⁷⁸ tion in order to spread gossip about someone I did not like.”¹⁷⁹ ,and “Part of me enjoys seeing the people I do not like fail¹⁸⁰ even if their failure hurts me in some way.” Items are scored¹⁸¹ on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to¹⁸² 5 (“Strongly agree”). Higher spitefulness scores represent¹⁸³ higher acceptance of spiteful attitudes.¹⁸⁴

Sexuality Self-Esteem Subscale: The Sexuality Self-Esteem¹⁸⁵ subscale (SSES; Snell and Papini (1989)) is a subset of the¹⁸⁶ Sexuality scale that measures the overall self-esteem of par-¹⁸⁷ ticipants. Due to the nature of the study, the sexuality sub-¹⁸⁸ scale was chosen from the overall 30-item scale. The 10-¹⁸⁹ items chosen reflected questions on the sexual esteem of par-¹⁹⁰ ticipants on a 5-point scale of +2 (Agree) and -2 (Disagree).¹⁹¹ For ease of online use the scale was changed to 1 (“Dis-¹⁹² agree”) and 5 (“Agree”), data analysis will follow the sex-¹⁹³ uality scale scoring procedure. Example questions are, “I am¹⁹⁴ a good sexual partner,” and “I sometimes have doubts about¹⁹⁵ my sexual competence.” Higher scores indicate a higher ac-¹⁹⁶ ceptance of high self-esteem statements.¹⁹⁷

Sexual Jealousy Subscale: The Sexual Jealousy subscale by¹⁹⁸ Worley and Samp (2014) are 3-items from the 12-item Jeal-¹⁹⁹ ousy scale. The overall jealousy scale measures jealousy in²⁰⁰ friendships ranging from sexual to companionship. The 3-²⁰¹ items are “I would worry about my partner being sexually²⁰² unfaithful to me.” “I would suspect there is something go-²⁰³ ing on sexually between my partner and their friend.” and²⁰⁴ “I would suspect sexual attraction between my partner and²⁰⁵ their friend.” The items are scored on a 5-point scale rang-²⁰⁶ ing from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly agree”). Higher²⁰⁷ scores indicate a tendency to be more sexually jealous.²⁰⁸

Sexual Relationship Power Scale: The Sexual Relation-²⁰⁹ ship Power Scale (SRPS; Pulerwitz et al. (2000)) is a²¹⁰ 23-item scale that measures the overall power distribution²¹¹ in a sexually active relationship. The SRPS is split into²¹² the Relationship Control Factor/Subscale (RCF) and the²¹³ Decision-Making Dominance Factor/Subscale (DMDF). The²¹⁴ RCF measures the relationship between the partners on their²¹⁵ agreement with statements such as, “If I asked my partner²¹⁶ to use a condom, he [they] would get violent.” and “I feel²¹⁷ trapped or stuck in our relationship.” Items from the RCF are²¹⁸ scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly agree”) ²¹⁹ to 4 (“Strongly disagree”). Lower scores indicate an imbal-²²⁰ ance in the relationship where the participant indicates they²²¹ believe they have less control in the relationship.²²²

The DMDF measures the dominance level of sexual and social decisions in the relationship. Example questions include “Who usually has more say about whether you have sex?” and “Who usually has more say about when you talk about serious things?” Items on the DMDF are scored on a 3-item scale of 1 (“Your Partner”), 2 (“Both of You Equally”), and 3 (“You”). Higher scores indicate more dominance by the participant in the relationship.

Scenario Realism Question: Following Worley and Samp in their 2014 paper on using vignettes/scenarios in psychological studies, a question asking the participant how realistic or how much they can visualize the scenario is. The 1-item question is “This type of situation is realistic.” The item is scored on a 5-point scale of the participants agreement with the above statement, 1 (“Strongly agree”) to 5 (“Strongly disagree”). Higher scores indicate disagreement with the statement and reflects the belief that the scenario is not realistic.

Spiteful Vignettes: After participants complete the above scales, they are presented with 10-hypothetical vignettes. Each vignette was written to reflect a dyadic or triadic relationship with androgynous names to control for gender. Five vignettes have a sexual component while five are sexually neutral. An example vignette is,

“Casey and Cole have been dating for 6 years. A year ago, they both moved into a new flat together just outside of the city. Casey had an affair with Cole’s best-friend. Casey had recently found out that they had an STI that they had gotten from Cole’s best-friend. Casey and Cole had sex and later Cole found out they had an STI.”

For each vignette, the participant is asked to rate each vignette on how justified they believe the primary individual, Casey in the above, is with their spiteful reaction. Scoring ranges from 1 (“Not justified at all”) to 5 (“Being very justified”). Higher scores overall indicate higher agreement with spiteful behaviors.

Procedure:

Participants were recruited on Prolific Academic. Participants must be 18-years of age or older, restriction by study design and Prolific Academic’s user policy. The published study is titled, “Moral Choice and Behavior.” The study description follows the participant information sheet including participant compensation. Participants were asked to accept their participation in the study. Participants were then automatically sent to the main survey (Qualtrics, Inc.). Once participants accessed the main survey, they were presented with the consent form for which to accept they responded with selecting “Yes.” Participants were then asked

to provide demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and educational attainment. Participants would then complete in order, the spitefulness scale, the sexual relationship power scale, the sexual jealousy subscale, and sexuality self-esteem subscale. Next, participants were presented ten vignettes where they were instructed to rate on the level of justification for the action carried out in the vignette. After each vignette, participants would rate the realism of the scenario. Upon completion of the survey (median completion time 20 minutes $SD = 10$ Minutes 30 seconds), participants were shown a debriefing message and shown the contact information of the Primary Investigator (Andrew Ithurburn). Participants were then compensated at £8/hr. via Prolific Academic.

Data Analysis:

Demographic characteristics were analyzed using a one-way analysis for continuous variables (age) and Chi-squares tests for categorical variables (sex, ethnicity, ethnic origin, and educational attainment). Means and standard deviations were calculated for the surveys along with correlational analyses (e.g., spitefulness, SESS, SRPS, SJS). Bayesian multilevel models were used to test differences between levels of justifications of vignettes that are either sexually or non-sexually vindictive in behavior. Model 1

Results

Discussion

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