



Perceived risk of female infidelity moderates the relationship between men's personality and partner-directed violence

Farnaz Kaighobadi *, Todd K. Shackelford, Danielle Popp, Ryan M. Moyer, Vincent M. Bates, James R. Liddle

Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, 2912 College Ave., Davie, FL 33308, USA

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ABSTRACT

We hypothesized that men's personality traits interact with men's perceived risk of partner's infidelity to predict men's partner-directed violence. Moderation analyses of data provided by 467 men in a committed relationship indicated that: (1) men with lower emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and men who perceived greater risk of partner infidelity perpetrated more partner-directed violence, and (2) the relationship between men's personality traits and partner-directed violence depends on their perceptions of the risk of partner infidelity. Simple slope analyses indicated that: (a) men's emotional stability and agreeableness predict partner-directed violence only when perceived risk of partner infidelity is low, and (b) men's conscientiousness predicts partner-directed violence only when perceived risk of partner infidelity is high.

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1. Introduction

In response to the tragically high incidence and negative consequences of female-directed violence in intimate relationships, a large literature has investigated the predictors of female-directed partner violence. Previous research has identified several proximate predictors of female-directed partner violence, such as family history of aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981), culture and social roles (e.g., Archer, 2006; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006), and ultimate or evolutionary causes such as paternity uncertainty (e.g., Goetz, Shackelford, Romero, Kaighobadi, & Miner, 2008; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005). The current research is guided broadly by a person-situation interaction approach to female-directed violence in intimate relationships. This approach is informed by research on the personality characteristics of men who inflict violence on their intimate partners and also considers the situational contexts in which intimate partner violence occurs.

1.1. Personality and intimate partner violence

Previous research also has investigated men's personality traits as predictors of men's perpetration of violence in intimate relationships, such as antisocial tendencies, self-centeredness, and impulsivity (see White, McMullin, Swartout, Sechrist, & Gollehon, 2008, for review). However, only a few studies (e.g., Busby, Holman, &

Walker, 2008; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; Hines & Saudino, 2008) have investigated the relationships between men's personality traits, as assessed by the Five Factor Model (FFM), and men's partner-directed violence. Hines and Saudino (2008) emphasize the importance of using the FFM to study interpersonal relationships, in general, and interpersonal conflict, in particular. Hellmuth and McNulty (2008) note that most previous research addressing links between men's partner-directed violence and men's personality traits has investigated personality disorders as predictors of partner-directed violence.

The FFM is a comprehensive descriptive organization of personality traits that is applicable to the general population and generalizable cross-culturally (Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & John, 1992). According to the FFM, most personality traits can be categorized in terms of five broad factors: *emotional stability*, which describes the ability to cope with stress; *extraversion*, which describes positive emotionality with the axes of dominance and affiliation; *agreeableness*, which describes characteristics such as altruism and emotional support at one end of the dimension, and hostility, self-centeredness, and jealousy at the other; *conscientiousness*, which describes diligence and thoroughness; and *openness*, which describes creativity, intellect, and a need for variety (Digman, 1990; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992).

Buss (1991) investigated the links between personality factors as assessed by the FFM and conflict in marriage. He documented positive associations between husband's low emotional stability and low agreeableness, assessed by husband's self-reports and by wife's partner-reports, and female-directed neglect and abuse. A number of studies have found a positive relationship between

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, 2912 College Avenue, Davie, FL 33314, USA.

E-mail address: fkaighob@fau.edu (F. Kaighobadi).

low emotional stability in men and physical aggression in intimate relationships (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Busby et al., 2008; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; Hines & Saudino, 2008).

These findings fit well with Digman's (1997) taxonomy of alpha-linked personality traits and with higher-order negative emotionality traits (see Krueger, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000, for review) and their links with violence. Digman categorized the major personality factors into two higher-order factors: *alpha-linked traits*, including agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness, and *beta-linked traits*, including openness and extraversion. Men's higher-order alpha-linked traits and negative emotionality, in turn, has been identified as a predictor of both men's general violence and partner-directed violence (Krueger et al., 2000; Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan, 2000). Thus, according to the results of previous research, men's emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness is expected to correlate with men's partner-directed violence in intimate relationships.

1.2. Personality and intimate partner violence in context

Personality often affects behavior differently in different interpersonal contexts (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Thus, it is important to consider interactions between stable features of personality and features of the interpersonal context or situational factors when investigating predictors of behavior (Buss, 1987, 2009; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Hellmuth and McNulty (2008), for example, documented that husband's and wife's emotional stability interacts with levels of chronic stress to influence the frequency with which violence is inflicted against spouses. Lower emotional stability scores predicted more frequent partner-directed violence, especially for spouses with high levels of stress. Previous studies also have found that the relationship between men's stable personality features and performance of partner-directed violence varies with men's substance abuse (Leonard & Blane, 1992; Stuart & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005). Consideration of the situational factors and interpersonal context may be important for accurately identifying relationships between men's personality and men's partner-directed violence.

1.3. The context of perceived partner infidelity risk

The adaptive problem of paternity uncertainty over human evolutionary history might have caused the evolution of male anti-cuckoldry tactics, such as non-violent and violent mate retention behaviors, to prevent or punish female sexual infidelity (see Goetz et al., 2008). Thus, the risk of partner-directed violence may increase as men's perceptions of the risk of partner infidelity increases. Previous research has indeed shown that men's suspicion of their partner's infidelity predicts men's partner-directed sexual coercion (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006; Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, & Stewart-Williams, 2008) and partner-directed violence (Kaighobadi, Starratt, Shackelford, & Popp, 2008). Thus, men's perceptions of partner infidelity may act as a situational context in which personality affects partner-directed violence differently.

Given (a) previous research findings and the importance of situational contexts in determining the relationship between personality and behavior, and (b) the links between higher-order personality factors (emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) and female-directed violence, we generated three hypotheses:

1.3.1. Hypothesis 1

Men's emotional stability interacts with men's perceptions of partner infidelity to predict female-directed violence, such that low emotional stability will predict violence in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

1.3.2. Hypothesis 2

Men's agreeableness interacts with men's perceptions of partner infidelity to predict female-directed violence, such that low agreeableness will predict violence in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

1.3.3. Hypothesis 3

Men's conscientiousness interacts with men's perceptions of partner infidelity to predict female-directed violence, such that low emotional stability will predict violence in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four hundred sixty-seven men, each in a self-defined committed, heterosexual sexual relationship, participated in this study. Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding communities of southeastern United States. The mean age of the participants was 24.2 years ($SD = 7.9$), ranging between 18 and 63. The mean age of the participants' partners was 23.0 years ($SD = 7.3$), ranging between 14 and 59. The mean relationship length was 37.1 months ($SD = 59.7$), ranging between 0.5 and 475 months. About half the participants drawn from universities received nominal extra credit toward one of several social science courses in exchange for their participation. The remaining half of participants drawn from universities received credit toward a required research participation component of an introductory psychology course. Researchers solicited participants from these courses at the beginning of a class session, noting only that the research was a "study on romantic relationships." Participants drawn from the surrounding community were recruited by word of mouth and via flyers posted in public locations. These flyers stated only that volunteers were needed for a "study on romantic relationships." The researchers contact information was provided on the flyers. We estimate that 20% of participants in both studies were nonstudents drawn from the community. We did not code for method of data collection, so we are unable to include this as a variable in the statistical analyses. Different subsets of this database have been used to conduct different analyses designed to test different hypotheses investigating men's non-violent and violent mate retention behaviors (e.g., Shackelford, Goetz, Guta, & Schmitt, 2006; Shackelford, Goetz, McKibbin, & Starratt, 2007) and sexual coercion in intimate relationships (e.g., Goetz & Shackelford, 2009; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). None of the previous studies using this dataset have investigated the relationships between men's personality and men's partner-directed non-violent or violent behaviors in intimate relationships.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed a survey that included several sections. The first section solicited demographic information, including the participant's age, his partner's age, and the duration of his current relationship. Participants then completed a measure assessing their own standing along the five major factors of personality (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). This measure includes 40 bipolar adjective scales, eight for each five personality factors. For each bipolar scale, the participant circled a number between 1 and 7 that describes himself "generally." The five personality factors were scored by averaging scores on the relevant scales for each factor. The alpha reliabilities for the three personality factors included in this study, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, were .52, .65, and .64, respectively.

To measure perceptions of risk of partner infidelity, we asked participants to answer four questions regarding suspicions of their partner's past and future likelihood of sexual and emotional infidelity (e.g., "As far as you know, has your partner had sexual intercourse with someone other than you since you have been involved in a relationship together?"). The responses were recorded on a 10-point scale, anchored by 0 (*Definitely No*) to 9 (*Definitely Yes*). Perception of partner infidelity risk was computed by summing the responses to all four questions. The alpha reliability of the perceived risk of infidelity measure for this sample was .71.

Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, and Lewis (1995, 1996) developed two indices to assess the occurrence and consequences of violence in relationships. The Violence Assessment Index (VAI; Dobash et al., 1995) measures specific methods of assault, objects used in assaults, and parts of the body to which assaults are directed. The types of violence assessed range from pushing to choking. Because the effects of violence can range from minor wounds (e.g., a scratch) to more severe damage (e.g., an internal injury), Dobash et al. (1995) developed the Injury Assessment Index (IAI) to measure the physical consequences of violence against partners. The IAI is comprehensive in that it measures the specific injury (e.g., bruise, cut) and the location of the injury on the body (e.g., face, limb).

The participants completed both the VAI, which assesses how often men performed 26 violent acts against their partners, and the IAI, which assess how often their partners sustained each of 20 injuries as a result of their violence against their partners. For each index, responses are recorded using a 6-point Likert type scale anchored by 0 (*never*) and 5 (*11 or more times*; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1996; Dobash et al., 1995). Research by Dobash and colleagues (1995, 1996, 1998) has demonstrated the reliability, validity and utility of these indices.

2.3. Procedures

The prospective participant had to be (1) male, (2) at least 18 years of age, and (3) in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman. If these criteria were met, the researcher handed the participant a consent form, the survey and a security envelope. The participant was instructed to read and sign the consent form, complete the survey, place the completed survey and the consent form in separate envelopes and then place the sealed envelopes in two boxes—one for surveys, one for consent forms. The participants completed the surveys in a classroom setting, with some distance between participants to provide privacy of responses.

3. Results

We constructed three factors of the FFM by summing the responses for the relevant factor; agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. We constructed a composite risk of partner infidelity score by averaging responses to the four partner infidelity items. We constructed a composite variable for partner-directed violence, Overall Violence Index (OVI, $\alpha = 0.90$; Shackelford et al., 2005), by standardizing scores on the VAI and IAI and then averaging these standardized scores into a composite OVI. Table 1 includes the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables.

Here we report the results of three separate moderation analyses and subsequent simple slope analyses to test the three hypotheses of this study. First, we conducted three separate hierarchical regressions to test the interaction between each personality trait and the risk of partner infidelity. Then, for each significant interaction, we tested the relationship between each personality trait and partner-directed violence at different levels of risk of infidelity. To

test the three interactions, we followed the steps recommended by Aiken and West (1991) to test the interaction between two continuous variables (each personality factor and risk of partner infidelity) to predict the variance in a dependent variable (partner-directed violence): (1) we centered each continuous predictor variable, and (2) we produced three separate interaction terms (emotional stability \times infidelity risk; agreeableness \times infidelity risk; conscientiousness \times infidelity risk). Three hierarchical regressions were used to test the three hypotheses. Table 2 includes a summary of the significant moderations.

To test the interaction predicted by hypothesis 1, we first entered the centered emotional stability and risk of infidelity variables into the regression analysis, and then we entered the interaction term for these two variables. The results revealed an interaction between emotional stability and infidelity risk predicting partner-directed violence ($t = 2.32, p < .05$). The results also showed a main effect of emotional stability ($b = -0.19, t = -4.03, p < .00$) and a main effect of risk of infidelity ($b = 0.02, t = 2.38, p < .05$).

To test the interaction predicted by hypothesis 2, we first entered the centered agreeableness and risk of infidelity variables into the regression analysis, and then we entered the interaction term for these two variables. The results revealed an interaction between agreeableness and infidelity risk predicting partner-directed violence ($t = 2.73, p < .01$). The results also showed a main effect of agreeableness ($b = -0.15, t = -3.44, p = .001$) and a main effect of risk of infidelity ($b = 0.01, t = 2.11, p < .05$).

To test the interaction predicted by hypothesis 3, we first entered the centered conscientiousness and risk of infidelity variables into the regression analysis, and then we entered the interaction term for these two variables. The results revealed an interaction between conscientiousness and infidelity risk predicting partner-directed violence ($t = -2.19, p < .05$). The results also showed a main effect of conscientiousness ($b = -0.15, t = -3.16, p < .01$).^{1,2}

3.1. Simple slope analyses

To investigate the relationship between each personality factor and partner-directed violence at different levels of infidelity risk, we conducted separate simple slope analyses for the significant moderations. To compute low and high levels of infidelity risk, we added one *SD* and subtracted one *SD* from the centered infidelity risk (Aiken & West, 1991), and then created new interaction terms with each personality factor and each level of infidelity risk. We conducted nine separate multiple regressions (three for each significant moderation at different levels of infidelity risk) to investigate the simple slopes.

We conducted three separate multiple regressions to test the relationship between emotional stability and partner-directed violence at different levels of infidelity risk (low, medium, and high). The results showed: (1) A negative relationship between men's emotional stability and frequency of partner-directed violence at low levels of infidelity risk ($b = -0.30, t = -4.80, p < .001$); (2) a negative relationship between men's emotional stability and frequency of partner-directed violence at medium levels of infidelity risk ($b = -0.19, t = -4.03, p < .001$); (3) but no relationship between men's emotional stability and frequency of partner-directed violence at high levels of infidelity risk (see Fig. 1).

¹ The OVI variable is positively skewed. We normalized OVI using a square-root transformation and then conducted the three moderation analyses again. The results were not substantially different from the current findings. The analyses using the transformed OVI are available upon request from the first author.

² We also tested interactions between the remaining two personality factors, extraversion and openness, and the risk of partner infidelity in predicting partner-directed violence. The results showed no significant interactions. These analyses are available upon request from the first author.

Table 1
Correlations between the main variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Emotional stability	4.51	.87	–	.28***	.19***	–.17***	–.25***	–.12*	–.23***
2. Agreeableness	4.83	.93		–	.35***	–.14**	–.17***	–.13*	–.19***
3. Conscientiousness	4.82	.91			–	–.12*	–.13**	–.12*	–.15**
4. Infidelity risk	5.21	6.49				–	.09	.11*	.11*
5. VAI	3.30	5.47					–	.35***	.83***
6. IAI	0.27	1.00						–	.82***
7. OVI	0.00	0.82							–

Note. VAI = violence assessment index, IAI = injury assessment index, OVI = overall violence index (The OVI is constructed by standardizing scores on the VAI and IAI and then averaging these standardized scores into a composite OVI).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Main and interaction effects of men's personality traits and perceived partner infidelity risk on partner-directed violence.

Predictors	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>Emotional stability</i>			
Emotional stability	–0.19	0.05	–4.03***
Infidelity risk	0.02	0.01	2.38*
Emotional stability × infidelity risk	0.02	0.01	2.32*
<i>Agreeableness</i>			
Agreeableness	–0.15	0.04	–3.44**
Infidelity risk	0.01	0.01	2.11*
Agreeableness × infidelity risk	0.02	0.01	2.73**
<i>Conscientiousness</i>			
Conscientiousness	–0.15	0.05	–3.16**
Infidelity risk	0.01	0.01	1.63
Conscientiousness × infidelity risk	–0.02	0.01	–2.19*

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

We conducted three separate multiple regressions to test the relationship between agreeableness and partner-directed violence at different levels of infidelity risk. The results showed: (1) A negative relationship between men's agreeableness and frequency of partner-directed violence at *low* levels of infidelity risk ($b = -0.27, t = -4.41, p < .001$); (2) a negative relationship between men's agreeableness and frequency of partner-directed violence at *medium* levels of infidelity risk ($b = -0.15, t = -3.44, p = .001$); (3) but no relationship between men's agreeableness and frequency of partner-directed violence at *high* levels of infidelity risk (see Fig. 2).

Finally, we conducted three separate multiple regressions to test the relationship between conscientiousness and partner-directed violence at different levels of infidelity risk. The results showed: (1) A negative relationship between men's conscientiousness and frequency of partner-directed violence at *high* levels of infidelity risk ($b = -0.25, t = -3.43, p = .001$); (2) a negative relationship between men's conscientiousness and frequency of partner-directed violence at *medium* levels of infidelity risk ($b = -0.15, t = -3.16, p < .01$); (3) but no relationship between men's conscientiousness and frequency of partner-directed violence at *low* levels of infidelity risk (see Fig. 3).

4. Discussion

We investigated the relationships between men's personality traits and perpetration of partner-directed violence in the context of perceived partner infidelity risk. We tested three hypotheses corresponding to interactions between three personality factors of the Five Factor Model (FFM) and perceived risk of partner infidelity. Hypothesis 1 and 2 are partially supported, such that the results indicate a significant interaction between emotional stability, agreeableness, and perceived infidelity risk in predicting partner-directed violence, but the direction of the simple slopes are not in the hypothesized directions. The results indicate that men's low emotional stability and low agreeableness predict partner-directed violence only in the context of low perceived infidelity risk. The results support Hypothesis 3, indicating that conscientiousness interacts with perceived infidelity risk to predict partner-directed violence such that men's low conscientiousness will

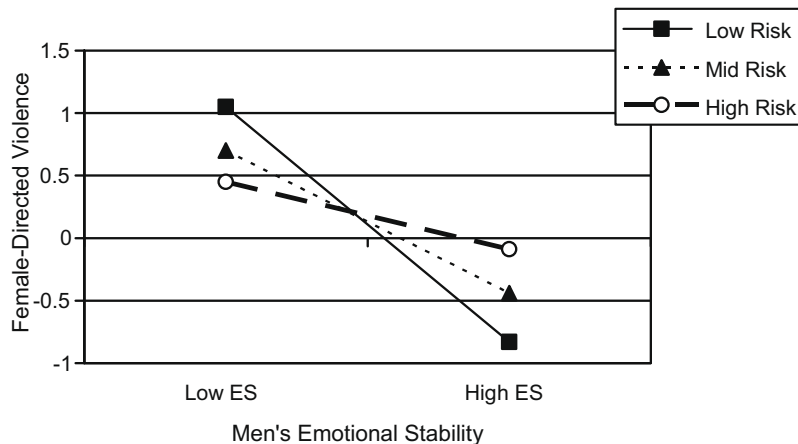


Fig. 1. The relationship between men's emotional stability and partner-directed violence at different levels of perceived infidelity risk.

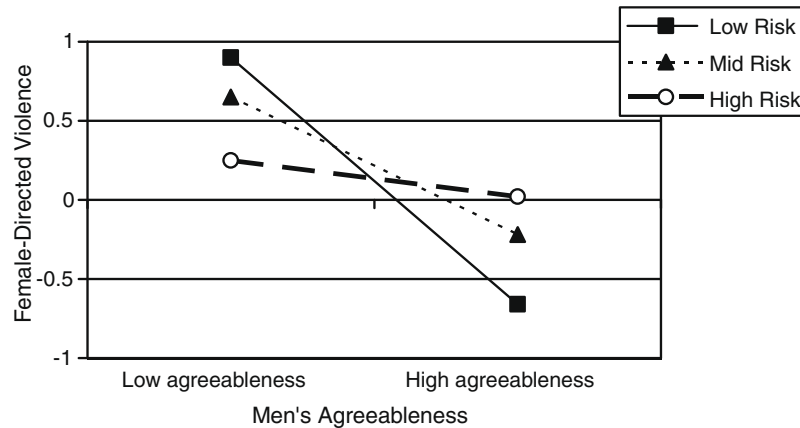


Fig. 2. The relationship between men's agreeableness and partner-directed violence at different levels of perceived infidelity risk.

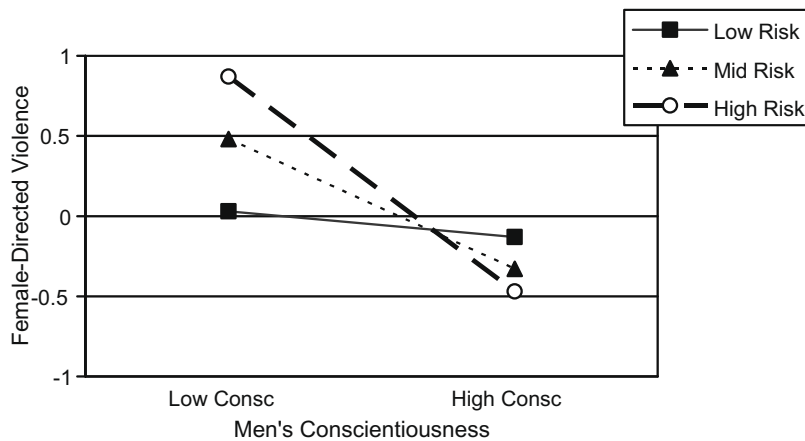


Fig. 3. The relationship between men's conscientiousness and partner-directed violence at different levels of perceived infidelity risk.

predict violence only in the context of high risk of partner infidelity.

The main effects identified in the moderation analyses are consistent with the results of previous research on personality predictors of men's partner-directed violence: (1) men who score lower on emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are more likely to inflict violence against their partners, and (2) men who are suspicious of their partner's³ infidelities are more likely to inflict violence against them.

The results of the simple slope analyses indicate that men's emotional stability and agreeableness predict violent behavior only when the perceived risk of partner infidelity is low. Emotional stability and agreeableness do not predict men's violent behavior when the perceived risk of infidelity is high. In other words, when the perceived risk of female infidelity is low, men high on emotional stability or agreeableness are least likely to be violent, and men low on these factors are most likely to be violent (see Figs. 1 and 2). We speculate that when the perceived risk of partner infidelity is low, men who are impulsive, distrustful, and noncompliant—characteristics associated with low emotional stability and low agreeableness (Widiger, Trull, Clarkin, Sanderson, & Costa,

2002)—are more likely to use partner-directed violence; the findings are consistent with previous research and with the main effects of emotional stability and agreeableness. However, the perceived risk of infidelity appears to have a mitigating effect on partner-directed violence in men with these personality traits. One possible explanation for this finding is that men who are cognizant of their low emotional stability and low agreeableness recognize that by inflicting violence against their partner, they may motivate a partner who is likely to be unfaithful to commit infidelity or to defect from the relationship altogether (e.g., Buss, 2003; Miner, Shackelford, & Starratt, 2009). Men low on these personality factors do not engage in violence when the risk of their partner's infidelity and relationship defection is high. Thus, it may be that men's emotional instability or low agreeableness predicts partner-directed violence only when they are not suspicious of partner infidelity or at initial stages of suspicion (i.e., when perceived infidelity risk is low or medium).

Men's conscientiousness predicts partner-directed violence when the risk of partner infidelity is high. When the risk of partner infidelity is low, conscientiousness no longer predicts violent behavior. In other words, when the perceived risk of female infidelity is high, high conscientious men are least likely to be violent and low conscientious men are most likely to be violent. We speculate that men who are highly conscientious and who are suspicious of partner infidelity are less likely to engage in violent behavior because they may assess that violence towards a partner who is likely to be unfaithful may motivate her to defect the relationship (e.g., Buss, 2003; Miner et al., 2009). Low conscientious men, in contrast,

³ To investigate the independent effects of men's emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness on partner-directed violence, we entered all three personality factors in a multiple regression predicting partner-directed violence. The results indicate that only men's emotional stability ($\beta = -0.13, p < .001$) and agreeableness ($\beta = -0.08, p < .05$) uniquely predict the variance in partner-directed violence. These analyses are available upon request from the first author.

are low on self-discipline and tend not to deliberate before acting (Widiger et al., 2002) and therefore may not anticipate the consequences of violence towards their partners. Thus, they engage in violent behavior when the perceived risk of partner infidelity is high.⁴

4.1. Limitations, future directions, and conclusions

The first limitation of the current research is the lack of paired partner-reports. We secured men's self-reports of their personality standings and their partner-directed violence. Men might be reluctant to report incidences of partner-directed violence (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998). Future research may benefit by securing women's partner-reports of men's perpetration of partner-directed violence. A second limitation is that we cannot make strong causal statements about the identified relationships because the data reflect single assessments. For example, we cannot be certain about the direction of the relationship between perceived risk of infidelity and men's partner-directed violence. It is possible that men who engage in partner-directed violence assume that their partner is more likely to leave the relationship because of it. Future research on partner-directed violence could collect data from both partners across multiple time points to allow detection of causal relationships.

A third limitation of the current study is the moderate internal consistency of the three personality factors. The alphas reliabilities for emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness did not exceed .70, which in turn may attenuate effect sizes. We also deem appropriate to report that the data on men's partner-directed violence is positively skewed. One hundred ninety-three men reported engaging in no acts of violence. To address this limitation, we tested the hypotheses after transforming the OVI variable into a normally distributed variable. However, the findings were not substantially different from the findings using the skewed OVI.

Finally, individual difference predictors of men's partner-directed violence are not limited to men's personality or suspicions of female infidelity. Future research might investigate other proximate or ultimate (described by men's evolved psychological adaptations) predictors of men's partner-directed violence, such as family history of impulsiveness and aggressive behavior or men's perceived low "mate value." For example, men who perceive their value on the local "mate market" as low might engage in more cost-inflicting behaviors towards their partners (Miner et al., 2009), including inflicting violence against her, because they perceive an inability to attract and retain a partner (Figueredo & McCloskey, 1993).

Despite these limitations, the current research adds to the literature on partner-directed violence by investigating the interaction between men's personality and perceptions of partner infidelity risk. The results indicate that men's low emotional stability, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness predict men's violence towards their partners. In addition, men's personality interacts with their perceptions of female infidelity risk to predict partner-directed violence. To achieve a fuller understanding of partner-directed violence, future research might benefit by considering an evolutionary perspective to build models of intimate partner violence that include both stable dispositions, such as personality factors, and situational factors, such as perceived risk of partner infidelity.

⁴ To demonstrate that the interaction effect may be specific to partner-directed violence, we tested the interaction effects with a composite of relationship quality as the outcome variable. The results indicated main effects of personality factors and perceived risk of infidelity; however, none of the interactions predicted relationship quality significantly. These analyses are available upon request from the first author.

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