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Neuroticism and Men's Sexual Coercion as Reported by Both Partners in a Community Sample of Couples

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Compared with other forms of intimate partner violence, very little is known about sexual coercion (SC) and its correlates in intact couples from the general population. Among potential dispositional risk factors for SC, neuroticism has been related to various aspects of couple functioning, including psychological and physical partner abuse. Based on theoretical and empirical evidence, we suggest the existence of two maladaptive profiles on the neuroticism dimension and examine the curvilinear association between neuroticism and men's SC. A total of 299 adult couples completed measures of neuroticism and SC perpetrated by the male partner. Descriptive analyses indicated that SC translated mainly into insistence or partner pressure to engage the other in unwanted sexual activities. Results confirmed the hypothesis that both lower and higher levels of men's neuroticism predict higher levels of men's perpetrated SC, while low to moderate levels of neuroticism predict lower levels of men's SC. These findings contribute to the empirical literature on SC in community samples of couples and bear significant clinical implications for the evaluation and treatment of couples experiencing these negative sexual experiences.

Sexual coercion (SC) by an intimate, generally male (Hamby, 2014) partner is a major social and public health problem, with prevalence rates varying from 4% to 59% depending on the type of act experienced. Sexually coercive behaviors may include rape, attempted force penetration, use of threats, or verbal insistence to engage a person in unwanted sexual activities (Black et al., 2011; Brennan, 2011; World Health Organization/London School of Hygiene and Tropical

Medicine, 2010). Despite adverse personal and relational consequences related to sexual victimization in intimate relationships, such as anxiety, diminished sense of sexual safety, lower self-esteem, impaired sexual self-perception, and feelings of betrayal and disrespect from the partner (De Visser, Rissel, Richters, & Smith, 2007; Maas-DeSpain & Todahl, 2014), SC remains understudied in comparison with other types of partner aggression (Hines & Saudino, 2008). Early explanatory conceptions of men's SC focused mostly on severe and relatively rare psychiatric deviance disorders (Cohen, Garofalo, Boucher, & Seghorn, 1971). However, sexual victimization in various milder forms (e.g., verbal insistence, pressure to engage the partner in sex acts) in

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dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships may be much more common. Contemporary causal models are rapidly evolving to highlight deeply entrenched social scripts (Renaud & Byers, 2005) and pervasive personality features (Mager, Bresin, & Verona, 2014) out of which inappropriate sexual behaviors may emerge in a minority but meaningful proportion of men.

Although most studies regarding sexual coercion have been conducted using samples of convicted sex offenders (Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Taft, 2009), a number of studies on SC included community samples and high school or college samples (e.g. Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Hines, 2007; Katz & Myhr, 2008; Oswald & Russell, 2006), helping to describe the phenomenon in individuals from the general population. Regarding personality risk factors, Abbey, Wegner, Pierce, and Jacques-Tiura (2012) observed that persistent perpetrators (those who reported SC at Time 1 and at a one-year follow-up) committed more severe forms of SC and showed higher scores on psychopathy-related personality traits (callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, and narcissism) than other types of perpetrators and nonperpetrators. Desisters (SC at Time 1 only) and initiators (SC at Time 2 only) did not differ from each other on psychopathy-related traits but differed from nonperpetrators. Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, and LeBreton (2011) also found that psychopathy-related traits were indirectly associated with SC through hostile masculinity and heavy alcohol consumption, in a community sample of single men. Impulsivity (Mouilso, Calhoun, & Rosenbloom, 2013) and antisocial traits (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015) have also been shown to distinguish between perpetrators and nonperpetrators. Others highlighted the contribution of low empathy, anger, and anxiety (for a review, see Sharp et al., 2013).

Using the five-factor model of personality (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992), Voller and Long (2010) found that rape perpetrators show lower agreeableness and conscientiousness than sexual assault perpetrators and nonperpetrators. The authors also observed that rape perpetrators showed evidence of lower extraversion than nonperpetrators. Two studies by Mouilso and Calhoun also concluded that male perpetrators of SC (combining rape and any form of sexual assault) showed evidence of lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012b) and that subclinical psychopathy and narcissism distinguish perpetrators from nonperpetrators (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012a, 2012b). In a study conducted on 146 college men, Forbes and Adams-Curtis (2001) observed no association between the FFM dimensions and sexual aggression. However, the definition of SC referred to a single dimension representing the use, or threat to use, physical force to engage in sexual activities.

Rather than referring to sexual violence as sexual abuse with use of physical force exclusively, the present study refers to SC to account for various behaviors that also encompass milder forms of sexually aggressive acts (e.g., verbal insistence or other types of partner pressure to engage in sexual behaviors) that may be more prevalent among intact couples from the community. Moreover, studies are generally

conducted using individuals rather than couples and do not always examine SC specifically in the context of a romantic relationship. The goal of the current study is to deepen our understanding of the correlates of SC toward an intimate partner, using neuroticism, a personality characteristic that is (a) more widely distributed across the general population of men in comparison with severe clinical personality features (Lenzenweger, 2010), and (b) a robust predictor of marital functioning, including partner violence (Bartholomew, Cobb, & Dutton, 2015).

Neuroticism, Relationship Quality, and Partner Violence

Neuroticism, characterized by negative emotionality and emotional instability, is a universal personality dimension acknowledged by most personality theorists (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1968; Watson & Clark, 1984). Referring to the propensity to experience a variety of negative emotions (anxiety, anger, irritability, etc.), neuroticism and its deleterious impacts on various life domains, such as mental health and well-being, physical health, occupational performance, and relationship functioning, have been extensively studied (for a review, see Lahey, 2009; McNulty, 2013; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006).

High-neurotic individuals are more prone to psychological distress and tend to experience negative emotions more easily and more intensely than their low-neurotic counterparts (Costa & McCrae, 1992), including greater reactivity to anger and expression of hostility (Decuyper, De Bolle, & De Fruyt, 2011). These features of neuroticism have been related to poorer adjustment in several aspects of romantic relationships (for a review, see McNulty, 2013), with the frequency and intensity of between-partner negative interactions being a key exploratory mechanism of this association (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004; McNulty, 2008). The propensity toward adverse relational dynamics in couples where one partner shows a high level of neuroticism may therefore constitute fertile ground for the development of negative escalations, from which violent behaviors may emerge. The lower threshold for the experience of anger in high-neurotic individuals represents a potential risk factor, as meta-analytic results have shown that anger and hostility are significant predictors of partner physical assault (Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005).

Sexually coercive behaviors have received far less attention from researchers (Hines & Saudino, 2008) in comparison with psychological and physical aggression and have generally been neglected in empirical studies (e.g., Cohn, Seibert, & Zeichner, 2009; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008) and in meta-analyses examining personality risk factors for violent behaviors (e.g., Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). Moreover, very little is known about the association between neuroticism and perpetration of SC toward an intimate partner. Given its stable influence on attitudes, behaviors, and relationship experiences (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006), as well as on the perpetration of psychological and

physical abuse (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008), neuroticism may constitute a pervasive risk factor for perpetrating SC against an intimate partner.

In a rare example of a study using both partners' evaluation of SC, Buss (1991) found that, while high-neurotic men were more verbally and physically abusive toward their partner, neuroticism was unrelated to sexual aggression. However, the author defined sexual violence in terms of forced sexual acts and did not assess minor forms of SC. Consequently, the prevalence of sexual violence in this community sample of married couples was very low (2% of women and 1% of men reported being sexually victimized), decreasing the power to detect significant associations. Using a sample of 480 college students, Hines and Saudino (2008) conceptualized sexual violence as including a broader range of coercive acts, such as insisting or threatening the partner, and found a much higher prevalence, with 29.1% of men and 13.2% of women reporting perpetration of SC. In this study, neuroticism was positively associated with SC victimization in women but was unrelated to perpetration in both women and men. In 521 male college students, Voller and Long (2010) observed that, in comparison with nonperpetrators, participants who committed sexual assault showed higher scores on the depression facet of neuroticism, and those who committed rape showed higher scores on the vulnerability facet of neuroticism. No difference was observed for the remaining neuroticism facets. Finally, Forbes and Adams-Curtis (2001) found no association between neuroticism and men's sexual coercion in a sample of 438 college students. Except for the Hines and Saudino (2008) and Buss (1991) studies, sexual coercion as assessed in those studies was not specifically directed toward an intimate partner or in the context of a romantic relationship.

One explanation for the absence of association between neuroticism and perpetrated SC may lie in the fact that studies focused solely on the linear relationship between these variables. Recently, not only high levels of neuroticism but also very low levels have been found to predict lower marital (Daspe, Sabourin, Péloquin, Lussier, & Wright, 2013) and sexual satisfaction (Daspe, Sabourin, Lussier, Péloquin, & Wright, 2015), suggesting a curvilinear association between neuroticism and couple functioning. On one hand, the detrimental aspects of very low neuroticism may be explained by a poor reactivity to normal negative emotions, leading to a lack of concern for potential relational threats, as well as a lack of involvement in problem-solving behaviors. High-neurotic individuals, on the other hand, tend to be overreactive to situations, thus creating an atmosphere of distressing feelings, negative perceptions, conflictual interactions, and sometimes violence within their relationships (Caughlin et al., 2000; Donnellan et al., 2004; Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; McNulty, 2008). Previous studies suggest that researchers must assess the potential negative outcomes associated with scores falling at both extremes of the neuroticism dimension to provide a more accurate appreciation of the association between neuroticism and various aspects of couple functioning. Accounting for this complex influence may help uncover significant relationships that have been overlooked using the

traditional, linear conception of the association between neuroticism and couple outcomes. Consequently, the possibility that high neuroticism and very low neuroticism both foster the use of coercive behaviors in the sexual sphere deserves more attention. In this study, we hypothesized a curvilinear relationship, where scores falling at both ends of the spectrum of neuroticism would predict the use of SC in men from the community.

Overview of the Current Study

The goal of the present study was to examine the potentially complex association between men's neuroticism and SC toward an intimate partner. Using a large sample of couples from the general population, we examined the hypothesis that both high and very low levels of neuroticism predict a higher use of SC, while low to moderate levels predict a lower use of SC. Regarding gender differences, some evidence suggests that SC, especially nonviolent SC, is perpetrated by both women and men (Williams, Ghandour, & Kub, 2008). Empirical data nevertheless show that women are generally sexually victimized more often than men (Hamby, 2005; O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelmann, 1998; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). Moreover, when using dyadic reports of SC, studies consistently suggest gender asymmetry, with male partners being the main perpetrators (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Lipsky, 2009; Chan, 2012; O'Leary & Williams, 2006; Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & McGrath, 2007). In contrast with other types of intimate partner violence that are generally reciprocal (Archer, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Misra, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012), SC remains mostly unilateral, with only 20% of couples experiencing mutual SC (Brousseau, Bergeron, Hébert, & McDuff, 2011). We therefore specifically focused on men's perpetration of SC in the current study. Given that dyadic investigations have been shown to lead to more accurate evaluations of SC compared to individual responses (Brousseau et al., 2011), we used data from both partners to assess the use of men's SC. Studies about SC are either conducted on individuals instead of couples or include only one source (self- or partner report) in the assessment of perpetrated SC. In the current study, the inclusion of both members of a sample of intact couples, as well as the use of both partners' reports of men's use of SC, aims to overcome this limitation. The female partners' report of SC victimization and the male partners' report of SC perpetration were included in the analyses. The inclusion of these two sources of data is an important advantage when studying partner aggression, where the perpetrator may be likely to underreport the use of violence (Fernández-González, O'Leary, & Muñoz-Rivas, 2013). It is also a significant strength of the current study, given that data collection regarding perpetrated violence toward an intimate partner generally relies solely on self-report strategies in samples consisting of individuals without any access to information from the victimized partner. The use of data from both partners allows for a dyadic appreciation of the sexual aspects of the relationship (Dewitte, 2014) and a valid

assessment of sensitive phenomena such as SC. We sought to increase our understanding of individual characteristics associated with men’s use of SC toward an intimate partner and to focus specifically on this type of partner abuse that has been particularly understudied in comparison with psychological and physical violence.

Method

Participants and Procedure. A total of 299 heterosexual couples were recruited from the community. Sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. Partners were from the province of Quebec, Canada, and were contacted through a software program designed to randomly select potential participants using their listed phone number. Inclusion criteria were being aged 18 years or older, being in a heterosexual relationship for at least six months, and being married or cohabiting. Among the households contacted who met the inclusion criteria ($n = 1,128$), 602 (53.4%) couples volunteered to engage in a study on couple satisfaction and stability. They received two envelopes by mail, one for each partner, containing a series of questionnaires. To ensure confidentiality and to avoid mutual influence between partners’ responses, participants were asked to complete the questionnaires separately and to return them by mail in individual, prepaid envelopes. Complete data were obtained for 294 women and 279 men (49.7%). When necessary,

missing data were handled using the full information maximum likelihood (FIML).

Measures

Neuroticism. Neuroticism was measured using the neuroticism scale of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992). This self-report questionnaire assesses the neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness dimensions of the five-factor model of personality (Goldberg, 1990). Each subscale is composed of 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale assessing the extent to which the participant endorses the statement (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). Examples of items for the neuroticism scale are “I am a worrier” and “I often get angry at the way people treat me.” Raw scores for each subscale are converted into *t* scores, based on normalization data for women and men. The following ranges have been suggested (Costa & McCrae, 1992) to interpret scores according to the level of neuroticism: very low (*t* score = 34 or below), low (*t* score = 35–44), moderate (*t* score = 45–55), high (*t* score = 56–65), and very high (*t* score = 66 or above). The French version of the questionnaire was developed by Sabourin and Lussier (1992). Both the original and the translated versions of the NEO-FFI show adequate estimates of construct validity and fidelity, with an α coefficient of .86 for the neuroticism scale (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Correlation Coefficients, Means, and Standard Deviations for Neuroticism, Women’s Report of Experienced SC and Men’s Self-Report of Perpetrated SC

Measure		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	%	<i>n</i>
Age	Men	30.08	5.56	18–47		
	Women	28.02	3.97			
Marital status	Married				31.1	88
	Length of union		8.56	4.67		
		Cohabiting				68.8
Number of children per couple	Length of union	5.97	4.03			
Personal annual income		0.98	1.03	0–5		
	Men	40,215	39,659			
	Women	26,657	38,643			
Education	No degree					
	Men				12.2	34
High school degree	Women				5.1	15
	Men				39.1	109
College degree	Women				30.6	90
	Men				23.7	66
Undergraduate degree	Women				32.0	94
	Men				18.6	52
Graduate degree	Women				28.2	83
	Men				6.5	18
	Women				4.0	12
Measure		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Men’s neuroticism		46.88	10.59	—	.18**	.08
2. Women’s experienced SC		0.13	0.38		—	.48**
3. Men’s perpetrated SC		0.19	0.50			—

Note. Personal annual incomes are in Canadian dollars. SC = Sexual coercion. Mean scores for SC were used.

** $p < .01$.

Sexual Coercion. SC was assessed using a short version of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus & Douglas, 2004; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), a self-report questionnaire assessing partner aggression in the current relationship. The short version developed by Straus and Douglas (2004) contains two items: "I insisted on sex when my partner did not want to" (minor coercion) and "I used force to make my partner have sex" (severe coercion). In the current study, a third item from the original CTS2 was also used: "I used threats to make my partner have sex" (severe coercion). For each item, their partner was asked to answer the following statement "My partner did" to assess experienced coercion. Items were rated on an 8-point Likert scale (0 = *This has never happened*, 1 = *Once in the past year*, 2 = *Twice in the past year*, 3 = *3–5 times in the past year*, 4 = *6–10 times in the past year*, 5 = *11–20 times in the past year*, 6 = *More than 20 times in the past year*, 7 = *Not in the past year, but it did happen before*) indicating the frequency of perpetrated and experienced SC. To focus the main analyses on the presence of SC in the past year, we assigned a score of 0 to the category *Not in the past year, but it did happen before*. The mean score for the three items was computed to obtain a total score of experienced SC and a total score of perpetrated SC. The French version of the questionnaire was developed by Lussier (1997). The CTS2 shows good construct and discriminant validity and the short version constitutes a satisfying alternative to the original form (Straus & Douglas, 2004; Straus et al., 1996).

Analytical Strategy. Descriptive and correlational analyses were used to examine the prevalence of SC in the current sample and to verify associations between the studied variables. To document the prevalence rates and the average number of acts for each type of SC (insistence, threats, or use of physical force), we used midpoint scores, which represent the approximate midpoint of the frequency range for each item. The mean score was used in all remaining statistical analyses. To test our main hypothesis, path analyses were performed using *Mplus* version 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015). Both women's and men's reports of men's sexual coercion were simultaneously included in the model and were allowed to correlate to account for the nonindependence of partners' data. Because the distribution of SC is naturally skewed, the robust maximum likelihood estimation was used. To examine the curvilinear (or quadratic) association between men's neuroticism and SC, a quadratic term for neuroticism was computed by squaring neuroticism scores. Both linear and quadratic terms for neuroticism were exogenous variables in the model. Missing data were handled using FIML, which uses maximum likelihood to estimate model parameters using all available raw data (Arbuckle, 1996; Wothke, 2000). Several fit indices were considered to assess the extent to which the hypothesized model well represents the data. First, a nonsignificant p value for the chi-square statistic or a ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom lower than 3 suggests no difference between the specified model and the observed

variances and covariances (Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 2012). Second, comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) ranges from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates the best possible fit; values above .90 indicate good fit (Bentler, 1992); and values above 0.95 indicate ideal fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Finally, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993) values below .05 indicate good fit and values less than .08 are used as thresholds for adequate model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The confidence interval of the RMSEA represents its precision in assessing the fit of the model (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). A 90% confidence interval (CI) with an upper bound below .08 indicates good fit to the data.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 1. Results of correlational analyses (Table 1) revealed significant associations between men's neuroticism and women's report of experienced SC, as well as between women's and men's reports of SC. In the current sample, SC perpetrated by men was present (at least one act in the past year) in almost one-fifth of the couples (15% according to women's reports and 19% according to men's reports). Table 2 presents prevalence rates for each type of SC, as reported by both partners. In the current sample, SC almost essentially translated into verbal insistence to engage the other in unwanted sexual activities, with a very low occurrence of threats or use of physical force. Because women's and men's reports of SC were significantly correlated, we used a paired-sample t test to examine the presence of significant differences between these two sources of data. Results showed a significant difference between women's and men's reports of SC, $t = -2.61$, $p = .010$, $d = .17$, indicating that men reported perpetrating more SC than their female partner reported experiencing from them. Regarding partners' agreement more specifically, both partners reported no SC in 76% ($n = 207$) of the couples. Within the 65 (24%) couples with SC, as reported by at least one of the partners, both partners acknowledged SC in 34% ($n = 22$) of the cases, women reported SC whereas men did not in 26% of the cases ($n = 17$), and men reported SC whereas women did not in 40% of the cases ($n = 26$).

Final path analyses model is illustrated in Figure 1. Results showed a significant association between men's linear neuroticism and women's report of experienced SC. No significant association was observed between men's linear neuroticism and men's report of perpetrated SC. As expected, significant structural paths from men's quadratic neuroticism to women's report of experienced SC and to men's report of perpetrated SC suggested a curvilinear association between these variables. The specified model showed good fit to the data ($\chi^2(1) = 2.09$, $p = .149$, ratio $\chi^2/df = 2.09$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .06 with 90% CI = 0.00, 0.18).

Table 2. Prevalence Rates for the Different Types of Men’s Sexual Coercion

Items	Men’s Report of Perpetrated SC					Women’s Report of Experienced SC				
	Prevalence		Average Number of Acts in Violent Men			Prevalence		Average Number of Acts in Violent Men		
	Past Year	Life Prevalence	M	ET	Range	Past Year	Life Prevalence	M	ET	Range
Insistence (minor)	16.8%	21.5%	6.87	7.54	1 to 25	14.1%	14.4%	3.98	4.31	1 to 25
Use of threats (severe)	1.8%	1.8%	2	1.22	1 to 4	1.0%	1.7%	1.67	.58	1 to 2
Use of physical force (severe)	0.4%	0.8%	1	0	1	0.3%	0.6%	1	0	1
Total	19.0%	24.1%				15.4%	16.7%			

Note. SC = Sexual coercion. Midpoint scores were used.

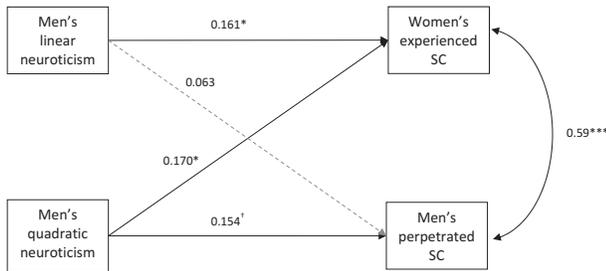


Figure 1. Path analyses for the associations between men’s neuroticism and women’s and men’s reports of men’s SC. Notes. SC = sexual coercion. Regression coefficients are based on standardized scores. †*p* = .06; **p* < .05; ****p* < .001.

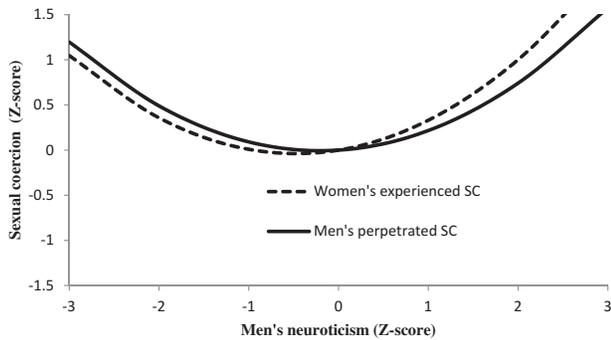


Figure 2. Curvilinear associations between men’s neuroticism and women’s and men’s reports of men’s SC. Note. SC = Sexual coercion.

The shapes of the curvilinear associations between neuroticism and SC are illustrated in Figure 2. The U-shaped relationships for women’s and men’s reports indicate that, from very low levels, neuroticism is negatively associated with SC, until an inflection point from which neuroticism becomes positively associated with SC. An inflection point corresponding to a neuroticism score of 45 for the association with women’s report of experienced SC and a inflection point corresponding to a neuroticism score of 42 for the association with men’s report of perpetrated SC were calculated using the following equation: $X_{\text{inflection}} = -b_1/2b_2$. According to the ranges proposed by Costa and McCrae (1992), a score of 45 falls on the lower limit of the moderate range while a score of 42 falls into the low neuroticism

range. Thus, low to moderate neuroticism in men seems to predict the lowest levels of SC while both lower and higher scores predict higher levels of SC. This model accounted for 7% of variance in women’s experienced SC and 3% of variance in men’s perpetrated SC.

Discussion

In comparison with psychological and physical violence, SC is by far the least studied form of intimate partner violence (Hamby, 2014). Research targeting dispositional risk factors for this phenomenon in intact couples from the general population is also limited. In fact, the bulk of studies dedicated to personality traits associated with SC has been conducted within clinical or correctional settings (Monson et al., 2009) or in individuals from the community rather than couples. Notwithstanding the value of these studies in highlighting individual dispositions toward sexual violence, it remains unclear if the issue occurs in a similar fashion within intact couples from the community. Some authors actually suggest that motivations for violence may differ across different populations (Bowen & Gilchrist, 2004; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994) and distinguish “common couple violence” (Johnson, 1995), generally characterized by more minor forms of violence, from more severe violent crimes. This underscores the need for studies looking at different forms of sexual coercion as well as their dispositional risk factors within intact couples from the community. In the current study, SC was defined as acts including the use of physical force, threats, or verbal pressure to make the partner engage in unwanted sexual activities. We observed that sexually coercive behaviors translated mainly into verbal pressure, with a very low occurrence of more severe forms of SC.

So far, studies conducted with individuals from the general population, mostly using college student samples, have revealed associations between SC and personality characteristics such as low agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion; subclinical psychopathy; narcissism; and impulsivity (Abbey et al., 2011; Abbey et al., 2012; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012a, 2012b; Voller & Long, 2010). To generate more knowledge about the dispositional risk factors of SC specifically in functioning romantic relationships, the goal of the current study was to

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examine the association between neuroticism, a well-distributed personality trait in the general population, and perpetration of sexually coercive acts against an intimate partner. Because SC is a form of partner violence usually committed by males (Black et al., 2011; Hamby, 2014), the study focused on men's neuroticism and men's perpetration of SC against a female partner. We used data from both partners to assess men's coercion, that is, women's report of experienced SC as well as men's report of perpetrated SC.

Curvilinear Association Between Men's Neuroticism and Perpetration of SC. Results confirmed the main hypothesis of a curvilinear association between men's neuroticism and men's SC, for both sources of assessment. Lowest and highest levels of neuroticism were both predictive of men's sexually coercive behaviors. More specifically, from very low to low levels the association between neuroticism and SC was negative, while from low/moderate levels to high levels of neuroticism this association was positive.

At the elevated pole of the neuroticism dimension, characterized by hostility, anger, and irritability, higher risk for SC is consistent with findings obtained for other types of partner violence (Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, & Kim, 2012; Hines & Saudino, 2008). Hornsveld and De Kruyk (2005) observed that sexually violent forensic psychiatric outpatients scored significantly higher on this personality trait than non-sexually violent outpatients. The current findings suggest a similar association between neuroticism and SC in community couples. Given the marked impulsivity and susceptibility to experience intense feelings of anger, anxiety, and irritability observed in highly neurotic men, sexually coercive behaviors may be used to cope with negative emotional states (Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000; Pinto, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2013). As argued by Quayle, Vaughan, and Taylor (2006), the use of sex as a way to deal with affective dysregulation and reduce unpleasant and aversive emotions may play a major role in understanding sexual offenses. The difficulty to cope effectively with stress in individuals with high levels of neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992) may also contribute to partner violence. In this regard, Hellmuth and McNulty (2008) observed that poorer problem-solving skills and the experience of chronic stress predicted physical assault in partners with high neuroticism. Applied to SC, men with high emotional sensitivity and reactivity to negative emotions or situations (i.e., high in neuroticism) may be more prompted to use sexuality (regardless of the partner's willingness) in an urge to gain the illusion of control over strong and overwhelming emotional states.

At the low end of the neuroticism dimension, very low scores on typical facets of neuroticism such as self-consciousness, anxiety, and vulnerability have been related to narcissistic and psychopathic personality disorders (Samuel & Widiger, 2004; Widiger & Costa, 2012). As reported by McNulty and Widman (2013), when components of narcissism are activated in the sexual domain, otherwise known as sexual narcissism, they are associated with sexual exploitation (defined as the tendency

to manipulate the partner to gain sexual access), sexual entitlement (the belief that the fulfilment of one's sexual needs is a personal right) as well as low sexual empathy (a general lack of empathy and devaluation of the partner in sexual contexts). Using a definition of SC that is not limited to the use of physical force and accounts for verbal insistence and threats, these features of sexual narcissism, possibly present at the low end of the spectrum of neuroticism, might explain the use of SC. The weak reactivity to negative emotions characterizing low neurotic individuals may reduce their empathy toward their partner's emotional expression, needs, and desires. It may simultaneously induce emotional apathy, passivity, and insensitivity. These individuals may be more prone to insist on engaging their partner in sexual activities when he or she is not willing, or to be less sensitive or receptive to his or her emotional experience regarding the sexual aspects of the relationship. In sum, the restricted emotionality portrayed in very low neurotic individuals (Widiger & Costa, 2013) is likely to lead to a sense of justified pursuit of their own sexual needs and desires, regardless of their partner's emotional experience.

In terms of scientific implications, the two profiles of vulnerability observed in the current study bring further support to the assumption of a curvilinear association between neuroticism and various aspects of couple functioning (Daspe et al., 2013; Daspe et al., 2015) as well as to recent developments in personality research underlining maladaptive features associated with extreme scores falling at both poles of personality dimensions (Widiger & Costa, 2013). Taken together, these empirical and theoretical findings suggest a need to revise the traditional conceptualisation of the role of neuroticism on diverse life outcomes and to acknowledge its complex and multifaceted influence on relational functioning.

Prevalence and Nature of Sexual Coercion.

Occurring in about 20% of couples, the pattern of SC observed within the current sample suggests that mostly milder forms of sexually coercive acts were committed by men recruited in the present study, with a majority referring to insistence or partner pressure to engage the other in unwanted sexual activities. Although severe coercive behaviors may be perpetrated by men from the general population, the current findings are informative with regard to the nature of SC that is more likely to occur within community couples. They also support the relevance of distinguishing these milder forms of coercion from severe acts of violence, mostly found in men with severe psychopathology (Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004), which might be more extreme and rare in cases within functioning couples from the general population (Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002). Despite its lesser degree, minor SC and associated negative sexual experiences deserve special attention to acknowledge their related psychological and relational outcomes (Hamby & Koss, 2003). Consideration of minor manifestations of coercion might also be essential in preventing escalation of aggressive behaviors, leading to more severe forms of

partner sexual violence. From a systemic point of view, given interrelations between various types of intimate partner violence (Krebs, Breiding, Browne, & Warner, 2011; Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002) and given that mutual violence is the most frequent dynamic of partner abuse (Bartholomew et al., 2015), even milder forms of coercive behaviors from men might set the stage for hostile and aggressive interactions, where both partners are engaged in violent behaviors toward each other.

It is noteworthy that in the current study men reported perpetrating more SC than women reported experiencing from them. This finding contrasts with the general idea that victims are more prone to perceive and report violence than perpetrators (Archer, 1999) but is consistent with previous observations (Brousseau et al., 2011; Perry & Fromuth, 2005). We propose some explanations for women's underreporting of SC. First, the SC social scripts related to masculine and feminine roles could influence the perception of partners' behaviors. For example, Eaton and Matamala (2014) observed that heteronormative beliefs about men as active and persistent in the sexual sphere and about women as more passive but sympathetic to male sexuality might lead to more acceptance of sexual coercion within intimate relationships. Some women might perceive pressure from their male partner as typical male sexual behavior rather than coercion. In addition, within the context of an intimate and enduring relationship, women might feel that sexually pleasing their partner is part of their role, and thus interpret milder forms of coercion as normal attempts to initiate sexual intimacy. Second, in another study using both partners' reports of sexual coercion, Brousseau and colleagues (2011) found that both perpetrators and victims tend to underreport SC. They understood victim minimization as a way to decrease cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), elicited by the paradox of "admitting" to being in a violent relationship. Finally, because milder forms of sexual coercion might be more ambiguous and likely to be interpreted according to one's social script and beliefs (Brousseau et al., 2011), they might be susceptible to more variability in partners' agreement. These hypotheses will need to be examined in future studies.

Clinical Implications. The current results bear significant clinical implications in uncovering two neuroticism profiles that might foster the use of sexually coercive behaviors in men from the community. These findings suggest that extreme scores on the neuroticism dimension represent dispositional risk factors for SC and that evaluation and treatment of couples might benefit from a systematic evaluation of these individual vulnerabilities. The present findings add to other studies highlighting associations between these two problematic profiles of neuroticism and lower levels of women's and men's marital (Daspe et al., 2013) and sexual satisfaction (Daspe et al., 2015), suggesting that particular attention to extreme scores on this personality dimension might inform clinicians about potential difficulties in various spheres of the relationship. Consideration for neuroticism might also constitute a valuable treatment goal, as some authors suggest that this personality trait may be

directly targeted in the therapeutic process (Barlow, Sauer-Zavala, Carl, Bullis, & Ellard, 2014). Given the contribution of neuroticism to the latent structure of a variety of emotional disorders (Lahey, 2009) and empirical evidence supporting its malleability in response to therapeutic intervention (Brown & Barlow, 2009; Piedmont, 2001), addressing neuroticism directly might be an efficient strategy to encompass a broad range of problematic areas of psychological and relational functioning (Barlow et al., 2014). Applied to couple therapy, intervention targeting maladaptive neuroticism might also include addressing divergence with regard to both partners' levels on this dimension as well as their consequences on couple functioning (Piedmont & Rodgers, 2013), helping partners develop strategies to overcome associated difficulties and fostering acceptance of individual differences (Christensen, Doss, & Jacobson, 2014).

Strengths and Limitations. The present study contains several strengths as well as limitations. First, the use of both partners' reports of men's SC provides support for a dyadic approach where both partners' perceptions are considered and prevents possible biases concerning underreporting of sexual violence. Previous studies have showed that violence can be underreported by either the perpetrator or the victim (Brousseau et al., 2011; O'Leary & Williams, 2006). Given the discrepancy between men's and women's reports of men's SC in the current study, it is possible that the use of both partners' assessments of SC provides a more accurate picture of the prevalence of this phenomenon in our sample. In addition, the consistency of the curvilinear association between neuroticism and men's SC across both sources of data strengthens our confidence in the validity of these findings. Moreover, the use of a sample of intact couples from the community constitutes an important occasion to deepen our understanding of the nature of SC faced by these intimate partners as well as to identify specific individual risk factors, which are likely to differ from individuals with criminal antecedents or severe psychopathology.

Regarding limitations, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes any conclusion about the causal role of men's neuroticism on perpetration of SC. Furthermore, the exclusive use of paper-and-pencil questionnaires introduces the problem of shared-method variance, which may have been overcome by using different assessment strategies. Despite the broad definition of SC used in the current study, sexually coercive acts were measured by a three-item version of the SC subscale of the CTS2. Future studies should replicate the current findings using a more thorough and comprehensive assessment of the construct, such as the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss et al., 2007). Moreover, given that participants in the current study were recruited on a voluntary basis, possible self-selection biases may have limited the representativeness of the sample. However, these self-selection biases may have been reduced given our randomized sampling strategy. Next, the results obtained suggest that neuroticism explains only a low percentage of the variance of SC. This is not surprising, however, given that dispositional

risk factors are likely to have a distal impact on the perpetration of sexually coercive behaviors. Conceptual models of the dispositional predictors of SC in romantic relationships might benefit from addressing the role of mediating/moderating proximal variables (e.g., alcohol use, communication skills) through which these distal factors influence partner abuse. For instance, potential mechanisms of the curvilinear association between neuroticism and men's SC have been proposed to explain the results of the current study (attempts to regulate overwhelming negative emotions, lack of empathy for the partner, sexual narcissism, etc.). An examination of these hypothesized underlying mechanisms should be carried out in future studies. Finally, the current study is limited to men's perpetration of SC. Although observed in a lower proportion of cases, studies have demonstrated that men might also be sexually victimized by a female partner. Moreover, reciprocal sexual coercion, especially nonviolent sexual coercion as predominantly found in the current study, is experienced by a substantial minority (about 20%) of couples (Brousseau et al., 2011). Women's use of SC toward male partners therefore needs to be addressed in future research. Nevertheless, the present study contributes to the scarce empirical literature on the contribution of personality to men's SC in community couples and uncovers the influence of neuroticism as a multifaceted dispositional risk factor.

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