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2018 ATSA Conference | Friday October 19 | 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

F-03

Structure and Covariates of the Agonistic Continuum: Assessment and Treatment Implications

Symposium Chair: Raymond A. Knight, PhD
Brandeis University

Sexual Sadism was once thought to be a rare paraphilia, and coercive sexual sadists were conceptualized as an infrequent, extreme, disordered type of offender who constituted a distinguishable separate categorical group. Recent data have indicated, however, that sadism is an endpoint on an Agonistic Continuum that moves from noncoercive sexual fantasies and behaviors, through paraphilic coercive fantasies, through bondage and sexual humiliation, and finally to overt sadism. It is distributed as a dimension and not a taxon or non-arbitrary group (Knight, Sims-Knight, & Guay, 2013). Current research in our laboratory has corroborated the unidimensionality and ordinal structure of the Agonistic Continuum on a new sample of 680 offenders (Longpré, Sims-Knight, Guay, Thornton, & Knight, 2018) and has explored the covariates of the continuum in a large sample of non-criminals using Turk (Longpré, Du, & Knight, 2018).

The major purpose of the proposed symposium is to present the new data that have been generated in our laboratory on the Agonistic Continuum. The first talk of this symposium begins by tracking the history of sadism, with a particular focus on the recent controversies that have arisen in the generation of the DSM-5, including the definitional problems of sadism, the difficulties discriminating sadism from a proposed paraphilic coercive disorder (PCD), and the consequent poor reliability of both sadism and PCD. Next, we will summarize both the original data that support the generation of an Agonistic Continuum and the replication of these results on a new sample. We will then illustrate the advantages of using the continuum for both assessment and treatment. The second talk will explore the etiology of the Agonistic Continuum and present new data on its relation to components of psychopathy and to types of hypersexuality. This talk will end with speculations about the mechanisms underlying sadism and the importance of these for assessment and treatment.

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The Agonistic Continuum: History, Generation, Empirical Support, and Clinical Implications

Raymond Knight, PhD
Brandeis University

The first talk of this symposium has multiple objectives. First it tracks the history of sadism, with a particular focus on the recent controversies that have arisen in the generation of the DSM-5. The definitional problems of sadism will be explored, emphasizing the problem of the difficulties discriminating sadism from a proposed paraphilic coercive disorder (PCD) and the consequent poor reliability of both sadism and PCD. Next, we will summarize both the original data that support the generation of an Agonistic Continuum and the replication of these results on a new sample. We will then illustrate the advantages of using the continuum for both assessment and treatment.

Learning Goals:

- Explore nature of sadism, including its history and the variety of ways it has been and is currently measured.
- Present and explain in a simple, non-mathematical fashion the data that indicate that sadism is the upper end of an agonistic continuum that includes paraphilic coercive fantasies and behavior at the lower end.
- Present new data from our laboratory that corroborate the dimensionality of the agonistic continuum and suggest the ordinal components of its structure.
- Discuss the importance of using the entire agonistic continuum for advancing research, improving risk assessment, and contributing to treatment planning.

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Unpacking the Etiology and Potential Mechanisms Underlying the Agonistic Continuum

Nicholas Longpré, PhD
Brandeis University
Raymond A. Knight, PhD
Brandeis University
Jean-Pierre Guay, PhD
University of Montreal

The second talk will focus on two important aspects of the Agonistic Continuum and its endpoint. First, we will explore the literature on the etiology of sexual sadism. Although various explanations of the etiology of sadism have been proposed, few have been validated. Two new research-based, developmental models of sexual sadism will be presented. Next, the results of an ongoing project that is studying the covariates of the Agonistic Continuum in a community sample will be presented. The aim of this study is to map psychopathy-related traits, hypersexuality, and their underlying emotional mechanisms onto the Agonistic Continuum. We will conclude the symposium with a proposal for a theoretical model of the Agonistic Continuum.

Learning Goals:

- a. Identify the factors associated with the development of sexual sadism.
- b. Present two developmental models of sexual sadism.
- c. Present new data on the covariates of the Agonistic Continuum that suggest likely mechanisms that contribute to its final endstate.
- d. Introduce and elucidate a hypothetical model of the Agonistic Continuum and sexual sadism.

References

- Knight, R. A., Sims-Knight, J. E., & Guay, J.-P. (2013). Is a separate disorder category defensible for paraphilic coercion? *Journal of Criminal Justice, 41*, 90-99.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2012.11.002>
- Longpré, N., Du, R., & Knight, R. A. (2018). *An exploration of the covariates of the agonistic continuum*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Longpré, N., Sims-Knight, J. E., Guay, J.-P., Thornton, D., & Knight, R. A. (2018). *Is paraphilic coercion a different construct from sadism or simply the lower end of a continuum anchored at the high end by sadism?* Manuscript submitted for publication.

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Raymond Knight, PhD, has been researching sexual violence for more than four decades. Dr. Knight has published extensively on sexual aggression, psychopathy, and antisocial behavior. He is the co-creator of the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex, and Aggression (MIDSA), which is one of the inventories that has been administered for the proposed symposium. Dr. Knight's research interests involve the classification, etiology, and prognosis of psychopathology; risk assessment of sexually coercive males; and the efficacy of bullying interventions in the public school system.

Nicholas Longpré is a visiting research scholar in the department of psychology at Brandeis University and a lecturer in criminology at the University of Montreal. His research interests principally revolve around sexual and nonsexual violent offending. More specifically, his work focuses on the study of the latent structure and etiology of sexual sadism and sexually coercive behaviors, the Agonistic Continuum, the measurement of offense-supportive cognitions among sexual offenders, as well as the exchange and consumption of child pornography. He is currently trying to map dysfunctional personality facets, hypersexuality correlates, and emotional processes onto potential brain regions malfunctioning among coercive individuals.

Financial Interest Disclosure:

Some of the data gathered for this research used the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex, and Aggression (MIDSA). The data were collected either in a research setting or as part of evaluations to identify treatment targets for individuals who have sexually offended. The MIDSA is available commercially for assessment purposes. Neither Raymond Knight nor Judith Sims-Knight, who created the instrument, receive any financial Remuneration from their involvement in the commercial product, but nonetheless have a financial interest in the MIDSA because they wish to support its continued use in research and clinical practice.