



A test of the four-factor model of impulsivity-related traits

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Abstract

In a recent article, Whiteside and Lynam [Person. Indiv. Diff. 30 (2001) 669] proposed a new model for understanding personality pathways to impulsive behavior. Their UPPS model maintains that there are four personality dimensions that are related differentially to impulsive behaviors: urgency, sensation seeking, (lack of) premeditation, and (lack of) perseverance. The purpose of the current study was to provide validation for this model and to test some of the specific hypotheses offered by Whiteside and Lynam. The sample used in this study consisted of 481 individuals who completed mailed surveys at age 20 and an in-depth laboratory protocol at age 21. Zero-order correlations and multiple regression analyses were used to examine the relations between the four personality traits and various forms of externalizing behaviors, several types of internalizing psychopathology, and intelligence. Results revealed that the four traits were differentially related to various behaviors and forms of psychopathology consistent with many of Whiteside and Lynam's predictions. Therefore, the UPPS model does appear to offer a novel and useful way of understanding behaviors and forms of psychopathology considered to be characterized by some form of impulsivity.

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Impulsivity is one of the most widely researched, but poorly agreed upon, personality constructs. Despite many different nominal representations, some variant of impulsivity can be found in every major model of personality. Various researchers have described impulsivity-related constructs using terms such as control, deliberation, excitement seeking, impulsivity, novelty seeking, psychoticism, self-discipline, and venturesomeness. Although there is clearly some conceptual and

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content overlap among these impulsivity constructs, there may also be real and important distinctions among them.

Over the past 30 years, there have been several attempts to consolidate the many impulsivity-related constructs by locating impulsivity within a broader framework of personality. For instance, Eysenck and Eysenck (1985) argued that impulsivity had multiple forms, one of which (venturesomeness) existed on the superfactor of Extraversion, while a more “pure” form of impulsivity existed on the superfactor of Psychoticism. Cloninger’s personality model (Cloninger, Przybeck, & Svrakic, 1991; Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993) gave impulsivity its own factor called Novelty Seeking. It is clear from this name that Cloninger’s view of impulsivity is one characterized primarily by a need for engagement in novel and risky behaviors. Similarly, Zuckerman and colleagues (Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993) placed the impulsivity construct on a superfactor entitled Impulsive Sensation Seeking, which combines a need for excitement and danger with a difficulty in delaying one’s behavioral responses in order to first consider the possible consequences. Barratt (1959, 1965, 1972) developed a personality-based model of impulsivity with an explicit goal of distinguishing impulsivity-related traits from anxiety-related traits, in order to capture a “purer” form of impulsivity. Although these various conceptualizations of impulsivity may have merit, they do not seem to capture fully the variety of impulsivity-related constructs found in the literature.

Recently, Whiteside and Lynam (2001) have suggested that the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, as assessed by the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992), might provide a way of parsing impulsivity into its different forms. They argued that the FFM model includes four personality traits that represent distinct pathways to impulsive behavior. These four traits exist on three separate higher-order factors of personality. The first trait they identified was the NEO-PI-R trait of impulsiveness, which is situated on the Neuroticism factor and assesses an individual’s tendency to give in to strong impulses, specifically when accompanied by negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, or anger. Next, they suggested that excitement seeking, a specific trait on the higher-order factor of Extraversion, which measures an individual’s preference for excitement and stimulation, is another route to impulsive behavior. The third and fourth traits, self-discipline and deliberation, both exist on the broader factor of Conscientiousness, and a lack of these traits is hypothesized to lead to impulsive behavior. Self-discipline measures an individual’s ability to persist in completing jobs or obligations despite boredom and/or fatigue, while deliberation assesses an individual’s ability to think through the potential consequences of his or her behavior before acting. Whiteside and Lynam (2001) went on to argue that these four personality dimensions actually subsume the major conceptualizations of impulsivity and that the four dimensions are best understood as four personality pathways to impulsive behavior. That is, rather than one overarching impulsivity factor, there may be multiple impulsivity-related personality traits that lead to various impulsive behaviors.

In order to test these hypotheses, Whiteside and Lynam (2001) conducted factor analyses with the most widely-used impulsivity scales and the four selected scales from the FFM. The results supported the existence of a four-factor model, which accounted for 66% of the variance in the impulsivity instruments. Importantly, each of the four traits from the FFM loaded on a separate factor. Following this, Whiteside and Lynam (2001) created four new scales to assess each of the underlying dimensions. Although the new factors were defined by the FFM scales, in an effort to bring clarity the authors titled the new dimensions urgency (FFM-impulsiveness), perseverance

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