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Personality and Individual Differences 37 (2004) 1693–1700

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Impulsivity as a predictor of smoking and alcohol consumption [☆]

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Received 7 July 2003; received in revised form 3 February 2004; accepted 12 March 2004

Available online 10 May 2004

Abstract

This prospective study examined the relationships between impulsivity, smoking and alcohol use in a large non-clinical sample of 601 men and 4832 women working in 12 Finnish hospitals. Data on impulsivity, smoking and alcohol consumption were collected by two questionnaires with a two-year interval. At baseline, impulsivity was associated with smoking and alcohol use. After controlling for baseline smoking, impulsivity predicted increased number of cigarettes smoked per day in women ($p = 0.08$), but not in men. After controlling for alcohol use at baseline, impulsivity predicted increased alcohol consumption similarly in both genders ($p < 0.01$). Higher impulsivity was also associated with increased likelihood of taking up smoking or becoming a heavy drinker ($p < 0.05$). This evidence suggests that impulsivity contributes to increasing health risk behaviours.

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Keywords: Personality; Impulsivity; Smoking; Alcohol consumption; Health risk behaviour

1. Introduction

Personality may have a role in behaviour involving risk to health, such as cigarette smoking and heavy alcohol drinking (Barefoot, Smith, Dahlstrom, & Williams, 1989; Caspi et al., 1997;

[☆] This study was supported, in part, by grants from The Finnish Work Environment Fund and the Academy of Finland (projects 105195 and 77560).

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Cloninger, 1987; Hoyle, 2000). Impulsivity is a major personality dimension in several personality theories (Gray, 1987; Jackson, 2002), and there is some evidence suggesting a relationship between impulsivity, smoking and alcohol consumption (Bergen & Caporaso, 1999; Grau & Ortet, 1999; Lipcus, Barefoot, Feaganes, Williams, & Siegler, 1994; Mitchell, 1999; Mulder, 2002; Waldeck & Miller, 1997).

Grau and Ortet (1999) found impulsivity to be associated with increased alcohol consumption in a study of 149 non-alcoholics. Mitchell (1999) reported in her study with 40 non-clinical subjects that smokers were more impulsive than never smokers. Lipcus et al. (1994) identified with a large, prospective data that impulsive personality predicted smoking status. Finally, Waldeck and Miller (1997) studied impulsivity, use of alcohol, nicotine and caffeine in their cross-sectional study of 332 students. They found that men with high impulsivity used alcohol and caffeine more than men with low impulsivity. No differences were seen for smoking. Among women, significant differences between high and low impulsivity groups were only found for alcohol intake and smoking.

Previous studies suggest that cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption may be more common among impulsive subjects. However, the existing evidence is typically based on cross-sectional data which cannot exclude the possibility of reversed predictive relationships (i.e. health risk behaviours may predict increasing impulsiveness). Moreover, prior research has insufficiently controlled for potential third factors. For example, low socio-economic status is a correlate of personality and health risk behaviours. Thus, uncontrolled variations in socio-economic status may lead to spurious associations between impulsivity, smoking and alcohol consumption. Furthermore, much of previous studies are limited to clinical samples with poor generalisability to healthy populations.

To reduce many of the limitations in previous research, the present longitudinal study examined the relationships between impulsivity, smoking and alcohol consumption in a large, non-clinical sample of different aged employees. We hypothesised that higher impulsivity would predict higher consumption of alcohol and cigarettes after controlling for age and various indicators of socio-economic status.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twelve hospitals in two of the 23 health districts in Finland volunteered to participate in the project 'Work and health in Finnish hospital personnel' coordinated by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Kivimäki, Elovainio, & Vahtera, 2000). Based on employers' registers, there were 10 968 employees aged 18–63 years working in these hospitals. They were asked to respond to a questionnaire on personality and health risk behaviours in 1998. 8107 employees (74%) responded to the first survey, and of them, 6675 were working in the target hospitals two years later at the time of the second survey. The final cohort included those 5433 (81%) employees (601 men, 4832 women) who also responded to the second survey.

2.2. Measures

Demographic variables at baseline included age, gender, education, as indicated by an 8-point scale (1 = no education to 8 = university), and salary (monthly income in Finnish marks).

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