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The construct of impulsivity revisited

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Abstract

We examine the construct of impulsivity using an organismic-developmental approach. Trait impulsivity was assessed by means of both the *Impulsiveness Questionnaire* (I₇ or I₅) and the *Barratt Impulsiveness Scale* (BIS-11 or BIS-11-A). Cognitive impulsivity was assessed by means of a computerized *Matching Familiar Figures Test*, the *Porteus Maze Test*, the *Trail Making Test*, a computerized *Wisconsin Card Sorting Task*, and *Circle Tracing*. Our data were collected from a total of 182 individuals, ranging in age between 14 and 22 years, divided into two groups. Participants were tested individually, and completed the tests in one session lasting approximately 1.5 h. We were able to substantiate our prediction that the multi-faceted construct of impulsivity becomes more differentiated with age: factor analysis revealed two impulsivity factors in the younger age group (primarily ages 14 and 16), and three impulsivity factors in the older group (primarily ages 20 and 22).

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1. Introduction

The large number of impulsivity measures to be found in the literature—assessing cognitive impulsivity, trait impulsivity, or motor impulsivity (Barratt & Stanford, 1995; Kindlon,

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Mezzacappa, & Earls, 1995)—indicates the growing interest in this construct (Evenden, 1999). Yet, impulsivity is not clearly defined, and the definition varies across studies (Carrillo-de-la-Peña, Otero, & Romero, 1993; Kindlon et al., 1995; Milich & Kramer, 1984). This leads to inconsistent and contradictory findings (Carrillo-de-la-Peña et al., 1993; White et al., 1994).

In this study, we examine the construct of impulsivity using an organismic-developmental approach, in line with Werner's orthogenetic principle (Werner, 1978, pp. 108–109)—that is to say, we postulate a unified construct which develops over time into one having differentiated factors. Specifically, we suggest that the measures defining the construct should therefore become *less* differentiated (or de-differentiated) with *decreasing* age. This approach also gains support from some comments made recently, to the effect that “impulsiveness is much less differentiated in adolescence and probably evidences increased differentiation with advancing age” (Fossati, Barratt, Acquarini, & Di Ceglie, 2002). In factor-analytic terms, we operationalize this notion as follows: with decreasing age, fewer factors should be revealed. To test this hypothesis, we use a number of measures that fall within the domain of impulsivity, broadly constructed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 182 individuals (59 males and 123 females) participated: 72 students from Bar-Ilan university aged between 20 and 22, and 110 high-school pupils aged 14, 16 and 18. Pupils with learning disability or those exhibiting conduct disorders were excluded.

2.2. Personality assessment

2.2.1. The Impulsiveness Questionnaire (*I*₇: Eysenck, Pearson, Easting, & Allsopp, 1985; *I*₅: Eysenck & Eysenck, 1980)

The *I*₇ comprises three subfactors: Impulsiveness (Imp: 19 items), Venturesomeness (Vent: 16 items), and Empathy (Emp: 19 items). The Hebrew *I*₇ has adequate reliability for both Imp ($\alpha = 0.83$) and Vent ($\alpha = 0.81$) in this study, as in our other work (Glicksohn & Nahari, 2007). The Hebrew *I*₅ junior *Impulsiveness Questionnaire* (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1980) included 63 items: Imp (22 items), Vent (19 items), and Emp (22 items). We computed for the *I*₅ a score for Imp based on 19 of the 22 items, and one for Vent based on 16 of the 19 items. The Hebrew *I*₅ has adequate reliability for both Imp ($\alpha = 0.79$) and Vent ($\alpha = 0.77$) in this study, as in our other work (Lipperman-Kreda & Glicksohn, in review), and these values are comparable to those originally reported by Eysenck and Eysenck (1980).

2.2.2. The Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (*BIS-11*: Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995; *BIS-11-A*: Fossati et al., 2002)

We focus on the *BIS* total score (Patton et al., 1995). The Hebrew *BIS-11* has adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$) in this study, as in our other work (Glicksohn & Nahari, 2007). For the adolescents, we used the *BIS-A-11* (Fossati et al., 2002). The Hebrew *BIS-11-A* has adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.77$) in our sample.

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