



## The relationships between personality disorders and social problem solving in adults

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### Abstract

Personality disorders, as defined in DSM-IV, require theoretical models to guide our understanding and treatment of them, and social problem solving is one cognitive model that might contribute. In this study, the relationships between social problem solving and personality disorders were investigated in a sample of 173 men and women in treatment for personality problems. Cluster A diagnoses were infrequent and not amenable to analyses. Of the Cluster B diagnoses, Borderline predominated and was associated with an impulsive/careless problem solving style, as were Histrionic and Narcissistic. Of Cluster C diagnoses, Avoidant was associated with negativity and low impulsive/careless problem solving style, and Dependent with negativity. Thus, the social problem solving profiles of specific personality disorders in Clusters B and C mostly showed the expected associations with personality characteristics. Theoretical and practice implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Personality disorders (PDs), as defined in DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), have been criticised as having been formulated without any theoretical underpinning, with the consequence that efforts to understand and treat PD lacks direction (Arntz, 1999). Nonetheless, Arntz (1999) provided evidence that DSM PDs are reasonably coherent constructs and suggested that it is possible to propose theoretical models of PD that can be empirically tested.

We have proposed a model in which the concept of social problem solving is central to adaptive functioning (McMurrán, Egan, & Duggan, 2005). We postulate that innate traits are the developmental start-point for behavioural patterns. Certain personality traits limit and bias information processing, interfering with the acquisition of good social problem solving skills and consequently leading to dysfunctional ways of operating in everyday life. Interpersonal dysfunction causes stress, experienced affectively in a number of ways including anxiety, depression, and anger. Stress further impairs problem solving abilities and may also lead to problematic stress-relieving behaviours, such as substance use, which still further impair social problem solving abilities and also potentially create additional interpersonal problems. Persistent dysfunction leads to a negative approach to life's problems and the development of maladaptive self-schemas that have a further deleterious effect on information processing and social problem solving. This model is based upon existing, albeit limited, research into problem-solving abilities in people with PDs.

We have examined social problem-solving abilities using the Social Problem-Solving Inventory-Revised (SPSI-R; D'Zurilla, Nezu, & Maydeu-Olivares, 2002), a self-report questionnaire measuring problem orientation and styles of social problem solving. Comparisons of mean scores for male personality disordered offenders with sentenced male prisoners and male mature students showed personality disordered offenders to be most negative, least rational, most impulsive, and most avoidant (McMurrán, Blair, & Egan, 2002; McMurrán et al., 2005).

In further investigations with mentally disordered offenders, we used the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992), finding that high neuroticism (N) predicted poor social problem solving, and correlations showed N to relate positively to both the impulsive/careless and avoidant subscales of the SPSI-R (McMurrán, Egan, Blair, & Richardson, 2001; McMurrán et al., 2005). These dimensions of impulsiveness and avoidance are positively correlated in this sample, as in a student sample (McMurrán et al., 2002), indicating that people with high N use both maladaptive styles. Furthermore, high openness (O) predicted good social problem solving, possibly because O correlates highly with intelligence, which is associated with better social problem solving (Harris, 2004). Looking at the correlations between O and SPSI-R scales, those who scored high on O were more rational and less impulsive/careless in their approach to problem solving, which accords with other research where O has been shown to correlate with planful problem solving (Bouchard, 2003).

One further aspect that we have investigated is impulsiveness, as measured by the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS; Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995). Using our mature students' data, all scales of the SPSI-R correlated significantly and in the expected direction with the BIS, indicating that impulsivity may be one trait that adversely affects problem solving (McMurrán et al., 2002).

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