



# Sensation seeking as a predictor of positive and negative risk behaviour among adolescents

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## Abstract

The present paper examines the relationship between sensation seeking and risk-taking behaviour among adolescents. Risk behaviour is defined as positive risk behaviour (activities like climbing, kayaking, rafting etc.) and negative risk behaviour (crime and socially unacceptable activities like shoplifting, drug use etc.) Perceived challenges and influences from school, parents, friends and social background are examined as contributing factors. Three hundred and sixty adolescents between 12 and 16 years of age from a school in Trondheim, Norway, answered the tests. The test consisted of My Opinion II, a Swedish version of the sensation seeking scale, which measures sensation seeking among adolescents around the age of 14. Three other questionnaires developed especially for this study were also used; one measuring risk behaviour, one measuring challenges from school, parents and friends, and one measuring social background. The results indicate a strong relationship between sensation seeking and both types of risk behaviour. Negative risk behaviour correlates negatively with challenges from both school and parents, and a similar relationship exists between negative risk behaviour and social background. It seems that few challenges and a poor social background could result in more negative risk behaviour. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Sensation seeking; Risk behaviour; Adolescents

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to see whether there is reason to believe that risk sports could prevent problem behaviour and juvenile delinquency. Earlier research indicates that risk activities and adventure programs are successful methods in rehabilitation of criminals and drug abusers

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(Durgin & McEwen, 1993). Interviews of criminals have shown that criminal behaviour is an alternative when there is a lack of opportunity to do exciting and thrilling activities (Robertson, 1994). Since risk sports are often used in rehabilitation, it would be interesting to try such interventions at an earlier point of time in the delinquent's life. This could possibly prevent him or her from entering the criminal path.

The personality trait sensation seeking (Zuckerman, Kolin, Price & Zoob, 1964) characterises people who have a tendency to seek strong sensations and experiences by taking different kinds of risks. The various versions of the sensation seeking scale (SSS) measure this trait, and several former studies demonstrate that both participants in high risk sports and criminals get a high score on this scale (Zuckerman, Bone, Neary, Mangelsdorf & Brustman, 1972; Zuckerman, 1994).

In this study, a sensation seeking scale developed by Björck-Åkesson (1990) has been used along with measures of participation in different types of risk behaviour, challenges in the social environment and social background. The respondents were adolescents, 12–16 years of age. Our first objective was to look at the relationship between sensation seeking and participation in different kinds of risk behaviour. The second objective was to examine the respondents' own experiences of challenges in the environment, and to see if there is a relationship between experience of challenges and the kind of risk behaviour they engage in.

## **2. Earlier research**

### *2.1. Sensation seeking*

The theoretical basis for the present study has been Zuckerman's sensation seeking theory (Zuckerman, 1979, 1994). His definition (1994) serves as an effective basis also for a study of adolescents: "Sensation seeking is a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense situations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, and financial risks for the sake of such experience" (Zuckerman, 1994). The study was designed to determine how adolescents seek stimulation and take risks in relation to these parameters: parents, social background, school, friends and sports. Zuckerman's theory makes it possible to see how individual differences play a role in how the interaction pattern of the above mentioned factors is realised also among youth.

### *2.2. Problem behaviour and sensation seeking*

Sensation seeking and impulsiveness are factors that have been found to influence problem behaviour, especially drug use and criminality (Petersen et al., 1993). Zuckerman et al. (1972) found that there was a connection between sensation seeking and heterosexual activity, drug- and alcohol use. Zuckerman (1994) has reviewed a number of studies examining sensation seeking and drug abuse. The studies show that the use of drugs correlates positively with high scores on the sensation seeking scales. It seems that the reasons to begin drug use are not necessarily the same as the reasons to continue using them. Sensation seeking is crucial in the early phase where the search for a new experience is often an important factor for trying drugs. The reason that some

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