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A detailed analysis of the reliability and validity of the sensation seeking scale in a UK sample

Jacqueline M Gray ^{a,*}, Margaret A. Wilson ^b

^a *School of Health and Social Science, Middlesex University, Queensway, Enfield, EN3 4SA, United Kingdom*

^b *Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, Guildford, GU2 7XH, United Kingdom*

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Abstract

The Sensation Seeking Scale V (SSS-V; Zuckerman, 1979, 1994) has been a popular measure of the sensation seeking trait in the study of a variety of risky behaviours. Despite the popularity of this questionnaire it has previously been criticised in a number of areas, notably the forced-choice format and the nature of some of the items which are somewhat dated, and also the way in which items were selected for inclusion and retention in the scale. This study provides a detailed analysis of the SSS-V, based upon responses from 142 British university students, using a combination of traditional reliability analysis and Smallest Space Analysis. The forced-choice items were broken down to their constituent elements and assessed using a Likert-type scale. The analyses indicated that 19 items should be removed to maximise the reliability and validity of the scale. The items removed are mostly those that are dated in tone or reflect attitudes that are perhaps less useful indicators of sensation seeking at the start of the 21st century.

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* Corresponding author: Tel.: +44 79 67473620.

E-mail address: J.Gray@mdx.ac.uk (J.M Gray).

1. Introduction

The concept of a sensation seeking personality trait was developed by Zuckerman (1979, 1994) to account for differences in people's willingness to participate in risky activities across a wide range of behaviours. Sensation seeking is "a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks for the sake of such experience." (Zuckerman, 1994, p 27). The Sensation Seeking Scale has gone through a number of stages in its development and whilst there is a Sensation Seeking Scale VI, the most widely used version is still the Sensation Seeking Scale V (SSS-V). The SSS-V consists of four sub-scales; Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS), Experience Seeking (ES), Boredom Susceptibility (BS) and Disinhibition (DIS). Since its development the SSS-V and the four sub-scales have been found to be very reliable (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978) and to associate with a wide range of behaviours. These include recreational activities such as mountaineering, scuba diving and adventure travel (e.g. Cronin, 1991; Fowler, von Knorring, & Orelund, 1980; Gilchrist, Povey, Dickinson, & Povey, 1995; Heyman & Rose, 1979) pro-social risk taking among groups such as fire fighters, police and bomb disposal experts (e.g. Goma-i-Freixanet, 1995; Glicksohn & Bozna, 2000; Levenson, 1990) and anti-social risk takers such as criminals, drug users and risky drivers (e.g. Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993; Rosenbloom, 2003).

The structure and item content of the SSS-V has previously been tested in a variety of different cultural contexts such as Israel (Birenbaum, 1986), France (Carton, Jouvent, & Widlocher, 1992) and China (Wang et al., 2000). Using various methodologies, these studies have found the four sub-scales proposed by Zuckerman (1994), although some items have been shown to load onto different sub-scales or to be unreliable. However, in a Canadian sample the structure was found to be similar to those in US samples (Rowland & Franken, 1986).

The original SSS-V consists of 40 forced-choice items, with 10 items relating to each of the TAS, ES, BS and DIS sub-scales. Zuckerman (1994) argues that this format is valid for this questionnaire and that participants do not report any difficulty making the necessary choices. However, the forced-choice format means that some potentially useful information is lost as it does not provide any indication of the extent to which participants agree or disagree with the items, and it also assumes participants' responses are adequately reflected in the choice available (Fife-Schaw, 2000). Whilst the SSS Form VI created by Zuckerman (1984) does not use a forced choice format, it only includes the TAS and DIS sub-scales, and does therefore not include all the aspects of sensation seeking.

A number of criticisms have previously been made of the SSS and the way it is used. Certain items on the scale, such as drug or alcohol use or sexual behaviour, are the same behaviours that the scale is frequently used to measure (Arnett, 1994). Arnett also identifies as problematic the forced-choice format of the questionnaire and that some of the terms used, such as 'hippies', 'jet-set' and 'queer' now sound dated (Arnett, 1994). Subsequently Zuckerman (1996) has revised some of these terms, but it is unclear whether this revision has entirely brought the scale up to date. Despite the criticisms of the SSS-V, and the fact that both Arnett and Zuckerman (1994) have provided revised versions of the sensation seeking scale that do not rely on a forced choice format, this scale is still widely used (Zuckerman, 1996).

A more fundamental issue is perhaps that raised by Jackson and Maraun (1996a), and subsequently discussed by Zuckerman (1996) and Jackson and Maraun (1996b). Jackson and Maraun

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