



Developing a personality profile of the bomb-disposal expert: the role of sensation seeking and field dependence–independence

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Abstract

The high-risk, prosocial professional should score highly on sensation seeking, particularly on the thrill-and-adventure-seeking subscale (TAS). However, the TAS subscale will not permit differential prediction of who will prefer which high-risk job. The cognitive style of field dependence–independence (FDI) could have predictive faculty. We compared a group of bomb-disposal experts to one comprising anti-terror operatives, examining both personality (sensation seeking and the Eysenckian Big Three) and cognitive style. Our prediction was that while both groups would score high on TAS, they would differ on FDI. For comparison, we provide relevant data taken from recently published norms [Glicksohn, J., & Abulafia, J. (1998). Embedding sensation seeking within the big three. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 24, 1–15]. The personality profile of the high-risk, prosocial, professional was found to conform to that of the nonimpulsive sensation seeker who is emotionally stable. As hypothesized, bomb-disposal experts were found to be markedly more field independent than were anti-terror operatives. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Professionals whose work entails calculated risk-taking and physical risk, such as members of the police, fire brigade, those serving in rescue units, special forces, etc., are characterized as

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being high sensation seekers (Gomà-i-Freixanet, 1995; Zuckerman, 1994). One would therefore expect that those serving in elite units, such as bomb-disposal or anti-terror operations, would score highly on sensation seeking, particularly on the thrill-and-adventure-seeking subscale (TAS). However, the data base here is rather meager. Furthermore, even if more data were available, one would not be able to predict differentially those choosing to serve in one unit over the other. Calculated risk-taking is not synonymous with sensation seeking. While high sensation seekers do take risks in different areas (Gomà, Pérez & Torrubia, 1988; Gomà-i-Freixanet, 1995; Zuckerman, 1994; Zuckerman & Neeb, 1980), they do so only when they feel comfortable with their own self-efficacy (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). Self-efficacy, in turn, at least intuitively, seems to be dependent on the amount of responsibility one carries for personal safety.

Cooper (1982) found that bomb-disposal experts tended to prefer working alone and with equipment, rather than with others. They are flexible and unconventional (as is required by the different situations which they have to resolve), while being able to maintain a detached mode of operation and social isolation. Indeed, those undergoing training, who were found to be less comfortable with technology, in greater need of social interaction, and less self confident, were also less successful on their course (Hogan & Hogan, 1989). In contrast, the anti-terror operative usually works in continual interaction with others, thereby incurring group responsibility and mutual dependence. We have combed the literature for studies on these individuals, with no luck. Nevertheless, this social factor may lead to a differential prediction. Following Witkin and Goodenough's (1977, 1981) emphasis on findings indicating that field-independents work more autonomously than do field-dependents, while field-dependents prefer to work with others, we hypothesized that it would be the cognitive style of field dependence–independence (FDI) which would provide such a differential prediction for distinguishing among the risky occupations adopted by high sensation seekers. Indeed, this follows from Witkin and Goodenough's (1977) suggestion that FDI plays a critical role in choice of profession (see also Alvi, Khan, Hussain & Baig, 1988).

This strategy of research will be successful if sensation seeking (and/or any other relevant personality trait) and FDI have a cumulative (and independent) predictive effect (Buss, 1989). Indeed, this has been the line taken by Fine (Fine & Danforth, 1975; Fine & Kobrick, 1976) when using both extraversion and FDI, in a 2×2 design. Fine (1983, 1991) has consistently assumed that there is no correlation between these measures—but, they could still be related. Zuckerman (1979, 1994) has suggested that high sensation seekers should be field independent. Eysenck, on the other hand, has suggested that sensation seeking loads on his dimension of extraversion (Eysenck, 1994; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985), and that extraverts should be field dependent (Eysenck, 1982, 1983). There is a basic mismatch here. We note, however, following Eysenck (1983) (but see Fine, 1983, 1991), that it is probably the impulsiveness factor, previously subsumed under extraversion (and now subsumed under psychoticism), and not the sociability factor currently defining extraversion, which is the key trait similar to field dependence. Furthermore, while there is a close relationship between Eysenck's model of personality and Zuckerman's sensation-seeking construct (Eysenck & Zuckerman, 1978), and while there is agreement on the need for a psychobiological base to personality (Eysenck, 1992, 1994; Zuckerman, 1991), they do differ in important ways (Zuckerman, 1989, 1998). Thus,

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