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Development and validation of an MMPI-based Sensation Seeking Scale [☆]

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Abstract

A measure of the sensation seeking construct was developed based on the MMPI item pool. An 18-item scale resulting from content and factor analysis had high test–retest reliability in a sample of 95 undergraduates. The scale showed good convergent and discriminant validity with respect to Zuckerman's (1979) Sensation Seeking Scale Form V and predictive validity similar to that of the Sensation Seeking Scale when evaluated in a separate sample of 175 undergraduates. In a sample of 461 twin pairs the new scale had a heritability of 0.52, which is also similar to past results for the Sensation Seeking Scale. The results suggest that the new MMPI-based sensation seeking measure may be a useful alternative to previously developed measures of the construct, particularly in settings where the MMPI is already being collected for other reasons.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 30 years, sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979, 1994) has been one of the most widely investigated personality characteristics in basic and applied research. Zuckerman (1994) has described sensation seeking as “a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical, social, and financial risks for the sake of such experience” (p. 27). At this point, hundreds of studies have shown sensation seeking to be a robust predictor of substance use and abuse, risky sexual behavior, and a broad

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range of other behaviors that are expected to be associated with the construct (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000; Zuckerman, 1994). Zuckerman (1994) contended that sensation seeking was a basic personality characteristic reflecting individual differences in biological functioning. As would be expected if this were true, several studies have found sensation seeking to be moderately heritable (Fulker, Eysenck, & Zuckerman, 1980; Hur & Bouchard, 1997; Koopmans, Boomsma, Heath, & van-Doornen, 1995) and the association between sensation seeking characteristics and substance use has been found to be due in part to a shared genetic liability (Mustanski, Viken, Kaprio, & Rose, 2003). Similarly, individual differences in an array of hormonal and psychophysiological measures have been linked to the trait (Zuckerman, 1994).

Form V of the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS; Zuckerman, 1979) is the most common method of assessing sensation seeking, although other measures have been used (Arnett, 1994; Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002). The SSS has 40 items in a forced choice format, and it can be used both as a global Sensation Seeking Scale and as four more specific subscales. SSS has been used in most of the research on sensation seeking, and the measure represents a gold standard for investigations of the sensation seeking construct. However, databases from many existing individual differences studies do not include the SSS, and even in new studies it may not be possible to add another 40 item measure, even when there is some interest in the sensation seeking construct.

The MMPI (Dahlstrom, Welsh, & Dahlstrom, 1972; Graham, 2000) is another widely used measure of psychopathology and individual differences. Because of its clinical utility, the MMPI often is present in existing data sets, and its broad coverage of symptomatology makes it a frequent choice when only a single personality/psychopathology measure is obtained. Unlike focused measures like SSS, the MMPI relies on a large and heterogeneous item pool to assess a broad range of symptoms and other characteristics, and it includes many items not used for the basic MMPI clinical scales. As a result, the MMPI item pool has been used to develop a large number of focused measures of individual differences (Dahlstrom, Welsh, & Dahlstrom, 1975). Because of the widespread use of the MMPI, a reliable and valid MMPI-based measure of sensation seeking would be valuable for investigating the construct in new settings and datasets.

The current study develops and validates a new measure of sensation seeking based on the MMPI item pool. We selected an initial pool of items based on the theoretical concept of sensation seeking; identified a subset of those items loading on a single factor; tested the convergent and discriminant characteristics of the new scale with respect to the SSS and a related MMPI-based measure of behavioral disinhibition, the psychopathic deviate (Pd) scale; evaluated the similarity of the predictive relations of the new scale and SSS with respect to substance use related outcomes; estimated the heritability of the new scale and compared it with previous heritability estimates for SSS; and investigated the test–retest reliability of the new scale.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Validation sample. Participants (96 female, 79 male; mean age 19.35, range 18–26) were undergraduate students who completed a questionnaire in partial completion of course require-

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