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The relationship between cognitive distortions, impulsivity, and sensation seeking in a non-clinical population sample

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between cognitive distortions, impulsivity and sensation seeking. It has been suggested that individuals with psychological problems have a tendency to make negative interpretations and dysfunctional predictions of events. It remains unclear how impulsive individuals interpret the situations that may contribute to their unplanned, rapid reactions with disregard to the consequences of behaviour. A battery of self-report scales measuring cognitive distortions (*Cognitive Distortion Scale*), impulsivity (*Barratt Impulsiveness Scale-11*), sensation seeking (*Sensation Seeking Scale form-V*), depression (*Beck Depression Inventory*), and anxiety (*Beck Depression Inventory*) was administered to a sample of 100 normal people, mainly undergraduate students to examine this. Individuals with high impulsivity had significantly higher levels of dysfunctional cognitions and sensation seeking. Multiple regression analysis showed that only impulsivity and age factors were significant predictors of cognitive distortions, with impulsivity positively correlated, and age negatively correlated, with cognitive distortions. These findings have clinical implications suggesting that cognitive-behavioural interventions targeting information processing characterized by specific cognitive distortions may help people with high levels of impulsivity regulate their behaviour and emotions more effectively, thereby increasing self-control.

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1. Introduction

Beck's cognitive model of psychopathology emphasizes the central role of thinking in the elicitation and maintenance of problematic behaviours or disturbing emotions (Beck, 1976; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). This model suggests that there are several levels of cognitive processing (see Beck & Clark, 1997). At the most immediate and superficial level are the automatic thoughts that come spontaneously and are associated with dysfunctional behaviour and negative emotions (Leahy, 2003). These automatic thoughts are misinterpretations characterized by 'cognitive distortions' and impute vulnerability to negative life events (Beck et al., 1979). Some general and specific cognitive distortions have been identified in a number of psychological disorders (e.g., Beck, 1976; Clark, 1986; Salkovskis, 1985). Despite this, less attention has been paid to investigating the relationship between these cognitive distortions and maladaptive personality traits such as impulsivity and sensation seeking.

Impulsivity is often defined as 'a predisposition toward rapid, unplanned reactions to internal or external stimuli without regard to negative consequences of these reactions to themselves or others' (Moeller, Barratt, Dougherty, Schmitz, & Swann, 2001). Within the behavioural analysis domain, it is believed that impulsive individuals show deficient tolerance of delay of gratification or have difficulty in delaying or inhibiting voluntary responding (Logue, 1995; Ho, Mobini, Chiang, Bradshaw, & Szabadi, 1999). Some other definitions describe impulsiveness in terms of a number of personality traits. Eysenck and Eysenck (1978) found that impulsivity in the broad sense breaks down into four factors: Narrow Impulsiveness, Risk-taking, Non-planning and Liveliness. Later, Eysenck and Eysenck (1985) proposed that impulsivity consisted of two components: venturesomeness that correlates with extraversion, and impulsiveness that correlates with psychoticism.

Barratt and colleagues (see Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995) have developed a general system theory of impulsiveness by including biological, behavioural, environmental, and cognitive factors. They identified three components of impulsivity: motor impulsiveness (acting on the spur of the moment and perseverance), cognitive (attentional) impulsiveness (the ability to focus on the task at hand and cognitive instability), and non-planning impulsiveness (the inability to plan and think carefully) (Patton et al., 1995). Likewise, Zuckerman and colleagues (Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993) have discussed impulsivity based on a general model of personality. They introduced the concept of 'Impulsive Sensation Seeking', which combines a need for excitement, risk-taking and danger with a difficulty in delaying one's behavioural responses in order to first consider the possible consequences. Zuckerman and colleagues (Zuckerman, Ballenger, Jimerson, Murphy, & Post, 1983) found that sensation seeking and impulsivity in humans are correlated, but not synonymous, dimensions of personality.

In addition to these attempts to place impulsivity in a comprehensive theory of personality, impulsivity is recognized as a prominent feature of a variety of psychiatric disorders (DSM-IV: American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The DSM-IV (1994) recognizes a number of distinct categories of 'impulse control' disorders characterized by a variety of dyscontrolled behaviours: intermittent explosive disorder, kleptomania, pyromania, pathological gambling and trichotillomania. However, in clinical practice, impulsivity is widely seen as a prominent feature of a variety

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