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Sensation seeking in the community: Sex, age and sociodemographic comparisons on a representative German population sample

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Abstract

Our current knowledge regarding age and sex differences in sensation seeking is based on studies, which all use the SSS-V. The aim of the present study therefore was to validate the results reported by Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck (1978) while applying an alternative instrument. We also examined the relevance of sociodemographic factors in sensation seeking. German data were collected from 1949 subjects (47% female; aged 16–79 years) constituting a representative population sample of Germany. Sensation Seeking was measured using the Arnett Inventory of Sensation Seeking (AISS), which consists of two subscales: Novelty and Intensity constituting a Total Score. The results clearly confirm the postulated age and sex differences. Significant age declines occurred on all three scales for both sexes. Males generally scored higher than females in all age groups. The age and sex differences are independent of sociodemographic factors. On the whole, sociodemographic factors explain only a small part of the variance in sensation seeking.

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1. Introduction

Sensation seeking, as described by Zuckerman (1994, p. 27), 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”. Currently, the explanation for sensation seeking (SS) is based on a model influenced by genetic, biochemical, psychophysiological and social factors, which influence certain behaviour, specifically, several types of risk behaviour (cf. Roberti, 2004; Roth & Hammelstein, 2003; Zuckerman, 1994). The most frequently used instrument to assess sensation seeking is the Sensation Seeking Scale–Form V (SSS-V) by Zuckerman et al. (1978), a self-report questionnaire composed of four subscales, each of which has 10 forced-choice items. The Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS) subscale reflects a desire to engage in thrill-seeking, risky and adventurous recreational pursuits. The Experience Seeking (ES) subscale represents the need to seek new experiences through, for example, travel, drugs, music, art and an unconventional style of life. The Disinhibition (Dis) subscale reflects a desire for social release through drinking, partying, and a variety of sexual experiences, whereas items on the Boredom Susceptibility (BS) subscale tap into an aversion for repetitive experiences.

At present, age and sex differences in sensation seeking are predominately based on common sense. Zuckerman (1969) postulated early on that sensation seeking relates to developmental phases, and is generally “lower in children, reaches a peak in adolescence and declines thereafter” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 92). This hypothesis is based both on the observations of play and exploratory behaviour in humans and animals, and also on results which demonstrate an increase in conservatism relative to increasing age (cf. Zuckerman, 1979, 1994). Up to now, three studies have examined age and sex differences in sensation seeking in samples with a broad age range. The first comprehensive data on age differences stemmed from an English sample assessed by Zuckerman et al. (1978). The sample consisted of 254 males and 693 females from the Maudsley Twin Register ranging in age from 16 to 70 years. The scores of the Total Scale decreased from the youngest age group (16–19 years) to the oldest group (60 and older) in both sexes. Furthermore, the sex-differences were significant at all age levels with males scoring higher than females. Decreasing values with rising age, however, were not found in all subscales. Higher scores for younger males were only found in TAS and Dis, whereas ES and BS seemed not to be affected by age. These results were partially supported by Ball, Farnnill, and Wangeman (1984) in an Australian group of 363 males and 335 females aged between 17 and 60 years. In the Total Scale, Ball et al. (1984) also found a significant decrease for both sexes. Contrary to Zuckerman et al. (1978) however, there was a significant age-by-sex interaction, caused by the steeper decline for males aged 30–39, resulting in a slightly higher mean for females in the same age group. Analyses of the subscales revealed that age-by-sex interaction could be traced primarily to the ES and Dis subscales. Ball et al. (1984) speculated that the differences were generational rather than age-related because women aged 30–39 years “were brought up in post-war conditions and during times of economic hardship” (p. 264).

The results of a German study including a broad age range ($N = 1480$, 16–59 years) conducted by Beauducel, Strobel, and Brocke (2003) seems to point in a similar direction. In order to analyse

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