



Reliability and validity of a brief measure of sensation seeking

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Abstract

We developed a self-report measure of sensation seeking, a dispositional risk factor for various problem behaviors. In two studies, we administered the Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (BSSS) to more than 7000 adolescents. Study 1 participants completed a paper-and-pencil form of the BSSS in mass-testing sessions. Psychometric analyses of the resultant data revealed suitable item characteristics and internal consistency of responses to the items across age (13–17 years), sex, and ethnic categories. Study 2 participants, who completed the BSSS individually in an interview format, also provided data on their perceptions of and experiences with licit and illicit drugs as well as a series of additional risk and protective factors. Scores on the full BSSS correlated inversely with negative attitudes toward drug use and positively with drug use; sensation seeking as measured by the BSSS was a particularly strong predictor of the intention to try marijuana in the future. BSSS scores were reliably and predictably associated with other risk and protective factors. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Sensation seeking, a biosocial dimension of personality characterized by “the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences” (Zuckerman, 1979a, p. 10), is a potent predictor of a wide array of problem behaviors (Zuckerman, 1994). Individuals high in sensation seeking appear to

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be drawn to activities that are high in risk such as sexual risk-taking (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000), reckless driving (Heino, van der Molen, & Wilde, 1996), smoking (Zuckerman, Ball, & Black, 1990), alcohol use (Stacy, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1993), and use of illicit drugs (Newcomb & McGee, 1991; Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993). One explanation for these findings is that high sensation seekers underestimate the risks associated with such behaviors. Indeed, research findings indicate that sensation seeking is negatively associated with risk estimates for novel activities (Zuckerman, 1979b). Similarly, risk estimates for previously experienced activities are inversely associated with sensation seeking (Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993), an association that is mediated by risky behavior. In other words, high sensation seekers are more likely than low sensation seekers to engage in risky behaviors then, after the fact, less likely to label them as risky. These findings suggest that high sensation seekers are more likely than their low sensation seeking counterparts both to try and to repeat a wide array of risky activities.

1. Assessment of sensation seeking

The sensation seeking construct typically is assessed using Form V of the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS-V; Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978), which comprises 40-items in forced-choice format.¹ The SSS-V produces an overall score as well as scores on four factor-analytically derived subscales: thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition, and boredom susceptibility. The disinhibition and experience seeking subscales represent the less socially acceptable forms of sensation seeking, whereas thrill and adventure seeking and boredom susceptibility reflect a more socially acceptable form of sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1978). Disinhibition is particularly strongly associated with reckless behavior, perhaps due to its apparent effect on the decision stage of information processing (Orlebeke, van der Molen, Dolan, & Stoffels, 1990). Although males tend to score higher than females on the full SSS-V, sex-related differences are largely attributable to the thrill and adventure seeking and disinhibition items (Zuckerman et al., 1978). Also, the pattern of correlations between sensation seeking scores and problem behaviors appears to vary little across sex (Newcomb & McGee, 1991).

Although the SSS-V is meritorious in many respects, it is not optimal for use in many common research contexts. The large number of items prohibits its inclusion in lengthy surveys typical of longitudinal research on problem behavior. The forced-choice format is cumbersome and poses particular difficulties for adolescent respondents. A subset of items refer directly to problem behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and, therefore, must be excluded before scores can be used to predict those behaviors. And the colloquial words and phrases used in some items no longer hold meaning for young respondents.

There have been a number of attempts to develop alternative measures of sensation seeking. The Sensation Seeking Scale for Children (Russo et al., 1993) is a forced-choice measure that comprises 26 items from the SSS-V revised for use with children. Factor analyses indicate that

¹ Zuckerman (1984) introduced Form VI about 5 years after Form V was introduced; however, Form VI was described as an adjunct to, not a replacement for, Form V. Form V remains the standard measure of sensation seeking in adults.

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