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Sensation seeking scales and traits delineating personality disorders in a sample of Chinese students

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Abstract

Scores on the Zuckerman Sensation Seeking Scales (SSS) are consistently elevated in samples of psychopathic patients or prisoners suggesting that sensation seeking is an aspect of antisocial personality disorder. This was investigated in a sample of 171 Chinese university students (102 women and 69 men) who also completed the Dimensional Assessment of Personality Pathology – Basic Questionnaire (DAPP) which assesses four broad domains of personality dysfunction. Factor Analysis clearly identified five-factors, four of which were labeled as “Emotional Dysregulation”, “Dissocial”, “Bored” and “Inhibition”, similar to those detected in the previous studies. Contrary to expectations, except the Boredom Susceptibility was loaded on the factor “Bored” in women, the four SSS subscales were loaded on a fifth factor in both gender samples, suggesting that the SSS does not clearly measure an important feature of personality disorder.

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1. Introduction

Zuckerman (1979, 1994) wrote that to reach and maintain a certain level of arousal, individuals need to experience varied, novel, complex, or intense sensations such as the willingness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks. This willingness is thought to be modulated by personality factors, in particular, by sensation seeking which led Zuckerman (1979) to develop the Sensation Seeking Scales (SSS) to measure this willingness. The SSS is composed of the following subscales: (1) Disinhibition (DIS), which represents the desire for social and sexual disinhibition as expressed in social drinking, partying, and variety in sexual partners; (2) Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS), expresses a desire to engage in sports or other physical activities involving speed and danger; (3) Experience Seeking (ES), represents the seeking of experience through the mind and senses, travel and a nonconformist life-style; and (4) Boredom Susceptibility (BS), represents an aversion to repetition, routine, and restless when things are not changing (Zuckerman, 1979).

There has been some debate as to whether or not Zuckerman's concept of sensation seeking is a basic personality trait or simply a sub-trait of a broader domain, such as extraversion. Several correlational studies have been published between the SSS and measures of the Big Three Model (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, EPQ, Eysenck & Eysenck, 1992), the Five-Factor Model (NEO-PI-R, Costa & McCrae, 1994), or the Alternative Five-Factor Model (e.g., Zuckerman–Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire, ZKPQ, Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993). These studies have reported a relationship between the SSS and NEO-PI-R Openness to experience, specifically with ES ($r = .33$) (Zuckerman et al., 1993), and DIS ($r = .25$), TAS ($r = .30$), ES ($r = .54$) and Total SSS scores ($r = .45$) (McCrae, 1987).

However, Openness to Experience has been found to be unrelated to personality disorder (e.g., Ball, Tennen, Polling, Kranzler, & Rounseville, 1997; Clark, 1993) because this trait had no common etiology with traits delineating personality disorder (Jang & Livesley, 1999). Thus, by virtue of its association with Openness to Experience, it is unclear if SSS can be conceptualized as a feature of personality dysfunction. There is evidence that SSS has been useful in understanding some clinical populations. For example, higher SSS Total and most subscale-scores have been reported in subjects with psychopaths (antisocial behaviors) or prisoners (for recent studies, see Egan, Charlesworth, Richardson, Blair, & McMurrin, 2001; Munoz, Navas, & Grana, 2005; Vermeiren, Deboutte, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2002). Furthermore, sensation seeking characterizes adolescent girls and young women with eating disorders (Rossier, Bolognini, Plancherel, & Halfon, 2000) and that the SSS structures have been confirmed in personality disorder patients (Loas et al., 2001). On the other hand, ZKPQ Impulsive Sensation Seeking which was developed after adopting items measuring both Impulsivity and Sensation Seeking, has been tried to correlate with the disordered personality traits assessed by the Dimensional Assessment of Personality Pathology (DAPP, Livesley & Jackson, in press). A relationship was found between ZKPQ Impulsive Sensation Seeking and DAPP Stimulus Seeking (Clark & Livesley, 1994) and Conduct Problems (Wang, Du, Wang, Livesley, & Jang, 2004). However, it must be made clear that the ZKPQ Impulsive Sensation Seeking is different from the SSS scales because it does not include content that covers specific interests and activities (see Zuckerman et al., 1993). Another weakness is that the majority of the previously published studies reported only the simple correlation between the scales, whereas only a few used the factor analysis to illustrate the co-loaded structures.

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