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Family study of sensation seeking

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of the family study of sensation seeking. The sample consisted of high school students and their parents: 151 offspring (95 females and 56 males), 148 mothers and 118 fathers. Both offspring and their parents completed Sensation Seeking Scale-Form V (SSS-V). Parents also completed the Parental Behaviour Scale (PBS). Parental Behaviour Scale is a measure of parental behaviour developed for the purpose of this research. It consists of 10 items measuring two dimensions of parental behaviour: parental affection and parental control. Each parent had to report his/her own behaviour, as well as the behaviour of their partners. Parents' SSS-V and PBS scores were related with the offsprings' SSS-V scores. Father–offspring correlations ranged between 0.18 and 0.27 for different sensation-seeking subscales, while mother–offspring correlations ranged between 0.02 and 0.24. Regressions of offspring on midparent scores ranged between 0.19 and 0.32. Mother–father correlations were statistically significant for all subscales, except for Thrill and Adventure Seeking Scale, and ranged between 0.26 and 0.46 suggesting assortative mating for sensation seeking in this sample. The only measure from PBS that correlated with children's sensation seeking was fathers' parental control (average fathers' control correlated 0.24 with total children's SSS score).

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1. Introduction

Sensation seeking, as described by Zuckerman (1994), 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. Since the construction of the first Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) in the early 1960s, the concept of sensation seeking has been extensively

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researched. The research has found the behavioural expressions of sensation seeking in various risk-taking behaviours (sexual behaviour, alcohol and drug use, sports, driving habits, gambling), and also linked sensation seeking with different aspects of human life such as social and marital relationships, vocational preferences and choices or eating habits. The research in the field of behaviour genetics, neuropsychology, biological psychiatry and psychophysiology was oriented toward finding biological correlates of sensation seeking.

Fulker, Eysenck, and Zuckerman (1980) analyzed the genetic and environmental contributions to the trait of sensation seeking measured with Form IV of the SSS on 442 twin pairs from the Maudsley twin registry. Their research established that 58% of the general sensation-seeking trait is heritable while the remaining 42% is due to specific or nonshared environmental influences and error of the trait measurement. Another behaviour genetic analysis of sensation seeking was done using the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart and found correlations of 0.54 and 0.32 for identical and fraternal twins reared apart, heritability of 54 and 64% respectively (Zuckerman, 1994). The analysis of the four sensation-seeking subscales, Thrill and Adventure Seeking Scale—TAS, Experience Seeking Scale—ES, Disinhibition Scale—Dis and Boredom Susceptibility Scale—BS, showed that they are, on the phenotypic level, moderately correlated (Zuckerman, 1994). The next step was to explore if genetic and/or environmental effects that contribute to individual differences on these subscales are also correlated and, if they are, to what extent do they explain the covariation between subscales. Koopmans, Boomsma, Heath, and van Doornen (1995) analyzed the genetic architecture of sensation seeking measured with Form IV of the SSS, in 1591 adolescent twin pairs. The genetic correlations between subscales in this study ranged from 0.24 to 0.54 for males and from 0.29 to 0.55 for females, while unique environmental correlations ranged from 0.06 to 0.26 for males and from 0.12 to 0.34 for females. The proportion of total variance attributable to additive genetic factors was highest for Thrill and Adventure Seeking (62% for males, 63% for females) and Disinhibition (62% for males, 60% for females), followed by Experience Seeking (56% for males, 58% for females) while it was lowest for Boredom Susceptibility (48% for males, 54% for females).

Another interesting finding about sensation seeking came from the research of assortative mating. Assortative mating is defined as mating of individuals within a species that are more similar phenotypically than would be expected if only chance mating were to occur (Reber, 1995). Although assortative mating research showed that spouse correlations for personality usually range from 0.10 to 0.20 (Ahern, Johnson, Wilson, McClearn, & Vandenberg, 1982), research done in the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands found high correlations between SSS scores of spouses (Zuckerman, 1994). Lesnik-Oberstein and Cohen (1984) collected data from 177 married couples in the Netherlands and found high spouse correlations for total SSS scores (0.46; $P < 0.01$) as well as for ES (0.51; $P < 0.01$) and Dis (0.40; $P < 0.01$) subscales. There was also assortative mating for TAS and BS subscales, but spouse correlations for those subscales were small, although significant (0.14; $P < 0.05$). But assortative mating for sensation seeking wasn't found only using married couples. Thornquist, Zuckerman and Exline (1991) collected data from 55 college couples in the USA and also found significant correlations between couples total SSS (0.38; $P < 0.01$), ES (0.32; $P < 0.01$) and Dis (0.39; $P < 0.01$) scores, but only marginal significance on TAS (0.21; $P < 0.06$) and BS (0.22; $P < 0.06$) subscales. Recent research done by Glicksohn and Golan (2001) in Israel also found sizable assortative mating for sensation seeking ranging between 0.25 and 0.29 for three SSS subscales—ES, Dis and BS.

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