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Faites vos jeux! Another look at sensation seeking and pathological gambling

Philipp Hammelstein *

Institute of Experimental Psychology, University of Duesseldorf, Universitaetsstrasse 1, Duesseldorf 40225, Germany

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Abstract

Zuckerman (1999) described the pathological gambler as the prototype of a high sensation seeker. The aim of the presented review is to clarify the role of sensation seeking in the aetiology and pathogenesis of pathological gambling, while also drawing conclusions concerning the conceptualisation of sensation seeking. The overwhelming majority of empirical psychometric results contradict the suggestions of Zuckerman which, in part, rely on the measurement of sensation seeking. The results suggest that pathological gamblers have similar sensation seeking values as control subjects, and occasionally display even lower values. Nevertheless, further studies show the importance of (psychometrically measured) sensation seeking in the dynamic of pathological gambling. Based on the reviewed results, this paper aims to critically discuss the concept of sensation seeking and its psychometric assessment, and postulates to conceptualise sensation seeking as a need instead of a concrete behaviour. In regard to possible research directions in pathological gambling, we recommend differentiating between at least three factors: the need for novelty and intensity of stimulation, the available variety of behaviour undertaken to satisfy this need, and the possible control of such behaviour (impulse control).

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1. Introduction

While prevalence rates of pathological gambling are rising dramatically (e.g. Ladouceur, Jacques, Ferland, & Giroud, 1999 for prevalence rates in Canada), research efforts to attempt to understand the aetiology and pathogenesis of this disorder have expanded. One field of research

* Tel.: +49-211-8113482; fax: +49-211-8114261.

E-mail address: philipp.hammelstein@uni-duesseldorf.de (P. Hammelstein).

puts forward the question of whether pathological gamblers are indeed high sensation seekers (e.g. Anderson & Brown, 1984; Blaszczynski, Wilson, & McConaghy, 1986). This question seems to have been neglected in recent theoretical considerations; perhaps due to controversial findings (Sharpe, 2002).

By critically reviewing the corresponding studies, the following article has two major aims: on one hand to clarify the role of sensation seeking in the aetiology and pathogenesis of sensation seeking, while discussing possible consequences for the conceptualisation of sensation seeking on the other hand. The following article does not aim at proposing a complete aetiological model of pathological gambling. Therefore other important constructs for the aetiology of pathological gambling (like e.g. specific cognitive biases and distortions, c.f. Sharpe, 2002) have to be neglected.

2. Are pathological gamblers high sensation seekers?

2.1. *The concept of sensation seeking*

The concept of sensation seeking can be traced back on the works of Zuckerman (1971) and Zuckerman, Kolin, Price, and Zoob (1964). The definition of this concept has changed over time. Initially, Zuckerman (1979) defined sensation seeking as a “trait defined 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 experience” (p. 10). In later years he himself rejected the definition of sensation seeking as a *need* by trying to define sensation seeking as a trait involving the “seeking of varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences” (1994, p. 27). This was done because the term “need” would imply “compulsion” (ibid., p. 26). It is, however, virtually impossible to avoid conceiving sensation seeking as a need: an exclusively behavioural definition without a motivational component would lead to an exclusively descriptive conceptualisation without explicative function. Even Zuckerman himself speaks sometimes of a “need” for sensations (1994, p. 374). Apart from this breach of logical propaedeutics (defining “sensation seeking” by “seeking”), problems arise when defining and operationalising sensation seeking using highly specific behaviour (via the Sensation Seeking Scale—Form V SSS-V; Zuckerman, 1994). In addition to a total score, the SSS-V consists of four factor-analytically determined subscales: thrill and adventure seeking (TAS), experience seeking (ES), disinhibition (Dis) and boredom susceptibility (BS). An alternative concept to sensation seeking was presented by Arnett (1994) based on a fundamental criticism of the SSS-V (Roth, 2003). The Arnett Inventory of Sensation Seeking (AISS) was developed as an alternative instrument for measuring sensation seeking. The AISS attempts to measure sensation seeking defined as “the need for novelty and intensity of stimulation” (Arnett, 1994). The instruments vary on the basis of differential conceptualisations. While Zuckerman (1994) explicitly includes risk taking and illegal behaviour, Arnett excludes such items, viewing this concept in a more general light as a quality of seeking intensity and novelty in sensory experiences (Arnett, 1994, 1996; Beauducel & Roth, 2003). These conceptual differences are reflected in the wording of the items. Zuckerman’s SSS-V contains highly specific descriptions of behaviour, while Arnett, being more interested in the underlying needs, has formulated the items in a more general fashion and has thus minimized the—surely inevitable—involvement of concrete behavioural description.

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