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Personality and Individual Differences 40 (2006) 943–952

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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The role of impulsivity in predicting maladaptive behaviour among female students

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Received 17 January 2005; received in revised form 9 September 2005; accepted 3 October 2005

Available online 23 November 2005

Abstract

This study examines the role of impulsivity and the Big Five personality traits as predictors of academic performance and alcohol consumption in a sample of 273 first year female students at a British university. Academic performance was assessed at two points in the first year, at the beginning and the end of the second semester. The Big Five personality traits, impulsivity and alcohol consumption were assessed by self report at the beginning of the first semester. Impulsivity proved to be a significant predictor of both measures of academic performance and of self-reported alcohol consumption. Of the Big Five traits, only conscientiousness showed a significant positive correlation with academic performance whereas both agreeableness and conscientiousness correlated significantly and negatively with alcohol consumption. Further analysis indicated that despite the high correlation between impulsivity and conscientiousness, as well as with the Big Five taken as a whole, the variance unique to impulsivity was significantly predictive of the criterion variables. Implications for the concept of impulsivity and its relation to the Big Five are discussed. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Impulsivity; Big Five; Academic performance; Drinking behaviour

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1. Introduction

Buss and Plomin (1975) identified the following two characteristics of impulsivity “(1) resisting versus giving in to urges, impulses, or motivational states; and (2) responding immediately and impetuously to a stimulus versus lying back and planning before making a move” (p. 8). Within the domain of personality, impulsivity is considered a trait dimension and is usually measured by self report questionnaires such as the Barratt impulsivity Scale—Version 11 (BIS-11; Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995), the Eysenck I₇ (Eysenck, Pearson, Easting, & Allsopp, 1985) and Dickman’s scale of functional/dysfunctional impulsivity (Dickman, 1990).

There is considerable evidence of the validity of the trait of impulsivity and for its utility in the prediction and understanding of both normal and pathological behaviour. Kipnis (1971) reported significant correlations between impulsivity and academic performance in college students, and Vitaro, Arseneault, and Tremblay (1999) found impulsivity to predict both delinquency and problem gambling in adolescents. Colder and Chassin (1997) found a significant correlation between impulsivity and alcohol consumption in young adolescents and the traits of sensation seeking and ego control, which are closely related to impulsivity, were found by Hampson, Severson, Burns, Slovic, and Fisher (2001) to predict alcohol use in high school students. The results of the Kelly longitudinal study (Kelly & Conley, 1987) illustrate the continuing importance of impulsivity beyond the adolescent years; the trait of ‘impulse control’ predicted the incidence of divorce, marital satisfaction and alcohol abuse in males (though not in females) across a period of 15 years.

The BIS-11 (Patton et al., 1995) has been used extensively to explore the role of impulsivity in psychopathology and delinquent behaviour. Such research has found significant differences in impulsivity between bulimic patients and normal controls (Steiger et al., 2001), between alcoholic and non-alcoholic groups, (Ketzenberger & Forrest, 2000), between female borderline personality patients and controls (Dougherty, Bjork, Huckabee, Moeller, & Swann, 1999) and between adults with and without a history of childhood conduct disorder (Dougherty, Bjork, Marsh, & Moeller, 2000). Stanford, Greve, Boudreaux, Mathias, and Brumelow (1996) found that impulsivity, assessed by the BIS-11, predicted aggression, drug taking and drunk driving in high school and college students and this relationship was especially strong for females.

While the study of single traits such as impulsivity and related traits such as sensation seeking continues, recent decades have seen the rise of hierarchical trait models which aim to encompass the major aspects of personality the most prominent of these being the Five Factor Model (FFM; John & Srivastava, 1999). Such models tend to converge on five broad traits at the highest level of the hierarchy: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. At a lower level of the hierarchy more narrow traits such as deliberation and self discipline are identified as facets of, for example, conscientiousness; while at the lowest level are narrowly defined traits such as tidiness and punctuality.

The FFM subsumes the major traits, both singly and in combination, that are predictive of significant behaviours. For example, there is an extensive body of evidence relating the trait of conscientiousness to various indices of work performance (e.g. Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 2001) and research on the concept of integrity utilises a construct which is an emergent trait—a blend of the independent traits of conscientiousness, neuroticism and agreeableness (Ones & Viswesvaran, 2001).

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