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Personality dimensions and substance use in individuals with mild to borderline intellectual disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The aim of this study was to examine the role of the personality dimensions anxiety sensitivity, negative thinking, impulsivity and sensation seeking (as assessed by the revised version of the Substance Use Risk Profile Scale; SURPS) in substance use in individuals with mild to borderline intellectual disabilities (MBID).

Method: We tested the relationship between level of ID and SURPS personality dimensions and the relationship between SURPS personality dimensions and severity of alcohol and drug use. Participants were 118 persons (mean age 20.5 years) with a mean IQ of 71.1 admitted to care facilities for persons with MBID and severe behavioral problems.

Results: We found no significant relationship between level of ID and the four personality dimensions. In addition, findings showed that individuals with lower levels of anxiety sensitivity, higher levels of negative thinking, impulsivity and sensation seeking showed more severe alcohol use. Individuals with higher levels of negative thinking and sensation seeking had more severe drug use.

Conclusions and implications: The SURPS personality dimensions identify persons at increased risk for substance use disorders and might be useful in developing selective substance use interventions for individuals with MBID.

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What this paper adds

Substance use is widespread among individuals with mild to borderline intellectual disabilities (MBID) and it has a more negative impact on both mental and physical health compared with nondisabled peers. Nevertheless, risk factors for substance use (disorders) in this group are understudied and there is an urgent need to develop and/or adapt substance use interventions. This study was the first to examine the role of personality dimensions in the (severity of) substance use in individuals with MBID. Results provide support for the utility of the substance use risk profile scale (SURPS) personality dimensions and show evidence for the role of personality dimensions in severity of alcohol and drug use in individuals with MBID. Findings have important clinical implications as the SURPS enables the identification of individuals at increased risk for substance use disorders. Subsequently, interventions based on the SURPS can be used to train competences to clients and/or care staff to deal with clients' personality dimensions and associated motives for substance use.

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1. Introduction

The use of alcohol and/or drugs has adverse health and social consequences and is globally one of the major risk factors for morbidity and mortality (United Nations, 2012; World Health Organization, 2014). Similar to individuals with average intelligence, substance use is common and develops as early among those with mild to borderline intellectual disabilities (MBID; Van Duijvenbode et al., 2015; VanDerNagel, Kiewik, Buitelaar, & de Jong, 2011). Estimates of the prevalence of substance use disorder among individuals with MBID vary from 0.5 to 21% (Van Duijvenbode et al., 2015). These prevalence estimates highly depend on sample characteristics, but are particularly high among individuals with MBID and severe behavioral problems, offending behavior or psychiatric co-morbidity (Van Duijvenbode et al., 2015; Chaplin, Partsenidis, Samuriwo, Underwood & McCarthy, 2014). Compared to individuals with an average intelligence alcohol use and misuse seems to be lower in individuals with MBID, while the prevalence of use and misuse of cannabis and illicit drugs seems to be higher (VanDerNagel, Kiewik, Buitelaar et al., 2011). People with MBID have an IQ between 50 and 85 and limitations in their social adaptive skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In this group, substance use has a more negative impact on both mental and physical health compared with nondisabled peers (Barret & Paschos, 2006; To, Neiryck, Vanderplasschen, Vanheule & Vandeveld, 2014). The past decade has shown an increased attention for substance use interventions for people with MBID, although evidence of their effectiveness is still weak (Kerr, Lawrence, Darbyshire, Middleton & Fitzsimmons, 2013). In addition, risk factors for substance use (disorders) for individuals with MBID are understudied. One of the risk factors may be related to individual's personality dimension. In persons without MBID the four personality dimensions anxiety sensitivity, negative thinking, impulsivity and sensation seeking have convincingly been associated with substance use risk (e.g., Krank et al., 2011; Mackinnon, Kehayes, Clark, Sherry & Stewart, 2014; Malmberg et al., 2010; Woicik, Stewart, Phil & Conrod, 2009). It is unclear whether these personality dimensions can also be identified in individuals with MBID which would enable us to identify subgroups of individuals at increased risk for problematic substance use and which would be helpful to develop and adapt interventions to their specific needs. The aim of the present study was to examine the role of personality dimensions in the (severity of) substance use in individuals with MBID.

The above four personality dimensions are commonly assessed by the Substance Use Risk Profile Scale (SURPS; Woicik et al., 2009) which was developed in a community-based sample of adult substance users without MBID (Conrod, Pihl, Stewart & Dongier, 2000). Ample research shows that the SURPS personality dimensions are related to various measures of substance use in adolescents (e.g., Krank et al., 2011; Malmberg et al., 2010; Woicik et al., 2009) and (young) adults (Hecimovic, Barrett, Darredeau, & Stewart, 2014; Mackinnon et al., 2014; Spriggins & Hides, 2015; Woicik et al., 2009) with average intelligence. The SURPS reflects the theoretical perspective that vulnerability to substance use (disorder) can be explained by a sensitivity to either negative or positive reinforcement processes that maintain substance use (Woicik et al., 2009). The dimensions anxiety sensitivity and negative thinking are mainly related to substance use maintained by negative reinforcement, that is substance use to cope with negative emotional states (Comeau, Stewart & Loba, 2001; Cooper, Frone, Russell & Mudar, 1995). However, the specific facets of the personality dimensions anxiety sensitivity and negative thinking determine the nature of negative reinforcement of substance use. Anxiety sensitivity is defined as the fear of symptoms of physical arousal and related to self-medication of anxious symptoms through the use of alcohol and/or drugs (Comeau et al., 2001; Conrod, Pihl & Vassileva, 1998; Woicik et al., 2009). Negative reinforcement related to negative thinking is characterized by substance use to relieve negative affect (Hecimovic et al., 2014; Woicik et al., 2009). Negative thinking has been shown to be related to alcohol use (Krank et al., 2011; Mackinnon et al., 2014), problem drinking (Krank et al., 2011; Mackinnon et al., 2014), cannabis use (Krank et al., 2011) and hard drug use (i.e. opiates, stimulants and hallucinogens) (Conrod et al., 2000; Krank et al., 2011). The personality dimensions impulsivity and sensation seeking are associated with a vulnerability to positive reinforcement and positively rewarding effects of substances (Woicik et al., 2009). Sensation seeking, characterized by the desire for intense and novel experiences, is specifically linked with substance use to attain positive affect (Castellanos-Ryan, Rubia & Conrod, 2011; Woicik et al., 2009). Sensation seeking is associated with alcohol use (Janssen et al., 2014; Krank et al., 2011), drinking problems (Krank et al., 2011), cannabis use (Krank et al., 2011) and hard drug use (i.e. stimulants and hallucinogens; Krank et al., 2011). Impulsivity, finally, is defined as the inability to control behavior when faced with immediate (positive) reinforcement (Castellanos-Ryan et al., 2011) and has been shown to be related to alcohol use (Krank et al., 2011; Mackinnon et al., 2014), drinking problems (Krank et al., 2011; Mackinnon et al., 2014), alcohol dependence (Conrod et al., 2000), cannabis use (Krank et al., 2011) and hard drug use (i.e. stimulants, hallucinogens, cocaine; Krank et al., 2011).

In sum, the association between the SURPS personality dimensions and substance use in individuals with an average intelligence has been well established. Given the high prevalence of substance use among individuals with MBID – especially those with comorbid behavioral and/or mental health problems – and its detrimental consequences there is a need for interventions developed on the basis of underlying risk factors like personality dimensions. The aim of this study is to examine the role of the SURPS personality dimensions in severity of substance use in individuals with MBID. Study participants vary in level of ID (i.e., mild ID IQ between 50 and 69 and borderline ID IQ between 70 and 85), therefore we will first explore the relation between level of ID and SURPS personality dimensions. Then, we will examine the relationship between SURPS personality dimensions and severity of substance use. We expect that the association between the SURPS personality dimensions and substance use in a sample of 118 individuals with MBID will be in line with that in research in individuals with an average intelligence. More specifically, we expect that individuals with MBID scoring high on the dimensions anxiety

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