



# With risk may come reward: Sensation seeking supports resilience through effective coping<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Sensation seeking is often considered a risk factor for negative psychosocial outcomes. Our research challenges this view, testing a model in which sensation seeking is associated with psychological resilience, with this relationship mediated by coping. Two-hundred-and-sixty-eight respondents completed measures of sensation seeking, experiences of trauma, coping, perceived resilience, subjective wellbeing, and perceived stress. Sensation seeking was directly and indirectly positively associated with the psychological resilience markers of life satisfaction, positive affect, and (lower) perceived stress through problem-focused coping in those who had experienced trauma. Sensation seeking was also positively related to greater perceptions of resilience. Based on the results it is argued that sensation seeking increases resilience by decreasing stress responses and increasing individual's resources to manage adversity. Results highlight the need to consider sensation seeking as a multifaceted construct that can support healthy development through building resilience.

## 1. Introduction

Risk taking is often viewed as a negative or irrational behaviour (e.g., Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). Research to understand and mitigate the risks of such behaviour has frequently used trait conceptualisations of sensation seeking to predict negative risky activities (Roberti, 2004). However, some research has found sensation seeking can be associated with positive outcomes (e.g., Ravert et al., 2013). We propose a model in which sensation seeking promotes psychological resilience by promoting perceptions of potential stressors as challenges rather than threats. This increases involvement in, and successful negotiation of these stressors, thereby supporting the development of and belief in individual's coping skills and ability to handle adversity, and supports long-term resilience.

### 1.1. Assessing sensation seeking and resilience

Sensation seeking is most often operationalised using Zuckerman's general definition - "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" (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). The few studies focusing on this "experiential" aspect of sensation seeking found positive associations with resilience-related outcomes, including: lower perceived information overload when using

the Internet; buffering the impact of daily stressors leading to lower psychological discomfort; decreased perceived time to recover from stressful events, and; lower PTSD symptoms after war trauma (Jorgensen & Johnson, 1990; Misra & Stokols, 2012; Neria, Solomon, Ginzburg, & Dekel, 2000; Solomon, Ginzburg, Neria, & Ohry, 1995). However, little research has looked at the processes underlying such findings.

### 1.2. Coping, resources, and self-perceived resilience

Coping refers to behaviours and thoughts people use to manage stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Appraisals are cognitive and emotional processes individuals undertake to determine if a stressor has implications for their wellbeing. Primary appraisals involve assessing whether a situation is positive, dangerous, or irrelevant for one's wellbeing. When situations are appraised as dangerous, individuals consider if the stressor could cause *harm or loss*, presents a *threat* for losses or a *challenge* with potential gains or growth (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Secondary appraisals involve consideration of the resources such as coping styles an individual has to manage the stressor. Coping styles are cognitive and behavioral strategies for managing stress. Many have been identified, and are associated with different outcomes (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Active and problem-focused coping strategies generally result in positive adaptation and better long term functioning

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while denial and avoidance (e.g., consuming alcohol to forget) are associated with longer-term dysfunction (Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006). An individual's resources and the stressor's nature influence the coping strategy selection, however, individuals tend to have "dispositional" coping strategies they use more frequently (Bouchard, Guillemette, & Landry-Léger, 2004), and these can predict longer-term adjustment and resilience (Litman & Lunsford, 2009).

Another important predictor that influences secondary appraisals is an individual's expectancy of their capacities to manage adversity. Self-perceived resilience, belief in one's ability to bounce back from stress, has been linked to positive outcomes despite adversity (Smith et al., 2008). For example, those with greater self-reported resilience had fewer PTSD symptoms and adjustment issues, and better health and wellbeing outcomes following trauma (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Smith et al., 2008). We argue that through increasing stress tolerance and the preference for active management of stressors (Zuckerman, 1994), sensation seeking modulates primary appraisals by framing situations as challenges rather than threats. Additionally, secondary appraisals are influenced by sensation seeking indirectly through increasing beliefs in one's ability to bounce back quickly and employ active coping strategies. Thus, sensation seeking supports the management of adversity and experience of resilience by modulating appraisals. To test these types of models operational definitions for both adversity and positive adaptation aspects of resilience are required.

### 1.3. Operational definitions of adversity and resilience

#### 1.3.1. Measuring adversity

A widely used indicator of adversity is *cumulative lifetime adversity* – a set of major negative life events (e.g., assault, disaster, bereavement) statistically related to poor adjustment and mental disorders (Lloyd & Turner, 2008; Seery, 2011).

#### 1.3.2. Measuring healthy adaptation

Research has used two types of indicators of positive adaptation: *competence* outcomes and psychological *responses* to adversity (Masten, 2001). Competence outcomes (e.g., higher salaries and school grades) are useful indicators of resilience in specific populations, but are poor *general* indicators because norms are culturally, historically, and life-stage specific (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). School grades, for example, are not comparable between completers and early school leavers. Individuals can show competence while experiencing distress, suggesting that competence is not unambiguously indicative of positive adaptation (Masten, 2001). Thus, psychological responses confer the advantage of capturing a broader range of experiences and outcomes that can be compared across groups and the lifespan (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012).

Psychological responses (e.g., subjective wellbeing, perceived trauma) can differ across domains (e.g., affective vs cognitive), therefore it is important to assess short- and long-term adjustment across multiple domains (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Perceptions of stress can also differ between people experiencing objectively similar circumstances, and thus can indicate quality of adaptation (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). We argue that psychological measures capturing short- and long-term adaptation to adversity avoid the limitations of competence-based measures and provide a better picture of resilience for a general population.

### 1.4. The present study

The current study tests whether sensation seeking influences resilience directly during primary appraisals by increasing perceptions of challenge, and indirectly during secondary appraisals by increasing individuals' beliefs in their abilities to handle adversity or through affecting their coping style selection. Several researchers (e.g., Misra & Stokols, 2012; Ravert et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2008) have

proposed relationships between isolated subsets of variables in our model, but to our knowledge, this mediation model is the first to integrate all of these components. We test a mediation model where sensation seeking is related to increased psychological resilience (operationalised as life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and perceived stress) through the mediating factors of coping and perceived resilience.

We hypothesized that sensation seeking would moderate the relationship between cumulative lifetime adversity and psychological resilience. We further hypothesized that the relationship between sensation seeking and psychological resilience would be mediated by active problem-focused coping strategies and self-perceived resilience.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Procedure and participants

The research was approved by the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee. Three-hundred-and-fifty-three participants responded to an online survey using Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2015). Approximately half of the participants were undergraduate psychology university students who participated as part of a research experience program, the remainder were recruited using snowball sampling techniques through Facebook, Reddit, and the Australian Whirlpool Forum. Eighty-four participants who omitted more than 10% of the items were removed from further analyses. None of the outcome resilience measures were correlated with experiencing or witnessing trauma. Since our model makes no predictions about those without trauma, 18 participants who had not witnessed or experienced trauma were removed. The final sample comprised 250 participants (59% female) aged 19–69 ( $M = 34.41$   $SD = 9.52$ ). Ten-per-cent had not finished high school, 22% had completed high school, 29% had a diploma, 29% a bachelor degree, and 10% a masters. Respondents resided in Australia. Ethnicity of participants was 82% Australian, 2% American, 2% Chinese, 2% British, 1% New Zealand, and 1% Sri Lankan with the remainder either not reporting ethnicity or reporting multiple ethnic backgrounds.

### 2.2. Measures

Unless otherwise stated, instruments are scored by summing item responses, with higher scores representing greater expression of the construct measured.

#### 2.2.1. Sensation seeking

Sensation seeking was measured using the Sensation Seeking Scale-V (Zuckerman, 1994). The SSS-V contains 40 items comprising four 10-item subscales: *Thrill and adventure seeking* (TAS), *experience seeking* (ES), *disinhibition* (DIS), and *boredom susceptibility* (BS). Items are dichotomous forced-choice. One point is allocated to each high sensation seeking response and each low sensation seeking score is assigned 0 points. The individual subscales and total (SSVtot) score exhibit poor to excellent reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.60$ – $0.86$ ; Zuckerman & Aluja, 2015).

#### 2.2.2. Brief resilience scale

(BRS; Smith et al., 2008). BRS is a self-perceived resilience measure. Participants rate 6-items using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has demonstrated good reliability in previous studies ( $\alpha \geq 0.80$ ; Smith et al., 2008).

#### 2.2.3. The COPE inventory

(Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Coping style use was measured using the 60-items Cope Inventory. Participants indicate the frequency they use each coping behaviour on a 4-point scale from 1 (*I usually don't do this at all*) to 4 (*I usually do this a lot*). Carver et al. (1989) recommend factor analysing the inventory for every cohort to

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