

Differences in impulsivity and sensation seeking between early- and late-onset alcoholics

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Abstract

The personality traits of impulsivity and sensation seeking have been proposed as important features of early-onset alcoholism. Early-onset (EOA, $n=62$) and late-onset (LOA, $n=68$) alcoholic inpatients were compared as to the severity of their substance use and related problems, and self-report scales measuring impulsivity (Barratt Impulsiveness Scale, version 11), sensation seeking (Sensation Seeking Scale), and aggressiveness (Buss Durkee Hostility Inventory).

The symptom severity of the EOAs' alcohol-use disorder and related problems was higher than that of the LOAs. Furthermore, the EOAs had higher levels of impulsivity, sensation seeking, and aggression relative to the LOAs. The differences in impulsivity remained after an analysis controlling for the effect of aggressiveness. Finally, cigarette smoking was positively correlated with impulsiveness across alcoholic subgroups.

Active screening for impulsive traits in treatment-seeking alcohol-abusing populations is recommended to improve treatment planning and prevent early drop-out.

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1. Introduction

Impulsivity is intimately related to substance abuse (Dawe, Matthew, & Loxton, 2004). Longitudinal studies have identified impulsivity in children as a high-risk factor for early substance use and later substance abuse (Dawes, Tarter, & Kirisci, 1997; Tarter et al., 2003). Cross-sectional studies show higher

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levels of impulsiveness to be associated with substance use and abuse in college students (e.g. Jaffe & Archer, 1987). Within clinical populations it has been demonstrated that illicit drug abusers score higher than controls on inventories of impulsivity (Allen, Moeller, Rhoades, & Cherek, 1998; Petry, 2001). Furthermore, impulsivity proved to be linked to the severity of drug abuse and poor treatment retention (Moeller et al., 2001; Patkar et al., 2004).

High levels of impulsive traits have also been found within alcohol-dependent patients (Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995). However, alcoholism is a very heterogeneous disorder and in the past different typologies have been proposed to distinguish more homogeneous subgroups (Henderson & Galen, 2003; Windle & Scheidt, 2004). High trait levels for impulsivity and sensation-seeking have been associated with specific subgroups within the different classification systems, i.e. type II alcoholism (Cloninger, Bohman, & Sigvardsson, 1981), Type B alcoholism (Babor et al., 1992), and early-onset alcoholism in the univariate classification based on the age of alcoholism onset (Buydens-Branchey, Branchey, & Noumair, 1989; Varma, Basu, Malhotra, Sharma, & Mattoo, 1994). Irwin, Schuckit, and Smith (1990) found age at onset to be a robust predictor of the severity of alcohol dependence and showed it to be associated with a sensation-seeking and impulsive temperament. This is consistent with a recent study revealing age at onset to be a valid classification criterion in male alcohol-dependent patients (Lykouras, Moussas, & Botsis, 2004). It was reported that early-onset alcoholics (EOAs) had more familial alcoholism, higher levels of family and professional instability and more impulsive behaviors compared to the late-onset alcoholics (LOAs).

Finally, an increasing body of research points to a relationship between impulsiveness and nicotine dependence. Studies using self-report measures of impulsivity (e.g. the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale) and those using behavioral tasks (e.g. delay-discounting) have consistently demonstrated higher levels of impulsiveness in smokers than in non-smoking subjects (Baker, Johnson, & Bickel, 2003; Bickel, Odum, & Madden, 1999; Dinn, Ayciceggi, & Harris, 2004; Jaroni, Wright, Lerman, & Epstein, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Reynolds, Richards, Horn, & Karraker, 2004). Recently, Skinner, Aubin, Henri-Jean, and Berlin (2004) found smoking alcoholics to have higher levels of impulsivity than non-smoking alcoholics.

In the present study we were interested in the differences between EOAs and LOAs as to their personality traits of impulsivity and sensation seeking. These traits were measured by two well-known self-report scales: the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS 11; Patton et al., 1995) and the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS; Zuckerman, Kolin, Price, & Zoob, 1964). Furthermore, since a recent study on cocaine-dependent patients demonstrated a high correlation between BIS scores and measures of aggressiveness (Moeller et al., 2002), we included the Buss Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957).

The following hypotheses were put forward: (1) EOAs have higher trait levels of impulsivity and sensation seeking, (2) EOAs have a higher prevalence of paternal alcoholism, (3) EOAs were expected to have a more deteriorated pattern of alcohol and drug use as reflected by higher levels of social, family and legal problems compared to LOAs; and finally, (4) we anticipated higher impulsiveness in alcoholics with co-morbid nicotine dependence compared to those without.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

All alcohol-dependent participants were recruited from an inpatient addiction treatment facility. During a period of 18 months (2003–2004) every second patient hospitalized for treatment of his/her

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