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A review of behavioral and biological correlates of sensation seeking

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of studies related to sensation seeking. A description of sensation seeking and methodology to measure various preferences for sensation seeking is identified. In addition, the relation of sensation seeking with other personality factors is also examined. Various behavioral expressions of sensation seeking in the domains of vocational choices, habits, hobbies, risk perception, and risk appraisal are explored. Furthermore, biological characteristics related to sensation seeking are highlighted. Lastly, areas for future research are suggested, especially the investigation of non-risky forms of sensation seeking in young adults.

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1. Introduction

Sensation seeking is “a trait defined by 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). Sensation seeking traits can be measured via standard self-report questionnaires (e.g., SSS-V). These traits can be partitioned into four dimensions: thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition, and boredom susceptibility (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978). Currently, the explanation for sensation seeking is based on a model influenced by genetic, biological, psychophysiological, and social factors

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(Zuckerman, 1983, 1984, 1990, 1994, 1996; Zuckerman, Buchsbaum, & Murphy, 1980), which influence certain behaviors, attitudes, and preferences.

Sensation seeking individuals tend to engage in behaviors that increase the amount of stimulation they experience. Such behaviors (e.g., interest in stimulating occupations, drug use, driving recklessly, etc.) involve seeking out arousal. The activities to fulfill the preferred arousal vary in the amount of risk associated with them. Risk taking is a correlate of sensation seeking but is not a primary motive in behavior (Zuckerman, 1994). Sensation seekers accept risk as a possible outcome of obtaining this arousal, yet do not seek out risk for its own sake (Zuckerman, 1994).

Satisfying a preference for stimulation can be accomplished through many behaviors, activities, and attitudes (Arnett, 1991; Irwin & Millstein, 1986; Zuckerman, 1985, 1994; Zuckerman & Neeb, 1980). These areas include such things as occupational choice, recreation, lifestyle choices, sports, and social interactions. The purpose of this paper is to examine how sensation seeking preference is associated with preference for certain behaviors, attitudes, and activities. Additionally, biological correlates associated with preference for sensation seeking are identified. To assist the reader, Table 1 provides magnitude of experimental effects for various studies reviewed in this paper.

2. Sensation seeking characteristics

Sensation seeking is a constellation of personality traits related to a primary group of personality traits (Glicksohn & Abulafia, 1998; Zuckerman, 1994; Zuckerman et al., 1993). Because there is no agreement about how many broad personality traits exist, two common taxonomies exist. The “Big Five” measures five difference dimensions labeled: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The “Big Three” measures the traits of psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism. These broad traits of personality are typically measured with questionnaires, including the Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness Personality Inventory, Revised (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R; Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985a).

Sensation seeking is a dimension of personality that is related to factors in the five-factor model of personality (Aluja, Garcia, & Garcia, 2002). Zuckerman (1994) reports that Costa and McCrae (1990, as cited in Zuckerman, 1994) found a positive correlation ($r = .45$, $p < .01$) between the sensation seeking total score on the SSS-V and the NEO-PI-R scale of Openness to Experience. Furthermore, all subscales on the SSS-V, especially the experience seeking (ES) subscale, correlated significantly with the Openness to Experience scale on the NEO-PI. In addition, the Agreeableness scale of the NEO-PI correlated with the total sensation seeking score, the Disinhibition subscale, and Boredom Susceptibility subscale. Zuckerman et al. (1993) found similar results, associating the Openness scale of the NEO-PI-R with the Experience Seeking scale ($r = .43$, $p < .01$) of the SSS-V and Agreeableness with the SSS-V subscales of Disinhibition ($r = -.40$, $p < .01$) and Boredom Susceptibility subscale ($r = -.048$, $p < .01$).

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