Short Communication

The sensation seeking scale V (SSS-V): Still reliable and valid

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Abstract

This is a response to Gray and Wilson’s (2007) article: “A detailed analysis of the reliability and validity of the sensation seeking scale in a UK sample”. Gray and Wilson analysed the items in the four subscales of the SSS-V, using a Likert type response format and deconstructing the forced choice format of the original. However they used some anachronistic items from the old 1978 form rather than the revisions of these items in the newer form. But even excluding the 19 items from the 80 item test not meeting their internal reliability criterion did not improve the reliabilities of the old scales in their Likert format. Validity of the SSS is not really addressed despite the title of the article.

Keywords: Sensation seeking scale; Reliability; Validity; Test construction

1. Main text

Some old tests, like their authors, “just fade away”. Fortunately this has not proven to be true for the SSS-V which dates from Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck (1978). The SSS-V was a shortened version of the older SSS-IV (Zuckerman, 1971) whose items were written in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. The forced choice form was used to control the influence of social desirability. In the mode of behavioral assessment, popular at that time, items tended to reflect behav-
ioral experience, intentions, and desires as well as attitudes consistent with the concept of sensation seeking.

Unfortunately, some of the item content was worded in the vernacular or slang of the time. This is a mistake test constructors should be warned about because if the test survives beyond a generation the vernacular of an older generation may become incomprehensible to the following generations. Sometime in the 1980’s we became aware of the datedness of some of the items and changed the wordings or explained what terms meant in the item itself. One problem with the Gray and Wilson study is that they seem to have used an older version of the SSS preceding the wording changes. Perhaps they used the copy in the appendix of the first book on sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979) instead of the one in the appendix of the second book on sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1994).

The fact that they used the older version is apparent in the items cited, for instance “I stay away from anyone I suspect of being queer”, this item choice was based on the idea that homophobia is a characteristic of low sensation seekers’ fear of the unfamiliar, particularly in the area of sexuality. The word “queer” was not meant to be pejorative although it is now regarded as offensive, at least as used by those who are not themselves homosexual. In the revised version (Zuckerman, 1994) the item reads: “I stay away from anyone I suspect of being ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’”. The term “swingers” is defined in the revised item as “...people who are uninhibited and free about sex”. Four items relating to these two (both choices of the forced choice version) were deleted from their revised Likert format of the SSS.

The title of their article mentions both the reliability and validity of the sensation seeking scale, but their study concerns only the reliability or internal consistency of the four subscales. Both the reliability and validity of the SSS-V can be found in the many hundreds of studies done on the test over the years (Zuckerman, 1979, 1994, 2007). The discriminant validity of the subscales is shown by the findings that they relate differentially to various criteria like musical and art preferences and biological factors like augmenting of the evoked potential. The factor structure of the test has been replicated in many studies even those done on translated versions of the test. But is their study a credible test of the reliability and does it challenge the reliability of the older version?

They adapted the forced choice form to a Likert form so that the 40 item test was deconstructed to 80 Likert type items. The number of subjects (142 British undergraduates) does not seem to be adequate for an analysis based on the intercorrelations of 80 items. Did their deletion of the 19 items which did not cluster most highly with the other items in their respective subscales actually improve the reliabilities in the Likert format? The alpha of the Thrill and Adventure Seeking subscale (0.91) was already so high that it could not be improved by the deletion of items. The alpha of the Experience Seeking subscale went from 0.79 to 0.80. The alpha of the Disinhibition subscale soared from 0.83 to 0.84. The Boredom Susceptibility alpha changed from 0.72 to 0.74. In sum, deleting the 19 deficient items had practically no effect on the reliabilities of the four subscales.

The real problem with the SSS-V that became more apparent over the years was not the reliability of the factors but the confounding of some of the item content with the dependent variables in some studies. A few items concerning drinking and the desire to try drugs were a potential confound in studies of actual use or abuse of substances. Questions about desires to engage in specific risky sports were a confound in studies of those actually engaging in those sports. Some investigators tried to eliminate the confounding by eliminating those items or scales from the test. The validity in predicting engagement in risky sex, drugs, or sports was generally unaffected by such
revisions (Zuckerman, 2007), but when we devised a new scale for “Impulsive Sensation Seeking” as part of a broader 5-factor personality test (Zuckerman–Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire) we decided to remove all references to specific activities in the items (Zuckerman, 2002; Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993). Unlike the SSS-V the ImpSS has only two facets, impulsivity and sensation seeking. Like the other items of the ZKPQ it is in true-false response format. Gray and Wilson (2007) do not mention this scale in their review.

In sum, their study did not take account of the revised SSS-V and used items from an older form no longer in use. Even so, the deletion of items did not change the reliabilities of the four old subscales of the SSS-V and, despite its title, the study did not really address the well-demonstrated validity of the SSS-V or its subscales in terms of their relationships to theory and external criteria.

References


