



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The role of risk propensity in smokers and overweight people[☆]

Ana Isabel Gil-Lacruz*, Marta Gil-Lacruz

Departamento de Organización y Dirección de Empresas, Universidad de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

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KEYWORDS

Body weight;
Smoking;
Risk

Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this study is to investigate the nature of the link associating the risk propensity of smoking and overweight. For example, a person who is a smoker and obese does not have to be more prone to risk than another person who is obese and a non-smoker.

Material and methods: The data were taken from the German Questionnaire on Personality and Daily (Cross section for the period 2005). This questionnaire was selected because it collects individual data on the sociodemographic characteristic, behaviours, risk attitudes, lottery games, and health status. Our main contribution is to analyze the role of risk propensity taking into account smoking and overweight.

Results: Risk propensity encourages smoking, and smoking and overweight are positively associated. The greater the role of the unobserved characteristics, the lower the correlation between smoking and overweight is. Although the risk propensity is an important determining factor of individual behaviour (smoking and overweight), its inclusion does not decrease the influence of personal circumstances and conditions. The need to define other measurements to be able to analyze the risk propensity of risk specific to risk behaviour is also highlighted.

Discussion: To reduce the number of smokers it would require interventions in life styles. Given that overweight is an important determining factor in the decision to smoke, encouraging healthy behaviours, such as physical exercise or balanced diets, could improve the health status of the population in reducing obesity rates, and consequently the number of smokers.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Peso corporal;
Fumar;
Riesgo

El rol de la propensión al riesgo para fumadores y personas con sobrepeso

Resumen

Introducción: El objetivo de este trabajo es estudiar la naturaleza del nexo de unión entre la propensión al riesgo, fumar y el sobrepeso. Por ejemplo, una persona que sea fumadora y obesa no tiene porque ser más propensa al riesgo que otra persona que sea obesa pero no fumadora.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: anagil@unizar.es (A.I. Gil-Lacruz).

Material y métodos: Los datos proceden de la Encuesta Alemana sobre Personalidad y Vida Cotidiana (corte transversal para el periodo 2005). Hemos seleccionado esta encuesta porque recoge datos individuales sobre características socio-demográficas, comportamientos, actitudes de riesgo, juegos de loterías y estados de salud. Nuestra principal contribución es analizar el rol de la propensión al riesgo considerando el consumo de tabaco y sobrepeso.

Resultados: La propensión al riesgo fomenta fumar, y fumar y el sobrepeso están correlacionados positivamente. Cuanto mayor es el papel de las características inobservadas, menor es la correlación entre fumar y el sobrepeso. Aunque la propensión al riesgo es un determinante relevante del comportamiento individual (fumar y sobrepeso), su inclusión no menoscaba la influencia de las circunstancias y condiciones personales. También destacamos la necesidad de definir medidas de propensión al riesgo específicas al comportamiento de riesgo a analizar.

Discusión: Para reducir los ratios de fumadores sería necesario actuaciones sobre los estilos de vida. Dado que el sobrepeso es un determinante importante de la decisión de fumar, promover comportamientos saludables (ejercicio físico o dietas equilibradas, entre otras) podría mejorar el estado de salud de los ciudadanos al reducir los ratios de obesidad, y consecuentemente los ratios de fumadores.

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Introduction

Preventive campaigns remind recurrently citizens about the dangers of smoking and being overweight. Their messages usually make reference to scientific research that quantifies the effects of life styles on health. For example, an anti-tobacco campaign of the World Health Organization¹ states that smokers have a 12-times higher probability of suffering from laryngeal cancer than non-smokers. Although the message of tobacco campaigns is simple ("smoking kills"), many smokers are reticent to quit the habit. The reasons for not quitting smoking are wide ranging such as tobacco addiction (past consumption reinforces their current demand)^{2,3} or the generalized belief that people who quit smoking put on weight.⁴⁻⁶

The reasons for not quitting smoking and/or not controlling the body weight depend on individual priorities. There might be people who smoke, eat in a compulsive way or not practice any physical sport because their future discount rate is high, so they enjoy the present moment without worrying about the potential negative consequences of present behaviours.⁷⁻⁹ However the relationship among risk seeking, risky behaviours and health outcomes is more complex. For example, there might be also people who smoke because they assign a higher value to their social and body images than to their state of health. In this last case, smokers are not only behaving rationally, but also as risk averse.

This argumentation line has important implications for the theory and practice of welfare. The consumers' freedom to choose is the key concept to make people responsible for their own actions. The transfer of responsibility to the individual exonerates the policy makers from implementing any kind of public action. For example, if smokers have health problems derived from consuming tobacco products, they should cover the expenses of their medical treatments and not the state.

Accepting that people smoke on the basis of biased subjective probabilities implies reconsidering the doctrine of consumer sovereignty. In practice, many public policies

are aimed at protecting citizens. Special indirect taxes, regulation of cigarette ingredients, restrictions on selling conditions or anti-tobacco informative campaigns are some examples of public interventions.^{7,10-12}

Although there is no doubt that people are subject to manipulation by television commercials that play with the craving of perfect body images and social awkwardness, conventional economic theory has not considered these ideas in the economic principles.^{10,13-15} In this paper, we address the issue of tobacco consumption and overweight under the paradigm of risk uncertainty. To that end, we have drawn a sample of 1012 observations from the German Personality and Daily Life Survey (Pre-test, 2005). Although most national health surveys, such as the Spanish National Survey on Health (1987-2006), include standardised questions about risky behaviours and health outcomes (ever smoked; daily smokers; number of daily cigarettes; height; weight...), this German survey has the particularity of including a rich set of variables related to risk seeking (lottery games, risk perceptions and risk attitudes). All these variables allow us to control individual heterogeneity to a greater extent than data sets with only basic questions about socio-demographic characteristics, lifestyles and health outcomes.¹⁶

Although the expected utility framework has been implemented to analyze risk attitudes and behaviours with data drawn from lottery experiments,¹⁷⁻²⁰ the contribution of this paper to the economic empirical literature is two-fold. First, we estimate simultaneously two kinds of independent but correlated risky behaviours (tobacco consumption and overweight) under the paradigm of risk uncertainty. Both risks are very common in modern societies, and many people are concerned about their weight when they think about quitting smoking and vice versa. The results of this research have important policy implications because if, for instance, overweight reinforces tobacco consumption, then health campaigns aimed at promoting physical exercise or the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables might be also useful to control tobacco demand.²¹ Second, this paper

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