



Sensation seeking and risk-taking in the Norwegian population



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ABSTRACT

The article is based on a comprehensive study of the relation between sensation seeking and various forms of risk-taking in a representative sample of the adult Norwegian population, aged 15 years and above (N = 1000). The study included social, intellectual, financial, achievement-related, political, physical, ethical and existential risktaking dimensions. There was an expected main effect for age as well as gender on total sensation seeking, but no main effect for social class.

All sensation seeking scales correlated positively with all the risk dimensions, although moderately for most scales. Physical risk had the highest correlation scores. The study found that altogether 21, 2% of the general population had been involved in risky activities during their life and had elevated scores on sensation seeking. A relatively high percentage of the population would be willing to be involved in risky sports (35,7%), risky jobs (54,8%) or risky military operations (25,9%), provided they were in good shape and of the right age. Those who were willing had higher sensation seeking scores.

Only 16,9% of the population thought basejumping or other risk sports should be prohibited. The prohibitionists had lower sensation seeking scores than the non-prohibitionists.

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1. Introduction

The article is based on a comprehensive study of the relation between sensation seeking and various forms of risk-taking in the adult Norwegian population. Our primary goal was to find out how sensation seeking is related to a broader array of risk-taking attitudes than those used in previous studies. We also wanted to find out how sensation seeking is related to socio-demographic background factors and is expressed in choice of work, leisure and risky activities. Since the study was based on a representative sample of the population aged 15 years and older, we have been able to identify a broad array of characteristics of sensation seeking and risk-taking that are valid for the general adult population.

Our study is based on Zuckerman's bio-social understanding of sensation seeking. According to Zuckerman's theory, "sensation seeking is a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense situations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, and financial risks for the sake of such experience" (Zuckerman, 1994, 27). One problem with this definition is that risk-taking is included within the definition of sensation seeking, which makes the connection tautological. However, Zuckerman underlines that sensation seekers do not seek risk for its own sake. It is not the riskiness per se that is important but the stimulation. Listening to rock music or partying is not risky,

whereas other activities like fast driving or drug use involve risk of some type. It is therefore of great interest to find out the ways in which sensation seeking is related to various types and forms of risk and risk-taking.

The concept of risk itself is not unproblematic. In economy and risk management literature risk is typically understood as something negative, as the possibility of a loss of some kind (Yates & Stone, 1992). Zuckerman accordingly defines risk as "the possibility of suffering harm or loss; danger" (Zuckerman, 2007, 52). The loss can be of different kinds. Yates and Stone (1992) suggested financial loss (money), performance loss (for a product), physical loss (from discomfort to death), psychological loss (self-esteem), social loss (esteem of others) and time loss. When Horvath and Zuckerman (1993) factor analyzed items they found four major areas involved in voluntary activities: "crime risk (offenses serious enough to warrant arrest), minor violations risk (e.g. traffic offenses), financial risk (loss of money from gambling and business investment) and sports risk (injuries incurred in sporting activities)" (Zuckerman, 2007, 42). We think that risks and risk-taking should therefore be differentiated in a proper way into different types or forms. Below we propose a new and wider model of risks and risk-taking from those which have previously been used.

One problem with the dominant conception of risk and risk-taking is that it mainly focuses on negative or adverse aspects of risk. First, risky decisions seem to be influenced by more than simply a loss. Yates and Stone (1992) defined three characteristics of risk in any activity: potential losses, significance of the losses and uncertainty of the losses. But

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secondly, decisions about risks depend not only upon possible losses, but also upon possible benefits. As shown in various types of decision theory actions may have a total expected utility that warrant risky decisions. And we would argue that it is not only the possible consequences and outcomes, but the character of the activity itself that plays a role; something of which Zuckerman is aware. For high sensation seekers in particular risky activities may be experienced as positive in themselves, even if they are dangerous. Risk-taking, or rather risk-seeking, is identified in sports and other contexts as the positive experience of thrills or flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Zuckerman, 1994). The risk element adds value and content to the experience of the activity since one needs to master the activity in the face of danger. Risk, thus, contains negative as well as positive possibilities dependent upon person, situation, and context.

One important question is whether risk-taking is general or different across dimensions or domains. In a study by Franken, Gibson, and Rowland (1992) sensation seeking was negatively correlated with the tendency to view the world as threatening and the tendency to expect negative outcomes resulting from interactions with the world. High sensation seekers are positive and optimistic. According to studies reported by Zuckerman (1979) high sensation seekers accept higher risks to reach their goals. They experience less anxiety or fear and more positive sensations in situations that are unfamiliar or risky. They have a lower appraisal of risk in situations involving physical, mental or punishment aspects. Zuckerman thus concludes: "Sensation seeking is related to risk-taking in all kinds of risk areas. This is true of children as well as adolescents and young adults. In fact, the sensation seeking trait may be the common factor that accounts for the relationships among different kinds of risk-taking" (Zuckerman, 2007, 65). In our study, we wanted to see whether this general attitude can be identified among not only high sensation seekers but in the general population.

Since Zuckerman's theory and earlier findings have shown that sensation seeking differs with age and gender (Zuckerman, 1994, 99–11) and educational and socioeconomic differences (Zuckerman, 1994, 113–118), we wanted to identify these relations on a population basis. We furthermore wanted to see how sensation seeking is expressed in risky leisure behavior and willingness to engage in specific dangerous activities, selected from different areas, like work, the military and leisure.

1.1. Key variables and key questions

An overview of the key variables is presented in Table 1.

Even if theories and earlier research could have resulted in a confirmatory approach we have chosen an exploratory. Instead of formulating specific hypotheses, we have chosen open-ended questions to guide our presentation. Our analysis of data was performed to answer the following key questions:

Q1. How is sensation seeking related to socio-demographic background factors?

Q2. What is the relation between sensation seeking and the different risk dimensions?

Q3. What is the relation between sensation seeking and participation in risk sports?

Q4. What is the relation between sensation seeking and attitudes towards risky activities connected with sport, work or military operations?

2. Material and methods

Data were collected by Ipsos research institute, a global company with ISO9001 and ISO 202252 certificates. Data were collected during 14 days in February 2015. The respondents were recruited from the company's own data base, which contains all registered telephone numbers in Norway, including cellphones. Numbers were selected on a lottery base and the interviewers asked for the person in the household, 15 years or older, who had birthday next. The size of the database makes it possible to draw representative samples related to sex, age, and residence. To reach 1000 complete interviews 22,355 persons were contacted with a total of 61,916 calls. Of the persons contacted 9567 answered and 12,788 did not. A total of 1000 respondents then completed the telephone interviews, which lasted approximately 18 min. The total response rate was 4.4%. In relation to those who answered the telephone call the response rate was 10%. The sample satisfied criteria for representativity for the selected variables. Especially representativity for age may be difficult to obtain. The final sample scored well. Age was collected in years. For age between 15 and 24 years the sample reached 82% of the population goal, for 25–39 years 109%, for 40–49 years 90%, for 50–59 years 112%, for 60–69 years 110%, and for 70+ years 94%.

An overview of the sample characteristics is presented in Table 2. Structured interview guidelines were developed by the authors of this paper in cooperation with representatives from Ipsos MMI, the research company that conducted the telephone interviews. Descriptive data were gathered with respect to socio-demographics, participation in risk sports and attitudes towards eight dimensions of risk-taking.

Socio-demographic background included own education, parents' education and household income. We decided to use these variables as a combined measure representing social class. There is no clear agreement about how social class shall be defined but definitions typically focus on a group's position within the social hierarchy based on power, prestige, and wealth. Since household income and education in combination signify power of some sort our aggregated variable can be interpreted as a pragmatic measure of social class. The combined social class variable was constructed in the following way: The income variable was dichotomized according to above or below mean income and the education variables according to whether one had higher education at college/university level or not. The lower levels were given value one and the higher levels value two and the aggregated variable, consisting of scores between four and eight was then divided into three levels; score value four representing the lower class, five, six and seven the medium and eight the higher class.

Sensation seeking was measured by a Norwegian version of an eight-item Likert scale developed by Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgren, Lorch, and Donohew (2002). The scale contains two items for each of

Table 1
The key variables, their relationships and contents.

Socio-demographics	Personality	Attitudes towards basic risk dimensions	Risky behavior During leisure time	Attitudes towards specific risky activities
Sex	Sensation seeking	Social	Actual participation in risk sports	Willingness to participate in:
Age		Intellectual		risk sports
Education		Financial		risky type of work
Income		Achievement		risky military operations
Social class		Political		
		Physical		
		Ethical		
		Existential		

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