



Impulsivity traits as correlates of antisocial behaviour in adolescents



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ABSTRACT

Impulsivity has been linked to several risky behaviours, however, the multifaceted conceptualization of the construct has hardly been studied regarding adolescent antisocial behaviour. Thus, the aim of this study was to analyse the influence of impulsivity facets assessed by the UPPS-P scale on different types of antisocial behaviours (i.e. aggression, rule-breaking behaviour, theft, and vandalism), and whether sex moderated those relationships. The sample was composed of 575 Spanish adolescents aged 14 to 18. Four hierarchical multiple regression models were carried out, one for each antisocial behaviour. Results show that positive urgency and sensation seeking were related to all behaviours above and beyond prediction from the other facets. Lack of premeditation only predicted aggression whereas lack of perseverance predicted all nonviolent behaviours. After taking into account all the impulsivity facets, negative urgency was no longer related to antisocial behaviours. Males displayed higher levels of sensation seeking and sex moderated a quarter of the associations between impulsivity facets and antisocial behaviour. Results support the multidimensional conceptualization of impulsivity and reveal differential effects on diverse typologies of antisocial behaviour.

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Impulsivity constitutes a central personality dimension in the etiology of crime and delinquency (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993). Related research has evidenced the influence of impulsivity, as well as lack of self-control, disinhibition, or sensation seeking – closely-related concepts – on the development of behaviour problems and delinquency (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2009; Lynam, 2011; Zuckerman, 2006). Several meta-analyses confirmed this relationship and concluded that self-control and personality dimensions characterised by a lack of impulse control and behavioral disinhibition represent some of the most important correlates of crime (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2009; Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011; Pratt & Cullen, 2000). The influence of disinhibited personality traits on behaviour problems was also confirmed in adolescent samples and in long-term studies, showing a significant association between impulsivity and antisocial behaviour (Caspi, 2000; Luengo, Carrillo, Otero, & Romero, 1994; Romero, Luengo, & Sobral, 2001).

A growing number of investigations suggest that impulsivity is not a single personality dimension but it constitutes a multidimensional construct (Cloninger, Przybeck, & Svrakic, 1991). Whiteside and Lynam (2001) revealed the multi-faceted nature of impulsivity and developed the UPPS impulsive scale. They identified four impulsivity facets:

Urgency, (lack of) Premeditation, (lack of) Perseverance, and Sensation Seeking. Urgency, later known as negative urgency, is the tendency to experience intense impulses under conditions of negative affect. Premeditation refers to the tendency to think about the consequences of an act before carrying it out. Perseverance is the ability to keep focused on a tedious or difficult task. Sensation Seeking incorporates two aspects: a tendency to pursue and enjoy exciting activities, and openness to new experiences that might be dangerous (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). The factorial structure of the UPPS scale has been replicated in adolescent samples (D'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2005). Subsequently, a new dimension named Positive Urgency was included to the UPPS, which refers to the predisposition of engagement in risk activities during positive emotional states (Cyders et al., 2007). This dimension has shown distinctness from the other facets proposed by Whiteside and Lynam (2001). Specifically, it was found that positive and negative urgency measures differentially predicted positive mood-based rash actions and negative mood-based rash actions, respectively (Cyders & Smith, 2007; Cyders et al., 2007). The UPPS-P scale has been developed for the assessment of these five factors (Lynam, Smith, Whiteside, & Cyders, 2006).

The UPPS-P factorial structure has shown invariance across sex, and may be considered a valid and reliable instrument for the assessment of impulsivity in both males and females (Cyders, 2013). Although very few studies have analysed the role of sex, some differences emerged regarding the facets of the UPPS-P. Males showed higher levels of positive urgency and sensation seeking (Cyders, 2013; d'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2005), whereas females displayed higher levels of negative urgency (d'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2005). However, the influence

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of sex in the prediction of risky behaviours remains unclear. Whilst some studies did not find differences between males and females, others showed some moderating effects on the relation between impulsivity dimensions and problematic behaviours (Cyders, 2013; Lynam & Miller, 2004; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003).

Despite agreement about the influence of impulsivity on the development of behaviour problems, few studies have assessed the role of impulsivity facets on different types of antisocial behaviour and delinquency. Related researches have shown, consistent with the factorial structure of impulsivity, that each dimension might be differentially related to distinct risky behaviours (Cyders & Smith, 2008). Studies with undergraduate samples showed a positive association between negative urgency and aggression (e.g., Berg, Latzman, Bliwise, & Lilienfeld, 2015; Carlson, Pritchard, & Dominelli, 2013; Settles et al., 2012). Specifically, Hecht and Latzman (2015) found that negative urgency was positively related with reactive aggression, whereas proactive aggression was associated with positive urgency.

Regarding lack of premeditation and sensation seeking, studies with undergraduate samples have shown that both dimensions are related to externalizing problems, disinhibited behaviours, general aggression including fighting, weapon use and theft, as well as antisocial behaviour (Carlson et al., 2013; Derefinko, DeWall, Metze, Walsh, & Lynam, 2011; Lynam & Miller, 2004; Miller et al., 2003). Other studies showed that lack of premeditation predicted reactive aggression, but not proactive (Latzman & Vaidya, 2013) and even that higher levels of premeditation were associated with aggression, both reactive and proactive (Hecht & Latzman, 2015). On the other hand, lack of perseverance has led to contradictory results and its relationship with different typologies of antisocial behaviour remains unclear (Carlson et al., 2013; Hecht & Latzman, 2015; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001).

A limited number of studies have assessed the influence of the UPPS-P facets on antisocial behaviour specifically in adolescent or preadolescent samples. The few studies that did displayed some influence of positive and negative urgency on behaviour problems, minor delinquency, and aggression (Marmorstein, 2013; Pihet, Combremont, Suter, & Stephan, 2012; Zapolski, Stairs, Settles, Combs, & Smith, 2010). Although lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance and sensation seeking have not emerged as significant predictors, these facets have shown correlational associations with adolescent behaviour problems (Marmorstein, 2013; Zimmermann, 2010).

None of the reviewed studies assessed the differential associations of the impulsivity dimensions with different typologies of antisocial behaviour in adolescent or preadolescent samples. Furthermore, sex moderation effect has not taken into account in this kind of samples. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyse the influence of the impulsivity dimensions assessed by the UPPS-P scale on antisocial behaviour (i.e. aggression, rule-breaking behaviour, theft, and vandalism) in a Spanish adolescent sample, as well as impulsivity sex differences and its influence on the relationships with antisocial behaviour. The following hypotheses are established: 1) males will display higher levels of positive urgency and sensation seeking, whereas females will show higher levels of negative urgency; 2) lack of premeditation, sensation seeking and urgency, both positive and negative, will be significantly associated with antisocial behaviour in a correlational way; 3) UPPS-P facets will differentially predict different antisocial behaviours. Finally, sex moderation effect is assessed regarding each association.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The final sample was composed of 575 students of Secondary Education and Vocational Training (46% males), coming from six high schools located in Galicia (NW Spain). <3% of the adolescents from the initial sample declined to participate in the study ($n = 17$). Participants were between the ages of 14 and 18 ($M = 15.94$; $SD = 1.12$).

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Short Spanish version of the UPPS-P impulsive behaviour scale

The short Spanish version of the UPPS-P (Cándido, Orduña, Perales, Verdejo-García, & Billieux, 2012) is a 20-item measure composed of five subscales (4 items each): Positive Urgency (e.g. “I tend to act without thinking when I am really excited”), Negative Urgency (e.g. “When I am upset I often act without thinking”), (lack of) Premeditation (e.g. “I usually think carefully before doing anything”), (lack of) Perseverance (e.g. “I finish what I start”), and Sensation Seeking (e.g. “I quite enjoy taking risks”). All of the items were scored on a Likert scale 1 (*totally disagree*) to 4 (*totally agree*). The Cronbach's Alphas ranged from 0.71 (Positive Urgency), to 0.85 (Sensation Seeking). This scale has previously been validated in a Spanish sample of undergraduates (Cándido et al., 2012). Regarding the current sample, a confirmatory factorial analysis was carried out and the results showed a better fit for the five specific but inter-related factors model ($\chi^2 (162) = 365.99$; $RMSEA = 0.05$; $SRMR = 0.06$; $CFI = 0.94$), according to the factorial structure of the UPPS-P short version.

1.2.2. Antisocial behaviour questionnaire

Four subscales of the Antisocial Behaviour Questionnaire (ABQ, Luengo, Otero, Romero, Gómez-Fraguela, & Tavares-Filho, 1999) were used in this study (6 items each): Aggression, which refers to proactive aggression (e.g. “Fighting and hitting someone”), Rule-breaking behaviours (e.g. “Spending the night out without permission”), Theft (e.g. “Taking something from class without permission with the intention of stealing it), and Vandalism (e.g. “Setting fire to something: a dustbin, table, car, etc.”). The items were scored on a 4 point Likert scale from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*frequently*). The Cronbach's Alphas ranged from 0.77 (Rule-breaking behaviours) to 0.80 (Aggression). The ABQ has previously proven to be a valid measure of antisocial behaviour across different adolescent populations (e.g., Cutrín, Gómez-Fraguela, & Luengo, 2015; Sobral, Villar, Gómez-Fraguela, Romero, & Luengo, 2013).

1.3. Procedure

Data used in this study were collected in group sessions in the different high schools. Students filled out the questionnaires at school time, taking about 1 h, and after parental informed consent was requested and received. Data collection was carried out in a single session, whereby collaborating researchers were present in order to explain the goals of the study and to address participant's doubts. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured during all the procedure following the legal and ethic standards.

1.4. Data analysis

Descriptive analyses were carried out for impulsivity facets and antisocial behaviours. A multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) was carried out to assess significant sex differences in the UPPS-P facets and the ABQ subscales. Zero-order correlations among the study variables were examined and then four hierarchical multiple regression models were implemented, one for each dimension of the ABQ. Analyses were performed using the SPSS statistical package, version 20.0.

2. Results

2.1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

Sex comparisons regarding impulsivity traits and antisocial behaviour are presented in Table 1. With regards to the UPPS-P facets, MANOVA results showed a significant effect only in the sensation seeking dimension, and suggest that male adolescents display higher levels in this dimension. Likewise, males showed significantly higher levels of all types of antisocial behaviour.

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