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Self-perceived level of competitiveness, tension, and dependency and lifestyles in the ‘Seguimiento Universidad de Navarra’ cohort study



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to assess the differences in lifestyles according to levels of self-perceived competitiveness, psychological tension, and dependency in a Mediterranean cohort of university graduates.

Study design: Levels of personality traits, food consumption, nutrient intake, eating attitudes, physical activity, sedentary lifestyle, and alcohol and tobacco consumption were assessed through a questionnaire administered at baseline. This was a cross-sectional study in the context of the Seguimiento Universidad de Navarra cohort. Participants are 15,346 Spanish adults.

Results: Participants with a high level of self-perceived competitiveness consumed more vegetables and fish but less refined grains; they had higher protein intake and healthier eating attitudes. They were more physically active and less likely to be smokers. Participants with a high level of tension or dependency were less physically active, and participants more dependent also had poorer adherence to the Mediterranean diet.

Conclusions: Self-perceived personality traits, especially the trait of competitiveness, are likely to be associated with healthier dietary patterns, better nutrient profile, better eating

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attitudes, physical activity, and less exposure to smoking. The use of short questions about self-perceived levels of competitiveness, psychological tension, and dependency can contribute to add additional information when assessing lifestyles and diet in adults.

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Introduction

According to the American Psychological Association, personality can be described as the individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.¹ Different personality theories have been developed throughout history by many recognized psychologists and psychiatrists, including Freud, Jung, Horney, Adler, Erikson, Maslow, and Skinner, among others.² The approach adopted by Allport, Cloninger, Cattell, Costa, and McCrae is based on the trait theory,³ which focuses on personality characteristics or tendencies to behave in a regular or predictable way along the life cycle.⁴

Presently, the relationship between personality factors and specific dietary habits or lifestyles is an area of interest within the study of personality. Thus, several investigations have been conducted aiming to find any association between personality factors or specific traits and different lifestyle variables such as quantity and quality of physical activity,^{5,6} adherence to a healthy^{7,8} or unhealthy diet,^{9,10} alcohol consumption,^{11,12} and tobacco consumption (intensity and frequency).^{13,14}

However, there is limited information regarding certain personality traits such as competitiveness, psychological tension, and dependency and their association with lifestyle variables in middle-aged and healthy adults.

In this context, we aimed to assess the differences according to personality traits in diet and eating attitudes and in other aspects of the lifestyle: physical activity, sedentariness, smoking status, and alcohol consumption. We assessed the participants in the 'Seguimiento Universidad de Navarra' (SUN) cohort, according to their self-perceived level of competitiveness, psychological tension, and dependency.

Methods

The SUN project is a prospective and dynamic cohort study, and therefore, it has a permanently open recruitment process. Its objectives, design, and methods have been previously published elsewhere.¹⁵ Participants fulfilled a baseline questionnaire (Q_0), and thereafter, they completed a follow-up questionnaire every 2 years, either by mail or e-mail.

All participants who completed the Q_0 from 1999 until March 1, 2013 were considered for this cross-sectional study. Among 21,678 participants, 2518 were excluded because they had prevalent depression or were consuming any antidepressant drug at baseline. The main reason for this exclusion was that these factors could have had a negative effect on

their declared answers if they were experiencing a crisis at the time of the assessment. Furthermore, we excluded 240 participants because they were under antidepressant medication but without a medical diagnosis of depression in at least one of the follow-up questionnaires because there was a possibility that they had other medical conditions in addition to depression. We also excluded 1789 participants who reported a total energy intake out of predefined limits (women <500 kcal or >3500 kcal and men <800 kcal or >4200 kcal),¹⁶ 358 participants with missing data in the personality trait items in the Q_0, and finally, 1427 participants without any follow-up. The total number of participants available for analyses was 15,346.

The completed Q_0 was considered the informed consent of each individual. The protocol of the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Navarra.

Exposure assessment: personality traits

Personality trait items were collected in the Q_0 and included the following questions: (a) Do you consider yourself a competitive, non-conformist, and fighter person who demands everything of yourself at work and sometimes even more of what you can afford?; (b) Do you consider yourself a tense, aggressive, worrywart person or you think of yourself as a relaxed and calmed person?; and (c) Do you think you have enough resources, preparation, and autonomy to solve any problems at work, or do you exclusively depend on others to do it? Participants were expected to assess themselves and choose the option from 0 to 10 that best described them. For instance, if they thought they had all characteristics described in each question, they would have chosen a higher score. If they only had one characteristic or if they did not have any of those characteristics at all, they had to choose a lower score. The frequency of these characteristics was also a parameter considered for choosing the best suited score. Keywords were given in each question to avoid self-assessment confusion in case they were hesitating on whether to choose one score or another. For question (a), conformist was given for score 0 and competitive for score 10. For question (b), relaxed was given for score 0 and tense for score 10, and for question (c), autonomy was given for score 0 and dependency for score 10.

For each question, there were 11 possible answers ranging from 0 (more conformist, relaxed, or autonomous) to 10 (more competitive, tense or dependent). For the present study, the concepts competitiveness, tension, and dependency will be used to describe the three personality traits assessed in the Q_0. Finally, each personality trait was categorized into three groups according to the declared answers in the Q_0: low level (1–4), moderate level (5–6) and high level (7–10).

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