

How nurses who are sensation seekers justify their unsafe behaviors[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Sensation seeking, risk-taking propensity and openness to experience are known predictors of unsafe behaviors. The aim of this study is to determine if individuals with these characteristics justify their unsafe behaviors by attributing them to external factors such as a lack of organizational support. We explore the interaction between sensation seeking and risk-taking propensity, explain how nurses justify their unsafe work practices, and investigate the effect of openness on directing sensation seekers' behavior. In this cross-sectional study, 108 nurses completed questionnaires and an objective task measuring risk-taking propensity. Conditional direct effect analysis showed that nurses with sensation-seeking characteristics and high level of risk-taking propensity were likely to perceive external factors as accounting for their unsafe behaviors. Furthermore, sensation seeking re-expressed as openness to experience predicted increased blame externalization. Additionally, nurses with high risk-taking propensity, leading to a focus on rewards and learning experiences, attributed unsafe work practices to external factors.

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1. Introduction

In the workplace, nurses are often exposed to safety-related situations where they must take action, make decisions, or take risks inconsistent with their beliefs. The state of tension that arises when an individual acts inconsistently with their beliefs has been termed “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1957). Nurses may attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance by justifying their unsafe behavior or actions (Aronson, Akert, & Wilson, 2013). Understanding how nurses justify their unsafe behavior or actions may provide information to organizations seeking to create better risk management programs (Nicholson, Soane, Fenton-O'Creevy, & Willman, 2005, p. 157).

Williamson, Feyer, Cairns, and Biancotti defined risk justification (a facet of safety climate) as “the instances when and the reasons why the individual worked unsafely or took risks” (1997, p. 20). Risk justification also assesses the extent of the occurrence of the unsafe behavior and risk taking, and the underlying causes, such as inadequate training, lack of learning opportunities, time restrictions, and a lack of resources within the organization (Williamson, Feyer, Cairns, & Biancotti, 1997). It is likely less cognitively demanding for individuals to justify unsafe behavior by attributing it to support deficiencies because it reduces cognitive dissonance and perceived internal liability. Such justification has been referred to as “external self-justification” (Aronson et al., 2013). Nurses, for example, may behave unsafely in their routine

activities, and justify accidents in terms of hospital management failures such as inadequate provision of proper equipment, such as gloves, hand scrubs, or other medical equipment.

Previous studies have explored the influence of personality characteristics on safety behaviors (see Griffin & Neal, 2000); however, we have identified no studies which have investigated how individuals justify taking risks in organizational settings. In relation to safety-related constructs and attitudes, the most studied personality characteristics are sensation seeking, risk-taking propensity, and openness to experiences. These characteristics have been studied in such contexts as accidents, driving behavior, drug consumption, smoking, and sexual activity (see Dahlen & White, 2006; Miller et al., 2004). Based on the findings of previous research, it is argued that these personality characteristics also influence how people justify their unsafe behaviors. This study therefore examines the interaction between sensation seeking, risk-taking propensity, and openness to experience in predicting risk justification (see Fig. 1).

This study considers the difference between sensation seeking and risk-taking propensity. Sensation seeking is defined as a drive for stimulation and a desire to find and explore new experiences that remains relatively stable and unchanged over time (Jackson, 2008, 2011). Risk-taking propensity is defined as “a behavioral tendency to take risks in response to cues for potential reward in spite of some probability for undesirable results” (MacPherson, Magidson, Reynolds, Kahler, & Lejuez, 2010, p. 1401). Earlier studies have shown that sensation seekers do not always take risks, and their behaviors may tend toward functionality or dysfunctionality (Jackson, 2008). Given that sensation seekers do not take risks in every situation, Nicholson et al. (2005) suggested that there are two types of sensation seekers: risk takers and risk bearers.

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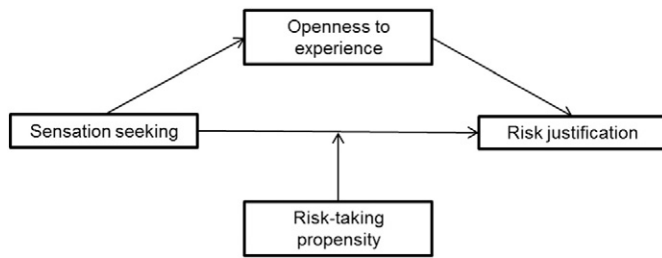


Fig. 1. Conditional direct effect model.

Further, [Nicholson et al. \(2005\)](#) suggested that risk takers have both sensation seeking and risk-taking propensity characteristics, whereas risk bearers have only sensation seeking characteristics.

Previous studies have also assumed that sensation seeking and risk-taking propensity are measures of risk-taking behavior; however, these characteristics have different effects on behavior ([MacPherson et al., 2010](#)). The most well-known difference between sensation seeking and risk-taking propensity is that the latter is more influenced by rewards ([Lauriola, Panno, Levin, & Lejuez, 2013](#)), while the former focuses on finding new experiences for greater stimulation ([Jackson, 2008; Zuckerman, 1994](#)). Additionally, while sensation seeking is usually assessed by questionnaires, risk-taking propensity is assessed by computerized measures such as the Balloon Analogue Risk Task (BART). BART is a more stable measure and reflects real-world behaviors more objectively than questionnaire-based measurements ([White, Lejuez, & de Wit, 2008](#)).

Earlier studies have failed to consider how sensation seekers justify their unsafe behaviors. However, [Franken, Gibson, and Rowland \(1992, p. 36\)](#) suggested that sensation seekers do not perceive their environment as a threat and found that individuals with high levels of sensation seeking were less likely to perceive their actions or behaviors as leading to negative outcomes. [Jackson \(2008\)](#) noted that sensation seekers perceive their environment as allowing them to gain new experiences, and engage in exploratory behavior. Both studies found that individuals with high levels of sensation seeking have a propensity to engage in risky behaviors to fulfill their need for new sensations and experiences ([MacPherson et al., 2010; Roth & Liebe, 2011](#)).

In investigating the circumstances in which sensation seekers try to justify their risky behaviors, we also consider risk taking propensity. We use the BART as a way of determining the effect of rewards on sensation seeking in the prediction of risk justification ([MacPherson et al., 2010; Nicholson et al., 2005](#)). Exposure to rewards using a risk taking propensity task will likely modify sensation seeking due to the effect of external motivation. When sensation seekers receive rewards for taking risks, we think they will perceive their tendency to take risks as externally motivated and therefore believe that negative outcomes are not due to them but their environment. Thus, in the context of the workplace, sensation seekers with high risk taking propensity, or risk takers, will likely externally justify unsafe behaviors in terms of deficiencies of support from within their organizations; such as a lack of training and learning opportunities, or time restrictions.

Risk bearers (people who do not perceive rewards as a reason for taking risks) do not have high levels of risk-taking propensity ([Donohew et al., 2000; Nicholson et al., 2005](#)). Such people are likely able to focus their energy and attention to face difficulties and take risks when necessary so that they can achieve success in the workplace ([Nicholson et al., 2005](#)). We argue then that risk bearers will behave more safely as they are less likely to externalize issues. As risk bearers are able to learn from their experiences, they will be aware of when they have made mistakes or when they have been involved in accidents. Accordingly, the current study predicts that risk bearers will not perceive accidents as occurring due to deficiencies in external support from their organization and will not attribute such deficiencies to be

the cause of unsafe work practices. The following hypothesis was formulated:

H1. Risk-taking propensity positively influences the relationship between sensation seeking and external risk justification, and this relationship is stronger in individuals with high levels of risk-taking propensity.

This study also postulates that openness to experience influences how sensation seekers justify their actions. Openness to experience, which is based on the five-factor model of personality, is characterized as being “curious, broadminded, cultured, and intelligent” ([Barrick & Mount, 1991, p. 6](#)) and having a tendency to experience positive learning environments ([Clarke & Robertson, 2005](#)). Openness to experience is positively related to sensation seeking ([Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2009](#)) and types of experience seeking represent all facets of openness ([Aluja, García, & García, 2003; Costa & McCrae, 1992](#)). However, open people need to have some degree of curiosity and stimulation to find and learn from new experiences ([McCrae & Costa, 1997](#)). This study suggests that the need of sensation seekers for varied and complex stimulations and experiences may direct them to be more open to their environment and learning effectively.

Individuals who have high levels of openness to experience have a tendency to maintain their safety, even when taking risks to gain new experiences ([Weller & Tikir, 2011](#)). Generally, such individuals use new information and knowledge to improve their behavior ([McCrae & Costa, 1997](#)). However, a high level of openness to experience can also negatively influence behavior and lead to “distracting thoughts, troubling impulses, and cognitive inconsistencies” and a motivation to find unfamiliar views ([McCrae & Costa, 1997, p. 840](#)). It is suggested that characteristics of openness also influence how individuals justify their unsafe behaviors.

It appears that no previous studies have examined how individuals with high levels of openness to experience justify their behavior. This study postulates that sensation seeking will direct individuals to become more open and that openness to experience leads to a cognitive bias to identify external factors which can be used to justify unsafe actions. We argue that openness to experience leads to greater cognitive capacity to use experiences as explanatory factors for poor behavior. In clinical settings, for example, it is evidenced that people with high score in openness to experience tended to have high internal sensation seeking motivation to find and try new excitement and experience which led them generally to find new types of activity to fulfill their curiosity ([Terracciano, Löckenhoff, Crum, Bienvu, & Costa, 2008](#)). Consequently, in workplace settings, their external orientation will lead them to perceive unsafe behaviors as occurring due to organization deficiencies in support and will not attribute their behaviors to a desire to have positive learning experiences. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H2. Openness to experience indirectly influences the relationship between sensation seeking and external risk justification.

As illustrated in [Fig. 1](#), we analyzed the interaction of sensation seeking and risk-taking propensity in predicting risk justification, whereby a high level of risk-taking propensity was expected to increase the likelihood of support deficiencies being used to justify risk. Further, openness to experience was expected to affect the relationship between sensation seeking and risk justification.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

The study involved 108 female nurses ($M_{Age} = 28.71, SD_{Age} = 6.48$) from a private hospital in Indonesia (representing an 87% response rate). All respondents received research information from the hospital

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