Social norms for the desirability of sensation seeking

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Summary—The level of sensation seeking most socially desirable was determined by informing undergraduate students that they were to respond to Zuckerman’s (1979) Sensation Seeking Scale (Form V) twice, once under the usual instructions and once under instructions to create the best possible image for someone they found attractive. Scores under the best image instructions (M = 23.85, SD = 6.52) were higher than scores under the usual instructions (M = 18.00, SD = 5.40). The scores produced under the best image instructions were independent of scores produced under the usual instructions. These data are interpreted as evidence of norms for the social desirability of sensation seeking.

Scores from the present study were compared to baseline data for this population. Under the usual instructions, males scored lower than baseline, a difference not observed for females. Under the best image instructions, females scored higher than baseline, a difference not observed for males. This evidence regarding the susceptibility of the scale scores to instructional manipulations was discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The trait of sensation seeking is defined by Zuckerman (1979) as the “. . . need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences”. This trait has been shown to be correlated with a wide variety of day to day behaviors and attitudes, including sports (Zuckerman, 1983), entertainment (Zuckerman and Little, 1986), drug use (Galizio and Stein, 1983) and political/religious attitudes (Levin and Schaimo, 1984). Sensation seeking is also correlated with various aspects of interpersonal relationships, e.g. attraction to similar/dissimilar others (Williams, Ryckman, Gold and Lenny, 1982), assortative mating (Lesnik-Oberstein and Cohen, 1984) and marital compatibility (Ficher, Zuckerman and Neeb, 1981).

Given the importance of sensation seeking in social and interpersonal interactions it is expected that norms for the desirability of sensation seeking exist. The existence of social norms for a construct may be studied directly or may be inferred from the presence of socially desirable responding to psychometric instruments.

Zuckerman (1979) has explored the possibility of social desirability bias in Sensation Seeking Scales. His review demonstrated that responses to these scales are, for the most part, not correlated with other psychometric indices of social desirability. Moreover, instructions to form the best impression provide no evidence of such biases (Farley and Haubrich, 1974; cited in Zuckerman, 1979). However, even in the apparent absence of socially desirable responding, it remains possible that social norms for sensation seeking may exist, but must be directly investigated.

The present study was designed to explore social norms for the social desirability of sensation seeking in a homogeneous social group by having individuals respond to a sensation seeking scale twice, once under the usual instructions and once under instructions to create the most desirable image to an attractive other. This method permits evaluation of (a) inter-individual agreement as to the most desirable level of sensation seeking and (b) of intra-individual independence of the self score and the score perceived to be socially desirable. Information about such norms will enhance understanding of sensation seeking and pave the way for systematic investigations of the way in which it interacts with various social manipulations.

METHOD

Twenty-five male (mean age = 19.17 yrs) and 27 female (mean age = 19.19 yrs) unpaid undergraduate student volunteers were informed that they would be required to respond to Zuckerman’s (1979) Sensation Seeking Scale, Form V (SSS) under two sets of instructions. Respondents were first informed that:

“You will have the opportunity of responding to a 40 item survey twice. You will be asked to respond to this survey in two different ways: honestly as the survey applies to your actual interests and preferences, and dishonestly—in such a manner as to project the most desirable image of yourself.”

Individuals then responded to the survey under the usual instructions (UI) and under instructions to produce the best image of themselves (BI):

“Imagine that you have just been briefly introduced to an individual whom you find very attractive. This individual will have an opportunity to read your responses to the following 40 items and will know who made these responses. You are desirous of presenting the best possible image of yourself. Your task is to respond to each of the 40 following items so that a person reading your responses to these items will be led to view you as a highly attractive individual. Do not respond to these items as they pertain to you in reality, rather respond to these items in a ‘dishonest’ manner, one which you feel will project the best possible image of yourself.”

The order of instructions was counterbalanced across subjects.

A total and the four subscale scores were obtained for each SSS. The four subscales are, Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS), Experience Seeking (ES), Disinhibition (DIS) and Boredom Susceptibility (BS) and are described in detail in Zuckerman, 1979.
Table 1. Means and standard deviations for Sensation Seeking Scale (Form V) scores: Baseline scores, and within subject scores under two instructional sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Base</th>
<th>Male UI</th>
<th>Male BI</th>
<th>Female Base</th>
<th>Female UI</th>
<th>Female BI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS</td>
<td>22.58</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>18.64</td>
<td>(5.96)*</td>
<td>22.60</td>
<td>7.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>(2.02)</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>(2.32)*</td>
<td>*8.76</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>(2.07)</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>(2.62)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>(2.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIS</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>(2.53)</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>(2.66)</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>(2.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>(2.06)</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>(2.09)</td>
<td>*4.60</td>
<td>(2.80)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base = baseline data; UI = usual instructions; BI = best image instructions; SSS = total Sensation-Seeking Scale score; TAS = Thrill and Adventure Seeking subscale score; ES = Experience Seeking subscale score; DIS = Disinhibition subscale score; BS = Boredom Susceptibility subscale score; M = mean; SD = Standard Deviation; differences between UI and BI means indicated by * or t which denote r < 0.05 or 0.01 respectively, UI or BI means which differ from Base means, (P < 0.01) are underlined.

Baseline SSS scores were obtained by combining samples, taken over the past 3 years, from the same population of individuals who responded only once to the SSS under the usual instructions. Male and female Baseline values were based on samples of size 412 and 580 respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Subjects were classified as Low, Medium or High Sensation Seekers by equal tripartite division based on their total UI score, males and females being classified relative to the means for their respective groups. A difference score (total BI - total UI = Difference) was calculated for each subject. Male and female data (both raw and difference scores) were analyzed separately, and statistically controlled for age as suggested by Ball, Farnill and Wangeman (1984). Because of the homogeneous nature of the sample, the covariate was insignificant and thus was dropped and simple statistics utilized. The means for the subscale and total scores are presented in Table 1.

If BI scores are indicative of a homogeneous norm and if BI and UI scores are independent, there should exist a negative correlation between Difference and UI scores, i.e., the lower the UI score the larger the Difference score. More explicitly, if the same score were produced by every subject under BI (inter-individual agreement), and if the UI scores were distributed as usual for the instrument, then (a) the scores under (BI) would be independent of the scores under UI (intra-individual independence) and (b) the Difference scores and UI scores would correlate negatively, i.e. the lower the individual UI score (relative to the BI) the larger the magnitude of the Difference score. Both of the above conditions were observed.

First, it was found that the total UI and BI scores were independent, for males, \( r(26) = 0.01, P > 0.05 \), and for females, \( r(25) = 0.27, P > 0.05 \). Under UI and BI all the subscale scores were also independent. For males the correlations between the UI and BI for TAS, ES, DIS and BS were 0.12, 0.04, 0.19 and 0.10 respectively and for females were 0.26, 0.31, 0.28 and 0.18 respectively (none of these correlations were significant).

Second, a negative correlation between Difference and UI scores was observed, for males, \( r = 0.66, P < 0.01 \); and for females, \( r = -0.54, P < 0.01 \). The mean Difference scores for the male Low, Medium and High Sensation Seekers were 11.75, 5.33 and -5.38 respectively and for the females were 11.66, 7.80 and 3.11 respectively.

Further the scores obtained under BI did not significantly differ between gender (\( t(50) = 1.29, P > 0.05 \)) or between the High, Medium and Low sensation seeking groups (\( F(2,49) = 0.012, P > 0.05 \)) nor did the variance of any subscale or the total scores obtained under BI significantly differ (by \( F \) tests) from the corresponding index obtained under UI. Given the above evidence, the BI total scores, combined for males and females, were taken as an index of the norm for the social desirability of sensation seeking held by the social group from which this sample was drawn (\( M = 23.85, SD = 6.52 \); confidence interval = 22.00 < \( \mu \) < 25.70, \( P = 0.05 \)).

An item analysis revealed no clearly delineated set of items which were consistently altered to produce the observed changes in scores given under BI and UI. This finding is not unexpected given the modest internal reliability of the SSS (KR – 20 ≥ 0.75) observed in previous samples from the Canadian populations, Ridgeway and Russell (1980), Rowland and Franken (1986).

These findings demonstrate both an inter-individual agreement on the norm and an intra-individual independence of self and normative scores. However, these findings do not imply that there is a single level of sensation seeking that is seen by all social/cultural groups as most desirable across all social situations, it is more likely that norms differ, both across situations and across groups of individuals.

The scores on the SSS were subject to instructional manipulations. The total scores obtained under BI were higher than those obtained under UI for both males \( (t(48) = 2.02, P < 0.05) \) and females \( (t(52) = 3.32, P < 0.01) \). For females, all subscale scores were higher under BI than under UI, while for males the TAS and BS subscale scores were higher under BI than UI, see Table 1. Moreover, an interaction between gender and procedure/instructional set (UI, BI and Baseline) was observed. Under the UI, total scores for males, but not females, were lower than Baseline, \( r(24) = 3.58, P < 0.01 \). Under BI instructions, the total scores for females, but not males, were higher the Baseline (\( t(26) = 5.22, P < 0.01 \)). The effects of instructions on each of the subscales scores may be observed in Table 1. Further study is needed to elucidate the dynamics of this interaction as in the present study the instructional sets were confounded with procedural variables, i.e. subjects under UI and BI responded to the test twice in contrast to the Baseline subjects who responded only once.

The above data are at variance with the report of Farley and Haubrich (1974) that instructions to create the best impression had no effect on Sensation Seeking Scale scores. However, numerous differences between the above study and the present study must be considered, e.g. (Farley and Haubrich (1974) utilized Form IV in contrast to the use of Form V in The present Study). Additionally, the present study utilized a within subjects design in contrast to the between subjects design of Farley

*It should be noted that the Form V consists of items selected from the Form IV (Zuckerman, 1979).
and Haubrich (1974) and the samples for the two studies were drawn from different cultures. Finally, the two studies employed different instructions. Farley and Haubrich (1974) instructed subjects to produce the best impression in contrast to the present study in which subjects were instructed to produce the best image to someone they found attractive. It is likely that different norms are held for different situations. For example, different levels of sensation seeking may be perceived to be appropriate for an individual being interviewed for a managerial job with a major corporation as opposed to an individual who is socially introducing him/herself to an attractive person. Moreover, different social/cultural groups may hold different norms for the above situations.

The present study demonstrates that norms for the social desirability of sensation seeking exist and that these norms may be perceived independently of one’s own level of the trait. The above demonstration of social norms for sensation seeking taken with the demonstrated susceptibility of the SSS to instructional/procedural manipulations suggests a powerful tool for the investigation of the interactions of sensation seeking with other social processes.

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