

# Personality Characteristics as Predictors of Risky Behavior

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## Abstract

This study examines personality characteristics as predictors of risky behavior, utilizing the widely accepted Big Five personality dimensions as indicators. The Big Five dimensions include: Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Researchers utilized a 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey that investigates different types of risky behavior and for our purposes we utilized: delinquency, smoking & drinking, disorderly eating, and engagement in risky sexual behavior. Previous research has shown varying relationships between personality dimensions and risky health behavior. In addition, some problem behaviors have been investigated more thoroughly than others. Utilizing anonymous questionnaires, researchers surveyed 272 college undergraduates. For each risky behavior we predicted specific outcomes on each personality dimension. Some predictions are in line with previous research whereas others aimed to clarify those dimensions marked by the most variation. Researchers found agreeableness to be correlated with most delinquent behavior. Researchers also found gender differences in extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability as well as, various health risk behaviors.

## Introduction

### *Delinquency*

Studies have shown that delinquency correlates positively with extraversion and neuroticism (Lauriola & Levin, 2001; Leech et al., 2003), and agreeableness (Heaven, 1996). Other researchers have found conscientiousness to be a valid predictor of counter productive behavior (Lounsbury et al., 2004; Salgado, 2002).

### *Smoking and Drinking*

Openness and nicotine dependency are negatively correlated, but research has had inconclusive findings concerning both neuroticism and extraversion (Shadel et al., 2000). Despite these inconclusive findings, others have found support for high extraversion scores and smoking (Robins et al., 2001; Wilkinson & Abraham, 2004). As for drinking, both high extraversion scores and low conscientiousness scores were related to drinking (Kubicka et al., 2001).

### *Eating Disorders*

The two subtypes of anorexia differ in levels of conscientiousness, but had similar levels of neuroticism (Bollen & Wojciechowski, 2004). One study found similar results concerning neuroticism, but opposite findings for conscientiousness (Ghaderi & Scott, 2000). Ghaderi and Scott also found support for lower levels of agreeableness and openness.

### *Risky Sexual Behavior*

Risky sexual behavior (RSB), among other behaviors, has been attributed to sensation seeking (Gullette & Lyons, 2005; Shafer, 2001), which is related to high levels of extraversion. This is also one area where gender in

consistently investigated and one study found that males more than females report involvement in RSB at a higher frequency (Gil, 2005).

## Method

272 freshman college students (95 males, 177 females) responded to the Big Five Inventory 54 (BFI-54) scale measuring Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness. Students were given the 2005 State and Local Youth Risk Behavior Survey to measure how frequently and what types of delinquent acts the participants had been involved in.

## Results

The purpose of the present study was to examine correlations between personality type and risky health behaviors, as well as to examine gender differences in these health behaviors. As displayed in Table 1, several personality types correlated with risky behaviors. As displayed in Table 2, there were also gender differences in health risk behaviors.

## Discussion

Our results indicate that different personality dimensions correlate with different types of health risk behavior. The results allow counselors, health psychologist, and others to take into consideration which intervention would be appropriate for each health risk behavior. The results show that tobacco users are lower in conscientiousness and perhaps appealing to this characteristic by emphasizing responsibility other ones health could help. As for other health risk behavior and gender differences, the same could be done. The goal is to lower the frequency of health risk behavior by

utilizing what we know about the individual, or what these individuals have in common.

Table 1

*Correlations Between Personality and Various Health Risk Behaviors.*

|                            | Extraversion | Agreeableness | Conscientiousness | Emotional Stability | Openness |
|----------------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------|
| Violence                   | -.06         | -.23**        | -.08              | .04                 | -.05     |
| Suicide                    | -.01         | -.02          | -.00              | -.27**              | .09      |
| Tobacco                    | -.10         | -.24**        | -.19**            | -.08                | .04      |
| Alcohol                    | .13*         | -.06          | -.05              | .11                 | .06      |
| Marijuana                  | -.03         | -.13*         | -.07              | .09                 | .13*     |
| Other Drugs                | -.11         | -.18**        | -.09              | -.06                | .10      |
| Bodyweight Dissatisfaction | .10          | .13*          | -.02              | -.24**              | .02      |

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

Table 2

*Means and Standard deviations in Gender Differences Displayed between Personality Dimensions and Various Health Risk Behaviors.*

|                            |        | Mean  | SD   | t        |
|----------------------------|--------|-------|------|----------|
| Extraversion               | Female | 23.27 | 6.86 | 3.01**   |
|                            | Male   | 20.73 | 6.19 |          |
| Agreeableness              | Female | 25.11 | 5.81 | 3.00**   |
|                            | Male   | 22.99 | 5.00 |          |
| Emotional Stability        | Female | 15.86 | 5.57 | -5.32*** |
|                            | Male   | 19.85 | 6.49 |          |
| Violence                   | Female | 1.74  | 2.52 | -4.60*** |
|                            | Male   | 4.08  | 5.84 |          |
| Tobacco                    | Female | 5.24  | 6.59 | -2.33*   |
|                            | Male   | 7.41  | 8.53 |          |
| Alcohol                    | Female | 8.72  | 4.98 | -2.72**  |
|                            | Male   | 10.66 | 6.69 |          |
| Marijuana                  | Female | 3.14  | 3.70 | -4.66*** |
|                            | Male   | 5.74  | 5.45 |          |
| Other Drugs                | Female | 1.11  | 2.60 | -3.46*** |
|                            | Male   | 2.59  | 4.46 |          |
| Bodyweight Dissatisfaction | Female | 6.07  | 2.33 | 5.04***  |
|                            | Male   | 4.62  | 2.14 |          |

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001