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## **Sensation seeking**

**Synonyms:** thrill seeking, excitement seeking, risk taking

**Definition:** sensation seeking is defined as the tendency to pursue novel activities and sensations that are rich in variety and excitement, usually characterized by taking legal, social, financial, and/or physical risks.

Sensation seeking occurs when people chase activities, sensations, and experiences that are rich and intense in variety, excitement, and complexity. Such activities and experiences are usually intense in sensations because they may involve taking risks related to financial, social, legal and physical wellbeing. While sensation seeking has been studied in psychology, the link between sensation seeking and heroism is still understudied (Ulqinaku et al., 2021). What links sensation seeking to heroism is the overlap with life history theory (Figueredo et al., 2005, 2006) that explains both behavior related to sensation seeking and behavior related to heroism. Hence, the aim of this entry is to borrow from life history theory and to outline how sensation seeking is linked to the figures of hero, villain, and antihero.

### **Characteristics of sensation seeking**

Sensation seeking can be explained as going after experiences and sensations characterized by variety, novelty, excitement, complexity, all intensified together, even if that involves taking financial, social, legal, or even physical risks (Zuckerman, 1994). Zuckerman (1969, 1971) has empirically investigated the construct of sensation seeking, identifying factors that compose it. Specifically, Zuckerman has identified thrill and adventure seeking, experience

seeking, disinhibition, and social sensation seeking as factors that identify sensation seeking across both males and females. Moreover, sensation seeking in males is identified also by boredom susceptibility, visual sensation seeking, and antisocial sensation seeking.

While sensation seeking has been shown to be positively correlated with some personality traits that may remind us of heroes—such as change seeking and need for autonomy—most of the traits that sensation seeking is correlated to are in line with the figure of antiheroes and villains, rather than heroes. For instance, sensation seeking was found to be negatively correlated with needs for politeness and respect, nurturance, orderliness, and affiliation. Moreover, past research has found a positive and significant correlation between sensation seeking and drug abuse, sexual experience, hypomania, impulsive tendencies, and psychopathic personality.

### **Heroic, villainous, and antiheroic priming**

Past research has shown that there is a considerable overlap between heroes, villains, and antiheroes. They all start from ordinary people (Kinsella et al., 2015), no one is born good or bad, it is the combination of personal journeys and environmental triggers that explain the evolution of people into heroes, antiheroes, or villains (Allison and Goethals 2011). While heroes and villains are portrayed as two sides of a pole—good to bad—antiheroes are neither outright heroes, yet not villains, with some good and some bad behavior, a flawed persona that inconsistently shows some heroic and some villainy characteristics in their interactions with others.

Studying the effects of hero, antihero, and villain priming on people is very important. That is because past research has shown that reminders of these characters can affect people's identification with them, and hence, affect individuals' behavior. For instance, in the context

of video games, identifying with villains, as opposed to heroes, increases antisocial behavior both in the gaming world (Yoon & Vargas, 2014) and in the real world (Rosenberg et al., 2013). Similarly, even simply being reminded of heroes or villains can affect the food choices individuals make (e.g., virtue vs. vice) (Masters & Mishra, 2019). Here, we focus on one aspect in which reminders of heroic, villainous, or antiheroic reminders affect individuals' behavior: sensation seeking.

How can sensation seeking extend to and be applied to heroes, villains, and antiheroes? Few scholars have preliminarily attempted to outline the link between sensation seeking, heroism, villainy, and antiheroism (e.g., Ulqinaku et al., 2021). However, 1) a complete link between heroes, antiheroes, and villains and sensation seeking, 2) the extent to which sensation seeking of these characters is transferred to individuals, 3) and the contexts in which this transfer of attributes works best is still craving further academic research.

A theory that has investigated the character of heroes, antiheroes, and villains is that of life history theory (Figueredo et al., 2005, 2006). Life history theory groups living organisms into two categories: those with fast life-history strategies—focuses on the present—and those with slow life-history—focused on the future. Life history theory suggests that humans are generally among the organisms with a slow life strategy, although, some of them may adopt a faster one, to survive. This is mostly evident in whether the decisions and actions made are focused on the future—in line with slow life strategy—or on the present—in line with fast life strategy. How is this theory applied to heroes, antiheroes, and villains? Jonason et al. (2010, 2012) have linked life history theory to the Dark Triad, the latter one being very prominent and salient in heroism research. Here, we borrow and build on past research by suggesting how the construct of sensation seeking is linked to heroic, villainous, and antiheroic reminders.

## **Heroes and Sensation Seeking**

One would usually associate movies with heroes to action and thrill. Thinking of all the Marvel movies, Superman, Spiderman, and other artistic heroes, they are rich in action and sensation. Yet, research may disagree on the positive relationship between the figure of heroes, hence, hero reminders, and sensation seeking. The figure of heroes is one that focuses on the future, on the longer term, on mostly sacrificing the present for the future, rather than the opposite. This puts heroes in the category of those with a slow life strategy, rather than a fast life strategy. Doing so, reminder of heroes should actually prevent people from engaging in sensation seeking. This makes sense considering that sensation seeking is defined as the search for action and sensations that would place—mostly unnecessary risk—on physical wellbeing. Heroes are wise figures that act with caution, characteristics these that would go against sensation seeking. Research, indeed, provides some initial evidence that, compared to antiheroes, reminder of heroes is associated to less sensation seeking (Ulqinaku et al., 2021). This negative relationship between reminder of heroes and sensation seeking is to be partly explained by the lack of particular focus on the present when one is reminded of heroes, which is what usually happens when one is reminded of antiheroes, instead. With heroes, researchers found that attention was mostly a continuum between past, present, and future, rather than just the present, which would then be the driver of sensation seeking.

## **Antiheroes and Sensation Seeking**

The figure of antiheroes is increasingly present in arts and media: from Jane Austen's Henry Crawford character in *Mansfield Park* in 1814 to Lisbeth Salander to Walter White, *Deadpool* in more modern days. Antiheroes are placed somewhere on the spectrum between heroes and

villains, being neither outright heroes, nor completely villains. They are flawed, mostly because of their childhood traumas, and they behave heroically in some—but not all—situations, and when they do, it is mainly for selfish reasons.

Past research has shown that the reminder of antiheroes is associated with greater sensation seeking of people reminded of them (Ulqinaku et al. 2021). One explaining mechanism for this relationship is the focus on the present. Specifically, when people are primed with the figure an antiheroes, they then do focus their attention mostly on the present. This is then the key to greater sensation seeking, as life strategy theory would explain. Focus on the present is typical for those organisms with fast life strategy, involving greater risk-taking and discounting the future, typical of sensation seeking behavior.

### **Villains and Sensation Seeking**

Research is still silent on the relationship between villains and sensation seeking. What we know at this point is that sensation seeking is in line with a fast life strategy, and a fast life strategy is characterized by diminished self-control, focus in the moment, antisocial behavior and perspective. Moreover, Jonason et al. (2012) have provided evidence that fast life strategy is a characterizing way of acting for people that score high on the Dark Triad traits – typical of villains. With this information at hand, it is sensible to predict that there would be a positive relationship between sensation seeking and the villain figure. Not surprisingly, villains would have a greater focus on achieving something in the present, rather than thinking in the longer term, they would have low self-control, and more generally antisocial perspectives. This is even more salient considering that sensation seeking—as part of the fast life strategy—is positively related to future-discounting related behaviors.

While direct empirical evidence on the relationship between villains and sensation seeking behavior is still absent, past research suggests that villains would also rate high on sensation seeking, in line with behavior of antiheroes. This is based on the positive association between the Dark Triad traits that characterize villains and the future-discounting related behavior, typical of the fast life strategy and sensation seeking behavior. Remains to discuss whether antiheroes are somewhere more in the middle on the sensation seeking spectrum, between heroes and villains. If the main driver of fast life strategy in people is the trait of psychopathy as Jonason et al. (2012) find, then, we would expect villains to score even higher than antiheroes on sensation seeking, given the importance of psychopathy as a characterizing trait of villains.

### **Conclusions**

Reminder of the behavior and characteristics of heroes, villains, and antiheroes can affect how people behave in turn. Hence, it is important to focus on how priming with these figures can change individual behavior. This is key when it comes to studying ways in which characteristics of heroes, villains, and antiheroes can change individual behavior in an unhealthy or unsafe way.

One trait of heroism—or better say, antiheroism and villainy—is that of sensation seeking. Past research on heroism, life strategy theory, and sensation seeking lead us to assume that sensation seeking is a trait that mostly characterizes antiheroes and villains, rather than heroes. When individuals are primed with these figures, they may show greater tendency to sensation seeking. This could be by preferring and engaging in activities with greater risk and excitement (e.g., Ulqinaku et al., 2021).

As a final note, it is important to be aware of the effects that use or reminder of heroes, villains, and antiheroes can have on people. While most of the sensation seeking effects shown by research so far are potentially harmless and limited to the choice of brands or the choice of donation activities, using antihero or villain figures in other riskier contexts—like gambling or driving—could lead to potentially more dangerous outcome.

**Cross-References:** life history theory, dark triad, villains, heroes, antiheroes, sensation seeking, priming

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