

# Individual differences and risky behaviour amongst elite athletes: A review of the psychological predictors of risk-taking behaviour.

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## Introduction

Media portrayals of elite athletes often imply that these individuals are more frequently involved in risky and controversial behaviour, compared with non-athletes. Although many studies have investigated the off-field behaviours of athletes, the majority focus on adolescent and collegiate athletes. Elite athletes are a distinct subgroup as they carry out their sporting role as a job. With the ever-increasing media attention into the risky and antisocial behaviour of elite athletes, e.g. substance abuse, infidelity, risky driving, risky sexual behaviour, and heavy gambling, it is important to understand the central factors which may influence these behaviours. The present article aims to outline the scales which could be used to measure the contributing factors behind risky behaviour in elite athletes.

## Risky Behaviour and Personal Sense of Power

One point for researchers to consider when conducting research on the behaviours of elite athletes is that they receive a lot of attention from the general public and the media and are often considered role models. Because of this, many elite athletes may develop a heightened sense of power. Power refers to the amount of influence an individual has over other people. Researchers have inferred that a heightened sense of power can increase an individual's optimism and consequently result in an increase in risky behaviour to gain rewards. This can be because individuals who have a heightened perception of power or status will often face less interference from others when pursuing these rewards, and so having power may fuel an individual's tendency to take risks required for that reward. It has been suggested that people with heightened perceived power are more likely to participate in gambling and unprotected sex, behaviours which are often reported in elite athletes. Based on the previous research it may be beneficial to use a power scale to look in to an elite athlete's sense of power, e.g. The Personal Sense of Power Scale (Anderson, John & Keltner, 2012).

## Risky Behaviour and Attitudinal Differences

Attitudinal differences should also be considered. It has been found that that individuals who have more tolerant attitudes towards risk taking are more likely to be involved in highly risky activities. Based on these findings, it is possible to infer that elite athletes with more liberal attitudes are more likely to engage in higher risk taking than those with more conservative attitudes. It has also been found that collegiate athletes who gamble were more likely to have a heightened positive attitude to risky behaviour than those who did not gamble. Because of this, it may be logical to explore this connection using an attitudinal scale, such as the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), to measure differing attitudes as a potential predictor of risky behaviour.

## Risky Behaviour and Sensation-Seeking

Research has revealed that collegiate athletes drank significantly more than non-athletes and this may be related to levels of sensation-seeking and risk taking. It has been proposed that athletes may seek out situations which are more exciting for increased stimulation and as a means of social engagement. Since most collegiate athletes are highly competitive individuals, it could be argued that they attempt to seek out excitement and stimuli at a level which matches their personal characteristics. Based on this previous research it would be logical to assess this using a sensation-seeking scale when researching risky behaviour in elite athletes, such as the Sensation-Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1964), the Sexual Sensation-Seeking index (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995) or a personality questionnaire such as The Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire (shortened, ZKPQ-50-CC) (Aluja, Rossier, Garcia, Angleitner, Kuhlman & Zuckerman, 2006) which measures impulsive sensation-seeking.

## Risky Behaviour and Psychopathy

One study investigated morality and emotions in athletes when viewing unpleasant, neutral, and pleasant sport pictures. The study measured moral disengagement, empathy, empathic concern, antisocial behaviour and psychopathy and reported that psychopathy was one of the factors associated with emotional reactions to the unpleasant sports pictures. The work highlights the link between psychopathy and risky behaviour, with the association now emerging in noncriminal samples. Other research also suggests that risk taking also has links to psychopathy in the general population. Therefore, it may be valuable to use a Psychopathy Scale when researching risky behaviour of elite athletes, for instance the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III; Paulhus Neumann & Hare, 2009).

## Risky Behaviour and Substance Abuse

Research has found that heavy alcohol and marijuana use, as well as violence within relationships, are predictors of risky sexual behaviour. This may be because some substances disinhibit human behaviour. It has been suggested by researchers that collegiate athletes engage in riskier lifestyle behaviour patterns and choices when compared with the lifestyles of non-athletes, including higher alcohol consumption, driving under the influence of alcohol, and riding in a car whilst the driver is intoxicated. Research has studied the prevalence of risky sexual behaviour, such as unprotected sex and number of sexual partners, in relation to gambling behaviours and heavy drinking among college athletes. They found that older male athletes are more likely to participate in risky sexual activities, suggesting that with age came experience and higher risk-taking tendencies. Researchers may consider using an alcohol expectancy scale when researching the risky behaviour of elite athletes, for example the Comprehensive Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire (CAEQ; Demmel & Hagen, 2003).

## General Risk Taking

A potentially effective way to measure general risk-taking behaviour tendencies is by using the Revised Domain Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT) (Blais & Weber, 2006), a 30-item scale measuring 5 subscales: Ethical, Financial, Health/safety, Recreational, and Social. Results from this

scale could be compared with those from the scales mentioned above to examine how much each potential predictor contributes towards risk-taking behaviour.

## Conclusion

Risky behaviour is a multi-faceted concept which comprises various actions and behaviours which are either illegal or go beyond what is morally considered to be a social norm. Moreover, the inherent motivation for one individual to engage in risky behaviour may differ greatly from that of another person. Owing to this, it can be deduced that no individual scale can be used as a 'gold standard' measure for predicting risky behaviour. Instead, the present report suggests that an individual's propensity to engage in risky behaviour can be more reliably predicted using multiple scales, measuring different aspects, that have been identified by previous research as accurate predictors of certain risk-taking behaviours.

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