

Opinion

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The Myth of 'Addictive Personality'



Mark D Griffiths*

Distinguished Professor of Behavioural Addiction, International Gaming Research Unit, Psychology Division, Nottingham Trent University, UK

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*Corresponding author: Mark D Griffiths, Distinguished Professor of Behavioural Addiction, International Gaming Research Unit, Psychology Division, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham, NG1 4FQ, United Kingdom, Email: mark.griffiths@ntu.ac.uk

Introduction

In the 30 years that I have been carrying out research into addiction, the question that I have been asked the most – particularly by those who work in the print and broadcast media – is whether there is such a thing as an 'addictive personality'? Psychologists such as Sadava [1] have gone as far to say that 'addictive personality' is theoretically necessary, logically defensible, and empirically supportable. Sadava argued that if 'addictive personality' did not exist then every individual would be vulnerable to addiction if they lived in comparable environments, and that those who were addicted would differ only from others in the specifics of their addiction (e.g., alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, and heroin). However, Sadava neglected genetic/biological predispositions and the structural characteristics of the substance or behaviour itself.

There are many possible reasons why people believe in the concept of 'addictive personality' including the facts that: (i) vulnerability is not perfectly correlated to one's environment [1], (ii) some addicts are addicted to more than one substance/activity (cross addiction) and engage themselves in more than one addictive behaviour [2], and (iii) on giving up addiction some addicts become addicted to another (i.e., 'reciprocity' [3]). In all the papers I have ever read concerning 'addictive personality', I have never read a good operational definition of what 'addictive personality' actually is (beyond the implicit assumption that it refers to a personality trait that helps explain why individuals become addicted to substances and/or behaviours). Nakken [4] argued that 'addictive personality' is "created from the illness of addiction", and that 'addictive personality' is a consequence of addiction and not a predisposing factor. In essence, Makken simply argued that 'addictive personality' refers to the personality of an individual once they are addicted, and as such, this has little utility in understanding how and why individuals become addictive.

When teaching my own students about the concept of 'addictive personality' I always tell them that operational definitions of constructs in the addictive behaviours field

are critical. Given that I have never seen an explicit definition of 'addictive personality' I provide my own definition and argue that 'addictive personality' (if it exists) is a cognitive and behavioural style which is both specific and personal that renders an individual vulnerable to acquiring and maintaining one or more addictive behaviours at any one time. I also agree with Cloninger et al. [5] that the relationship between addictive characteristics and personality variables depend on the theoretical considerations of personality. According to Nathan [6] there must be standards of proof to show valid associations between personality and addictive behaviour. He reported that for the personality trait or factor to genuinely exist it must:

- either precede the initial signs of the disorder or must be a direct and lasting feature of the disorder,
- be specific to the disorder rather than antecedent, coincident or consequent to other disorders/behaviours that often accompany addictive behaviour,
- be discriminative, and
- be related to the addictive behaviour on the basis of independently confirmed empirical, rather than clinical, evidence. As far as I am aware, there is no study that has ever met these four standards of proof, and consequently I would argue on the basis of these that there is no 'addictive personality'.

Although I do not believe in the concept of 'addictive personality' this does not mean that personality factors are not important in the acquisition, development, and maintenance of addictive behaviours. They clearly are. For instance, Kotov et al. [7] examined the associations between substance use disorders (SUDs) and higher order personality traits (i.e., the 'big five' of openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism) in 66 meta-analyses. Their review included 175 studies (with sample sizes ranged from 1,076 to 75,229) and findings demonstrated that SUD addicts were high on neuroticism (and was the strongest personality trait

associated with SUD addiction) and low on conscientiousness. Many of the studies reviewed also reported that agreeableness and openness were largely unrelated to SUDs.

Malouff et al. [8] carried out a meta-analysis examining the relationship between the five-factor model of personality and alcohol. The meta-analysis included 20 studies (n=7,886) and showed alcohol involvement was associated with low conscientiousness, low agreeableness, and high neuroticism. Mixed-sex samples tended to have lower effect sizes than single-sex samples, suggesting that mixing sexes in data analysis may obscure the effects of personality. Hittner and Swickert [9] carried out a meta-analysis examining the association between sensation seeking and alcohol use. An analysis of 61 studies revealed a small to moderate size heterogeneous effect between alcohol use and total scores on the sensation seeking scale. Further analysis of the sensation seeking components indicated that disinhibition was most strongly correlated with alcohol use.

Munafò et al. [10] conducted a meta-analysis examining strength and direction of the association between smoking status and personality. They included 25 cross-sectional studies that reported personality data for adult smokers and non-smokers and reported a significant difference between smokers and non-smokers on both extraversion and neuroticism traits. In relation to gambling disorder, MacLaren et al. [11] carried out a meta-analysis of 44 studies that had examined the personality traits of pathological gamblers (N=2,134) and non-pathological gambling control groups (N=5,321). Gambling addiction was shown to be associated with urgency, premeditation, perseverance, and sensation seeking aspects of impulsivity. They concluded that individual personality characteristics may be important in the aetiology of pathological gambling and that the findings were similar to the meta-analysis of substance use disorders by Kotov et al. [7].

More recently, Andreassen et al. [12] carried out the first ever study investigating the inter-relationships between the 'big five' personality traits and behavioural addictions. They assessed seven behavioural addictions (i.e., *Facebook* addiction, video game addiction, Internet addiction, exercise addiction, mobile phone addiction, compulsive buying, and study addiction). Of 21 inter-correlations between the seven behavioural addictions, all were positive (and nine significantly so). More specifically:

- a. neuroticism was positively associated with Internet addiction, exercise addiction, compulsive buying, and study addiction,
- b. extroversion was positively associated with *Facebook* addiction, exercise addiction, mobile phone addiction, and compulsive buying,
- c. openness was negatively associated with *Facebook* addiction and mobile phone addiction,

d. agreeableness was negatively associated with Internet addiction, exercise addiction, mobile phone addiction, and compulsive buying, and

e. conscientiousness was negatively associated with *Facebook* addiction, video game addiction, Internet addiction, and compulsive buying and positively associated with exercise addiction and study addiction. However, replication and extension of these findings is needed before any definitive conclusions can be made.

Overall these studies examining personality and addiction consistently demonstrate that addictive behaviours are correlated with high levels of neuroticism and low levels of conscientiousness. However, there is no evidence of a single trait (or set of traits) that is predictive of addiction and addiction alone. Others have also reached the same conclusion based on the available evidence. For instance, Pols [13] noted that findings from prospective studies are inconsistent with retrospective and cross-sectional studies leading to the conclusion that the 'addictive personality' is a myth. Kerr [14] noted that 'addictive personality' had long been argued as a viable construct (particularly in the USA) but that there is simply no evidence for the existence of a personality type that is prone to addiction. In another review of drug addictions, Conway et al. [15] asserted there was scant evidence that personality traits were associated with psychoactive substance choice. Most recently, Szalavitz [16,17] noted that:

"Fundamentally, the idea of a general addictive personality is a myth. Research finds no universal character traits that are common to all addicted people. Only half have more than one addiction (not including cigarettes)—and many can control their engagement with some addictive substances or activities, but not others."

Clearly there are common findings across a number of differing addictions (such as similarities in personality profiles using the 'big five' traits) but it is hard to establish whether these traits are antecedent to the addiction or caused by it. Within most addictions there appear to be more than one sub-type of addict suggesting different pathways of how and why individuals might develop various addictions [18-20]. If this is the case – and I believe that it is – where does that leave the 'addictive personality' construct?

'Addictive personality' is arguably a 'one type fits all' approach and there is now much evidence that the causes of addiction are biopsychosocial from an individual perspective, and that situational determinants (e.g., accessibility to the drug/behaviour, advertising and marketing, etc.) and structural determinants (e.g., toxicity of a specific drug, game speed in gambling, etc.) can also be influential in the aetiology of problematic and addictive behaviours [21]. Another problem with 'addictive personality' being an explanation for why

individuals develop addictions is that the concept inherently absolves an individual's responsibility of developing an addiction and puts the onus on others in treating the addiction. Ultimately, all addicts have to take some responsibility in the development of their problematic behaviour and they have to take some ownership for overcoming their addiction. Personally, I believe it is better to concentrate research into risk and protective factors of addiction rather than further research of 'addictive personality'.

Not every addict has a personality disorder, and not every person with a personality disorder has an addiction [22]. While some personality disorders appear to have an association with addiction including Antisocial Personality Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder [23], just because a person has some of the personality traits associated with addiction does not mean they are, or will become, an addict [22]. Practitioners consider specific personality traits to be warning signs, but that's all they are. There is no personality trait that guarantees an individual will develop an addiction and there is little evidence for an 'addictive personality' that is predictive of addiction alone. In short, 'addictive personality' is a complete myth.

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