Chapter 7

The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

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One does not have to view the media coverage of unusual and serious offences for long, before the interest patterns of the offenders are commented on. In February 2001, David Mulcahy and John Duffy ('The Railway Rapists') were convicted of the rape and murder of three women. In their background, it was noted that ‘Neither boy had girlfriends at school and they shared a fascination with martial arts, watching kung-fu films, collecting knives and books on how to maim and kill’ (Bennetto, The Independent, February 2001). Also in February 2001, it was feared that some high-school students in Kansas were about to massacre members of their school in the same way Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had carried out the shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999. The raid on the homes of the students revealed pipe-bombs, knives, white supremacist literature and an animal skull daubed with swastikas. Detective Steven Rupert of Jackson County Sheriff’s Office stated ‘We don’t know how serious they were. We can’t delve into their minds, [but] we just couldn’t wait.’ In October 2002, a white racist bodybuilder with a large arsenal of weapons and explosives (and plans to use these in an attack on a mosque) was convicted for 12 years (Morris 2002). At the end of that month, the Washington DC–Baltimore conurbation was plagued by a serial-killing sniper who killed at least 12 persons and taunted the police with a message on the tarot card depicting death.

Fortunately, such persons are exceptional, and many offenders have more conventional interests in sports, vehicles or popular music. However, such information is not regarded as salient to understanding those individuals. Rather, an offender’s interest or active involvement in
Forensic Psychology

Violent, morbid, and macabre topics with a physiologically arousing and mentally stimulating dimension (e.g. actual and surrogate violence, sexuality, ideologically-driven power fantasies) has been presented as if this had some causal or contributory role to the offence in question. The current review discusses the status of such sensational interests as indicators of possible risk of serious violent or sexual offending, reviewing systematic research to operationalise formally the underlying constructs. The chapter seeks to provide a more systematic and scientific psychological framework by which such interests and behaviours might be formally examined and used to guide thinking about risk.

What is the aetiology of the idea of the pathological status of sensational interests?

Based on his decades of clinical experience, Brittain (1970) wrote a paper called *The Sadistic Murderer* in which he stated that the stereotypical male sadistic sexual killer tended to be timid, withdrawn, introverted and solitary. Such offenders were thought to be over-controlled, and subject to obsessive rumination and were typically socially and behaviourally incompetent. Their poor sex life was attributed to either impoverished relationships or ‘deviant sexuality’. This view is hugely generic for the many patients seen by the clinical services, let alone forensic services, and provides no differentiation of a person who may be mentally ill but harmless from one who may be dangerous. Brittain goes on to suggest that the interests of sadistic sexual murderers encompass many dramatic topics; sado-masochism and pornography; torture and atrocities; the depiction of true-life crime; weapons; Nazism and fascism; horror films; black magic and the occult; multiple murderers; and paganism. Into this face-valid selection of constructs, he also suggested that sadistic sexual murderers could be deeply preoccupied by their pets, or even going to church; clearly the latter somewhat drifts from what may be a legitimate clinical observation.

Brittain’s ‘sensational interests’ model is not the only unhelpful ‘back-of-envelope’ model of psychopathology; a predictive triad of persistent enuresis, animal cruelty and fire-setting in children has also been deemed sufficient to predict adult violent behaviour (Hellman and Blackman 1966). Similarly, the loosened florid associations of psycho-analysis have spuriously linked arson to masturbation, despite little evidence to support this as a general phenomenon (Fritzon 2000). As with sensational interests, the forensic triad and ‘eroticised arson’ are behaviours with a range of possible causes and outcomes that have been
regarded as quasi or actual medical symptoms. In both cases, grossly over-generalised models have been influenced by the selective observation or inclusion of a small number of highly disturbed individuals. The Brittain criteria, ‘forensic triad’, and fireside onanism were somehow neglected in the development of useful and predictive risk assessment instruments like the HCR (Webster et al. 1997) or the SVR-20 (Boer et al. 1997). This is unsurprising; sensational interests (let alone masturbation and bonfires) are of wide interest to many non-pathological samples as well as ordinary offenders and the specific symptoms are often too specific, readily subsumed within more general criteria such as anti-social offending, impulsivity or callousness. Of themselves and taken out of context, specific behaviours are predictive of little bar the dangers of over-simplifying human behaviour into symptomology. Behaviour can have many causes and outcomes. The diversity of ‘normality’ is rarely appreciated by those preoccupied with the pathological (Offer and Sabshin 1991).

**Popular culture and sensational interests**

That sensational interests are not generally causal to serious offending should be of little surprise to observers of contemporary popular culture. What begins as a marginal statement of individual choice in ethnic and urban subcultures – for example being tattooed or having a piercing – was once regarded as pathognomic. Such individuals were criminal, sexually deviant and indubitably ‘other’ (Ellis 1890). However, appropriated by the fashion and music industry, such signs of personal display quickly become common and exemplify the rate at which revolt becomes style. Anthropological studies show how important images of status and power are to diverse cultures, and such imagery is also seen in the status displays in western society. This is contrary to the objection that ‘sensational’ interests are influenced by time, place and cultural milieu. Indeed, the practicalities of bodily modification, violence, drug use, transgressive beliefs, and the valuing of paranormal and physical power are as likely to be seen in followers of the ‘carnival of crime’ (Presdee 2000) and ‘the new primitivism’ (Vale and Juno 1989) as in tribal settings.

There is a large general interest in the most dramatic forms of criminality (Biressi 2001), whether these are serial killers or sadistic sexual offenders, despite the relative paucity of such offences in real crime figures. This curiosity dates back to at least the ‘Newgate Calendar’, a hugely popular Victorian journal detailing the acts of
sensational crimes and the state’s punishment of the offenders (Thomas 1998). The louche and the picaresque remain popular today, with entire television channels sometimes appearing to serve such a need. Films depicting mass murder are highly successful and lucrative rather than off-putting to audiences. Contemporary modern art is also saturated with sensational interests (Home 1991). In 1997, London’s Royal Academy had an exhibition called *Sensation*. In this, the audience was challenged by what the artists fancied was edgy, dangerous and transgressive; Jay Jopling sculpted his own head in frozen blood; Mat Collishaw’s work *Bullet Hole* comprised a close-up photograph of a bullet in the brain. Tabloid newspapers expressed their alarm perhaps forgetting the nightmare visions of Hieronymus Bosch, Andy Warhol’s screen-prints of car crashes, or Govert Bidloo’s copperplate anatomical engravings in the *Anatomia Humani Corporis* (1685).

If there is one force driving the popular media to exploit the grotesque or violent for entertainment and profit (and perhaps even aesthetics), other forces perceive this as malign. Every few years a pop group appropriates violent, ‘Satanic’ or otherwise sensationalist images to sell more records or concert tickets, leading to a moral panic in conservative, often religiously motivated commentators. Public funding bodies may also over-react; thus it was that, thanks to the generosity of the US Congress, a youth-outreach programme in Missouri received $273,000 to combat ‘Goth culture’ (Dinan 2002). Not everyone views the noisy, hedonistic fancy dress party that is youth culture as ultimately transient and mostly harmless (Gaines 1992). One of the earliest examples of moral panic about topics that might be construed under the label of ‘sensational interests’ was *The Seduction of the Innocent* (Wertham 1955). This book linked American horror comics produced by EC to sadism, spelled out the latent (and not so latent) homosexual and fetishistic imagery of Batman and Robin, and posited both as associated with the rise in juvenile delinquency. In the 1980s ‘heavy metal’ music, often lyrically about violence, motorbikes, dungeons, dragons, devils and things that go bump in the night became of concern. It was found that the overt lyrical content and musical intensity of heavy metal does not generally lead to delinquency (Singer, Levine and Jou 1993). Nor do reverse presented and masked messages on heavy metal recordings influence the behaviour of listeners (Vokey and Read 1985). There are plenty of case studies of disturbed teenagers who commit serious violent or sexual offences. These persons are sometimes affiliated to subcultures that older and more conservative adults dislike (Victor 1994); however adolescence also marks the peak age of offending and for the development of lifelong mental illness.
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

Nevertheless, the causal significance of sensational interests popularly continues; the youths responsible for the Columbine massacre were found to have CDs by the latest glamour-wicked pop star, Marilyn Manson, and at one concert Manson was not allowed to perform unless he also read extracts from the Bible. Mr Manson read the most violent and blood-thirsty extracts from the Good Book, aware that this book, like many ‘holy’ books, is replete with sensationalist imagery which could (and has) inspired some individuals to harm others while being inspirational and positive to many others. What inspires a person to act in a destructive way towards others is often subjective; film director Alfred Hitchcock was asked about his irresponsibility in showing murder in his thrillers. He showed the enquiring journalist a press-cutting he kept about a man who strangled his girlfriend after they had seen Walt Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

It comes down to statistics; the base-rate for sensational interests is high, and the base-rate for serious offending is low. As a result, in the general population, such associations will never be sufficiently strong to reflect causality. Most people are unaware of basic maths when evaluating evidence (Scarr 1997). Nevertheless, for some individuals, or particular populations, such relationships may occur. Responsible researchers should not only examine the clinical or forensic populations where such associations may occur, but also ensure that such concepts are not excessively broadened to become meaningless or oppress individual freedom and diversity.

Mechanisms underlying sensational interests: arousal

Several mechanisms explaining why sensational interests are rewarding for some individuals can be advanced. Most derive from the broader personality and sensation seeking literature:

1 ‘Excitation-transfer’ models: These suggest that exposure to particular stimuli generate excitational states that intensify post-exposure emotional responses (Zillman 1978, 1980). The physiological arousal generated by exposure to such stimuli is transferred (or labelled) by individuals in an effort to impose meaning to their experience. Thus viewing-induced arousal to graphic horror images may be converted into feelings of distress or delight (Sparks 1991). These stimuli may lead to the formation of internalised sustaining fantasies that provide cognitive consolation when an individual feels upset (Zelin et al. 1983).
‘Optimal level of arousal’ (OLA) theories: OLA theories develop Eysenckian models of arousal modulation as a function of the individual leading to their expressed personality (e.g., Eysenck 1990), and can explain an interest in experiential stimuli that elicit anxiety, anger and even disgust. According to this model, the person’s need for novel and arousing experiences drives a desire to witness or read about ‘sensational’ events. The arousal of apparently negative emotions becomes positively reinforcing if it brings an individual to an optimal level of cortical arousal (or just beyond). Individuals seek intense and/or novel stimulation because they are generally under-aroused relative to those with a higher OLA (Zuckerman 1994, 1997).

Learning processes may also be important, as beyond arousal, some persons may habituate more rapidly to repeated exposure to arousing stimuli. The arousing potential of any stimulus is reduced by repetition, and some persons may seek novel experiences and activities in order to avoid the inevitable decline in arousal produced by familiarity.

Lastly, high sensation interests may reflect neurochemical states. Fabregat and Beltri (1998) associate sensation seeking levels with differing levels of catecholamines (catecholamines being monoamine neurotransmitters in the central nervous system such as noradrenaline, dopamine and serotonin, all of which are associated with brain mechanisms underlying behaviour in general). By modulating these neurotransmitters, an individual can arguably sustain his or her particular OLA (Zuckerman 1994).

Mechanisms underlying sensational interests: evolution and mating effort

When one thinks of causes underlying a psychological process, one has to consider ultimate and proximate causality. While the mechanisms above reflect proximate causal influences, the basic and ultimate cause of behaviour is often founded on evolutionary processes. If sensational interests reflect natural tendencies, as seen by comparable cross-cultural expressions of interest in violence, supernatural ritual and extreme bodily adornment, it is likely that they have some kind of adaptive value, and do not necessarily reflect ‘anti-social’ traits as such. One core construct in evolutionary psychology is that of status display, which generally reflects intra-sexual competition for mates. It has often been
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

noted that offenders – disproportionately young and male – seek to assert their dominance via physical and material display (Ellis and Walsh 2000), and Quinsey (2002) suggests that this forensic constant reflects an evolutionary strategy: the intra-sexual competition for partners. This is known as mating effort, which reflects the degree to which an individual devotes resources to finding and guarding sexual partners (Rowe et al. 1997). A study of juvenile sex offenders (Hunter, Figueredo, Malamuth and Becker 2003) found that high mating effort led to a series of deviant behavioural strategies including hostile masculinity and general (non-sexual) delinquency, which culminated in sex offending. Other strategies may be used in intra-sexual competition by those high in mating effort including: resource acquisition by legal or illegal means, wholesome activities indicating health or intelligence, or fitness displays of more or less social acceptability (e.g., sports, physical combat, or active aggression). Sensational interests are inherently attention-getting and should thus reflect a behavioural strategy for individuals high in mating effort. This suggests that, while sensational interests may be a strategy for some offenders, individuals who are not at risk of offending may also use such interests. In both groups, sensational interests may be one means of intra-sexual competition within their behavioural repertoire.

Evidence linking fantasies, interests and behaviour

I have argued that sweeping generalisations about the contribution of some sensationalist topic or construct to psychopathology or crime in populations are limited. This does not mean that certain individuals do not interpret and internalise such material in a way that contributes to their desire to harm others. The selection and use of violent, morbid, and macabre material has been claimed to contribute to violent and pathological fantasies in some individuals (West, Roy and Nicholas 1978; Dietz and Hazelwood 1986; Prentky et al. 1989). MacCullough et al. (1983) noted that 13 of 16 patients held in special hospitals for serious sexual offences described recurrent sadistic fantasies linked to sexual arousal. In all 13 cases, the index offences were recognisably part of the fantasy sequence, which contributed to their reported sexual arousal and mental pleasure during the offence. All 13 patients described previous behavioural try-outs to enact a fantasy sequence. One of the main reasons for behavioural try-outs was to maintain the effectiveness of the fantasy as a source of arousal. In 11 of the 13 patients, behavioural try-out occurred less than one year after the development of the
Fantasies, and in seven cases, the patients acted out parts of their fantasies at a frequency of once or twice per week.

The mechanism between fantasies and behavioural try-outs in some serious sexual offences is thought to be associative (MacCulloch et al. 2000). However, non-offending men also report sexual fantasies that have controlling and sadistic elements (Crepault and Couture 1980), and this group are well able to distinguish fantasy and behaviour. Equally, some offenders may not have deviant fantasies underlying their deviant behaviours (Langevin, Lang and Curnoe 1998), for example opportunist child molesters who are not actually paedophilic. Studying the fantasies of a patient is complicated by the fact that fantasies are unobservable, and may well be minimised. Clients may equally be brow-beaten into saying what the therapist wants to hear, and therapists may use this information in their reports. An alternative strategy is to identify the images and content of an individual’s fantasies by looking at her or his recreational choices and interests, reasoning that these give an analogue external validation to a person’s internal preoccupations.

**Personality and sensational interests**

The research into sensational interests as defined by Brittain is modest, and has generally addressed individual topics of a ‘sensational’ nature rather than the full constellation of constructs. Hans Eysenck’s book *Psychoticism as a Dimension of Personality* reports unpublished results by David Nias showing low but statistically significant correlations between psychoticism (P; tough-minded hostility) and an interest in crime, horror, and viewing war films in children (Nias 1975, in Eysenck and Eysenck 1976). There are reasonably well-recognised associations between schizotypy and a range of occult interests (Claridge 1997). However, it is the overlapping constructs of sensation-seeking (Zuckerman 1994) and trait P that are the personality dimensions best associated with sensational interests. Studies have found high scores on the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) associated with (unsurprisingly) drug use and misuse (Zuckerman 1994), a greater interest in risky sports (Jack and Ronan 1998); torture, execution, and corpses (Zaleski 1984) and the representation of death in the mass media (Potts, Dedmon and Halford 1996). Zuckerman and Little (1986) found that sensation-seeking and P correlated with self-reported interest in media depictions of violent, morbid and sexual events. Fabregat and Beltri (1998) replicated Zuckerman and Little’s result, finding the SSS (especially Disinhibition and Thrill and Adventure Seeking) had a relationship with interests in
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

sex and horror-related topics, and in actually going to see horror and sex films. Further studies in the field of media preferences for horror and filmed violence have replicated this association, typically demonstrating associations with Psychoticism and Extroversion (e.g. Weaver 1991; Weaver et al. 1993; Fabregat 2000).

For all their faults and perhaps questionable taste, none of the persons showing these associations were known sadistic sexual or mentally disordered offenders. Indeed one difficulty with this field is that most studies have addressed student populations, with inevitable limitations for extrapolating such results to clinical and forensic populations. There have not been systematic studies into associations between personality measures and topics such as the military, weapons, martial arts, or motorcycles. Neither has there been a systematic programme of research into sensational interests with standardised metrics, dissociation of confounds such as age and psychopathology, and links to the broader psychological mechanisms described above. Brittain himself stated:

Deliberately, no attempt has been made to quantify the data used nor to explain in detail the features mentioned. The purpose is to try and give a factual description for practical use, not a theoretical formulation. (Brittain 1970: 198)

Gunn and Taylor (1993) concur that Brittain’s ‘classical description’ has ‘largely stood the test of time’ (p. 391). Prins (1990) is one of the few to note the potential value of sensational interests despite the paucity of work upon them. He observed that the context and quality of a sensational interest, rather than the interest itself, might be important, as might be the qualitative nature of how the interest is expressed. These are interesting ideas deserving examination; however more basic questions might be more immediately tractable. It is thus peculiar that despite the numerous individuals held within secure settings, with sensational interests, who have committed violent or sexual offences, and the assumed salience of these interests to their psychopathology, little such research has been conducted.

**Systematic research into the topic: validating a measure of sensational interests**

Despite the implications of someone being falsely labelled as dangerous as a result of their interests, the empirical and conceptual basis of ‘sensational interests’ has not been examined in serious offenders. In
identifying this need, the first requirement was to produce a checklist of items to measure sensational interests in a more systematic way. The Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ; Egan et al. 1999) was developed to identify those items that best discriminate between individuals and fall together into meaningful clusters, thus providing the user with a means to assess an individual. We sought to exclude items that did not discriminate between individuals, and to discover which items reflected content overlap, so measuring facets of some underlying factor. The pilot SIQ comprised 60 items. These items included all the interests mentioned in the original Brittain paper, along with items examining conventional interests. Individuals rated whether they were ‘greatly interested’, ‘slightly interested’, ‘indifferent’, ‘disinterested’ or ‘greatly disinterested’ in the particular topic. This pilot instrument was given to 301 persons; 156 control participants from the normal population, including the cleaners and security staff of a regional secure unit. The scale was also completed by 53 individuals referred to the forensic clinical psychology out-patients service, and 54 individuals held within the same regional secure unit, all of whom were detained under the 1983 Mental Health Act. These individuals also completed a short measure of personality (the NEO-Five Factor Inventory; (NEO-FFI); Costa and McCrae 1992) and a measure of social desirability (the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability scale; Reynolds 1982). General demographic information (age, sex, social class, years of education) was also recorded.

With 300 subjects and 60 items, there was a 5:1 ratio between subjects and items, justifying an item factor-analysis. Inspection of the items found five meaningful factors, with the remainder being generated by chance associations from such an analysis. The 29 items contributing to these five factors were then re-factored (Table 7.1). These factors explained over 50 per cent of all the observed variance in the scale. These factors were:

1. Militarism (an interest in paramilitary groups, the Armed Forces, body-building, martial arts, weapons, sport and survivalism).
2. Violent-occultism (an interest in drug use, black magic, paganism, tattoos and body-piercing, and weapons).
3. Intellectual recreation (an interest in psychology and psychiatry, philosophy, medicine, making music and foreign travel).
4. Occult credulousness (an interest in the paranormal, flying saucers and astrology).
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

5 Outdoors activities (an interest in country and hill-walking, camping, gardening and the environment).

Analysis of these items as scales indicated that they all had Cronbach’s alpha co-efficients of 0.68 and above, meaning they were of acceptable reliability.

**Table 7.1** Items of possible forensic interest extracted from pilot research into the SIQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original ‘sadistic’ interest proposed by Brittain</th>
<th>Identified in analysis of pilot SIQ?</th>
<th>Substitute item which loaded in pilot SIQ</th>
<th>Identified factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vampires and werewolves</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>The paranormal</td>
<td>1st PC, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Motorbikes</td>
<td>1st PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial arts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motorbikes</td>
<td>1st PC, F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinosaurs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mangos</td>
<td>1st PC, F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossbows, knives and swords</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1st PC, F1, F2</td>
<td>1st PC, F1, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Flying saucers</td>
<td>1st PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending religious services</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Body-building</td>
<td>1st PC, F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Body-building</td>
<td>1st PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology and psychiatry</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Alternative medicine</td>
<td>F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motorbikes</td>
<td>1st PC, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black magic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motorbikes</td>
<td>1st PC, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercenaries and the SAS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motorbikes</td>
<td>1st PC, F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns and shooting</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1st PC, F1, F2</td>
<td>1st PC, F1, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science fiction and fantasy</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Alternative medicine</td>
<td>F3, F4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitler and fascism</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Tattoo and body-piercing</td>
<td>1st PC, F2</td>
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<tr>
<td>True crime</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Astrology</td>
<td>F4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horror films and stories</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Survivalism</td>
<td>1st PC, F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective films and stories</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paganism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1st PC, F2, F4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about spirituality</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Armed Forces</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1st PC, F1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funerals and death</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1st PC = loaded on 1st principal component; F1 = loaded on first varimax factor; F2 = loaded on second varimax factor; F3 = loaded on third varimax factor; F4 = loaded on fourth varimax factor
Scores for the five SIQ dimensions were summed and control individuals were compared to forensic clinical out- and in-patients. It was found there were no differences between any of the groups in age or social desirability. On the NEO-FFI, control individuals were predictably lower in Neuroticism and higher in Extroversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness than forensic in- or out-patients. Forensic patients (whether in or out) were significantly higher in sensational interests than control subjects for the Militarism and Violent-Occult SIQ scales, but there was no difference between forensic-in and forensic-out groups themselves. Correlations between SIQ scales and the general personality traits were also calculated; higher scores on total sensational interests and the militarism and violent-occult sub-scales were significantly but somewhat modestly associated with lower scores on Agreeableness and lower scores on Conscientiousness. Investigation of the NEO-FFI found this instrument had several psychometric flaws, perhaps artificially reducing this association (Egan, Austin and Deary 2000). Nevertheless, a useful metric for measuring sensational interests – the SIQ – had been derived.

### Table 7.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
<th>Dis</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
<th>TAS</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
<th>BS</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
<th>SPM</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIQ total</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militarism</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>−0.14</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Occultism</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n.s. = not significant; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

### Basic principles: sensation-seeking and intelligence (Egan et al. 2001)

The next sensational interests study examined what might be called basic principles; that intelligence has a Protean influence on all aspects of human behaviour (Brand 1996); and that sensation seeking – higher in both the mentally disordered and offenders, and associated with a range of individual sensational topics – would be independent predictors of sensational interests. The study comprised 42 residents of a regional
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

secure unit, none of whom were symptomatic for any active mental illness, and all of whom had been detained under the UK 1983 Mental Health Act. This represented 80 per cent of the patients held at the unit at the time of the study. All individuals were tested on the SIQ, the Standard Progressive Matrices (a non-verbal measure of intelligence; SPM; Raven, Court and Raven 1996), and the SSS (Zuckerman 1994). The results of this study are presented in Table 7.2, and show that scores on the SIQ have no relationship with intelligence, but are significantly and substantially associated with the more pathological elements of the SSS; disinhibition and thrill and adventure seeking. This study excluded one possible reason for lower sensational interests (intelligence) and highlighted that particular, perhaps more pathological, facets of sensation-seeking predict higher scores on the measure.

Are sensational interests associated with DSM-IV personality disorder?

Individuals who commit serious offences who also have sensational interests are sometimes reported to have personality disorder, and it is the more negative aspects of general personality, whether indexed by the NEO-FFI or the SSS that have been shown to be associated with the SIQ. A larger study was conducted to examine potential associations between formal personality disorder classifications and the SIQ (Egan et al. 2003). This study was conducted with 155 participants (62 outpatients, 30 inpatients, 63 court referrals) recruited over two years. All were assessed using the self-report International Personality Disorder Examination (IPDE; Loranger 1999). This instrument bases questions around formal criteria for each of the ten personality disorders listed in the standard diagnostic manual for psychiatrists, DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association 1994). In addition, all participants completed the NEO-FFI and the SIQ. The NEO-FFI was used to see the degree to which general personality traits and specific personality disorders indexed common constructs. As the NEO-FFI has previously been shown to be problematic if individual scaled scores were used, it was approached using a multivariate approach, enabling such difficulties to be resolved. Table 7.3 presents the results of a joint factor analysis of the NEO-FFI and the IPDE, and indicates that the two separate scales (comprising 13 variables but excluding the unreliable self-report measure of schizoid personality disorder, and the unrelated to personality disorder trait dimension of Openness) can be readily reduced to four factors. These four factors follow what is called the ‘4A’ model of personality disorders
Forensic Psychology

(Livesley, Jang and Vernon 1998; Austin and Deary 2000); Asocial (i.e. odd, aloof and withdrawn); Asthenic (i.e., highly anxious and neurotic), Antisocial (i.e., emotionally unstable, paranoid and criminal); and Anankastic (i.e., compulsive and narcissistic). The 4 A’s provide an empirically derived typology of personality disorders, rather than the arbitrary (though face-valid) classification of personality disorders into the three clusters traditionally described as odd, dramatic and neurotic.

Table 7.3 Factor analysis of NEO-FFI and IPDE-SQ (n = 150): Rotated Principal Component Matrix (16 iterations)

(70% variance explained)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asocial</th>
<th>Aesthetic</th>
<th>Antisocial</th>
<th>Anankastic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>-.85</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.75</td>
<td>-.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranoid personality disorder</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizotypal personality disorder</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisocial personality disorder</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histrionic personality disorder</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissistic personality disorder</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline personality disorder</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant personality disorder</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsive personality disorder</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent personality disorder</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These merged personality trait/disorder factors were saved and used as variables to correlate with SIQ scores. Higher scores on the anti-social factor predicted a higher score on all three measures of sensational interests; no other dimension of personality disorder showed such systematic associations (Table 7.4). Given the foregoing 4A model of personality disorder, it was possible to conduct a confirmatory factor-analysis to test this model and the associations in a more systematic way. The model was specified according to the previously observed 4A model, then linked to scores from the SIQ. Within this model, there were two additional correlated variables, which were also built into the analysis; thus recognition was given to an association between anxious and anti-social personality dimensions, and to the high correlation
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

between SIQ militarism and SIQ violent-occult scores. The fit indices for this model were all highly satisfactory. Standardised regression coefficients between the anti-social personality factor and the SIQ militarism and violent-occult sub-scales were 0.26 and 0.32, respectively.

These results re-affirm, using progressively more rigorous analysis, the view that it is elements of personality disorder associated with anti-social behaviour and aspects of emotional dyscontrol within this construct that best predict sensational interests, and that no other aspect of personality disorder is significantly associated with such interests.

While personality traits and personality disorders are clearly interleaved such that personality traits and disorders are often seen as part of the same continuum, it does not follow that all personality measures are equal in predicting sensational interests. To examine whether having a high score on the SIQ (defined as being above the 25th percentile) was better predicted by high scores on an Eysenckian P proxy (the total of scores for Agreeableness and Conscientiousness on the NEO-FFI) or an antisocial personality disorder factor derived from a factor analysis of the IPDE sub-scales, a ROC analysis was conducted. As can be seen from Figure 7.1, the ‘area under the curve’ (AUC) statistic for the personality disorder measure is a better predictor of sensational interests than a proxy P derived from the NEO-FFI. These results suggest that for mentally disordered offenders, those measures examining more clinical aspects of personality are perhaps more sensitive to detecting extremes of sensational interests than are general instruments.

Table 7.4 Correlations between merged personality trait/disorder factor scores and SIQ measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total SIQ</th>
<th>皮</th>
<th>Violent Occult</th>
<th>皮</th>
<th>Militarism</th>
<th>皮</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asocial</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthenic</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisocial</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anankastic</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The SIQ and psychopathy

Psychopathy presents a second-order construct deriving from the conjunction of particular personality disorders. Narcissistic personality disorder is compatible with the core psychopathic traits of callousness
and grandiosity indexed in factor 1 of the revised Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R; Hare 1991). Anti-social personality disorder corresponds well with the lifestyle-driven criminality captured by a higher score on factor 2 of the PCL-R. Given the value of the PCL-R in predicting many other aspects of violence risk, associations between psychopathy and the SIQ have also been examined. This study comprised 40 men assessed for a personality disorder treatment unit at a regional secure unit. All persons were assessed with the PCL-R, IPDE, NEO-FFI, and the SIQ. The mean total PCL-R score for this population was = 20 (SD = 6.9). While psychopathy correlated in predictable manners with lower Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, a higher factor 1 PCL-R score correlated with higher self-rated scores of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and higher scores on factor 2 of the PCL-R correlated with anti-social personality disorder, only one significant association was found between psychopathy and sensational interests: factor 2 of the PCL-R (lifestyle criminality) was correlated with SIQ militarism (r = 0.29, P<.05). Core psychopathy does not seem to predict a greater interest in sensational topics.

**Evolutionary issues: Mating effort and sensational interests**

Weiss, Egan and Figueredo (2004) tested the hypothesis that individual differences in sensational interests partially reflect intra-sexual competition for status and thus have an underlying evolutionary function. It was predicted that age and sex should be directly related to individual

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**Figure 7.1** ROC curve comparing measures of personality disorder and a psychoticism-type personality trait as predictors of sensational interests.
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

differences in mating effort; that mating effort should directly influence sensational interests; and that there should be direct effects of age and sex on sensational interests. To test these predictions, 972 university undergraduates were tested with the Revised Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ-R) and the Mating Effort Scale (MES; Rowe et al. 1997). The difference between the SIQ and the SIQ-R is that the SIQ examines a full range of interest patterns which are rated on a simple ‘interest to dislike’ continuum; the SIQ-R focuses on sensational interests alone. Subjects rate their interest, knowledge and the putative relevance of this interest and knowledge, thus indexing salience and increasing measurement reliability. The SIQ is useful as a quick general measure, the SIQ-R is more focused and requires a more demanding subject response. They are highly correlated and cover much the same item content, but applicable to different contexts.

A structural equation model revealed that a single factor accounted for the majority of variance in the three SIQ-R sub-scales (Paranormal, Militaristic and Criminal Identity interests). The structural model found effects of age and sex on the MES and the effects of the MES on SIQ-R, indicating indirect effects of age and sex on SIQ-R. Model-fitting procedures were used to examine pathways between age, sex, mating effort and scores on the SIQ-R. Causal paths from the latent SIQ-R factor to Paranormal Interests, Militarism, and Criminal Identity sub-scales were significant and high, indicating that these sub-scales all measured a common sensational interests factor (SIQ-R). Our predictions concerning the relationships between (male) sex, (younger) age and (greater) mating effort were also supported. Our second prediction, that mating effort would be related to sensational interests and, hence, age and sex should be indirectly related to sensational interests, was supported by the significant relationship between the MES and the SIQ-R. Lastly, direct, positive effects of sex on the Militarism and Criminal Identity sub-scales indicated that sex contributed to these measures over and above the degree to which it was related to them via mating effort alone. It was concluded that, even in non-clinical samples, an affinity for sensational interests might serve a form of intra-sexual competition.

Does a high SIQ denote risk?

I have reviewed the background to the construct of sensational interests and described preliminary systematic research into the topic. I suggest that in clinical forensic populations, sensational interests are associated with the more pathological elements of personality indexed by emotionally dyscontrolled, lifestyle criminality. In the more general
population, sensational interests are associated with mating effort and lower Agreeableness. What I have not addressed is what the specific degree of risk sensational interests denotes.

A case example

Figure 7.2 presents a drawing given to me by a prison officer concerned about a young offender. The young offender was on remand for having raped a woman in front of her child, the child being asked to hold the knife while the sexual act was carried out. The young man had also been reported as driving very dangerously whilst intoxicated, and when admonished by another road user, had left his car armed with a ball-pein hammer to threaten the remonstrating party. He disclosed a desire to slice his (supportive) mother’s face with a pizza-cutter. Given his index offence, the young man was a serious offender, and was close to committing at least one other violent offence. His doodle depicts images of death, violence, and babies with half their faces blown away. Assessment indicated he met all seven criteria for antisocial personality disorder, six of the seven criteria for paranoid personality disorder, and seven of the nine criteria for borderline personality disorder. He was not actively mentally ill. He had SIQ scores 1.5 standard deviations above normal, despite possibly minimising his interests given the transparent nature of the checklist. He refused to engage in prison rehabilitative or educational programmes. I was advised of his desire to stab me on his release, should we meet in the future.

This brief example of an individual with sensational interests and his graphic expression of these is subject to criticisms raised of the somewhat anecdotal nature of sensational interests in the forensic literature. This is currently being addressed, but two unpublished studies perhaps indicate that more formal associations are possible.

Sustaining fantasies and sensational interests

One putative function of sensational interests is that they provide imagery as content for sustaining fantasies – fantasies that enable the person to console themselves at times of difficulty (Zelin et al. 1983). Ahmadi (1998) examined scores on measures of sensational interests, sustaining fantasies, personality and self-reported offending in young offenders. It was found that it was possible to predict violent behaviour from the linear combination of (low) Agreeableness, sensational interests
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

Figure 7.2 Drawing indicating possible sensational interests in a young offender.
and negative sustaining fantasies on the Sustaining Fantasies Questionnaire (Zelin et al. 1983, op cit). Multiple regression found that these variables significantly and independently predicted a total of 49.6 per cent of the variance in violent behaviour (multiple R = 0.705, P<0.01). Agreeableness explained 33.3 per cent of the variance, sensational interests independently explained a further 10.3 per cent of the variance, and negative sustaining fantasies explained a further 6% of violence variance. Thus, in the case of young offenders, a simple model involving the action of low Agreeableness, Sensational Interests and negative Sustaining Fantasies constituted a highly significant prediction model for violence in young men.

Do sensational interests denote serious offenders?

Using data previously collected by Egan et al. (2001, 2003), Elliot (2000) examined whether higher scores on a measure of sensational interests were; a) linked with criminality; b) differentiated offender subgroups; and c) whether interest patterns linked to higher SIQ scores reflected more general psychological constructs associated with interests. It was found that offenders had a different pattern of sensational interests to control subjects, but that the sensational interests of offenders did not clearly differentiate offender subtypes. This is perhaps unsurprising; an offenders’ offending histories are often arbitrary and subject to the point in their criminal history when they were arrested, and specialised offending is relatively uncommon (Simon 1997; Piquero 2000). Smallest space analysis was applied to the SIQ data and found that the interests in the SIQ formed a circumplex structure divisible into regions similar to those proposed by value-type theory (Schwartz 1992). Schwartz’s values of hedonism (involving a bias to pleasure and selfish sensuous gratification) map onto the violent-occult factor of the SIQ, whilst SIQ militarism has affinities with self-direction, stimulation, achievement and power. These are all individualist rather than collectivist value orientations. When this model is applied to control subjects, a mixed model of individual and collectivist interests is seen, whereas the model for offenders who have offended against the person is far more individualistic.

The circumplex model identifies a progression in the continuum of sensational interests which ranges from socially acceptable but perhaps ‘macho’ interests, through to militarism and legitimised violence, and at the extreme of the continuum, violent occultism. Elliot’s model suggests that perhaps persons with higher levels of sensational interests are thus
The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk

more independent-minded. If this occurs without some sense of collectivist values (i.e., alienation from the greater social group) or a desire for achievement (i.e., lack of personal success via a demonstrated competency according to social standards), criminal behaviour may follow. The alienation and underachievement of most serious offenders – even those of normal intelligence and from adequate material and personal environments – work in conjunction with their strong sense of independence, perhaps rooted in the evolutionary and personality constructs identified as associating with sensational interests.

Conclusions

The present review has summarised the research into sensational interests up to the present, and linked the construct to aspects of personality and values. It is argued that sensational interests are underpinned by evolutionary processes, and that, like personality and values generally, these are not inherently criminal or psychopathological. If a person has large amounts of sensational interests it may reflect a strong independence of mind, but these may be checked by other interests of a more collective and conventional kind. Provided people are not alienated from the society (or a subsection of society) around them, and they have a desire for achievement via conventional means, they will be able to keep their sensational interests in perspective. This reflects the vast majority of individuals who may be interested in the military, or the occult, or, indeed have a tattoo, watch horror films, ride motorbikes, or practice martial arts. For those seeking systematically to measure sensational interests, the SIQ provides a valid and reliable measure of a range of sensational and non-sensational interests in both normal and offending populations, whereas the SIQ-R focuses on sensational interests alone. Both instruments identify those items described by Brittain that give the most useful information about an individual’s interest patterns. Mentally-disordered offenders are more interested in Militaristic and Violent-Occult topics than normal persons, and scores on the SIQ are more associated with psychopathology than general personality or ability traits. Those individuals within the ‘antisocial’ cluster of personality disorder (rather than having ASPD alone) have the highest SIQ scores. However these individuals are inherently extreme. If the foregoing findings and interpretation are correct, individuals reasonably integrated into their society, with a normal level of achievement motivation, who have a diversity of interests, are unlikely to present an inherent risk. Alienated
individuals with pathological individualism and polarised interests in hedonism and power may be potentially more problematic. It is easy to see how such persons could become involved in crime or violent terrorism.

References


The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk


Forensic Psychology


The status of sensational interests as indicators of possible risk


