**Sensational Interests**

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Overview

This essay examines the current status of sensational interests and their relationship with offending in adolescence. The essay describes sensational interests, their measurement and how they came to be associated with criminal behavior. New research, which addresses the complexity of the relationship, is discussed and recommendations are made for further developments in the field.

Defining Sensational Interests

Sensational interests denote an interest in dramatic and bizarre constructs observed in the histories of serious offenders, but which are often raised transiently in adolescents and young adults (Weiss et al. [*2004*](#CR191012)). These topics are associated with personality, in particular low Agreeableness and greater sensation-seeking (Charles & Egan, 2009; Egan, Austin, Elliot, Patel, & Charlesworth, 2003; Egan, Charlesworth, Richardson, Blair, & McMurran, 2001). This overlapping of population interests necessitates cautious and systematic work on such interests, as it is not possible to extrapolate from a single individual’s recreational, musical, or filmic tastes to the clinical-forensic inference that such interests denote risk without making a *post-hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this so because of this) error (Egan [*2004*](#CR19997)). Sensational interests can be measured using the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ) developed by Egan et al. ([*1999*](#CR19999)), or the SIQ-R (Weiss et al, 2004). The SIQ comprises 28 items, which measure interests along a scale of −2 for “great dislike” through to +2 for “great interest.” The development of the SIQ has allowed almost two decades of quantitative research in this area to flourish and provide new insights into the role of sensational interests in different populations. The significance of sensational interests in a criminal or psychopathological context was previously defined from reported case studies and qualitative research which was not intended to be used diagnostically (e.g., Brittain [*1970*](#CR19992)). However, concerns about the impact of violent, sexual, and irreverent material on vulnerable and unstable individuals has nevertheless led sensational interests to be given more causal influence than is perhaps warranted. These methods of analysis and focus on extreme individuals meant that many groups who may have sensational interests were ignored, e.g., the normal adult population and adolescents. Using such sources of information also reinforced the notion that sensational interests were inherently pathological.

Agreement on what constitutes a sensational interest is debatable as they are culturally and historically (and possibly age-) dependent; heavy metal rock groups such as “Black Sabbath”, who sing songs with occult and violent themes are played by and perform to audiences who are now in their 60s and 70s, and (mostly) live lives of quiet convention. Factor-analysis of SIQ items reveals two broad dimensions; militarism, and the supernatural. The militarism dimension includes an interest in guns, martial arts, crossbows, swords, survivalism, and the SAS. This group of interests consistently emerges in a variety of research samples ranging from normal adolescents (Charles and Egan [*2009*](#CR19995)), student populations (Weiss et al. [*2004*](#CR191012)), adults (Hagger-Johnson and Egan [*2010*](#CR191005)), and psychopathological participants (Egan et al. [*2003*](#CR191000)); in conjunction with more general traits associated with criminality, it also predicts weapons carrying in adolescents (Barlas and Egan [*2006*](#CR19989)).

There is some debate around supernatural interests and how they may manifest in different groups. The original SIQ presented a factor of violent occultism interests (e.g., paganism, black magic, and werewolves) alongside the more benign factor of occult credulousness (e.g., flying saucers, the paranormal, and astrology). Research with adolescents has shown that these two factors overlap (Charles and Egan [*2008*](#CR19994); Charles and Egan [*2009*](#CR19995)) and that adolescents do not make the same distinctions between these interests as adults do. This may reflect a lack of detailed knowledge on the subjects or a more sanitized knowledge gained through the media rather than through genuine involvement. It could be argued, for example, that “Harry Potter,” “Doctor Who,” or “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” and their various foes are fantastic or supernatural, yet an interest in this popular entertainment is not comparable with a non-psychotic individual who may believe they practice black magic.

The Media’s Role in Sensational Interests

The role of the media is important in considering where the link between unusual interests and crime comes from, and how that link is maintained in the public imagination. Curiosity concerning the relationship between unusual, sensational interests and criminality has been evident in the psychological and psychiatric literature for decades (Charles and Egan [*2008*](#CR19994)). The general public, however, tend not to form their opinions from scholarly and clinical sources, and rely instead on the presentation of individual case studies and the myths generated by cinematic representations of offender profiling (Snook et al. [*2008*](#CR191010)). It is easy to find examples of both adult and adolescent offenders who have the kind of interests discussed above. The 20-year-old Richard Samuel McCroskey III was indicted of the killing of three persons in Virginia, USA, and was allegedly a “horrorcore” rapper who performed alongside the rap and death-metal pop groups such as “Dismembered Fetus” and “Phrozen Body Boy” (Drash [*2009*](#CR19996)). In 2010 the UK media reported on Stephen Griffiths, a Criminology PhD student, who was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of three prostitutes in Bradford, Yorkshire (Brown, 2010). Griffiths (despite being 40) maintained the lifestyle of an outsider adolescent, and identified himself in court as “the crossbow cannibal”. Media outlets reported at length his interest in serial killers, gothic subculture, and carnivorous lizards (Gray [*2010*](#CR191004)). Such cases have an implied causation. The murder of Jodi Jones by Luke Mitchell in Scotland in 2003 is an often-discussed example of the keenness to connect satanic or “gothic” interests to crime. Mitchell was reported as being a heavy cannabis user, writing messages about the devil on his schoolbooks, and was identified as a Goth (Charles and Egan [*2008*](#CR19994)). Prior to this phase in his life Mitchell had been an army cadet. His victim, Jodi, also aspired to being a Goth but this was considered as something, which made her vulnerable, rather than violent (which suggests that the interest is interpreted differently depending on whether it is held by a perpetrator or a victim). Scott Dyleski, who was found guilty of a brutal murder in 2005, is a US example of a homicidal teenager who followed a “gothic” identity. Like Mitchell, Dyleski also used cannabis and had a reported interest in serial killers (Mitchell was supposedly fascinated by the Black Dahlia murder). Dyleski’s youth and his transformation from a conservative looking young boy into a macabre looking teenager were visually documented in the US media and he was described by some as “weird” (Sweetingham [*2006*](#CR191011)). Though slightly older than the teenagers Mitchell and Dyleski, Kimveer Gill (aged 25), who killed one person and injured 19 in 2006 after a mass-shooting at Dawson College in Montreal, was essentially also adolescent, as the context and circumstances of his offenses reflect an adolescent attitude. Gill had reportedly become fascinated with the Columbine High School shootings and posted numerous images of himself posing with guns on the Web site vampirefreaks.com (BBC [*2006*](#CR19990)). Gill listed the computer game “Super Columbine RPG” as one of his favorites. The photographs appear to have been taken in Gill’s bedroom where the walls were adorned with horror film and gangster posters. The published details of his life suggest a fascination for guns, knives, Gothic culture, and that Gill spent 1 month receiving military training after claiming he wanted to be a mercenary.

The cases briefly outlined above show how easy it is through the media to link extreme and serious crime with sensational interests in both adults and adolescents. In the last decade this has arguably become easier, as individuals leave behind weblogs and social networking pages detailing their thoughts, interests, and plans. Hagger-Johnson, Egan, and Stillwell (2011) found that social networking profiles, which can be used as character evidence in criminal trials, are reliable indicators of an individual’s level of sensational interests. Very soon after suspects (and sometimes victims) are identified in a criminal case there is a flurry of activity from journalists and the public to analyse their online presence for clues or indicators of their lifestyle. Davies (2016) reports on the case of Stephen Port who killed four men after using the app ‘Grindr’ to meet them for sex. Port’s online presence allowed for a range of photographs and information about him to be shared and analysed in the mainstream media and on websites such as ‘Reddit’. A trail of evidence, which may have previously been seen or deduced only by those closest to the offender or the police, is now open to everyone and remains cached in search engines long after it has officially been removed.

The reverse side of this is that it is also easy to see just how common sensational interests are. The website vampirefreaks.com has over two million profiles with names such as MorbidLoser, kill-yourself, MechanicalCannibal, and DeadlyAsphyxia. If one of those individuals were to commit a crime, the presence of his profile would be used as evidence of his strangeness and violent potential. However, this profile would be one of two million and has no forensic significance without other information. The UK site for Amazon has over 11,000 books about Satan across paperback, hardback, audiobook, and Kindle (with 184 specific biographies of Satan) (Amazon, 2017a). “The Satanic Bible” has 264 customer reviews (Amazon, 2017b). A similar example of mass-market sensational interests is the “Saw” franchise of seven horror films which have sold hundreds of millions of tickets (<http://www.the-numbers.com/market/genre/Horror>) and led to video game and theme park spin offs. These observations serve to highlight how mainstream sensational interests are and what an appetite many “normal” people have for them. Such interests only assume a pathological significance when they are linked to criminal or otherwise deviant behavior; it is likely that the mechanism for this lies in extremes of personality, such that the influence of sensational interests on actual behavior operates through synergy with antagonistic and risk-taking disposition.

Research on Sensational Interests and Crime

Turning from the media to research, an example of this tendency for retrospective analysis has been seen in the literature on deviant sexual fantasies, which has routinely linked deviant fantasy with sexual homicide (Gee and Belofastov [*2007*](#CR191002)). Although Gee and Belofastov acknowledge the lack of empirical research clearly explaining the nexus between deviant fantasies and offending, they go on to discuss an escalation and desensitization approach, which suggests fantasy becomes progressively more harmful and graphic until it is acted upon. They believe that this model is useful in offender profiling as “signature behaviors essentially mirror a perpetrator’s core fantasies; therefore, by attempting to understand the offender’s sexual fantasies, the investigator may develop a better insight into the psychological makeup of the offender” (Gee and Belofastov [*2007*](#CR191002), p. 65). As with sensational interests, there are plenty of case studies, which apparently show deviant fantasy to be very important with one of the most widely known being Ted Bundy. Bundy was interviewed shortly before his execution and claimed that his deviant fantasies and sexual offending had developed from watching progressively more explicit pornography (Caputi [*1989*](#CR19993)). However, Bundy’s claim can be seen as an attempt to evade personal responsibility; most people who use pornography do not become sexual criminals themselves (Ferguson and Hartley [*2009*](#CR191001)). Adolescents have more access to freer and more explicit sexual material on the Internet than at any time in history. Pratt and Fernandes (2015) observe that most young people are able to view pornography without sexually abusing others, while for others pornography provides high levels of sexual stimulation, indicates how sex is done, and may lower inhibitions against sexual and sexually abusive acts. The latter persons represent a sexually-reactive cohort, and are more aggressive and anti-social generally (Alexy, Burgess, & Prentky, 2009).

An issue with reasoning that a given interest enables the building of a criminal profile is that many adult and adolescent men and women have what can be described as “deviant” fantasies, so it is difficult to know what kind of psychological picture one could paint based on knowing the details of the fantasy. Leitenberg and Henning ([*1995*](#CR191006)) reviewed the literature on sexual fantasy and found that “sex offenders often report that they have sexual fantasies related to their offence. However, these kinds of fantasies are also not uncommon in people who have never acted on them” (p. 491). Maniglio ([*2010*](#CR191007)) offers a comprehensive overview of the research in this area and highlights the relevance of the offender’s wider experience rather than focusing on fantasy and crime as a relationship in a vacuum. In one of the few large scale studies of mass and serial homicide Allely, Minnis, Thompson, Wilson, and Gillberg (2014) place fantasy as a relatively small component in the behavior of such perpetrators. Overall, the vast majority of research in this field involves adults; moreover, the research that exists on sexual fantasies in adolescents is overwhelmingly focused on those persons at risk (or already convicted) of committing a sexual offense, so findings do not compare control samples and offenders on deviant fantasies. A far more salient predictor of risk of sexual violence is malign masculinity and general criminality (Ferguson and Hartley, op cit; Murnen et al. [*2002*](#CR191008)).

The pattern of linking fantasy with action is similar to linking sensational interest with action. There are many examples where it seems intuitively appropriate (as discussed above), and academic research has tended to follow this assumption, look for correlations between interest and behavior, and then consider how that association came about, without considering a more detailed profile of the individual. Many of the mechanisms to explain how interest becomes action are described in the sexual offending literature by Seto et al. ([*2001*](#CR191009)) and in the sensational interests arena by Egan and Campbell (2009) and Egan ([*2004*](#CR19997)). These mechanisms form a group of causal models and cover conditioning theories, excitation transfer, and social learning theory. Both conditioning and social learning theory rely on an individual obtaining some form of reward or reinforcement from their interest or engagement with it. That reward may be internal in the form of pleasure or it may be external in the form of a perceived reward (others who do the same thing are rewarded). Over time, habituation occurs and the interest or activity must evolve in some way to produce the same kind of reinforcement or reward. This is much the same as the approach adopted by Gee and Belofastov ([*2007*](#CR191002)) in their discussion of the role of deviant fantasy. Excitation transfer assumes that arousal is not linked to a specific emotion. Engagement with a sensational interest, e.g., a militaristic computer game, may cause arousal, which then needs to be paired with an emotion. If that emotion is excitement, rather than anxiety, the user of that game is likely to continue his engagement. As with conditioning and social learning, there is eventually habituation of arousal so that the game no longer produces any arousal.

Violent computer games have often featured in the adolescent case studies described above, and there are many games, which link very closely to the items covered in the SIQ. Unsurprisingly, such games and related media have become the focus of research. Boxer et al. ([*2009*](#CR19991)) examined juvenile delinquents and normal adolescents to see what role violent media played in the expression of short-term aggression and the long-term development of aggressive behaviors. Boxer et al’s research marks a departure from the limited perspective of noting a correlation and attempting to explain it (which has often been seen in research concerning fantasy and interests). The more limited perspective alluded to is now virtually unknown in other research areas; it would be most unlikely in any recent research to find an article merely stating that there is a negative correlation between IQ and offending and then trying to explain that relationship by focusing solely on one side of the association. Research on the causes and correlates of criminality now widely acknowledges the interactions between a multitude of biological, environmental, and social variables. This acknowledgment is only just beginning to occur with variables associated with sensational interests.

Boxer et al. ([*2009*](#CR19991)) consider the role of media violence in the context of a risk matrix and describe violence as multiply determined. Their findings show that a preference for violent media makes a significant contribution to actual violent behavior in those with both a high and low cumulative risk for violence. This is an interesting contribution to the literature as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how interests and preferences may work across very different adolescents with varying backgrounds and risk profiles. It appears to provide good evidence that sensational preferences make an adolescent more likely to act in a violent way. More recently Evans, Li, and Whipple (2013) have highlighted the importance of considering cumulative risk in children and adolescents when attempting to profile the effects of exposure to a range of risk factors. Simply adding together risk indices to understand the likelihood of an undesirable outcome is too simplistic. Evans et al argue instead for greater recognition that being exposed to one kind of risk increases the chance of being exposed to others. This more sophisticated approach to understanding the potential forensic relevance of different interests or behaviours is a welcome development in this area. There is further scope for improvement in terms of a longitudinal dimension as adolescents do change their interest preferences over relatively short periods of time.

Egan and his colleagues have also evolved a fuller approach to analyzing sensational interests. Early criticisms of the SIQ highlighted how important context and behavioral engagement could be in terms of giving the interest meaning. What else is there to the individual other than his or her unusual interests, and what are the cardinal influences on their behavior? Research in this area has gone some way toward addressing these issues. Robbers (2007) reported that students studying criminal justice programmes at university had significantly higher levels of sensational interests than other students and that the best predictor of these interests was hours spent watching crime related television shows. Criminal justice students also shared personality traits typically associated with sensational interests and crime such as low conscientiousness and low agreeableness. These results support the idea that sensational interests alone are not necessarily pathological indicators. Egan and Campbell ( [*2009*](#CR19998)) found that a small correlation between the SIQ and sustaining fantasies and stated that “negative sustaining fantasies may provide a ruminatory retreat for the unhappy or disturbed, while sensational interests provide more active escapism via dramatic imagery and concepts” (Egan and Campbell [*2009*](#CR19998), p. 468). They also go on to discuss the possible importance of alienation as a factor for increasing the risk for violence and comment on how important it is to view aggression and violence through an assessment of the individual rather than through recreational choices.

Hagger-Johnson and Egan ([*2010*](#CR191005)) examined sensational interests and their link with sadistic personality disorder. It was Brittain’s ([*1970*](#CR19992)) original article in this area, which first linked sensational interests with sadism 40 years ago. Hagger-Johnson and Egan could not, however, clearly link sensational interests with deviance or sadism, and the research made the familiar conclusion that the interest itself is not the crucial factor in contributing to criminal behavior. James, Kavanagh, Jonason, Chonody, and Scrutton (2014) investigated the extent to which sensational interests are related to the Dark Triad (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) and schadenfreude. They found that sensational interests and the Dark Triad significantly correlated with one another and this relationship was primarily driven by psychopathy. The strongest correlation between the Dark Triad and sensational interests was with militarism, which supports previous research linking antagonistic personality traits with militarism. In a cross-cultural study, Zalaf and Egan (2017) found that those who scored low on militaristic interests, and high on agreeableness and conscientiousness had a more positive attitude towards animals. Zalaf and Egan interpreted this as confirmation that militaristic interests may be an extension of dark personality traits.

A criticism of these studies discussed here is that there is no longitudinal component to the analysis. It is not yet clear how sensational interests work over time in determining an individual’s behavior.

It is in the area of longitudinal research that adolescence research is ahead of the studies carried out with adult samples. Research carried out by the authors allows for some commentary to be made on the function of sensational interests over a 1 year period in UK teenagers. Two hundred and eighty three adolescents (51.2% male, mean age 15.02 years, SD = 0.88) had their personality, psychopathology, intrasexual competition, self-reported offending, and sensational interests measured at time 1 and then 1 year later at time 2. Correlations on all variables between time 1 and time 2 were significant (Pearson’s *r* values ranging from 0.47 to 0.66). This shows that some degree of prediction for any of the measured variables is possible over a 1-year period during adolescence. Further analysis using repeated measures *t* tests showed that there is a significant increase in offending behavior in the sample (which is to be expected given the age group). What is also evident is that there is a significant decrease in self-reported interest for militaristic topics, while interest in more supernatural themes shows no change. This result is of particular interest as militaristic topics are most often linked to offending, weapons carrying, unpleasant personality characteristics, and high mating effort. The fall in interest level was observed across the age range, suggesting that adolescent sensational interests may be particularly affected by what is considered popular or fashionable. This may not be the case for adults but longitudinal research on adult populations is currently non-existent, so educated guesses have to be made based on how the SIQ factor structure differs with a younger sample. A fuller analysis of the adolescent longitudinal data will be forthcoming, but these preliminary analyses are promising in the insight, which they offer to this difficult research topic.

Many of the studies described in this essay have been limited by the use of self-report measures and a reliance on cross-sectional data. It is in principledifficult to address the limitation of self-report in this area as it is problematic to measure a person’s interests purely behaviorally in a reliable way, although Gosling’s work may suggest methods for overcoming this impasse (Gosling et al. [*2002*](#CR191003)), as might intelligent use of FaceBook information (Hagger-Johnson et al, 2010). In some respects, this research area faces the same difficulty as sexual fantasy research. In order to know what a person is interested in and thinking about it is necessary to ask him and then hope the answer is truthful, or rely on inexact and indirect inferences. Many people self-identify as having particular interests by their public activities on the Internet but they do not necessarily represent everyone who has those interests, and may in fact represent a particular subset more willing to share this information publically. The problem of purely cross-sectional research is somewhat easier to address. Now research on sensational interests is becoming a more established field that it should be possible for the SIQ to be incorporated into longitudinal projects, which assess a wide variety of measures. Studies such as this could also help address the often cited conclusion that the whole individual needs to be considered rather than his interests in isolation.

Conclusions

Research on sensational interests has come a long way in the last 15 years in terms of the variety of samples it has included, and with regard to the nomological network which underpins the construct. A clear picture has emerged from the research, which shows that where sensational interests are linked to offending, it is usually mediated by other variables (namely personality or intrasexual competition), and this is seen in both adults or adolescents. This suggests that sensational interests themselves cannot be reliably used as solitary predictors for offending, or as an explanation for offending after the fact. A causative relationship between offending and sensational interests remains in the public imagination (and more sensationalist academics) because of media analysis of very violent and often sexual crimes where the perpetrator has unusual or bizarre interests. Some high-profile offenders may also deliberately draw attention to their sensational interests as a way to define themselves through personal identity myths, their sensational interests being a form of projective expression more important than their untrammeled selves (e.g., the Stephen Griffiths case mentioned previously (Gray [*2010*](#CR191004))). This may have some personal compensatory function. Forthcoming work on the longitudinal assessment of sensational interests in adolescents will take SIQ research to the next level and address and often cite limitation in this and related research areas.

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