



Sensational interests as a form of intrasexual competition

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Abstract

Sensational interests, i.e. a curiosity for the violent and macabre, are reputedly common in mentally disordered offenders. However, ostensibly well-adjusted individuals are also interested in these topics. We tested the hypothesis that individual differences in sensational interests may partially reflect intrasexual competition for status and have an underlying evolutionary function. Several predictions derive from this hypothesis. First, age and sex should be directly related to individual differences in mating effort (the degree that an individual devotes resources to finding and guarding sexual partners). Second, mating effort should directly influence sensational interests. Third, there should also be direct effects of age and sex on sensational interests. To test these predictions we collected data on 969 university undergraduates using the Revised Version of the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ-R) and the Mating effort Scale (MES). A structural equations model revealed that a single factor accounted for the majority of the variance of the three SIQ-R subscales, Paranormal, Militarism, and Criminal Identity. This model also included direct effects of age and sex on the MES and two SIQ-R subscales and direct effects of the MES on the SIQ-R. Model fit statistics indicated that this model was a good fit to the data. We conclude that, even in a non-clinical sample, an affinity for sensational interests might serve a form of intrasexual competition.

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Pathological and personality attributions are sometimes made about individuals who have ‘sensational’ interests (i.e., an interest in weapons, the occult, martial arts, the paranormal, and the military; Brittain, 1970). High profile serious offenders sometimes have these interests; thus Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, instigators of the Columbine School massacre, allegedly had an

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inordinate interest in Nazism, knives, clubs, firearms, and violent computer games (Anton & Ryckman, 1999). More recently Auki Collins, an American citizen who became a mujahideen admitted that much of his attraction to this way of living reflected a long-standing love for weapons and the access to these his adopted faith and lifestyle afforded him (Collins, 2002). However, anecdotal reports of homicidal teenagers or radical extremists drawn into ostensible ‘political’ militancy by their fascination for weaponry do not make for scientific theories applicable to the range of individual differences (Egan, *in press*). One of the most basic criticisms that can be made of such observations is that such phenomena are also seen in non-offenders. Another objection is that ‘sensational’ interests are very much determined by the cultural milieu, and that the details and practicalities of violence, drug use, and fetishising paranormal and physical power are not cross-culturally valid. One might argue that it is the opposite that is the case, as body modification, drug use, weapons and paranormal or ‘transgressive’ beliefs are significant in both traditional and Western societies and may reflect general tendencies that unite the sociologist, anthropologist and psychologist (Vale and Juno, 1989; Presdee, 2000; Egan, *in press*). The current study seeks to overcome some of these objections and link sensational interests to evolutionary constructs associated with offending behaviour in a Western population.

Irrespective of their heuristic value in forensic settings, the sensational interests construct was, until recently, an arbitrary and atheoretical mix of generic psychopathology, common interests of no differentiating value, and constructs with more legitimate possible diagnostic utility. Egan, Auty, Miller, Ahmadi, Richardson, and Gargan (1999) sought to formally measure sensational interests so that the relationship between these interests and more general psychological factors such as personality could be better understood. They found that sensational interests reduced to two correlated dimensions; Militarism and the Violent Occult; these constructs were highly reliable, and led to the creation of a brief checklist, the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ; Egan et al., *op cit*). Although the correlations were not strong, scores on the SIQ were higher in males and correlated with low Agreeableness, low Conscientiousness, and younger ages. A subsequent study (Egan, Charlesworth, Richardson, Blair, & McMurrin, 2001) examined the SIQ in a cohort of mentally disordered offenders using the Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1984). This study found that there were correlations in the region of 0.50 between the SIQ sensational subscales and two dimensions of sensation seeking: Disinhibition and Thrill and Adventure Seeking, the Disinhibition scale arguably reflecting externalised behavioural pathology. The less risk-oriented sensation seeking subscales of Boredom Susceptibility and Excitement Seeking showed no such associations. This study seemed to suggest one should focus on more psychopathological individual differences to understand the basis of sensation interests. A third study of sensational interests examined their relationship to self-reported DSM-IV personality disorders and the “Big Five” (see Digman, 1996; Goldberg, 1990; and John, 1990 for reviews) personality traits (Egan, Austin, Elliot, Patel, & Charlesworth, 2003). Using confirmatory factor analysis to define the latent personality dimensions underlying both types of assessment in 155 referrals for forensic clinical psychology assessment, it was found that sensational interests were exclusively associated with a personality disorder factor dimension defined by high loadings on low Agreeableness, and anti-social, borderline and histrionic personality disorders. This suggests that primarily neurotic or mental illness-associated personality disorders are not systematically related to an interest in sensational topics.

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