



Sensational interests and sensation seeking in mentally disordered offenders

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Abstract

Violent and sensational interests are reported in the background history of some mentally disordered offenders. As sensation-seeking accounts for the drive for intellectual and physical excitement, it was thought that this trait would also underlie an interest in sensational material. We examined the differences in sensational interests and SS between patients detained under the Mental Health Act (1983) classifications of psychopathic disorder (PD) and mental illness (MI), the degree to which sensational interests related to sensation-seeking, and the relationship between these factors and self-reported personality disorders. The Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ), Zuckerman's Sensation-Seeking Scale (SSS), the Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM) and the MCMI-II were given to 42 patients (32 MI, 10 PD). There were no significant differences between the MI and PD groups for scores on the SIQ or the SSS. The SIQ was not related to scores on the SPM. As predicted, the SIQ's subscales of militarism and the violent-occult were significantly and positively associated with sensation-seeking, especially the SSS subscales of Disinhibition and Thrill and Adventure Seeking. Sensation-seeking mediated the relationship between sensational interests and measures of personality disorder. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

It is popularly assumed that those who commit apparently senseless and horrific crimes are fascinated (and perhaps even driven to offend) by topics of a lurid and morbid nature. For

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example, a recent case of a schizophrenic who killed schoolgirls was said to have shown a particular interest in accounts of murder and the occult (Wainwright, 1995). Brittain's (1970) paper 'The Sadistic Murderer' crystallised this stereotype when he suggested that those who commit such crimes are often withdrawn, introverted, socially isolated, over-controlled and timid, that such individuals compensate for their social isolation by having a rich fantasy life and that they are fascinated with atrocities and cruelty such as those committed by the Nazis. Others were said to have an interest in werewolves, vampires, black magic, torture, and 'escapology' (p. 203). He suggested such offenders have an inordinate interest in weapons, often having a large collection which may be 'lovingly handled', to the extent of 'endowing some with pet names' (p. 201 and 202).

Brittain's description came from clinical anecdote and experience rather than formal research, and some ostensibly deviant interests have a high base-rate of interest in the population. While it is tempting to conclude that investigation of lurid interests is unhelpful for understanding the mostly commonplace nature of even severe offending, the presence of such interests may indeed differentiate the deviant from the more stable offender. Prins (1988; 1990a,b; 1998) suggests that assessing an individual's interests (e.g. books, videotapes) may provide evidence of their fantasy life and as such it is important to recognise such material. McCullough, Snowden, Wood and Mills (1983) have also provided evidence that deviant fantasies are one stage in a chain of behaviours approximating ever more closely to the final sadistic act. Deviant thoughts and interests may therefore warrant exploration.

Egan, Auty Miller, Amadi, Richardson and Gargan (1999) developed a Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ), based on an item analysis of the overall items identified by Brittain along with others proposed by forensic clinical psychologists. Table 1 presents a summary of the items extracted from an analysis of the SIQ items proposed by Brittain and shows that 11 (50%) of the original Brittain 'sadistic interests' items do not exist as coherent latent constructs (Egan, 1999). For example, an interest in serial killers and Hitler/fascism did not load significantly on the main sensational interest factors of the newly developed questionnaire. The pilot SIQ study found that general sensational interests encompass two main, but highly correlated, sub-components; militarism and violent occultism, both of which share an interest in weaponry. The 'violent occultism' factor reflected subcultural lifestyles, violence, and a preoccupation with the supernatural, whereas the 'militarism' factor reflected a general interest in aggression, dominance and independence.

Egan et al. (1999) found forensic patients significantly more willing than control subjects to express a positive interest in militarism and violent-occultism. In the same study, scores on the SIQ were examined in relation to general personality traits using the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and a demographic-based estimate of verbal IQ (Egan, Crawford, Goodwin & Brettle, 1990). Militaristic interests were independently associated with higher extraversion and lower estimated verbal IQ, whereas an interest in the violent-occult was independently associated with lower Agreeableness and lower Conscientiousness; both factors were associated with younger age. The associations between sensational interests and general personality traits were modest, suggesting the relationship between these factors was insufficient to provide a comprehensive explanation of why people are interested in sensational topics. We recommended that future studies should utilise more specific scales of psychopathology and better validated measures of personality, for example, sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, 1979).

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