



# Sensational interests are not a simple predictor of adolescent offending: Evidence from a large normal British sample

Kathy E. Charles<sup>a,\*</sup>, Vincent Egan<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Health and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, South Craig, Craighouse Campus, Edinburgh EH10 5LG, UK

<sup>b</sup> Forensic Section, School of Psychology, University of Leicester, 106 New Walk, Leicester LE1 7EA, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 November 2008

Received in revised form 4 February 2009

Accepted 5 March 2009

Available online 7 April 2009

### Keywords:

Military interests

Gothic interests

Offending

Intrasexual competition

Psychopathology

## ABSTRACT

Anecdote and samples from extreme populations suggest military interests and 'esoteric' or Gothic interests (collectively referred to as sensational interests) are a predictor of offending. We examined such interests and offending in a large sample of normal British adolescents also considering other aspects of personality. Six-hundred and ninety-five participants provided data on their interests, personality, intrasexual competition, and psychopathology. These data were analysed in relation to self-reported delinquency using principal components analysis and structural equation modelling. While a small positive relationship between militarism and offending was found, this is strongly mediated by personality, with intrasexual competition and low agreeableness emerging as better predictors of delinquency than sensational interests alone. The assumption that unusual interests (e.g., those which are esoteric, 'Gothic' or militaristic) inevitably convey dangerousness or antisocial behaviour in adolescents is challenged. Those working with and researching adolescents should consider such dramatic interests in the context of personality and behavioural engagement before inferring clinical or forensic risk.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Frederic Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) declared a link between dramatic interests and violent offending in juveniles. This view led to a concern that comic strips implicitly use and explicitly model criminal activities and lifestyles, drug use, nudity, veiled sadomasochism and homosexuality, and so drove adolescents into criminal behaviour and deviance (Goodman, 2000). Wertham also expressed a concern about the advertisements for knives and air rifles which appeared alongside the stories. Despite no strong evidence for his views (and initially voluntary self-censorship by some US comic publishers), the purported association of adolescent interests and antisocial behaviour has remained influential within forensic psychiatry, and contemporary concerns simply replace the malign influence of comics with equivalent anxieties about films, music, the Internet and computer games.

The empirical evidence for this view is modest; Brittain (1970) asserted that sadistic murderers were interested in topics such as Nazism, torture, black magic, sadomasochistic pornography and weapons. Uncritically, Gunn and Taylor (1993) claimed this description as essentially accurate. More recently, Murray, Warren,

Kristiansson, and Dietz (2002) discussed some of the unusual interests held by offenders with Asperger's syndrome reporting cases of individuals who went on to assault two women, and sexually assault a minor. At the same time, there are some general findings of relevance to interest patterns in offenders at the clinical population level; military interests are present in half to two-thirds of adult and adolescent North American mass murderers (Meloy et al., 2004); and military experience and an interest in guns are predictors of the deadliness of rampage killings (Lester, Stack, Schmidtke, Schaller, & Muller, 2003). DeFronzo and Prochnow (2004) argue that cultural factors such as the legitimisation of violence through exposure to violent magazines, television programmes and hunting provoke serial homicide, again noting via case studies of serial murderers that the perpetrators have militaristic interests. Castle and Hensley (2002) have a social learning model of militarism and serial killing, with militaristic and hunting environments reinforcing aggression, violence, stalking and butchery, so normalising murder. Military and hunting environments routinely compartmentalise aggression and violence, modelling exculpatory rationalisations in violent offenders. However, as with other generalising models of the malignant influence of particular material or lifestyles on behaviour, argument for an association is based on the observation of small samples and/or extreme groups, rather than evidence from the general population. Over-exaggerating the influence of such interests arguably contributes to expert evidence over-estimating risk in unusual defendants, thereby

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 131 455 5039; fax: +44 131 455 6306.

E-mail addresses: [k.charles@napier.ac.uk](mailto:k.charles@napier.ac.uk) (K.E. Charles), [ve2@le.ac.uk](mailto:ve2@le.ac.uk) (V. Egan).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +44 116 252 3658; fax: +44 116 252 3994.

driving miscarriages of justice. Barry George is a recent example of a UK case where much was made of his interest in firearms, gas masks and other bizarre behaviour. Yet in 2008 he was acquitted of murder after serving over seven years in jail.

Where apparent 'Satanism' is observed in serious offenders it is likewise assumed, but weakly established, to be driving their offending. High-profile murder cases involving teenagers with a Satanic element are luridly reported, and generate a large amount of media interest (e.g., Damien Echols (found guilty of murdering three boys in a 'satanic ritual' in Arkansas: *State of Arkansas v Damien Echols*, 1994); and Luke Mitchell (found guilty of murdering his girlfriend near Edinburgh had 'satanic' interests: *HMA v Luke Mitchell*, 2004)). The degree of evidence supporting a satanic theme in these cases varied, but the assumption that such interests precipitated violent crime was not strongly questioned. In both cases, the fact that the defendant had written down heavy metal song lyrics in his notebooks was presented as prosecution evidence. Evidence of psychopathology or possible personality disorder is more valuable in such cases yet very little media attention was given to this information at the trials. Pfeifer (1999) found that, whether admitted or alleged, reference to satanic cults in homicide cases had a significant influence on a mock juror's decision of guilt, with jurors more likely to find the defendant guilty if they suspected any kind of 'esoteric' influence. This mechanism seems to have been at work in the Echols case, where there was a lack of forensic evidence to support the conviction, but the conviction nevertheless sustained.

The Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ; Egan et al., 1999) was developed to examine the unusual interests of offenders more systematically. The scale measures interest in militaristic topics (e.g. guns, knives, survivalism), occult topics (e.g. black magic, vampires, the supernatural), and other interests (e.g. philosophy, medicine, singing). The SIQ was created on the basis of previous research and case-reports suggesting that certain interests are more commonly found among violent criminals. The first studies with the SIQ centred on known offenders and individuals with personality disorders, examining whether the notion that sensational interests were associated with extremes of personality was justified (Egan, Austin, Elliot, Patel, & Charlesworth, 2003; Egan, Charlesworth, Richardson, Blair, & McMurren, 2001). It was found sensational interests related to antisocial elements of personality in antisocial cohorts. However, this association was not strong in the general population, limiting exaggeration of the pathological significance of interests in normal persons.

More recently, research has examined undergraduates and other adults to determine what characteristics correlate with sensational interests. Weiss, Egan, and Figueredo (2004) found that intrasexual competition was a significant predictor of sensational interests in undergraduates. This finding suggests that for young adults unusual interests may be used as a competitive strategy to attract partners, present the self as dramatic and dynamic, and to so subdue rivals. Many interests considered sensational have a strong visual component to them e.g. a particular style of dress, musculature, tattoos, piercings, striking hairstyles, or 'macabre' looking make-up. This allows an interest or display to be communicated to potential partners or rivals. The same relationship between intrasexual competition and sensational interests was found in a cross-cultural study comprising undergraduates and other adults in Europe, North, Central, and South America (Egan et al., 2005).

Barlas and Egan (2006) considered the degree sensational interests, mating effort and personality could predict weapon carrying amongst British teenagers. Military interests were one of four significant predictors of weapon carrying (the other three being aggressive identity, delinquency, and low Conscientiousness). Carrying weapons was not associated with mating effort in teenagers

who carried weapons, but teenagers who did not carry weapons did see it as a gesture of status display, suggesting that weapon carrying has a status display effect whether intended or not.

A final influence on antisocial behaviour is psychopathology; mental disorder is markedly over-represented in adolescent offenders (Fazel, Doll, & Långström, 2008). The present study sought to examine whether sensational interests predicted delinquency in a large cohort ( $N = 695$ ) of British adolescents in the general schooling system. Given the foregoing research, the simultaneous influence of personality, psychopathology, and intra-sexual competition was also measured, enabling these influences to be estimated in relation to their concurrent correlation.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants came from two suburban state-funded, non-selective, non-religious schools in Scotland. There were 380 males (54.7%) and 315 females (45.3%). The age range was 12–16.6 years (mean 14.3,  $SD = 0.97$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ; Egan et al., 1999)

The SIQ is a 28 item list of interests which participants rate on a Likert scale according to how interested they are in the topic ( $-2 =$  great dislike,  $+2 =$  great interest). The measure yields five factors. Two of the factors, militarism ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) and violent-occultism ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ) reflect sensational interests with potentially forensic relevance. The other three factors identified by Egan et al. (1999) were 'intellectual recreation' ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), 'occult credulousness' ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), and 'wholesome activities' ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ). See Table 1 for

**Table 1**  
Factor analysis of adolescent SIQ data.

Interest variable	Structure matrix	
	Factor 1 General interests (SIQgen)	Factor 2 Military interests (SIQmil)
<sup>a</sup> Philosophy	.722	
<sup>d</sup> The paranormal	.678	
<sup>c</sup> Psychology/psychiatry	.674	
<sup>c</sup> The environment	.594	
<sup>d</sup> Astrology	.588	
<sup>b</sup> Paganism	.574	
<sup>c</sup> Alternative medicine	.554	
<sup>c</sup> Medicine	.541	
<sup>b</sup> Black magic	.520	
<sup>d</sup> Flying saucers	.508	
<sup>b</sup> Vampires/werewolves	.468	
<sup>c</sup> Gardening	.459	
<sup>c</sup> Singing	.452	
	$\alpha = 0.86$	
<sup>a</sup> Crossbows/swords		.775
<sup>a</sup> The SAS <sup>*</sup>		.740
<sup>a</sup> Armed forces		.722
<sup>a</sup> Guns and shooting		.711
<sup>a</sup> Motorbikes		.632
<sup>a</sup> Fishing		.509
<sup>a</sup> Martial arts		.495
<sup>a</sup> Survivalism		.492
<sup>a</sup> Bodybuilding		.481
<sup>c</sup> Camping		.429
		$\alpha = 0.85$

<sup>\*</sup> Special air services (an elite commando unit within the British military).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/892458>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/892458>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)