

# Sensational interests and general personality traits

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# ABSTRACT

While an interest in guns, knives, true crime, the occult and Nazism is said to be common in sexually sadistic murderers, these topics are of interest to many rather less extreme individuals. A Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ) was developed to measure violent and unusual interests in a sample of 301 individuals, over 100 of whom were mentally disordered offenders. The SIQ had high internal reliability and measured five dimensions: militarism; the violent-occult; intellectual interests; paranormal credulousness; and wholesome activities. Despite face-validity, some ostensibly sensational interests (for example, 'serial killers', 'true crime' and 'Hitler and Fascism') did not load significantly on the main factors of the SIQ. These items have high base-rates of interest in the general population, and thus lack discriminatory value. SIQ scores were correlated with the 'Big Five' personality traits (Openness; Conscientiousness; Extroversion; Agreeableness; and Neuroticism) as measured by the NEO-Five Factor Inventory, and an estimate of verbal IQ. Hyper-masculine interests were independently associated with higher Extroversion and lower verbal IQ, while violent-occult interests were independently associated with lower Agreeableness and lower Conscientiousness; both factors were associated with younger age.

Keywords: interests, personality, sadism, violence, occult, forensic

Violent and sensational interests exist on the boundaries of mental illness (Prins, 1990) and are found in the histories of some seriously disturbed offenders. The evidence for this is often based on anecdotes and case studies; the 15-year-old boy who used a 17-inch machete to kill a 14-year-old boy, was described as 'fixated with martial arts and computer fighting games' (Bennetto, 1997: 12); the notorious British poisoner who 'read extensively about Hitler and the Nazi movement and ... spent a lot of time sketching graves, devil's heads and representations of Dracula' (Bowden, 1996: 17); or the obsession with firearms seemingly commonplace for individuals who engage in shooting massacres (Streeter, 1996). That the evidence for sensational interests in mentally disordered offenders is modest may seem surprising. However, searches of PsychLIT and Medline found few systematic, methodologically rigorous studies of sensational interests. The current study sought to redress this oversight and presents the development of an instrument to measure sensational (i.e. vivid, exciting, savage, or violent) interests in forensic and nonforensic populations.

Brittain (1970) described the prototypical male sadistic sexual killer as a timid, withdrawn, introverted, solitary, 'loner' who lives on his own or with his mother. He was said to be over-controlled, subject to obsessive rumination, and socially and behaviourally incompetent (i.e. unable to hold a job or sustain educational or training programmes); he was also thought to have a poor active sexual life because of his impoverished relationships and transgressive (often covert) sexual preferences. The perpetuation of this prototypical model reflects the perspective of those involved with the most dramatic and extreme end of offending (e.g. Holmes and Holmes, 1996). It would be more accurate to say that many of the mentally ill and personality disordered

have lives of isolated social incompetence, but do not present a risk to society. It is incumbent upon the forensic clinician to distinguish the functionally incompetent but behaviourally harmless individual from the one who is a more dangerous proposition.

A better way to differentiate between the deviant and the harmless is to examine their respective mental lives, as interests and life-styles reflect individual choices and preoccupations. Generalizing across cases, Brittain (1970) suggested that sadistic sexual murderers show a particular interest in sadomasochism and pornography, torture and atrocities, the depiction of true-life crimes, weapons, Nazism, horror films, black magic, and the occult. While clinical case-studies and individual descriptions provide some evidence of an association between sensational interests and serious offenders (Britton, 1997; Greswell and Hollin, 1997), the widespread availability of materials addressing sensational topics in the ordinary high street suggests that sensational interests may not be the exclusive province of the psychopathological.

Fantasy styles show a continuity with preferred media content (McIlwraith and Josephson, 1985), and it has been suggested that the selection and use of violent, morbid and macabre material for home use (i.e. depictions on TV, on video, in books and magazines, and within computer programs) may substantially contribute to violent and pathological fantasies in some individuals (Dietz and Hazelwood, 1986). The majority of research into such effects has examined the influence of television violence on behaviour. The positive association between televised violence and subsequent aggressive behaviour seems mostly attributable to a small number of individuals who combine lower intelligence and greater hostility, who are disproportionately affected by such material (Lande, 1993; Wiegman *et al.*, 1992). The relationship between fantasy and behaviour is complex; sadistic fantasies may predispose an individual to offend through the interaction of fantasy, masturbation, subsequently reinforced fantasy and behaviour, and a process of analogue behaviour ('tryouts') leading to the eventual crime (McCullough *et al.*, 1983). Nevertheless, deviant fantasies do not necessarily underlie all deviant behaviours (Langevin *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, fantasies represent an unreliable and unobservable variable, which an individual may have an understandable motivation to minimize or even conceal outright. A more effective way of getting at the images and content of an individual's fantasies may be to look instead at their recreational choices and interests.

The evidence for an association between sensational interests and extreme personality traits is modest but consistent (Weaver, 1991). Among children small but statistically significant correlations between Psychoticism (P) and an interest in crime, horror, and viewing war films have been found (Nias, 1975, in Eysenck and Eysenck, 1976). Zuckerman and Little (1986) found the Sensation-Seeking Scale (SSS; Zuckerman, 1979) correlated with self-reported interest in media depictions of violent, morbid and sexual events, as did P; unsurprisingly, sensation-seekers were more likely to attend sexual or horror films. Individuals high in P express a preference for films with themes of graphic violence or horror (Tamborini and Stiff, 1987; Weaver *et al.*, 1993), with fearfulness, empathy, and sensation-seeking being related to different motivations for

viewing graphic horror (Johnston, 1995). Each of these studies indicates that extreme personalities may have more sensational interests, but each has difficulties that limit generalization; Nias's study used children and individual items with a correspondingly low individual reliability; Zuckerman and Little's study used psychology students; and both Weaver and Johnston were primarily concerned with cinematic choice.

The original description of sensational interests in sadistic killers was an important observation based on clinical experience in which it was 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). Almost 3 decades later, it was observed that Brittain's descriptions still had not been examined empirically, reflected (possibly biased) preconceptions, and could equally fit clinical and forensic samples, as well as many of the general public (Grubin, 1997). At the very least, Brittain's interest items have substantial content overlap and require conceptual separation, as some items appear to address paranormal phenomena, which may be of greater interest to the schizotypal individual (Claridge, 1997; Eckblad and Chapman, 1983), whereas others are more violence- or sadism-oriented, and may thus reflect more antisocial tendencies. The current study sought to examine Brittain's original observations and use them to develop a formal instrument to examine sensational interests in large populations; to compare sensational interests between normal subjects and forensic inpatients and outpatients (predicting that more sensational interests would be found in the forensic cohort); and to examine the degree to which the new measure related to general personality traits (in particular those indexing hostility).

# METHOD

## Design

The study involved both correlational and cross-sectional approaches. Using factor-analytic, correlational and regression methods we sought to reduce a number of items believed to measure sensational interests in a forensic sample into a usable scale, and to see the degree to which this scale related to general personality traits. Cross-sectionally, we sought to examine whether individuals referred to, or residing within, a 55-bed, medium secure residential setting for mentally disordered offenders (Arnold Lodge, Leicester) were significantly more likely to express an interest in sensational topics on the newly developed scale as compared with control subjects, as well as to show differences in general personality traits. In order to minimize confounding associated with class and/or verbal IQ, a large cohort of controls was recruited.

## Sample

The number of individuals recruited was 301. Of the sample, 59 were outpatient referrals (M:F = 47:12) and 53 were inpatient referrals (M:F = 3:50) to the Forensic Clinical Psychological Service at Arnold Lodge, giving a total clinical sample of 112 (37.2% of the entire cohort). The remainder of the sample (185; M:F = 79:106) comprised a range of non-clinical individuals — fishermen, security guards, domestic assistants, teachers, nursing and clerical staff of all grades, and students. Four individuals chose to maximize their anonymity by not providing any demographic information, leading the number of individuals in some analyses to vary slightly. Controls were recruited from the community, the ancillary workers at the Arnold Lodge, and the support staff at various university halls of residence.

## Measures

All subjects completed the following four instruments.

## **(1) The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa and McCrae, 1992)**

The NEO-FFI is the short form of the NEO PR-R and measures the ‘Big Five’ personality dimensions of Neurotism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A) and Conscientiousness (C). The shorter scales correlate highly with the full measure, and also have good internal reliability (Costa and McCrae, 1992).

## **(2) The short form of the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale**

(Reynolds, 1982)

This measure assessed the credibility of responses to the various scales by examining whether individuals were exaggerating the more positive aspects of themselves.

## **(3) The Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ)**

The pilot SIQ comprised 60 items to which the participant had to respond according to whether he or she had a ‘great dislike’, a ‘slight dislike’, ‘no interest’, a ‘slight interest’, or a ‘great interest’ in them. The items were selected from Brittain’s 1970 paper and from clinical consensus by the forensic clinical psychologists of the Arnold Lodge regarding their potential significance.

For example, items were included that examined an individual’s active interest in the environment and alternative life-styles on the grounds that animal liberationists or militant environmentalists (for example, the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski [Pickover, 1998]) might be as concerned with the topics as more benign and tender-minded individuals of ‘green’ sensibilities. These items were embedded within an array of others reflecting normal activities and pastimes; for example, reading, needlework and watching videos. The anchored responses of the individual were coded from  $-2$  (strong dislike) to  $+2$  (great interest) for analysis of the scale; strongly anchored response points within rating scales are important to minimize ambiguity and uncertainty in individual ratings (Egan, Miller *et al.*, 1998).

## **(4) Demographics and premorbid verbal IQ**

Given the scale of the study, it was not possible to give each individual a personalized assessment of his or her IQ. However, it is arguable that a further dimension is required for an adequate survey of an individual’s more static psychological attributes over and above ‘the Big Five’: intelligence (Brand and Egan, 1989). For this reason information was collected on demographic details (age, sex, occupation and years of education), which enabled the calculation of an estimate of premorbid verbal IQ using validated regression equations (Egan, Crawford *et al.*, 1990; Crawford *et al.*, 1989).

## Procedure

Prior to starting, the study passed internal and local ethics committee criteria. All subjects gave informed consent to engage in the study. The procedure was straightforward: all individuals completed the three scales and a brief demographic screen. No forensic individuals were assessed when they were floridly psychotic or in any other acutely disordered state. Individuals who had difficulties reading had the questionnaires read out to them and their responses were recorded by the experimenter (one of the authors).

## Statistics

In order to justify item factor-analysis of the 60-item SIQ, five times as many subjects as variables were required for the study sample. All SIQ items were entered into a database and subjected to Principal Components Analysis with varimax rotation of the resulting factors. Due to the anticipated large numbers of factors with eigen values over 1, a scree test was used to differentiate the larger, meaningful factors from those produced by chance alone. The items in these factors were then used to calculate scores on the SIQ and any putative subscales. This method is a standard way of constructing a valid psychometric test (Kline, 1986). Differences between control subjects, inpatients and outpatients were compared using a one-way analysis of variance with post-hoc comparison made using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) test. Correlations between the SIQ, NEO-FFI and demographic factors were analysed using Pearson's  $r$  and stepwise multiple regression.

# RESULTS

## The SIQ

The 60 items of the SIQ completed by 301 individuals were subject to exploratory factor analysis. A scree test revealed that whilst 16 factors had eigen values over 1.0, only 5 of these factors were of major importance. The 29 items loading on these 5 major factors were selected and the remaining 31 items discarded. Among the items discarded by this analysis were face-valid sensational topics such as ‘Hitler and Fascism’, ‘Serial Killers’ and ‘True Crime’. The remaining items were subject to a further principal component analysis with varimax rotation; this revealed a general factor upon which 20 of the 29 items loaded. Rotation of the 5 factors occurred in 7 iterations, and explained 50.5% of the variance, the eigen values (and percentage of variance explained) being respectively 5.51 (19.0%), 3.24 (11.2%), 2.67 (9.2%), 1.66 (5.7%) and 1.55 (5.4%). A summary of these results is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1* Factor analysis of the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (N = 301)

	<i>1<sup>st</sup> PC</i>	<i>Varimax rotation (7 iterations)</i>				
		<i>F1</i>	<i>F2</i>	<i>F3</i>	<i>F4</i>	<i>F5</i>
Martial arts	AZ	A3	.28	-.03	.17	-.08
Motor-bikes	.52	<i>M</i>	.25	-.15	.05	.45
Crossbows, knives and swords	JO	33	.55	.00	-.03	.13
Body-building	.46	AZ	-.04	.05	.09	-.09
Mercenaries and the SAS	JO	J5	.29	-.07	.07	.06
Guns and shooting	.66	56	.54	-.08	-.08	.09
Survivalism	.52	A0	-.10	.26	.21	.18
The armed forces	.56	.73	.05	-.10	.03	.08
Sporting activities	<i>A2</i>	3Z	.00	.25	-.11	.05
Fishing	<i>A4</i>	30	.07	-.14	-.05	.42
Vampires and werewolves	.39	.04	.45	-.06	.45	-.08
Drugs	A3	.00	JO	.22	.03	.02
Tattoos and body-piercing	.49	.22	56	.06	.16	-.15
Black magic	.37	.21	A3	.02	.43	-.13
Paganism	AA	-.07	A1	.19	.41	.08
Home-brewing	.31	.09	.45	.02	-.08	.40
Philosophy	.30	.00	.17	.56	.08	.15
Psychology and psychiatry	.15	-.07	.15	J4	-.06	-.07
Alternative medicine	.19	-.16	.08 10	AZ	.40	.11
Singing and making music	.21	.05	.07	A0	-.05	.15
Foreign	.15	.06	-.07	5Q	.04	.01

Loadings over 0.30 have been underlined and printed in bold. Items have been reordered to increase clarity.

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The five rotated factors were interpreted as representing ‘militarism’ (F1), with high positive loadings identified for an interest in paramilitary groups, the armed forces, body-building, martial arts, weapons, sport and survivalism; ‘violent-occultism’ (F2), in which the highest positive loadings were found for drug use, black magic, paganism, tattoos and body-piercing, and weapons; ‘intellectual recreation’ (F3), in which high positive loadings were found for an interest in psychology and psychiatry, philosophy, medicine, making music and foreign travel; ‘occult credulousness’ (F4), with high loadings for the paranormal, flying saucers, and astrology; and ‘wholesome activities’ (F5), for which the main positive loadings were for country and hill-walking, camping, gardening and the environment. All scales had alpha reliabilities of 0.68 and above. Those SIQ items loading above 0.3 on their particular factor were regarded as reflecting measures of that particular variable, and were correspondingly summed. As the SIQ scale is novel, scores may be difficult to interpret. They were therefore transformed into T-scores (i.e. to have a mean of 50 and an SD of 10).

## **Differences between the general population and forensic psychiatry**

General differences between control subjects and forensic outpatients and inpatients for the measured variables were examined using one-way analysis of variance, with an LSD test to compare for significant mean differences between specific subgroups. There was no difference in the age of the control and forensic populations (Table 2). Nor was there a difference in the degree to which they responded in a manner that exaggerated their more positive aspects of themselves, as shown by the Social Desirability Scale. Despite attempts at matching controls and forensic samples, there remained significant differences between the groups in education and estimated verbal IQ. Control subjects from the general population were significantly lower in Neuroticism, and higher in Extroversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness than forensic patients. Bar F4 (‘Occult Credulousness’), forensic patients were systematically and significantly different from control subjects on all the SIQ scales, with control subjects expressing less interest in sensational topics generally, and in militaristic and violent-occult topics separately. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their higher verbal IQ and longer education, control subjects also expressed significantly greater interest in cerebral activities. Forensic inpatients were significantly more interested in active recreations than control subjects or forensic outpatients. This is understandable given that forensic inpatients reside in a medium secure mental health facility, and by having

significant limitations placed on their external activity, may correspondingly place a premium on outdoor recreation.

## **Intercorrelations between the SIQ and measures of personality and verbal IQ**

Simple, zero-order correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ) were calculated between the SIQ and its various subscales, and the independent measures of personality, verbal IQ and social desirability for the entire population (Table 3). These reveal small but significant negative correlations between the total score on the SIQ and lower Agreeableness, lower Conscientiousness, lower age, and lower verbal IQ; there is also a small positive correlation between the total SIQ score and Neuroticism. An interest in militarism topics was correlated with lower Openness, lower Agreeableness, lower verbal IQ, and lower age. An expressed interest in violent-occult topics was marked by significant negative correlations with Neuroticism, Agreeableness (see Figure 1), Conscientiousness, social desirability, age and verbal IQ.

*Table 2* Comparison of demographic and psychometric measures across groups

- Out - In	Controls		Forensic						
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P <
N	156		53		54			(2, 262 df)	
Age (years)	31.4	9.8	30.3	9.4	32.3	9.4	0.49		n.s.
Education (years)	11.0	3.0	11.2	1.8	10.7		2.2	48.8	.001
N	140		46		50			(2, 233 df)	
Estimated verbal IQ	113	5.0	103.3	5.8	100.6**	5.7	91.4		.001
N	185		59		53			(2, 294 df)	
Social desirability SIQ (T-score)	6.8	3.0	6.4	3.3	6.3	2.3	0.92		n.s.
General SIQ score	48.4	9.2	51.9	9.1	54.2*		11.7	8.85	.001

FI: Militarism | 48.1 | 9.2 | 52.3 | 10.2 | 54.4\* | | 10.7 | 10.7 | .001 | F2: Violent-occult | 48.8 | 9.2 | 51.3 | 9.5 | 53.6\* | | 11.7 | 5.50 | .005 | F3: Cerebral activities | 52.4 | 9.1 | 45.2 | 8.7 | 47.1\* | | 11.7 | 15.80 | .001 | F4: Occult credulity | 50.0 | 10.1 | 50.1 | 9.3 | 50.5 | | 10.2 | 0.06 | n.s. | F5: Active recreations | 48.9 | 9.6 | 50.0 | 9.6 | 53.6\* | | 11.2 | 4.70 | .01 | *NEO-FFI (raw score)* Neuroticism | 19.5 | 8.2 | 29.0 | 9.7 | 27.8\* | | 8.7 | 38.2 | .001 | Extroversion | 29.5 | 5.0 | 24.3 | 5.6 | 24.1\* | | 6.6 | 32.4 | .001 | Openness | 28.7 | 6.7 | 25.2 | 6.5 | 24.1\* | | 5.9 | 14.1 | .001 | Agreeableness | 30.7 | 6.0 | 26.7 | 8.7 | 27.5\* | | 5.5 | 10.9 | .001 | Conscientiousness | 31.9 | 7.0 | 28.0 | 8.3 | 29.6 | | 7.5 | 7.2 | .001 |

Key

\* = Forensic inpatients sig. greater than controls (and equal to forensic outpatients)  
 \*\* = Forensic inpatients sig. less from controls (and equal to forensic outpatients)

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Table 3 Correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the SIQ and measures of personality, social desirability and verbal IQ — all subjects |  $n$  | Total | FI

Militarism | F2

Violent-

occult | F3

Cerebral | F4

Credulous | F5

Wholesome | N | 300 | .13\* — | .07 | .19\*\*\* | -.08 | .11 | -.03 | E | 300 | .00 | .00 | .05 | .30\*\*\* | .05 | .00 | o | 300 | .00 | -.20\*\*\* | .09 | .45\*\*\* | .19\*\*\* | .04 | A | 300 | — .23\*\* | — -.19\*\*\* | -.28\*\*\* | .15\*\* | -.09 | .05 | C | 300 | -.14\* — | .01 | -.30\*\*\* | .07 | -.23\*\*\* | .04 | Soc. des. | 301 | -.06 | .04 | -.19\*\*\* | .05 | -.09 | .08 | Pred. VIQ | 238 | -.25\*\* | ● -.35\*\*\* | -.16\* | .34\*\*\* | -.04 | -.14\* | Age | 265 | -.21\*\* | ' -.15\* | -.32\*\*\* | .09 | -.14\* | .20\*\*\* | </center>

Two-tailed test: \* =  $P < .05$ , \*\* =  $P < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $P < .001$

— Out — In



20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 |

Violent-occult interests (T-score)

Figure 1 Correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) between Agreeableness and violent-occult interests ( $r = 0.32$ ,  $P < .001$ )

Whilst not directly related to sensational interests, the other factors arising from the SIQ also showed interesting patterns of correlation; an interest in more cerebral activities (F3) was correlated positively with Extroversion, particularly highly with Openness ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $P < .001$ ), higher Agreeableness, and higher verbal IQ. Occult credulousness (F4) was associated with greater Openness, lower Conscientiousness, and being younger. Engaging in wholesome outdoors-oriented activities (F5) was correlated with being older and having a lower verbal IQ. The remainder of this study will disregard factors 3 to 5, on the grounds that they do not reflect the main clinical facets of sensational interests, which are the focus of this study.

# Predicting the SIQ from combinations of personality traits

As a final test of the validity of combining personality and intelligence to predict sensational interests and their two major subcomponents, stepwise multiple regression was used to see which particular variables significantly predicted interest patterns. Each regression model used the same five personality traits, verbal IQ, social desirability and age. This over-inclusiveness was necessitated by the discovery that the ostensibly independent ‘Big Five’ traits scores were correlated; for example, Neuroticism correlated with Extroversion ( $r(300) = 0.46, P < .001$ ), and Extraversion correlated with Agreeableness ( $r(300) = 0.39, P < .001$ ). It was therefore decided that the degree of significant independent variance added by the systematic inclusion of further variables would best determine the separate contributing factors to higher scores on the SIQ and the two main SIQ subscales. A maximum of 20% of the observed variance could be predicted on the violent-occult subscale by the combined independent effects of low Agreeableness, low Conscientiousness, and younger age, whilst 15% of the observed variance in militaristic interests could be provided by combining higher Extraversion, lower verbal IQ and lower age (Agreeableness almost entered this model, but was significant to only 0.06, so did not meet the  $P < .05$  criterion for entry); 13% of the variance in the total score on the SIQ could be predicted by higher Extraversion, lower Agreeableness, lower verbal IQ, and younger age. The modest predictions provided by the use of general personality traits and verbal IQ alone suggest that other factors are also required to accurately identify contributing factors to the development of sensational interests.

*Table 4* Stepwise multiple regression predicting scores on the SIQ (and subscales) from linear combinations of personality and IQ variables |

<i>SIQ</i>	<i>Militaristic</i>	<i>Violent-occult</i>
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Significant independent | • lower A | • (lower A)\* | • lower A | predictors | • higher E | • higher E | • lower C |

• lower VIQ • lower age	• lower VIQ • lower age	• lower age
----------------------------	----------------------------	-------------

Multiple R | 0.38 | 0.41 | 0.46 | Adj. R<sup>2</sup> | 0.13 | 0.15 | 0.20 | F | 10.06 | 15.39 | 20.75 | df | 4, 233 | 3,234 | 3,234 | P< | .0001 | .0001 | .0001 | </center>

Key

=  $P < .06$

Multiple R = multiple correlation of significant independent predictors

Adj.  $R^2$  is the total amount of variance predicted by the multiple  $R$ , adjusted for the number of variables and sample size.

# DISCUSSION

The current study presents a validated scale for the measurement of sensational interests, and suggests that some topics — for example, ‘serial killers’, ‘Hitler and Fascism’, ‘True Crime’ — do not fit within the conceptual model discovered. It may be that such topics have become so commonplace (indeed now often the subject of entertainment or historical enquiry) as to cease having psychopathological significance. Our study suggests that general sensational interests encompass two main — but highly correlated (0.60) — subcomponents: militarism and violent occultism, the fulcrum of both being a shared interest in weaponry. The militarism factor reflects a general interest in aggression, dominance and independence, whereas the violent-occultism factor reflects subcultural ‘outlaw’ life-styles, violence, and a preoccupation with the supernatural. Both convey an inordinate valuing of power over others.

Our study found that forensic subjects were significantly more willing to express an interest in militaristic and violent-occult topics than control subjects, despite their probable caution in answering direct questions about interests in violent and bizarre material. There was no difference in the SIQ or personality responses of forensic patients whether they were inpatients or outpatients. SIQ and subscale differences were equivalent to over one half of a standard deviation, and suggest an effect-size of approximately 0.5. This value may provide the basis for researchers seeking to estimate sample-sizes in further studies of this phenomenon. The personalities of the two groups differed predictably, with forensic subjects being more Neurotic, and lower in Extraversion, Openness, and Agreeableness than controls. Whilst there was a general difference between the groups for Conscientiousness, this did not reach significance when subgroups were compared. This configuration of ‘Big Five’ traits corresponds to the psychometric description of individuals with Paranoid and Schizoid Personality Disorder (Costa and Widiger, 1994). It must be reiterated that no subject was seen when experiencing florid mental illness or any dissociative state.

Our control group for the study was not ideal; while we sought a group of individuals reflecting a similar social background to the forensic patients, they were still significantly different in years of education, estimated verbal IQ, and social class. However, when all individuals of social class I (professional) to 31 (skilled, non-manual workers) were excluded (leaving only those with skilled manual, semi-skilled, or unskilled occupations), the crosssectional and correlational results were little different. This suggests that whilst many of the controls were of a different social class from the forensic sample, class differences were insufficient to account for the observed results.

Patterns of correlations between personality, verbal IQ and age with SIQ total and subscale suggest that individual differences are important predictors of sensational interests. Nevertheless, more specific scales of psychopathology and better validated general measures of personality may be closer correlates of the SIQ than the questionnaires used in the present study. For example, both the SSS and Eysenck's P scale have been previously used in studies of unusual or lurid interests, and a similar study to the current one using the EPQ or the SSS may provide a more straightforward explanation of independent influences upon the SIQ, as well as supply a more parsimonious personality model than that of the 'Big Five' (Eysenck, 1991; McCrae and Costa, 1985). Another issue in the study of sensational interests is the degree to which they simply reflect delusional beliefs and schizotypy. Magical ideation and unusual perceptual beliefs provide two of the three main components of the schizotypal individual (Claridge, McCreery *et al.*, 1996) and it would be surprising if scores on the Schizotypal Personality Scale (Claridge and Broks, 1984) did not correlate highly on the violent-occult subscale of the SIQ.

Clinical work with forensic patients is often concerned with therapeutic efforts to reduce an individual's impulsive recourse to violence, deviant sexuality, criminogenic ideation, or irrational and schizotypic beliefs. This work may be subverted by the choices individuals make during their recreational time, which may lead them to consume explicitly violent or sexual materials, or view sensational programmes on late-night television. Evidence from the enquiry into the Personality Disorder Unit at Ashworth Hospital suggests that, even in closely monitored settings, people surround themselves with images and materials that say something about their deviant preferences and interests. Whilst the current study used self-reports of interests by individuals, in principle one could examine an individual's property to identify sensational materials and rate them on a SIQ. These may provide an independent check upon the degree of openness the subject shows about his or her interest patterns and monitor the progress in moving away from deviant interests following treatment.

Some individuals in this study had normal SIQ scores despite low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness; others had high scores on the SIQ, but normal scores on the NEO-FFI. This failure to find a closer correspondence between general personality traits and the SIQ or its subscales illustrates that adroit interviewing will remain a central part of the assessment of mentally disordered offenders and their motives. It is unlikely that the SIQ will take the study of the most severe cases of sexual homicide and serial murder much further, as these offences are by their nature rare and complex. Nevertheless, the current study provides an instrument that enables the prevalence and magnitude of sensational interests to be systematically examined in large populations. A copy of this revised questionnaire is presented in the appendix. Researchers and clinicians interested in using the SIQ can obtain norms and T-scores for this scale from the first author of this article.

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# APPENDIX: THE SENSATIONAL INTERESTS QUESTIONNAIRE (SIQ). 1.1

<i>Great dislike</i>	<i>Slight dislike</i>	<i>No opinion</i>	<i>Slight interest</i>	<i>Great interest</i>	
Alternative medicine	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Astrology	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Black magic	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Body-building	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Camping	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Country and hill-walking	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Crossbows, knives and swords	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Drugs	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Fishing	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Flying saucers	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Foreign travel	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Gardening	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Guns and shooting	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Martial arts	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Medicine	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Mercenaries and the SAS	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Motor-bikes	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Paganism	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Philosophy	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Psychology and psychiatry	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Singing and making music	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Sporting activities	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI
Stamp collecting	GD	SD	NO	SI	GI

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