

# **Crime Shows and Sensational Interests: An Exploratory Examination of Students in Criminal Justice Related Majors**

**By**

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It has been assumed for many years that people who commit sadistic or other violent crime possess an unhealthy fascination with violence and death. Numerous studies have focused on levels of such sensational interests among criminal populations with a view to rehabilitation. What appears to be missing from current literature is an examination of sensational interests among those who work with, or aspire to work with, criminal populations. Further, we have yet to examine whether prolonged exposure to popular media influences levels of sensational interests. Using a quasi-experimental design, this study compares levels of sensational interests among 240 students in criminal justice related majors with non-criminal justice majors using an adapted version of the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ), and the effect that popular media has on sensational interests. In keeping with previous tests of sensational interests, personality traits are also examined. Results from the study indicate students in criminal justice related majors have significantly higher levels of sensational interests than non-criminal justice related majors, and the number of hours spent watching crime related television shows is the best predictor of sensational interests. Further, there are a number of similarities found between predictors of sensational interests for students in criminal justice related majors and predictors of sensational interests among offenders examined in earlier studies. Implications from the study for criminal justice educators and practitioners are discussed.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*Since I had been in the criminal arena for years, I was able to think like they did – up to a point. As far as I was concerned, that was the most fascinating part of the job. The challenge was to outmaneuver the criminal element by thinking ahead of them.*

Gregg O. McCrary, former FBI profiler, on serial killers (2003, p.8)

The number of students enrolling in criminal justice related programs is increasing in schools across the United States (Smallwood, 2002). One of the factors not yet examined among this student population are levels of sensational interests, particularly fascination with violent crime, perhaps inspired by the plethora of crime related television shows. Sensational interests have been studied extensively among criminal populations, as it has been assumed for many years that people who commit sadistic or other violent crimes possess an unhealthy

fascination with violence and death (see Egan, Auty, Miller, Ahmadi, Richardson, & Gargan, 1999; Egan, Charlesworth, Richardson, Blair, & McMurran, 2001; Geberth & Turco, 1996; and Johnson & Becker, 1997). However, no one has studied levels of sensational interests among populations who work with, or aspire to work with, these types of offenders. This study addresses these shortcomings in current literature and poses three main research questions. First, do students majoring in criminal justice related majors have higher levels of sensational interests compared to students majoring in other subjects? Second, how do personality traits affect students' levels of sensational interests? Third, to what degree does exposure to crime related television shows affect levels of sensational interests?

In addition to a shortage of research, there are several other rationales for this study. First is the current lack of knowledge on levels of sensational interests among students. Currently criminal justice educators rely on anecdotal accounts of student interests, such as the commonly heard "I want to be a serial killer profiler for the FBI," at open houses for prospective students. Second is the need for research on how the recent plethora of crime shows affects students' interest in crime and violence. Third, if the models presented in this study can actually predict expected levels of sensational interests, they could be used as a tool for educators to weed out students whose interest levels may actually become a liability in the field, or identify students who may have unique characteristics suited for certain types of work in the criminal justice field. The latter identification has merit, given anecdotal accounts from police and special agent supervisors in the field who suggest the best officers and agents on cases involving the bizarre, are the ones who are a little bizarre themselves.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Sensational Interests*

In 1970, Brittain published a study on sadistic murders based on clinical observations. The study highlighted the notion that sadistic behavior, violence, death, weapons, and torture fascinated these offenders. Brittain's study also identified a number of common personality traits among sadistic murderers, such as introversion, social isolation, and shyness, all of which he proposed may be offset by a vivid fantasy life. Despite criticisms of Brittain's methodology, his study provided the foundation for research on sensational interests and sensation seeking behavior (Brittain, 1970).

Elements from Brittain's study and subsequent forensic psychiatry studies were taken by Egan et al. (1999) to form the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ), which was designed to assess levels of violent and unusual interests among different types of offenders. The SIQ has two subscales; the first measures militarism and includes measures of aggression, dominance, and independence. The second subscale measures deviant group identity, violence and fascination with the supernatural. Studies to date typically examine predictors of both subscales separately (see Egan et al., 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005). Content, construct, and criterion validity and reliability of the SIQ have been established by Egan and colleagues, as well as others, and the SIQ has been the dominant measure of sensational interests in literature (see Egan et al., 2003 for discussion of related literature).

In a study designed to validate the SIQ, Egan et al. (1999) surveyed mentally disordered offenders and a control group that included individuals who worked with offenders. Results from this study indicated offenders scored higher on the militarism and outdoor activities items of the SIQ than control subjects. Control subjects scored higher on cerebral activities. Included in the study were measures of personality traits. Subjects from the control group exhibited higher levels of extroversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness than subjects from the experimental group. Experimental group subjects recorded higher levels of neuroticism.

In a study examining sensational interests and sensation seeking among mentally disordered offenders, Egan et al. (2001) employed the SIQ. Results from the study indicated antisocial personality and borderline personality were associated with higher SIQ levels. In a later study of sensational interests and personality disorders among mentally ill offenders, Egan, Austin, Elliot, Patel and Charlesworth (2003) found offenders who were antisocial, as measured by low agreeableness and low conscientiousness, had more interest in militaristic items and violence items than other offenders and control subjects.

### *Media and Sensational Interests*

The relationship between aggressive behavior and viewing violence in the media has been widely studied (see Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998 for discussion), and there has been some research conducted on the relationship between preferences for media violence and sensation seeking (Weaver, 1991).

From a cultivation theory perspective, those who watch a lot of violence in the media begin to perceive society as it is depicted by the media. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1980) called such a distortion of reality the “mean worldview.” In this world, people believe crime is rampant and the world is a dangerous place (see Dowler, 2002; Hoffner et al., 2001 for discussion). What appears to be lacking in current literature is an examination of the effects of viewing violence on levels of sensational interests. If individuals are watching numerous television shows depicting grisly murders and their investigation, this must have an impact on the individuals’ sensational interests.

A recent story in the *San Diego Tribune* reported that in one week in September of 2005, there were 63 dead bodies visible during prime time television on the six broadcast networks, which was almost two and a half times as many shown during the same period in 2004 (Bauder, 2005). Further, some of those bodies were visible in extremely macabre circumstances, for example, gunshots gushing blood, auto-erotic asphyxiation, a man being burned alive, a woman with her eyes removed and lids sewn shut, etc. The variety and frequency of crime shows being aired at the time of this study is an indication that entertainment media are catering to sensational interests among mainstream society.

In a study examining the effects of personality and sensation seeking on perceptions of violence in the media among adolescents, Aluja-Fabregat and Torrubia-Beltri (1998) found boys watched more violence on television than girls, and reported a greater level of enjoyment while watching violence than girls did. They also found that adolescents with

high sensation seeking scores tended to be more aggressive.

While assessing the impact of entertainment media on fascination with gang violence, desensitization, and destructive social values, Knox (1999) suggests much of what appears on screen about gangs and gang life is inaccurate and that those inaccuracies can actually add to the gang problem. Knox proposes the media has glamorized the gang problem, an argument that could certainly be extended to crime investigation.

There is also a large body of research in criminal justice addressing the impact of the media on criminal justice issues, such as fear of crime, attitudes toward the police, and attitudes toward punitive crime policies (see Altheide, 2002; Chiricos, Padgett & Gertz, 2000; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 1998; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Dowler (2002) found regular viewers of crime shows tended to over-estimate the levels of violent crime in society, and may be desensitized to violence.

Kleck (1996, 1997) writes the public's knowledge of criminal justice policies are filtered through the media using what he terms exclusion bias. This bias entails the omission of critical facts in a news story. One example Kleck cites is a story about new armor piercing "cop-killer" bullets aired in newspapers and television news across the country during 1985 and 1986. The facts omitted in these stories were: 1) bullets capable of piercing police armor had been around for years, 2) these bullets had never actually killed an officer (Kleck, 1997). Such misleading information not only influences viewers, but also ultimately influences criminal justice policy (Kleck & Kates, 2001).

### *Personality Traits*

Studies that examine sensational interests and personality traits often employ the five-factor model of personality traits developed by Costa and McCrae (1992), and tested by numerous other researchers (see Anderson et al., 2001; Costa & McCrae, 1992, 1992a; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Miller et al., 2004; and Soldz & Vaillant, 1999 as examples). In literature, this model is referred to as the OCEAN model, indicating Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.<sup>1</sup>

According to Costa and McCrae (1992), openness refers to an individual's willingness to experience new things, their creativity, emotional complexity and love of the arts. Conscientiousness refers to an individual's organizational skills, responsibility, and analytical assessment of situations. Extraversion is measured by a number of traits, such as sociability, assertiveness, and experience of positive emotions. Extraverts are typically spontaneous, talkative, self-confident, and may appear bold and forceful (Carver & Scheier, 2000).

The final two traits in the model are agreeableness and neuroticism. Agreeableness is a measure of interpersonal behavior and people who score high on this scale are trusting, warm, polite and altruistic (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Neurotics are those individuals who are more likely to experience psychological distress and may appear nervous, stressed, high-strung, and / or, emotionally unstable (Carver & Schier, 2000).

Costa and McCrae note that these five traits are personality dimensions and not personality types. In practice, this means that although most people will have a dominant trait, scores actually fall on a continuum and therefore, people exhibit characteristics of more than one trait (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Studies examining the effects of personality traits on sensational interests consistently point to a relationship between extreme personality traits, such as psychoticism, and fascination with violence (see Johnston, 1995; Weaver, 1991; Zuckerman & Little, 1986). Horvath and Zuckerman (1993) also found correlations between low agreeableness and high levels of sensational interests, and low conscientiousness and high levels of sensational interests. Such results were also replicated by Egan et al. (1999) and Egan et al. (2003).

## **METHODS**

### *Sample*

Respondents for this study were drawn using probability and non-probability techniques from two population pools attending a liberal arts, metropolitan university. The first group is comprised of student volunteers from introduction to sociology, and introduction to social science classes. The students received extra credit for completing the survey, which was housed on-line.<sup>2</sup> These two courses are required of all students, therefore assuring a variety of student majors. Four introduction to social science classes and four introduction to sociology classes during a two-year period were used in this pool. This group of respondents serves as the control group in this study.

The second group of respondents was students pursuing undergraduate degrees in criminal justice or criminal justice with a concentration in forensic science, and students pursuing graduate degrees in forensic psychology.<sup>3</sup> Students were contacted via email list-serves and invited to participate in the study. A reminder email was sent to these students after three weeks, again inviting participation. The response rate for this group of respondents was 62 percent, and of these, the majority were criminal justice majors (74 percent) and the remainder is criminal justice: forensic science students or forensic psychology students. This group of respondents serves as the experimental group in this study.

The on-line instrument automatically filters out respondents who have already participated by matching the student's email address, thus eliminating the possibility of students participating in the study twice. The sample is technically a combination of probability and non-probability techniques, but given all students who had declared criminal justice related majors were included in the sampling frame, and all students are required to take the courses included in the first population pool, the sample is likely to be a good representation of students in criminal justice and non-criminal justice related majors.

The total number of respondents included in the study is 240; five surveys were discarded due to incomplete information. The demographics for the sample can be seen in

table one.

**Table 1**  
***Comparisons of Control and Experimental Groups***

Variable	Control Group (n = 87)			Experimental Group (n = 153)		
	% or mean	SD	Valid n	% or mean	SD	Valid n
Gender						
Male	32.2		28	54.2**		83
Female	67.8		59	45.8		70
Age	23.62	5.24	87	22.64	4.21	153
Political Affiliation						
Conservative	52.9		46	51.6		79
Liberal	21.8		19	30.1		46
Independent	25.3		22	13.1		20
None	0		0	8.2		8
Watch Crime Shows?						
Yes	59.8		52	80.4**		123
No	40.2		35	19.6		30
Hours spent each week watching crime shows	2.68	1.59	87	5.69**	2.11	153
Social Desirability	29.34	4.63	87	29.84	4.46	153
Openness	17.35	4.77	87	17.96	4.06	153
Conscientiousness	21.36	2.95	87	15.81**	5.89	153
Extraversion	16.56	4.90	87	21.00	5.19	153
Agreeableness	18.85	6.10	87	14.77*	5.12	153
Neuroticism	19.65	5.11	87	17.43	4.66	153
Militarism	9.37	4.68	87	12.66**	5.21	153
DIV	10.72	5.16	87	14.27**	6.00	153

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

### *Dependent Measures*

The dependent variable in this study is sensational interests as measured using an adapted measure of the Sensational Interests Questionnaire (SIQ), developed by Egan et al. (1999).<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked whether they had a great dislike, slight dislike, no interest, slight interest, or great interest in 32 topics such as, martial arts, and weaponry, serial killers, and true crimes. Responses were coded on a five-point scale from zero to four, with four indicating great interest.<sup>5</sup> Nine of the 32 items are filler items, and in keeping with previous uses of the SIQ, these items are not included in composite scores.

Because we had adapted the SIQ for this study, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for all substantive items. Two factors were found, and item analysis indicated the two scales previously identified by Egan et al. (2003), the first being militarism and the second deviant group identity / violence, hereafter referred to as DIV. Descriptive statistics for all measures can be found in table two.

**Table 2**  
***Variable Items and Descriptive Statistics***

Variable	Descriptive Statistics
Sensational Interests: Militarism	Range = 0 – 24 (M = 11.47; SD = 5.25) Cronbach's alpha = 0.73
Sensational Interests: DIV (deviant group identity / violence)	Range = 0-30 (M = 12.98; SD = 5.95) Cronbach's alpha = 0.76
Neuroticism	Range = 8-27 (M= 18.24; SD = 4.94) Cronbach's alpha = 0.80
Extraversion	Range = 8-24 (M = 19.39; SD = 5.51) Cronbach's alpha = 0.79
Openness	Range = 7-28 (M = 17.75; SD= 4.33) Cronbach's alpha = 0.74
Agreeableness	Range = 7-27 (M = 16.25; SD = 5.82) Cronbach's alpha = 0.79
Conscientiousness	Range = 8-26 (M = 17.82; SD = 5.69) Cronbach's alpha = 0.84
Social Desirability (Marlow-Crowne short form)	Range = 18-40 (M = 29.83; SD = 4.51) Cronbach's alpha = 0.79

### *Independent Variable Measures*

#### *Personality Traits*

In keeping with previous studies on sensational interests (Egan et al., 1999, 2001, 2003; and Zuckerman, 1984), the OCEAN five-factor model of personality is employed in this study (Costa & McCray, 1992a) based on Goldberg's (1999) research. The five personality traits measured are Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Items measuring all five traits are scored on a five-point Likert scale; from strongly agree to strongly disagree.<sup>6</sup> Composite scores were then calculated for each personality trait. For each of the five traits, a high score indicates a high level of that trait; for example, a high score on the extraversion scales indicates a high degree of extraversion. Descriptive statistics for each trait can be found in table two.

#### *Social Desirability*

Social desirability is included in this study as a control to assess to what degree respondents exaggerate their positive traits, as has been done in previous studies on sensational interests (see Egan et al., 2003; and Johnson & Becker, 1997). To this end, the short form of the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale is used. This scale is a 13-item measure developed by Reynolds (1982). Responses are measured on a five-point Likert scale; from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A high score indicates exaggeration of positive traits. Descriptive statistics for the scale can be found in table two.

#### *Other Independent Variables*

Students were asked to identify their major and their main rationale for choosing it. Given the variety of student majors, the variable was re-coded into a dichotomous variable indicating criminal justice related major and non-criminal justice related major. Additionally, students were asked to identify crime related television shows they watched on a regular

basis from a list, and about how many hours they spent watching crime related television shows each week. If respondents indicated they did watch crime related shows, they were also asked to identify their favorite crime related show. Gender, age, and political affiliation were also included as demographic control variables.

### *Method of Analysis*

Three stages of analysis are used in this paper. First, demographic and main study variables were compared between the control and experimental groups using comparison of means or chi-square tests. Second, zero order correlations were examined to assess relationships between the main study variables, and to identify any collinearity problems. Third, given the independent variables were either binary or continuous, OLS regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of the study variables on the two subscales of the dependent variable.<sup>7</sup>

Given literature previously reviewed, we expect criminal justice related majors would have higher sensational interest levels than non-majors. We also expect to find a positive relationship between watching crime shows on television and sensational interests. We expect to find relationships between personality traits and sensational interests, specifically; we expect low agreeableness and low conscientiousness would be associated with higher levels of sensational interests.

## **RESULTS**

### *Comparing the Experimental and Control Groups*

To assess differences between the control group and experimental groups, particularly differences in levels of sensational interests, independent samples t-tests, chi-square tests, and one way ANOVA's were conducted. Results of the analysis also appear in table one above. Results indicate the two groups do not differ on demographic variables such as age and political affiliation, but do differ on gender. Gender disparities between criminal justice majors and other majors are typical; males who major in criminal justice usually outnumber their female counterparts (see Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999).

Among the main variables of this study, results indicate levels of sensational interests on both scales, militarism and DIV, are significantly higher among criminal justice related majors. There is a mean difference of 4.5 points for the DIV scale and a mean difference of 3.3 points on the militarism scale.<sup>8</sup> Also of interest is the significant difference between respondents who watch crime related television shows. Eighty percent of criminal justice related majors said they regularly watched crime shows, compared to 59 percent of non-criminal justice majors. The number of hours spent watching was also significantly higher among criminal justice related majors.

The most popular crime show among the entire sample was *Law and Order: SVU* (Special Victims Unit). Seventy-three percent of those respondents who reported being regular crime show watchers indicated they watched this show. The second most popular



crime show was *CSI* (Crime Scene Investigation), and the third most watched show was *NCIS* (Naval Criminal Investigation Service).<sup>9</sup>

Among the other independent variables in the study, significant differences were found between the two groups for conscientiousness and agreeableness. In both cases, non-criminal justice related majors had higher scores.

### *Correlation Results*

Zero order correlations for the main study variables revealed numerous significant correlations. Confirming analyses of means, major was significantly correlated with watching television crime shows, hours of television crime shows, militarism, DIV and a number of the personality trait variables. As expected, there were some moderately strong correlations among the personality trait variables; although there are no correlations strong enough to indicate multicollinearity issues (see Neter, Kutner, Nachtsheim, & Wasserman, 1996 for discussion).

**Table 3**  
***Correlation Results***

	Gender	Major	Crime Shows	Hours	Social Desirability	Openness	Consci.	Extraver.	Agree.	Neuro	Milit.	DIV
Age	-0.24**	-0.16*	0.18**	0.56**	-0.08	0.06	0.04	0.36**	0.20**	-0.30**	-0.24**	-0.15**
Gender		-0.25**	-0.06	-0.21**	0.05	-0.03	0.24**	-0.24**	0.25**	0.25**	-0.28**	-0.20**
Major			0.24**	0.61**	-0.02	0.09	-0.48**	-0.40**	-0.37**	-0.24**	-0.32**	-0.30**
Crime Shows				0.47**	-0.05	-0.10	0.14	-0.21**	-0.16**	-0.15**	0.18**	0.13**
Hours					0.01	0.03	-0.59**	0.63**	-0.56**	-0.26**	0.55**	0.46**
Social Desirability						0.41**	0.04	0.07	0.12*	0.08	-0.09	0.03
Openness							-0.11*	0.14**	0.04	0.02	-0.11*	0.09
Conscient.								-0.52**	0.55**	0.27**	-0.46**	-0.55**
Extraversion									-0.45**	-0.34**	0.36**	-0.27**
Agreeableness										0.31**	-0.50**	-0.35**
Neuroticism											-0.30**	-0.27**
Militarism												0.31**

*Note:* \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

## Regression Analysis

Regression models were run for each of the two subscales of the SIQ. Results appear in Table four below. In both models, variance inflation factors were included as a further check for multicollinearity and have been included in the Table.

**Table 4**  
**Regression Results**

Variable	Militarism Model				DIV Model			
	Beta (std. error)	Std. Beta	t-value	VIF Value	Beta (std error)	Std. Beta	t-value	VIF Value
Major	1.10 (0.40)	0.10	2.20**	2.08	3.22 (0.81)	0.27	3.94**	1.72
Gender	-1.46 (0.56)	-0.14	-2.62**	1.16	-0.27 (0.64)	-0.02	-0.42	1.16
Age	-0.15 (0.06)	-0.14	-2.56**	1.14	-0.25 (0.06)	-0.20	-3.65**	1.14
Hours	0.86 (0.21)	0.40	4.04**	4.00	0.67 (0.24)	0.28	2.67**	3.80
Social Desirability	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.08	-0.14	1.27	0.08 (0.07)	0.06	1.11	1.27
Openness	-0.14 (0.06)	-0.11	-1.98*	1.27	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.04	-0.65	1.27
Conscientiousness	-0.16 (0.06)	-0.17	-2.52**	2.87	0.02 (0.09)	0.02	0.25	2.87
Extraversion	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.01	-0.16	1.99	0.04 (0.07)	0.03	0.46	1.99
Agreeableness	-0.13 (0.05)	-0.13	-2.20**	1.78	-0.13 (0.07)	-0.14	-2.00*	1.78
Neuroticism	-0.12 (0.06)	-0.12	-2.02**	1.29	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.06	-0.96	1.30
F (df)	15.33				12.98			
R- Square (ADJ)	(239) 0.42 (0.40)				(239) 0.38 (0.36)			

Note: \* p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01

Examining the first regression model for militarism, major, gender, age, hours spent watching crime shows, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism all are significant predictors of militarism. As expected, students in criminal justice related majors, and males had higher militarism scores. Age was negatively associated with militarism, indicating older students scored lower on the militarism scale as has been found in previous studies (e.g., Egan et al., 1999). Paralleling findings of Egan et al. (2003), greater levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness were associated with lower militarism scores in this model. In the current study, there was also a negative relationship found between openness and militarism, and neuroticism and militarism.

The most important predictor variable in this model is number of hours spent watching crime shows on television, and a greater number of hours is associated with greater levels of militarism. The model explains a healthy 42 percent of the variance in militarism.

In the second regression model, major, age, hours spent watching crime shows on television, and agreeableness were significant predictors of DIV. Again, criminal justice related majors scored significantly higher on the DIV scale. Age was negatively associated with DIV as was agreeableness. The most important predictor variable in this model was again the number of hours spent watching crime shows on television. The model explains 38 percent of the variance in DIV.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study is a preliminary examination of the differences in levels of sensational interests between students in criminal justice related majors and non-criminal justice majors, and how exposure to crime related television shows affects levels of sensational interests. The study also examined how personality traits affect students' levels of sensational interests.

Results indicate there are large differences between sensational interest levels for students in criminal justice related majors and students in non criminal justice related majors. Such differences were also found for sensational interests between criminal and non-criminal populations in an earlier study conducted by Egan et al. (1999). Further, there were some other parallels between offender populations and the students in criminal justice related majors. For example, results indicated criminal justice related majors scored significantly lower on consciousness and agreeableness than the control group, as was the case in the study conducted by Egan et al. (1999), where offenders scored lower on both traits than the non-offender control group. In a later study conducted by Egan and colleagues (2003), low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness predicted both interests in militarism and violence. In the current study, the same was true of agreeableness, but only low levels of conscientiousness were associated with militarism.

Extraversion was not a significant predictor of either subscale of sensational interests in this study when major was controlled for. This finding is consistent with the findings of Egan et al. (1999), but contradicts those found by Aluja-Fabregat and Torrubia-Beltri (1997) who examined teenager's preferences for viewing violence. This suggests relationships between some personality traits and sensational interests of students in criminal justice related majors may resemble those of offenders more closely than the general population. However, interest in sensational events is not the same as being involved in sensational events. Egan et al. (2003) suggest the SIQ could be adapted to measure degrees of importance sensational events have in someone's life and should include actual knowledge of events. The challenge of the latter would be truth in reporting among non-offender populations.

The number of parallels between offender populations and students in criminal justice related majors found in this study have interesting implications. Egan et al. (1999)

suggest people who score highly on the SIQ are willing to surround themselves with objects and things that “say something about their deviant preferences” (p. 579). Johnston (1995) proposes there are very different motivations for high levels of sensational interests, such as an interest in violence and sadism, thrill seeking, or even humanitarian interests. Students in criminal justice related majors may be thrill seekers or they may have intellectual or humanitarian motivations for their interest in the sensational. Future studies should more fully investigate such motivations, as it is possible that very high levels of sensational interests among some criminal justice practitioners, such as police officers, could be problematic on the job.

The most important finding in this study was the positive correlation watching crime related television shows had on both subscales of sensational interests. The number of hours spent watching crime shows was significantly higher among students in criminal justice related majors, and predicted both militarism and DIV. The strength of this finding alone deserves further examination. We have assumed in this study that watching the shows has influenced levels of sensational interests. However, because temporal priority has not been proven in this study, it may be worth exploring in future studies whether already established sensational interests are motivating students to watch crime shows. Analysis could also examine relationships between personality traits and television viewing over time to ascertain whether certain traits are associated with viewing.

Egan et al. (1999) suggested some differences in sensational interests between offender and control groups could be influenced by social class, and typically in earlier studies, offender and control subjects came from different socio economic groups. In the current study however, the experimental and control subjects are very similar in social class. Thus, the differences between the two groups on sensational interest levels suggest other factors are influential. One factor not examined extensively in this study was motivations for students’ course of study, which could influence sensational interests. Although we did ask why students primarily chose their majors, responses from the criminal justice related majors were typically things like “I want to go to law school,” “I am interested in working with juveniles,” and “I am interested in probation work.” No one said they had chosen their major because they were fascinated by crime or criminals. However, outside of this study, anecdotal evidence from focus groups conducted with prospective criminal justice students indicates consistent fascination with serial killers, profilers and true crimes. Given criminal justice students’ high scores on the adapted SIQ in this study we wonder whether there was some respondent reactivity with responses to the question or whether students change their rationales for studying criminal justice once they have completed some criminal justice courses. Motivations given by students in this study are consistent with those found by Krimmel and Tartaro (1999), although beyond this study, there does not seem to be a body of literature addressing criminal justice students’ motivations for choosing their majors. This would be a good addition to future studies in this area.

An additional variable to be included in future studies examining motivations for students’ choice of major would be stereotypical masculinity. It is quite possible that criminal justice related majors have interested in militarism given many of the items in the scale are stereotypical male activities.

Another limitation of the current study is the possible relationship between students in criminal justice related majors and interest in militarism due to family military background. Although there were no students included in the sample who were formerly or are currently in any branch of the military, and none who said they chose their major based on an interest in any branch of the military, it is possible some students came from military families and so already had elevated interests in militarism. This small possibility is balanced by the possibility the same condition existed for those students in the control group. As an aside, there has been some research conducted on sensational interests and mating efforts, which could be relevant to future investigations (see Egan et al. 2005).

Prins (1990) writes interest in violence and other sensational topics is often symptomatic of mental illness, and is usually present in the backgrounds of violent and mentally disturbed offenders. The parallels found in this study between students in criminal justice related majors and earlier studies using offenders, could be interpreted in two ways. First, these findings could send off alarm bells with criminal justice educators on the premise we are training a group of individuals with unhealthy preoccupations with violence. In this case, Egan et al. (2003) recommend practitioners familiarize themselves with the context of an individual's sensational interests to establish whether those interests "reflect an underlying sadism, idiosyncratic interest, or a transient and ephemeral curiosity" (p.61). Second, these findings could imply the impact that television shows are having on the criminal justice community has been vastly under-estimated and under studied. Given the strength of the relationships between hours spent watching crime shows and sensational interests in this study, I would propose the latter is more applicable and would recommend educators and practitioners in criminal justice fields begin to explore these relationships more fully.

## NOTES

1. The OCEAN acronym is commonly used in literature but it should be noted the order is not meaningful. The actual order of the variables is ENOAC.
2. Students were presented with extra credit alternatives to ensure complete voluntary participation in the study.
3. All courses in this program are tailored to careers in the criminal justice system.
4. We added two items to the SIQ that had previously been excluded as they were thought to be items of general interest. Our rationale for doing this was these items were consistently referred to by prospective criminal justice students in focus groups conducted outside of this study. Because we adapted the SIQ, we included tests of reliability and validity.
5. Egan et al., (1999) originally used a coding scale of -2 to +2, but later said this prevented maximizing variance in the scale and suggested alternative methods of coding in future studies.
6. The scale is zero to four, as never is coded as zero.
7. Although MANOVA or MANCOVA are feasible options with multiple dependent variables, we felt both tests were inappropriate because the majority of the independent variables used in our analysis are interval level, and examining combinations of the dependent variables were not being tested in this preliminary investigation of sensational interests among criminal justice students. Further, recent research on complex ANOVA modeling (see Smith et al., 2002) suggests Type I and Type II error rates are much higher with multiple F tests, and the quality of statistical inference is compromised (p. 527). This would be the case in the current study given the number of variables.
8. It would have been interesting to compare these means with offender population means; however, this could not be done accurately because the SIQ was adapted for this study.
9. NCIS was relatively new at the time of this study, so this result could be due to viewer curiosity.

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