Chapter 5

Sensational and Extreme Interests in Adolescents
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Abstract
This chapter addresses sensational interests and offending behavior in adolescents and examines if such interests can be said to cause offending. The quantitative assessment of sensational interests is a relatively new area within forensic psychology. This chapter reviews the literature so far and presents the first findings in this area based on an adolescent sample. Several recent case studies of adolescents with sensational interests who have also murdered are presented. Intrasexual competition (or mating effort) emerges as an important individual difference affecting the criminogenic relevance of sensational interests. Suggestions for improvements in the measurement of sensational interests are discussed along with the relevance of the current findings for offender profiling.

INTRODUCTION
The curious and dramatic interests of dangerous criminals have been a feature of populist forensic profiles since 1970 when Brittain published his work on violent offenders and their pursuits. This qualitative work based on subjective analyses of extremely violent men became a foundation for the

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assumption that interests are eventually mirrored in behavior. This assumption has been partly propagated by the media, who give intense coverage to any unusual interests associated with criminals. This reaction is often particularly evident when the perpetrator of the crime is an adolescent, and the interests may even be regarded as causal, producing a subsequent media and social furore. In the United Kingdom, a British youth convicted of mutilating and murdering his girlfriend was found to have a marked interest in the occult and knives (1). In the United States, a Native-American teenager who shot nine people (and then himself) contributed to discussions on a neo-Nazi website and created animations depicting a masked gunman carrying out a spree shooting (2). Such offenses are often presented as driven by the offender’s interests in the bizarre and violent.

It is not until recently that quantitative research in this field has been carried out to assess the validity of these assumptions in both convicted offenders and the normal population. This chapter explores some recent high profile cases and the media reaction generated by them. The chapter also presents contemporary understanding of sensational interests in adults and suggests several factors that may be important when attempting to link these interests to criminal behavior. Preliminary results of ongoing research with a community sample of almost 600 adolescents in Scotland are also presented. The prevalence of sensational interests in this group is assessed along with the relation to delinquency, mating effort, psychopathology, and personality.

**Recent Juvenile Cases and Media Reaction**

On June 30, 2003, Luke Mitchell, then 14 years old, met his teenage girlfriend, Jodi Jones, in a wooded area between their homes in Midlothian, Scotland at around 5.00 p.m. and then proceeded to murder and mutilate her. Forensic evidence suggests that he punched her several times in the face and then tried to strangle her with his hands. When she fell to her knees he continued the attack with a knife, severing a major artery in her neck, which caused her death. He slashed her neck another 20 times and then stripped her. Using her trousers to bind her naked body, he continued the mutilation by stabbing her abdomen, breast, and mouth. He also slashed her right arm and slit her eyelids. This murder resulted in the longest single-accused trial in Scottish history (3) and the longest prison sentence (a minimum of 20 years) ever given to a youth (4). The trial also provoked a heated debate about what may have motivated such a young person to commit such a crime.

Many issues in Mitchell’s background were discussed by the media as possibly contributing factors to the murder. He had used significant amounts