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Relationship between criminal behaviour and mental illness in young adults: conduct disorder, cruelty to animals and young adult serious violence.

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Many mental health professionals working with children and juveniles either do not have the training in psychological testing techniques, or sufficient diagnostic time to recognise significant indicators of future serious violent offending. The research literature suggests the diagnosis of conduct disorder (CD) can be a strong indicator of serious young adult violence. One component of CD, cruelty to animals, would also appear to be a significant indicator or "red flag" in the background of many serial killers and thus, it is suggested, in the history of perpetrators of other forms of major interpersonal violence. Either concurrently with CD or as a major indicator of antisocial behaviour in its own right, cruelty to animals deserves more attention from both a research and assessment perspective.

Predicting Serious Youth Violence

In studying serious interpersonal violence the factors that contribute to offending behaviour are often sought. In particular, the progression from juvenile offending to adult violence is an area that has been assigned the unenviable task of attempting to uncover the predictive behaviours and developmental abnormalities that contribute to this cycle. Longitudinal studies (e.g., Farrington, 1999) have been able to shed some light on this transition from juvenile to adult offending. Forensic psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals have also developed and employed a number of diagnostic instruments and categories--the so-called "disruptive disorders"--that attempt to provide some validity to this field (Spitzer, Davies, & Barkley, 1990).

The prediction of violence or "risk assessment" as it is currently called, is an extremely contentious area. Despite the relative lack of success in achieving even modest levels of validity and reliability, mental health professionals are often forced, in a variety of settings, to make such assessments (Pinard & Pagani, 2000).

In clinical practice, a full risk assessment is not always possible--or indeed appropriate--for the mental health practitioners wanting to make decisions regarding treatment programs in the community. Often the issue that the practitioner is dealing with has nothing to do with an assessment of future violence but instead, deals with long-term educational or family intervention strategies, as in the case of juveniles. The possibility of future violent or serious delinquent and/or young adult criminal behaviour may be a low priority in the assessment process. Even when it is considered, the mental health professional may not have the skills required to carry out such an assessment.

In terms of obvious "red flags" in predicting future serious violence, we know that the single most robust predictor is prior violence and in particular, a history of multiple offences. Indeed, some research suggests that recidivism risk exceeds 50% for people with more than five prior offences (Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 1997). However, one of the next strongest indicators, which appears to be associated with adult criminality, is conduct disorder (CD). Indeed the literature clearly demonstrates that a childhood history of comorbid problems (such as CD with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or aggressivity) is a very strong risk factor both for delinquent behaviour and serious young adult criminality (Frick, 1994).

Conduct Disorder and Risk of Violence

The current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000) defines conduct disorder as "a repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated" (p. 93). In order to apply the term, the DSM-IV-TR requires that at least three of the separate criteria be present for the preceding year and at least one in the last 6 months. The main diagnostic criteria are:

1. Aggression to people and animals including bullying, initiating fights, carrying weapons, cruelty to animals or people, stealing from victims and forced sexual activity.
2. Destruction of property, in particular arson and vandalism.
3. Deceitfulness or theft, including burglary, unauthorised cat taking, lying to obtain goods and shoplifting.
4. Serious violation of rules: for example, staying out after night curfews, running away from home and truancy.

The diagnostic criteria for CD specify three onset types--childhood-onset, adolescent-onset and unspecified onset. By convention, antisocial personality disorder (APD) is a term that is confined to individuals over 18 years of age while CD is only used for those under 18 when the criteria for APD are not met.

There is some debate in the literature concerning the behaviour pattern defined as CD and whether it constitutes a mental disorder or merely a "moral failing" or social problem. Past concerns included whether CD, as defined in the DSM-III-R, unduly emphasised the aggressive behaviour of boys while downplaying lying, truancy, running away, prostitution and other behaviours more characteristic of girls (Frances, First, & Pincus, 1995). Nevertheless, the DSM-IV-TR attempts to rectify some of these objections by accounting for such behaviour that causes significant impairment in social, academic or occupational functioning.

There are correlations between the behaviours exhibited as a juvenile that provide indicators to the consistency and prediction of similar traits in later life. Indeed, the best predictor of poor long-term outcomes in early adulthood, such as the development of APD and violence, is the onset of CD before the individual reaches 10 years of age (childhood-onset type; Melton et al., 1997). However, it should be noted that although CD in childhood and adolescence can be a good predictor of violence and APD in adulthood, only one third of those diagnosed actually go on to engage in behaviour or to exhibit personality characteristics that are congruent with APD (Frances, First, & Pincus, 1995). Nevertheless, there can be no doubt from the research literature that there is a great deal of overlap between the symptoms of CD and behaviours used to characterise serious violent juvenile offending (Loeber, Farrington, & Wascbusch, 1998).

Abuse of Animals and Interpersonal Violence

The abuse of animals is a juvenile behaviour that has more than a causal link with serious violent activities in adults. In the past decade in particular, there has been increased research activity to examine this recurring phenomenon, not only as an indication of CD, but also in the perspective of violence in adult offenders. Verlinden (2000 as cited in Ascione, 2001) discovered that in 45% of school shootings in the United States (US; 9 in total from 1996-1999) the perpetrators had a history of cruelty to animals. This mirrors a study a decade earlier in which the FBI discovered a similar percentage in perpetrators of homicide (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). While assessing 28 convicted and incarcerated sexual homicide perpetrators, 46% self-reported adolescent animal abuse and 36% childhood animal abuse. Over a third admitted to also abusing animals in adulthood. Looking beyond serial and mass murder, Tingle, Barnard, Robbins, Newman, & Hutchinson (1986) studied a sample of 64 male sexual offenders, and found animal abuse in earlier developmental stages in 48% of rapists. Schiff, Louw, and Ascione (1999, as cited in Ascione, 2001) consulted 117 incarcerated men and found that 63% of those imprisoned for aggressive crimes (n = 58) had previously been cruel to animals.

Although these studies highlight the more serious element of animal abuse and its prevalence among acute, violent offenders, a considerable body of knowledge is emerging that implies the existence of animal cruelty in other categories of offenders. Achenbach, Howell, Quay and Connors (1991 as cited in Ascione, 2001) report cruelty to animals as being significantly higher in occurrence among youths that had been referred to mental health clinics. Cruelty frequencies of up to 34% were reported in their sample, which becomes more striking when compared to a control group (who had not been referred) who ranged between 0-13%. A later study by Achenbach (1992, as cited in Ascione, 2001) indicates that youths aged 4 and older have a marginally higher rate of self-reported incidents of cruelty to animals than for vandalism. This was further supported by Offord, Boyle and Racine (1991 as cited in Ascione, 2001), who found that the prevalence for animal cruelty was in tandem with two other symptoms of conduct disorder: vandalism and fire-setting.

Ascione (2001) asserts that animal abuse is not a panacea for addressing youth violence, as such behaviour is multi-dimensional, but it is hard to deny that animal abuse and interpersonal violence towards humans share common characteristics. Thus it is not surprising that they may share similar levels of activity in the lives of violent offenders and in attempting to understand the causes of animal abuse, numerous studies have focused on its prevalence in such areas as abusive families (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983), corporal punishment (Flynn, 1999a), sexual abuse (McClellan, Adams, Douglas, McCurry, & Storck, 1995) and strained individuals (Agnew, 1998).

Other areas that have been implicated in this analysis are what are the violence graduation hypothesis (Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999) and rehearsal (Flynn, 1999a). Although they may appear to be, and may well be related assumptions, there are distinct differences in their focus. Violence graduation predicts that the presence of cruelty to animals will precede interpersonal violence in later life, and that it is almost a natural progression as the intensity of behaviour escalates. Rehearsal may mirror graduation in behaviour, but instead, provides the offender the opportunity to practice abusive behaviour on either more available or less "important" targets. In this regard it is reported that aggressive criminals have a significantly higher level of cruelty to animals than both non-aggressive criminals and non-criminals (Kellert & Felthous, 1985).

The correlation between animal abuse and its apparent association with serious violent crimes has been documented by Ressler et al. (1988) in relation to serial murder, and by Verlinden (2000) with mass murder. These US studies implicate the role that animal abuse may play in various facets of violence from childhood development to crime rehearsal. Many infamous serial

killers, such as Albert de Salvo, Richard Speck, Henry Lee Lucas, David Berkowitz and Carrol Edward Cole have been implicated in this association. In Australia there has been a number of individuals that conform to this model of offending behaviour. Archibald Beattie McCafferty, the Sydney "Kill Seven" murderer, strangled chickens, dogs and cats apparently to see what it was like (Kidd, 1998). Prior to his murderous activities in Frankston, Victoria in 1993, Paul Charles Denyer disembowelled a neighbour's cat and cut the throats of its kittens. He also wrote on the walls with the cat's blood and it appeared that one of its eyes had been wrenched out (Kidd, 1998).

The Tasmanian town of Port Arthur experienced what could be considered Australia's most terrible act of mass violence in April 1996 when Martin Bryant killed 35 people in a 19-hour rampage. As is often the case with retrospective analysis, there are a number of "red flags" that would indicate cause for concern in light of offender activities. This is particularly so for Bryant, who had been referred to mental health officials prior to his involvement at Port Arthur. He was first referred in 1973 when he was 7 years old, and again in 1977 where his assessment at the Hobart Diagnostic Centre noted he had tortured and harassed animals (Avery, 1996).

What is important in the Bryant case and in other cases of serial and mass violence is that cruelty to animals appears to be one of the first CD symptoms to appear in the young offender. The median reporting age by parents on the emergence of CD symptoms in children in one study was 6.5 years for the onset of "hurting animals". This was earlier than for bullying, cruelty to people, vandalism or setting fires. (Ascione, 2001; Frick, 1993; Spitzer, Davies, & Barclay, 1990). These findings suggest that animal abuse may be a "red flag" or indicator that both criminal justice and mental health personnel should take particular care when assessing the need for early intervention and monitoring of juveniles that come to their attention. Psychological and psychiatric opinions on the portrait of the typical mass killer following the Port Arthur massacre, sought to answer questions on the kind of person who would commit such acts. While some declined to provide a rational explanation and concluded that they did not know why, other experts argued that it was possible to predict dangerousness by taking into account the early warning signs in children, which included amongst other things cruelty to animals--a precursor to something more serious down the track (McCallum, 2001).

Conclusion

The link between animal abuse and violent offending is far from proven, but there is a growing body of evidence that indicates further examination may be warranted. The task for the mental health community is to place greater emphasis on this element of offending behaviour in their examination and diagnostic procedures.

While there would appear to be an increasingly strong case for using the diagnosis of CD, and in particular animal abuse, in the predictive capacity for future youthful violence, it is not without both its problems and limitations. Animal abuse is significantly under-reported and under-emphasised, and it is therefore feasible that in the cases where it has been noticed this is because the individual has come under increased supervision or detention for other reasons. It is also possible that mental health professionals do not consider animal cruelty as a major indicator of later violence and/or do not probe sufficiently to uncover incidents of abuse in the past. Adequate and suitable definitions of what constitutes animal abuse are also needed, and just how certain actions relate to behaviours would appear to be an area for future research.

What we can be sure of, though, is that the prevalence of animal abuse in the general population is disturbing, and the frequency with which it is a feature in the lives of serious violent offenders is equally alarming. Scholarly concern over the lack of adequate research and empirical study in this area highlights the importance that this possible indicator of future violence affords both mental health professionals, the general public and not least the abused creatures. As we learn

more about predictive behaviours and use this knowledge to validate diagnostic criteria, the importance of certain elements may need to be acted upon.

This article has explored the possible link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence. More specifically, it has proposed that as one of the defining features of conduct disorder in children and adolescents, its predictive capacity for violent behaviour in adults may be underestimated and therefore under-reported. Although the media interest in serial killers in Australia and overseas far outweighs its actual problematic reality, it would appear to be no coincidence that the lives of many such offenders include the abuse of animals. Mental health professionals have the task of developing and utilising these "tools" in the diagnosis of possible problematic cases and hence further our understanding of this area within a preventive framework.

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