

Book Review

Sex Differences in Antisocial Behaviour: Conduct Disorder, Delinquency, and Violence in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study

Moffit, T., Caspi, A., Rutter, M., and Silva, P.

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This book presents new findings from the Dunedin Longitudinal Study and provides the reader with a wealth of research findings on gender differences in youth with antisocial and serious criminal offending. This study is of particular importance as it is one of two longitudinal developmental studies undertaken in New Zealand and is internationally recognised as one of the most significant. Furthermore the book synthesizes a raft of information on a topic that is now being given the acknowledgement by political leaders, health providers, and clinicians that it rightly deserves.

The book begins with a preface setting a context and outlining how antisocial behaviour changes over the first 20 years. Most notably it provides information on sex differences as they relate to antisocial behaviour. Psychological and neuro-biological explanations have been used to account for gender differences in emotional and antisocial behaviour. However, from the outset the reader gets a sense that previously held beliefs will be challenged as the authors indicate that new information has led to the development of alternative hypotheses, as data from their study has been analysed. They also rightly argue that investigating sex differences across the first decades of life provides an avenue for uncovering the causes of subsequent antisocial behaviour.

Chapter One consists of a précis of the aims and findings. The authors explain that the chapters are organised in a similar fashion to a research report, with each chapter

concluding with a clean, comprehensive summary of the research and subsequent literature which they have termed 'take-home messages' and 'unanswered questions'. Given the book's emphasis on research findings this is an excellent way to make the book widely available to a broadened readership; these 'take-home messages' could be of use to clinicians, academics, and students alike. On the other hand, 'unanswered questions' could be of particular interest to academics and researchers wishing to develop further research in this area.

Chapter Two provides a historical context to the study, its procedures and methods. In particular, the nine assessment points where data were gathered and the relevance of adolescence as a period when peaks in the onset, prevalence and incidence of antisocial behaviour are likely to have a great impact on later behaviour and mental health. The authors discuss the demographic characteristics of the sample and include a section on ethnic diversity. While they conclude that participants in the Dunedin study are less ethnically diverse than in the North Island, they fail to acknowledge the true extent and importance of this given that the vast majority of New Zealanders live in the upper North Island. The bi-cultural and multicultural perspectives which are so important in New Zealand, as a whole, are clearly missing from this study, and the authors would do well to discuss the importance of this and the generalisability of their findings on sex differences to different cultures. Such information is of significant importance given the over-representation of Maori in prisons and mental health services.

In Chapters 3 to 5 the authors discuss their findings on sex differences and the level of antisocial behaviour of violent and non-violent behaviour. They acknowledge that these chapters confirm existing research on antisocial behaviour, namely, that most offending is perpetrated by males. Also of note is the finding that male and female antisocial behaviour is most similar around 15 years of age, and is often coupled with alcohol and drug abuse problems. The authors reveal some controversial findings from their analyses on male and female partner violence, specifically, *"that female perpetration of violence inside intimate relationships is a valid phenomenon that is very common,*

their findings and conclude that women's aggression is not only perpetrated in self-defence, but is also part of an emerging propensity for antisocial behaviour. What they do not measure is men's and women's perceived levels of fear of violence in intimate relationships. There are obvious problems of confining violence to physical abuse and ignoring both psychological and sexual violence. When sexual violence is included in studies, then significant gender differences do exist. The authors conclude by saying that more research and theoretical development is needed in order to understand the consequences. Chapter 5 is sure to be a catalyst for considerable debate and obviously justifies further research that includes sexual and emotional abuse.

Chapters 6 and 7 compare self-report records, and arrest and conviction data, and find that the majority of people who display antisocial behaviour during adulthood have started this behaviour during adolescence. While this is not a new finding, it is nevertheless important given that it is local. An interesting point identified by the authors is that convictions data lag 3 to 5 years behind self-reported illegal behaviours, which could be viewed as important for prevention programmes that target at-risk youth.

In subsequent chapters the authors examine risk prediction for antisocial behaviour and find that both sexes are likely to experience the same individual, familial and environmental risk factors that lead to antisocial behaviour. The differences that did emerge between the sexes were that males were more likely to experience poor impulse control, neuro-cognitive deficits, hyperactivity, and a challenging and difficult temperament. Remaining chapters in the book focus on comorbid and social problems associated with antisocial behaviour. Here some important findings emerged. For example, females are significantly more likely to experience depression following conduct disorder and the propensity for this increases during early adulthood. Such a finding is of importance for young mothers and the next generation of children from this group. Another important finding is that female antisocial behaviour is strongly influenced by social factors and in particular the antisocial behaviour of males.

The remaining chapters focus on reviewing the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder in females and how the developmental model relates to females. The final chapter summarises the major research findings and identifies priorities for future research. Noticeable by its absence is a chapter on the limitations of the different studies. I would have expected such a critique, which would have been invaluable for students and researchers in the early stages of their careers.

Overall the book is a detailed description of an important international study. I found the book clearly written and very stimulating. It is likely to be of interest to academics and researchers. Practitioners who work with this population would benefit from reading this book as they need to be well informed about local research when planning therapeutic programmes and effective interventions.

Ian Lambie, PhD, is a registered Clinical Psychologist and a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Auckland. He has been working clinically with adolescent offenders for over 13 years and particularly in the fields of sexual offending, violent offending and fire-setting. His research interests include risk assessment in adolescent offenders, intergenerational transmission of violence, resiliency, outcome research, and family based interventions for high-risk children. Ian is the Clinical Consultant for the SAFE community programme for sexual offenders.

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June 2003:

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