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0521804450 - Sex Differences in Antisocial Behaviour: Conduct Disorder, Delinquency, and Violence in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study

Terrie E. Moffitt, Avshalom Caspi, Michael Rutter and Phil A. Silva

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

Why are females antisocial so seldom and males antisocial so often? This key question is addressed in a fresh approach to sex differences in the causes, course, and consequences of antisocial behaviour. The book presents all-new findings from a landmark investigation of 1,000 males and females studied from ages 3 to 21 years. It shows that young people develop antisocial behaviour for two main reasons. One form of antisocial behaviour is a neurodevelopmental disorder afflicting males, with low prevalence in the population, early childhood onset, and subsequent persistence. The other form of antisocial behaviour, afflicting females as well as males, is common, and emerges in the context of social relationships. The book offers insights about diagnosis and measurement, the importance of puberty, the problem of partner violence, and the nature of intergenerational transmission. It puts forward a new agenda for research about both neurodevelopmental and social influences on antisocial behaviour.

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This book is dedicated to three people we admire:

Professor Emeritus Eleanor Maccoby, who pioneered the psychological study of sex differences; Professor Emeritus Lee Robins, who pioneered the longitudinal study of antisocial behaviour; and police officer and community leader Mr Paul Stevenson, who helped to gather the data for this book.

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Preface

This book presents all-new findings from the Dunedin Study, which has followed 1,000 males and females from ages 3 to 21. Unlike previous studies of sex differences, we incorporate information about how antisocial behaviour changes with age over the first two decades of life, a stage when it emerges, peaks, and consolidates into antisocial disorders and serious crime. Unlike previous studies of age effects on antisocial behaviour, we incorporate information about sex differences. This novel synthetic look at age and sex opens windows on the fundamental aetiology of antisocial behaviour, ruling out some old hypotheses and pointing to some new ones. The findings will interest students of antisocial behaviour, but the questions we frame – and the analytic approaches we use to answer them – demonstrate an approach that is applicable to any behavioural problem or mental disorder showing a sex difference.

The book incorporates approaches from three disciplines: developmental psychology, psychiatry, and criminology. Using dimensional measures of antisocial behaviour, diagnostic measures of psychiatric disorders, and measures of adjudicated delinquency and violent crime, chapters examine sex differences in the developmental course, causes, correlates, and sequelae of antisocial behaviour. We test the hypothesis that girls pass a higher threshold of risk to become as antisocial as boys, finding evidence counter to the hypothesis. We test the hypothesis that the diagnostic cut-offs defining conduct disorder should be set at a lower, milder, level for girls than for boys, finding that this is not justified.

Taken together, the new findings in the book's seventeen chapters show that young people develop antisocial behaviour for two main reasons. On the one hand, one form of antisocial behaviour may be understood as a disorder

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having neuro-developmental origins that, alongside autism, hyperactivity, and dyslexia, shows a strong male preponderance, early childhood onset, subsequent persistence, and low prevalence in the population. The book shows that extreme sex differences are linked with this form of antisocial behaviour. This form is a good candidate phenotype for molecular and quantitative genetic research. On the other hand, the book's findings show that the bulk of antisocial behaviour, especially by females, is best understood as a social phenomenon originating in the context of social relationships, with onset in adolescence, and high prevalence. The book shows that sex differences linked with this form are negligible; for example, the antisocial activities of males and females are especially alike when alcohol and drugs are involved, near the time of female puberty, and when females are yoked with males in intimate relationships. This form needs more basic research on processes of social influence.

The book's findings point to the overarching conclusion that females' antisocial behaviour obeys the same causal laws as males'. Females are unlikely to develop the neuro-developmental form because they are unlikely to have the risk factors for it, whereas they are as likely as males to develop the socially influenced form because they share with males the risk factors for it. The book's final chapter puts forward an agenda to stimulate future research into both neuro-developmental/genetic and social-influence origins of antisocial behaviour. These are the most promising directions for basic science work on individual differences in antisocial disorders and violence.

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