

Enuresis, Fire Setting, and Animal Cruelty:

A Useful Danger Signal in Predicting Vulnerability of Adolescent Males to Assaultive Behavior

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ABSTRACT: Current shifts in corrective and rehabilitation planning result in an emphasis upon primary prevention efforts involving early identification and intervention with vulnerable children who run high risk of serious adolescent and adult delinquency. A variety of observers have argued that the presence of a combination of observable problem behaviors documented in childhood is related to ego weakness and may have value as a predictor of explosive acting out in later life. The present study examines a number of institutionalized adolescent male delinquents whose recent history contains reference to a triad of behaviors (persistent enuresis, fire setting, and animal cruelty). Not only does the predictive validity of the triad appear to be supported, but the cases cited rank highest among overtly dangerous assaultive youth seen in the Southern California Youth Authority during the 12-month observation period. Presented is a summary of case history data supporting the hypothesis that the triad is a useful clinical tool in the prediction of violent behavior.

Various social sciences have long struggled with issues concerning behavioral prediction. The applied behavioral sciences, particularly in the areas of correction and allied rehabilitation, have often seized upon concepts such as the psychological test profile, body type

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correlates, and even genetic variance such as the XYY phenomenon in the hope that such notions might be of use in predicting potentially dangerous individuals. The fate of each such attempt at prediction should be kept in mind by anyone describing further such instruments. Hence, we offer the following discussion in full awareness of such limitations, including "predictor vulnerability" and potential misapplication. Indeed, we do not argue that the configuration we shall discuss should be accepted as a "fail-safe" technique. Rather, we intend its careful use as one possible element in an "early warning system" which we feel is much needed by clinicians and allied personnel who are consulted in the screening and treatment planning for the young offender.

A surprising number of observers have noted clinically a triad of behaviors usually described in case histories of violent adults. The triad includes persistent enuresis, repeated fire setting, and extreme animal cruelty. In the most thorough recent review on this phenomenon, Hellman and Blackman [1] established with their data that a significant relationship exists between this triad of symptoms in *childhood* and violent aggressive behavior in *adulthood*. Our present exploration of this phenomenon has involved a detailed study of *adolescent* males evidencing this triad [2,3]. Our findings are consistent with previous studies of adults and the detailed descriptions of children demonstrating this triad. We shall describe our research method and summarize our findings briefly before discussing the clinical application of the triad.

Methodology

The subjects under study were seen by us in our service as clinical consultants to the California Youth Authority. Although psychiatric referrals are preselected to a significant degree [e.g., declared delinquent under California Welfare and Institutions Code 602; demonstrate significant psychological symptoms so as to merit psychiatric evaluation], there was no further selection of cases for this study by the authors. A total of 46 cases were referred and seen during the 12-month period. Of these, six adolescents demonstrated the triad of persistent enuresis, repeated fire setting, and excessive animal cruelty. Four additional cases were considered to possess the triad, but complete documentation of one or more of the components was not possible; thus they were not included in this study. Although we believe that many Youth Authority subjects possessed the triad under consideration, denial of one or more of

the symptoms was considered sufficient for exclusion. Each subject was seen individually in psychiatric evaluation, and subsequent referral for psychological testing.

Summary of the Data

As we have mentioned earlier, a full discussion of the case histories and allied materials appears elsewhere and will not be presented here. Rather, we shall attempt to describe in tabular summary what we consider to be the relevant aspects of each case.

A number of pathognomonic factors including the triad under scrutiny are present in each of the six cases in our study. Table 1 presents the frequency and pattern in which these pathognomonic features appear. Manifestations of extreme violence and marked sexual deviation are documented in each case studied. The tendency of these adolescents to fuse sexuality and aggression has been discussed by us elsewhere [2]. This phenomenon seems consistent with the arrested, rather infantile levels of psychological development evident generally in our subjects.

As presented in table 1, most of our subjects were reared in an atmosphere marked by family disorganization and deprivation. Clinical

Table 1
Pathognomonic Variables Present in Histories of Six Male
Adolescents Evidencing the Triad of Persistent
Enuresis, Firesetting, and Animal Cruelty.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Assaultive	Xa.	X	Xa.	X	X	X
Sexual Deviation	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family Disorganization	X	X	X	?	X	X
Maternal Deprivation	X	X	X	?	X	X
Psychosis/Borderline	X	X	X	X		X
Affect Disorder	X		X		X	
Significant Drug Usage	X			X	X	

Key
 X = variable present
 ? = no information available
 a. = suicide attempt and self-mutilation

disorders of thought and affect, usually associated with such atypical child rearing, were found present, to a degree, in each subject. Two members of the group presented affective disorders involving severe depression with suicidal and self-mutilative behavior, wherein presumably the aggression was turned inward upon the self.

In summary, we were repeatedly struck by the remarkably consistent display of serious psychological difficulty by all members of the "triad" group. Though at this time untested, by means of a matched control group, neither observer had seen such consistent pathology in groups of wards not displaying the triad. Further, though anecdotal, the six young men in our group were considered within the Youth Authority system to be the most assaultive and potentially dangerous wards remanded to its care.

Our review of the literature revealed the triad as representing a most primitive mode of impulse expression considered quite consistent with clearly inhibited personality development and severe limitations in the area of impulse control and expression. Table 2 presents each of the triad symptoms according to the chronology offered by the subject and his background materials. The figures in parentheses are the respective ages of the subjects. In each case, enuresis is present through the onset of puberty. Of the three symptoms, enuresis is

Table 2
Chronology of Triad Symptoms in Six Seriously
Assaultive Adolescent Males Under Study.

	Eneuresis	Firesetting	Animal Cruelty
1 (17)	to present	to present	to present
2 (13)	to present	to present	to puberty
3 (20)	to present	to present (intermittent)	to puberty
4 (16)	to present	to puberty (9)	to present (intermittent)
5 (18)	to present	to present (intermittent)	to 16th year
6 (13)	to present	to present (intermittent)	to present

most persistent, though this observation may be somewhat heightened by the fact that the subjects were institutionalized. Whereas access to opportunities for fire setting and animal cruelty would be limited in an institution, enuresis, de facto, becomes that triad symptom still easily manifest and readily evident to staff and peers. It should be noted, however, that two instances of sadistic behavior toward younger peers were reported in our data. We were generally impressed by the tenacity of this triad in the cases studied, as is evident in table 2.

Discussion

Various of the triad behaviors have been described as manifestations of atypical ego development or "ego weakness" in latency *children* [4, 5]. Observers have interpreted the triad behaviors, particularly fire setting, as the child's attempt to externalize and gain some control over internal turbulence and disorganization. We tend to agree with that conclusion, but caution that in *adolescents* a lack of mastery over such issues must represent a clear failure in the development of various controls and therefore must be viewed as a warning signaling vulnerability to explosive impulse expression. This contention, we feel, has been borne out in our sample of assaultive adolescents as well as in similar findings with adults [1].

What then does the triad offer to a social system that must at once protect its membership from danger while at the same time respond to an equally humanitarian obligation to restore comparative freedom and initiative to its damaged members? Naturally, evidence of the triad or any such documented pattern in childhood should serve as an early warning device for clinicians and others such as pediatricians, school guidance personnel, and clergy. Appropriate consultation and therapeutic intervention should be arranged immediately.

With adolescents, the situation becomes more complicated. Obviously, as our sample demonstrates, the difficulties associated with the triad have not erupted as indications of an acute disorder. Rather, gross internal difficulties and the triad of symptoms have existed for some time, in most instances from early childhood on. Hence, we might assume that the developmental deviation represented by this condition if anything has widened over time so that the adolescent manifesting the triad is in even worse shape than his childhood counterpart. Even within the institutional population, we now speculate that individuals evidencing the triad are quite different from those not possessing the configuration. They, that is, the triad group,

have developed with an internal vulnerability, a very singular form of handicap.

The developmentally arrested infantile character formation signaled by the triad suggests that treatment efforts must be directed toward remarkable personality change rather than conflict resolution or relearning of socialization skills. Facilitation of personality development should be the goal with triad-present adolescents. Those involved in the treatment of such adolescents must be prepared to engage in a long-term, highly supportive process directed toward in-depth personality change. Such goals are most difficult indeed; however, we see no viable alternative. A psychological danger signal like a traffic stoplight must be heeded. Failure to do so increases the chances for collision. Increase the frequency of such heedless driving, and you increase the inevitability of tragedy. So, too, with psychological warning signals like the triad we have discussed, they should be used to alert us to existing potential for disaster and therefore offer us cues to develop alternatives.

References

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