

Fact Sheet 19: Violence and aggression: Relating theory to practice.

- *“Past violence is the best predictor of future violence”* – How many times have you encountered or indeed used this statement in your own practice? While often stated as something of a truism, it is in reality a relatively simplistic assumption whether related to violence specifically or offending behaviour more generally. How can it be countered?
 - **It is simply incorrect, according to research.** According to the best individual studies and meta-analyses of various risk factors for violence, “history of violence” or similar variables are **not** the best predictors of future violence. History of violence is typically significantly less predictive than clinical risk factors such as substance use.
 - **It is simply incorrect, according to theory.** There is some consensus that the most successful and best-validated theories of human behaviour in the history of psychology are the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Theory of Reasoned Action. According to these theories, the best predictor is the behavioural **intention** of actors, not their past behaviour.
 - **It is simply incorrect, according to logic.** Every violent offender had a time in his life when he had no past violence. Therefore we would have predicted that none of these individuals would be violent and we would have been wrong in every single case. Similarly, once they have committed violence, we would have predicted that every one of them would go on to commit the same kind of violent offences repeatedly and we would be wrong in most cases. Many individuals go on to commit different forms of violence, or more serious violence; still others commit less serious violence, or desist altogether.
 - Of course, information about someone’s past violence is critical to risk assessment. However, the value of the information is that it helps one to infer the causes of someone’s past violence, as well as someone’s capacity for and intentions with respect to future violence. ([Stephen Hart](#), 2013, email communication).
- According to Ireland (2011), there is a tendency to utilise the **antisocial literature** base when describing and communicating recommendations for managing aggression. Numerous approaches have been shaped by the ‘What Works’ literature which provides useful direction as regards **how** to undertake assessment and intervention but little guidance on the **content** of assessment and intervention. It is with reference to the **core aggression literature** that this deficit can be overcome.
- Three concepts are of particular importance when assessing habitual aggression:
 - *Motivation* – Is aggression **reactive** (‘frustration-anger’ theory of aggression) or **proactive** (social learning theory models of aggression) and what **function** does it serve?
 - *Adaptation* – Violence and aggression may have adaptive qualities and should not be viewed entirely through a deficit-model lens.
 - *Client strength* – Asking what makes an individual ‘peaceful’ as well as identifying exceptions to their aggressive behaviour are of critical importance.

*Practitioners wishing to explore issues raised in this Fact Sheet may find Jane Ireland’s chapter, ‘Conducting individualised theory-driven assessments of violent offenders’ in Ireland, J.; Ireland, C.; and Birch, P. (2011) *Violent and Sexual Offenders: Assessment, treatment and management information particularly useful, along with the 6 Day Life Minus Violence-Enhanced (LMV-E) training. The National Youth Justice Practice Guidance (www.cycj.org.uk) also contains useful information in relation to assessment and intervention of young people who display violent and aggressive behaviour as does the manual accompanying the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk and Young People (SAVRY).**

David Orr, CYCJ For further information contact: cycj@strath.ac.uk.