



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2015

19 Violent Behavior and Protective Factors: A Retrospective Study of a Psychiatric Patient's Cohort in Southern Italy

*Felice F. Carabellese, MD**, University of Bari, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, p.za G. Cesare, 11, Bari 70124, ITALY; *Gabriele Rocca, Via De Toni 12, Genoa, ITALY*; *Chiara Candelli, MD, PhD, Section of Criminology and Forensic Psychiatry, p.za G. Cesare, Bari 70124, ITALY*; *Donatella La Tegola, PhD, p.za G. Cesare, 11, Bari 70124, ITALY*; *Domenico Montalbò, MD, p.za G. Cesare, 11, Bari 70124, ITALY*; and *Roberto Catanesi, MD, p.za G. Cesare, Bari 70124, ITALY*

After attending this presentation, attendees will focus on possible psychosocial factors that may be specifically associated with the various modalities of violent behaviors enacted by the sample cohort examined (directed against others, directed against objects, and self-directed) in order to identify targeted strategies of prevention and treatment.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by assessing the role of psychosocial factors in the etiology of violent behavior.

In recent years, numerous investigations have confirmed that patients suffering from severe mental illness are at greater risk of engaging in violent behavior. Several risk factors that increase the probability of psychiatric patients committing violent acts have been identified. Some of the factors associated with violent behavior are also psychosocial, including: the occurrence of stressful events, belonging to a “pathogenic” or “disinterested” family, a family history of substance abuse and violent behavior, and poverty and deprivation of the family of origin. There is evidence in the literature to suggest that some psychosocial factors exert a protective effect.

Method: The four different public psychiatric outpatient facilities taken into consideration met all the same criteria of homogeneity. In addition, the local social service agencies in each municipality were involved in the investigation. The sample consisted of 1,582 subjects. The resulting data were stored in a dedicated database. Psychosocial factors and various modalities of violent behavior were the main focus in the sample.

Results: Most patients had long clinical histories (70% of the cases had more than 10 years of history) and had often been hospitalized (sometimes forcibly) over the years. The most common diagnosis was mood disorder (41.2%). After the first contact with the facility, virtually all patients were placed on psychopharmacological treatment (84%).

Violent behavior emerged in the clinical histories of more than one-third (36.3%) of the patients in this sample. Males were clearly predominant among patients exhibiting violent behavior (65.74%). In the majority of cases, this behavior was directed exclusively toward others (76.7%). There was a significant correlation between violent behavior and a family history of either substance abuse or violent behavior. In approximately half of these cases, the victim of the violence was one of the parents.

One episode of violent behavior toward other persons was recorded in 27.9% of the total sample. For the most part, this behavior was enacted by men (69%). Indeed, male sex proved to be a risk factor for violent behavior toward others. Having a supportive family reduced the likelihood of enacting violence against others. By contrast, this probability was increased by the presence of a disinterested family or a “pathogenic” family. Good intra-familial relationships were seen to reduce the probability of committing acts of violence against others, while poor intra-familial relationships increased this probability. Likewise, the probability of engaging in violence against others was reduced when extra-familial relationships were good or satisfactory. By contrast, poor extra-familial relationships increased the likelihood of violence against others. Having a good psychosocial level was seen to reduce the probability of engaging in violence against others as was a satisfactory psychosocial level.

Discussion: Generally speaking, a significant prevalence of violent behavior emerged in this sample, especially among more seriously ill psychiatric patients (psychotic disorders). Moreover, as this study unequivocally demonstrates, the phenomenon investigated is, in terms of magnitude and gravity, considerable. This first finding, which has a direct and immediate impact, requires consideration in order to draft adequate treatment programs.

The importance of psychosocial protective factors is therefore confirmed. In agreement with the literature data, this study confirmed the general finding that protective factors play a significant role in preventing the enactment of violent behavior.



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Apart from the results yielded by the present research, many of which are in agreement with the literature, some of the limits typical of a retrospective study must be taken into account, in particular the partial nature of the medical documentation available. Moreover, episodes of violent behavior on the part of patients in public health service care are not always reported in clinical records. It therefore seems likely that the phenomenon was underestimated in the population sample studied.

Mental Illness, Violent Behavior, Protective Factors