

The dynamic-behavioural model of firesetting

Kenneth Fineman's (1995) dynamic-behavioural model presents a promising conceptual framework for improving understanding of why some people manifest firesetting behaviour. Fineman believed that a model should reflect not only the literature, but also the impressions and observations of those in clinical practice and the fire services.

The dynamic-behavioural model is based on the idea that firesetting comes about through the interaction of three factors:

- dynamic factors in the individual's history that predispose that person to engage in maladaptive and antisocial acts
- environmental factors in the individual's history that have delivered the message that firesetting is an acceptable response to difficulties, and
- conditions in the immediate environment that encourage firesetting behaviour.

Dynamic historical factors include dysfunction around family background, peers, academic performance, personality and health. While some individuals may respond to dysfunctional histories by engaging in firesetting, others, or even the same individuals at different times, may engage in acts of vandalism, antisocial behaviour or other expressions such as substance abuse.

Fineman saw that the decision to engage in firesetting is largely driven by historical environmental factors that led to development of at-risk behaviours around fire. These factors shaped the individual's relationship with fire and belief in its use as a means of expression. Factors might include lack of parental supervision of early fire play, a history of firesetting and responses of parents or significant others to previous firesetting.

Historical factors in turn combine with other conditions such as the individual's ability to express anger in appropriate ways, and the degree of their interest in or fascination with fire. For some troubled children, having parents who smoke provides easy access to matches or lighters and demonstrates the purposive use of fire within their familiar home environment.

What makes the dynamic-behavioural approach particularly useful is that these interacting factors can be defined into variables which can be directly observed and measured. This allows the model to be empirically tested and each variable individually examined to assess its value in predicting firesetting behaviour. Some of the observable variables that arise from the model are:

- crises or trauma, such as a relationship breakdown, or experiencing physical or sexual abuse
- characteristics of the fire itself, such as location, means of ignition, whether it was deliberate or accidental and whether the person acted alone or in company
- thoughts and feelings the offender experiences before and after lighting the fire
- reinforcements, such as feelings of power and control, excitement, support of peers when the fire is a group act, and perceived risks of detection.

For more information

Fineman KR 1995. A model for the qualitative analysis of child and adult fire deviant behaviour. *American journal of forensic psychology* 13(1): 31–61