

‘Throughout my life I’ve had people walk all over me’: Trauma in the lives of violent men

Authors

Dr Anthony Ellis, University of Salford

Prof Simon Winlow, Teesside University

Prof Steve Hall, Teesside University

Abstract

In this article we present original qualitative data gathered during prolonged ethnographic fieldwork with violent men in deindustrialised communities in the north of England. We use the data as an empirical platform for a theoretical exploration of the symbolism and subjectivising influences of traumatic life experiences in these men’s biographies. We conclude by making the tentative suggestion that there is a complex and mediated causal link between traumatic experience and a deep subjective commitment to aggression and violence in adulthood.

Introduction

This article presents original ethnographic interview data that suggest a complex mediated causal link between early childhood trauma and a deep subjective commitment to aggression and violence in adulthood. The data is drawn from a research project that addresses the relationship between social class, masculinity and violence. We interviewed twenty-two men living in deindustrialised working-class regions across the north of England. Each has an established reputation for violence in his community. The majority have been arrested many times for violent offences. Some are committed entrepreneurial criminals who operate in

illegal markets, while others are out of work or underemployed, often using modest earnings from petty crime to supplement welfare payments. A smaller number have legitimate jobs in the construction industry and manual trades. In the majority of cases violent reputations were established in the neighbourhoods where the interviewees spent their teenage years and, as they grew older, in their local night-time economies. The data is theorised in a framework that explains how initial traumatic experiences desubjectify young boys. This causes a durable sense of loss and humiliation that is gendered and culturally affirmed in a way that reproduces a physically aggressive form of competitive individualism in which others are seen as substitutes for the original assailant.

Methodology

The analysis is based on interviews supplemented by contextual observations. The empirical data represent our respondents' reflections on their lives and their commitment to violence. The significant amount of time we devoted to gathering this data is crucial because respondents rarely reveal anything of real value in initial discussions. We had to allow time for the growth of familiarity and trust, which allows our respondents to address the deeper emotional impact of biographical events of which they initially indicated little conscious recollection. We listened to many respondents simultaneously talk up the justifications for violent acts and talk down the harm they had inflicted upon others, but we wanted to dig beneath *post hoc* discursive issues to address the deeper and more complex motivations that drove these men towards violence. We often found it necessary to abandon standard methodological protocols and engage in honest and open-ended discussions with our respondents on issues that often appeared tangential to our core goals. Generally, we

encouraged respondents to construct autobiographical narratives and identify key life events that, in their view, played a significant role in the emotional constitution of their adult selves.

Our aim was to transport them back to the emotional states that accompanied these incidents so that we could attain a better vantage point to reveal the formative events that shaped their current motivations and desires. Quite often these open-ended biographical interviews were animated, fraught and emotionally charged. Occasionally we had to interject to solicit further reflections on violent incidents, but on other occasions the information flowed quite freely in a way that suggested a wish to unburden themselves of difficult memories and talk honestly to a non-judgemental and empathetic listener. Over time we were able to identify important common patterns of formative events in these biographical accounts.

Anxiety and Narcissism

One of the most striking patterns was the respondents' positioning of early traumatic experiences at the core of processes of self-becoming. In most cases it took some time for our respondents to reveal their childhood victimisation. When they did, they steadfastly refused to utilise the standard narrative of the powerless victim abused by an aggressive domineering other. All respondents rejected this framework and addressed their victimhood in terms that reflected their current self-image and socialisation. The most common response was to present childhood victimisation, often spread over a considerable period of time, as a life experience that enabled them to move away from what they perceived to be the weakness of normalised modes of masculine performance. Their early experience of traumatic victimisation encouraged them to grow into men of enviable violent capacity and significant cultural reputation. They removed the negative connotations of their victimisation and

relocated it in a positive context of revelatory social learning. This reversal allowed them to become the distinguished men they are today, and in every case our respondents offered narcissistic interpretations of their imagined social status.

In these biographical accounts, ‘the man they are today’ is a man who takes no shit; a man who will not back down or walk away from a verbal challenge; a man worthy of respect and admiration; a man who forges his own path; a man who refuses to submit to the petty rules and regulations that trap most ordinary men in ignominious servitude. Underneath these anxious, narcissistic accounts of self two crucial and interwoven processes operate. First, they are a practical attempt to manage respondents’ experiences as victims of often quite horrific childhood violence. Second, they reflect the extremity of a formerly functional gendered socialisation in the ‘rougher’ elements of Northern England’s post-industrial working class. During the region’s industrial heyday the distinct *visceral habitus* that signifies and reproduces social reputation was grounded in the functional requirements of work in the heavy and extractive industries and service in military conflicts. It was constituted and reproduced in the controlled contexts of occupational camaraderie, communal norms and fragile projects of unifying politics (Hall, 1997). However, as neoliberalism’s restructuring of the economy replaced labour-intensive industry and its social world with insecure service work and a culture of relatively depoliticised competitive individualism, the visceral habitus did not simply sink into obsolescence. It was thereafter reproduced as a declassed, hyper-individualised, insecure and unpredictably hostile form of toughness, endurance and autonomy (Hall, 1997; 2002). Those attuned to the rhythms of today’s visceral habitus recontextualised in insecure labour and criminal markets know that intra-class violence is real and not merely a mediatised spectacle. They know that in their everyday life violent incidents

can and will happen, and they know of the capacity of violence to both disrupt relationships, social identities and economic opportunities. Therefore those subject to this visceral habitus treat violence and violent potential with reverence, solemnity and awe (Winlow, 2012).

In interviews these men tended to oscillate between narcissistic self-justification and a more reflexive acknowledgement of their psychic entrapment in a combative mode of identification and social engagement. Occasionally, when the narcissistic frame was transcended, they were able to distance themselves from their own destructive violence and view it with critical hindsight. This reflection encouraged our respondents to acknowledge their inability to move away from violence. They knew and were capable of discussing the fact that their violence tended to destroy things of genuine value in their lives (Bollas, 1995). On some occasions they openly fantasised about occupying a life in which they were free of their attachment to violence. Tom, 34 at the time of our first interview, offers a clear example:

‘...you’d be able to breath, stop worrying about all the little things, stop worrying about the grind of it all. No police, no prison. No fucker trying to kill you. Just be a boring cunt out shopping or sitting in an office or something.’

Barry, 42, seemed to agree:

‘It’s just there’s no peace to it. I’ve got young kids coming through who want to take me on. I’ve got to be ready all the time. Everyone is looking to rob you or fuck you over or something. The money isn’t always what people think. Some

days I just want to be done with it, sit at home and have a few drinks, you know, take it easy. But there's no going back now, is there?'

However, these flights of fancy usually ended with a reassertion of the 'distinguished' social self, the autonomous bearer of 'special liberty' (Hall, 2012) who has wrestled free from social convention to do what needs to be done. Where other men bow their heads and walk away, our respondents see themselves stepping forward to meet challenges head-on. Where other men dream of responding violently to threats and insults, our respondents actually live the dream and impose their will upon all who question their supremacy. Where other men live lives of quiet despondency, trapped in dysfunctional relationships and in jobs they hate, our respondents imagine themselves as titans of a free market in which any determined individual willing to do what is necessary can be a winner (see Berardi, 2011). They see the chaotic world as it is and make up their own rules to clear the way for their own ambitions.

When our respondents reflected more deeply to express regretful rather than triumphalist or justificatory accounts of their own violence, they usually deployed strategies that enabled them to hold it at a distance. The standard method was to suggest that their violence had been enacted by a distinct, unconscious and irrational part of themselves over which they have minimal control. In the quote below, Ray, who was 29 at the time of our initial interview, acknowledged the harm done by his violence but apportioned blame to the dissociated 'not me' (Stein, 2007; Hall, 2012) that is his disavowed violent subjectivity:

'I get in situations where I'll just get so angry...there's just nothing I can do... I get the 'red mist' and that's it, I'm off, I can't be stopped. I go proper mental and

people will say, what happened there? They won't recognise me coz I've gone fucking mental and lost it totally. Now I know I've just got to keep out of them situations, keep away from certain types of people, keep out of certain types of places. I just fuck everything up if I put myself next to people who's going to rile me. That's what I've got to do or they'll lock me up for good.'

Here Ray renounced responsibility for his violence, its resonance throughout his own life and its impact on his victims' lives. His body was simply a conduit for an internal source of unconscious blind rage triggered by external stimuli. His limited responsibility existed only insofar as he could make calculative decisions about his social engagement. He could avoid situations likely to prompt his loss of control, but upon entry into such a situation he could not control himself in the face of events that, to him, demanded an immediate violent response. On one occasion, when asked about his regrets, he replied:

'I regret making stupid decisions. Like, I shouldn't have gone out that night. I know that now. I should've, I don't know, gone somewhere else, done something else, stayed at home, just kept away from her, just fucking ignored everything. I've just got to keep myself away from all that or I know what'll happen.'

He didn't broach the topic of his destructive violence and its impact upon his victim. He regretted only placing himself in situations where the 'red mist' might descend. He recognised that it was his bodily self who attacked a man who had spoken to his ex-partner, but he did not feel fully responsible because he could not recall being faced with a conscious choice between violence and non-violence. At no stage did he feel in control of events.

Rather, he believed that he is constantly overwhelmed by external events that trigger internal forces over which he has no control. Assailed by emotions that cannot be marshalled or contained, he felt unable to control aggressive drives that demand to be immediately acted out. Daryl, 39, makes a similar point:

‘Of course, you don’t want to be in those kind of situations do you? Honest, I’ve stopped going out to places coz I know there’s going to be people about that’s going to wind me up. You can feel yourself getting sucked into it but there’s nothing you can do. Someone will start chirping on and by then it’s too late really... But I do try to avoid it. I avoid places, people... In the past I’ve put myself in daft situations where there’s nothing you can do really. I’ve got to learn that I can’t just go around like I did when I was a boy. I’ve got to be smart about it. That’s what you learn. That’s what I regret. I should’ve been a bit more, thinking ahead and that.’

However, in more contemplative moments respondents could briefly identify the recurrent nature of their violence. During verbal accounts of violent incidents both the victims of violence and the offences that justified a violent response often remained quite vague and adumbrated. In Lacanian terms (see Lacan, 2007; see also Fink, 1995) the victim exists in the mind of the perpetrator only as a *signifier of lack*, deprived of substance and a social identity, and reduced to a bit-part player in our respondent’s narrative of the preliminary build-up to violence. Our interviewees could recount many stories of punishing perceived wrong-doers, but often they were unclear about what drove them to violence. A look or a mere utterance, no matter how innocuous or ambiguous, could trigger a violent response.

Occasionally, accounts of initial events deemed worthy of a violent response appeared to change over time. Some interviewees could not clearly remember what drove them to violence. Something had happened and they had lost control. The opacity and interchangeability of the serial victims and their offences lends support to the view that these men have, in effect, been fighting the same adversary since boyhood (Winlow, 2014). Different actual individuals inhabit the imaginary role of the threatening external agent who deserves to be punished, but, for the violent actor, the overall narrative remains the same. Trapped by a daemonic drive to repeat (Freud, 1975), our respondents often deliberately sought out a threat simply as an opportunity to respond appropriately to it. To understand this clearly we must look closely at key events that have shaped our respondents' biographies.

As we investigated this biographical data it became increasingly clear that our respondents' fundamental commitment to violence was not driven by conscious choices, intersectional prejudices or social 'othering' (see Chakraborti, 2010), or the cultural reproduction of a domineering social identity and the need to maintain some position of social power (see Hearn, 2012; Weenink, 2015). These common sociological positions can shed light on various forms of prejudice and oppression, but they do not explain the ultimate urge to act out physical violence. Our respondents' persistent tendency to draw upon physical violence as a social resource, the ambiguity of their victims and the gestures perceived as slights, and the deep rage they summon to fuel their violence, together suggested that each violent act was driven by the need to compensate and atone for the *inability to act* in previous violent incidents in which they were victims (Winlow and Hall, 2009). The innocent victims of our respondents' serial acts of violence stood in for the initial aggressors who violated them.

These victims took the punishment that our respondents would like to go back and inflict upon the *formative others* who have harmed or humiliated them in the past. Each victim momentarily acted as a substitute or ‘double’ (see Girard, 1988) who must be punished in a perpetual ritual that can never deliver redemption for the failure to respond to previous traumatic assaults. The social spaces, the victims and their perceived offences simply provided a *mise en scène* in which respondents could unleash their pent-up rage.

The violent event represented an opportunity to make social a range of complex subjective issues that weighed heavily upon our respondents’ psyches. However, the ultimate cause of their violence cannot be reduced to the interaction rituals, symbolic encounters or gender performances that Butler (1994), Messerschmidt (1993) and Collins (2008) see being played out in front of the social mirror. This general idealist position subsumes all possible causative experiences in systems of cultural reproduction and sociosymbolic relations. Our data suggest that the underlying cause is a *pathological attachment* to violence grounded in personal experiences that can be discerned throughout the social structure but seem more common and extreme in some post-industrial working-class environments. We are certainly not attempting to pathologise an entire class of men. We are simply suggesting that there are indeed *some* men whose relationship to violence not only poses a threat to victims but damages their own chances of living a reasonably safe and satisfying life. They have lived in the shadow of violence since early childhood and it has endured to contaminate their adult lives. Theirs is not an ‘otherness’ that should be celebrated (see Dews, 2012), and we should deny neither the harm they have inflicted nor the harm they have experienced themselves (Howe, 2008). Their anxious asociality and propensity to launch violent attacks with little warning reflects their experience of childhood trauma and prolonged insecurity, and their desperate desire to avoid

the mental torment caused by their inability to respond adequately to initial traumatic and humiliating events. A powerful commitment to violent action and an often quite desperate attempt to monitor, protect and advance their reputations and self-concepts represents an unconscious attempt to come to terms with childhood experiences of extreme violence and trauma. Of course it is given social meaning and affirmation by their gendered socialisation (Winlow, 2012), but this is neither the cause nor the primary reproductive mechanism of persistently enacted physical violence.

It became clear that these men often felt entirely unable to free themselves from the repetitive drive to identify a threat to negate with violence. Observing these men at leisure, it became clear that they rarely experienced a sustained period of repose and relaxation. They appeared constantly to be on the lookout for threats and challenges. Their reputations and general social demeanour ensured that others tended to keep their distance. After many months in the field we became convinced that if the sociology of violence is to advance from its present position it must dig beneath cultural reproduction, sociosymbolic interaction and power relations to investigate complex motivational traumas. To illustrate these traumatic experiences and their aftermath, and construct an empirical platform for the psychosocial analysis that follows, we will now refer to representative case-studies.

Biographical Account Number 1: Brett

Brett is in his early forties. The symbolism of Brett's scarred visage, tattoos and imposing physique immediately suggest that this man may be capable of violence. Underneath Brett's shirt, thick lines of scar tissue run across his stomach and rib cage, mementos from an attack that very nearly cost him his life. This scarring is so deeply etched that each time he removes

his shirt it brings back painful memories of this attack and others that have occurred throughout his life. Such painful memories constantly flicker in and out of his consciousness (Winlow and Hall, 2009).

Brett developed a reputation for serious violence in his teens and has carried it with him ever since. Since leaving school he has worked in the construction industry but also earned a living trading in large quantities of cocaine. His career as a drug dealer began to spiral out of control as he developed a voracious addiction to his own 'product'. Stressed, threatened and high on cocaine, he attacked a rival criminal and was subsequently forced into hiding. Since those days he has developed an addiction to alcohol and scratches out a meagre living in low-level marijuana and amphetamine distribution. Brett continued to carry with him a justified reputation for serious violence. He was strangely at ease with violence. It was a form of social engagement that immediately made sense to him. He understood its development and symbolism and he was immediately attuned to its energies and rhythms. He weighed people up as soon as they entered his field of vision to form a judgement on whether they represent a physical threat. When the violence started it almost came as a relief. It seemed as though he achieved a pathological form of homeostasis amid the violence: no longer troubled by dark memories, no longer anxious about those who would challenge or mock him, and free to focus completely on the here and now. Why was Brett so predisposed toward violent action? Reviewing his biography gives us some clues.

Brett's biological mother put him up for adoption before he reached his first birthday. He had never met his parents and he was unsure of the specific reasons why his mother gave him up. Some amateur detective work had led Brett to believe that his biological father was a serial

sex offender, which encouraged him to form the view that his biological mother had been the victim of a sexual attack perpetrated by his biological father. The veracity of this story matters little. To Brett it was the truth, and from this initial traumatic scene developed a biography in which he would forever be out of place – angry, aggrieved and unloved.

Brett was forthcoming about his childhood, far more so than the majority of our other respondents. He discovered that he had been adopted on his seventh birthday. Throughout our discussions he often alluded to his unease about his relationships and his social position, as if he were set apart from the world, unable to partake of the benefits of inclusion. His adoptive mother, who died many years ago, appears to have been the only person to have given him love. However, Brett's image of his mother was tainted by her failure to protect him from his adoptive father, who abused him physically for many years. He commented:

‘...he [Brett's adoptive father] just used to knock me about and I just took it. I remember one time...I was eating my dinner and I was scraping the gravy off my plate with a knife instead of a spoon and my dad took his knife and stuck it through my cheek and it knocked one of my teeth out, and he just says “don't lick your knife”.’

The ferocity of his father's violence and the total absence of any semblance of positive paternal support was so traumatic that Brett had not psychologically rehabilitated his adopted father, casting his aggressive violence as an ultimately positive social learning experience (see Athens, 1992; Hobbs, 1994; Winlow, 2012). However, Brett was slightly unusual in this regard. Many of the men we spoke to had psychologically rehabilitated the image of a violent

parent. This framing narrative affirmed the father figure's supposed commitment to cold realism (Winlow, 2012; 2014). In it, the father figure imagines the social world to be inhabited by aggressively instrumental others locked in a ceaseless battle for dignity, status and recognition and believes his abuse of the boy is a necessary preparation for a life in which one must constantly fight to defend one's social status. Many of our contacts had grown to believe that their childhood victimisation efficiently prepared them to occupy a cold and unfeeling world characterised by unrelenting competitive individualism and inevitable physical conflict. Essentially, in order to become the cold realist they are today, it was necessary to pass through a childhood typified by occasional violence and constant insecurity. This process had led these men to what they believed to be a fundamental understanding of the nature of human societies, which transcends the naivety of men lucky enough to have enjoyed a loving and supportive childhood. The hidden truth they had accessed through their experience of sustained victimisation was simply this: the social is a myth. Ultimately we are alone in the world. All social relationships are built upon disguised instrumentalism. There is no charity without a selfish ulterior motive. Everyone, ultimately, is out for himself. In such a situation, all the victimised subject can do is fight hard to secure his interests, or otherwise meekly accept failure.

Brett subsequently identified himself as a far-sighted realist capable of coming to terms with an uncomfortable truth about contemporary collective life. However, underneath these imagined pragmatic benefits he remained deeply aggrieved and resentful towards his adopted father and disconsolate about his experience of childhood abuse. Brett believed that his regular experiences of his adopted father's violence led him to:

‘Just flip out. I just flip out and I can’t control myself, that’s what it’s like... throughout my life I’ve had people walk all over me, you know, and I wouldn’t do anything about it. I’d just let them get away with it, and so I’d just flip out, lose control and fucking do people in.’

Brett’s narrative was characterised by helplessness, regret, sadness and loss but also by a distinct absence of any sense of personal agency. However, he also carried a significant measure of self-critique. In particular, he wished he had stood up to his abusive father. In the quote above it is possible to detect a desire to censure his childhood self. We should assume that the victimised child is in no position to defend himself against the violence of a fully grown man, and Brett consciously accepts this. However, when he revisited these events in memories he did so as a fully grown man capable of his own restitutive violence. He would dearly have loved to deliver retaliatory violence to his adoptive father. He admonished his childhood self for being scared and too weak to resist. He oscillated between a form of self-critique that identifies his failure to act and a narcissistic form of self-aggrandisement in which he imagined himself as a violent man who has conquered fear to take an idealised position above a social world that not only failed to protect him from being attacked but now continues to loom in his imagination as the external source of humiliation. The ultimate result was an *integrated and self-reproducing hatred* of himself, his father and a social world full of mocking, abusive others.

Brett talked of having people ‘walk all over him’. However, his biography suggested clearly that usually it was Brett who has been doing the walking. His frequent convictions were a drop in the ocean compared to the amount of violence in which he had been involved. For

him this mattered little – he always imagined his own violence to be retaliatory because this is an essential part of the narrative which informs his consciousness that the violence he suffered changed everything for him. Like Ray, Brett talked of being overcome by rage and completely without the capacity to control his behaviour:

‘One time I went absolutely mental... Come round and realised I had squashed some kid’s head with a hammer... He had to have re-constructive surgery to his face... He come at me with a knife... I thought fuck you, you’re not stabbing me, so I grabbed the hammer, fucking whacked him with it... knelt down next to him and just kept smashing his head with the hammer... “here, have that you cunt”, whack, straight on his head... And I thought he was dead, me. I had blood all over me trousers.’

As Stein (2007) suggests, experiencing horrific abuse at the hands of a parent or carer is so traumatic that it cannot be symbolised; in the Lacanian sense, it belongs to the realm of *the Real*, the irruptive experience of internal and external stimulation that is so alien it cannot be named (see Fink, 1995). Thus, to invoke the other two categories in the Lacanian tripartite structure of the psyche, it cannot be consciously understood and communicated in the *Symbolic* (the social order of symbols to which most social theories are restricted) but remains trapped in the narrativised *Imaginary* from where it can be projected onto a variety of spectral others. It cannot be recognised as genuine experience, so the individual cannot understand or fully come to terms with it. Abuse of this kind continues to resonate throughout the life course. The horror is repressed but inevitably returns in a mutated form (see Freud 2006). Often the abuse is so traumatic and repressed so deeply that it cannot even be fully

remembered. The memory of the abuse is too horrific, therefore the conscious mind attempts to protect itself by disavowing the event and forcing it into the unconscious (A. Freud, 1992). Despite the psyche's attempt to defend itself, the memories themselves cannot be fully dispensed with. That which is repressed always returns with potentially catastrophic results (Stein, 2007).

Biographical Account Number 2: Paul

At the time of interview Paul was in his early thirties. Unlike the majority of our respondents he was in full-time and reasonably secure employment. Paul had not been damaged by the deep negativity of sustained parental abuse. However, he had been socialised to expect and be ready for violence, and he had experienced the trauma of helplessness and humiliation. These humiliating experiences appeared to have had a considerable bearing on the development of his adult self and played an important part in the stories he had to tell about his own violence.

Paul recalls his father's instruction that he should never walk away from a fight, even if defeat appeared unavoidable. His father told him that cowardice is ultimately self-defeating. Running away might have prevented physical injuries but, in comparison to the psychological turmoil caused by cowardice and the damage done to one's reputation, such concerns were quite negligible. Physical injuries heal, but damage done to reputation was permanent. It was better to stand one's ground, fight hard and with every last drop of energy to secure a victory that would consolidate one's reputation and dissuade others from future attacks. In time, Paul had learnt this lesson and he communicated it to other men who had failed to fully internalise the cold realism that pervades the locale.

Paul's father had not been physically violent in the family home but his constant affirmation of toughness impacted upon the family in other ways. Some of Paul's most powerful childhood memories were of his father's quick temper and willingness to use violence when threatened. Many respondents told similar stories of life in the shadow of a 'cynical realist' father. The role of Paul's father in shaping his son's social expectations was important, but below he recalled a series of crucial events that still cause him emotional turmoil. To Paul, these events seemed indicative of the processes that inspired and reproduced his adult violence:

'There used to be this guy who lived across the street. He was a bit strange... One day he came out...and he got right angry...I just remember I was trying to go home and he kicked me in the chest and wouldn't let me go. I just sort of got right upset and went home... I would've been 13 maybe. And he would have been 17, something like that. So pretty distressful. I didn't do anything back coz I just thought, it were quite frightening. Do you know what I mean? Coz he were like a bloke to me... The worst thing about that is that you felt helpless to do anything back about it coz you couldn't win coz he were bigger and older. Do you know what I mean? So that was the worst thing for me, coz I couldn't get my own back... that you could never do anything with your anger about it, do you know what I mean?'

Paul's humiliation has caused him considerable anger and deep regret. He appeared to be troubled that another individual *desubjectivised* his younger self (see Stein, 2007; Wiewiorka, 2009) – that is, denied him the qualities of the subject and rendered him a mere object to be

used by the older and more powerful aggressor. He brooded upon these events still and the memory of the initial incident brought with it feelings of bitterness and the wish to be physically transported back to the incident so that he might inflict a personally restorative act of violence upon his tormentor. In the quote Paul continued to reiterate that his attacker was much older and physically stronger. He was keen to ensure that our interviewer did not negatively judge his performance in the event, even though he was plagued by his own negative evaluation. His own negative assessment of his conduct in this incident was mirrored, affirmed and intensified by the voice of his father amplified by the attachment of locally efficient social symbolism to the anger and regret caused by the original desubjectivising incident. Thus it had penetrated down to the core of his emotional being, taking advantage of the plasticity of the neurological system to constitute the visceral habitus as an embodied form of deaptive 'personal ideology'. For Johnston (2008; see also Hall, 2012) *deaptation* is the fate of an embodied ideology that once functioned in a specific environment but has become dysfunctional and unruly in the current environment – it can be reshaped only by years of experience in an entirely different symbolic and material milieu.

For Paul these memories lingered because he had meekly capitulated to an adversary. He could not fully integrate such memories into his present social identity, but, because these events were so disturbing, he could not fully forget what happened. In the standard Freudian manner (see Freud, 2004), the injunctions of the father may have been consciously disavowed but they continued to constitute part of a super-ego that bombarded him with a series of demands that could not be met. Paul knew that, at such a young age, he could not be expected to take on an older and stronger opponent. He knew this *consciously* but he was still *unconsciously* troubled by his inability to do precisely that. His father's teachings, supported

as they were by a visceral habitus that had patterned his tastes and dispositions, were captured clearly in Paul's adult self. Of course, he could now list a multitude of violent events that were far more physically injurious than the one he discussed above. However, in our conversations he often returned to this specific incident. It is this incident, perhaps more than any other, in which he failed to live up to the requirements he had learnt to impose on himself. Rather than face down his adversary he was beaten and humiliated. Beneath consciousness Paul appeared to carry an enduring anxiety that he had let down his father by failing to live up to the gender protocols he had impressed upon him. Paul's conviction that he would never allow such an experience to happen again added fuel to the restorative motivation for his violence. Subsequently he scanned the horizon in the hope of identifying attempts to humiliate him so he could rise to the challenge, acquit himself admirably and thus abide by the rules of his father, who, he had come to understand, was right all along.

Biographical account number 3: Darren

Darren was in his early thirties when he was interviewed and had for some time been involved in football violence. He was well known and respected within this network. He had also been involved in the sale and distribution of ecstasy and cocaine.

During interviews Darren spoke extensively about his late father who passed away during his teenage years. His father, also involved in football violence, had been considered by some as one of the founders of the football 'firm' that Darren now leads. He clearly admired and loved his father and was very much aware of his reputation for violence. During his youth Darren had made a number of childish attempts to develop a similar reputation. However, it was the death of his father that appeared to have solidified his commitment to violence. He

talked at length about being consumed by sadness, and he recognised that it prompted what he called a ‘sinister’ change in him. With the death of his father the innocence of youth was at an end. He put aside childish things and approached the world differently. He was angry and toughened himself mentally as the world appeared to take on a darker hue.

Around this time Darren was severely assaulted by a large group of young men outside a fast-food outlet. This event, cast as it was in the shadow of his recently departed father, changed him:

‘I got done over by a group of lads, and after that it just changed everything for me around dealing with confrontations... I’d been out in town with my mate... [We got to the] takeaway and this kid comes up to me and says ‘what you been saying to my bird [girlfriend]?’ And I put my hands up, saying ‘I don’t know what you’re on about’. And next thing I know he just cracked me in the face. So I grabbed him and started giving him a good hiding. All his fucking mates were in the takeaway, so they come straight out, about 5 or 6 of them, and just started laying into me. Got me on the floor and started booting me in the ribs and that... after that I learnt, don’t bother with this putting your hands up and that, protesting your innocence. If someone comes at you like that just fucking hit them. And that’s what I have done.’

For Darren, his commitment to violence stemmed from this abrupt entry into the cold realm of localised *realpolitik*. He had learnt to be dismissive of the usual reflective hesitation and

now pre-emptively senses threat and attacks. He unleashed an inner fury that far exceeded the established choreography of male-on-male violence in this milieu (see Hobbs, 1995).

It was clear that Darren connected his father's death to this vicious and prolonged beating, when a new realist version of himself began to emerge. Darren talked often of the darkness of that time, and it was clear that he had not entirely come to terms with the loss of his father. He had not begun the hard work of mourning and instead remained fetishistically attached to the lost object (Freud, 2001). His father had of course told him of the importance of standing up for himself, but after the assault the role of these lessons in structuring Darren's sense of self changed. The assault empirically confirmed the need for the culturally reproduced hypothesis at the core of his personal 'evidence-based policy'; the world out there is hostile and must always be approached as such. He steeled himself to the world and made violence his own. He would not be treated like that again.

Biographical account number 4: Tim

At 42 Tim was one of the oldest men we interviewed. He had experienced a very difficult childhood. He had been subjected to severe corporal punishment, but he had not been brutally abused. He had often been left to his own devices for long periods. The family home was chaotic and populated by a shifting cast of characters, often from his father's extended family. Tim's father and mother had often gone missing for days on end. Both parents drank regularly to excess and had taken little interest in the life of their son. Tim believed he had been given no love from either his mother or his father.

Tim began to get into trouble with the police in his early teens. He had a varied list of criminal convictions and had twice been imprisoned. He claimed to have been diagnosed with an addictive personality, and in recent years he had struggled to rid himself of a dependence on amphetamine and alcohol. The edited quote below is suggestive of the environment that shaped Tim's adult self:

'My Dad was a violent man. He liked a drink and he liked a fight and he just did what he fucking wanted. My Mother was just beat by it all. She just gave up, and it was drink and fags and crying all the time. He did that thing where they try to turn you into a man by making you fight. From very young we'd have the [boxing] gloves on in the back garden. He would properly hit me and as I got bigger he would go for it more and more. I remember he'd hit me and I'd cry. This is when I was a proper young kid. He'd scream at me 'don't you fucking cry!' and he'd keep going at me... We'd fight for hours and I'd be shattered, my face red and my lip swollen up... It was fucking terrifying at first. I'm just a kid after all, just a little boy home from school.'

'He wasn't a Dad like I saw round my mate's house. He never got on with anyone. I was hard work at school. I couldn't keep up and we had fuck all and I was just an angry, angry kid. I was small for my age, but the other kids there were normal kids, you know, normal happy kids with jokes and toys and stuff... I could fight. I was good at it and they just couldn't understand me. No one could touch me. I was like a proper trained boxer at fucking eight year old.'

‘One time I got into it with this older kid... He gave me a proper beating and my face was all bust up. He was, like, loads stronger, and it was the first time I knew I couldn’t win. My Dad wasn’t happy. He was shouting and bawling... calling me a soft cunt and telling me I had to stand up for myself. He had a go at my Mam, saying she’d turned me soft and he wasn’t going to have it. Fucking tears and that. He kicks me out the house and tells me I have to learn, I have to stick up for myself. I knew I couldn’t beat this kid... He [Tim’s father] wouldn’t let me back in [the house] until I beat him. It was getting dark and I was stood in the garden out the way so he couldn’t see me. I could hear him and her fucking screaming blue murder. I keep thinking about that, over and over for years it’s been. I was just a nipper. It was getting dark and I’m fucking crying me eyes out. Terrible...I didn’t know what to do, just stood there crying. The worst that was, worse than getting stabbed. I got glassed, got smacked up with a pool ball bad, all sorts, but that was the worst.’

‘He never spoke to me again; never said nowt to no-one really. They both died... He toughened me up. He did do that. I was a tough kid and I didn’t mind having a fight. The type of lad I am is just, I’m not the type who’s going to stand there and take shit from anyone really... I’ve had that many fights it’s just normal and I don’t mind getting hurt. I just throw myself into it and I do like a good fight. Still, even now. I like it. I’m good at it. You’ve got to be like that really round here.’

Tim’s case was probably the most revealing of the formative power of deaptive socialisation. His direct encounter with a formative other from an older peer-group prompted

a response pre-affirmed by gendered socialisation. He consciously accepted the resultant trauma as an essential part of growing up in his local environment and becoming a man ready to transcend fear and face threats. Simultaneously the initial trauma and the further trauma of being humiliated and cast out by his father constituted his brutal introduction to cynical realism, to produce in the unconscious neurological dimension an embodied subject of toughness capable of facing inevitable threats in the future. Apart from rare moments of reflection, the conscious and unconscious dimensions of his subjectivity continued to mutually reinforce one another. The physical traumas and the ensuing humiliation inflicted on him by his father resembled the process behind a classic initiation rite (Eliade, 1965). Once functional in the superseded world of the warrior-producer, this reputation and set of skills and dispositions had been essential for survival in heavy work, military service and the cultural environments populated by individuals of similar disposition. But they are now deadaptive, opening doors to very few functions in the current pacified world of consumerism and service work (Hall, 2012).

Conclusion

The data we have gathered so far suggests that there may be a causal link between the experience of trauma and humiliation during childhood and the establishment of a persistently violent identity in adulthood. However, in order to understand this relationship it is vital that we also acknowledge the social and cultural specificities of our sample.

Traumatic experience by itself is not enough to drive the individual towards violence. The individual must be subjected to a gendered socialisation that stresses toughness, stoicism and physicality. The traumatised individual must be encouraged to *value* violence. If a parent and/or formative others espouse an asocial narrative that is affirmed by the local culture and

encourages the child to be distrustful of others and always seek to secure the interests of the self, and if they socialise the child to adopt a tough, ready-to-fight persona capable of securing the recognition and respect of others, then trauma can be made social through violent action. The men we spoke to have both crucial elements in place: traumatic biographical events in the past that are rarely consciously acknowledged and cannot be emotionally transcended, and an encultured socialisation that emphasises the necessity of rising violently to any challenge.

The trauma that accompanies childhood abuse can be to some extent overcome if the victim can access supportive relationships capable of enduring the inevitable trials and tribulations that arise from the traumatised subject's attempts to come to terms with it. Other traumatised victims who cannot access supportive relationships may also avoid violence if the crucial cultural framework is absent. Of course, many of these traumatised subjects are likely to find themselves trapped in other self-sabotaging cycles. Addictive behaviours and a fetishized relationship to sex are perhaps the two most relevant to criminology. Unfortunately, all our respondents were unable to access different environments or positive supporting relationships, thus they were unable to divest themselves of the anger they carry. Unlike other highly traumatised subjects, they tended not to direct their anger inwards. Instead, they actively sought physical encounters with external 'doubles' who fully deserved to be victims of their righteous violence.

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