

Violence as communication

Stephen Blumenthal describes the internal conflicts communicated by violent behaviour.

Violence arouses a powerful response in us, and we are moved to deal with it in primitive ways. Our instinct is to follow talion law and mirror the original act by retaliating in kind; an eye for an eye. On the whole, civilised society recognises that we need to protect ourselves from our own retaliatory impulses and therefore victims of violence are not the makers of the laws or involved in the prosecution of the guilty, although there is a constant pressure to abandon this principle.

Amongst other issues, violence communicates shame (Gilligan, 1996). Perpetrators of violence have almost always been the victims of shaming and humiliating experiences in their early lives. The violent act is often triggered by shame (for example, being 'disrespected'). The victim of violence is made to feel shame: in shaming another, the perpetrator may be attempting to rid themselves of feelings of humiliation by locating these feelings in the other, thereby distancing themselves from the feelings associated with vulnerability and identifying themselves with the powerful invulnerable figure of the perpetrator. This is not where the cycle of violence ends, however, because it is at this point that the wider community becomes involved. In part, violence may bring a perceived 'respect' to the perpetrator, but it also provokes the community to respond in a shaming way, and consequently, the perpetrator may paradoxically become the victim of shame once again, an all too familiar personal experience. The biblical example of Cain bearing the mark of shame for killing his brother Abel is at the heart of our conception of criminal justice.

Violence and thinking are mutually exclusive. Thinking reflects the capacity to represent mental contents in symbolic form. Mental conflict can be articulated and described to others, which brings relief. Violence, on the other hand, signifies the breakdown of thought and the failure of words, but it is powerful communication none the less, and one which can have devastating consequences. Violence is a communication at such a primitive level that it bypasses thought altogether, and consequently the dialogue between the victim, the perpetrator and society occurs largely at a level that is beyond awareness. There is an unconscious transaction both between victim and perpetrator and the court and the accused. In this article I will try to articulate aspects of this primitive communication, beginning with the perpetrator as victim, the repetition of early experiences in the perpetration of violence, and finally the perpetrator and societal institutions.

I argue that we should be more aware of what we are trying to achieve in our responses to violence. For example, whilst our conscious purpose may concern rehabilitation, its unconscious purpose may be retaliatory.

Precursors of violence

The field of violence risk assessment has accumulated a substantial literature, which indicates the comprehensible precursors of violent action. At this stage this literature shows that the most predictive factors are those associated with childhood and with the individual's past actions. Sadly these variables are unchangeable, since they represent historical fact. Much to the dismay of those involved in the field, so called dynamic factors, i.e. changeable variables, such as attitudinal factors, victim empathy and the like seem to bear no relation to the risk of recidivism, although this is an area which requires further research. In fact, an individual's presentation at any one point in time can be misleading as a guide to risk. But herein lies an important lesson. The compulsion to repeat is very strong indeed, beyond conscious thought, etched deep into the character. Cure requires time, patience and communication at a profound level for understanding to take place and to make an impact on behaviour. For the vast majority, brief rehabilitative courses intended to educate or treat may do little more than invite a simulated response.

The scientific study of human behaviour has identified precursors of violence in many different areas, such as genetics and socio-economic factors. My interest in the field relates to the study of psychology, and here there is a substantial literature showing a link between childhood adversity and violence. Perpetrators of violence have almost inevitably experienced the extreme end of the spectrum of violent abuse in their early lives. Violence towards a child communicates the absence of love and pride. Typically, the child will have experienced shame and humiliation. Physical abuse results in a three-fold increase in the risk of chronic aggressive behaviour patterns in children (Dodge *et al.*, 1990), and has been found to increase the risk of a male child receiving convictions for violent offences as an adult by 42 per cent (Widom, 1989).

Clinical work with people who perpetrate violence reveals that there are particular relational patterns that emerge in treatment which are reminiscent of past patterns in the person's life. The consulting room becomes a relational laboratory, a microcosm of the patient's past and current relationships. As a clinician, one is immersed in

the relational world of the patient's early years and what is clearly evident is the disruption to the development of healthy attachment in this group. Emotional attunement between mother and infant is the bedrock for the development of a capacity for thinking (Hobson, 2002). Where this is inadequate or absent, so too is the ability to think, and consequently behaviour becomes the only mode of expression.

It is apparent that there exists a particular victim-perpetrator relational dynamic in the offence, characterised by tyranny and the inequality of power, which forms part of the psychological make-up of violent individuals. This dynamic is a repetition of an earlier situation in which the perpetrator was a victim, though in the present, the position of victim and perpetrator has been reversed. Consequently, the violent individual is spared the painful memory of the past, and his actions represent a mastery of the early experiences he suffered passively. For example, the boy who felt humiliated by a bullying father may, in adulthood, reverse the experience and bully and intimidate others. Through action he may avoid dwelling on the memory of what it was to be bullied and humiliated himself. This dynamic is not restricted to the offence but is evident in all the individual's relationships.

The institutional dynamic

The consequences of a chain of events often provide a clue to the original unconscious motives of the actor. In 'Criminals from a Sense of Guilt', Freud (1916) proposed that prior guilt leads an individual to offend in order to make real his or her internal sense of guilt relating to childhood wishes by dramatising it in the outer world and attaching it to something tangible. The perpetrator then also becomes the victim of a dehumanising and shaming system which paradoxically recreates the circumstances of their experience of being on the receiving end of punishment. One of the basic assumptions of current thinking on crime, that the problem can be solved by teaching the perpetrator the difference between right and wrong through punishment, is flawed. The notion that 'prison works' and the requirement to be 'tough on crime' through the creation of an ever more punitive and shaming penal environment colludes with the very pathology that leads these men to arrive at this situation in the first place. The punitive regime is a repetition of the shaming experience which the individual sought to rid himself of through violence.

The external conditions of incarceration perpetuate the notion in the minds of offenders that it is something external that needs to change and draws attention away from their own internal state of violence. Paradoxically, the more punitive



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the environment, the more those incarcerated in it 'escape'. They escape from thought and awareness, from the notion that the source of their intolerable distress is rooted in the internal world of their memories and fantasy. Ironically, punishment also provides a perverse gratification for some, thus completing the vicious cycle of violence.

According to Gilligan (1996) prison serves a very useful function for these men, because it simultaneously fulfils the wish for punishment and also the wish to be taken care of. The manner in which they are cared for in prison is brutal which is reminiscent of the care (or lack of it) they received in the past. Being in prison conceals the wish to be cared for very well, and society with its institutions colludes with this. Apparently some inmates of a North American penal establishment refer to it as the 'concrete mamma', cold, impersonal, but secure none the less.

Institutions inhabited by the violent, including prisons, special hospitals and secure units, have peculiar and complicated dynamics which may be underpinned by dependence and its denial, shame, anxiety, and the lack of a

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capacity to think. Within such institutions there is a constant pressure on staff to respond to the primitive communications of those who are resident in unhealthy, distorted ways, just as we respond to the problem of violence collectively as a society. Institutional dynamics may come to mirror the societal impetus to deal in talion law. It is well established that there are high rates of mental disorder amongst inmates within our prisons (Singleton *et al* 1998). The consequence of grouping people with personality disturbances together is that the institution inevitably becomes infected by those who inhabit it, and a constellation of disturbed dynamics is set in motion.

Our gut response is to respond to violence in a thoughtless way, at best as a problem which needs to be eliminated and locked away. Clearly there are some people who have to be physically restrained. But by shifting our view and maintaining our capacity for thinking, violence provides useful data; seen from a different point of view, what at first appears to be a problem can be a source of information, a communication about the experience of shame, humiliation, vulnerability and fear, which the perpetrator cannot bear to experience and thus forcibly locates in someone else. Our wish as a society to forcibly relocate these experiences with the perpetrator once again can perpetuate rather than address the problem of violence in society. ■

Dr Stephen Blumenthal is Consultant Adult Psychotherapist and Clinical Psychologist at the Portman Clinic, part of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. The Clinic is an NHS outpatient psychotherapy service offering assessment and treatment to children, adolescents and adults who are disturbed by their delinquent, criminal or violent activities or by sexual desires and behaviours which cause distress and damage to others or themselves. Based on this clinical experience the Portman Clinic offers a teaching, consultancy and research programme aimed at colleagues working with perpetrators of violence.

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Standing Commission on Custodial Deaths to bring together the experiences from the separate investigation bodies as the most effective way to ensure that the lessons of past custodial deaths are learned in order to prevent or minimise future violations of Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2004c). An over-arching body could look beyond individual deaths and identify key issues and problems arising from the investigation and inquest process and monitor the outcomes and progress of inquest findings. The Standing Commission could play a key role in the promotion of a culture of human rights in regard to the protection of people in custody. It could provide a mechanism for an examination of broader thematic issues as well as issues of democratic accountability, democratic control and redress over systemic management failings that fall outside the scope of the inquest.

The continuing high toll of preventable deaths of vulnerable people in custody make it absolutely vital that this closed world is open to independent inspection and investigation and held to account when human rights abuses occur. ■

Deborah Coles is Co-director of INQUEST.

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