

My Story – witnessing narratives of childhood trauma and violence

Roger Grimshaw reports on new research from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

Children found responsible for serious violence make for high profile news stories. The news media give their cases plenty of space and attention and the stories dwell on the information made available through a criminal justice process that typically focuses on a key incident. Issues of individual responsibility are central to the court's decision making and the sentencing is regarded as the major output. In this way criminal justice is seen to provide the dominant legitimate response to the crisis that an incident of interpersonal violence has caused. Prominent media coverage of a case has the effect of giving massive social endorsement to the significance of the criminal justice process as the legitimate place of account for the event, and by default for the public understanding of such individuals. Typically the individuals then disappear from public view and enter the criminal justice system, stories about them remaining embalmed in the media record. As the criminal justice system continues to record information about their progress in custody, the verdict and sentence based on the court process become the dominant narrative, guiding subsequent decisions.

Key questions

The *My Story* project began with the question: do media and courtroom narratives provide an adequate basis for public understanding of the connection between offenders' childhoods and the incidents of violence for which they are found responsible? And if there is a gap here, what kind of narrative might help to shed more light? We concluded that the stories most evidently missing were from the children themselves.

When asked to tell the stories of their childhoods, what would young people convicted of grave crimes say? What experiences might they talk about? A consistent body of evidence indicates a high likelihood of traumatic loss and abuse in their backgrounds (e.g. Boswell, 1995). How could the recall of stressful episodes be encouraged and witnessed in a manner that aimed to be as respectful and supportive as possible? Our project presents three distinctive stories that begin to give significant answers (Grimshaw et al., 2011).

Story telling

Stories resonate with a permanent human interest in sharing experiences. Unlike intricately constructed forms of narrative, simple stories depend on a recognisable sense of spontaneity for their ability to hold our attention. A public taste for biography has been nurtured by the

proliferation of memoirs that highlight dramatic lives or take us into the confidence of celebrities. Some are based on abusive experiences and the resulting accounts attract large readerships. However, when opening an autobiography, a sceptical reader more than half expects to glimpse, beneath the conversational surface, the promptings and 'improvements' of a 'ghost writer' who delivers a coherence otherwise lacking in the tale.

Story telling is also a key part of psychotherapy: the therapist asks the client for a story in order not only to discover facts but also crucially to listen to how experiences have been remembered, how emotions are recalled and recounted and how the storyteller relates to the actions, as agent, bystander or, potentially, as victim. In this sense the therapist witnesses to the traumas experienced. Judith Herman in a classic book on trauma writes that telling the story is a step towards recovery, 'undertaking remembrance and mourning' (Herman, 2001). A further stage takes the form of 'reconnection', bringing into being a new self and new relationships (ibid).

The *My Story* project bears comparisons with both the public memoir and the private therapeutic narrative; it shows how public narratives of trauma can emerge through the same process of 'witnessing' that occurs in therapy, demonstrating the quality of experiences through the immediacy of storytelling.

Method

The young people in the project were approached in prison and, after their consent to take part had been obtained, their files were examined. It was important to clarify that there were no medical conditions, for example affecting memory, that might make participation difficult. Working closely with the therapeutic advisers Dr Joseph Schwartz and Rachel Wingfield, I interviewed young people on several occasions in prison. After the interviews had been transcribed, I held discussions with the therapists in order to identify the psychotherapeutic significance of the 'story in progress', especially the emotional tone of the account. If there were any adverse signs of distress, the therapists were ready to give support to the young people. After the consultation with the therapists, I would then go back to embark on another phase in the interviewing.

Finally I agreed with the participants the edited texts, based very closely on recorded interviews. These young people are the authors, having each agreed a non-exclusive copyright licence with the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. In recognition of their contribution, the

participants have also been offered additional services, such as educational support. As well as co-operation with prison staff, such a complex project has called for strong partnerships – with the Bowlby Centre as a source of therapeutic expertise and with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation providing generous financial support.

The responsibility of an editor for this kind of publication is to avoid elaboration or embroidery in the manner of a ghost writer eager to create a marketable product. Our models lay in the discipline of oral history, determined to bring out the actual spoken words but to reduce the ‘noise’ of false starts, broken links and superfluous statements.

Impact of trauma

While the stories each have their strongly distinctive and original features, the participants talked about life experiences that fitted with the expectations formed by a reading of the literature on violence. The traumatic experiences recounted include bereavement, interruption of care, abuse and domestic violence, which seriously undermined the participants’ capacity to develop positive relationships.

In the introduction to the study we reflect on what the stories reveal about the impact of problems in early childhood relationships upon involvement in interpersonal violence. Using the psychoanalyst John Bowlby’s ideas about ‘attachment’, it is possible to identify links between childhood relationships with primary carers and subsequent violence (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). If there is inconsistency or rejection by parental figures, anger and insecurity frame children’s working models of relationships. Damage to the child’s model of the external world creates the potential for violence in response to frustration (De Zulueta, 2006). In a study of 200 young people convicted of grave crimes Boswell (1995) found that many had experienced abuse or loss of a person to whom they were emotionally attached.

Implications

We believe that a major implication of the project is to renew a debate about the priorities and principles of reactions to serious violence for which children are held responsible. The criminalisation of these children has for too long detracted from our society’s capacity to understand traumatic experiences that

should be the target of wider preventive support and intervention. Without listening carefully to them, can we seriously say that we are a society that seeks to protect children?

The central aim of the project has been to witness the experiences of young people. We now hope that others can read their stories, presented almost as we heard them, and appreciate how the children’s primary attachment relationships have been damaged and how they have tried to come to terms with disturbing outcomes. ■

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My Story is available to download from:
www.crimeandjustice.org.uk

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MY
Story

YOUNG PEOPLE TALK ABOUT THE
TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN THEIR LIVES

Serious offences by children, especially against vulnerable victims, generate a plethora of media narrative and comment; here the story normally ends. The My Story project has encouraged young people convicted of grave crimes as children to tell their stories, not about the offences but about their childhoods, shedding fresh light on the relationships and events that have shaped their lives. This publication is of key interest for practitioners in prevention programmes, child and family support, therapy, and youth justice, as well as sentence management.



A copy of the report is available to download at
www.crimeandjustice.org.uk