

Psychosocial Criminology: Making Sense of Senseless Violence

David Gadd, Manchester University

Mary-Louise Corr, Edinburgh Napier University

[I]t requires two minds to think one's most disturbing thoughts ... When the thinking capacity of the parts of the personality in conversation with one another proves inadequate to the task of thinking one's troubling experience, the minds of two separate people are required for thinking one's previously unthinkable thoughts. (Ogden, 2009: 100, emphasis in original)

Introduction

Although a relatively niche field within criminology, in the social sciences more generally there has been something of an explosion of interest in psychosocial studies as a field of inquiry that cuts across the disciplines of sociology, social work, psychology, education, counseling, and forensic psychotherapy in particular. Definitive of the approach is the premise that psychological phenomenon (personalities, emotions, dispositions) and sociological phenomenon (class, gender, ethnicity, inequality, strain, poverty) are not as discrete as we have become accustomed to considering them. Psychosocial scholars have, as Stenner et al (2008: 411) elaborate, sought to transcend the “existing disciplinary configurations of the psychological and social sciences” through:

the development of modes of thinking and acting capable of recognizing both that social issues and problems have psychological dimensions and that,

symmetrically, psychological questions need always to be addressed.

In other words, the psychosocial approach is not to be confused with simply adding one approach to the other, for example adding social risk factors to psychological ones. Rather, at the heart of the new psychosocial studies is a commitment to coming to terms with the reality that people are irreducible to the group identities in which they are cast. Recognizing this enables the psychosocial researcher to perceive in the researched a capacity for human agency however dire their circumstances. This, we would argue, is a critical insight for criminology, the subject matter of which is more often than not the multiple forms of human suffering inflicted on and by some of the most multiply disadvantaged. It is, nonetheless, an insight many criminologists are reluctant to exploit, probably because it involves speculating about elements of human subjectivity that cannot be verified through social scientific methods. This reluctance needs to be surmounted because for our research subjects in criminology, far more than in most other social sciences, “suffering lies at the heart of ... subjective experience” (Frost and Hoggett, 2008: 440). It follows therefore that we need methods which are able to grapple with the complexities of the:

lived experience of the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful and the intra-psychic and relational wounds that result. In other words, both inner worlds of psychic suffering and outer worlds of social structural oppression are constitutive of such subjects, their capacity for agency, and the forms of agency that are possible. (ibid)

This attention to inner and outer worlds—often pulling in tension in ways we are not fully conscious of—among research subjects who suffer and cause suffering has been a feature of the small body of psychosocial criminology that has variously addressed the perpetration of domestic and sexual violence, the fear of crime, reactions to sex offenders, racist crime, as well

as the homophobic hate crimes of Stanley the Jackroller, a famous criminological case study derived from 1930s Chicago (Evans, 2003; Jefferson, 1997; Gadd & Jefferson, 2007; Gadd & Dixon, 2011; Gadd, 2012; Garfield et al, 2010; Gelsthorpe, 2007; Hollway and Jefferson, 2012; Maruna and Matravers, 2007). At the heart of all of this work is a commitment to redressing the central criminological challenge of explaining crime and reactions to it in ways that neither shirk responsibility for coming to terms with the most monstrous manifestations of human behavior nor neglect the mundane, commonplace, and essential normal nature of much crime and deviance. This, as Gadd and Jefferson (1997: 2) explained, is what makes a psychosocial approach necessary:

Ontologically speaking, our interest in explaining exceptional crimes stems from a view that all crime, including the most apparently bizarre, is normal in the sense that it can be understood in relation to the same psychosocial processes that affect us all—much in the way that Freud saw mental illness. We are all more or less neurotic and life, given certain psychosocial exigencies, can make psychotics of any one of us. This does not obviate the need for understanding, but it does require that we do so using understandings of psychic life and of the social world—and their interrelationship—that are applicable to all: pacifist church-goer as well as multiple murderer. This should humanize the criminal, however awful his or her deeds, and rescue him or her from the uncomprehending condescension of pathologizing discourses and the exclusionary practices these tend to promote. Which brings us to a further, political, reason why criminology's failure to produce recognizable subjects plausibly committing particular crimes matters: those we do not understand we can more readily demonize, thus enabling 'folk

devils and moral panics' to continue to figure prominently in the contemporary politics of law and order.

In seeking to overcome such demonizing discourses, psychosocial criminologists have concerned themselves with showing how apparently commonplace social and psychological reactions, buttressed within everyday social discourses and interactions, can in very specific circumstances lend themselves to extreme behaviors, or at the very least render extreme apparently senseless behaviors comprehensible. The collation and production of complex qualitative data about offenders and offending has been critical to this work, though this has been less well discussed outside of psychosocial studies. There, much of the methodological discussion has been between scholars with some level of psychoanalytic understanding, even if not practicing psychoanalysts themselves.

The Production of Case Studies

Whether trying to make sense of high profile cases or attempting to understand the behavior of little known offenders, the analyses produced by psychosocial criminologists usually involve the assembling of a textual portrait of the people or community in question; a portrait that enables a complex view of the subject to be grasped and one that seeks to hold onto apparently contradictory data, whether that be two conflicting accounts of the same event or attitudes that do not square logically with each other. The reason why psychosocial criminologists refuse to let go of contradictions in the data—or aggregate them away in favor of discovering some kind of norm, trait, or propensity—has much to do with how they regard typicality. Typicality is regarded as problematic from the psychosocial perspective, as one should not assume that people from any particular demographic group are likely to think and feel the same. Rather it is only in understanding the particularity of any single case—whether typical or

extraordinary—that one can extract conceptual lessons from it (Gadd and Jefferson, 1997; Hollway and Jefferson, 2012: 147).

Sometimes, as with the cases of high profile offenders or widely publicized crimes, it is possible to assemble such complexity from secondary sources, including academic ones (Jefferson, 1997; Gadd, 2012). But when it is not, psychosocial criminologists have turned to qualitative methods, especially in-depth interview data, to produce them. Although in no sense the only method used by psychosocial scholars, Hollway and Jefferson's attempts (2001; 2013) to do qualitative research differently through the development of an interview method geared to eliciting "free associations" from participants has had a profound impact on the wider field. In terms of its core principles in the gathering of interview data the method packaged together a set of techniques that were commonly used in oral history and biographical research, although not necessarily explained in pragmatic ways for English speaking audiences. These included:

- The importance of asking questions that invited story-telling;
- The avoidance of 'why' questions that might encourage over-rationalization;
- Careful adherence to the utilization of the interviewee's words and meaning frame in the reposing of questions;
- Minimalist facilitation.

What was more revelatory was the intellectual rationale Hollway and Jefferson conferred on these principles, most notably the idea that we are all more or less "defended subjects," unable ever to recount unsettling events exactly as they really were, because anxiety (whether evidenced as shame, doubt, or omnipotence) and desire (whether for love, recognition, or self-validation) shape, even if only in very subtle ways, how we remember, recount, and retell.

The free association narrative interview method is based on the premise that the meanings underlying interviewees' elicited narratives are best accessed via links based on spontaneous association, rather than whatever consistency can be found in the narrative. This is a radically different conception of meaning because free associations follow an emotional rather than a cognitively derived logic ... It gives priority to the meanings inherent in the links, rather than the meanings contained within statements. In the interstices, we believe, is revealed a subject beyond the unitary, rational subject of most social science (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 140).

It is in the theorization of emotionally charged links and interstices that the approach has courted most controversy. One central question is whether researchers can ever access the worlds of others without recourse to well rehearsed discourses, including psychoanalytic ones (Wetherell, 2005). The psychosocial approach assumes that one can and that a psychoanalytic interpretive perspective provides a means of sensitizing oneself, in mind and body, to the lived and not always speakable experiences of another (Hollway, 2011).

The latter position has been elaborated by Hollway (2006) who attempts to capture the relational dynamics involved in the parenting of small children through a form of "scenic understanding" which, like a piece of theatre or film, requires a form of academic engagement that is "more holistic, closer to tacit, unconscious knowing and capable of accessing societal-cultural unconscious" than might otherwise be expected. For Hollway, scenic understanding, like engaging with any good drama, involves being able, at least sometimes, to tolerate the "absence of a consistent story" or a "muddle;" by "using imagination" and "arousing curiosity" (Balint 1993:11, cited in Hollway, 2011: 95). Such an approach, of course, brings with it the danger of

over-interpretation—of seeing connections that cannot be demonstrated empirically—and may have their origins as much in the mind of the researcher as in the minds of the researched, the former no less a defended subject than the latter (Wengraf, 2001). But this danger is inherent in all social scientific methods and not exclusive to the psychosocial approach, which is at least receptive to the possibilities of interrogating researcher defensiveness as a means of delivering more probing qualitative analyses (Garfield, 2010).

Interpreting Case Studies

In short, the methods psychosocial criminologists usually deploy involve being critically attuned to both what is said and produced in interaction and conversation, particularly in-depth interviews, as well as what is not fully articulated, whether because of the defensiveness of the interviewee, or the interviewer, or most likely both. Conceptually, the psychosocial approach blends post-structuralist and relational psychoanalytic insights in order to theorize the behavior of an individual who is not merely conditioned by social circumstances or upbringing, but able to choose within delimiting circumstances, how to present themselves and who is, simultaneously, prone to acting out feelings which they are neither able to fully articulate nor fully conceal. The approach, as we will show in due course, has considerable potential for making sense of violence that, rationally speaking, often seems senseless to both those on the receiving end of it and those who perpetrate it. Such sense making, however, requires a familiarity with at least three key ideas.

1. *Discourse*. The concept of *discourse* is central to the psychosocial approach, but not in the conventional sense which assumes people are disciplined absolutely by its configuration of power and knowledge. Someone who has committed a racist crime, for

example, might depict themselves as “able to get along with everyone as long as they don’t interfere,” as well as “tolerant of other faiths,” but “worried about unrestricted immigration” (Gadd and Dixon, 2010). Such depictions can involve the individual actively positioning themselves through a number of competing discourses—“the laid back individual,” “the multiculturally sensitive,” and the “economically rational and reasonable” man—that sometimes fit well together, but can also fall into tension, i.e. when someone perceived as an immigrant is perceived to be staking a claim that restricts the individual’s choices. Identifying how offenders construct themselves discursively is thus a critical methodological task. In understanding violence, noticing what these discourses achieve in relation to the construction and attribution of vulnerability and invulnerability is often critical.

2. *Defended, Non-Unitary Subjects.* In part because of these different discursive positionings, psychosocial criminologists question the idea that people are only rational conscious beings whose thoughts all hang together in a unitary and uncomplicated way. Instead, they note that most people espouse attitudes that are at least a little contradictory. People tend also to hold quite contradictory feelings in their minds and bodies. This is obvious when people feel both love and hate for a particular individual upon whom they are dependent, but it is common in all kinds of relationships, not just romantic ones. It happens in our work lives, schools, politics, and in local communities; all the places where hateful attacks are mounted. Psychosocial criminologists take the psychoanalytic view that such contradictions are commonly managed using unconscious defense mechanisms that protect the individual from feelings of vulnerability. This can mean

burying certain feelings—like shame, disgust, and guilt—as best we can, while running the risk that they will sometimes resurface in ways that are not always strictly controllable, i.e. slips of the tongue, sudden outbursts, as well as dreams. They can also be managed through psychic splitting and projection, processes whereby unwanted feelings are attributed to others where they can be attacked. This might be the case, for example, in a homophobic attack where someone who feels insecure about their heterosexuality will attack someone else for their perceived effeminacy, or when someone who is worried about their reputation for being unemployable” attacks immigrants or disabled people for “stealing our benefits” as if they are the “real” problem. For this reason, psychosocial criminologists have to address the emotional work discursive investments achieve.

3. *Identification.* Finally, there is the issue of identification: the participant’s identifications with significant others as revealed in their story; but also the identification between the researcher and the researched, and particularly the extent to which the former feels moved, troubled, endeared, or repulsed by what is revealed by the latter. For the researcher-turned-analyst this is liable to shift during and after the research as they become more acutely aware of the discursive and emotional linkages represented explicitly and latently in interview transcripts. This can require the researcher to confront some of their own defenses, a process which is all the more difficult when the safeguard of anonymity is foregone, as it has to be in academic publishing, but one that can be facilitated through sharing parts of the analyses with colleagues and co-authors willing and able to provide critical comment.

In what follows, we wish to illuminate some of these dynamics in interview based material we elicited from young men with experiences of domestic violence. The interviews formed one of three parts of a larger multi-method project, *The From Boys to Men Project*¹. The study explored why some boys become domestic abuse perpetrators when others do not and aimed to establish what can be done to reduce the number of young men who become perpetrators. In its first two phases the project involved the measurement of 1203 young people's attitudes towards and experiences of domestic violence, an evaluation of a schools based domestic violence prevention program, and focus groups that explored the way in which young people construct some forms of domestic abuse as acceptable or unacceptable. The third stage of the project involved in-depth interviews with thirty men, aged sixteen to twenty-one, who had experienced domestic violence either as a victim, perpetrator, or witness. Given the recruitment challenges faced in this stage of the study, the sample recruited was one of convenience, skewed more towards young men in trouble and who were known to criminal justice practitioners to have had experiences of domestic violence of some kind.

Young men were asked to participate in one in-depth interview “about people who have been involved in domestic abuse or violence either as victims, witnesses or because they have been accused of doing it.” At the outset of the interview, they were invited to tell their life story using a set of biographical interviewing techniques that included active listening, reflection, and narrative-focused questions. After the opening “tell me your life story” question, the interviews focused on eliciting stories from participants using follow up and probing questions, requesting them to elaborate on the experiences they had shared in their opening “story,” aiming to follow the sequence of events as presented by participants, and reflecting their own use of language

¹ Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant number RES-062-23-2678)

and terminology. The interviews focused on exploring how young men have come to understand violence through the examples they recalled and described. They also focused on young men's feelings towards their own parents and partners, the contingencies that make them feel sad, angry, defensive, and fearful, and their expectations about relationships with partners and children. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and "pen portraits" were constructed of each participant. These attempted to capture the complexity of the stories told, bringing the participants alive in a more literary way to readers who had not studied the original transcripts. Jez, described below, was a participant in stage three of the From Boys to Men project.

Pen Portrait

Jez was an eighteen-year-old man of mixed race origins—his father "Asian" and his mother white. Despite having been "kicked out of school" and a sports course at college for fighting, Jez claimed to have "six to eight" GCSEs (the standard qualification for 16 year olds in Britain). He was nevertheless currently unemployed and living with his mother; an arrangement that had recently been reinstated after a fire caused the loss of the family home and the separation of Jez and his older sister from their mother. His sister—four years his senior—had now moved out "for good." Jez had little contact with his father who was imprisoned for drug related crime when Jez was five years old and not released until six or seven years later. Although he knows his father is "doing well for himself now"—"he's got properties"—Jez hardly ever sees his dad and the other members of what he referred to as his "Asian family," a loss which seemed troubling yet hard to articulate:

Obviously everyone knew they split up anyway like cos me mum split up with me dad when he went to jail. But like my Asian family. But you see beforehand they were quite like, I was between yeah me both families like constantly but

obviously I had to like, everyone split up basically. So him and her obviously, me dad's mum and dad, obviously helped him out with a lot. He's doing well for himself now like, you know what I mean like. He's got properties and that now [DG: right]. So he's doing good and that but.

Asked for memories of his life after his father went to prison, Jez explained only that his “mum was always out ... with different men ... like the whole way through ... six different men ... most of them were ... muppets.”² Jez liked none of them and explained he had “a thing against all of them”—“couldn't relate to them or anything.” One of his mother's relationships had, nevertheless, lasted six years, even though beset by “constant” arguments.

I used to stand on the stairs and listen like ... there was just too many arguments to talk about... Everyone she has been with there's been massive arguments like ... literally screaming, slamming doors and smashing plates. Walking out the house, slamming the door again, going missing for about three hours, coming back.

Jez remembered being left alone “wondering” if his mother would return: “I never used to ask her, I always knew what had happened, but I never said anything.” More recently his mother had asserted that he “didn't know anything” about how “serious” it was, and that her ex had “grabbed her a few times” and “hit her against the wall ... stuff like that.” From what Jez himself recalled, it would appear that he is still somewhat skeptical as to whether his mother was hit, having not seen it directly: “I wouldn't say hitting, I would say it was like good gripping.”

By the time he entered secondary school, Jez was getting into fights with other pupils, typically over trivial matters, but with the violence escalating to punching in the face, and the

² The Muppets is a classic children's television show that uses puppets similar in style to the US programme Sesame Street. We took Jez's use of the term to be derogatory, referencing those whom he regarded as like childish puppets, pale imitations of real men with real problems, like his own.

teachers “secluding” Jez to other parts of the building to minimize the disruption. Like the arguments at home, these school fights were too numerous to recount—“just craziness ... I used to have fights over nothing ... too many to think of.” But Jez had distinct memories of the arrival of “Czech republican” students, one of whom had “barged”, or shoved into, him. He had picked a fight with a short but “stocky” one—“being crazy, just bam, whacked him, then it just kicked off”—amassing a crowd of “150” pupils, and culminating in the stocky Czech being hospitalized and Jez arrested but not charged. As Jez recalled it, he had never lost a fight, except on one occasion, two years prior to the time of the interview, when outnumbered by a group of boys from another part of town. Having challenged Jez to explain who he was, they knocked Jez to the ground when he was not looking, then kicked him in the face so much he feared his “lip was hanging off ... I couldn’t speak ... get any words out ... It was mad.” That, he said, was “probably the only time that I’ve known what it feels like to be a victim.”

Despite this aversion to knowing what it feels like to be a victim, or to lose more generally, Jez also explained that he had recently “lost everything” when a fire destroyed his and his mother's house. “I just had enough. It was in my room. Everything, literally everything just bam gone.” Asked specifically what happened in his room Jez insisted he did not and could not know—ultimately speculating that it was probably “electrical problems”—as he was home alone at the time—“just me and my dog”—asserting that he was “obviously” “downstairs” when the fire started. Not only did he lose his things, but, at least from his perspective, the fire also broke up the family unit, his mother choosing to move in with the man she was seeing, leaving Jez and his sister to go to his nan’s. Over this, apparently “everyone fell out”: Jez’s mum falling out with his nan (her own mother), first taking her boyfriend’s “side”; and then Jez ultimately falling out with his mother’s boyfriend, the boyfriend having tried “talking nice to him,” having fallen out

with Jez's mum and having told her to "pack her bags."

I, just like, [got] pretty bad cos obviously like I threw a bottle at him and ... he tried to come chase me on the streets ... The only reason I went mad at him then is because me mum were ... phoning my nan's house ... crying ... So obviously I went down there and he's come out... and he tried like talking to me nice and then I was like 'you f.' I was kicking off like so that's how it started.

Jez also lost his girlfriend around the same time, though it was unclear if this was before or after the fire, Jez initially insisting that he did not "want to talk about her" and revealing only how he had "whacked...gripped [and] butted ...clear in the nose" someone who had "tried it on with her." Subsequent probing around any "impact of domestic violence" on Jez's life, prompted him to disclose that he had "ended up slapping...her as well like" and to return to the story of their relationship. This girlfriend, Jez had discovered, had been having a "secret romance" with one of his mates "behind" his "back." At the time of this discovery, Jez was already enrolled in anger management classes at school (which he regarded as "crap," in part because the other attendees were just "loads of muppets" for whom the course was "just a game": "I couldn't hack it") and attending counselling (which he found more helpful—"she was a good person to talk to") specifically because of how stressful Jez found the relationship with his girlfriend. In fact, they were actually "on a break" before Jez assaulted his "mate" for "trying it on" with her. The relationship, Jez said, had long been "crap" the two of them having apparently 'argued from the get go" or outset. The girl, Jez said, was "stupid," but perhaps more to the point, he had always been "paranoid with her" because she left another boy for him when they first started dating:

A girl who does that she'll never change, does she? She did that to a guy for me like then obviously it can come back round.

Inability to trust now seemed to be an enduring problem for Jez: “I don’t trust anyone, I can never trust anyone.” Jez said he was just “a paranoid person”—though between him and his girlfriend he was the more untrustworthy: “cheating on her all the time” from the “beginning,” despite believing “she was proper in love” with him.

Upon seeing “them” together after the school “awards night,” Jez encouraged another mate, whose car they were in, to help him attack the boy who had been seeing his ex-girlfriend. The victim asked Jez to stop, before twice questioning his sanity: “You’ve drawn blood, just leave it ... Are you mad? Are you mad?” About this, however, Jez continued to believe he was in the right: “He’s done something to me.”

Jez was, however, more hesitant to admit that he had “ended up slapping” his girlfriend. “as well like.” She was round his house “getting drunk and ... getting in my face and I slapped her and that’s it.” The girl rang the police, alleging Jez had tried to “batter” her. An arrest culminated in a “final warning,” sparing Jez a prosecution for a domestic violence offense, if not the assault on the other man, for which he was sentenced to the referral order he was currently serving under Youth Offending Team supervision. Jez was nevertheless so “stressed” by the knowledge that his (ex)girlfriend had asked the police to “lock” him up, that he hit an instructor at his college, whom he perceived to be laughing at him for being “angry.” Jez was then kicked off the course, despite generally “doing good” there.

Now, Jez said he had not got “a clue” how things were going to unfold. On the positive side, he had found the two week course he had just completed on computing and going for job interviews “good,” and things were now “all right” with his mum with whom he was living again and at least beginning to talk more openly with. On the more negative side, Jez was unable to “think about” avoiding further violence with other men. “It just happens too fast ... If it happens

it's over and done with and you're there thinking 'what have I done?'" He was more confident about avoiding perpetrating violence against another female partner, though not necessarily for the best of reasons: "Girls are nothing to me like. They are just there for a link [i.e. sex] ... I'll never get into a relationship again." Moreover, it was plain that he still blamed his ex for the assault he perpetrated on her:

No one else except that one girl can make me slap them. Trust me, I can never slap another girl, just her. I hate her with a passion ... a big, big passion ... She's just a rat. I hate her like [laughing].

Analysis

Leaving the interview with Jez, my (DG) initial feelings were quite mixed. The interview had been relatively brief (45 minutes), and it appeared less cohesive towards the end. As Jez's responses became briefer, he kept checking his phone, implying he had other things to be getting on with. His account of being left on the stairs "wondering," nevertheless, struck a chord with me. I felt for the abandoned child depicted, "left wondering" if his mother would return. I also felt a little disappointed that Jez could only articulate second-hand reasons as to why his mother left, the physical violence not recounted in a way that conveyed understanding of how frightening it could be. This lack of detail jarred in part with the somewhat graphic accounts Jez provided of the assaults he perpetrated against other young men, depicted as worthy adversaries; a masculinity enhancing narrative which, as he appeared to know, was undercut by his own reluctantly offered revelation that he had felt compelled to slap (or perhaps "batter"?) his girlfriend (or ex-girlfriend?), when someone "tried it on with her" (or when they were "on a break" following his infidelity). No less confusing was Jez's account of the house fire in which he lost everything, the cause conveyed as uncertain and irrelevant, and the consequences

recalled, perplexingly, not at all in terms of the fear of being trapped in a burning building, but almost exclusively in terms of the separation from his mother, as she left him to his nan, compounding a family break-up that began with his father going to prison, his parents separating, and his sister, actually now old enough to move in with her partner anyway, doing just that.

In short, Jez's was a confusing account in terms of both its content and in terms of how it left the interviewer feeling. It was not one that could provide a simple, easy-to-read-off answer to the question of why some young men become domestic violence perpetrators when others do not, for example, in terms of a combination of attitudes and experiences. Rather it was an account that required interpretation; interpretation that would require us to think critically about how Jez told it and how we heard it, including why some parts of it had been easier to hear than others during the interview and in our first readings of the transcript. Ultimately, the disjunctions between our perceptions of Jez as both an articulate, likeable, but abandoned boy overcoming adversity and an evasive young man who avoided blame for the violence he started needed somehow to be reconciled.

Keeping these different ways of seeing Jez together—as opposed to disaggregating selective quotes from the transcript—was fundamental to our analysis. We worked dialectically, discovering patterns in parts of the transcript which motivated us to look again at other parts that had at first seemed unproblematic. Spotting the identifications between interviewer and interviewee involved in the telling of the story provided us with a first step for returning to the transcript. This was a story that Jez could tell an older man, for discursively it was a culturally familiar one—a young boy heroically overcoming adversity against the odds—and it was one I (DG) felt some sympathy with, having a half sibling of my own who never knew his mother (my mother). Discursively, the journey Jez took the interviewer on was a relatively simple one. As

Jez told his story, I could imagine him sitting alone on his stairs, unsure that his mother would return, unsure how long he had been waiting, wondering if things would have been different had his father been around. As a teenager he felt he had left to make his own way in the world, amidst a host of “muppets” including the men in Jez’s mother’s life and fellow pupils at school with “anger management” problems.

As we returned to the transcript we noticed that these muppets—childish puppets—were construed as somehow inauthentic, their problems not as “real”. They were men to whom Jez could not “relate.” His father—now “doing all right for himself” despite a period in prison and his estrangement from his wife and children—was not talked about in these terms. But his mother appeared to be damned through her association with such men. She was constructed as naïve, failing and fickle, constantly arguing and falling out with a string of “different” men with whom “she was always out,” despite apparently settling down with one for six years. Jez was willing to take on boyfriends who crossed her, though he was, paradoxically, hesitant to accept her account of her own victimization.

This hesitance we speculated was perhaps a clue as to why Jez’s account became more guarded as the interview progressed. Conceding that his mother was also a victim—that he could not or would not identify with her vulnerability to being abused by the “muppets” he hated—would have undermined his own investment in the discourse of the abandoned child now making his own way in the world. While Jez’s tendency to “kick off” and “lose it” was perceived as completely “mad” by those on the receiving end of it, and laughable by his teacher, the safer construction for Jez was one of the male outlaw come good; a characterization that also resonated with his account of his father, whom he rarely saw and hardly knew. In this way, Jez found a means of presenting his violence, though too fast to think through, as heroic, entailing

the righting of wrongs, perpetrated for example, by the outsiders like the stocky Czech Republican, his mother's boyfriend whom she had chosen over him, and indeed any man who tried it on with his (ex)girlfriend. In such instances, Jez felt entirely justified in meeting out punishing lessons in morality through violence, typically with an on-looking audience to verify his victory.

Such discursive constructions, however, while fostering a sense of identification between interviewer and interviewee, also kept out of full consciousness some of the pain, rage and discomfort a young man ill at ease with loss must surely have felt. This could explain why the latter part of his story was less coherent, more contradictory and, in places, frustratingly evasive. That Jez could not really describe the abuse his mother suffered was not a shortcoming of the method, if one notices that he was perhaps only now starting to hear, if not to fully know, what she was struggling to cope with. Most of his reactions were not informed by an identification with her suffering. Hence, he saw himself not as a victim, like her, but as a loner unable to trust anyone, making his own way in the world. This is how Jez continued to remember those younger years and in part how he experienced his present. The feelings had endured, for as Jez explained, he was also alone—maybe lonely—just him and his dog the day when his mother's house burnt down. “Obviously” (or the converse), Jez was nowhere near his own bedroom where the fire started. “Obviously” (or not) he was in no way culpable. As analysts, we noticed just how frequently this term—“obviously”—was used, alongside a chorally, “basically” to describe something that was not at all obvious.

Basically, just, to be honest I don't know. Basically electrical problems like but yeah, I was the only one in the house as well. So obviously I was downstairs, come up and see my room on fire like, black smoke. So obviously I got my dog,

gone out, in jumper, trackie, socks, that's it. And like obviously went out and all the fire brigades come.

This led us to look again at what was “obvious” in Jez’s opening words about the fire. To us, he was obviously feeling very aggrieved at the time, having “just had enough.” What he had had enough of was not clear in his account of the fire. But looking elsewhere in the transcript, one thing stood out, namely, the “constant arguments” between him and his mum and between him and his girlfriend.

Noticing this led us to read the story back again and to attempt to order it chronologically. When we did this we discovered that it was potentially plausible that Jez was thinking that he had already lost everything before the fire started—the love of his girlfriend, the respect of his mother, the support his father’s family could have supplied, and access to mainstream schooling. The painful truth of the break up became apparent as we learnt that the relationship was already suspended, that she was no longer Jez’s girlfriend but his ex, as they were “on a break,” she having discovered his infidelity. Seeing this construction of the “ex” as still in his mind “his girlfriend” proved revelatory, for it exposed the sense behind what would have seemed to her a relatively senseless attack on her new partner, Jez’s former “mate.” The mate was not really “trying it on” as Jez construed it. But now, realizing that the girl he had treated so badly had once “really loved” him, the loss was laid bare, salt rubbed in the wound, as she and her new partner were spotted leaving the school awards night—a celebration of pupil success—of which Jez was clearly not a part. Like his mother and the men that came after his father was imprisoned, Jez now remembers that he and his girlfriend argued “from the get go.” Everything was bad. His ex-girlfriend—like his mother whom he claimed without much substance dated so many men—was untrustworthy because she had left a former boyfriend for

him. Now Jez hates her with “a passion.” Given his self-assuredness in his skillful use of violence, his insistence that no one else could make them hit them except her, represented something of a paradox.

At this point in our analysis, we looked towards psychoanalysis for concepts that might help explain such a paradox. The interchanging of hate with love reminded us of the psychoanalytic concept of “splitting,” where good and bad parts of the self are kept apart and projected onto others who can be overtly despised and unconsciously desired. In Jez’s case, this splitting worked by unconsciously attributing his girlfriend, and she alone, with such mystical power that she was able literally to drive him crazy, provoking his violence, stifle his agency: “No one else except that one girl can make me slap them.” And yet, looking again at the accounts of provocation in his story we discovered that this was not the whole truth either.

After the break-up, it seemed that anyone who reminded him of this loss placed themselves in potential danger. So a smirk from a teacher at the college where Jez was now trying to secure the basic skills needed to get a job proved enough to unhinge him, unleashing an explosion of anger and violence. Such violence, as Jez himself concluded, was becoming a way of life, not because it had ever really secured him anything tangible, but because it happened so quickly. “Crazy,” “mad” attacks on adversaries—“too many to *think* of”—providing the means through which a positive identity as victor could be asserted. This idea that painful thoughts get acted out through sudden, extreme actions, is another psychoanalytic insight of use for grappling with violence which defies an obvious cultural logic. Without having to think, Jez could be spared the pain of having to contemplate having lost everything, of being a victim, and of causing his own downfall because of his inability to fully come to terms with the perspectives of his mother and his girlfriend.

Conclusion

We opened this chapter with a quote from the relational psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden, who notes that it takes at least two people in dialogue—in the psychoanalytic context, therapist and client—to bring a dangerous thought to a point in consciousness where it can be articulated. In this chapter, we have shown the same can also be true in criminological research. We have illustrated this point through the analysis of a single case study that can be read—if one is prepared to accept that it is a motivated account—both discursively and psychodynamically. In order to do this, however, the interviewer had first to consider his own identifications with the interviewee’s vulnerability and heroically masculine constructions of violence. This was done in conversation with the chapter’s co-author and others to whom we have presented the case. What we hope to have illustrated in the process is that, far from being a weakness of data, the absence of a consistent story provided by an interviewee can, if considered more analytically, provide valuable clues to the nature and etiology of otherwise unthinkable acts, permitting the psychosocial researcher to access an intersubjective realm that is more or less imperceptible to those still caught in ruminations about the victims of their violence and/or others who have aggrieved them.

Undertaking this kind of research runs the risk of over-interpretation. In our own analysis of Jez we have hung much meaning on his disclosure to the effect that he had “lost everything,” reading this not only as about the burning of material possessions, but also as the source of emotional pain that fueled the “mad,” “crazy” behaviors to which he confessed, and potentially the fire-starting which he, for quite “obvious” reasons, did not want to be associated with. Such an analysis would have been too dangerous to share with Jez directly. But we think it is one that academic criminologists should be willing and able to entertain for what it might reveal about the

problem of senseless violence perpetrated by troubled young men. The substance of criminology is, of course, ridden with such dangerous matter. But if we are to truly understand it, we will need to ensure that our analyses go beyond the patterning of crime rates, whether in general or for different groups of offenses. What we need as well are opportunities for understanding offending behavior in terms of its logic within the lives of particular offenders, a logic that sometimes evades them too. The argument made in this chapter is that we need to embrace the methods of psychosocial studies more fully, including its capacity to utilize identifications in the research process, if we are to fully comprehend the dangerous thoughts and deeds of our research subjects. Embracing such methods may require criminologists to relinquish the pursuit of scientific certainties in favor of the pursuit of plausible interpretations that are conversant of the competing social and psychodynamic processes that culminate in crimes that are apparently senseless to many victims and offenders. It will also, as we have shown in this chapter, require us to adopt a much more inquisitive, more deductive, approach to data analysis than is conventionally the case in qualitative research. In order to do so we will have to prioritize working with the entirety of case studies and interview material before we disaggregate them. This will mean keeping particular participants fully in mind for much longer periods than we are accustomed to doing and sharing our dangerous thoughts about them with those less accustomed to psychosocial analysis.

References

- Balint, Enid., *Before I was I*. (London: Free Association Books, 1993).
- Evans, Jessica. 'Victims and vigilantes: thinking psychoanalytically about anti-paedophile action'. *Theoretical Criminology* 7 (2003): 163-89
- Gadd, David 'In-Depth Interviewing and Psychosocial Case Study Analysis.' In David. Gadd, Susanne. Karstedt and Steven.F. Messner (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*, pp36-48 (London, Sage, 2012).
- Gadd, David and Bill Dixon. *Losing the Race*. (London: Karnac, 2011).
- Gadd, David. and Tony Jefferson. *Psychosocial Criminology*. (London: Sage, 2007).
- Garfield, Shoshana, Paula Reavey and Mehul Kotecha. 'Footprints in a toxic landscape: reflexivity and validation in the Free Association Narrative Analysis method'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 7(2010): 156–169.
- Gelsthorpe, Loraine. 'The Jack-Roller: telling a story?' *Theoretical Criminology* 11 (2007): 515–542.
- Hollway, Wendy *The capacity to care: gender and ethical subjectivity*. Women and Psychology. (London: Routledge, 2006)..
- Hollway, Wendy. 'Psycho-social writing from data', *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies* 5 (2011): 92-101
- Hollway, Wendy and Tony Jefferson *Doing qualitative research differently*. (London: Sage, 2000).
- Hollway, Wendy and Tony.Jefferson, *Doing qualitative research differently: Second Edition*. (London, Sage, 2013).
- Jefferson, Tony 'The Tyson rape trial'. *Social and Legal Studies* 6((1997)): 281–301.

- Maruna, Shadd and Amanda Matravers, (2007). 'N = 1: Criminology and the person',
Theoretical Criminology. 11(4):1362-4806.
- Ogden, Thomas. H. *Rediscovering Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, London, 2009).
- Stenner, Paul Marian Barnes and David Taylor 'Psychosocial welfare: contributions to an
emerging field'. *Critical Social Policy*, 28 (2008): 411-414.
- Wengraf, Tom. *Qualitative research interviewing*. (London, Sage, 2001).
- Wetherell, Margaret 'Unconscious conflict or everyday accountability?' *British Journal of
Social Psychology*, 44 (2005): 169-173.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Margareta Hydén and Claire Fox for comments on the case material contained in this paper and work on the project from which it derives. They would also like to acknowledge thanks to 'Jez' for sharing his story.