

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Establishment on the couch: a psychological exploration of class wounding – in the counselling room and society **Report on the one-day conference mounted by CONFER, 9 May 2015**

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The conference took place on Saturday 9 May, when the votes were all in, and a Conservative majority elected for the first time since 1992. For many in the room this seemed unwelcome ...

The day was led by (in order of appearance) Prophecy Coles, Professor Joy Schaverien, Steve Potter and Nick Duffell, and was hosted by Jane Ryan. Around 70 people attended. The event was videoed. For reasons of space I have decided to omit any detailed coverage of the contributions made by Prophecy and Steve, so my apologies to them. I have decided instead to focus on the issue of Boarding School Syndrome, which was addressed by Joy and Nick, although I have included a brief introduction to Prophecy and Steve's segments.

Prophecy Coles is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, author of many articles and books, most recently *The Shadow of the Second Mother* (Coles, 2015). Prophecy's focus was on the impact on children removed from intimate contact with their mothers and wet-nursed, this being a practice initially limited to monarchs and the high aristocracy. This she cited as a European phenomenon, with the ostensibly protective purpose of removing the infant from the squalor of the city to the healthier realms of the countryside. This practice declined in the nineteenth century as sterilization and sewage systems developed, but did not entirely disappear.

Joy Schaverien is a Jungian analyst and ex-art therapist. Her presentation was entitled 'Boarding School Syndrome: Trauma, Attachment and Loss'. Her latest book, published in June (and very favourably reviewed by Alex Renton in *The Observer* newspaper; Renton, 2015) is *Boarding School Syndrome: The Psychological Trauma of the 'Privileged' Child* (Schaverien, 2015). Joy reminded us that boarding school (BS) boys are still at the helm following the May 2015 general election. BS is a long-standing British tradition, with a history of brutality and a total disregard of its emotional impact.

Joy told us that the child deprived of attachments has to find a way of caring for him/herself. Girls' BSs were less overtly brutal – more subtle in their cruelty.

Why the need for the term and theory of Boarding School Syndrome (BSS)? BSS often goes unnoticed, despite symptoms being anecdotally commonplace. It is possible that BS can be safer than an abusive home environment. Some pupils may find the structure and ritual supportive. Rarely, however, at the age of seven or eight.

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In 2011 the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* described BS children as ‘Looked-after Children’, a term more commonly associated (certainly among social workers) with children from troubled/deprived backgrounds, and often being looked after in the face of parental objection. However, the BS pupil is usually from a privileged background, and BS life is chosen for them by their parents. But ... it is an environment without love. The child enters a double bind, feeling punished by exile, but being assured that this is for their own good, and will be the making of them.

They develop a cluster of learned behaviours:

- a pattern of emotional encapsulation
- problems with intimacy
- inability to talk about feelings
- formation of deeply dependent relationships, before cutting off (often leaving before their partner leaves them, as they’d unconsciously predicted they – the partner – would).

The depth of the trauma still gets missed by practitioners. The clichéd disclaimer ‘It never did me any harm!’ is a powerful barrier to disclosure of pain and trauma. It is important for practitioners to *ask*, rather than waiting for the ex-boarder to raise the issue. One could wait for 30 years ... or more! The trauma consists of abandonment and abuse (beatings/sexual abuse/fagging). It arises from a psychological split, formed to conceal the unbearable pain of loss of home: family, pets, friends, toys, the daily round, and missing these loved ones.

The bereavement process (as described by Colin Murray Parkes) consists of:

shock > alarm > terror > loss dawns

hope for rescue > sickness/mourning > reality despair > crying, anger, guilt > acceptance

The termly cycle ensures a repetition of loss, with multiple losses of family etc. from home, and friends from BS. Ex-boarders such as John le Carré and Stephen Fry were mentioned, who had spoken of captivity and holidays ‘taken on parole’. Prince Charles’s legendary description of Gordonstoun as ‘Colditz in kilts’ also had an airing.

Joy moved on to a case study (with the permission) of a man she’d worked with, who experienced ‘black moods’, convinced he was ‘beyond help’ and ‘dangerous’, dismissive of previous therapists. He talked of foreboding, of experiencing ‘the world fall apart’. Joy invited him to draw, and showed us a series of his images:

1. Entrance lobby. Open door on left (Joy: portal to the unconscious)
2. Headmaster – blotchy and smelling of food
3. Headmaster’s wife – witch-like and cruel
4. Dormitory – loss of bowel and bladder control
5. Jagged red claw clenching back of head in foreground (split between school and home selves); small lost figure in mid-ground
6. When the shadows lengthen and the evening comes: spiritual readings by teacher: ‘Ammonite priests to be sawn in half’ (abuse of religion by the Establishment)
7. Inner controller: monster holding child in check

8. You are safe with me: image of benign adult with small child in heart
9. Tortoise, quite sophisticatedly drawn, emerging from shell
10. Our garden in spring. Respite

The session was opened to the floor. A participant spoke of the parental issue of sending children away, and of damage being passed down through the generations, often thoughtlessly. Another spoke of children in need of care and protection being placed in BS by courts 50 years ago. (Not to mention residential care homes, still prolific well into the late 1980s.)

Another asked Joy if secure early attachment provides resilience – or is the shock of loss then so much greater? Joy considered this to be a complicated mixture. Another told us he had written a paper on BSS, describing it as a ‘triple lock’. He mentioned a poem, with the line: ‘The boarding school boy, too bloody polite to scream’. A show of hands revealed the majority in the room to have attended BS. A far smaller number were married to ex-boarders.

Steve Potter’s presentation was entitled ‘Voicing Class Difference Therapeutically’. He is a psychotherapist who works within a Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) framework, with Community Mental Health Teams and in forensic settings, such as secure hospitals, teaching ‘relational intelligence’ to professional groups/staff teams. He showed us a fantastic set of slides, full of diagrams mapping ways of voicing class therapeutically: talking and retelling, mapping and tracking, writing, voicing, rewording (and very possibly repeating this circuit), enabling internal and external perspectives on one’s class relationships, while the practitioner helps one develop reflective capacity and orchestrating skills where these have been historically forbidden or split off.

The final presenter was Nick Duffell. Nick has written two books (as well as numerous articles) on BS and its many implications: *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System* (2000) and *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion* (2014). His presentation was entitled ‘Family Abandonment, Normalized Deprivation and Wounded Leaders’. Nick is a psychotherapist, co-founder of the Centre for Gender Psychology and a leader of men’s groups and, of course, groups for BS survivors. It is difficult to overstate his passion for, and engagement with, this subject.

With the election result rankling, Nick suggested that perhaps it should be the electorate on the couch. Finally psychotherapists can get their hands dirty with politics: traditionally unhappy bedfellows. Training programmes are apolitical. The *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, *Therapy Today* magazine and even Boarding Concern have all asked him to remove political references from articles. He quoted James Hillman who famously said: ‘We’ve had 100 years of psychotherapy, and the world’s getting worse’ (Hillman & Ventura, 1992), because psychotherapy is in thrall to the myth of the individual, and considers itself to be an outsider discipline.

The politics of blame, fear and denial are on the increase. Blame arises from disowning and projection. Psychotherapists know all about this, and yet we stay silent! We should be denouncing this! And this talk of British values. We cannot own values – they’re self-existent!

Nick then stated that the schools aren’t getting worse (what with carpets and central heating) – but the people sending their children there are. In the recent hustings for the general election, it emerged that Scottish National Party leader Nicola

Sturgeon was congruent: this needs to be noted. Electoral apathy is a side-effect of the politics of blame, fear and denial, whereas the SNP has fostered a communitarian approach in Scotland, based as much on the rejection of public school-related tropes of bullying and shaming as it is upon nationalism.

Britain grooms its political elite by the means of privileged abandonment in childhood. The BS habit is so normalized in this country that we don't notice it – like fish with water. Such normalization acts as a powerful defence mechanism. Do we end up with the leaders we deserve, or with the leaders we've cultivated? *A cri de coeur*: please don't vote for them!

Nick moved on to a sequence of video clips, beginning with clips from Colin Luke's 1994 film 'The Making of Them' (available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uRr77vju8U>), featuring a British mum rather chillingly contrasting British and French approaches to raising children; then a school assembly where the boys were required to pray for the prime minister and government. Nick spoke of the primacy of the Anglosphere in the perseverance of BS: the golden path to success via public school and Oxbridge, and the contrast between top-down UK government and largely bottom-up in the remainder of Europe.

He then showed us the infamous clip of our beloved leader (prime minister David Cameron) losing it with Angela Eagle, a Labour Member of Parliament, telling her to 'Calm down, dear!' As Nick explained to us, Cameron was under enormous stress, but unable to acknowledge this. BS life results in astonishing amounts of anxiety in its pupils, who appear, like the prime minister, to be far more confident than they actually are. He mentioned Stephen Porges, a professor of psychiatry and biomedical engineering, who has developed the Polyvagal Theory, which links the evolution of the autonomic nervous system with emotional experience and expression. This process is interrupted by the development of the *survival personality* necessitated by this privileged abandonment in BS – the encapsulation that Joy Schaverien spoke of, and what Professor Porges describes as a chronic self-protective state.

The next sequence of clips looked at this process, again using 'The Making of Them'. The first showed a small boy (aged eight) who is visibly upset, but who, on being sympathetically approached by some (perhaps slightly older) peers, battens down his hatches and tells them no, he's not homesick. No. As Nick said: he is not the weak one.

The next clip showed a boy (aged nine) speaking of how BS is helping him to 'get used', to manage by himself, to handle himself, to prepare him for greater things in his twenties. Nick saw in this little boy the spectre of Conservative politician Boris Johnson – BEWARE!, he said. Bring your psychological knowledge into the world. We are being led by the boys in the men who are running things. He quoted John le Carré: 'The British are known to be mad; in the way they maim their privileged young they are criminally insane'.

The next clip showed the boy talking about responsibility, but then heart-warmingly talking about his birthday cake. Parents who send their children to BS deprive themselves of this love (that we in the room all felt for this little boy).

The next clip showed another little boy, unable to decide whether he would rather be at home or at BS. 'How's he going to be after 10 further years of this?', asked Nick. How's he going to be towards his wife? His daughters? His sons? The

ambivalence will be gone. He warned person-centred therapists to beware of the unconscious rage in ex-BS clients with whom they work, as the person-centred approach has no model of transference.

The next clip showed another little boy asking his mum how long it would be before he saw her again, and being fobbed off by her. Nick spoke of the development of internal misogyny, disdain for feelings, dreams and so on. You need parents to help you regulate your feelings, your sexuality. Therapeutically, the problem is surviving these schools.

The final clip showed Boris Johnson ranting at (ex-Labour Party leader) Ed Miliband, who is trying to calm him, ultimately accusing him of knifing his (Ed's) brother in the back. Do we really want to be led by men like this?

The session was then opened to the floor. A participant commented on 'freeze states' and 'immobilization' within the BS survivor, and how parenting also benefits the parent. Another (who disclosed being 81) 'recoiled' against Nick's 'seize the moment' exhortation, and spoke of how (after years of expended energy) the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy got off the ground, only for the British Confederation of Psychotherapists to start up the very same weekend. Another mentioned meeting members of PCSR (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility) during the lunch break, who were at a conference themselves upstairs in the same building. Why aren't we talking to them? Why aren't we talking to Social Justice?

Another participant asked: why don't we speak about class? There is restricted class diversity among therapists and monetary obstacles involved in training, although bursaries are available. Another spoke of owing her professional status to the Labour Party and the gains it had made for working class people. Her parents had left school when they were 12. She added: this – i.e. boarding school – doesn't look normal to a working class person. This looks like child abuse.

The day ended with a plenary session, in which many different views were voiced, and which Jane Ryan closed by noting there had been a call to action, to stay together in some sort of way, to see if anything might come out of this. But I would like to end with the contribution quoted above: this looks like child abuse.

Notes on contributor

Hank Earl retired in 2015 after working for the London Borough of Hackney for 37 years, predominantly as a social worker in the field of adult mental health. For the past 13 years he has been co-leading men's groups with Nick Duffell and, more recently, Manu Bazzano, under the aegis of the Centre for Gender Psychology. While not a boarding school survivor himself, Hank believes that Nick's book *Wounded Leaders* raises important and pressing issues.

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