

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SENDING CHILDREN AWAY TO BOARDING SCHOOLS IN BRITAIN: IS THERE CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

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This paper aims to consolidate existing literature on the psychological impact of sending children away to boarding schools in Britain. A scarcity of literature pertaining specifically to independent boarding schools leads the author to examine child developmental theory, peer victimization in the British Army, trauma within captivity and adaptive behaviours. In conclusion, it is clear from this research that more time and effort is needed to understand the psychological impact of sending children away from home to be schooled, socialized and parented institutionally. In particular, the ethos and traditions associated with British and colonial schools, and the way in which these things are preserved warrants further study as it appears to be a significant source of the attitude toward children in boarding schools. The psychoanalytic community may be best placed to understand, and make understood, the positive or negative impact on children attending boarding schools in Britain.

KEYWORDS: BOARDING SCHOOL, BOARDING SCHOOL SURVIVORS, CHILD DEVELOPMENT, CHILD WELFARE, IDENTITY, MENTAL HEALTH, PSYCHOTHERAPY

INTRODUCTION

The British boarding school is a national institution woven into the consciousness of English society (Lambert, 1968) and a bastion of exclusivity and elitism (Lambert, 1968; Wakeford, 1969; Erichsen and Waldow, 2020). Serving the upper and upwardly mobile classes (Reeves *et al.*, 2017), public boarding schools have been largely ignored by the psychological community (Schaverien, 2004; Lauryn, 2012). Despite increasing biographical evidence detailing the separation anxiety endured by boarding school attendees (see Monbiot, 1998; Duffell, 2000; Schaverien, 2015), the historical and current cases of sexual abuse in boarding establishments (Rhodes, 2015; Poynting & Donaldson, 2016; Ward & Rodger, 2018; Symonds, 2019), as well as evidence showing that students of independent¹ schools

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are statistically less likely to achieve a higher class university degree than their state-funded counterparts (Smith & Naylor, 2005), boarding schools are still considered by many as a sought-after educational path, and a symbol of aspiration and social standing (Faulkner, 2020).

The aim of this paper is to consolidate existing literature on the psychological impact of sending children away to boarding schools in Britain. Literature which attends specifically to the psychology of boarding students is scarce. A desire to protect the social standing of these schools (Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2013), an emphasis on the financial and social benefits to the country, and a dismissive view of any psychological impact on children (Faulkner, 2020) could have limited academic inquiry in the past.

In the past 20 years, however, there has been a shift in awareness following *The Making of Them* documentary (Luke, 1994) and several journalistic articles and books written by ex-boarding school students (see Rhodes, 2015; Renton, 2017; Simpson, 2018). Two authors appear to be spearheading discussions on this subject, academically or otherwise. Duffell's first book on the subject, *The Making of Them* (Duffell, 2000), is cited in most studies alongside Schaverien's (2015) book, *Boarding School Syndrome: The Psychological Trauma of the 'Privileged' Child*. Although some of these sources may consciously or unconsciously contain bias, they collectively corroborate independent research findings relevant to this review, lending further credence to the academic validity of their observations or phenomenological experiences.

This paper is specifically aimed at British boarding schools, but studies from schools outside of the United Kingdom are included in recognition of the fact that the boarding institution was exported to what are now former British colonial states (Morrell, 1994; Schaverien, 2004; Chief Moon-Riley *et al.*, 2019). These international schools were modelled on British independent boarding schools down to the architecture, ethos, education and discipline (Rich, 1989; Morrell, 2001; Mander, Lester & Cross, 2015).

ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

Five themes are discussed as cause-and-effect elements of psychological ruptures recognized by researchers and practitioners in working with ex-boarding school students: *cultural context, separation, adaptive behaviours, peer victimization and prolonged abuse, and trauma in captivity*.

Cultural Context

While British public schools have their roots as far back as the early first century (Gathorne-Hardy, 1978), they have evolved to serve the changing needs of the nation (Duffell, 2000). Children of parents serving the Crown outside of Britain were sent back to attend these schools necessitating not just education but accommodation as well. Fees evolved to cover both of these services, which created an economic barrier to the lower and middle classes and, as a consequence, public school education,

became the privilege of the wealthy and influential (Schaverien, 2015). Now long interweaved with the social class system of Britain (Reeves *et al.*, 2017), unique pressures exist around the perceived privilege of attending these schools, which can result in repression of emotion and a reluctance to ask for help (Schaverien, 2015; Duffell & Bassett, 2016).

The schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mirrored a patriarchal society where women's education was considered less vital than that of a man (Bruley, 1999), whose future endeavours were likely to involve service to the burgeoning Empire (Rich, 1989; Duffell, 2000). It is perhaps for this reason that boys still account for the majority of boarders in the UK (ISC, 1980–2022). Despite the significant numbers of girls attending boarding schools (ISC, 1980–2022) and the consequent psychological impact (Stack, 2008; Schaverien, 2011), there is a disproportionate emphasis on boys' boarding experiences in the research that was found (see Schaverien, 2004, 2021; Faulkner, 2020; Lester & Mander, 2020, for example). Schaverien (2015) offers an insight and possible explanation; that girls generally attend boarding school at a later developmental stage than boys, suggesting they may be able to cope more with the demands placed upon them. Furthermore, bullying is less institutionalized in such schools and sexual abuse, though nonetheless deplorable, is less widespread. The weighting toward boys and men in the research is mirrored in psychoanalytic practice. Noted by Schaverien (2015), those seeking help in her practice for issues relating to their boarding experiences are mostly men. Regardless, it is important to note that while this weighting toward boys' experiences currently exists, girls have, and still do, suffer psychologically by attending these schools, and in much the same way as is described in this paper (Stack, 2008; Schaverien, 2011).

Separation

Research shows that the family unit is the primary force for social and emotional development and that, for example, a parent's inability to respond appropriately to the emotional needs of an adolescent with the necessary quality of care is associated with 'poor self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety and depression' (Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2015, p. 1046). Family units grow and flex in response to the child's normal development (Schaverien, 2011), but fixed policies and procedures are needed in institutional settings to legally safeguard the collective (Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2013). Legislation that safeguards children in Britain specifically extends protection to children in boarding schools, stating that any school or college, while providing accommodation, has a duty to safeguard and promote the child's welfare (Children Act, 1989). However, blanket policies are, by necessity, inflexible and difficult to adjust to the needs of the individual in the same way that a family unit may. Bound by this inflexibility, it is arguably unrealistic to expect these institutions to provide an effective parental role for a developing child (Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2013).

Teaching staff may lack the appropriate level of training, experience, and/or time to successfully attend to the emotional needs of their charges (Hodges, Sheffield &

Ralph, 2015; Lynam, McConnell & McGuckin, 2019), potentially resulting in the aforementioned mental health issues. The significant trauma of rejection that is experienced by some boarding school students (Faulkner, 2020) when separated from their families can, for example, be likened to ‘disenfranchised grief’ (Mitchell, 2017, p. 4); a term used to describe the non-death loss experiences of some foster children. Mitchell (2017) argues that these experiences of separation are not sufficiently acknowledged as loss; that the grieving process can be seen as socially unacceptable and is consequently invalidated. School staff may respond appropriately if a child suffers a bereavement, but if they are not adequately trained they may not understand that a small child experiences separation in much the same way as an adult experiences bereavement (Faulkner, 2020). That said, students may benefit from staff who have the opportunity to develop their skills and understanding of the emotional needs of children over time, while parents may be relatively inexperienced at each stage of their child’s development (Martin *et al.*, 2014).

In recent years, there has been a shift towards a more holistic approach to pastoral care alongside anti-bullying measures, and it is asserted that empathic understanding from school staff can help a child recover from the trauma of deprivation (Lauryn, 2012). In Britain, there have been an increased number of programmes implemented to address the mental well-being of students in schools, but the effectiveness of these programmes has been varied. Some report significant successes and others cite the inattention to the quality of care provided as being one reason for implementation difficulties (Department of Education, 2011). This acknowledgement of the need for mental health care in schools is very positive. However, due to the independence of most boarding schools, it is difficult to establish to what degree pastoral care is implemented, as no such studies were found.

Separation and Identity Development

Although separation for unwilling participants can be traumatic, separation from parental figures is a natural developmental process for adolescents. From age 10 onwards, there is a progressive move to independence as individuals become less in need of parental input (Blau & Blau, 2021). The vast majority of boarding school students have, and still do, attend from the age of 11 or 13 years (ISC, 1980–2022). At this stage, ‘identity v. role confusion’ (Erikson, 1965, p. 252), the child becomes more attuned to how others see them and, as the child develops, the importance of intimate relationships outside of the family comes to the fore (Erikson, 1965; Erwin & Duck, 1993). The value of friendship in boarding schools is prized above all else (Lambert, 1968) and past students note the strong bonds they have with their peers many years after leaving (Faulkner, 2020). Nevertheless, Lauryn (2012) argues that this move to independence away from parental figures is usually symbolic in nature and not accompanied by physical distancing as experienced by children living in boarding schools. However, in their study of boarding school students in Israel, Blau and Blau (2021) found that these students presented with a higher level of identity development than their day school counterparts, in part because of the enforced physical separation from their parents. Furthermore, boarding school students showed

a greater sense of autonomy while simultaneously preserving a healthy relationship with their parents (Blau & Blau, 2021). Positive parent relationship for boarders is also noted by Martin *et al.* (2014), while day school students who experienced greater parental control in their schooling years experienced more emotional distance from their parents (Blau & Blau, 2021). While these studies do not attest to any specific psychological benefits or detriments, it has been shown elsewhere that a closer relationship with primary attachment figures is of benefit to one's overall mental well-being (Hair *et al.*, 2008).

Erikson (1965) warns of a danger, at this stage of development, of isolation and 'character-problems' if the fear of vulnerability with another person leads to avoidance of relationships (Erikson, 1965, p. 258). Erikson's developmental stages are predicated on the idea that a subsequent stage builds upon the outcomes of the preceding stages (Erikson, 1965; Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009). The ability of a child to resolve the crisis of one stage heavily influences the outcome of all subsequent stages (Erikson, 1965). A significant number of pre-adolescent children attend boarding school each year (ISC, 1980–2022), and at this stage, a child would ideally enjoy the physical presence, support, inclusion and safety of parental figures in their daily lives. In fact, it is deemed an essential constituent of identity formation (Blau & Blau, 2021). Lacking the physical presence and safety of parental figures, children in boarding schools may experience issues with identity and a sense of belonging (Murphy *et al.*, 2020).

Separation and Attachment

Attachment theory has been used prolifically in studies to allow us to further understand the effects of separation from parental figures and has been the focus of studies specifically about boarding schools (see Lauryn, 2012; Faulkner, 2020). Attachment, as described by Bowlby (1999), is a way of conceptualizing the affectional bonds that human beings naturally form with others, the healthy maintenance of which results in a sense of security. Unwilling separation and repeated disruptions to affectional bonds give rise to 'anxiety, anger, depression and emotional detachment' (Bowlby, 1999, p. 127). These same psychological consequences are observed in adult boarding school survivors in a therapeutic environment (Duffell & Bassett, 2016).

Bowlby (1999) posits that attachment's most likely biological function is that of protection from predators, and so abandonment by an attachment figure can arguably be perceived by the child as an existential threat. Certainly, the threat or actual separation of an attachment figure can be damaging to an individual's development and can include a diminished capacity to form affectional bonds (Bowlby, 2015). Difficulties with intimate relationships and trust in adulthood have also been noted by both Schaverien (2011) and Duffell (2014), Duffell & Bassett, (2016) in their work with boarding school survivors. It is also an area of research identified by Faulkner (2020) as needing further attention.

Though the effects of infant attachment are felt throughout a person's life, in adolescent years this attachment can be supplemented, and even supplanted, by another

(Bowlby, 2015). Boarding school teachers and housemasters spend many hours beyond the normal school day with their students, giving rise to the potentiality for a child to consider a teacher to be an attachment figure with whom they feel a sense of safety and security (Spina, Mireles-Rios & Roberts, 2019). Faulkner's (2020) findings, however, run counter to this and show that all of her study's participants experienced a repeated loss of their main attachment figure with each return to school, but only one was able to replace that figure with another from the school. Schaverien (2015) puts it quite plainly: 'A boarding school may provide a caring environment but it cannot provide individual attachment figures to foster the reciprocity of emotional intimacy' (Schaverien, 2015, pp. 156–7).

A study of adults who were separated from their parents during the evacuation in World War II shows that separation from parents leads to insecure attachment styles in both girls and boys, and tends later to develop into dependent styles in girls and independent styles in boys (Rusby & Tasker, 2008). In her study of adolescent attachment in a boarding school, Lauryn (2012) notes boarders before the age of 11 presenting signs of insecure attachment styles. She later concludes that separation as a result of boarding school attendance results in an avoidant attachment style. Ein-Dor *et al.* (2012) suggest that these individuals find it difficult to trust in the goodness of others, minimize their own distress, and tend to attempt to cope alone without seeking any support. These and other adaptive behaviours are discussed in more detail in the next section. Vermeire (2020), though, makes an important point; the perception of attachment style can be obfuscated by the influence of social context, and what can be seen as an attachment style may more accurately be described as an adaptive strategy deployed in an unsafe environment or situation.

Adaptive Behaviours

For children who attend boarding school, emotional displays may be unwelcome or unable to be held by teachers, housemasters and fellow students. Crying over separation may be deemed inappropriate for their age and so children are left with little choice but to stifle their feelings (Bowlby, 1999). Morrell (1994) suggests that this elimination of emotional expression gives rise to frustration and provides the conditions in which violence is formed. In an environment where difference is not tolerated, violence between boys is common (Poynting & Donaldson, 2016; Duffell, 2000; Morrell, 2001). The subsequent sense of isolation can give rise to a form of masculinity that is borne not out of genuine confidence and strength, but out of fear of being targeted (Duffell, 2000; Lauryn, 2012).

This newly created personality is part of what Duffell (2000) refers to as the 'strategic survival personality' (SSP) (p. 222). He posits that one of two mechanisms is activated for psychological survival in an environment which appears unsafe: 'protection' and 'control' (p. 230). Where protection fails in keeping the outside at arm's length, control is exerted on the inner self. Vulnerability and the consequent fear of being targeted in and of itself becomes an existential threat to the child and the response is to create a personality that will be more socially capable and acceptable

(Duffell, 2000). In extreme cases, one might build two defences; one to protect from the outside and one from the overwhelming feelings coming from within, shielding the person from danger but also disconnecting them from the possibility of intimacy (Duffell, 2000). While Duffell's (2000) model of the SSP favours one in which the individual adapts to become more acceptable, Hopper (1991) suggests that a threat of identity annihilation may trigger an 'encapsulation' response whereby an individual will attempt to seal off access to all sensations associated with the threat (Hopper, 1991, p. 607). Similarly, an individual faced with the disruption of caregiving may seek order in whichever form they can achieve it. One such mechanism is that of dissociation, or splitting (Holmes, 2001) in which a child learns to maintain the appearance of normality by presenting a false self (Herman, 1992). Whichever mechanism a child uses, one can argue that it is an adaptive behaviour triggered by fear and an overwhelming sense of helplessness, loss, and break in attachment relationships (Hopper, 1991).

Identity Trauma

British boarding schools function as 'total institutions' (Reeves *et al.*, 2017, p. 8), providing not only education, parental support roles and accommodation, but a secondary, hidden curriculum of socialization based on the culture and ethos of the school (Morrell, 1994; Reeves *et al.*, 2017). Wakeford (1969) describes these schools fundamentally as 'people changing organisations' (p. 42). This acculturation ultimately produces what we now refer to as the traits of an English gentleman; a highly prized status (Reeves *et al.*, 2017). It is a covert and slow-burning method of supplanting the authentic individual with a sense of identity more in line with the school ethos.

Most staff in public boarding schools perceive it as one of their chief tasks to persuade the boy to adopt their perspective of his behaviour in an attempt to persuade him to internalise the official ideology. (Wakeford, 1969, pp. 174–5)

This systematic and intentional assimilation of culture and separation from parental figures is, in some ways, similar to the way in which the indigenous population of Canada, Australia and the United States experienced the stripping of identity in colonial residential schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Chief Moon-Riley *et al.*, 2019). Children were specifically targeted for this practice because of their plasticity so they could be easily indoctrinated into a culture that served a greater purpose to those in power (Smith, 2004). Acculturation, as defined for Native Americans, was the degree of acceptance and adherence to the majority's cultural values (Reynolds *et al.*, 2017); the psychological stress of which led to 'depression, anxiety, identity confusion, feelings of marginality, and alienation as well as behavioural and functional difficulties' (Barnes & Josefowitz, 2019, p. 72).

In reference to the embodied culture of boarding schools, Reeves *et al.* (2017) note that '[m]astery of this cultural identity' was seen as a sign of 'elite status' (p. 8). As will shortly be seen, safety can be achieved by assimilating oneself into

the dominant culture (Lewis, 1956; Duffell, 2000, Kira *et al.*, 2017). C.S Lewis (1956) felt that the best way to remain safe at school was to be like them; to hide one's vulnerability and identify with the ethos of the school. The implication being that one would need to suppress or split from one's original identity in order to take on a more socially acceptable one (Duffell, 2000).

When the elements of identity are forcibly altered or done away with in, for example, a new social context in which acculturation or an unsafe environment elicits adaptive behaviours, the individual experiences this as a threat to identity (Jaspal, Lopes & Wignall, 2020). How the individual responds is varied and subjective, but it is generally accepted that they will respond in such a way as to mitigate the effects of the threat by using a combination of coping strategies which might include self-isolation, denial of oneself, and changing oneself to fit in (Jaspal, Lopes & Wignall, 2020).

The above coping strategies involve a level of rejection and potential loss of one's own identity. This loss of authenticity and agency is described by Kira *et al.* (2017) as an 'identity trauma' (Kira *et al.*, 2017, p. 178) and can lead to 'general distress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, substance abuse, anger, and psychosis as well as negative associations with happiness' and 'life satisfaction' (p. 177). While this particular study was written in the context of refugees facing sexual, and physical abuse and rape, all of which have occurred in British boarding schools (Rhodes, 2015; Renton, 2017; Symonds, 2019), it also emphasizes the threat to the identity of individuals or groups who are deemed to be inferior in status by dominant others (Kira *et al.*, 2017), the school context for which will now be discussed in the exploration of peer victimization.

Peer Victimization

The definition of peer victimization or bullying often differs depending upon the context within which it is being used (Kirke, 2007). However, it is generally accepted that it is a cluster of behaviours consolidated under a theme of aggression (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; O'Brien, 2014). More specifically, it is defined as 'the experience in which an individual is exposed repeatedly to discomfort at the expense of another peer's behaviour' (Armitage *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). Peer victimization usually operates within the power imbalance (Armitage *et al.*, 2021) that is inherent in the hierarchical structures that are present in most schools, but particularly formalized and established in boarding houses (Lambert, 1968). Victimization can be direct or indirect, taking the form of physical and verbal acts of aggression or social exclusion, respectively, and both have been shown to lead to a significant and lasting impact on a person's mental health into adulthood (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2012; Armitage *et al.*, 2021).

No studies could be found that attended specifically to bullying in British boarding schools and so it was necessary to refer to studies of bullying in another traditional British institution. Not unlike boarding schools, the British army also operates as a 'total institution' (Kirke, 2007, p. 8) whereby a number of people are removed from

the wider society for a period of time and live together in a formal, institutionalized environment and a similar hierarchical structure (Kirke, 2007) to that of boarding schools (Lambert, 1968; Schaverien, 2015). In particular, one can draw a comparison between the school's aforementioned unofficial mandate of shaping individuals, to the culture of bullying in the British army that is seen as a necessary means to an end, that is, 'oppressive coercive behaviour' used to elicit 'operationally advantageous' (Kirke, 2007, p. 9) outcomes. Aggressive behaviour, the threat of violence, discipline and humiliation are all deemed acceptable if the motives behind the perpetrator's actions are within the cultural norms and in the best interest of the wider institution (Kirke, 2007). Recruits are socially isolated and consequently more susceptible to bullying in an organization that takes advantage of the psychological vulnerability of adolescents. The unrelenting pressure exerted on these individuals is designed to break them down and rebuild them to serve a specific purpose within the organization (Wither, 2004). Boarders are subjected to similar pressures; isolated from wider society (Wakeford, 1969), they are more susceptible to bullying as they are unable to escape the onslaught of physical and psychological torment (Kirke, 2007). They also live in an institution that values emotional toughness and whose desire is to reform the individual to serve specific roles in society (Duffell, 2014).

In the boarding houses of schools, the family unit is replaced by a substantially larger hierarchical social framework (Morrell, 1994) of peers, seniors and housemasters (Lambert, 1968). The hierarchy below the housemaster is unofficial in nature and reinforced by the system of peer discipline (Lambert, 1968), which could, depending on one's perspective, be seen as corrective behaviour or as victimization. Kirke's (2007) argument for replacing the word bullying with 'oppressive coercive behaviour' (p. 9) is that an act of aggression can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. For example, a physical attack on an individual by a group may be perceived by the group as acceptable corrective behaviour; from the victim's point of view as excessive force and intimidation; or from a commanding officer's standpoint, anything including and in between (Kirke, 2007). Notwithstanding the military's understandable difficulties in defining bullying (Kirke, 2007; Stuart & Szeszeran, 2020), that is, balancing aggressive behaviour with building a robust army where lives are at stake (Kirke, 2007), it is arguably the perception of the victim that is important when it comes to the individual psychological effect of any form of bullying.

In contrast to these behaviours, Kirke (2007) notes the necessity for, and expectation of, senior officers to form warm and supportive bonds with juniors in a pastoral sense. A similar relationship was noted by Lambert (1968, p. 68) in the earlier days of 'fagging'² at boarding schools, whereby a mutually supportive and beneficial relationship is formed despite the imbalance of power. However, Kirke (2007) goes on to say that those in authority can easily embrace a more authoritarian approach devoid of any intent to build healthy relationships, which can lead to an abuse of the power bestowed upon them by their rank. This view is similarly shared by Wither (2004). There is, however, a general sense of ambiguity in Wither's report; a reluctance also noted in Kirke's (2007) writing, owing to the nature of the armed

forces; that is, the need to maintain a specific image and balance the need for a robust army against the risk to its personnel. This is certainly illustrated by the fact that recruits are actively discouraged from reporting bullying (Wither, 2004). Boarding schools are similarly keen to maintain their image (Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2013) and students likewise find it hard to articulate their experiences. This is owing partly to their traumatic experiences (Herman, 1992; Schaverien, 2015) and partly to a fear of vulnerability among social peer groups which leads to emotional repression and a reluctance to seek help (Duffell, 2000, Schaverien, 2015).

According to Stuart and Szeszeran (2020), bullying is more prevalent in institutional environments. Organizations that hold fast to tradition and for whom discipline and compliance are strongly encouraged, normalize bullying as part of the culture, making it more likely to reoccur and harder to reform. The psychological effects of bullying in the British army are shown to manifest in anger and anxiety disorders, suicidal ideation and completion of suicide, depression and post-traumatic stress (Kim, Kim & Park, 2019; Stuart & Szeszeran, 2020). Similarly, bullying at school has been shown to lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, aggression, withdrawal, suicidal ideation and completion of suicide (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007). Army recruits who attended boarding schools consider enrolment in the armed forces to be a natural progression and even an extension of their schooling (Kayss, 2018), and so it is reasonable to suggest that these correlations in the aforementioned environment, ethos, aggressive bullying behaviours, and the consequential psychological impacts lend their relevance to this review.

The psychological consequences of bullying are, of course, not exclusive to boarding schools. Any child faced with the challenge of a new school environment would be subject to similar forces (Lester & Mander, 2020). However, Lambert (1968) asserts that tensions are intensified when living communally, Kirke (2007) suggests that living in close quarters makes individuals more susceptible to bullying, and Lester and Mander (2020) point out that children who board have the additional burden of dealing with these difficulties without the support of their parents or siblings. Furthermore, Mander, Lester and Cross (2015) found levels of stress, anxiety and depression to be substantially higher in boarding students than in their non-boarding peers.

Prolonged Abuse and Trauma in Captivity

Trauma is generally accepted to be an event or series of events that overwhelm the autonomic nervous system of an individual (Payne, Levine & Crane-Godreau, 2015), resulting in psychosomatic responses due to a compromised ability to self-regulate (Herman, 1992; Levine, 1997). Although speaking primarily of sexual abuse, Herman (1992) argues that a single traumatic event can occur anywhere, but prolonged trauma can only occur in an environment where the victim is held captive and unable to flee the perpetrator. As discussed previously, one of the core elements of the social construct of boarding schools is a hierarchy that is established between the members of the institution; one which, defined by

authority and power, provides the potential and motivation for the oppression of those lower in status (Kirke, 2007; Kira *et al.*, 2017). Wakeford (1969) suggests that this hierarchy is maintained by the threat and execution of verbal and physical assault and humiliation and, though written in the late 1960s, his findings are consistent with accounts of boarding school attendees to this day (Schaverien, 2011, 2015; Duffell & Bassett, 2016).

For those children who find themselves at the mercy of senior students or teachers and for whom the day and night are tainted with anxiety and fear, respite from this environment is not forthcoming: ‘the bullying was remorseless and inescapable. Sometimes it lasted through much of the night’ (Monbiot, 1998). People subjected to prolonged trauma may suffer from post-traumatic stress. Unable to reconcile the experience cognitively, and discouraged from feeling, boarding school students, while subject to prolonged stress and trauma, may be forced to split from memories (Schaverien, 2011) and adapt by means of dissociation by creating a new narrative (Herman, 1992). With emotions too overwhelming to bear, these children, now adults, can present as intellectually impressive but with very little capacity for emotional articulation (Schaverien, 2011).

Writing about bullying in the military, Kirke (2007) surmises that any bullying that occurs in army units will be intensified by the fact that the persecuted is unable to walk away (Kirke, 2007). In describing the repetitive nature of prolonged trauma, Herman (1992) writes that captivity ‘brings the victim and perpetrator into prolonged contact’ (p. 74). Beatings and humiliation, especially in the context of an inescapable environment (Herman, 1992; Kirke, 2007) that lacks the basic benefits of autonomy and privacy (Lambert, 1968), can be considered to be a serious violation of a child’s integrity, and can arguably lay the foundations for sexual abuse (Herman, 1992; Schaverien, 2011).

Although sexual abuse of children by staff in boarding schools has been much publicized, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) states that a quarter of all reports made through a temporary helpline for boarding school students in the 1990s were regarding peer on peer sexual assault. The IICSA report highlights the nature of residential schools as increasing the risk of such abuse occurring. Specifically, the fact that children of different ages reside together in close quarters and for long periods with little or no parental oversight (Ward & Rodger, 2018). This same environment allows boarding staff unfettered and prolonged access to the intimate routines of a child’s life opening the potentiality for physical and emotional abuse (Ward & Rodger, 2018).

The effect of sexual abuse on an individual is well researched and publicized, and Herman (1992) describes it thus:

The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. Unable to care for or protect herself, she must compensate for the failures of adult care and

protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defenses. (p. 96)

THE BENEFITS OF BOARDING SCHOOLS

It is important to acknowledge that there are children who seem to thrive at boarding school, and who maintain strong bonds with both the school and their peers for decades after they graduate. This is perhaps through the mechanisms of membership in old boys' clubs, a recognition of an intense shared experience (Lauryn, 2012), and the desire to remain loyal to the collective (Reeves *et al.*, 2017). Perhaps, as Lauryn (2012) posits, the boarding school itself becomes an attachment object having had such a profound influence on identity formation in adolescent years. We have already seen how an increased sense of identity and the consequent improved parental relationship can impact positively on an individual's well-being (Blau & Blau, 2019). Lester and Mander (2020) showed that peer protection and care for one's peers increased significantly in comparison to non-boarders after the first year of attendance. It is therefore suggested that the boarding environment contributes both to the likelihood of bullying and paradoxically to the prevention of it (Lester & Mander, 2020). An extensive study of boarding and day students found that boarders scored modestly higher in 'meaning and purpose, life satisfaction' and 'parent relations', although also scoring higher on maladaptive motivation and emotional instability (Martin *et al.*, 2014, p. 1035). Furthermore, where a child lacks a sense of basic safety and security at home, in the case of domestic abuse for example, it is understandable that a boarding environment may provide this security (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). However, when it comes to the psychological well-being of boarding school students, the literature is scarce and non-specific. Without studying the lived experiences of each individual in a therapeutic setting, one would not know for sure whether this apparent ability to thrive is one of genuine resilience or psychological protective measures deployed in the light of overwhelming emotional ruptures (Duffell, 2000; Faulkner, 2020).

REFLECTIVE STATEMENT

Where an author may have previous experience of the subject they are writing about, McGhee, Marland and Atkinson (2007) suggest that open acknowledgement of the potential for that experience to impact the research is essential to share with readers. As an ex-boarding student of a school in South Africa, founded by a Briton, and modelled on Eton (Morrell, 1994), the author's lived experience of this subject has been in constant awareness during the process of writing this paper. It is consequently noted that this review is weighted toward the negative aspects of the psychological impact associated with boarding schools. However, the author believes this is an unavoidable reality given the similar weighting of the literature to date. A concerted effort was made to find studies that attended to or mentioned positive psychological outcomes for boarding school students. Other than those already mentioned, no others were found.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PRACTICE

Although corporal punishment was officially outlawed in state schools in the UK in 1987, it would be a further 12 years before private schools fell in line. Many UK students since have reported that the unofficial beatings, humiliations and sexual assaults have continued largely unabated and unchallenged to this day (Schaverien, 2011; Ward & Rodger, 2018; Faulkner, 2020). Duffell and Bassett (2016) rightly point out that even if these practices had been eradicated there is still a significant rupture in the separation of a child from their parents. It is for this reason that the knowledge compiled in this review is still relevant to therapeutic work (Schaverien, 2015).

The nature of this paper does not lend itself to making specific recommendations on clinical practice (Munn *et al.*, 2018) and it is beyond the scope of this study to fully explore the ways in which clients can be supported. However, it is important for therapists to recognize that boarding school has an impact on the development of a child. Perhaps, then, a universal starting point for treatment can be found in Bowlby's (1999) concept of a 'secure base' (p. 103). According to Holmes (2001), the aim of the therapist is to provide the foundational constituents of a secure base for their client: 'consistency, reliability, attunement, rupture, repair' (p. 46). Both Holmes (2001) and Bowlby (1999) emphasize the fact that, just as a child cannot safely explore without a secure base to return to, so too is a client hindered from their exploration should the therapist be unable to provide such a base in therapy (Holmes, 2001). However, forging a healing therapeutic relationship with an ex-boarding client who is not conversant in intimate relationships can be challenging (Duffell & Bassett, 2016). The adaptive strategies employed by the child in order to survive can manifest in the adult as self-reliance, avoidance, self-denial, aggression, hyper-vigilance, over-achievement and emotional detachment (Duffell, 2000). Frustratingly it can be just at the point at which these individuals begin to explore these adaptive patterns that many terminate therapy (Duffell a& Bassett, 2016).

FURTHER RESEARCH

It is clear from the research that more time and effort is needed to understand the full psychological impact of sending children away from home to be schooled, socialized, and parented institutionally. In particular, the unique ethos and traditions associated with British and colonial schools, and the way in which these things are preserved warrants further study as it appears to be a significant source of the attitude toward children in boarding schools.

Studies that briefly mention positive outcomes of boarding school attendance have already been noted, but the indeterminate nature of findings pertaining to psychological benefits has led the author to identify this as another avenue of research that is required to potentially balance the current literature's leaning toward the negative. With a rich history and ever-growing knowledge of psychological development, distress and healing, the author asserts that it is the psychoanalytic community that is best placed to understand, and make understood, the positive or negative impact on children attending boarding schools in Britain.

CONCLUSION

This literature review set out to consider the implications of boarding schools on the psychological well-being of their students, and whether there was cause for concern. The author believes that the evidence to date, academic or otherwise, points overwhelmingly toward a need for concern about the psychological impact of sending children to boarding schools in Britain.

The studies reporting positive outcomes in children who attend these schools tend to focus on academic achievement, and if any psychological element is introduced, it is usually that of an undefined measure of psychological well-being (see Martin *et al.*, 2014; Blau & Blau, 2021). These studies go no further to explore where positive outcomes originate and, as has been argued in this review, traits such as independence and resilience can be the result of long-held adaptive behaviours (Herman, 1992; Duffell, 2015; Schaverien, 2015; Duffell & Bassett, 2016).

Some children did undoubtedly enjoy their school experience. The substitute family could foster an intense loyalty to the school, to the team and to the house in which they lived (Morrell, 1994; Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2013). For some, this provided an enduring sense of security, community, camaraderie and identity (Lambert, 1968); for others, a welcome respite from home (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). While not wishing to lose sight of these facts, we must also acknowledge those who were mistreated (Schaverien, 2015).

While this review is concerned primarily with British schools, the long arm of the Empire has also been addressed. Colonial schools helped to maintain a distance from their indigenous population who were seen as inferior (Morrell, 1994; Morrell, 2001). This sense of elitist privilege, superiority and power, both at the time of the Empire and beyond, was the foundation of a system at home and overseas tasked with producing leaders and influencers (Rich, 1989; Morrell, 1994; Poynting & Donaldson, 2016). The unintended consequences of this produced men in positions of power who displayed a façade of confidence that belied the wounded child whose separation at a young age from their parents, and exposure to prolonged trauma, had a deleterious effect on their psychological well-being well into adulthood (Herman, 1992; Lauryn, 2012; Duffell, 2015; Schaverien, 2015).

The environment in which these children spend their formative years was also explored. Boarding schools and the armed forces share more in terms of their environment and ethos than initially meets the eye. The minimal research found on the psychological impact of bullying in boarding schools and the British Armed Forces suggests that these are both areas deemed appropriate to remain as they are; woven into the fabric of our society and unchangeable because they serve a greater purpose. In both cases, the emotional and mental well-being of students or recruits appears secondary. Consequently, psychological studies that question whether the short-term gains in total institutions are at the expense of long-term psychological effects are perhaps understandably unwelcome.

Perhaps the most insidious impact on children who grow up outside of their family unit is that of adaptive behaviours. It is not exclusive to boarding school, but it

has been shown to be significantly increased in an intense and unrelenting environment (Herman, 1992; Kirke, 2007; Schaverien, 2015). Any display of emotion is discouraged by both the school and by one's peers, so it must be hidden for fear of being vulnerable to attack (Lewis, 1956). These children consequently grow up with a compromised ability to express any emotion (Lambert, 1968). In adult life, this has been shown to lead to relationship difficulties, a lack of empathy, aggression, depression and anxiety disorders to name but a few (Duffell, 2014; Duffell & Bassett, 2016).

In concluding her thesis, Faulkner (2020) suggests that sending children away to boarding school amounts to 'emotional neglect and psychological cruelty' (p. 184); a crime under the Serious Crime Act of 2015. While boarding schools may now have counsellors and modern amenities, it is the separation and rejection, fear, anxiety and the increased likelihood of experiencing abuse and other traumas that are shown to have a detrimental effect on the mental health of boarding students well into adulthood (Duffell & Bassett, 2016, Faulkner, 2020). In the absence of evidence to the contrary we are left with the fact that children being separated from their families is not supported by any child development theory (Duffell & Bassett, 2016) and is considered the last resort by the social care system in Britain (Murphy *et al.*, 2020).

NOTES

1. Independent schools in the UK are understood to be those that are privately funded through the charging of attendance fees (UK Government, 2023)
2. A traditional practice used widely in public boarding schools whereby a junior student is assigned to carry out menial tasks in servitude of a senior student for a period of time (Lambert, 1968).

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