

INTRODUCTION

Each of us is born into a set of cultural values that reflects the period of history we live in and the societal norms that exist at that time. These frameworks give overall shape to the ways in which we make sense of our humanity and how we understand our relationships and the world we live in. The meanings we ascribe to difficult social and cultural problems can be easily manipulated by political and professional vested interest: instead of shedding light on those problems we are confused or deliberately misled. How any given society at any period in its history defines deviancy, and particularly those whom it perceives as 'evil' or 'mad', always reveals more about that society and the vested interests and values of those who are most powerful than about those who are being defined. The frameworks we have for making sense of madness and badness are heavily loaded with both historical prejudices and continuous professional and political mythologies. Critically examining those prejudices and myths is of crucial importance because how we make sense of madness and badness defines our own humanity and the nature of the society we live in.

The central aim of this book is to try to explain why people behave violently. There are many reasons why people express themselves in brutal ways and hence many levels of explanation are required. It is not my intention to excuse or condone violence in any way: attempting to understand why something happens is certainly not the same as condoning it or accepting it. However, once we gain a fuller understanding of why some people might behave in a given way, especially those whose actions are defined as being beyond explanation, then we stand a greater chance of being able to discard whatever prejudices and misconceptions we have about them.

Inasmuch as I am concerned about those who express themselves violently, the book is also about those who are victims of violence and the consequences of being victimised: the two are closely linked. While I am

making links between the experience of personal distress ('mental health problems') and violence, I am certainly not suggesting that the majority of people who are distressed are going to be violent. Those who are experiencing personal distress have a hard enough time as it is, being stigmatised and misunderstood.

I have based much of what is in these pages on my years of experience as a clinical psychologist, working with people who have been violent and many more who have been the victims of violence. As well as having a particular set of professional beliefs and experiences, which are of course embedded within a particular cultural framework, I am also the product of many other cultures. It is because I have inhabited so many diverse cultural frameworks that I have gained a particular vantage point from which to make sense of what I see going on around me. Culture is at the very heart of how I make sense of the world.

With the exception of certain high-profile cases that have received extensive amounts of media coverage, and fictional terrorist incidents in London, all of the stories or accounts of child abuse and violence in Chapter 1 are based on the experiences of people I have known or worked with. They are truthful and unexaggerated accounts of the kinds of brutality and cruelty that I hear on a regular, almost daily, basis in the clinical and secure settings in which I have worked over the last fifteen years. The identities of the people have obviously been concealed and altered although this in no way diminishes from the accuracy of the experiences that I have reported. I have attempted to do justice to the accounts of violence by writing in a style that is real and accurate. This, however, has not been done in any way to dramatise or sensationalise the accounts or to exaggerate their impact. These are accounts of the kinds of painful experiences that so many of the people I have worked with have told me, often with a great deal of trepidation and distress, in their attempts to make sense of their experience of a confusing, brutal world. I am indebted to them for their courage in daring to speak out; their experiences deserve to be heard outside the closeted setting of the therapy room.

As a clinician I typically deal with individuals and their unique personal experiences. However, over the course of my career universal themes have continually emerged: personal experience is always at the same time political. For example, a popular way of making sense of madness and badness tends to refer to individual personal responsibility and choice, and it is a short step from this to moral condemnation and compassionless blame. Responsibility is much too important a moral imperative to be

reduced to the level of individuals. Families, communities, companies, governments and entire societies can behave irresponsibly, yet it is very much harder to apportion blame when they do. Similarly, it is not possible to make sense of, say, an individual woman's struggles with eating distress without understanding that her personal experiences are also highly gendered and encompass the role of women in society and unattainable marketed expectations. Equally, the over-representation of black people in mental health and forensic settings needs to be understood as part of a much bigger picture of prejudice and alienation. It is not possible to make sense of the terrorist atrocities attributed to the loose coalition that is Al Qaeda, without placing these acts of destruction within the context of global ideological and political problems. Violence is as much about meaningful employment, poverty, or brutal cultural values and beliefs as it is about unhelpful individual attitudes.

The ways in which a people who are violent are portrayed in the media, especially high profile cases in which children are harmed, are a sign of a general lack of compassion and understanding. Violent offenders are often the focus of extreme vilification and they are all too readily 'demonised' and stripped of their humanity. It does indeed seem hard to be compassionate to those who brutalise, harm or even take another person's life. Yet such people are no less deserving of our understanding than anyone else, not only because of what they themselves will in all likelihood have experienced, but because denying them their humanity seriously diminishes our own. To explain how violence arises out of people's experience of violence and abuse is not to excuse what they have done and it does not mean they should not be held responsible for their actions. There are times when people should be denied their liberties on account of their violence or their distress. However, if we do not explain people's actions or distress in terms of their personal experience then all we are left with is a process of demonising them, defining them as biological aberrations or else blaming them in harsh and compassionless ways.

At a time when the inequalities in British society and across the globe grow ever larger, and deprivation and exclusion more widespread, it cannot be merely coincidental that there has been a proliferation of simplistic and highly individualistic explanations for every facet of human experience, suffering and of course, violent behaviour. By the same token, a social order based on gross inequalities requires a conceptual framework that justifies it on the basis of the inherent worth of those who benefit most from it. As we embark on a new millennium, all manner of professional

explanations for distress and violence tend to exaggerate the contribution of individual factors as opposed to social or environmental ones. Such factors have come to dominate how we view and explain distress and violence. This book is an attempt to counter the imbalanced emphasis on individuals and to offer an essentially social ecological explanation for violence. To do this not only means trying to explain the personal experiences that shape individual people's behaviour, but also requires a field of view that extends far beyond the individual.

Current medical and cultural perspectives massively exaggerate the contribution of biological and genetic factors and marginalise the contribution of social and ecological factors. In so doing they contribute to a wider myth and prejudice of 'otherness' — that people who have significant problems in the way they relate to others or who suffer from distress are in some way fundamentally different to the rest of us 'normals'. We are all shaped and influenced by the conditions we find ourselves in and the experiences we have over the course of our lives to a much greater degree than is commonly accepted. The expression of violence or the pain of personal distress arises out of people's experiences. Once seen within this context then these problems cease to be 'disorders' or 'abnormalities' but make sense as *adaptations* to those experiences.

It is important to emphasise that this is not a book about 'treatment'. Though I am critical of the way in which many people are dealt with throughout the mental health services and within psychiatry in particular, I am not specifically concerned here with what to do with people once they have already become violent. My criticisms about those professions which are charged with dealing with violent offenders or those in distress are not centrally about their attempts to 'treat' those people they work with, except inasmuch as their methods of treatment systematically obscure the realities behind the violence or the distress they are routinely presented with. I am not 'anti-psychiatry' and I am not against the consensual use of medication. The central problem is that the imperative to control people defined as 'mentally disordered', the methods of treatment available (usually some form of chemical sedation or another), and the pragmatic need to do something quickly about their behaviour or experience all become hopelessly confused with cause and explanation. The fact that a violent individual perceives the world in a particular way which is unhelpful, or because they are knocked out by a particular drug, says very little about why they are violent in the first place: yet all too often these methods of 'treatment' and social control are completely inverted, presented

as original cause, and offered as explanation.

The way in which madness and badness are portrayed in the media may be harsh and unforgiving but tragically compassion and understanding are often also missing in so much mainstream mental health and forensic service provision. I have worked in too many psychiatric hospitals and prisons in which the attitudes of staff have been harsh and controlling, and characterised by intolerance and abuses of power. Technical solutions to personal and social problems promote dispassionate forms of 'care' that are sadly all too often brutal and insensitive. Placing people's difficulties in the context of their life histories is a way of regaining compassion; it promotes moral and ethical approaches to looking after and rehabilitating people, rather than simply technical solutions. Hopefully, offering a more environmental explanation for violence and distress might contribute to a process whereby compassion and understanding become central features of service provision as well as the defining values of a tolerant society.

Our cultural frameworks are becoming increasingly harsh, intolerant and unforgiving. Compassion is something that is becoming harder to encounter in a world where we are forced to compete with one another for apparently meagre resources, encouraged to blame each other when life is hard and to view anyone who seems different from us with fear and suspicion. If we organise the economic basis for societies, and increasingly the world, on the basis of ruthless competition then the inevitable consequence of this is to promote aggression and inhibit co-operation. Competitive and unregulated free markets have created vast inequalities in the material and political landscape of people's lives right across the globe and this has nurtured extreme cultural frameworks characterised by intolerance and hatred. Polarising the world along political and economic lines merely encourages people to focus on and exaggerate difference. The threat of global terrorism is one sign of a growing climate of intolerance but the response to that threat has been manipulated in ways that contribute to a climate of heightened fear and paranoia. More importantly, the responses that have been justified in the 'war on terror' not only seriously undermine democratic values of tolerance and pluralism but also seriously undermine democracy itself. This book is therefore an attempt to reclaim democratic values from all reactionary forces that seek to undermine them.

