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The permeating presence of past domestic and familial violence: “So like I’d never let anyone hit me but I’ve hit them, and I shouldn’t have done”

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Introduction

As de Beauvoir (1949) argues, for women, the future is often haunted by phantoms of the past, which impact on the present. This chapter draws on one woman’s narrative journey from childhood to motherhood, examining how ‘troubles’ feature in her life in the form of domestic and familial abuse. Specifically, the permeating nature of ‘trouble’ is demonstrated in her ideas of what she might become and what she is afraid of becoming; and whilst she recognises abuse as a harm to be avoided if possible, and/or repaired, it is also routinely normalised in her account.

In the introduction to this section, Hooper (2012) established the ways in which domestic abuse remains an insidious presence in the darker side of family life.

Domestic abuse has a substantial financial cost to the economy (Walby, 2004) and

such violence can also disrupt typical developmental trajectories through psychobiological effects, posttraumatic stress disorder and cognitive consequences (Jarvinen et al, 2008; Margolin and Gordis, 2000).

Violence was not my initial research focus, nonetheless, as Rock (2007, p.30) contends, there is a 'need to remain open to the features that cannot be listed in advance of the study' and this family trouble was an invasive element in the construction of femininity (see Mannay, 2011). The normalisation of male violence was central in the participants' accounts where masculinity was tied to aggression, and male violence was naturalised.

Adult recollections of violence in childhood supported Henriques et al's (1998) contention that the question of who we are is tied to the memory of who we have been and the imagination of what we might become. In this way male violence had a pervasive hold over the participants, permeating their everyday lives and aspirations, becoming normalised, and engendering intergenerational journeys that threaten to impinge on their daughters' trajectories.

The Study

The data was drawn from a wider research project that employed visual and narrative methods of data production to explore the experiences of mothers and daughters, residing on a marginalised housing estate. The research focussed on the ways in which the boundaries of the immediate culture and memories of the past mediate their educational and employment histories and futures.

Research was conducted in Hystryd [1], a predominately white urban area, which ranks as one of the most deprived communities in Wales (Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2008). Nine mothers and their daughters participated in the project. I previously lived in Hystryd and this shared sense of geography positioned me as ‘experience near’ (Anderson 2002, p.23). Consequently, it was important to address my position as an indigenous researcher and make a deliberate cognitive effort to question my taken for granted assumptions of that which I had thought familiar (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995).

Participant-directed visual data production techniques of photo-elicitation, mapping and collage were selected to limit the propensity for participants’ accounts to be overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding (see Mannay, 2010). Participants took photographs of, drew maps of, and made collages depicting, meaningful places, spaces and activities, then discussed them with me in tape-recorded interviews to ensure I understood what they intended to communicate (Rose, 2001).

‘Possible selves’ narratives were also elicited – participants were asked to produce narratives from the retrospective perspective of their childhood self, describing who they wanted to become (positive possible self) and who they feared becoming (negative possible self), and this activity was repeated from the perspective of the present. For this chapter, I have selected data produced with one mother, Zoe [2], drawing from interviews around her ‘possible selves’ narratives, to explore the centrality of ‘trouble’ in family life and the ways in which family troubles are both normalised and pathologised.

When I was just a little girl

This section draws from the retrospective accounts of Zoe thinking back to her childhood possible selves and analyses the connections between individual biography and the future self. The extract below is taken from Zoe's retrospective past 'possible selves' narratives written from the perspective of being a dependent young daughter.

'I wanted to be a nurse when I was younger. I've always had a very caring side that wanted to help other people and feel that my daughters are the same.'

This narrative fits with wider discourses of appropriate work for women and the naturalisation of women's capacity to care. However, when we examine the accompanying interview we see how the career aspiration is related to the prevalence of domestic violence.

Zoe: I didn't think I would be able to, I didn't think I was intelligent enough to become a nurse, so I never bothered, but I think I only wanted to be a nurse because of what my Mother went through and everything, 'cause I wanted to stop people getting hurt... Well to help people that got hurt

The ambition of nursing was not only a vocation embedded in discourses of women's work but a reaction to an individual biography where violence in the home was prevalent and sustained, and one where her mother frequently '*got hurt*', a discourse we see in Zoe's retrospective negative 'possible selves' narrative.

'My Dad was quite abusive to my Mum when I was growing up and I didn't want to end up with someone like him. Although I love my Dad because he's my Dad, I hate

him sometimes because of what he put my Mum through... Another negative self would have been that I wasn't able to protect my Mum and felt quite helpless when she suffered at my father's hands.'

The extract illustrates the difficulty of 'loving *and* hating the same person' (Lucey 201X, p.xx); and throughout the account there is sadness about the child's inability to intervene, "I wasn't able to protect my Mum", and an associated guilt, which although dismissed by adult rationality still lingers unforgiving and pervasively regulates Zoe's adult life. An insight into the weight of this perceived culpability is evident in a memory Zoe shares about the aftermath of an episode of domestic violence.

Zoe explains how her father broke her mother's arm and after this incident her mother wanted him to leave the family home. Zoe's father sat Zoe down and told her that her mother wanted him to leave but that the decision was in her hands. Zoe was to decide whether her father should stay or leave. In a violently charged and highly coercive atmosphere, Zoe said that her father should stay. The self-reproach of Zoe's narrative is palpable, and although an adult rationality of the situation is presented in part and echoed by my own interactions with Zoe, confirming that her father would have remained whatever her reply, these unanswerable possibilities continue to haunt the present.

The physical violence in Zoe's parental home had, according to Zoe, abated some years prior to the interview. The catalyst for the change after three decades of physical abuse was an incident when a grandchild was unintentionally embroiled in a physical

conflict. The near injury of the grandchild resulted in the expulsion of Zoe's father from the family home as discussed in the following extract.

Zoe: He haven't he haven't hit her since, I think because of what he done to [grandchild], he sort of thought *oh my God*, like I just hurt my [grandchild] now as well so its got to stop... Yeah she kicked him out ages didn't she, for about a year, and then she had him back silly cow (laughs) (both laugh) but he haven't hit her since

Zoe found her mother's decision to take her father back disappointing. Zoe uses the phrase 'silly cow' in a humorous tone, illustrated by the responding laughter, but there is an underlying frustration in her voice. In an earlier study, Walkerdine (1997) describes a family in which domestic violence is prevalent. Walkerdine suggests the daughter holds deep pre-Oedipal feelings about her mother that can be turned into dislike for a woman who it seems must deserve the beatings she is getting.

The pre-Oedipal case may be relevant, but here, for Zoe, this resentment appears to be more connected with the ongoing sense of responsibility carried from childhood and built up through the life of the maternal relationship. Therefore, although actual bodily harm no longer characterises the relationship, the legacy of domestic abuse remains a powerful and pervasive presence, which elicits a new narrative of protection;

Zoe: Yeah that's what I mean about her like she likes a full house she don't like to be on her own with my Dad

This extract is taken from Zoe's second interview where we discuss her retrospective narrative account of domestic violence. Zoe explains that she endeavours to visit her mother daily and that there is an unspoken rule of protection amongst her and her siblings. As Page and Jha (2009, p. 106) maintain girls are still often taught to be 'housebound, caring and self-sacrificing' and, in conversations about education and employment, Zoe describes how she has sacrificed her own opportunities to provide a protective presence in her childhood home.

Zoe's own ambitions and her plans to better herself and improve her own family's prospects disrupted this perceived duty of care and caused an unliveable tension, resulting in the abandonment of training and employment opportunities and confinement to low paid, unqualified care work. Bates (1991) explored male violence in conjunction with working-class girls' involvement with and training for low level employment in the care sector. In homes where male violence forms part of the everyday, Bates (1994) proposes that family background mediates a set of social attributes that prepare young women to deal with the emotional and physical violence against employees; endemic in the caring sector.

Therefore, as well as conforming to a prevailing ideology of 'sacrificial femininity' (Holloway, 2006) the disciplinary socialisation acts as a vehicle for learning 'to take' physical abuse. Importantly, Bates' (1991) focus on violent practices regulated in the culture of the home reinforces the salience of the normalisation of male violence. I expand on this 'normalisation' in the following section.

But that was just a slap

Phillips (2003) argues that although it is rare for girls to use physical violence on a regular basis, studies focusing on the meaning of violence in girls lives show how violence is perceived by many young girls and women as ‘normal’ and routine.

Although Zoe recognises her childhood experiences as abusive, there is a tacit expectance and acceptance of what she interprets as lower level physical violence, and a distinction between acceptable and expected violence as opposed to the unacceptable, illustrated in the following extract presented as everyday family life.

Zoe: Yeah (laughs) (both laugh) I’d beat one [brother] up and then they’d all tie me down and batter me (laughs) all of ‘em booting me in the head and all that

Interviewer: Oh no

Zoe: Yeah (laughs) its funny thinking about it

Interviewer: Was it, did you used to get frightened at the time or didn’t you used to care

Zoe: No, I mean you just used to rage and didn’t care if they used to hit you then, I can remember one time my brother chucked a snooker ball at my head

Interviewer: Ah no

Zoe: So I picked up the snooker cue and snapped it across his head

This memoire of sibling fighting is presented as ‘normal’ family life and the laughter and commentary “its funny thinking about it” belies the embodiment of violence.

However, Zoe introduces this childhood reflection after discussing her own children and saying “I didn’t want to have kids that fought all the time”, implying that her upbringing was not as painless as the laughter and colloquialisms suggest. When I ask

about her parent's response to this sibling 'play' Zoe's answer reinforces the admissibility of aggressive physicality.

Zoe: Mum and Dad used to just let us fight, they used to say just fight it out

Interviewer: Did they?

Zoe: Yeah (laughs) they used to just sit back until one of us got hurt and they'd be right that's enough now, you deserved that (laughs) (both laugh) yeah

This 'hands off' parenting process "just sit back until one of us got hurt" suggests a continuum of aggression that moves from harmless sibling rivalry to something that must be curtailed in response to injury (see Lucey, 2012). The extent of the physical damage acts as a signifier between the harmless and the harmful. The permissive attitude to violence within the home was not reflected in Zoe's use of outdoor space, where her mother's parenting took a more proactive stance.

Zoe: I was always taught that I had to fight to defend myself like

Interviewer: Mmm

Zoe: So if I ever got into an argument my Mum used to say right get out that street now and batter her now or I'll batter you

Interviewer: Did she?

Zoe: Yeah (laughs) (both laugh) I'd rather give someone else a hiding than have one off my mother (laughs)... she wanted me to be a stronger person and she was just thinking like she won't be going through this when she's got boyfriends

Interviewer: Yeah

Zoe: Just make her tough and then she'll never take any of it... and in a way it's worked 'cause I wouldn't there's no way I would take any one hitting me

Zoe was taught to fight back and non-compliance was met with the threat of physical punishment from her mother, an imagined "hiding" that would make the street fight pale in comparison. Cawson (2002) argues that there is a strong overlap between the physical abuse of children and domestic violence, and from a child protection perspective, Zoe's childhood account could be read as abusive.

However, Zoe reflects on sibling and peer violence within and outside the home pragmatically, explaining that her mother wanted her to be a "stronger person", one who would not become a victim of domestic abuse. This parental protection strategy of 'fighting fire with fire' has had some success according to Zoe, who justifies her mother's actions with the phrase "in a way it's worked". However, tactics to impart the tools of self-defense through the medium of violence can have unintended consequences in that defence becomes attack.

Zoe: I think that's what frightened me the once and once he [Zoe's partner] did threaten me when I was sat on the toilet and that and that's when my Dad really battered my Mum when she was sat on the toilet once... so that brought back memories and I was like no you're gone, and like that was the second time I kicked him out, but he learnt 'cause he never did it since... I have punched him in the face and all that

Interviewer: Oh have you

Zoe: Yeah (pause) and I think that's affected me from what my Dad was doing

Interviewer: Yeah

Zoe: So like I'd never let anyone hit me but I've hit them, and I shouldn't have done

Interviewer: D'you feel bad then

Zoe: Yeah I was really violent before, you know I didn't batter him or nothing, but it's just like I punched him in the face, hit him with a sweeping brush, I been nasty and all that

Interestingly, this conversation evolves from Zoe's retrospective positive possible self narrative where there is an idealised representation of a future husband 'one day I would have a prince charming to marry'. However, Town and Adams's (2000) conception of the Beast Prince is evoked a few minutes after this introduction of 'perfect love' when Zoe talks about how her partner frightened her in an incident that corresponds with a specific childhood memory of domestic violence. Here the pedagogical training in self-defence and the adage "there's no way I would take any one hitting me" is tested.

Zoe draws on these resources to challenge and resist domestic abuse but the recurrence of domestic abuse elicits a violent reaction and engenders a set of new difficulties in which Zoe employs violence to guard against victimization – "So like I'd never let anyone hit me but I've hit them [her partner], and I shouldn't have done". Zoe acknowledges this behaviour is wrong and although she does not want to be in the same position as her mother, neither does she want to act like her father, citing him as the source of her aggression, "I think that's affected me from what my Dad was doing". Identification with either parent has damaging connotations and Zoe

needs to establish ground from which she can split the ‘bad’ mother and the ‘bad’ father away from her identity as an acceptable self, partner and mother (Klein, 1975).

Again we see techniques of justification embodied in the type of physical violence. Feminine violence is often viewed as ‘doubly deviant’ (Phillips, 2003) and Zoe differentiates her actions from perceived ‘real’ violence “I didn’t batter him or nothing”. Zoe may have “punched him in the face, hit him with a sweeping brush” and she admits “I been nasty and all that”. However, the domestic violence endured by her mother went beyond surface physicality, there were injuries sustained and the embodied legacy of bruises, cuts and broken bones affiliated with ‘*battering*’. Being ‘*nasty*’ allows for a retention of femininity, the composite ‘mean girl’ (Ringrose, 2006), in a way that ‘battering’ cannot allow. ‘*Battering*’ is more than ‘*just a slap*’ it represents a troubling masculinity embodied in the both loved and hated father figure. Violence then cannot sit easily with femininity but there seems to be something about being feminine that also engenders abuse. This was the impasse that confronted Zoe’s mother and now it has become a consideration for the next generation.

Zoe: She [her daughter] don’t see no violence in my house so I don’t understand it (pause) she’s always fighting in the street, I’ve had to stop her going out and all that... Yeah she’s not scared of no one maybe she got that from me, I don’t know but she’s never seen me fight or be aggressive like

Zoe is not sure how to address her daughter’s fighting. It is causing difficulties with the neighbours but learning not to be “scared of no one” has served Zoe well because

she is not a victim of domestic violence. The grading of violence has rendered many forms of aggression invisible and Zoe is convinced that her daughter has “never seen me fight or be aggressive”. The subjective identification of aggression discounts many words and actions that do not fall within ‘*battering*’ and the extract below is typical of an exchange that describes an argument between her and her brother when they are visiting their mother’s and father’s home.

Zoe: And if I shouts at him and that he just gets abusive towards me then call me a stupid C. U. N. T. or

Interviewer: Yeah

Zoe: Fat bitch or something, or shut your fucking mouth or I’ll punch you in the face

This conversation is tied to the rivalry between cousins on visits to Zoe’s mothers and the way in which the children’s arguments become a bone of contention between siblings. Phrases like “shut your fucking mouth or I’ll punch you in the face” are commonplace in arguments between Zoe’s siblings, Zoe’s parents and within her intimate relationship.

In this way violence can be dangerously both an expected and accepted ‘family trouble’ that although recognised as ‘*aggression*’, is normalised in ways dependent on both the form of abuse and its context. As Page and Jha (2009, p.194) maintain ‘children will continue to absorb the biases of existing understandings of society and reproduce these ways of thinking in the future’, and in this familial milieu Zoe’s daughter will negotiate her femininity and face decisions about how abuse should be categorised, avoided, challenged, accepted, expected or rejected.

Concluding Remarks

There may well be new opportunities for generations of girls that exceed what was available to their mothers (Nielsen, 2004), nevertheless, this chapter demonstrates how violence actively contributes to the real and symbolic subordination of girls, and often clouds these new horizons across the life course.

A particularly problematic aspect of the data has been the distinction between acceptable low-level violence that is attached to ‘normal’ masculinity as opposed to ‘battering’. The prefix ‘*it was only*’ before the description of the attack of a ‘*slap*’ or a ‘*punch*’ indicates that many women and their daughters live with a normalised, yet pathological presence of danger that they may only consider requires action when they define it as ‘*battering*’. It is important to lift this delicately veiled guise of the common and the commonplace, and maintain that everyday cultural practices and traditions can no longer be employed to sustain domestic abuse.

Individual biographies can be useful to examine the ways in which women negotiate the darker side of family life. This chapter sought to trouble the ‘normal’, to restate and make central the salience of embodied violence in the construction and maintenance of lived femininity and masculinity, and to ask why, in a supposedly enlightened and forward thinking society, brute strength and dominant physicality remain implicit, in retaining, enforcing and regulating femininity across generations.

Notes

1. Hystryd is a pseudonym chosen to maintain the anonymity of the area.
2. Zoe is a pseudonym chosen to maintain the participant’s anonymity.

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