

Boarding School Syndrome: Disguised Attachment-deficit and Dissociation Reinforced by Institutional Neglect and Abuse

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... the ex-boarder is a master of emotional disguise.

Joy Schaverien, 2011, p. 147

Introduction

This paper is based on the talk I gave at the invitation of the Inner City Centre Psychotherapy Charity on 26 January 2013. As far as I know it was the first time a boarding school survivor—myself—had addressed a group of therapists, counsellors, and trainees as a survivor.

Leaving home at eight

To start my talk I used the beginning of the TV documentary *Leaving Home at 8* (2010).¹ I did so because the opening graphically illustrates the struggle of Sandra, mother of April, to override her maternal instincts of attuned attachment as she faces the prospect of her daughter going off to prep boarding school, due to her husband's army commitments. I chose it because unlike some of the other documentary material on boarding schools it cannot be dismissed as being "dated". The film follows the story of four eight-year-old girls as they struggle to cope with their first term at a co-educational preparatory boarding school, the prestigious *Highfield* in Hampshire. In many respects it is a reprise of James Robertson's path-breaking 1952 film *A Two-year-old Goes to Hospital*,² made with the encouragement of John Bowlby, which illustrates the effects on a young child of being left alone in hospital without her mother. This gave rise to a campaign that led to the abolition of this practice in the 1960s.

A brief history of the diagnostic category boarding school syndrome (BSS)

The diagnostic term actually originates with Dr Charles Brasfield (2001), a psychiatrist who worked for many years among the the indigenous people of British Columbia (BC), Canada. He invented the comparable term “residential school syndrome” (RSS), because many of his clients had suffered terribly in residential (or boarding) schools set up under the auspices of various churches (latterly government funded), to “Europeanise” them. An article titled “residential school syndrome” first appeared in the *British Columbia Medical Journal* in March 2001, but drew on earlier versions going back to August 1998. I think it is safe to say that the idea has been around for about fifteen years.

The abstract for the article announced: “Many of the suggested diagnostic features are similar to the diagnosis of PTSD, but with specific cultural impact” (Brasfield, 2001, p. 78). The work of Brasfield and others, and the vigorous campaigning of survivors, eventually led to the foundation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in June 2009.³

The effects of RSS/BSS in Canada amount, in the opinion of some, to a cultural and physical genocide in the indigenous peoples of Canada. It is estimated that several thousand young people died from disease, malnutrition, cultural heartbreak, and homesickness in such schools.⁴ No one knows the exact number because there are no comprehensive records. Our boarding school issues, while very serious are of a somewhat different order. There were deaths here too, as Hislop’s recent three-part series *Stiff Upper Lip*, a BBC2 TV series of October 2012, shows.⁵ Until quite recently this Canadian work continued in parallel with, but largely unknown to, the work going on in the British Isles.

Nick Duffell—the British pioneer

Before acknowledging the pioneering work of psychotherapist Nick Duffell, I want to take a look at a moving anecdotal critique from the early nineteenth century. Here satirist and novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (1863) describes how he felt as a six-year-old in 1811, on departing for school, alone, in the stage coach of the day:

Twang goes the horn: up goes the trunk; down come the steps. Bah! I see the autumn evening: I hear the wheels: I smart the cruel smart again; and, boy or man, have never been able to bear the sight of people parting from their children. (Thackeray, 1863, quoted in Brendon, 2009, p. 9)

Thackeray, like many other British children of the Raj (Brendon, 2006), had been sent to boarding school in England while his mother and her new husband remained in Calcutta for the next three years. He later wrote:

We Indian children were consigned to a school . . . governed by a horrible little tyrant, who made our young lives so miserable that I remember kneeling by my little bed of a night, and saying, "Pray God, I may dream of my mother!" (Thackeray, 1863, p. 143)

A Bowlbian *avant la lettre*, we could say.

Duffell's route into working with boarding school survivors was via the Men's Movement of the mid-1980s, itself a response to the feminist revolution of the 1960s. Here he discovered what he called the "nameless shame" of those wounded by boarding school, himself included, and to his eternal credit as a novice psychotherapist grew curious about it. In his book *The Making of Them* (Duffell, 2000), he says:

I began to wonder how such a "survival personality" gets constructed and how it endures for so long . . . One day one of my clients really hit the nail on the head, saying: "I became a strategic person, always on the look out for danger and how to turn every situation to my best advantage. I still do it. It's exhausting. I don't know how to stop doing it." That was exactly it, I thought, it is a "strategic survival personality" that we are dealing with. (Duffell, 2000, p. 10)

Duffell went on to describe the "survival personality" of a man sent away to board at five and a half, as being in a "classic double-bind", on account of his shame at being shamefully treated. He identified a "second double-bind" due to the conviction that "there will be little sympathy because it happened in an institution of privilege, because his parents are wealthy enough to have chosen that for him." (p. 55) Now while these are undoubtedly very painful contradictions, I do not think they are "double-binds", at least not in the original sense explored by Gregory Bateson in the 1950s. (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956). Double-binds require two contradictory messages to be imposed on the "victim" (as Bateson called the recipients) in a way that the victim finds it impossible to define the exact nature of the paradoxical situation in which he/she is caught.

I do think that a "double bind" situation does exist in the case of the early boarder, but it is located elsewhere and is of a more painful, destructive, and fundamental nature than the ones Duffell identifies. In my view its nature is akin to that of an "emotional-deprivation torture", and comparable to the "fear without solution" created by the fear-inducing care-giver identified by attachment theory researcher Mary Main (Main & Hesse, 1992). It is this: there is a continuing attachment imperative in the early boarder, which unconsciously pleads "please, please keep me in close proximity to my primary care-giver; or at least let the separation be of a bearable length, hours not days or weeks." However, the mores of upper class culture assume the direct opposite, that it is time for independence and for cutting the apron strings. Pithily summed up by

a Mr Woodard, founder of Ardingly public school (and others) in 1858 who said the aim was to, “remove the child from the noxious influence of home and home comforts”! (*Stiff Upper Lip*, 2012, part 2) This crass formulation, unintentionally, points to the enormous losses sustained by the child sent off to boarding school at a young age.⁶

That is the fate which awaits almost every upper-class child—certainly the boys—it is just the “done thing”, beyond question. That *is* the unspeakable double-bind (and real double-binds have to be unspoken) to which the boarding school child is subjected.

Joy Schaverien—hidden trauma of the privileged

Joy Schaverien, a Jungian psychoanalyst and art psychotherapist, and non-boarder, followed in Nick Duffell’s footsteps, building on her own extensive clinical work with boarders. In 2004 she published a paper in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* “Boarding school: the trauma of the ‘privileged’ child”. No one before her had linked “trauma” with “privilege” quite so directly. This was followed by another, more elaborated paper in May 2011, “Boarding school syndrome: broken attachments a hidden trauma”, in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* (*BJP*). This stirred up considerable media interest, leading to a headline in *The Telegraph* “Does ‘brusque’ and ‘rude’ David Cameron suffer from Boarding School Syndrome?” (Brown, 2011), and led to an extended *BJP* correspondence (Duffell, 2012a,b; Partridge, 2012a,b; Standish, 2011, 2012).

Although Duffell had described many features of the traumas associated with boarding, Schaverien was the first, in the British context, to identify a pattern and call it a “syndrome” (she confirmed to me in a personal communication that she was unaware of the Canadian precedent). I was at the same time working on a similar formulation with regard to my paper on the upper-class psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft, which I called “British upper-class complex trauma syndrome: the case of Charles Rycroft” (2011). Here I extended the syndrome back into Rycroft’s familial environment, and identified it for the first time as a type of “complex trauma” (Herman, 1992, 2001).

Schaverien maintained that “it is not my intention to pathologize all those who attended boarding school” (2011, p. 140). I find this intention (one shared by Duffell in his pronouncement, “Recognising the problem of boarding school survival is not about identifying yet another group of victims . . .” (2000, p. 39)) logically incompatible with her attachment-inspired observation: “For the first time in their life the child may be in a situation where there is no intimate contact; no love. *Even when not mistreated, being left in the care of strangers is traumatic.*” (p. 141, my emphasis)

Like Duffell, I think that Schaverien underestimates the losses and consequent pain suffered by psyche and soma (Bowlby, 1980, p. 69) associated with the upper class family and the boarding school nexus. There is considerable talk in her paper about the “self”, as if it is already some unified, well-formed entity. But we are not examining here an adult self suddenly impacted by a natural disaster, accident, or horrors of war or concentration camp. We are confronting a child “self” that is still in the process of developing its identity and thus vulnerable to influence or mind control.

We are looking at a situation of continuing extreme stress and neglect (and sometimes the sort of outright physical and sexual abuse documented in the film *Chosen*⁷), what has come to be called “complex trauma” or DESNOS, disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified (Herman, 1992). This process, it seems to me now, is more like the radical disruption of the formation of any true self. Perhaps Schaverien (2011) is getting near this when she observes:

The child in the boarding school is bereft because his or her primary attachments can no longer be relied upon; the environment has become unsafe. Later problems arise because, as time passes, the self remains unknown. (Schaverien, 2011, p. 142)

To me this seems to signify that self-development or, in Jungian terms, individuation, has been arrested and disrupted. The description “unformed” or even “non-existent” seems nearer the mark, and in this way the “self” comes to resemble the “dissociated identity” increasingly familiar to early trauma therapists.

Schaverien devotes considerable space in her paper to examining why there has been so little recognition of BSS in the analytic and psychotherapy communities. The reasons she gives all seem to carry weight to me:

- Deference by the therapist in response to upper class “confidence”;
- Collusion with the client if therapist is of the same class background; and
- The subtlety of “emotional disguise” (dissociation) that many ex-boarders can deploy after a boarding indoctrination lasting ten years or more, and a family tradition quite possibly extending over two or more generations.

However, perhaps we have to recognise two other factors. First, the reality that people from this background wield influence and power out of all proportion to their numbers (less than one per cent of children attend boarding schools in the UK). Successful treatment of such clients shades into making them “class traitors” to their families, friends, and perhaps employers, with all that that implies.

Second, the fact that until quite recently we have lacked a coherent conceptual framework within which to address the problem. As Rycroft tellingly put it later in his life:

Sharpe [his training analyst] had only been interested in the Oedipus complex and infantile sexuality, and that loss, bereavement, grief—subjects about which I then needed enlightenment—did not enter into her theoretical scheme of things. (Rycroft, 1995, p. 453)

And we still lack, as Schaverien admits, any large-scale psycho-social evidence base—and gaining access to boarders and ex-boarders will be intrinsically difficult. This is not so true of Canada where, in a different and more extreme situation, quite a lot of evidence has been gathered, some immediate, some longitudinal (The Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2003), and much more is being collected by the TRC. Hopefully, with more contact, British researchers and therapists can learn something from this.

At the end of her 2011 paper Schaverien proposes that the “painful experience of boarding . . . inhabits the shadowy realm of split-off negative emotions” (Schaverein, 2011, p. 153). She recognises that we have not grasped the full extent and gradations of this debilitating condition and suggests the need for “further exploration . . . and a specialist framework within which to consider approaches to working with ex-boarders” (Schaverein, 2011, p. 153). I agree with her assessment, and here’s my survivor’s contribution.

The triple lock

I see the early boarder as subject to a profound double-bind or “fear without solution” in triplicate. We could call this a “triple lock” from which it is almost impossible to escape without informed and empathic therapeutic assistance.

First, as usually a member of a family where an avoidant/dismissing attachment pattern predominates: where physical contact is sparse or non-existent, in which emotions are discouraged or inexpressible, where intra-familial relationships are already “detached” or “professionalised” through nannies or au pairs. Perhaps this is also a defensive measure that dissipates somewhat the pain of premature separation, which *Leaving Home at 8* illustrates so well.

Second, by entry to a pedagogy that removes the child from what elements of secure attachment that might exist—for example, pets, siblings, nannies/au pairs, and familiar surroundings, yet at the same becomes a surrogate care-giver of sorts demanding its own avoidant attachment behaviour (hence the often extraordinary “allegiance” to school or club), and which then compromises any simple return to “home”.⁸

Third, this avoidant/dismissing attachment pattern is legitimised by, and is the norm of, the wider culture of the ruling elite that places power, influence, and instrumental control (rationalised as “public duty”—the *Stiff Upper Lip* well demonstrated this) at the core of its *raison d’être*, leaving

little or no room for emotional warmth and security. Though there is sometimes a false “bonhomie” epitomised in the renowned behaviour of London’s mayor Boris Johnson. Indeed, deviation from the “avoidant mean” in any of the spheres threatens the intricate balance that has been achieved between them, at great emotional cost. “Do not rock the boat” captures this precarious equilibrium—dissociation has become *de rigueur*.

As I know from bitter experience, our upper classes by their upbringing and schooling, sadly forego the opportunity to develop a real, sentient, and reflective self. Falsity rules and instead there is an instrumental carapace (see “apparently normal personality”, below), which can often function quite well, even apparently very well, in situations that do not need empathy or that even require cruelty. We only have to think of the appalling crimes committed in the name of Empire and class coercion, and, yes, current “austerity”. Duffell’s “strategic survival personality” certainly rings bells with me, but does not seem to capture my sense of being a helpless victim nor the vacuous emotional incapacity that goes with the condition. Possibly, in more severe cases of BSS, “strategic” descends into something closer to the “disorganised states of mind” described so well in attachment theory.

This functioning-up-to-a-point personality does seem to fit rather well with the “apparently normal personality” (ANP) described in Nijenhuis, Van der Hart, and Steele’s paper “Trauma-related structural dissociation of the personality” (2004). This argues that under prolonged trauma (which the triple lock guarantees) there is a structural dissociation in the embryonic self as between what they call the “emotional personality” (that holds most of the trauma) and the ANP which continues to deal with the world as best it can. One could see early boarding as a crucial agent of a social system (family, school, and upper class society), by means of which a necessarily “apparently normal personality” is consolidated and then conditioned to function for its instrumental role in the ruling elite. This paper, which I have only discovered recently in the course of preparing for my talk, is closely argued, rich in evidence, and for me threw new light on the function and consequences of early boarding.

Are there other ways of identifying the boarding school personality which resonate?

Perhaps we could modify the taunt “chinless wonder” into a less eugenic, more psychological, “mindless wonder”. Does that describe Chancellor Osborne when he gets up and spouts, without batting an eyelid, without blushing, the ridiculous lie “We’re all in this together”?

My reaction to the non-recognition of my boarding school trauma

What happened to me in 2005, post my last analysis of six years, when I first really caught up with my boarding school victim⁹ status? To be honest I went

into a rage (Partridge, 2007). I felt that not only had I been abandoned by my parents at school, but I had also been abandoned by the institution of psychoanalysis and my psychoanalysts. I am still pretty angry, but I hope I am dealing with it. Recently I found myself another, non-analytic, integrative therapist. It helped when he said knowingly: “remember the twenty year rule, Simon; every new idea takes at least twenty years to enter the public domain.” Well, that is about the length of time Duffell and Schaverien have been on the case. So, from now on I do not think ignorance can be an excuse.

Positively, I channel my feelings about boarding and growing understanding of its consequences into work with the campaigning and support organisation Boarding Concern¹⁰—and by writing about the issues and giving talks. Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (2001) is a sort of bible for me on how to recover. For her, recovery from trauma is largely about building inner capacity, from a position of safety, to reconnect to self and society, and often groups are part of that. I also belong to a small men’s self-support group which meets every two or three weeks. And I have started a training course with Camila Batmanghelidjh’s Kids Company to gain some skills in working with traumatised children.

But there is a lot of sadness and grieving, which I think is even more difficult to address than the anger. For the pleasures of childhood irrevocably missed: my sister, thirteen months younger than me, was sent for full boarding at eight, (from six, like me, she was a weekly boarder, away Monday to Friday) literally three miles down the road from my school, yet I never saw her in term time! For the lack of good parenting, for the awful experience of loneliness and abandonment: in many ways our parents became strangers to me and my sister—how awful is that? And for the time lost in taking so long to undo the inner blockages and damage; to shake up those life-saving yet dreadfully limiting avoidant–dismissing attachment templates. I wish I had got there at thirty-five and not nearly sixty!

Some policy suggestions

While we may not have yet grasped the full extent and exact nature of BSS I think it is beyond reasonable doubt that there is a highly disabling psychosomatic syndrome associated with early boarding, usually compounded by the upper class familial environment and ruling culture. Some policy recommendations flow from this awareness:

1. Any therapist (or referral therapist) should try and ascertain in a tactful way whether their client has been subjected to boarding, particularly early boarding. They would then at least be alerted to a potentially difficult task and some of the pitfalls ahead. To what extent one-to-one therapy or group

therapy is most efficacious, or indeed a combination—or whether words alone are sufficient to uncover and repair the consequences—remains to be determined by the outcome of further research and experience. Indeed, psychotherapists and counsellors could contribute to this by pooling their knowledge. As Schaverien points up, they may well be in a privileged position in this respect. There is now a network of informed therapists.¹¹

2. A society that promotes early boarding as a desirable and superior form of pedagogy seems on the evidence we now have, and in the light of attachment research and the neuroscience of healthy brain development, to be behaving irrationally and immorally, because it puts the children submitted to such a regime at grave psychological and emotional risk. The evidence seems beyond reasonable doubt, and it follows that the institution of early boarding should be phased out forthwith for those aged thirteen or less—a recommendation shared by the organisation Boarding Concern. Indeed, this is the norm in most of continental Europe.
3. I would hope that the various bodies that represent accredited psychotherapy organisations and trainings could, at this late hour, find their way to making an informed statement on the psychological and emotional damage caused by early boarding. We have a precedent in the campaigning work which James Robertson and John Bowlby—of which the already mentioned film *A Two-year-old Goes to Hospital* was an instrumental part—initiated in the 1950s round the issue of young children being separated from their parents on entry to hospital. Their campaign came to fruition in the 1960s and such medical practice would today be unthinkable. I hope one day, before too long, we will wonder why we ever sent young, desperately vulnerable children off to boarding school. The Empire has gone!

The victims (see note 9) of boarding school have been “smarting the cruel smart” for an unconscionable length of time! It is high time that victims, survivors, psychotherapists, and sympathisers came together in a working alliance to campaign to put an end to early boarding and *prevent* this avoidable trauma and its appalling emotional consequences. It would have the added advantage of removing the pool from which an apparently normal but dissociated elite could be drawn.

Notes

1. *Leaving Home at 8* was directed by Charles Russell for Channel 4 TV's *The Cutting Edge* series. See References for details.
2. See also <https://classnet.wcdsb.ca/sec/StD/Gr11/History/soc,psych,anthro,smukavich/Shared%20Documents/3%20-%20Sociology/2%20-%20Socialization/A%202%20year%20old%20goes%20to%20the%20hospital%20summary.pdf>. Accessed 17 March 2013. See References for details.

3. The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in 2009 as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement negotiated with the Canadian government by survivors of residential schools for indigenous peoples—see their evolving website www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3. Accessed 17 March 2013.
4. A recent report in *The London Free Press* (Canada) reveals that at least 3,000 young people died—www.thewhig.com/2013/02/22/pov-time-to-reveal-all-details-on-lost-young-native-lives. Accessed 17 March 2013.
5. See Partridge, 2013.
6. The issue of loss is covered comprehensively in Volume 3 of Bowlby's trilogy *Attachment and Loss* (1980), although this is mostly in connection with mourning. As Bowlby points up, one of the consequences of prolonged loss, such as we see in boarding schools, is the "deactivation" of internal behavioural systems, and in this instance it seems that the attachment system is particularly vulnerable. The "stiff upper lip" would be one consequence. (p. 66)
8. *Chosen* (2008), directed by Brian Wood, details the grooming, systematic sexual abuse, and horrific consequences suffered by three pupils at Caldicott boarding school in the 1960s and 1970s. It was first broadcast on More4 on 30 September 2008, and an extract can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?gl=GB&hl=en-GB&v=RipR6yFXD44 (the full film is not available due to impending legal action).
8. Bowlby (1980) draws attention to Piaget's finding (1937) of how closely tied to a particular location a person is in the mind of a young child. Perhaps this explains why I felt so "lost" during my time at prep boarding school. (Bowlby, 1980, pp. 436-437)
9. The use of the descriptor "victim" can be controversial. But as Herman's (2001) trauma therapeutics ably testify, recognition of "victimhood" is the first step on the road to recovery and to becoming a reflective survivor rather than a passive victim.
10. For more information go to www.boardingconcern.org.uk
11. For information about therapists specialising in boarding school traumas contact www.boardingrecovery.com/contact.htm

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