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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The trouble with trauma: Interconnected forms of violence in the lives of repeatedly criminalised men

Sarah Anderson

Lecturer in Criminology, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh

Correspondence
Sarah Anderson, Lecturer in Criminology, Edinburgh Napier University, 9 Sighthill Ct, Edinburgh EH11 4BN, Edinburgh.
Email: s.anderson2@napier.ac.uk

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Abstract

Focus on the interconnection of interpersonal violence, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma and justice-involvement has increased interest internationally among policymakers and practitioners working within criminal justice contexts for 'trauma-informed' approaches and interventions which facilitate recovery. This article discusses limitations of employing these concepts to make sense of the lives of criminal-justice involved people. Drawing on UK-based research using interviews and collage-workshops to gather autobiographical narratives of 16 repeatedly-criminalised men, a case vignette is presented to show the institutional and structural contexts of interpersonal violence, and the critical role of the criminal justice system (CJS) in obscuring and perpetuating violence. This raises doubt about the CJS's capacity to respond to trauma. The contribution of this article is to integrate theoretical conceptualisations of violence and empirical findings to critique the possibility of trauma-informed practice (TIP) within a criminal justice context.

KEYWORDS
adverse childhood experiences, criminal justice system, narrative criminology, repeat offender, trauma, trauma-informed, violence

1 | INTRODUCTION

The interconnection of interpersonal violence, 'adverse childhood experiences' (ACEs), trauma and justice involvement has become a prominent topic among criminal justice professionals, policymakers and academics. Awareness of the criminal justice system's (CJS's) potential to retraumatise those who come into contact with it, has led to growing interest in 'trauma-informed' approaches to justice practice in the UK, US and beyond (McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021). Moreover, trauma is increasingly construed as the path *into* criminal justice and recovery as the path *out*. For all its progressive aspirations, the associated discourses tend to frame the CJS as the receiver of people traumatised by (interpersonal) violence, and as a mechanism by which it might be prevented and resolved. For example, the Scottish Government's (2022) 'vision for justice' declares the intention of delivering 'effective, modern, person-centred and trauma-informed approaches to justice' (p.18), where 'everyone is supported to recover from the harm and trauma and possible retraumatisation they have experienced' (p.22). Conversely, this article aims to show how the CJS not only perpetrates violence and trauma, but is critical in obscuring – and so perpetuating – other violent and traumatic experiences.

This article arises from empirical research exploring recovery from trauma among a group of men who had moved, or were trying to move, away from offending and repeated CJS-involvement. This research necessarily required engagement with their experiences of violence and almost incessant exposure to a myriad of other forms of harm and hardship. Although not the research's focus, the role played by different forms of violence – institutional, symbolic and structural, as well as interpersonal – in shaping the men's narratives emerged as an important finding.

It is hardly new that people in the CJS have experienced trauma, violence and deprivation, nor that structural factors facilitate these experiences. But attending closely to the complex interplay between different forms of violence in the men's lives suggests the futility of individualised responses to trauma, and to the dark irony of many proposed CJS responses: the adoption of narrow decontextualised framings of trauma, the promises of 'trauma-informed' practice (TIP) or 'care' which 'avoid retraumatisation', and of services which support recovery might well be regarded as a form of institutional gaslighting by a system which has denial, responsibilisation and isolation at its core.

In what follows, I present critiques of interpersonal violence, trauma and ACEs, introducing concepts of violence from zemiology, sociology and peace studies, to establish a wider basis for understanding harms experienced by criminalised people. After introducing the study's methods and participants, I present Gary's[1] case vignette to exemplify how participants' narratives of interpersonal victimisation were situated in wider contexts of structural and symbolic violence. The vignette reveals how intersecting and overlapping structures of violence obstructed Gary's path, with criminal justice institutions both demanding and hindering his efforts to find a better life. The contribution of this article is to integrate theoretical conceptualisations of violence with empirical findings, in the form of insights from Gary's life, to critique TIP within the CJS. While the article is focused on Scotland, this critique is relevant to the growing number of international contexts where such approaches are being implemented. This critique is not merely of poor (even

vacuous) implementation in UK police services and prisons that does not sufficiently reflect theoretical understandings of trauma and recovery (Herman, 1992), although I would agree with this as well. Rather it is that, at their very core, criminal justice organisations are violent and traumatising and so the antithesis of trauma-informed. To talk of trauma-informed criminal justice practice then only serves to dissemble, and so sustain the dynamics of violence.

2 | LIMITATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE: EXPLORING INSTITUTIONAL, STRUCTURAL AND SYMBOLIC FORMS

Traditional conceptualisations of violence focus on physical *actions*, and *intentions* to harm, centring interpersonal violence. Alternative conceptualisations recognise that 'highly different means may lead to highly similar results' (Galtung, 1969, p.177), including pain, injury, poor mental health and early death. These approaches focus on avoidable *outcomes*, such as 'physical or non-physical harm' (Iadicola & Shupe, 2013, p.26) or where 'the real level of needs satisfaction [falls] below what is potentially possible' (Galtung, 1990, p.292). This enables us to see other scenarios as violent, including inactions, and institutional/structural arrangements. 'Structural violence' (Galtung, 1969) includes harm from the 'hierarchical ordering of categories of people' within society, as well as violence pursued in aid of such arrangements (Iadicola & Shupe, 2013, p.35). 'Institutional violence' includes that which 'occurs by the action of an organization and their agents' (Iadicola & Shupe, 2013, p.33) within societal institutions: economy, polity/government, family, education and religion. These dimensions of violence overlap.

Institutional/structural forms of violence are often slow and invisible – resulting from processes rather than events (Galtung, 1990). They may not be seen as violence by either perpetrator or victim, because both parties' cultural contexts frame their perceptions of what constitutes violence. Religion, language, art, law and science legitimise distinctions between groups: justifying poorer outcomes for – even 'direct' physical violence against – some groups. Galtung coined the term 'cultural violence' (Galtung, 1990, p.291), while Bourdieu preferred 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). Bourdieu showed how the apparently arbitrary structure of the symbolic system reproduces the social order, reinforcing existing societal relationships of domination and submission; through 'misrecognition', both the dominant *and* the dominated come to view themselves and their relationship through the lens of the dominated, while failing to see this as violence (see Thapar-Björkert, Samelius & Sanghera (2016) for exploration of these dynamics within violence against women).

Explorations of institutional and structural violence experienced by criminalised people have been particularly prominent among prison scholars, particularly writers on abolition or racialised injustice. They emphasise the institutional context of interpersonal violence within prisons (Scott, 2015) and that 'prison violence' also includes the multiple institutional processes, logics and powers of labelling that erode people's sense of hope and self over time (Armstrong, 2020; Crewe, 2011; Mills & Kendall, 2018). Recently attention has been directed towards similar deleterious effects of penal supervision (McNeill, 2019) and criminalisation (Henley, 2018). My analysis extends this work by taking participants' life stories as its unit of analysis, rather than solely CJS/prison experiences, reflecting that only part of their lives were lived within this system – much of the institutional and structural harm experienced happened beyond it. While scholars such as Wacquant (2009) and Alexander (2010) have attended at a macro level to the symbolic powers of the criminal justice and welfare systems, to legitimate classed and racialised differences and denials of rights/social support, this article privileges first-person experience of

these dynamics. The approach is used to think about limitations of trauma as a means of making sense of this experience.

3 | THE TROUBLE WITH TRAUMA AND 'ACEs'

'Trauma' is no less contested a concept than violence, although it has increasingly gained traction and legitimacy within justice circles as a way of making sense of people's experience. It is variously employed to describe a highly stressful event, or its psychological impact – usually construed as a form of psychic injury. Written into the definition of the medical diagnosis 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD) is the idea that only some events can constitute 'trauma', irrespective of the subjective meaning of events, or the person's embodied response. Diagnosis is limited to only events involving 'actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence' (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013), excluding 'non-immediate, non-catastrophic life-threatening illness, such as terminal cancer' and 'medical incidents involving natural causes, such as a heart attack' (Pai, Suris & North, 2017, p.2). By implication, traumatic events are sudden and against the natural order of things. This focuses attention on interpersonal violence, since structural violence can *seem* 'as natural as the air around us' (Galtung, 1969, p.173).

Lannamann & McNamee (2020) remind us of the dangers of 'assuming that psychological terms mirror natural categories in the world' (p.329); instead considering trauma as discourse and the role of other people, institutions and disciplines (e.g., psychiatric medicine) in determining what constitutes 'trauma', and how society responds. While recognising interpersonal violence as a cause, Reynolds (2020, p.350) argues that psychological discourse redirects attention onto a 'damaged' victim as 'the problem' to be fixed, obscuring focus from the institutional and structural context/causes of violence. Reynolds gives multiple examples of such hidden violence including 'Legislative poverty, ableism, developer-created homelessness, ongoing colonial violence, racism, anti-black racism (Hardy, 2017), white supremacy, the prison industrial complex (Maynard, 2017), cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and rape culture'. These structural features promote harm but are not targeted for interventions to promote (demand?) their recovery.

Often trauma is not a one-off event, so Herman (1992, 1997) argued for a new diagnosis, 'complex PTSD' or complex trauma which better captures the experiences of repeated or prolonged trauma exposure, 'where the victim is in a state of captivity, unable to flee' (Herman, 1992, p.377), through physical force or economic, social and psychological means. As well as somatic symptoms, this has profound effects on people's belief systems, identity and relationships. Herman's (1997) feminist analysis articulates the underlying social-structural dynamics of trauma, viewing it as inherently related to social justice. Still, as a model for psychotherapy she understandably focuses on the individual and their direct environment. Moreover, interpersonal violence still also seems privileged over other ways in which social structures manifest considerable distress and harm (e.g., sickness) – and it seems the person needs to be rendered completely helpless for this experience to be counted as trauma (Whalley & Hackett, 2017). Nevertheless, Herman importantly recognises that for traumas to be recognised this requires the mobilisation of social movements which challenge relationships of power, allowing experiences to be seen, named and understood *as* trauma (or, indeed, violence).

The rise of 'ACEs' discourse in recent years has arguably led to a revival of an overtly individualistic understanding. Epidemiological/public health research has identified a relationship between a range of ACEs and increased likelihood of poor health and social outcomes (Hughes et al., 2017). 'ACEs' commonly include: emotional, physical and sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect; violence against the mother; household members with substance use or mental health problems

or being imprisoned; and parental separation/divorce. Some experiences are relatively common, but have a cumulative impact on outcomes. ACEs discourse expands the experiences considered potentially traumatic but limits these to those occurring within the family home[2] in childhood. Once again, the family's institutional nature and the structural contexts of these experiences – poverty, racism etc. – is written out (Davidson, Critchley & Wright, 2020; Joy & Beddoe, 2019; McEwan & Gregerson, 2019), alongside other adverse experiences outside the home.

Through ACEs discourse, trauma-as-event becomes trauma-as-impact, emphasising how toxic stress affects brain development (Davidson, Critchley & Wright, 2020; McEwan & Gregerson, 2019), constructing the victim as psychologically/neurologically damaged. Narratives purporting to offer hope for change, instead reify the victim as abnormal. In Scotland, those working within prisons are expected to understand 'the neurobiological basis of trauma' in understanding 'current distress and difficulties' and its impact on behaviour (NHS Education for Scotland, 2017, p.79). The implication of this discourse is that criminal justice involvement is a consequence of (bad) biology, in what was perceptively described by one anonymous reviewer as a partial 'renaissance of biological positivist thinking in justice circles'. In linking ACEs with increased likelihood of criminalisation (e.g., Scottish Government, 2022), the person is transformed in discourse from victim into (potential) offender, their adversity into risks to be managed (see O'Mahony's (2009) critique of the Risk Factors Prevention Paradigm). While there is acknowledgement that not all those who experience ACEs go on to commit crime, anyone who has spent time within those circles since the arrival and promotion of the ACEs model across Scotland (Walsh, 2020) – will have witnessed the repeated tendency for ACEs and trauma to be proffered as both description and sufficient explanation of those found within the CJS. Carceral institutions are viewed as an unfortunate but necessary requirement for those who are 'just too damaged', with discourse about TIP optimistically viewing these as potential sites of repair. Such focus on the damaged risky person detracts attention from taken-for-granted structurally violent sociocultural, economic and political contexts, including the violence of the CJS. This article attempts to guide us back.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This article emerged from research exploring the relationship between desistance from crime and recovery from trauma within the autobiographical narratives of 16 men (Anderson, 2019). Presser (2009) distinguishes three conceptualisations of narrative in criminological research: record, interpretation and constitutive – the latter being 'the view that narratives produce experience even as experience produces narratives' (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, p.4) and that narratives might be understood as *antecedents* to – as much as consequences of – crime, trauma, desistance or recovery. In this research I variously approached narratives as a record of social events/psychological experiences, as interpretations of those experiences, as influencers of future action, and as evidence of underlying psychological dynamics. I attended to 'the 'latent' meanings of interviewees' narratives as much as the 'manifest' meanings' (Gadd, 2003, p.320), accepting that narratives can reveal unconscious, as well as social and cultural imperatives (Andrews et al., 2000). Adopting a constructivist approach to trauma, I focused on the subjective meaning of events, their impact on existing frames of meaning, and how these (re)shaped the men's lives.

The project received approval from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee and fieldwork took place in England and Scotland from 2015 to 2017.[3] Scotland has long had a distinct legal system, including, since 1971, a welfare-led Children's Hearings System for children and young people. Since 1999, policy areas including justice and health have been devolved to the Scottish parliament. Despite the Scottish Government adopting a distinctly

different tone from the UK government, both countries have a high use of imprisonment for western Europe and Scotland has the highest drug-related death rate in Europe (see Morrison, Buchan & Wooff (2021) for an introduction to the Scottish context). Scottish participants (n = 11) were recruited through one voluntary-sector service providing post-prison resettlement support serving areas in west-central Scotland, while English participants (n = 5) were geographically dispersed, recruited through conferences, the researcher's professional networks and support services. Participants were recruited with extended histories of repeat offending and two of: poor mental health, substance use problems or homelessness. Past research indicated trauma might be prominent among this group (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

Participants came from across the UK. Ages at first interview ranged from late 30s to late 50s. Given their salience to discussions of structural violence, I regret not asking participants to self-define race or religion. The overwhelming majority appeared to be white (including Gary, below), one a Black British man with parents of Caribbean origin, another 'passed' as white but described his family as 'mixed-race'. All left school by age 17 years (a small number resumed studies later), with some excluded/removed from mainstream education. All had experienced problems with illicit drugs/alcohol. They self-reported involvement in/convictions for a range of crimes, including driving, drug, acquisitive and violent offences, breach of the peace, and non-adherence with court orders. A small number reported involvement in/convictions for violence against women. All had spent repeated periods in prison/youth alternatives, often for relatively short periods. At least four had served sentences for serious violent crimes, including one for murder. Time since last prison release varied substantially: all at least a year, five at least ten years (one atypical case, 30 years). At the first interview, one was under life licence (and awaiting court for a minor possession charge), another was subject to an interdict, and a third to an unpaid work requirement. One was imprisoned for a serious offence during the study.

Interviews were undertaken over two sessions, approximately six months apart. The first used minimalist passive interviewing (Jones, 2003), while the second contained questions to clarify details, generate data and test emerging theories.[4] Prior to the interviews, I ran group art workshops with the Scottish participants, where participant-generated collages represented autobiographical narratives visually, supporting the elicitation of oral biographical narratives (Butler-Kisber, 2008). This article predominantly relies on oral data, albeit that the collages facilitated data elicitation. The analysis was informed by (although substantially adapted) the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001), which compares and contrasts events in 'the lived life', with the narrative structure of 'the told story', to consider the interrelationship between these – along with insights from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Pen portraits of each man were developed and contrasted. This article employs a case vignette to present my interpretations of our co-constructed narrative. This approach avoids fragmentation and decontextualisation of participants' words and stories, retaining the nuance, messiness and complexity of these narratives and providing a means to understand experiences in the round (Gadd, 2003; Weaver, 2016).

Researching sensitive topics carries an emotional burden for the researcher. Gary passed away before I could interview him a second time. The process of listening and relistening, reading and rereading his story was acutely painful. Too many other participants have died prematurely in the years since the fieldwork. Similar to some researchers interviewed by Dickson-Swift et al. (2007), the heavy responsibility I felt for/to my participants to do justice to their stories left me at points highly anxious, experiences captured in a research diary and explored in a conference paper (Anderson & Schinkel, 2019). Space precludes exploring the working through of those feelings here in depth. Importantly though, this emotional burden has implications for the analysis. Attending closely to my own emotions through the research interaction was important in

making sense of how events were experienced, although required careful disentangling of how those reflected the respective histories that the two parties (me and the participant) brought into that encounter. It could be argued that those emotions and sense of responsibility (exacerbated knowing that Gary had no 'right of reply'), resulted in a desire to present Gary in the 'best light', sanitising for example, his occasional use of racist language. Like some of the workers in Scanlon & Adlam's (2008) 'traumatised organisation', there is a danger that my response to Gary's own fractured internal state is to problematically identify with Gary, irrespective of behaviour, throwing myself into a fight against a 'hostile external enemy' (in this case the CJS). This has been the subject of considerable ongoing reflection. There are clearly multiple other perspectives available on the events described here and each character in Gary's story will have their own lived reality, aligning with or deviating from Gary's to different degrees. Having said this, for the purpose of my argument, it is sufficient to explore how these events were experienced for Gary, and what this means for the possibility of providing trauma-informed care to him – or others like him – within criminal justice environments.

Finally, this article focuses on negative experiences, but Gary and the other men were much more than these. Collages depicted loved ones, hobbies, religion and music. They were variously funny, political, well-read, knowledgeable and kind. This article gives only partial insight into multifaceted lives, as told to me for a specific purpose, in a specific time and place.

5 | CASE SELECTION

This article is primarily structured around the presentation of one man's story, 'Gary'. Earlier analysis grouped the men's narratives into three narrative 'positions': transformed, trapped and travelling (Anderson, 2019), which differed as to their *experience* of change; the extent to which embodied, emotional, relational and symbolic consequences of trauma, substance use or offending played an ongoing role in the present; and feelings about the future. This was a heuristic device, not a strict typology, and the men shifted between narrative positions (even within the same interview) suggesting these coexisted, surfacing at different times, in different relational interactions and in connection with different internal feelings and external events. Gary was one of eight participants who predominantly told a trapped narrative at their first interview.

Gary's case is selected to explore entrapment through different interconnected forms of violence. 'Misrecognition' is central to symbolic violence for Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Thapar-Björkert, Samelius & Sanghera, 2016), rendering such violence invisible to its victims, so that this is usually latent rather than explicit within narratives. Gary's story was chosen because the interacting dynamics of different forms of violence were – for various reasons – more visible in his case. Whereas Gary expressed anger at the way in which the CJS had labelled and (mis)treated him, others had internalised contemporary neo-liberal narratives of responsibilisation (Barry, Farrall & France, 2022) in making sense of their own behaviour, in spite of the experiences of interpersonal victimisation, economic decline and the effects of state deindustrialisation that underpinned it. Having just described the challenges finding work growing up once all the factories had been shut down and the subsequent impact this had had on his life, one participant, Ollie, told me: 'Got to blame yerself. You cannae just like, point the finger … You've got to take responsibility as well'. In such a way, the symbolic domain acts to deny the violence inherent within the men's experiences – even to themselves. However, just as the men espoused these narratives of responsibilisation, they also resisted them.

The interacting dynamics of different forms of violence could be seen to differing degrees within all participants' narratives. For most of the men, structural conditions meant they had been – and

continued to be – differentially exposed to harm, which impacted paths in and out of the CJS, for example through the areas they lived in, but also being the victim of racially motivated assaults or assaults while homeless. Like Gary, their narratives were punctuated by events experienced as catastrophic later in life, including violence, bereavement and other experiences of loss, including through criminal justice experiences (Vaswani, 2018) – as well as the deleterious traumatising impacts of a lifetime's social exclusion (Scanlon & Adlam, 2008). Others drew more explicit links than Gary did between adverse experiences in childhood or catastrophic events later in life and either the onset or escalation of substance use or offending. But as with Gary, so for many of the men in this study, viewing violence as merely interpersonal obscured important ways in which it was structurally and institutionally facilitated.

Violence in the men's stories was frequently facilitated by hierarchical structures which gave one person – or social group – power over another. The large majority of the men in this sample, like Gary, presented as white, but one Black man, Alfie, had been victim of a racist assault. He described how the resulting scar meant that he (the victim) looked disreputable and dangerous – in an interplay between interpersonal, structural and symbolic violence. Scholars of colour (e.g., Oliver, 2001; Watson, 2005) have long recognised how hierarchical racial structures are reinforced by physical violence. Although this was not prominent within his narrative, Gary was from a family of Irish Catholic descent. At least in the Scottish context, racialisation of Irish Catholics as inferior, criminal, a 'menace' lived on in various forms of discrimination (e.g., in the labour market) and disadvantage throughout the period in which Gary is describing (McBride, 2018). Another participant, Francis, who had experienced violence from the police in the same area over the same period, highlighted: 'they [the police] were all Protestant at that time', showing how the institutional context gave and reinforced the dominance of one social group by another.

Assaults by criminal justice actors appeared in a number of the men's narratives – alongside the other dynamics of prison-based institutionally structured violence described by Scott (2015) and discussed in relation to Gary's case. For one participant (unusual for this sample), a sentence for life imprisonment as a teenager, and the accompanying loss of self and future – was the defining traumatic event within his narrative (Vaswani, 2018). Others, like Gary, experienced a life sentence by instalments, with the associated pain of a wasted life (Schinkel, 2021).

Transformed narratives often contained tentative attempts to take something positive from negative experiences. It should be acknowledged that two of these men identified some positive experience within prison (at least on one sentence), for example, an educational course and someone believing in them, or an opportunity to get clean and reconnect with a family member. Nevertheless, they still had to recover from the emotional, relational and symbolic consequences of criminal justice experiences, as well as the traumatic and violent events which preceded and interspersed CJS involvement and which were often obscured by prison. They concentrated on looking forward to the future, not back on a wasted life. Crucially, the salience of these positive experiences rested on what came afterwards, in which these potentially fleeting gains were able to be sustained through access to therapy, drug rehabilitation services, secure housing and opportunities to rebuild lost relationships within the community – opportunities which for many are made only harder to access by criminal justice experiences.

6 | GARY

Gary attended two collage workshops. At the first, he thoughtfully selected images to vividly represent his life story (see Figure 1). At the second, a serious family illness affected his mood. Gary wanted

FIGURE 1 Gary's collage, representing his life story (some sections obscured for anonymity).

to be interviewed but became emotional, so I did not follow up on some aspects of his story. Gary was only interviewed once. Consequently, Gary's story contains gaps and some details remain vague. It was also fragmented, and a brain injury may have impacted Gary's narrative capacities, and so the coherence/content of the narrative in places. Throughout, Gary's words are employed to illustrate points, but ethical and anonymity concerns preclude more extensive use of Gary's words (as employed in some articles using a narrative approach).

In the early 1960s, Gary was born into a large family in an urban area in the west of Scotland, where he still lived. Gary's Dad drank heavily and was abusive. Seemingly tempted to skip past this part of his life, after a long pause he reconsidered, indicating its relevance to his story:

> And I grew up. [long pause] See my Dad, he's an alcoholic. See when we're all young c**ts [long pause] [Very brief details of abuse from father]. That's when we were all young. And I / So end of the day, he ended up f**king dying. And [long pause] so I grew up anyway.

He had had a large group of friends on the housing 'scheme' [estate]: 'All my pals were in a group and we all stood by each other'. In their early teens, they started 'screwing shops' for the 'pure magic buzz'. He became involved in fighting with friends and football violence. He was sent to an approved school, from which he ran away, and later borstal.

In his late teens, 'the drugs hit the scheme. And that was it. Everybody ripping off everybody'. He held drugs responsible for friends' deaths and the suicides of a brother and a sister. His narrative circled around these events, at times trying to make sense of them:

> Had everything going for him [brother]. And he just, I don't know what the f**k happened to him.

An event in his twenties negatively transformed Gary's life. The collage (Figure 1) depicts a man on a black background look[ing] into the camera. Blood runs down his white face and his outstretched arm holds a bloody brain: '… Coshed time …', Gary told me. Below this image is a small

panel cut from a comic book. The scene shows a man lying in a hospital – or maybe death – bed, surrounded by two people. One says 'everything you ever did was meaningless'. Despite its centrality to his collage and oral narrative, the details are confusing. Broadly he told me that, he received a serious head injury in a fight, hospitalised for a lengthy period with serious and lasting speech and memory problems. Seemingly in relation to this incident, Gary was then arrested and charged with assault and robbery, which he strongly denied. His charge and, ultimately, conviction led to further events which compounded the devastating impact on him and his family.

I don't know much about his life over the subsequent 20 years, although much was taken up with prison:

> In and out the jail. In and out the jail. I've done f**king, tss, all in I've done about [the equivalent of] two lifers.

During his last prison sentence, he was violently assaulted. Following release, around ten years previously, Gary decided: 'Enough's enough', potentially aided by family relationships and subsequent spiritual experiences. He told me how much he loved his children, describing one as 'a bundle of joy'. It seemed that in this context, he was able to enact his decision to change, coming off drugs and remaining out of prison ever since.

By the time of our interview, progress had become increasingly fragile. Gary felt betrayed after his relationship had broken down, another significant event to which Gary repeatedly circled back in his narrative. They had separated and he became estranged from his children. He had started drinking heavily, although as far as I know, had not resumed heroin use. He had been convicted for shoplifting alcohol (the exact timing of this was unclear) but remained 'free of these f**king prisons'.

Despite reducing his offending, Gary's narrative lacked any sense of personal transformation, with indications of progress immediately followed by a return to negative events. Just before our interview, Gary's younger brother – with whom he was close – fell seriously ill and was hospitalised. This is likely to have influenced the narrative he told me. His focus was not on desistance from crime per se, but on a search for a better life: 'my life is pure sh*te. And I want to make my life different'. Both his collage and oral narrative referenced a trip to an activity centre through a resettlement service. He described this as 'one of the best times of my life. If no' the best', highlighting the many outdoor activities available there. He described tentative hopes for the future notably investing his energy in young people. Concluding the interview, he told me:

> That's what I'm wanting to do. Look for happiness. [long pause] But it's sad the now. Cause of [my brother].

Gary's brother died soon afterwards. I had no further contact with Gary, who subsequently passed away himself.

7 | THE INADEQUACY OF INTERPERSONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF VIOLENCE

Gary's narrative circles around several negative events: participation in and experiences of interpersonal violence, especially the physical and psychological impacts of the brain injury, alongside other trauma including his siblings' suicides and his relationship breakdown. His early home life

is less central to the narrative, but nevertheless appeared to play an important foundational role. While acknowledging these events' importance, I want to show the inadequacy of both individualised understandings of trauma and interpersonal violence as a means of making sense of Gary's life and encounters with the CJS.

7.1 | Early life: a story of *interpersonal* violence?

Gary usually talked about violent experiences at an interpersonal level, describing the behaviour of one or more individuals. However, a closer look reveals the role of social institutions and structures in the emergence of this violence. To start with, Gary's father's violence occurred within the institutional context of the family unit, with the extensive literature on family violence recognising the structural dimensions (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). The family unit is an institution of discipline and social control, and violence serves to reinforce the father as the dominant figure, the patriarch. A story of his father's violence echoes a later story he tells of police violence, in each case the perpetrator in a position of power demands that Gary line up against a wall. The hierarchical structure – of the family unit, of relations with police or prison officers – facilitates violence, while being sustained by this violence.

Beyond the family home, interpersonal violence emerges from specific features of social environments. Thinking about Gary's early experience of and participation within interpersonal violence in the community, Gary's collage speaks to the environmental dimension, representing his childhood through an image of a boy in a war zone (Figure 1). The environment of his west of Scotland scheme in the 1960s and 1970s was shaped by structural forces associated with deindustrialisation and poverty. As Gary says:

> People had it. And we didnae have it. [Laughs] So why not let us get involved?

His close friendship group may have mediated the psychological harms of his family home, providing the support and belonging that it lacked (Weaver, 2016). Conversely, it made other harms – for example, offending – more likely. Herman (1997) writes that traumatic reactions occur '[w]hen neither resistance nor escape is possible' (p.34), but the scheme and its relational context initially offers Gary both. Gary's narration of his story suggests that it is the collapse of his mutually-supportive friendship group, which was experienced as catastrophic for Gary. This occurred when 'the drugs hit the scheme', a community-wide event with structural underpinnings (Buchanan, 2006):

> We used to [have a] fire every night. Just sitting around the fire. … Before they f**king drugs came into t'scheme. And [pause] see once the drugs came in the scheme. They just, ppss, split every c**t up.

With the solidarity gone, another relational betrayal, the scheme was experienced as changed and corrupted. This was a significant disruptive turning point for Gary, which he returned to throughout our interview. The arrival of drugs was also associated with multiple bereavements.

7.2 | Violence in and of criminal justice institutions

Gary's experiences of violence traversed multiple domains before, outside and alongside any CJS involvement. Criminal justice institutions are stereotyped as violent places in terms of

interpersonal violence; indeed, Gary reported assaults in prison by prisoners, and by prison officers. He describes how, after he was violently assaulted by a prisoner:

> … these screws trying to get, get me on protection. I said, 'Ah, f**k off'. Get the f**k. I don't need go on protection. See when I was in [another prison], I was kidding on [i.e., pretending] I was suicidal right. And pphh they fucking tss, gave, ttss put a gownie on me right? [i.e., a hospital gown …] Nae clothes. Or f**k all. … Threw me in the f**king cells. And [pause] you get F**K ALL. Nothing. I couldn't even [have a?] smoke or f**k all. … It was pphh f**king murder so it was. And they [prison officers] used to come in and batter me. I were f**ked. They set 'em, one day they set right about me and I was doing F**K ALL. And they set right about me. … Some screws are alright. But other screws are f**king dugs [dogs].

Whether Gary was pretending to be suicidal, or whether telling me this is another example of the value Gary places on maintaining the appearance of 'coping' is in one sense unimportant. What Gary describes is a past instance of serious and repeated assaults while being held captive, while he was understood to be a vulnerable person under the prison's care.

Based on her work on domestic violence and using this to demonstrate the psychological processes underpinning complex PTSD, Herman (1992) describes how the perpetrator undermines the victim's sense of safety, autonomy, self and relational connections, through controlling by 'unpredictable outbursts of violence and by inconsistent enforcement of numerous trivial demands and petty rules' (p.383), 'by control of the victim's bodily functions. Deprivation of food, sleep, shelter, exercise, personal hygiene or privacy are common practices' (p.383) and through isolating the victim, so that 'she becomes increasingly dependent on the perpetrator, not only for survival and basic bodily needs, but also for information and even for emotional sustenance' (p.384). Gary's account, demonstrates the fear generated by the intermittent use of violence. In the aftermath of the assault by another prisoner, he is dependent on the prison for defence against one threat, yet this demands even further limitations to his bodily autonomy and isolation than he has already had to relinquish to the prison. It is this 'institutionally-structured violence' (e.g., undermining of autonomy, well-being, sense of safety), which 'forms the bedrock upon which physical violence takes root' (Scott, 2015, p.59).

As damaging as this interpersonal-institutional violence, is the devastating impact of the symbolic violence enacted through this system. This worked in two ways: it delegitimised or obscured Gary's status as a victim of violence; and it legitimised the perpetration of further institutional violence upon him.

There are multiple differing interpretations of the incident leading to his brain injury, and the event, like Gary's account of it, appeared messy. Nevertheless, the subsequent criminal justice process Gary was subject to formally symbolised this in such a way as to edit out this messiness and deny Gary's experience. About the verdict he said:

> end up getting found guilty for something I didn't do. And they gave me two years (prison) for it. And I hated everybody since.

Determination of Gary as an offender erased Gary's victimisation; for example, rendering Gary ineligible for compensation through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (Henley, 2018). Another incident reiterated this message. While 'trying to get myself back to normal' after the brain injury, he was smoking weed and pulled aside by some off-duty police officers. He told

me that they punched him while handcuffed and then concocted a case of police assault, for which he was also jailed: 'How sad is that? … That's very sad, innit?'. He told this story after describing the violence (outlined above) by 'screws', with police and prison officers seen as interchangeable in his narrative.

This is perhaps not the first time in Gary's narrative in which state responses acted to obscure his victimisation from view and legitimated the infliction of further violence upon Gary. As a child, Gary was a victim of his father's violence, but the main state response appeared to be placing Gary in an approved school, in response to concerns about Gary's behaviour. Gary did not expand on his experience at the approved school other than saying that he ran away, but concerns about punishment regimes at the schools at that time have been shared with the ongoing Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry,[5] something reflected in another participant's narrative. Gary progressed through approved school to borstal to 'YOIs' – all were viewed by him as forms of prison – and then to repeated imprisonment. Like other men with such histories, in this and other studies, Gary lamented 'a waste of a life' (Schinkel, 2021), if not the offences committed. Scott (2015) argues that one of '[t]he most intense pains of imprisonment … [is] the lack of an effective vocabulary to express the hardship of watching life waste away' (p.7).

The interpersonally and institutionally violent nature of his prison experience necessitated developing ways of coping. 'Coping' for Gary is understood as an (insincere) performance of happiness and the suppression of emotions:

> I'm no' proud o' it [having spent so long in prison]. But I coped. I went through prison wi' a smile on my face [pause] all the way f**king through. … Even the screws [prison officers] used to say. What the f**k are you laughing at? I said, I'm just happy [big laugh]. But I wasnae happy. I was sad deep down.

Gary adopted a familiar strategy of maintaining a front, repressing emotional responses, a familiar prison coping technique which Liebling (1999) notes as 'partial, unstable, and arduous' (p.288). This (arguably) dissociative reaction, in which Gary 'learns to alter an unbearable reality' (p.381), through suppression of his own emotions, nevertheless comes with an additional emotional toil. Alongside the emotional consequences, these ways of coping act to further obscure Gary-as-victim from view.

7.3 | No way out? Trapped by symbolic and structural violence

Elsewhere, I have characterised Gary's narrative as a 'trapped' narrative (Anderson, 2019). He conveyed an overwhelming sense of sadness but also injustice. He used the local colloquialism 'sad' to refer to numerous events – bereavements, his relationship breakdown and changes to relationships and place following the arrival of drugs – and to describe the ways in which he felt systems and state agents had acted, and continued to act, against his attempts at positive change. He remained clearly angry at the government and prison system, about perceived differential treatment for behaviour committed by politicians, the prevalence of drugs/methadone within prisons, insufficient help on release which exacerbate or expand problems of poverty and homelessness, and 'a mad vicious circle' of reimprisonment: 'What the f**k are they doing to us?' he asked, the 'humiliated rage' (Herman, 1992, p.382) lingering beyond captivity.

Describing the activity centre visit, a one-off experience set apart from rather than integrated within Gary's daily life, he said:

> I think there should be more of that. … the government should be ashamed of themselves. You have to fund, get funding. … *An ex-junkie*, I don't care what. This is fae *a guy whose got a steel plate in his head*. Couldn't speak for f**king years. (italics added)

Not only is Gary's lack of access to required services part of 'the violence of austerity' (Cooper & Whyte, 2017), but we see here the ongoing symbolic consequences of the past for Gary, with his identity as brain injury survivor experienced as denied or at least overshadowed by that of (former) drug user.

Gary's narrative repeatedly returned to the death of his siblings through suicide, events which he suggested he had still not processed: 'I haven't even grieved about them. [pause] And it's f**king hard'. Gary is likely to have experienced these events particularly acutely due to the recent hospitalisation of his younger brother. Rather than *feeling* these tragedies in isolation, the psychological impact of these multiple deaths appear to be experienced cumulatively. Gary was overcome with emotion saying:

> I don't know how I'm still going on. All these bloody [deaths, trails off].

Moreover, far from *being* isolated tragedies, the deaths can be seen as aetiologically linked through the conditions within Gary's place-based community, and their political and economic determinants, which result in poorer health and lower life expectancies for residents (Bambra, 2016). For affected communities and generations, political and economic changes of deindustrialisation and neo-liberalism have been linked with increased rates of premature death (Collins & McCartney, 2011), especially drug deaths and suicide (Parkinson et al., 2017, 2018), as well as offending trajectories (Farrall, Gray & Jones, 2020) – experiences which had touched Gary's life. There is also evidence of the impact of the post-2010 UK government austerity policies on stalled trends in life expectancy, and even an upturn in mortality rates among females in the most deprived groups (McCartney et al., 2022). Viewed as linked and avoidable outcomes, these deaths are the outcome of structural violence. For the men in this study, this violence continued to be played out throughout the research in the comparatively early deaths of family members, friends, and – like Gary – some of the men themselves. Trauma was by no means confined to the past but an ongoing threat to be contended with in the present.

8 | THE TROUBLE WITH TRAUMA-INFORMED CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Through Gary's narrative, I have demonstrated the need to forefront a wider conceptualisation of violence in understanding criminalised people's lives. I have shown, first, how interpersonal violence is embedded within, and emerges from, institutional and structural contexts, so that these institutions and structures must be included in analysing people's paths into the CJS. Second, Gary's narrative demonstrates how violence in such men's lives is not confined to the family home or childhood (as in the ACEs framework), nor even the past, but must be continually contended with in their present, shaping their efforts to remain out of the CJS, and move towards a better life. While Gary's experiences of abuse within the family home are important, these experiences take on new meanings and impact in interaction with later events (e.g., drugs in the scheme). To see the home-based traumas as the primary trauma and everything else as derivative from this, presents only a partial picture (which does not necessarily align with Gary or the other men's experience)

and constructs the individual (and while younger, their family) as the target for intervention. Finally, through exploring criminalised men's experiences of violence in various forms, I have highlighted the CJS as a critical player in the ongoing perpetration of violence, including physical violence within the prison, but also the other forms of institutionally-structured violence set out by Scott (2015). More fundamentally though, the CJS perpetuates violence through its *symbolic power*. As seen with Gary, this comes through criminal legal processes and discourses that elevate the wrongs that the men have committed above and to obscure all other aspects of their lives (Armstrong, 2020), so that it is deemed right to punish them and expose them to further violence, while the wrongs of institutional and structural perpetrators are denied.

There is growing policy and practice recognition of violent victimisation, ACEs and other trauma in the lives of CJS-involved people, and the potential role these may play in offending. However, although some trauma scholars have long recognised this (e.g., Herman, 1992), in practice the institutional and structural dimensions are too often erased, pathologising individuals (Edwards et al., 2017). For example, Police Scotland's first efforts to introduce trauma awareness to their officers centred on the screening of the Resilience documentary, which focuses on ACEs and centres biological and neurological narratives of how trauma affects the brain (Brodie et al., 2023; Walsh, 2020). Meanwhile the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) (2023) *Corporate Plan* pays little attention to the causes of trauma, instead emphasising the impact that this has on 'neurological, biological, psychological, and social *development*' (p.25, italics added) and specifically on 'behaviour'. Trauma is rightly depicted as an individual experience, but the disproportionate exposure of some social groups is ignored.

This has important consequences. First, where people internalise individual or family-centric trauma narratives to make sense of their experience, this inhibits the development of collective and emancipatory narratives and precisely the kind of political action required for change (Herman, 2023). Second, this facilitates a policy discourse that sees violent victimisation as something that happens in the past, prior to, and outside of, the CJS. Within this logic, the role of the CJS becomes one of avoiding *re*-traumatisation and responding to *past* trauma by promoting 'recovery'.

Some advocacy groups may understandably wish to use 'trauma' as a way in which to try and legitimise people in the CJS' rights to improved treatment. In their critique of trauma, Fassin & Rechtman (2009) have highlighted this way in which trauma is used instrumentally to argue for the legitimacy of a claim to victimhood, and associated redress. Not only does this unhelpfully homogenise all forms of distress, they argue, but importantly the status of trauma victim is more readily granted to some groups than others. This is the symbolic power of the CJS. It is notable that police officers receiving trauma awareness training were found to display more positive 'trauma-informed' attitudes to victims, than to suspects (Brodie et al., 2023), while people with criminal convictions who are violently victimised are deemed ineligible for compensation through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (Henley, 2018). While the system may be willing to accept that people in the CJS are developmentally damaged by their experiences, they are not afforded full status as trauma victims.

The SPS tells us that it 'is on a journey to becoming a more trauma-informed organisation'.[6] Within police and prison services in Scotland, the emphasis so far seems to have been on 'awareness raising', although there has also been an influential strand of thinking around trauma-informed design, which has prioritised changes to the built environment, such as 'soothing' colour schemes and 'attractive landscaping' (Jewkes et al., 2019, p.11). These ideas were integral in the plans for the (ultimately scrapped) HMP Inverclyde, but have been resurrected for the new women's prison, HMP Stirling. It is notable that, trauma-informed design necessitates the building of new prisons. The 2023 *Corporate Plan* (Scottish Prison Service (SPS), 2023, p.4) refers

throughout to 'those in our care', reconstituting the prison as a place which promotes well-being and where people are treated with 'compassion and understanding' through 'trusting and mutual relationships' with staff. There are only passing references to harms enacted through the CJS, followed immediately by a reminder of the riskiness of those within it: 'SPS will further minimise the risk of harm that can come with serving a sentence, and work with those in our care to ensure that any risk they pose to the public and other people is effectively managed' (p.11). There is no reference to the long hours people spend locked in their cells (HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS), 2022), the high levels of deaths of those in Scottish prisons driven by suicide and by drug overdose (Armstrong et al., 2022), nor to the police investigation underway into the SPS for Corporate Homicide in relation to the brutal restraint by prison officers and subsequent death of Allan Marshall in 2015 (BBC News, 2023).

Can the CJS be trauma-informed? Can prisons support recovery? TIP requires not only organisational realisation of trauma's damaging impacts and for staff to be able to recognise its signs. Crucially it involves wholescale organisational reform to avoid retraumatising people; and to integrate core principles of: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice and control and responsiveness to cultural, historical and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). Herman's influential phased model of recovery again emphasises that ensuring physical and psychological safety is integral to recovery, and that while '[h]elplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery' (Herman 1997, p.197), facilitated by relationships of mutuality and trust. Although Gary's prison experience pre-dates recent TIP initiatives, these conditions are notably absent. The dynamics of institutionalised violence within a prison environment (see Scott, 2015) suggest that physical *and psychological* safety are likely to remain elusive. Power dynamics which are integral to the prison and imprisonment suggest only rudimentary efforts at empowerment (e.g., individualised initiatives centred on developing agency, or efforts at consultation) are possible within the context of a prison. However well-intentioned those working in the CJS are, these power dynamics necessarily preclude the formation of trusting, mutual relationships with those in positions of domination, who are viewed as perpetrators of diverse forms of violence. All the while narratives held by workers of the helpless traumatised victim encourage a paternalism which actually reinforces carceral thinking (Whalley & Hackett, 2017), while TIP within the CJS leaves untouched the 'traumatizing, historical injustices' underpinning this system (p.465).

Moreover, once again safety is integral to recovery from trauma (Herman, 1992; McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021), but requires addressing the hierarchical structures which facilitated – and are invested in – this violence (Reynolds, 2020). Treating the violence as an individual problem, solved by rearranging the actors within the hierarchy (e.g., bad apples) cannot hope to succeed while the hierarchical structures which facilitated such violence remain in place. The CJS is based on power relations of domination and submission, rather than the relationships of mutuality required for Herman's (2023) final proposed phase of recovery: justice. A narrow, individualised conceptualisation of recovery is at best partial and fragile, since it excludes recovery from the institutional, structural and symbolic dimensions of violence needed for safety. It does nothing to dismantle the hierarchy which enables such violence: a recovery involving redistribution of resources and power, and undoing the symbolic processes which categorise some people as acceptable targets for harm.

The emergence in the UK and internationally of so-called trauma-informed policing, trauma-informed youth justice, trauma-informed prisons, trauma-related training of professionals across the CJS demonstrates a continued policy denial of the CJS's role in inflicting and sustaining trauma, and the structural conditions which engender this. This reality is not lost on individual CJS actors and people subject to these approaches, who recognise the limitations of what staff

training or individual programmes can achieve in these contexts (Auty et al., 2023; Petrillo, 2021; Vaswani & Paul, 2019).

Through the integration of theory and empirical findings, this article presents a critique of the possibility of TIP within criminal justice contexts. In my research, the men shared stories that profoundly demonstrated the harm of justice settings. Moreover, by taking people who have experienced violence, trauma, suffering and pain and by turning them into 'offenders', their entitlements to support, empathy and redress are removed. This outcome is not accidental but a core function of the system. As Angela Davis (2003) has argued, prison:

> functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers … it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism, and, increasingly, global capitalism. (p.16)

Far from being a vehicle for recovery, the CJS is a mechanism by which trauma is not only delivered but obscured. The effect is that suffering is delegitimised and denied. The desire to make the CJS 'trauma-informed' may seem laudable. In practice, though, this may simply further deny the reality of people's experiences. Worse, by making prisons *sound* more palatable, claims of TIP only distract from the much harder work of dismantling the structures which sustain these harms – not least the CJS itself.

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ORCID

Sarah Anderson https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6314-2573

ENDNOTES

[1] Names are pseudonyms.

[2] Except sexual abuse.

[3] The project's nature presented a plethora of ethical challenges. Acutely aware of the risk of retraumatisation through the research, this was integral to my planning of design and methods, and central to my reflective practice throughout (Anderson, 2019).

[4] Participants were initially asked: 'As you know, I am interested in how people who have faced complicated problems get their lives back together. So, can you tell me your story? Start wherever you like'.

[5] See https://www.childabuseinquiry.scot/ [Accessed 3 August 2024].

[6] See https://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/News/News-9173.aspx [Accessed 3 August 2024].

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