A contribution towards an analytic theory of violence

Richard Mizen, London

Abstract: This paper considers some of the clinical and theoretical problems contingent upon the imprecision and lack of clarity with which the word and concept ‘violence’ is used. A definition of violence is proposed, which separates the concept of violence from the related concept of aggression and sees the former as a particular form of the latter. This definition also proposes that violence must always have a psychological component aspect. It is contended that clarity is important clinically so that analysts can distinguish psychologically destructive from psychologically creative elements in their patients, in their own psychological functioning and in the countertransference. The phenomenon of violence is considered in the light of Fordham’s model of development, in particular that violence may be viewed as a consequence of a failure to integrate normal, aggressive aspects of the personality. Violence is seen as uncontained, split-off aggression, subjected to psychological projection. It is proposed that a particular quality of the experience that is being projected is an uncontained sense of violation. The notion of ‘mindless violence’ is considered.

Key words: affect, aggression, emotion, instinct, sadism, violence.

Introduction

‘I distrust the incommunicable: it is the source of all violence’.

Jean-Paul Sartre. ‘What is literature?’

The word ‘violence’ tends to be used in such a loose and broadly defined way that its use as a precise term of description or as a clear concept is severely limited. Wiener has recently described a similar problem in relation to the concept of anger (Wiener 1998). Popular conceptions of violence bridge the psychic and the physical, the imaginary and the actual. Commonly confusions arise because of the conflation and confusion of meaning between associated words, for example, ‘violent’, ‘aggressive’, ‘murderous’ or ‘destructive’ and so on. Use of these words, as though they were synonymous, is based upon the
co-incidence of associated (usually affective\(^1\) or behavioural) elements rather than clarity about their relationship or identity. For psychological purposes this is unsatisfactory, obscuring as it does matters such as cause, effect, meaning and motivation and giving an appearance of homogeneity to matters, which may in fact be heterogeneous.

How far are these phenomena related, identical or completely different? Unfortunately the answer is likely to be dependent upon one’s definition of the word ‘violence’. Although gross enactments of violence are thankfully rare in analysis, they are by no means unfamiliar to analysts working in other therapeutic capacities; none the less violence is a recurrent theme in analytic work. Most often it is encountered in ways that are disguised or distorted, for example, in sexually perverse forms or self-directed. Frequently it is the disguise that is concentrated upon and this can have the effect of obscuring the exact nature of the violence and violent ways of relating. In this prelusion I want to set aside some of these confounding elements and consider some possible answers to the question, ‘what are the essential qualities of violence and in what ways do they manifest themselves in analysis?’.  

**Problems of definition and conceptualization**

The semantic confusions generated by the word ‘violence’ with its disparate underlying concepts may be crude or may be complex. At a simple level the word ‘violence’ has become saturated with pejorative connotations which border upon it being used as a swear word or term of abuse. Certainly it is most often used to convey implicit disapproval. This may be extended to include verbal utterances similarly disliked. In such cases the matter is prejudged, the word defining the phenomenon, prior to any examination of it. Whilst this may be of use, after a fashion, for everyday speech it is unsatisfactory for the purposes of psychological understanding. Regrettably, this has proved no barrier to its use in this way in the analytic literature. In such instances the word ‘violence’ may be of no more use analytically than any other expression of preference or prejudice and undermines analytic attempts to understand the nature or meaning of violence.

For other than everyday usage, one of the most common confusions encountered stems from the way in which the word ‘violence’ is conflated with related words, for example, as though it is a synonym for aggression or for destructiveness;

---

\(^1\) It may be important at this point to define and differentiate the terms ‘affect’, ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’. Jung defined ‘affect’ (which he used interchangeably with ‘emotion’) as containing both psychic and somatic elements compared to ‘feelings’ which he considered to be more psychologically differentiated and confined to the psychic sphere (Jung 1921). Contemporary usage of these words, although not acknowledging Jung’s definition, is broadly consistent with his usage (see for example Panksepp 1998). I will follow Jung’s definition and assume that affects and emotions are identical and that ‘feelings’ are a more psychologically differentiated version of affects/emotions.
to give two recent examples, from the psychotherapy literature, Perelberg (1999) uses ‘violence’ interchangeably with ‘aggression’ as does de Zulueta (1993) who notes the problem but then goes on to repeat it.

Such problems are compounded where confusion arises out of the conflation of psychological theories with theories about behaviour. Often, theories and models of violence (and of aggression), which purport to be psychological, have very little psychology in them, but are in fact descriptions of, or theories about, behaviour. Psychological theories, that is theories assuming at least a significant place for mentation and mental experience, inevitably draw upon behavioural phenomena as a source of data. A hazard, however, is to confuse the two; to do so is to risk treating disparate matters as though they are identical as well as important differences between associated phenomena being lost. The risk is that the relations between behaviour and mental states are treated as though they were self-evident, when they are not and in reality may be obscure. An obvious example is the way that sexual offences are violent. Threat or coercion may be employed although little or no physical force is used; in strictly physical terms it is possible that a violent act may be indistinguishable from a non-violent equivalent. None the less the emotional tone of the interaction may make it quite clear that it is violent. In English law for example, the threat to strike somebody constitutes an offence of assault as much as an actual blow. Alternatively the ambiguity of an act can either generate misunderstanding or is capable of misinterpretation or distortion in order to avoid its psychological, social or legal consequences. Examples here might be the way in which questions of consent might be a central issue of proof in determining whether or not a given act of vaginal penetration is rape, or, in a medico-legal arena, how in one context what might be treatment, in another is assault.

Two elements related to violence produce particular difficulties: the involvement or otherwise of action and questions of motivation. In a recent paper by Glasser, for example, he adopts a definition of violence provided by Walker in 1972:

> Violence involves the bodies of both perpetrator and victim and it may thus be defined as a bodily response with the intended infliction of bodily harm on another person.

(Glasser 1999, p. 887)

By emphasizing bodily activity, it will be noted that this definition circumscribes distinctions in relation to the motivation of a perpetrator, invariably linking intention to bodily action. Glasser attempts to compensate for this by subdividing violence into ‘sadistic violence’ on the one hand and ‘self preservative

---

2 It is generally conceded that during Evolution, behaviour, as unsconscious patterns of action, evolved eons before the development of affective states and particularly states of self-awareness. Without going into the debate it will be assumed here, however, that the behaviourist extrapolation from this, that mental experience can be thought of only as epiphenomenal, cannot be sustained.
violence’ on the other. The former he considers pathological, the latter non-pathological. Unfortunately this then fails to distinguish any essential characteristic of violence per se. Taylor’s definition also limits violence to action, here defined as motor activity, which is itself a problematical definition, and this excludes the possibility of violence as an exclusively psychological phenomenon and obscures consideration of essential psychological factors.

The limitation of behavioural definitions emanates from the fact that the external appearance of behaviour may be deceptive or ambiguous, relative to the psychological state of the perpetrator or the recipient of the violence and especially what the perpetrator imagines to be the mental state of the recipient, which as I hope to show is an essential aspect of violence. It also confines violence to (or identification with) an act and divorces it from any underlying psychological state or disallows the possibility of violence confined to the mental sphere. It also sets aside the possibility of non-violent acts of aggression, which, whilst behaviourally similar and even identical, may in reality have very different meanings.

This leads us on to definitions, which are essentially psychological and motivational ones. Here the problem is that it becomes easy to underplay the sequelae of violence or even to overlook them altogether so that explanations become banal or even apologiae. This is a common criticism levelled at people engaged in academic and clinical work in this field.

The difficulty in this case is of holding together the mind of both subject and object, for example, perpetrator and victim. This is especially difficult if the same person has been a ‘perpetrator’ at one time or in one frame of mind, and a ‘victim’ at another. Anne Alvarez attributes this to:

...such a split countertransference..., such a split reaction...that at one moment you are upset on their behalf and sympathetic because they have been terribly abused as children themselves, and the next minute you are loathing them for what they are doing...

(Alvarez 1997, p. 431)

This experience is likely to be a familiar one to those who have worked with people who are violent (including the abusers of children to whom she is referring here) and Alvarez’s attribution to splitting may be accurate, presumably as a defence against the painful feelings generated in the observer; or, as I will argue, it may be that the construct ‘splitting’ is over-extended in this case. I will return to this below. Ideally what is required is something along the lines of a ‘cubist’ picture, presenting manifest and obscure aspects on a single plane. The extent to which this may be damaging to ordinary appearances, however, may be fatal.

The problems with these definitions are essentially qualitative in nature. One writer who has attempted to get around this is Meltzer who proposes a concept of violence as violation (Meltzer 1986), which spans (but may not necessarily include) both the physical and the psychic by means of its appeal to
subjective experience. Whatever the advantages of this approach from a qualitative point of view, it may throw up problems related to quantity, particularly in valuing the ‘seriousness’ of a given example of violence.

The concept of aggression

A further problem in considering the concept of violence is the extent to which the separate but related concept of aggression also lacks definition, although for the most part it is used in a way that implies a more broadly based phenomenon: the set, as it were, of which ‘violence’ is a sub-set, even where the two terms are used interchangeably. The academic literature covering the subject seems little clearer than colloquial usage; both may display an intuitive awareness of distinctions without being able to give clear definition to them. The analytic vocabulary is more confusing than it otherwise might be because of the shifts in meaning that have developed over time; in both Freud and Klein, for example, aggression, destructiveness and sadism are at times used interchangeably. In the case of ‘sadism’ Freud’s early use of the words to denote the fusion of the sexual and aggression had, by the time of Klein’s later writings, come to mean something closer to a concept of normal, innate aggression, with various mutations and variations in between.

Freud originally conceived of aggression as originating in consequence of frustration of the gratification of the pleasure principle, the disruption of primary narcissism. He made this a point of principle and his insistence that aggression was not in itself an instinct led to his separation from Adler in 1911 in part as a consequence of the latter’s insistence on the primacy of aggression, as a force in human development. Only in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1920), some years after the split with Jung, partly upon the issue of the centrality of sexuality, did Freud modify his views to include aggression as a further primary instinctual basis of the psyche. Aggression was conceived of by Freud to be destructiveness self-directed and only secondarily redirected outwards. This was subsequently elaborated into his notion of the ‘death instinct’, which in turn came to be given prominence by Klein in the development of her ideas. Klein suggested that ‘anxiety in young children could only be alleviated by analysing their sadistic phantasies and impulses with a greater appreciation of the share aggression has in sadism and in the causation of anxiety’ (Klein 1948, p. 41).

Unlike Freud, Jung did not develop a refined concept of aggression, initially sharing Freud’s concept of ‘libido’ and, like him, assuming aggression to be a consequence of frustrated gratification. Whilst Freud eventually posited the existence of an oppositional death instinct ‘Thanatos’ (Freud 1938), after their split Jung, in explicit contradiction, refined and expanded the concept of libido. This encompassed both Eros and its antithesis in his notion of enantiodromia (Jung 1927, paras. 1705–07), rejecting Freud’s dichotomization of, for example, love and hate. Jung did not explicitly address the issue of aggression,
subsuming his consideration of it in the attention that he gave to human destructiveiveness for the most part seen as an aspect of ‘the shadow’. It may be inferred, however, that he regarded aggression as having instinctual origins, although importantly not having origin in a single instinct (Jung 1916, para. 79).

In psychoanalysis it has been Klein’s concept of the ‘Death Instinct’ (Klein 1933) that has been most developed. She adopted the notion as a central part of her model in order to try to understand the genesis of the aggressive, violent and destructive nature of the play and fantasies that she observed in children clinically. From this she inferred the operation of innate unconscious mental structures, especially the existence and operation of a fierce and primitive form of conscience or super-ego, which she related to the existence of a death instinct. A criticism levelled at this notion is the albeit disputed absence of objective material by way of correlation. This has resulted in accusations of fanciful constructs added post hoc to meet theoretical gaps in the model. Freud, for example, referred to the death instinct as ‘clinically silent’ (Freud 1920) to explain what he considered to be its clinical absence, its existence inferred rather than manifest. Klein made claim that the operations of the death instinct are clinically observable, as noted above, in the play of children for example, but many critics of the concept, both inside and out of psychoanalysis have insisted that the concept is biologically speaking, nonsensical (Storr 1963; Rycroft 1967; Hinshelwood 1989).

All of these writers have, however, implicitly or explicitly conceived of aggression as an instinct, attempting to link concepts such as ‘destructiveness’, violence, brutality and so on to one instinctual base, or on occasion, for example, with sadism to the fusion of the two.

A number of analytic writers, particularly Jungian, have turned to animal ethologists such as Lorenz and Tinbergen or Jane Goodall for evidence of the origins of aggression (Fordham 1957; Storr 1963; Stevens & Price 1996), in particular linking this to the existence of innate psychic structures, for example, instincts and archetypes. Animal ethologists have extensively explored the idea of an instinctual basis for aggression in particular allied to survival, territoriality, and both inter species and intra species dominance. Until very recently whilst analytic writers have tended to talk in terms of the operation of single, discrete psychosomatic structures or a relatively limited number of instincts, drives or archetypes (Freud for example is significant for his insistence on the existence of only a single, erotic, drive), such notions have long been abandoned by

---

3 In order to assist clarity I have followed Susan Isaac’s distinction and notation (Isaacs 1952), which preserves the word and spelling ‘phantasy’ for innate, unconscious, structures, similar to Jung’s concepts of archetype and complexes. The word ‘fantasy’ with this spelling is reserved for conscious activity; daydreaming, imagination, and so on.

4 Tinbergen defined ‘instinct’ as ‘a hierarchically organized nervous mechanism which is susceptible to certain priming, releasing and directing impulses of internal as well as external origin…’ (Money-Kyrle 1978).
ethologists. As early as 1963, Lorenz in his book *On Aggression* made clear that the explanatory value of discrete instincts being directly causative of discrete behavioural or mental phenomena was limited (Lorenz 1967). He suggests a model, which supposed the interaction, combination and conflict of a range of instincts, in what he calls a ‘Great Parliament of the Instincts’, with the interplay between its constituent parts leading to various manifestations of behaviour and, implicitly, providing the somatic basis of mental life.

More recently the psychoanalytically-orientated neuro-psychologists, Kaplan-Solms and Solms have theorized that aggression is located in the ‘primitive areas’ of the brain (Kaplan-Solms & Solms 2000). They adopt Luria’s concept of ‘dynamic localization’ to suggest an even greater degree of interaction between discrete neurological structures, than that envisaged by ethologists. Elsewhere Siegal, in a recent review of the literature concerning affects generally, cites emerging evidence that

\[\text{emotion is not limited} \ldots\]

\[\text{emotion is found throughout the entire brain.}\]

\[\text{(Siegal 1999, p. 122)}\]

In the light of this the extent to which it is helpful to think of aggression as a drive or instinct is open to question. In practice it may be that it is more useful to think about aggression not as an instinct, but as instinctual. From this perspective aggression can be conceived of as an affective component or potential within an instinct, drive, preconception, archetype or innate unconscious phantasy (one amongst many) with a particular function. In the case of aggression the function appears to be one of mediating distance and difference in relation to the object. Jung’s definition of ‘affect’ makes clear the involvement of both psychic and somatic elements, in effect, bridging the two (Jung 1921). To oversimplify, a function of aggression would be to establish and mediate difference and separation, contrasted for example with ‘loving’ affects, where the issue is of alikeness, togetherness and so on. Affects and their more psychologically differentiated development, ‘feelings’, can be understood as serving the function of orientating the subject to the object and mediating the relationship with them.

Recent developments in neuro-psychology have suggested a number of new models for affective functioning. Panksepp, for example, conceives of affective states as

\[\text{the psychoneural processes that are especially influential in controlling the vigour} \]

\[\text{and patterning of actions in the dynamic flow of intense behavioural interchanges} \]

\[\text{between animals, as well as with certain objects during certain circumstances that} \]

\[\text{are especially important for survival. Each emotion has a characteristic ‘feeling-tone’} \]

\[\text{that is especially important in encoding the intrinsic values of these interactions} \ldots\]

\[\text{(Panksepp 1998, p. 48)}\]
In infant development the interplay of affective elements including aggression can be seen interpersonally as important in the establishment and valuation of object relations. An example of this might be intra-psychically in defining internal objects and the differentiation of ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ objects.

Whether in an infant or an adult, this is not, however, a simple matter, involving as it does the interplay of a hierarchy of affective elements itself interplaying with other neurological systems. The exact nature of these affective systems is poorly understood and the categorization tentative, but Panksepp, for example (Panksepp 1998), proposes four basic affective systems at a neurological level: the so-called Seeking system, the Fear system, the Sex system and the Rage system. The Rage system, most relevant for our discussion here, itself consists of five sub-systems providing a sort of ‘paint box’ for the production of affectively coloured states of mind from which a multiplicity of mental states may be produced.

**Aggression, deintegration, reintegration, splitting and projection**

Fordham proposed that Klein’s model of the mind is consistent with Jung’s in some important respects, in particular the innate patterning of unconscious structures of a psychosomatic kind. These may give rise to characteristic patterns of imagery and behaviour although these are not themselves innate. Amongst other matters he suggested that Klein’s model is congested and in need of the elaboration of a concept of the Self, which he addressed by means of developing his own model of the deintegration/reintegration of a ‘primary self’ based on Jung’s concept of an ‘original self’ (Fordham 1995).

An important aspect of this is Fordham’s divergent view on the nature of the clinical phenomenon, referred to by psychoanalysts as ‘splitting’. Klein used the concept of the mechanism of ‘splitting’ to describe both the defensive bifurcation of the object (in order, for example to preserve the ‘good’ and evacuate the ‘bad’) and the developmental process by which the infant establishes good and bad internal objects. In psychoanalytic usage this distinction has needed to be emphasized by introducing qualifying references to produce concepts of ‘normal splitting’ and ‘pathological splitting’. Despite this a number of semantic and conceptual confusions have arisen because concepts devised to describe normal psychological functioning are derived from concepts of pathological psychological functioning and in consequence important distinctions are obscured.

In contrast Fordham developed a model, which emphasizes the combination of cognitive and emotional development. In this model there is no need for a defensive bifurcation in normal development. Initially an infant’s immediate affective experience of an object is central to its conception of the object. A ‘bad’ feed will be experienced as a quality of a ‘bad’ breast and a ‘good’ feed a quality of a ‘good’ breast; the infant will have no perceptual grounds upon which to link the experiences of good and bad as qualities of the same object (Fordham 1988). Only over time will good and bad come to be perceived as
qualities of the same object. The concept of splitting is reserved for those circumstances in which the mental pain created by an experience of linking good and bad experiences is felt to be overwhelming. In this circumstance the illusion created during the early processes of cognition (of the separate existence of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects) is exploited for defensive purposes, by means of a retreat to the illusion (or delusion) of pure ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and a refusal of the too painful reality.

To give an example, Meltzer has proposed that birth can best be thought about as an ‘emotional experience’, that is an experience of a predominantly emotional kind, which carries with it the potential for the infant to respond in numerous different ways within a structure of innate potentials (Meltzer 1988). From the perspective of Fordham’s model this may be thought about as being a ‘massive deintegration’, suggesting the possibility of an infinite number of responses to the experience depending upon the particular conjunction of internal and external factors active at a given time. Fordham’s formulation encompasses both emotional and cognitive aspects (Fordham 1995). Mediation of the experience is dependent upon mother (or mother functionary) providing what Bion has described as ‘alpha function’, which enables the infant to digest the raw elements of experience in order to effect a reintegration and establish related and organized individual mental contents. Repetition of experience over time gives increasing sophistication and complexity to mentation.

Recent research by neuroscientists seems to offer some content for the ‘empty’ concept of ‘alpha’ function proposed by Bion. The orbito-frontal cortex has been identified as responsible for mediating and regulating the raw experience of affective states (Carvalho 2002). This brain structure is not developed until an infant reaches the age of about one year and until that time infants are wholly dependent upon mother or other carers to mediate affective experience. Absence of this mediation, because of faults in identification or failures of attunement, may lead to subsequent faults and failures in the development of the infant’s, and later the adult’s, capacity to manage its own affective states.

The concept of violence

In the light of the above I think that it is possible to begin to say something about the nature of violence and its relation to aggression and to begin to answer the question posed at the beginning. What are the essential qualities of violence?

The word violence makes best sense, at least when used in more than a colloquial way, to denote aggression manifest in a particular form. The potential for confusion and conflation with other forms of aggression, both theoretically but perhaps more importantly clinically, is considerable. In order to avoid these confusions, therefore, I wish to propose that the term ‘violence’, at least in a clinical context, be reserved for ‘action’, which serves a particular function.
The type of ‘action’, which is relevant, however, needs further definition here. In using the word action, I have in mind Bion’s usage (Bion 1989). In particular,

…something which…is thought, even though it is thought apparently instantaneously transformed into action, or to reverse Keats’s formulation of negative capability ‘action’ which is used as a substitute for thought and not thought which is a prelude to action.

(Bion 1989, p. 7)

It is possible in this way to understand violence as a type of action which fulfils a particular psychological function, namely the ridding of unwanted mental contents. I will turn in due course to the nature of the contents being got rid of. This definition of violence means that speech and some kinds of mental activity, for example obsessional rumination, have the essential quality of ‘action’. This phenomenon may most clearly be seen in patients in the grip of psychotic functioning. This sort of action (which is essentially mindless in its intentions) is carefully to be distinguished from ‘behaviour’ and is characterized by the operation of splitting and projective mechanisms with the aim of getting rid of unwanted parts of the mind in phantasy (and in subjective experience).

This relationship links fantasy and actual acts of violence, so that fantasy about violence needs to be distinguished from violent phantasy, which may or may not involve violent fantasy. Jung noted this when he observed that fantasies of violence may in fact be concerned with psychic development rather than the obliteration of mentation. Dreams of violence or death for example, disturbing to the dreamer, may in fact be a correlate of psychological development (Jung 1963). By contrast violent individuals for the most part do not entertain violent fantasies (although dominated by violent phantasy). They may consciously plan or imagine violence and especially their own violent behaviour, but this is not to be confused with fantasy violence, in the same way that some children’s obsessional manipulation of toys is not to be confused with play.

If violence has the function of ‘emptying’ the mind of unwanted elements, by means of splitting and projection, it may also be possible to say something further about the part of the mind that is being evacuated. Here Meltzer’s concept seems relevant including as it does the subjective experience of ‘violation’, which carries with it the implication of intrusions which are emotional or physical without distinction, or more accurately that both emotional and physical intrusions are experienced as though they are concrete intrusions by alien (non-ego, non-body) elements. It is important to note that the sense of violation is not related to the nature of the emotion evoked per se, but to its passionate nature so that the sense of violation is not produced by the quality of the emotion evoked, but by the overwhelming (uncontained/uncontainable) quantity of it (Mizen 2002). A sense of violation may be created as much by a surfeit of ‘pleasurable’ affect, for example, sexual excitation, as by painful
feelings such as shame or guilt, which may more obviously be seen to play a part in violence (Symington 1996).

The clinical significance of precision

It may be argued that to this point my proposed differentiation may be only an exercise in semantics or hair splitting and that I am proposing a merely idiosyncratic concept of violence. I contend, however, that such distinctions are critical clinically in that conflations not only in the common, but also the technical languages available to us, may also be a reflection of internal conflations and confusions. Such confusions may serve as or be a consequence of defensive mechanisms and have inhibiting consequences. Analysis of the material in order to understand its actual qualities may be crucial to the success or failure of an analysis.

I have already noted that gross enactments of violence are thankfully rare in analytic work, not least because obviously potentially violent patients tend to be rejected for treatment as ‘unsuitable’. As Bion, following Freud, commented: good manners are likely to be a ‘minimum necessary condition’ for analysis and violent behaviour is usually, not least, a breach of courtesy, even if acts, such as the breaking of the furniture are, on occasion, temporarily tolerated (Bion 1980, pp. 11–12). This does not mean of course, that violence is absent from analysis, even if it is, by its very nature, ‘anti-analysis’.

How then does violence manifest itself in the analytic relationship if violent behaviour is absent (and when generally the prejudice is in favour of its absence)? In its absence, is violence unavailable for analysis in an analytic relationship and especially the transference relationship? More generally can violence be considered to be absent from violent individuals when they are not behaving violently? In order to consider these questions and because clinical examples of a more dramatic and sensational kind tend to (and, I propose, are intended to) obscure the essential psychological components of violence I will attempt to give an example of a way in which violence occurs in analysis. It concerns a patient whose material is manifestly aggressive, but not manifestly violent in her behaviour. It may be that I risk being accused of using material that is not ‘real’ violence at all, but drawing upon my definition I hope to demonstrate that there are invariant elements which are essentially violent and which need to be distinguished from those aggressive elements in the service of psychological development.

An intelligent woman, who considered herself to be poorly educated and was attempting to redress her perceived lack of education, habitually mispronounced words. If I had occasion to repeat the words she used I was placed in a situation in which I had to choose between adopting her idiosyncratic pronunciation or use my own pronunciation (which she characterized as ‘received’). Use of the latter invariably provoked furious, verbal protests purportedly on the grounds that this was an attempt on my part to humiliate.
her by means of phallic displays of book-derived knowledge or to impose mindless conventions upon her. In the transference, she was sure that my upbringing was more privileged than hers, both materially and educationally. From this elevated position, she contended, I contemptuously attacked her hard won, autodidactic, intellectual achievements. More importantly, she argued that this was an example of a failure on my part to understand the deprivation that she had suffered as a child or appreciate her attempts to overcome this. This is of course a very complicated matter, not all of which is relevant here but including questions concerning the parts played by deprivation and self-destructiveness, of whether or not I was indeed evacuating detested, unwanted parts of myself into her or whether she was using me as a vehicle for what she found hard to bear in herself: idealization and contempt, for example. After some years during which this scenario was regularly played out an occasion arose in which she had several times mispronounced the name of a person, whom I had a strong suspicion she knew I was acquainted with. As it happened I had no need to refer to the person, but noticed after a long silence that the patient had a broad grin on her face. I did not comment but after some minutes she volunteered that she was enjoying a ‘delicious’ fantasy that I was incandescent with impotent rage, wishing I could lash out at her, but was inhibited by my fear of professional retribution. She said that she ‘knew’, that if I referred to the mispronunciation, I knew I would be subject to a ‘blitz’ by her, but in remaining silent gave evidence of my having submitted myself to her intimidation and dominance.

Setting aside the defensive, perverse aspect of this material, the question in the analysis was about the meaning of the aggression in the patient’s material and about how it was to be comprehended and interpreted. In particular the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the aggression related to her need to separate from me, and the aggression (violence) that she employed in order to destroy any evidence of our separateness. She would often say to me in a taunting tone ‘What’s what?’ and I took this to mean what in her material was to be understood as an expression of her wish to differentiate herself from me and what was to be understood as a wish to violently do away with the psychological realities of separation by means of splitting and projection. Beneath the bravado this was clearly a matter of considerable anxiety for her and her presentation an attempt to make it a problem for me because she felt it to be beyond her.

With patients such as these the potential for confusing appropriate aggression with violence, deprivation with destruction or progression with regression is considerable, not least as a consequence of the patient playing upon the analyst’s own anxieties about his or her potential for uncertainty and confusion upon these matters. On the one hand there is the extent to which conveying the confusion may be an attempt by the patient to communicate his or her pain in the hope of having it contained and mediated; on the other it may be an attack upon the analyst’s ability to make any links which
lead to painful realizations and this may have as its intention not containment but ablation.

Interpreting an example of a patient’s striving for autonomy as a violent attack upon the analysis is commonly recognized as having the potential to ruin an analysis. The potential for interpreting a patient’s violent attack as an attempt at self-determination is less commonly recognized as damaging, not least because it is likely to lead to an unconscious collusion of a sadomasochistic kind and in this way remain masked.

In contradiction of Taylor’s definition of violence, as adopted by Glasser, I hope that the essential ambiguity of the behavioural and verbal aspects of this example illustrates the extent to which it is the psychological aspect of the phenomenon, rather than a piece of behaviour, which is essentially ‘violent’. Central to this is the extent to which it is the unconscious meaning of any given act or interchange that is important, but unfortunately this may remain obscure for long periods including during an analysis.

A vignette may help to illustrate this. Two three-year old children, a boy and a girl, are walking side by side along a corridor. The boy is deeply absorbed in talking to the girl, apparently about something vital. He is not looking where he is going and walks into a doorjamb, hitting his head with some force. Instantly he turns to the girl, and hits her as hard as he can across the side of her face. The adults present tell off the boy and the girl dissolves in tears.

As analysts we may not agree with Sartre’s view of the incommunicable, but we will perhaps share some of his anxiety about it. In my story it is perhaps possible to get some sense of what is incommunicable and of what happens to it, which seems to be that an attempt is made to evacuate it. From this perspective violence is a response to a sense of violation, an unbearable affective state, which threatens to become an unbearable psychic experience. I need to add an important caveat here, which is that when I say ‘response’ I am not suggesting that violence has its origin in the environment in any simple sense; it is simply reactive. This idea has considerable currency (see de Zulueta 1993), however, and the strength with which it is adhered to may have its roots in the fact that subjectively recourse to violence is likely to be experienced as reactive. This may not just be a matter of hollow self-justification or rationalization, but be a consequence of the fact that, subjectively, aspects of the Self are likely to be experienced as alien, at least initially, and as it were ‘coming at one’. This might include deintegrative experiences prior to reintegration, or faults in or failures of reintegration following deintegration, in the latter case accompanied by splitting; these may all lend themselves to subjective experiences of violation or insult felt to have an origin in the environment.

In consequence, it is common for people to describe their violence and their experience of using violence as a reaction even in circumstances in which to an outside observer such a contention is absurd. Intellectually such persons may (although often they will not) be able to see that such a position is absurd, but this will be in contradiction to their feeling and to their experience, which
precipitated the violence. Often the violence is conceived of as an action which is directed as though it were against an object in the environment. I hope that my vignette illustrates another point too, which is that violence per se is neutral. It has no content. It is merely a mechanism whereby content – whatever the content might be – is moved around.

This vignette also raises a further question about violence, which concerns the extent to which it is possible to determine how ‘serious’ the violence is. By serious I mean how far it is indicative of severe, persistent or intractable, violent personality traits or how far any act of violence is a one off or is a product of particular circumstances (accepting that a particular incident can be considered violent in the terms that I have described).

One can think of the violence that the boy showed as a consequence of two different possibilities. In one the violence is a result of a failure of deintegration/reintegration because of a lack of the requisite container, either internally or externally. One might think here in terms of people whose resort to violence is a consequence of a failure of a medium for expressing themselves in any other kind of way, for example, lack of education or supportive social environment or cultural framework or by living in a cultural framework which in some way is organized around systematic recourse to violence. This might be contrasted with violence which is more systematic in a psychological sense and an expression of a fixed system of psychological splitting and resort to projective mechanisms.

The second of these situations may be further divided into two sorts of violence, unstable and stable. In the unstable category the violence has a reactive character in which its projective quality is intended to expel, perhaps explosively. In this circumstance the violence is intended to actively void mental elements, which are experienced as violating the existing psychic system. The force of the violence will be commensurate with the force of the threat (violation) to the psyche. In neurosis the anxiety will be related to great hurt; where psychotic the anxiety will be related to terror of annihilation.

The stable set-up is also essentially projective, but in this case the evacuatory element has been arranged in a way which fixedly projects the unwanted aspects. This is likely to take the form of a psychic structure and so is characterological. In practice there may be a good deal of flux between the two so that the stable set-up can become unstable and vice versa.

I do not think that it is possible to infer very much from the incident with the children with any certainty. One could, however, imagine different responses on the part of the boy. That he might dissolve in tears or howl for mother, without hitting the girl. If, as was the case, you knew that the children were in a children’s home, it would be possible to construct a theory that the boy had too little sense of an internal mother who could hold him or contain his pain. Is the girl supposed to be the mother who absorbs the pain? This seems to me to be plausible, but I do not know if it was true. Certainly if the participants were thirteen, one’s response might be different, and different again if they were thirty. It would also be different if the boy were older or
even much older than the girl was. In the latter cases one might be less inclined to feel sorry and more likely to call for the police, which has indeed been the case with many men (and indeed many women) now imprisoned or otherwise censured, at a deep level, much to their surprise.

Does this point to incipient pathology in the boy – a pointer to future violence? It does not seem to me that one can say with any certainty that the boy’s response is abnormal. One can easily see the boy’s action as intended to get the experience out of himself and into the girl and I wonder whether it made a difference that it was this girl or any girl. Would it have been different if it had been a boy? A bigger boy? Was the fact that he hit her in the face, the place that he had most hurt himself, not least his dignity with consequent loss of face, significant? I don’t know. From a prognostic point of view the question would be about whether the boy’s response was opportunistic or part of a fixed personality structure. It is to be noted here that the only predictor of violence is a previous history of violence. I hope that I have demonstrated some of the limitations even of this.

The central quality of violence, however, is its evacuatory function having as a particular quality the reversal of a sense of violation by means of creating a sense of violation in the other. I want also to draw attention to the extent that the violence seems related to situations in which there is nearly a conscious experience of an affective state which is feared to be unbearable.

The ‘mindlessness’ of violence

The supposed ‘mindlessness’ of violence is a quality that is commonly emphasized. It will have been seen in my consideration of the various definitions of violence above, as well as in everyday life, that it is common to stress the extent to which violence is conceived of as occupying the somatic realm. So we talk of ‘mindless violence’ and something about this expression is felt intuitively to be true. And yet it is not quite right. In my story although there is a mind, the boy appears to be trying to get rid of it at least in its all consuming hurt, pained and angry condition, by means of getting it into the girl. He does not want to mind, he wants the girl to mind and so it transpires that violence is not mindless, but that the expression conveys that its user is somebody who knows something about having a mind but wants to get rid of it into somebody else. They do not ‘mind’ the other person ‘minds’. It is the violating operation of these mechanisms of splitting and projection which in aggregate constitutes ‘violence’. I think that this also accounts for the apparent absence or unreality of pain or death in cases of completed suicide, para-suicide, deliberate self-harm or self-mutilation.

This area of mental experience can be thought about using, for example, Jung’s conception of the somatic substrate of psychic phenomena and in particular the ways in which ‘mind’ develops out of ‘body’. Of particular importance is the idea of the ‘psychoid’, which Jung conceived of as bridging
psyche and soma; implicitly there is the potential for two-way traffic between them, thought about by Jung at one time, in ‘energetic’ terms (Jung 1948, paras. 368–70; Jung 1968). This links to his definition of ‘affect’ or emotion, as a precursor or earlier version of ‘feeling’, crossing the bridge. Fordham’s model of deintegration/reintegration of a primary self, for example, implicitly operates in this context (Fordham 1957).

Bion’s grid describes a similar conception schematically, mapping movements across a spectrum that at one end is, or is indistinguishable from, physiological activity moving through proto-mental activity on to dreams, unconscious phantasy, fantasy, cultural expressions, thinking and so on. Bion’s formulation also makes explicit what is implicit in Jung’s energetic model; that these movements are available for defensive reversal from psyche back to soma, which Bion called ‘reverse alpha function’, the workings of which can be mapped through the operations of a ‘negative grid’ (Bion 1984).

From this perspective violence is the means by which the psyche attempts to reverse the progression that moves from the physical to the mental with increasing complexity and sophistication, when such a development would lead to a perception which for whatever reason, would be felt to be intolerable. In this way mental elements are transformed into physical activity (this may be gross or it may be subtle). In the case of violence a special quality of the experience that is refused is that of violation. It may be too optimistic to say in the hope of finding a container as suggested by Winnicott (Winnicott 1949), but this may be so.

A variety of circumstances may lead to this situation. A mother (or the internal mother) may fail to provide a container for a violating experience. Alternatively, rather than providing a container for the infant’s experience by means of alpha function or maternal reverie, the internal mother may be experienced as evacuating or may through projective identification indeed evacuate her own unbearable internal contents into the infant. These processes may be global in nature or they may be discrete. Gianna Williams (Williams 1997) has described the latter instance as ‘omega’ function to distinguish it from the former, which would be consistent with Bion’s notion of reverse alpha function and the operations of the negative grid.

There may be a variety of reasons why the experience of violation cannot be borne. Fatigue, toxic states, threats to the ego from dystonic, psychotic or neurotic elements or overwhelming anxiety may all evoke a threat of being overwhelmed. Such circumstances also promote confusion between internal and external reality, about what is fantastic and what is external reality. Violence is intended to discharge or undo the threatening experience of violation. Paradoxically the phantasy may be the part of the experience that is felt to be dangerous and an enactment is likely to be an attempt to discharge or get rid of what is experienced as a dangerous affect. The man who punches another man on the nose is likely to be the man who is afraid of feeling like punching the other man on the nose. Violent acts are attempts not to have violent feelings (or be subject to violent affects).
It may be argued that experience does not accord with my description and that, for example, violence and say criminal violence does not operate in this way but is in support of exploitation as in the case of theft or related to questions of status or control. This objection is likely to be negated if one takes into account the actions of splitting, projection, and particularly the operation of narcissistic defences, adhesive and projective identification. If according to this definition theft is inherently violent, it is intended to elicit a sense of violation in the victim and violence can be seen not as in the service of the theft, but as its very raison d’être. As Freud noted, thieves do not feel guilt because they steal; they steal because they feel guilty. As I have already suggested, in this way violence may be manifest or it may be obscure in terms of behaviour.

Conclusion

In analysis violence is most likely to be encountered in disguised or distorted form. It becoming manifest within the analytic relationship may be something that both patient and analyst are resistant to, not least out of anxieties about enactment and containment, which may require fine distinctions to be made between violence and aggression, action and affect. For the analyst and the patient to arrive at such distinctions may take a long time and make onerous demands upon both parties in terms of bearing the ambiguities and uncertainties. After Bion I assume that the purpose of analytic work is to produce a (hopefully) controlled breakdown. This is difficult. A failure to engage in the analytic work deeply will produce superficial, illusory or adaptive changes (although I should make it clear that I am not necessarily dismissing the value of these, especially for example, in the field of ‘forensic psychotherapy’). Loss of control can lead to injury or death, or acting out.

Patients who are violent or patients who are revealing violent aspects of their mental life are presenting undifferentiated, condensed, would-be affective aspects of their psyche, in projection. Violence performs the function of evacuating undifferentiated affects, which are felt to be violating and for which there is felt to be no satisfactory internal object or internal object relationship available as a container. As I have noted violence may be the expression of a hope of finding a container, in Bion’s sense, and of effecting development, but may not.

In this paper I have considered some of the essential elements of violence. Violence can be distinguished from aggression, but is related to it, aggression being a substrate of violence. Aggression is capable of integration being an instinctual, affective corollary of the processes of deintegration and reintegra-


consequence of this. Violence may take the form of a fixed mental system of evacuation, splitting and projection, which is ‘stable’ or it may be opportunistic and ‘unstable’ – often explosive. Violence has the particular characteristic of ‘undoing’ a mental experience along the lines that Bion seems to have been describing with his concept of reverse alpha function by which means unbearable mental experiences are in phantasy and subjective reality evacuated and got rid of. This involves the somatization of mental elements and so may often present clinically in a form distorted by the defensive operations of splitting and projection and in particular projective identification. I have also considered the nature of the experience being evacuated and its affective corollaries and following Meltzer’s idea identified the experience of ‘violation’ as an essential component of this (Meltzer 1988). Violation is not synonymous with violence and violence does not beget violence in any simple sense, however. It is rather the experience of violation, uncontained, that begets violence, which has the evacuation of the experience of ‘violation’ as its aim. The purpose of the evacuation is the transformation of what is anticipated as being an unbearable mental experience into action (action used in Bion’s sense), which in this context is an expression of a phantasy of omnipotence. Somewhat misleadingly this gives rise to the idea of ‘mindless violence’. The apparent mindless attributes of violence are in fact a consequence of the purpose of violence, which involves the emptying of a sense of violation out of the subject into the object.

**Translations of Abstract**

Cet article considère certains des problèmes théoriques et cliniques dus à l’imprécision et au manque de clarté dans l’utilisation du terme ‘violence’. Une définition de la violence est proposée, qui différencie la violence du concept voisin d’agressivité, et voit la première comme une forme particulière de la deuxième. Cette définition pose par ailleurs que la violence a toujours une composante psychologique. Il est affirmé que la clarté sur ces notions est cliniquement importante pour permettre aux analystes de distinguer les éléments psychologiquement destructeurs des éléments psychologiquement créateurs chez leurs patients, dans leur propre fonctionnement psychologique, et dans leurs contrc-transferts. Le phénomène de la violence est regardé à la lumière du modèle de développement de Fordham; il est proposé en particulier l’idée que la violence peut être vue comme une conséquence d’un échec d’intégration d’aspects normaux de l’agressivité dans la personnalité. La violence est vue comme de l’agressivité non contenue et clivée à laquelle s’ajoute une projection psychologique. Il est suggéré qu’une des qualités particulières du vécu projeté est une sensation non contenue d’effraction. La notion de ‘violence sans intention’ est discutée.

Diese Arbeit untersucht einige klinische und theoretische Probleme, die von der Unge- nauigkeit und mangelnden Klarheit abhängen, mit der das Wort und das Konzept der

Questo contributo considera alcuni dei problemi contingenti clinici e teorici riguardo l’imprecisione e la mancanza di chiarezza nell’uso della parola e del concetto di “violenza”. Si propone una definizione di violenza, che separa il concetto di violenza dal relativo concetto di aggressione e vede il primo come una forma particolare del secondo. Questa definizione prevede anche che la violenza debba avere un aspetto psicologico componente. Si suggerisce che la chiarezza è importante dal punto di vista clinico, perché gli analisti possono così distinguere gli elementi psicologicamente distruttivi e gli elementi psicologicamente creativi nei loro pazienti, nel proprio funzionamento psicologico e nel controtransfert. Il fenomeno della violenza è considerato alla luce del modello di sviluppo di Fordham che propone, in particolare, di vedere la violenza come conseguenza di un fallimento nell’integrazione di aspetti normali, aggressivi della personalità. La violenza è vista come un’aggressione non contenuta, separata, soggetta alla proiezione psicologica. Lo studio propone che una particolare qualità dell’esperienza proiettata sia un senso non contenuto di violazione. Si prende in considerazione, infine, il concetto di ‘violenza irragionevole’.

Este trabajo considera algunos de los problemas contingentes clínicos y teóricos sobre la imprecisión y falta de claridad con la cual se usa la palabra y concepto de violencia. Se propone un concepto de violencia, este separa el concepto de violencia del relacionado concepto de agresión y ve al previo como una forma particular del último. Esta definición también propone que la violencia debe siempre tener como componente un aspecto psicológico. Se establece que la claridad es clínicamente importante de tal manera que los analistas puedan distinguir los elementos psicológicos destructivos de los psicológicamente creativos en sus pacientes, en su forma psicológica personal de funcionar y en la contratransferencia. El fenómeno de la violencia se considera a la luz del modelos de desarrollo de Fordham proponiendo particularmente que la violencia puede ser vista como la consecuencia del fallo en la integración los aspectos agresivos normales de la personalidad. La violencia es vista como una forma incontenida, una desconexión de la agresión, sujeta a la proyección psicológica. Se propone que una forma particular de la experiencia que está siendo proyectada es una sensación incontenida de violación. Se considera la noción de baja violencia menta.
References


[MS first received July 2002; final version February 2003]