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"I needed to go backwards before going forwards": A psychosocial case study exploring the interweaving of desistance and professional youth worker identity formation.

Introduction

Public concern about levels of serious youth violence and knife crime in the UK is peaking. (Dodd, 2019). In the search for a response, the promotion of men with their own history of violence as role models to young men involved in violence is increasingly finding support within popular and political arenas (Keeling, 2016). Men with a history of involvement in violence are perceived as having acquired street social and masculine capital (Ilan, 2013; Sandberg, 2014; de Visser, 2013) which can then be cashed in when they need to gain access to key figures in the community. The hope expressed is that young men involved in violence will psychically identify with these older men (see parts of themselves in them) and follow their pathways away from violence and towards desistance. Mirroring well-established approaches taken in fields such as addiction and alcoholism work (White, 2000) men with their own history of violence are being positioned as suitable mentors to young men because of their own 'escape' from such involvement and their 'insider' knowledge.

Professions such as youth work can provide such men with a pathway out of crime, stable employment, and a way of meeting their needs for redemption and generativity (Erikson, 1959). The promotion of such 'professional-ex' workers, who have been characterised by criminologists working in the desistance field (e.g. Lebel et al, 2015) as 'wounded healers',

raises questions as to whether professional development and managerial structures in professions such as youth work are able to provide the financial and ideological sustenance for the intensive support and supervision that these workers may require (Author's own, [2019a]).

This paper seeks to illuminate some implications of this direction of travel in youth policy by exploring the interweaving of desistance and professional youth worker identity formation. It does this via an in-depth, longitudinal case study of a man (Mark) undergoing professional youth work training in the UK. It follows Mark for 5 years as he attempts to leave his violent offending as a football hooligan behind him and construct a new non-violent professional identity as a youth worker. First, I outline some conceptual tools including: psychosocial explanations of masculine violence, desistance theory, the idea of the wounded healer, and the demand on youth workers to engage in reflexive "internal conversations" (Archer, 2012) and "mentalising" processes (Bateman and Fonagy, 2013). A pen portrait of Mark then describes his childhood and a long period as an active member of a football hooligan firm. It charts his zig-zagging pathway towards desistance and his progress through a youth work training course. When he finds himself in a position of working with young men at risk of involvement in violence the ability to build relationships with them remains elusive. He struggles with the demands for reflexivity and mentalising ability that the course and professional role requires. Even though he manages (to some extent) to recalibrate his violent personal identity predicated on physical fighting prowess, the allure of violence still persists in his psyche.

A psychosocial reading of Mark's story explores the psychic and social forces that drove his violent behaviour; how removing one-self permanently from violent social milieus can be difficult for men like Mark, and the challenges of moving into a professional youth worker role. The analysis suggests that emotions rooted in his biographical experiences continued to colour Mark's perception of self and of others (fellow trainees, young people and colleagues) and heavily influenced his responses to these others in social and professional interactions. I argue that the case study exemplifies how other trainee youth professionals like Mark may struggle to meet the demands inherent in professional roles such as youth work. If not given the time and space to "go backwards before going forwards" and build high levels of reflexive awareness, there is a risk that their practice may have limited desistance promoting potential and even that they may return to the more troubling aspects of their former selves. The paper concludes that training and continuing professional development regimes, when designed with men like Mark in mind, might benefit from the distinctive perspectives on violence, identity formation and desistance that psychosocial analysis can offer.

Conceptual tools

Psychosocial explanations of male violence and football hooliganism

Psychosocial approaches to the explanation of male violence (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007; Jones, 2013) involve integrating insights from psychoanalytically inflected psychology along with social and cultural analyses. Following Klein (1946) and object relations theory (Kernberg, 1976) male violence is seen as partly rooted in an over-utilisation of primitive defence mechanisms, for example psychic *splitting* that functions to ward off emotional pain and unbearable states of mind. Arguably, the marked statistical correlation between violence

and masculinity becomes more comprehensible when developmental paths are seen through this psychoanalytic theoretical lens and as separated along gendered lines. Accounts of masculine development influenced by feminist readings of Freudian oedipal theory (Chodorow, 1978) suggest that men grow up to worry that weakness, vulnerability or any characteristics that could be labelled as feminine will leave them open to ridicule and abandonment. Men are therefore more likely to create idealised, grandiose selves shaped by identification with hyper-masculine ideals and develop distinctively masculine defences against vulnerability that lead to physical aggression and violence. Psychoanalytic theory also suggests that this possibility is further heightened in cases where boys experience adult carers who might be aggressive or out of control. If this is a feature of childhood experience it can lead to the phenomenon named by Anna Freud (1933) as identification with the aggressor. This can involve victims of violence dissociating from their own feelings of fear, identifying with perpetrators of violence and struggling to tolerate differences in others.

Oakley (2007) argues that football fandom and hooliganism may serve to distract men from the inner turmoil of their lives and are ways of men displacing suppressed emotions such as fear and isolation onto others. He suggests that these emotions become intensified when experienced collectively in groups. The tenaciously held identifications with other men in hooligan groups can be read as a means by which men seek to meet their needs for belonging, safety, and intimacy with other men. This perspective on male violence mirrors studies on young men's attraction to gangs that highlight how this offers the means to meet deficit needs for belonging (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

Desistance theory

Established desistance literature focuses on both the psychic and social processes that lie beneath offenders' initial decision to change their criminal behaviour (*primary* desistance) and then to permanently cease offending (*secondary* desistance). Maruna (2001) focuses on internal *psychological* processes which re-orientate the offenders' sense of self. These involve offenders reconstructing an internal narrative where past events are reinterpreted to suit the new developing self, sometimes at key turning points or epiphanies. At these moments, offenders can enter a period of liminality (Barry, 2012) and often try to 'knife off' past misdemeanours (Maruna and Roy, 2007); that is, sever themselves from harmful environments, undesirable companions or even the past itself.

Laub and Sampson (2003) highlight the *social* transitions in adult life (e.g. employment, marriage and personal relationships) that develop the social bonds that stabilise and sustain new crime-free identities. Maruna et al (2004) draw on symbolic interactionist theories of identity and labelling (Becker, 1963) to theorise the intersubjective processes that underlie desistance such as the role of the societal on-looker, as captured via Cooley's 'looking-glass-self' metaphor (1902). The role of this social recognition within desistance is given a psychoanalytic twist by Gadd (2006) who suggests that it can be supplemented with an appreciation of unconscious psychodynamics. Drawing on Benjamin (2017) he outlines how partners or significant others conferring their *recognition* on an offender, that is signifying their acceptance, can lead to a painful process of self-transformation. Healy (2010) has shown how this process is not necessarily unidirectional and can involve 'zig zagging' backwards and forwards through change and towards permanent desistance.

The wounded healer

The gravitation of ex-offenders towards professional roles such as youth work and youth mentoring can be understood in part through a deployment of Jung's (1951) concept of the wounded healer. This describes a subject position whereby individuals feel compelled to heal or help others as way of healing and helping themselves. LeBel et al (2015) revive the concept, opening up possibilities of considering the emotional and existential aspects of desistance and how these relate to the career choices of offenders. This incorporates Erikson's (1959) notion of generativity (a desire to contribute to society and benefit future generations). Generative desire is closely related to needs for meaning and redemption. The aspirations of offenders to redeem their past misdemeanours through encouraging others (especially younger people) to not make the same mistakes could be seen as driven in part by these generative desires. In some cases, this can take the form of a desire to develop viable ex-offender or mentor identities within professional fields such as youth work where their desire to help others with whom they psychically identify can be fulfilled. In the case of youth work this can expose workers to young people who are still involved in offending and whose own desistance pathways and identity construction may also be in flux. This brings the business of distinguishing ex-offenders permanent desistance from temporary lulls in offending into sharp focus, along with the extent of the worker's reflective and reflexive capacities.

The demand for reflexivity and mentalisation ability

The social theorist Mary Archer (2012) characterises people for whom this ability to be reflexive has been impeded as a result of traumatic personal biographies as *fractured reflexives*. She argues these people can become overly fixated on internal dialogues that emphasise and exaggerate their own lack of self-worth, so disabling the effective use of

reflexive knowledge. The psychoanalytic tradition (e.g. Horney, 1991) saw this fixation as a feature of neurosis - the return of repressed emotion arising from memories of trauma or conflict between the id and ego. The more fractured reflexives think and talk to themselves, the more they get emotionally distressed and cognitively disorientated. In response, they may seek to stabilise their incoherent subjectivities through a rigid maintenance of a perceived sense of difference from the 'other'. Burkitt (2012) argues that building this reflexivity is not just rational but also a relational, dialogical process in which the emotional stance that others take, and have taken, towards us, especially at key or formative periods of our lives, colour the way we reflexively see ourselves.

From a psychodynamic perspective, Bateman and Fonagy (2013) argue that our sense of self also develops in part through our perception of ourselves in another person's mind. Our ability to *mentalise* - to understand the mental state of oneself or others - underlies how we are able to regulate emotions, control our impulses, and experience self-agency. They suggest that the development of mentalising ability depends on the quality of the social learning environment and, in particular, early attachments. Adults with a history of fractured attachment may find it difficult to step back and respond flexibly to the symbolic qualities of other peoples' behaviour. Instead they find themselves caught in fixed patterns of attribution and instrumental uses of affect.

This demand for reflexivity and mentalising ability has important implications for professions such as youth work. Because of the opportunity for viable employment and generativity such professions offer to ex-offenders, it is increasingly likely that some may enter training still seeking to accomplish an identity which is both psychically acceptable to themselves and

socially acceptable to others. Reflective and reflexive capacity, when viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, is connected to the worker's ability to avoid over-identification (Cain, 2000) and projection of their own needs and desires onto and into (Klein, 1946) the young people with whom they psychically identify and are seeking to engage (Lemelin, 2006; Miller, 1990). Youth and social work training make extensive use of the reflective practice literature, often in an educational context (Dewey, 1997; Schon, 1983; Eraut, 2007) but arguably only limited use of more psychoanalytic perspectives on reflective practice (e.g. Webber and Nathan, 2010). How might a psychosocial frame aid understanding of the desistance pathways and professional development of workers with a history of violence? And how should training regimes interact with these evolving worker subjectivities in ways that maximise their utility and desistance promoting potential?

Methodology

The case study is based on a series (5 in total, each over an hour long) of Free Association Narrative Interviews (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013) conducted with a youth work student during his 3-year training course and for 2 years after his qualification. Mark gave his written consent at the beginning of the research process but over the research period (5 years) his relationship with me (which began as professional tutor/student) developed into a more informal and personal one. I was able to supplement formal interviews with many informal conversations and selected material (with his ongoing consent) from his reflective writing and SMS messages/phone conversations, some of which were exchanged after his qualification.

Maintaining reflexivity demanded that I acknowledge that whilst Mark may have felt comfortable sharing his story with someone with whom he had built up a mutually respectful relationship, he might also have been keen to appear the most competent and effective as

he could within his practice. Mark was regularly reminded of the option to withdraw from the research, given contact details of independent support/counselling agencies and provided with a clear complaint procedure.

The case is drawn from a wider doctoral study that sought to examine relationships between male youth workers and young men involved in violence in the U.K. As with all case study work, the study did not seek to offer objectivity, generalisability or replicability but rather to reveal the meaningful links between experience and structure within the selected relational encounter. The distinctive formulation of this case (as longitudinal and therefore incorporating dynamic change) strengthened the opportunity for meaningful theoretical generalisation, despite the $n=1$ sample size.

As I have documented more fully elsewhere (Authors own, 2019b) the FANI method assumes that psychodynamic concept of defence mechanisms has significant analytical purchase when seeking to understand subjectivity and the life worlds of research subjects. In this formulation of subjectivity, the modern notion of a rational, unitary subject is replaced with a non-unitary *defended* subject, with unconscious motivations. During interviews an effort was therefore made to consider not only what respondent said but *how* he said it. This included noticing what he struggled to say and what he could not or did not say. Silences and pauses were included within transcription in order to produce provisional hypotheses based on contradictions, inconsistencies and avoidances. Data analysis was underpinned both by these psychodynamic precepts and the principle of *gestalt* i.e. the belief that it is impossible to achieve an understanding of structured totals by starting with the ingredient parts which enter into them. All information gathered during the research process was kept confidential, including that which referred to illegal activities, past or present (unless there was a risk of

serious harm or an immediate threat to life). Individual identifiers were removed from stored data and altered where required in dissemination.

Mark: a pen portrait

When we first met, Mark was beginning a 3-year training course seeking to qualify as a professional youth worker. Mark was white, in his 20's, with a muscular physique and had tattoos on his arms and legs, mainly depicting his affiliation to the local football team. His face showed signs of wear and tear, which he explained were as result of fights he had been involved in throughout his life, but mainly through his involvement in football hooliganism.

Mark grew up in a socio-economically deprived, white working-class area. He came from a family with a reputation for violence which he felt had permanently affected how he was viewed and treated by others in his community. From an early age he felt needed to "look after himself" and "defend himself" from "hassle" because of his association with his brother, who was 12 years older and involved in a range of drug and gang-related violent activity. He felt his physical similarity to his brother marked him out from his peers, and this along with his family's socio-economic position meant he "got picked on". His childhood memories included vivid accounts of times he knew his family was different, such as his brother being stabbed and "seeing people hurt". This seemed to have been the beginning of his desensitisation to violence. Violence became "normality" for Mark. This was exacerbated by endemic conflict between his brother and father, which on occasion escalated into serious physical assaults. These events had left a "big scar" on Mark and the family fractured too. He acknowledged that this was not something that could be considered "normal", and he

“envied” what he saw as other families’ more routine lives.

At school, Mark, who like his brother suffered with dyslexia that was undiagnosed, found the school work difficult. He was labelled the “dumb kid” and a “trouble maker” by teachers and became the victim of bullying from other children, until he finally lashed out, hitting someone in the playground. His frustration, lack of self-esteem and sense of impotency starkly contrasted to his discovery of potency when involved in fights.

Fighting was simple. I knew what I had to do. There was no like, ‘oh you have to read up on it’ sort of thing. That person is put in front of me, all I have to do is beat him. And that felt good, it felt good to be good at, like, something, sort of thing, and that’s probably what kicked off my liking for it.

Mark remembered feeling that his actions at the time were not “that wrong”, just “self-defence really”. For Mark, instilling fear in others as result of his fighting prowess became a means of extracting revenge against his contemporaries and gave him a “buzz”.

PH: ...the fear that you see in other children at that point...

Mark: ...was probably the fear they saw in me when I was writing, so it was nice to give them something back.

Mark was expelled from school and sent to an alternative education unit. His brother, now heavily involved in drug-related crime, stabbed someone during an argument and went “on the run”. Despite Mark’s efforts to intervene, his brother was caught and imprisoned. Mark recalled how distressing this was for his mother.

I remember seeing my Mum's face when that actually happened. It was the most painful thing I've ever experienced in my life.

Often in the interview Mark would quickly move to enthusiastically describing his involvement in violence. At the age of 18 he drifted into petty crime, selling stolen clothes. Wanting to “get in” with the “big boys” he gradually became a more active member in the local hooligan gang, becoming closely acquainted with some of the older men, who gave him “protection” and used to “look out” for him. He attributed his violent behaviour to a desire to assert his masculinity.

It was pure...it was manliness, it made me feel good about myself if I'm honest with you.

You have to start acting like you're a man like.

Epiphanies and primary desistance

Mark began to sustain serious injuries in fights with rival firms and was hospitalised on several occasions, including once when he was stabbed. He felt his Mum was beginning to “look” at him in a certain way. All the other children in the family had begun to “settle down” and he felt he was “the shit part of the family”. Then Mark's grandmother died and this seemed to trigger the first of several sudden “overnight” realisations. Soon after, he met his girlfriend (Sarah) who Mark said came from a “good family” and a “peachy background”. He was attracted to Sarah's willingness to make him “work for it”. He felt that she “saw through him”; more as “her future husband and bearer of her kids” and he started to “open up more” and “rely” on her. Sarah's family also warmed to him.

However, despite this opportunity to reinvent himself, when Sarah's ex-boyfriend challenged him to a fight over her, Mark confronted him and arranged for some of his hooligan friends

to threaten him. He also admitted lying to Sarah for some time about his ongoing involvement in violence. After another serious fight he was left with injuries that required an emergency operation. Mark recalled Sarah's arrival at the hospital, when she "burst into tears".

They let her in because she was so distraught, but when I woke up, she said to me, "if you want to stay with me, you're going to have to change and get out of this sort of thing and change your life". Ever since that point, I felt like I've started to get my life together.

Mark drew parallels with a previous traumatic episode in his life when his brother had been sent to prison.

The only person who ever showed me that much affection was my Mum; who worried about me to that extent. It was the first time I felt that since seeing my Mum cry. That pain. I seen my girlfriend cry. Not wanting to see the person you love cry. I think that's one of the worst pain in the world for me. The worst thing in my life, or the most scars on my memory was when my brother went to jail and seeing my Mum cry; that was one of the worst.

Sarah began to police his involvement in hooliganism, attending games with him, especially those at which there was a greater chance of trouble. When trouble flared at a match when she was with him, Mark felt compelled to protect her from danger.

I think that was another moment of clarity. I just saw her face sort of thing. I had to save her, I had to protect her.

Mark finally resolved to remove himself from the hooligan "firm". However, this proved more of a challenge than he anticipated, because he was so accustomed to having a "reputation". Letting this go made him feel "massively vulnerable" and that people could "take advantage"

of him. He continued to attend matches but with who he called “blockers” – people who would not get involved in violence and therefore might prevent him from doing so too. He said it “felt good” not to “feel angry” and he began to take on the role of mediator, dissipating violence amongst younger peers, where in the past he would have been an instigator. On one occasion he broke up a fight involving a younger man and his manager where he worked. Mark took pride and satisfaction from this, claiming he had “stopped him maybe even wrecking his future”. But he still faced difficulties overcoming how he was perceived by some of his old acquaintances who were not supportive of his decision to leave. They saw this as a sign of weakness that meant they could “hassle” him.

Youth work training

Encouraged by Sarah who was studying Social Work, Mark applied for a place at University to study Youth and Community Work. It was at this point that we first met. In his first interview Mark said he had been out of football violence for about a year. He said he felt “more than happy” and that Sarah inspired him “to better than I am... to become what I can become”. He was looking forward to making his family proud through succeeding at University and already enjoying some affirmation from family members, all of which seemed to strengthen his resolve to alter his life trajectory. However, Mark confessed that he still missed the excitement of violence and felt he should be given help with what he saw as an “addiction”. Mark relied heavily on personal support from tutors, often openly expressing crises of confidence. His relationships with other students and lecturers became strained on occasions where his outlook was challenged. He found it difficult to recognise that his gendered and racialized identity afforded him any degree of power, choosing instead to focus on what his disadvantaged class position.

For his first fieldwork practice experience he was placed in an alternative education unit where he felt he could closely identify with the pupils, all of whom (like him) had been excluded from mainstream provision. He found it difficult to develop meaningful relationships with the young people in the unit. In his second interview (at the end of his first year) he confessed to feeling deeply conflicted. He struggled to express why.

I just am, like...like... I'm still torn between two realities in, in a massive...like... I'm not still fully accepting of Uni, sort of thing, and, and I'm still not, like, I still don't feel comfortable in this environment at all. But yet I'm starting to not feel comfortable in the other environment. So it's sort of like... And I don't... I'm just at... I'm just like... I'm fighting an internal battle, trust me. I'm just trying to feel like... trying to find a place.

This 'fight' was testing his psychological stamina and resolve.

'Cause it's a constant challenge, coming here, isn't it? It's constant, like, it's a constant... It's, even though I'm not fighting physically, I'm in a constant fight coming here. So, it's sort of like, it's sort of tiring after a bit, like.

He felt discernibly different to his younger, mainly female, student peers, especially in terms of his worldview. He envied their "intelligence" and "rosy" vantage point but felt they lacked sufficient experience of the environments they were likely to work in. Simply being in the classroom became a source of deep anxiety. Despite managing to secure some good grades he still "despised" academic work. In his final year he was placed in a local community football project, at his own request. This exchange from another interview shows how he struggled to make sense of how he felt "weird" at that time.

PH: What's weird about it, you know?

Mark: What's weird about it is obviously the situation I'm in. Because theirs is worse than mine, sort of thing, like. I mean, I go on about my stuff, which is sort of like, which is... But then, like, I get to go home to a nice sort of like, you know... I get to go... My mum and dad are at the house. Like I said, I have a good relationship. I get to go home to mum and dad. I get to go home to a girlfriend. I don't have that bad a life, sort of thing, like. So, but then... like... but then... but then I have... like...you know, there's stuff in my past which people wouldn't ever sort of do. And it's just like... And it's just... How can I... I can't... I can't describe it.

Other extracts from his reflective writing show how his ambivalent emotions meant he found the transition to professional status problematic. When he witnessed some malpractice in a work placement he found it difficult to shift his worldview despite engaging in considerable internal deliberation. He saw it as “grassing” and an “act of treason” and initially defaulted to his “natural reaction” which was to “shut down”. With support, he eventually decided to tell his manager, but his reflection shows how he struggled to make sense of this at the time.

I thought to myself why am I like this? I always lose the point, maybe because I am so insecure about being seen with weakness. And now the thought of somebody finding out that I had informed on them and the label that would give me in the end. All I could think is it could be something left over from my childhood.

Approaching qualification, his final reflections showed he now felt he could offer something to young people at the community football project as a “role model”. In his final interview Mark admitted he felt he was only “starting to fight the stuff from my past now” and that this was “getting messy”. He still felt more “at ease” with his former identity and “normal”

environments still felt “weird”. Significantly, he admitted “if something went wrong” he could still go “off the rails” and that he was still “stuck massively in between”.

The question I ask myself is: if it was made legal, would I still do it? I’ve gotta be honest with you. I don’t know if I wouldn’t still be doing it if it wasn’t, you know, if it was legal sort of thing.

Two months after his graduation I contacted Mark by SMS to check on his progress with finding a job. He had secured an interview at a local football club as an education development officer but had not been successful. His SMS read that it, “wasn’t for me to be honest. It’s a bit of a struggle”. 18 months later, Mark contacted me again to tell me he had finally secured a job as a behaviour support worker. He said he “just wanted to get back in contact to say sorry for disappearing after Uni”. His email suggested that he seemed to recognise that his pathway into youth work and a new, non-violent professional identity had not been at all straightforward.

I think I had to move backwards before I could move forward again.

A psychosocial analysis

Understanding Mark

Mark’s story suggests that a childhood of enforced self-sufficiency (“looking after himself”) morphed into a defensive formation as the hard man hooligan (“I can look after myself”) and then into the role model male youth worker who could “look after” young people. His world view remained gendered throughout and his accounts of his significant relationships were structured around a psychic split of his love objects (Klein, 1946) that either idolised or

demonised significant others often along conventionally gendered lines: Sarah as the “peachy” girl and himself as the rough and ready man. He seemed to hold his brother partly responsible for much of the family violence and conflict, despite seeing him experience alarming physical abuse at the hands of his father.

Mark seems to have dissociated from any sense of his own victimhood and instead identified with his father’s aggression and expressive violence. Organised football violence may have been more psychologically palatable than the unpredictable domestic variety he had witnessed at home. His account of entry into hooliganism included him first loitering on the fringes of a hyper-masculine enclave and repressing any vestige of vulnerability in order to be accepted. It is at least possible that Mark’s eventual membership of a hooligan group may have facilitated a desire to disavow vulnerability (associated with the feminine) allowed him to be together with men within an environment of collective warmth but one still laced with the hostility and aggression so familiar to him (Oakley, 2007). Mark’s possessive psychic identification with his local club and the excitement of violence facilitates his escape from the mundane and traumatic nature of his uncertain psychic and social world (Harvey and Piotrowska, 2013). The aggression and unprovoked random violence for which he is responsible seems to have been catalysed and fuelled by deep inner insecurities, possibly partly generated in humiliating experiences at home and school. Insecure about his educational ability and feeling the stigma of economic disadvantage, his aggression seems to have been driven by projection of his insecurities onto and into other men, discharged in violence sanctioned by the hyper masculine enclave to which he claimed allegiance.

Understanding Mark’s desistance

Events in Mark's social world such as the death of his grandmother, to whom he seems to have been close and may have provided much needed unconditional love, seem to have triggered some psychic introspection and the impetus for his first epiphany and primary desistance. The social stigma and negative label (Becker, 1963) attached to his violent hooligan activity was leading to some reservations as to how he was seen by others (Cooley, 1902). Then, noticing the pain etched on the faces of his mother and girlfriend stops him in his tracks. It took an ultimatum issued by his girlfriend following his hospitalisation for him to begin to take ownership of the fact that he was an important part of their life. This ultimatum eventually begins to drag him away from his attraction to violence and homo-social bonding.

He seemed to welcome Sarah "seeing through him"; a vital psychic recognition (Benjamin, 2017) which may have met an unconscious need for someone to see his vulnerability, if only in snapshot. However, he responded to this recognition by creating "two Marks"; it was some time before he really began to let his vulnerability be fully known or open to her. His strategy to permanently desist and live without the allure of violence involved removing himself from his male hooligan peers and the offending opportunities associated with them. Despite this, he still relapsed into threats of violence, such as the hyper-masculine posturing with his girlfriend's ex-partner. Surrounding himself with "blockers" was an example of strategies offenders use for the psychic knifing off of past misdemeanours (Maruna and Roy, 2007). For Mark this proved to be a painful task but one in which he took some pride. Once partially removed from the morally stigmatising hooligan milieu, Mark chose to adopt another, still masculinised persona; that of the "bigger man"- the protector and peacemaker trying to dissipate conflict – an identity that allowed him to remain connected (if not committed) to violence. This embryonic internal shift in his personal identity was then solidified by the social

bonds engendered by his choice to go to University and the different worldviews this exposed him to.

Understanding Mark's fractured reflexivity

A career in youth work offered Mark the opportunity for much needed material change in his social circumstances; a route to employment and active citizenship, a way to meet his responsibilities for his family and a tangible route to become the man he (and Sarah) wanted him to become. The potential for paid employment as ad youth worker provided him with a means to de-label (Maruna et al 2004) and a powerful generative script (Erikson, 1951). Studentship operated as a liminal space (Barry, 2012) as he sought to bridge the gap between his two identities (hooligan and youth worker). However, entering the restraining environment of a professional training course also brought new demands. During his training he seemed to oscillate between self-belief and self-doubt. His feelings at school, where he felt "different to other kids" in his class seemed to resurface in the classroom at university. The partial surfacing of previously unacknowledged emotion such as guilt about "stuff" in his past and humiliation surrounding experiences in his home and school life seemed to hamper his reflexive capacities and colour his "internal conversations" (Archer, 2007). His identity construction, especially surrounding his accomplishment of masculinity and a professional self, remained precarious.

Working effectively as a youth worker on placement required him to be able to build relationships with young men that offered them more than mutual or reciprocal identification. Engaging with vulnerable young men, some of whom may have suffered similar

abuse or the pain of loss, required something more than simply reproducing the same, culturally fixed dynamics. His halting attempt to describe his relationships with young men on the community football project and the persistent difficulties he had perceiving what *they* were thinking about *him* suggests managing his own affect was hampering his mentalising abilities (Bateman and Fonagy, 2013). It is possible that his own envy of more “normal” families during his own childhood was leading him to project that envy onto and into (Klein, 1946) the young men with whom he was engaged and then to worry that the young men might feel that same envy towards him in his new professional role. Without ongoing support and supervision this projection (Gadd, 2006) was likely to continue to colour his perception of himself and the young men. This mis-recognition and over-identification (Cain, 2000) is only one example of Mark’s struggle with his service users and how this affected his work. It is foregrounded here as one notable example of his internal preoccupations and how these interfered with his ability to fully recognise the young men, colleagues and other trainees whilst in training.

Mark’s vivid recall of the violence he witnessed and perpetrated suggest an ongoing psychic investment in violence. The near-fictionalised accounts in which he revisited the scenes of violence, suffused with a palpable nostalgia, indicates his new pro-social professional identity was still brittle as he neared completion of his training. When encountering professional malpractice he found it difficult to shake off the fear of being classed as a “snitch”. His eventual admittance that should hooliganism be legal he could not be sure that he would not still be involved suggests that he was still wary of his violent past. Entering a professional environment where job opportunities were scarce meant that Mark’s efforts to consolidate his identity, despite the social recognition offered by graduation, could still be frustrated by

events outside of his control. His need to stay away from former male friends, associates and rivals shows how he still struggled psychically with the loss of excitement, sociability, masculine status, loyalty and sheer fun that violence offered.

The stored-up troubles in the Mark's inner world were only surfacing as he reached the end of his training. After 18 months of unsuccessful attempts to find employment, his entry into a professional behaviour support role with young men, many of whom, like him, may well have been struggling with psychic and social deprivation, begs an important question. Should the social and relational factors in his life change again, how susceptible would Mark be to a return to his struggle to manage his emotional conflicts and violent offending? His acknowledgement that he needed to go "backwards before going forward again" suggested that even after 3 years professional training the potential long-term outcomes for Mark, and the young people he would be engaged with were, at the point our contact ended, less than certain.

Conclusion

This paper set out to illuminate some implications of the positioning of ex-violent offenders as role models for young men involved in serious violence by exploring how the psychosocial dynamics of desistance interweave with professional identity formation. The first half of Mark's story may well mirror that of many young men who become involved in violence, football related or otherwise. As such, the case sheds light on some of the underlying psychic and social causes of violence as committed by some young men like Mark, especially the roots of that violence in early experiences of humiliation and vulnerability.

Mark's story of movement into the youth work profession raises questions for the training and continuing professional development of youth workers with a history of involvement in violence. Youth work professional training is currently positioned (somewhat precariously) within the Higher Education sector in the UK. Viewing the desistance and professional development pathways of men like Mark through a psychosocial lens illuminates how they might struggle to maintain a professional identity. This risk can be more clearly and sympathetically evaluated (and potentially ameliorated) when the particular pathways taken by some individuals to a practitioner identity is understood more fully.

The analysis also underscores why the chances of permanent desistance for the practitioner are not automatically shored up by assuming a 'wounded healer' identity. The employment of individuals like Mark (professionally or as volunteers) tends to imply they have definitively 'crossed a line' to safety. The case shows how desistance can be destabilised by movement into a fledgling practitioner role. It gives some indication of the importance of creating pedagogical spaces where youth work trainees like Mark can work through their own biographical experiences. This should include helping trainees to recognise how emotions can interfere with the reflexivity required to maintain relationships with professional colleagues and young people involved in violence. Routinised, psycho-analytically informed supervision is one way in which trainees might be supported to move towards a more realistic and stable vantage point from which to understand the differences and similarities between themselves and young people.

Workers who are seeking to respond to violence need professional development spaces that can accommodate their own routes through the psychic and social complexity that Mark's story illustrates. Training and continuing professional development regimes, when designed for those with a history of violent offending, might benefit from the distinctive understanding of male violence, professional identity formation and desistance that a psychosocial perspective offers. If Mark's story is in anyway paradigmatic, it might raise a note of caution around current trends in the recruitment and selection of men with a history of violence, many of whom may undergo little or no substantive professional training before entering employment as youth workers and mentors. By the end of his training Mark was at least able to recognise that he needed to "go backwards before moving forward". The employment of men like Mark into youth work roles raises the prospect of them intervening in young men's lives without the tools to do so effectively (at best) or worse, simply engraining socially problematic behaviours.

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