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'Taking it to heart': Girls and the meanings of violence

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Introduction

This chapter highlights the importance of social and situational context to an understanding of girls' violence (and to girls' understanding of violence). The research study[1] that forms the basis of the chapter commenced, in Scotland, against a back-drop of increasing concern in Britain about violence by, and amongst, young people. Youth violence is rapidly becoming one of the most contentious issues in current debates about crime and criminal justice policy and, whilst the main focus has been on the violence of young males, part of the concern has been about the perceived increase in violence as measured by violent offending by girls and young women.[2] In both academic (e.g. Hardy & Howitt, 1998) and media accounts (e.g. Brinkworth & Burrell, 1994), girls' violence is commonly portrayed as more grave and disquieting than boys' violence, and as presenting more of a problem (Batchelor et al, 2001). Whilst there is evidence to support claims that young women are increasingly being drawn into the criminal justice system for violent offences,[3] closer scrutiny of the official figures reveal that, in fact, young women account for a very small percentage of violent crime,[4] and violent crime forms a tiny percentage of young women's offending in general.[5] Moreover, this pattern has remained largely unchanged for the past 20 years.

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[1] This research project, 'A View From The Girls: Exploring Violence and Violent Behaviour' (ESRC Award No. L133251018) was conducted by Michele Burman, Jane Brown, and Susan Batchelor (all Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Glasgow) and Kay Tisdall (Children in Scotland and Department of Social Policy, University of Edinburgh). It was one of 20 projects operating under the ESRC's five year Violence Research Programme.

[2] The term 'girls' is used throughout this paper to refer to females under the age of 16. 'Young women' refers to those aged 16-20 years.

[3] Between 1999 and 2000, there was a 19 per cent increase (to 336) in the number of custodial sentences for females aged under 21 in Scotland. (This was in contrast to the number of male young offender direct sentenced receptions which, in 2000, reached the lowest experienced since 1991.) A higher proportion of these young women (22%) were imprisoned for crimes of violence (32 out of a total of 148 receptions) than the rest of the female prison population (Scottish Executive, 2002).

[4] In 2000, females (of all age groups) accounted for 7.5 per cent of non-sexual crimes of violence in Scotland. In terms of actual numbers, 315 women had a charge proven against them and of this group less than one third (96 or 30%) were under the age of 21 years. This compares to 3,808 men who had a charge of non-sexual violence proven against them, of which 38% (1,445) were aged under 21 (Scottish Executive, 2001).

[5] We are relying here on the official statistics relating to *young women* (aged 16-20 years) processed through the adult courts. It is extremely difficult to get reliable information on *girls'* offending due to the distinctive nature of the Scottish system of juvenile justice. In Scotland, in all but the most serious cases, children aged under 16 who commit offences are referred to the Children's Hearing System. Children's Hearings are administrative tribunals where lay members of the public determine whether compulsory measures of supervision are required. The determination of guilt or innocence is considered inappropriate. Figures on the number of children convicted of various offence types are therefore not available, although the Scottish Children's Reporter Association publishes statistics on number of offence referrals. However, there are measurement complexities here regarding the manner

Despite the high level of interest in 'girl violence' (Stanko, 2001), there is a paucity of British literature on girls and violence, as most research on youth violence has focused on boys. Girls' voices are rarely heard. The international research literature however, shows that not only do forms of violence and aggression differ between girls and boys, but also that girls' violence emerges from experiences that are qualitatively different from those of boys. Girls who use violence have frequently been physically, sexually, and emotionally abused, often by close family members (Artz, 1998; Baskin and Sommers, 1998; Chesney-Lind, 2002; Miller, 2001; Stewart and Tattersall, 2000). This results in girls running away from home and subsequent drug or alcohol abuse (Belknap and Holsinger, 1998). They are also significantly more prone to self-harm and depression (Leschied et al, 2000). As a consequence, the behaviours that bring girls to the attention of juvenile justice professionals are often different from those presented by boys. Researching girls and violence, then, demands qualitatively different questions from those concerning boys.

In embarking on this research, our interest was not in establishing whether or not there had been an increase in girls' violent offending, but with investigating girls' views about and experiences of violence – as both victims *and* perpetrators. A key aim was to understand the ways in which different forms of violence – physical, sexual, verbal and emotional – impact on girls' lives. This was intended as an exploratory study to open up a discursive space for young women to talk about their experiences and attitudes towards violence. We were interested not only in exploring the nature and extent of violence experienced by girls, through personal accounts of their own involvement in violence and conflict situations, but also in exploring both the symbolic and instrumental meanings that violence holds for them. We took a multi-method approach, utilising a self-report questionnaire, a series of small-group discussions, and in-depth interviews.[6] Girls were drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and diverse communities across Scotland, and were located through their membership of youth groups and clubs, through schools, youth out-reach workers and contacts with other girls.[7]

The study started from the assumption that the meaning(s) of violence for those who use it and experience it are inextricably bound up with lived experiences, subjective identities and intimate and social relationships. In this study, as in several others that have focused on aspects of girls' lives (e.g. Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997; Hudson, 1989; Lees, 1993), girls demonstrated considerable insight into their own personal, gendered circumstances and the social inequalities underpinning their lives; all were well aware of 'being a girl'. Coming from different social, material, economic, demographic and educational backgrounds, however, they did not constitute a homogenous group. The ways in which girls subjectively experience violence, and the ways in which they bring these experiences to bear on their definitions and views about violence, are in turn mediated and shaped by factors of class, race, sexuality, as well as their place of

in which incidents and referrals are counted; for example, numerous incidents can be involved in one referral, and numerous referrals of the same young person can be made. Also, and crucially, offence referrals are not broken down by offence type, but in terms of grounds for referral.

[6] The discussion that follows draws on both the quantitative (questionnaire) and the qualitative (focus group and individual interview) data, although percentages refer to the survey data only.

[7] Consequently, we are not in a position to claim that our findings are representative of the views of all young women. Only a small number of 'hard to reach' girls with more chaotic and transitory lifestyles took part in the research, for example, and we did not speak to young women in private school settings.

residence. Furthermore, whilst there where were some broad similarities in terms of girls' experiences of violence,[8] there were also some key differences in terms of using violence. Whereas 30% of girls reported ever having hurt someone through the use of physical violence, only 10% reported being routinely physically violent. This group of girls also had a disproportionate experience of violence in their own lives; were able to normalise the impact of violence, and showed a high tolerance for the use of physical violence, particularly defensive violence. Yet for others, like Suzanne in the following quote, exposure to physical violence was far outside their own field of experience:

> *We were near Leicester Square and it was really slow moving traffic and there were these guys on the pavement and they started a fight. It was actually quite terrifying because I have just never...and it was proper fighting. I haven't ever seen that properly before and it is really, really shocking to see it because it's just amazing the way you suddenly see people really trying to damage each other.*
> [Interview 9]

'Violence': a continually contested, politically sensitive term
Exploring the nuanced meanings of violence held by girls with such divergent experiences and occupying different social positions was a challenging task. This was exacerbated by the overarching problem of the contested meanings of the term 'violence', which we encountered at a theoretical, methodological and analytical level. Most of the projects in the ESRC Violence Research programme appear, at some stage, to have encountered and grappled with problems associated with the definition and/or measurement of 'violence' and specifically what sorts of behaviours, actions, situations or orientations are meant by the use of the term within the context of each study. Using the word 'violence' implies that we share a common understanding of what it means to be violent, yet the term itself remains imprecise and continuously contested (Leibling and Stanko, 2001). It is used to denote a *range* of acts, consequences and practices, has powerful connotations, and is arguably one of the most confused, emotive and subjective terms in our moral and social language (Norman, 1995).

Ordinarily, the word 'violence' is associated with the practice of physical harm inflicted by one person on another. Yet it can also refer to the trauma (emotional or psychological) that comes from being frightened or threatened, or consistently terrorised, and has also been used to denote not only particular acts or their consequences, but a general climate in which the omnipresence of violent acts create an atmosphere of fear and demoralisation (Tonry and Moore, 1998). The experience of violence is subjective in so far as different people perceive different types of behaviour differently. As Littlechild comments, 'One person may view a situation as violent and threatening, whereas a colleague may not' (1997: 77). Hence an individual witnessing a violent assault may be more distressed than the actual victim of the assault (Bowie, 2002). This means that in order to comprehend fully the causes and consequences of

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[8] For example, 70% of girls from the self-report survey described regularly witnessing at first hand some form of physical violence, usually a fight, near or around where they lived, went to school or 'hung out'; nearly two thirds (65%) knew someone personally who had been hurt by physical violence; 42% had been frightened by someone threatening, following or chasing them; and 41% had been deliberately hit, punched or kicked (usually by another young person).

violence, it is important to bear in mind the wider meanings that embrace emotional and psychological effects, as well as individual incidents of physical harm.

The competing discourses defining and conceptualising violence draw attention to its socially and *politically* constructed nature. Arriving at a precise, yet inclusive, denotation of violence is much more than a simple definitional issue; it is also an important political and policy issue. Yet it is debateable whether an objective definition of violence could be found. Because its meaning and impact vary for different people, violence researchers must confront the dilemmas of engaging with a field where their research findings become part of a popular discourse that has a special moral mission in contemporary society (Sasson, 1995; Sparks, 1992). 'This moral discourse is steeped in contradictory notions of what kind of crime and violence are normal, acceptable, illegal and abnormal. As researchers we are often in situations where we are to make judgements about behaviour, and decide whether such behaviour is worthy of note.' (Leibling and Stanko, 2001: 426) The words we choose to talk about such behaviour are consequential (Best, 1999: 27). They have implications for the way in which violence is explained and responded to, and affect our capacity for dealing with it.

Following a research agenda examining girls' violence may push a researcher to the 'edges' of mainstream feminist debates (Batchelor, 2001a). One of the dangers of researching particular subjects is that by acknowledging their very existence we may contribute to their problematisation. The publicity generated by research on girls and violence may lead to the perception that girls' violence is a growing problem, or that girls are just as bad as, if not worse than, boys (Batchelor, 2001c; Tisdall, forthcoming). It is for this reason that feminists have traditionally ignored female violence, fearing the potentially negative political and social costs for the feminist movement more generally. After all, if energy and resources are expended on addressing *female* violence, the hard won acknowledgement that sexual and physical violence are gendered crimes may be lost within a 'women blaming' backlash.

The social meaning of girls' violence
Accounts of female violence are almost always framed in a discourse of gender (Batchelor, 2001b; Burman, 2001). The fact that violence perpetrated by young women is considered worthy of attention at all is related to the fact that hegemonic femininity is commonly perceived as passive, non-aggressive, and non-violent. Girls' violence challenges dominant gender codes and is therefore regarded as a 'problem', a threat to the moral fabric of society, and something about which something 'must be done'. In order to keep existing models of femininity intact, female violence has to be portrayed as an aberration (masculinised, pathologised), or redefined as *part of* the natural feminine condition (adolescent girls as emotional, irrational and out of control). Where girls' agency *is* depicted this is blamed on an erosion of traditional femininity, in turn attributed to feminism and women's liberation. Alternatively, it is blamed on masculinity and patriarchy ('the cycle of abuse').

The tensions and inconsistencies set up by the ways in which girls' violence is commonly conceptualised, and responded to, renders this thorny and complex issue difficult to address or analyse critically. Mixed messages are conveyed which increase confusion. Consider the following characterisations. Whereas girl victims of girls' violence are characterised in media accounts by their vulnerability (e.g. physically

frail, friendless, loners, not conventionally attractive etc.), 'violent' girls are presented as fierce and dangerous thugs who get a kick out of inflicting harm and pain, transgressors who have located themselves in opposition to conventional or appropriate femininity. This juxtapositioning of the innocent with the dangerous is premised on the construction of difference between girls, and in many ways echoes the basic conventional stereotypes of 'good' and 'bad' girls found in discourses of adolescent femininity.[9] Yet, there is a blurred boundary between girls as perpetrators and girls as victims of violence. As highlighted above, a number of researchers have identified a pattern of violent female offending that begins with their victimisation.

Throughout the various discourses, girls' violence is depicted in oppositional (and highly contradictory) ways. On the one hand, it is portrayed as dangerous, irrational, stemming from a lack of control, a manifestation of individual pathology, and hence largely incomprehensible (Campbell, 1993; Motz, 2001). Yet on the other, violent girls are described as coldly calculating, intentionally targeting, manipulative and scheming (Mitchell, 2000). Depicted as 'just as bad' as boys, but simultaneously as 'deadlier than the male'. Their violence is either trivialised, variously presented as unthreatening, amusing, sexy and not as serious as *real* (male) violence (e.g. girl's boxing), or it is constructed as particularly frightening (e.g. girl gangs randomly attacking innocent strangers) and a threat to (patriarchal) society (Batchelor, 2001b).

The meaning of violence to girls
It was against this backdrop that we set out to establish girls' *own* definitions and conceptualisations of violence. In doing so, we sought to avoid setting parameters as to what sort of behaviours or actions might be included as 'violent'. Young peoples' perceptions of what counts as violent does not necessarily mirror normative (adult, legal) conceptions of violence, and ruling out certain kinds of experiences because they did not fit a particular paradigm, seemed inappropriate to us. At a methodological level we sought to devise ways to explain the research topic to those who took part and why we were doing it, but without pre-defining 'violence' in any way. This did not prove entirely unproblematic (see Burman et al, 2001, for further discussion). At an individual level, what counts as violence is highly subjective and personalised. Furthermore, girls' definitions of violence were unpredictable and seemed, at times, contradictory. What emerged from girls' accounts of their experiences was a diverse collection of behaviours and actions. Here, the term 'violence' was interpreted widely and loosely as girls used it to describe and categorise a range of incidents. Some, like fights, attacks, hitting or being hit with objects, robberies and some sexual encounters entailed physical action, and resulted in particular consequences, but a whole range of other experiences did not involve any physical contact, like threats, name-calling, ostracism, gesturing, accusations, harassment, insults, verbal abuse, swearing, stalking, 'flashing', and various forms of intimidation.

Additionally, and like others researching violence from the perspective of children and young people, we found that the actual word 'violence' is very rarely used by girls in every day discourse. Rather, they employ an array of terms to describe a spectrum of unruly and violating behaviours from paradigmatic acts of interpersonal criminal violence, to threats, to the kinds of verbal intimidation and aggressive posturing cited above. Whilst some of these colloquial expressions such as 'battering', 'giein the heid'

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[9] The dichotomisation between 'good' and 'bad' girls also underpins images of young female sexuality, see, for example, Sharpe, 1976 and Lees, 1993)

(giving the head), 'nutting', 'chibbing', and 'sticking the boot in' attract legal censure (and have a more or less equivalent legal definition), others such as 'slagging' 'perving', 'trashing', and 'growling' do not. Attention to the language employed by and between young people when talking about different incidents is instructive. Not only are the expressions that they use graphically descriptive, but they also convey and communicate different messages and meanings about specific practices and behaviours (Burman, 2002). Although some expressions are associated with particular regions, this is very much a shared social vocabulary, attention to which can offer insight into the multi-facetted nature of violence.

Girls reported very high levels of verbal abuse (or what they called 'slagging' or 'trashing'), a practice which is seen as a common expression of violence. Ninety-one percent of girls self-reported being verbally intimidated by offensive name-calling, threats, insults and the like. This experience crosses economic, ethnic and cultural divides, and affects girls of all ages. On the other hand, 72% of girls reported being verbally abusive themselves – mainly to other girls, but also to boys and adults. Verbal threats, personalised, sexualised and racialised name-calling, and intimidation are important precursors to, and in certain situations can spill over into, physical violence. Verbal conflicts are a pervasive feature of girls' everyday lives, and for many constitute a major source of anxiety. Girls' have a heightened sensitivity towards the emotional costs and long-term impact of verbal abuse, and many considered verbal abuse to be more harmful and damaging than physical violence. This kind of abuse draws on individual girls' perceived sexuality, body shape, demeanour, and, frequently, dress style (particularly where the style is distinctive or idiosyncratic or unfashionable) (see Nilan, 1992), and frequently involves insulting remarks or insinuations about girls' families, especially their mothers. A key point about this type of abuse is that it is rarely a one-off altercation, but rather it is an ongoing verbal onslaught that can be kept up for long periods. Those who had been subject to sustained verbal abuse were also more likely to report self-harming behaviour, another practice named as 'violent' by many who took part in this study. A sole focus on the physical practice of violence would mask these other forms, and for these reasons, our exploration of the impact of violence in girls' lives could not be confined to physical acts alone. The collection of behaviours and practices that were relayed to us provides an indication of the many forms that violence takes in girls' lives, and at the same time reminds us of the nebulous nature of the term as it is used in everyday discourse. Knowing the extent and forms of violence is important, as is documenting its pervasiveness in girls' lives. In order to inform policy and practice in this area, we need to ensure that our definitions and understandings of violence are both grounded in, and pertinent to girls' own lived experiences. Yet, there are also crucial political, theoretical, policy and practical imperatives to clearly distinguish between different behaviours and orientations. It is for these reasons that, in the rest of this chapter, we differentiate between physical violence and verbal abuse.

The importance of context
The meaning of violence cannot be achieved by solely addressing the motivations of the 'perpetrator'. All of those involved in a particular event – whether as actors socially engaged in it ('victims' and 'perpetrators') or as witnesses to it (such as us as researchers) – have an influence on the meaning of that event. The meaning and significance of a violent act lies in the convergence of a number of social interactional, contextual, cultural and social situational factors. It is the interaction of these factors

which produces a situational dynamic that can influence the ascription of meaning (Kennedy and Forde, 1999). Hence, an act can be rendered more or less serious, purposeful or pointless, intentionally harmful, consequential, or written off as 'just a laugh' by reference to the particular configuration of a range of social and situational factors that shape and influence that particular social interaction, and the decisions, choices and interpretations of those involved. In other words, the meaning of violence is not inherent in a particular act, but emerges and becomes established as a consequence of the actions and interpretations of individuals or groups in particular social, situational, spatial contexts.

Much of the violence research undertaken in North America in recent years has adopted a situational or transactional approach to explain violent events (e.g. Baskin and Sommers, 1998; Felson, 1993; Polk, 1994; Sommers and Baskin, 1993). This in turn borrows somewhat from the work of Goffman (1959) on the ways in which individuals learn how to act through situated transactions. In these transactions, the meaning in the situation is drawn from the ways in which people act toward one another. The transactional or situational approach views violent events as interactions involving the convergence of motivations, perceptions, the social and spatial context, the social control attributes (formal and informal) of the immediate setting, and the ascribed meaning attached to the event (Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998). An advantage of this approach is that it takes into account both the motivations that bring individuals to violent (or potentially violent) situations, and also the decision-making that takes place within the violent event. There are some elements of this approach which are useful for understanding the (multiple and contradictory) meanings that girls ascribe to certain acts, behaviours or practices, and which we draw on here. The importance of context for understanding violence is well-established (e.g. Edgar and Martin, 2001, Messerschmidt, 1997; Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Stanko, 2001). Whilst the actual content and form of the violent act, and its consequences are important, contextual influences, in particular where the act takes place, the relationship between those involved, who is present and how they respond, the likelihood of intervention, and the availability and prevalence of behavioural norms are important mediators of meaning. In order to see how different meanings can emerge from particular incidents, we need to address not only the incident itself, but what precedes and what follows it. Context is again important here, whether the interaction is public or private, the relationship (and past history) between those involved, and the availability of other means of response. Context provides an important controller on the ways in which decisions are made by individual in the interaction both prior to and after the event (Kennedy and Forde, 1999: 29)

In this next section, we draw on examples from our study to illustrate how the interplay of social, situational and contextual factors shape and filter the meaning and the impact of different forms of violent and abusive behaviour encountered by girls in their everyday lives.

Friends, families and the private sphere
One of the most established, and significant, gender differences amongst young people involves the amount of emphasis placed on close interpersonal relationships. Several studies have shown the salience of intimate relationships for girls, especially those with same-sex friends (e.g. Gilligan, 1983; Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997). The creation, maintenance and operational style of girls' friendships are substantially

different from the friendships held by boys (Hey, 1997). In particular, girls' friendships are seen as more expressive of emotions, more confiding, more reciprocal, more mutually supportive, empathetic, nurturing and intimate and more disclosing of personal information than boys (Martin, 1997). Girls in our study described their friendships with other girls as the *most important* thing in their lives. Hanging out and talking with friends was a prime social activity. Inclusion in a close network of friends is also an important source of self-confidence and self-esteem (Hey, 1997).

Ironically, many conflict situations are played out within the context of intimate relationships. As well as being sources of comfort, well-being and ontological security, girls' friendships are also a key site of conflict. Several researchers have remarked on the normative behavioural codes or 'scripts' that both structure and underpin friendship relationships between girls and the priority afforded trust, reciprocity and understanding in such relationships (e.g. Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997). Girls' place immense emotional investment in their friendships, and 'falling-out' with friends can have momentous consequences. Girls' friendships are used both as a method of inclusion, but also as a mechanism of exclusion. Being ex-communicated from a close friendship group is a devastating experience for many girls, particularly if ostracism, ridicule and the disclosure of intimate secrets (the 'worst' form of betrayal) occur in the aftermath. Given that girls' social orientation is relationship-centred and that their friendship groups tend to be solidarity-based, conflict within friendships is sometimes unavoidable. The following is taken from a focus group involving a group of 15 and 16 year old friends who lived on one of the more accessible Scottish islands:

> Elsa: *Usually, if you have got friends, the girls usually tell their friends everything. They don't have any secrets, but the boys don't do that. So the girls know everything about each other so if they do fall out it is over major stuff. It can make you so suicidal. It can make you so depressed.*
> Jenny: *Boys just fight over stupid things, like football and that.*
> Emma: *Yes, and girls.*
> Elsa: *As I said, girls know everything about each other, and if one was to fall out with the other they would tell everyone else their secrets and the other one would be more hurt and it would cause a big fight.*

>   [Group 9]

Key reasons for 'falling-out' were stealing someone's boyfriend, spreading false rumours and malicious gossip, particularly if this was of a sexualised nature or if it concerned family members. The inferential significance of sexual reputation and in particular the connotations of being labelled a 'slag' are well-known (e.g. Lees, 1993). Falling-out with friends invariably involves the continued use of various forms of verbal abuse and intimidation. As previously stated, verbal abuse was seen by many girls in this study as a common expression of violence; its impact is strongly compounded when it occurs in the context of 'falling-out'. In illustration, being the target for malicious gossip, particularly by 'friends' emerged as a major fear for girls (61%), and more than half said they were worried about being verbally bullied or threatened by ex-friends. This is exemplified in a discussion between a group of younger girls (aged 13 and 14 years) who lived on farms and villages in a predominantly rural area, but came together to attend a youth club:

Kiki: *[Gossip and bad-mouthing] can break up friendships and that, those that have been together for ages.*
Anne: *And that hurts more than getting a punch in the face or something…*
Jo: *…and I can tell you a lot about that! [All laugh]*
Kiki: *It depends who is punching.*
Jenna: *I think that verbal stuff hurts you longer, physical violence, well, that is going to go away…*
Anne: *Yeah.*
Jo: *Verbal violence is really gonna, its' really gonna be there forever. I think verbal abuse is actually worse than physical abuse.*
Sue: *Yeah, and they just keep on saying it, even when they know it is really hurting you.*
            [Group 4]

Although relatively little is known about the situational dynamics of girls' involvement in assaultive behaviour, the interactional process suggests three key stages; verbal conflict in which identities are assailed; threats and/or evasive action; followed by physical attack in which retaliation plays a crucial motivational role (Baskin & Sommers, 1998: 114-124). Verbal abuse has been consistently identified in the international literature as a critical provocatory factor in girls' aggression (Leschied et al, 2000) and was almost always a precursor to the physically violent events reported in this study. Gossip (especially that impugning sexual character) verbal threats, talking 'behind backs, giving 'dirty looks' and 'slagging' were among the main causes of conflict between girls and, particularly for those girls who reported acting violently, form the specific criteria used to determine violence. 'Talking behind backs' often takes place in the presence of the 'victim' and involves gestures and posturing, prolonged staring, furtive whispering and sarcastic laughter which, taken together, constitute a challenging expression of aggression. Such behaviour, particularly when it takes place in the presence of others, is highly provocatory, generating anger and the need to strike back. For those girls who routinely use violence (who are also, by and large, those who have excessive experience of violent victimisation) a violent response is considered an entirely appropriate way to react. In some ways, this is reminiscent of findings from research on violent behaviour of male youth (e.g. Anderson, 1998; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Polk, 1994) where there is a preoccupation with maintaining respect and self-esteem, and violence is used when self-worth or confidence or honour is degraded or under threat. However, whilst there are gender similarities, there are also gender differences. We take the view - and we share this with other feminist researchers of female violence (e.g. Chesney-Lind, 2002; Miller, 2000: 11) that research which over-emphasises gender differences *essentialises* behaviour rather than understands its complexities – and in that which focuses on similarities, inadequate attention is paid to how gender might intersect with various other factors to create different meanings in the lives of women and men. Gender is central to our analyses; it plays a key role in girls' violence. For example, it defines appropriate targets and means, and affects girls' decisions of whether to use or desist from violence. But these decisions are also structured by other factors and dynamics, such as peer relations, group processes, situational motives and normative responses to violence (Adler & Worrall, 2002; Burman 2001; Miller, 2001;).

We now turn briefly to a different situation, similarly enacted within the context of (ongoing) friendships, to illustrate how the relationships between those involved plays a key role in compelling individuals to act in a certain way, depending on their interpretation of the situation and their views of the others' involved. Within the context of friendship groups, (mainly younger) girls' often engage in what they call 'play fights' or 'royal rumbles' where they variously hit, poke, pinch, punch, swing-around and wrestle one another to the ground; this is accompanied by much laughter and light-hearted shouting. On occasions, it appeared (to us) that play-fights escalated into something more intentionally harmful where certain girls were targeted by others in the group.[10] Yet such actions are held by those participating to be 'not serious', 'just a laugh', 'not real violence' despite some heavy blows being struck. 'Royal rumbles' involve a particular style of behaving which is conventionally acceptable (and expected) in that situation. Individual girls bring to the 'play-fight' situation a set of expectations, formed from previous interactions in the friendship group, that shape their behaviour in that situation. In play-fighting, there is no clear perpetrator, seldom a 'winner', or indeed any clear 'contest' in the conventional sense, although more than once, we saw play-fights end with one or more girls in tears (although other girls - including those who had dealt the hardest blows - were immediately attentive). Play-fights provide a means for relieving tensions, resolving minor (often unarticulated) conflicts or mini power struggles within groups, and for fostering intimacy between girls, as well as providing the opportunity for 'a good laugh.' There are certain rules and conventions to be followed, for example, regarding the intensity and siting of blows (no punches in the face), and girls usually adhere to these norms. Boys, on the other hand, are seen to stretch or flout altogether the rules of 'play-fighting' and consequently 'get out of hand'. The following is taken from a discussion between a group of 14 year old girls living in a northern Scottish city:

> Martine: *Boys like, may hae a caper, like, they'd run up and put you in a heid lock, or elbow you, or punch you or stuff like that [all laugh] … I'm just sittin' and a boy throws me on tae the green or sum'thin and I get up and I get really annoyed because its embarrassing…'*

Martine goes on to relate several incidents of boys going too far, and not paying any attention to her protestations of pain. Other girls gave their own examples:

> Elaine: *Boys dinna, ken, know their ain strength. You say, 'Ah, that's sair [sore. Will you stop it, and they say 'But I'm only punching you soft, and a'hin*
> Caron: *And they'll punch you again*
> ………
> Martine: *Like I was drying my hair the other day and Garry walks up and punches me right in the back of my neck*
> Elaine: *But that's their way of joking with you. Sometimes its [meant as a] a joke and a'thin, but they go too far*
> Caron: *But you daen't think its a joke, and they dae, so they just punch you, and you just turn around …[and whack 'em]*
> [Group 7]

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[10]Elsewhere (Burman, et al 2001: 452) we discuss play-fighting in the context of the difficulties associated with interpreting and reconciling research participants' words and actions, and balancing these against our interpretations.

Boys can also go too far in terms of 'slagging', as in the example that follows, taken from a group discussion between members of a girls football team who lived on a large housing estate on the outskirts of a major Scottish city:

> Kelly: *No, if its like really bad, it really gets to you. Like if people say something about your family.*
> Anthea: *Aye, that's what I was going to say. You know what boys are like. Boys will say 'Aye, you're a whore an all that. And so's your mum.' That's what boys bring up, your mum.*
> [Group 8]

Like others (Artz, 1998; Anderson, 1997) we found that common targets of derogatory and critical remarks were family members, particularly mothers. As previously mentioned, verbal abuse impugning family can be a trigger factor for a violent response. Most girls spoke about the desirability of 'standing up' for family and friends. For some girls, particularly those who routinely use violence, slights which degrade or insult their family constitute sure-fire imperatives for justifiable or righteous violence.

Physical violence between siblings provides an example of the ways in which the relationship between those involved plays a key role both in the ascription of meaning to a given situation, and in pressuring individuals to act in a certain way. Although fights in the home between siblings are common (59% of girls reported regularly fighting with their siblings in and around the home environment), and the stated intention is usually to cause physical harm, the social and spatial context within which this takes place, and the relationship of those involved together mitigate against this behaviour being seen as 'violent', partly because those involved make a consideration of the likely consequences of their actions. Sibling fights are normalised within the context of domestic and family relationships.

As we have remarked elsewhere (Batchelor et al, 2001; Burman et al, 2001; Burman, 2002; Tisdall, forthcoming) there were some resounding 'gaps' and silences in girls' discussion of violence. These silences offer insight into the contradictory and changeable ways in which violence is conceptualised, and remind us once again that young peoples' views about violence do not always correspond to widely-held (adult-led, legal or politicised) definitions. For example, few girls in the study spoke spontaneously of more 'private' forms of violence, such as domestic abuse or violence against women/girls by men/boys whom are known to them. Two main reasons can be ventured for this reticence. First, respondents were reluctant to speak about hidden violence (i.e. sexual or domestic) in the public setting of a focus group discussion, due to naivety, embarrassment, privacy, ignorance, or a general unwillingness to co-operate. Younger respondents (aged 13 – 14 years) in particular voiced confusion about what was encompassed in the term 'domestic violence' (physical, emotional, sexual acts? shouting? arguing?), who might be involved (men, women, children?), as well as the legitimacy of the behaviour.[11]

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[11] This mirrors other recent research, which revealed that young people – boys as well as girls – were fairly ambivalent about what 'counts' as domestic violence (Mullender et al, 1999).

Scary places, dodgy blokes and the public sphere
Second, and importantly, male violence towards women was overwhelmingly associated with the public sphere and (male) stranger danger. Girls' concerns about physical and sexual violence cohere around conceptions of dangerous *people,* mostly 'strange men' (but also groups of other young people who are perceived as hostile or antagonistic) and dangerous *places.* In this study, as in many others (e.g. Day, 2001; Pain, 1997; Painter, 1992; Warr, 1985, 1990), fear of *sexual attack* was expressed as a fundamental safety concern (70% reported fear of sexual violence) and considered to be the 'worst thing' that could happen to a woman. Yet this concern was located firmly in the public sphere, not in private spaces as recent policy/practice has acknowledged (Koskela and Pain, 2000; Pain, 1993; Painter, 1992). Girls of all ages and backgrounds held powerful concepts of public space as dangerous generally. The likelihood of encountering *physical* violence was similarly associated with the public sphere (e.g. on the streets, in parks, at the dancing, in school), particularly places of transit (e.g. school buses, corridors, train stations) and when moving across areas from one (residential, school, leisure) area to another.

'Fear' is a gendered phenomenon and female perceptions of danger are connected to their experience and knowledge of what might happen to them (Stanko, 1990, 1993). It is this experience, information and local knowledge, embedded in their social relationships, which render some situations, people or places more or less dangerous or threatening. On this basis, women develop personal images of dangerous people and places where they fear violent crime (Valentine, 1989, 1992; Stanko, 1990; Pain, 1997). The association of violence with certain environmental contexts is well-established (e.g. Valentine, 1992; Pain, 1997). The self-report data indicates that almost half (48%) of girls reported that there were specific places near where they lived in which they did not feel safe when out alone, and when the threat of violence was tangibly felt. Their apprehensions showed a strong temporal dimension since specific fears regarding 'dangerous' or 'scary' places were strongly linked with bad lighting, darkness (see also Warr, 1990) and restricted surveillance. Accounts of being 'followed', 'stalked' and 'watched' were provided by several girls. In these accounts, the threat of violence was constant, pervasive and demoralising, particularly in those cases where girls were watched in their homes by 'peeping toms'.

Stanko (1990) argues that women know how to negotiate their everyday lives in circumstances which render them more or less safe, and that they do this routinely. Particular 'strategies' adopted by women for negotiating space and 'staying safe' have been noted (Pain, 1997) although the predominant strategy is avoidance of 'dangerous places' at 'dangerous times.' This, in turn, can restrict women's mobility and pressurise them into a restricted use of public space. Collective travel, when out and about, is a key precautionary strategy for personal safety for many girls. Other studies have found that travelling with friends is used by young people in order to manage risks posed by their mobility (Jones, et al, 2000; Scott, 2000). There is an important flipside to this however, because being in a group of girls can just as easily attract trouble as deter it. Findings from our self-report data indicate that the more time that girls spent in the company of other girls, the more likely they were to have been shouted at, sworn at, or called names.

There is a suggestion from this research, and also from other studies (e.g. Rathzel, 2000) that girls are spending significant amounts of time in public places. The

increased visibility of girls has implications not only for how girls may be perceived (by adults, by police, by other young people) but also increases their chances of observing and/or participating in violent encounters with other young people. The self-report data indicates that approximately three quarters of girls spend most of their time 'hanging about' with friends, mostly on streets (in own areas and/or in city or town centre locations), in parks and play areas, outside shops or in shopping centres, but also congregating in bus shelters and unstaffed train stations and outside phone-boxes.

Girls do not solely experience their everyday lives in relation to the perceived threat of physical or sexual danger, rather there is a strong sense that they also engage in risk-seeking behaviour where the pursuit of excitement, thrills, and pleasure take precedence. [12] There are certain places and contexts that offer the possibility of excitement and, importantly, the opportunity to 'have a laugh.'   One such context is that of 'the dancing' [13] a key site of intra-gender, inter-group antagonism and fighting, a place significant in terms of both symbolic and instrumental violence. On a weekly basis, groups of girls (and boys) from different residential areas travel across many major towns and most cities to attend 'the dancing'. There are tangible feelings of trepidation and excitement, not only at the prospect of meeting members of the opposite sex (or potential 'lumbers'), but also because 'the dancing' is where an almost ritualistic enactment of antagonisms takes place.[14] Violence between girls (and between girls and boys) occurs here within the context of extensive social interactions. Witnessing outbreaks of physical violence is an anticipated part of the evening's proceedings. Much of this is provoked by the practice of groups of young people (same-sex or mixed gender) assembled together according to sharply-defined territorial affiliations, and shouting out, above the noise of the music, the name of the area that they come from. There are jostles, verbal confrontations, and fights regularly break out, despite the efforts of the bouncers. At one level, this is violence as spectacle and entertainment; but at another level, it is also a means for young people to declare their pride and allegiances to areas and territories that are otherwise characterised by deprivation and exclusion. It is also an important means of reinforcing social identity and hence, 'sticking-up' for friends in the context of the dancing is a social imperative. The risks of encountering violence are well-known and, for some girls, like Lauren and Pauline, two 15 year old who live in an economically and environmentally marginalised inner-city area which has a long-standing local reputation for violence, provides a good opportunity for a 'proper fight':

> Pauline: *Me and Linda went to the dancing about eight weeks ago noo, and I was in for about ten minutes and got papped right out. And I was outside with Linda, and Lauren came outside with a big burst lip, 'cos about twenty lassies jumped her, 'cos she's from a different scheme [housing estate]*
> ………….
> Lauren: *See when the music goes a bit quiet like everybody will shout*

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[12] The circumstances in which girls seek out 'danger' and 'risk' and their motivations for doing so, require close investigation and we are currently developing our analyses in this area.

[13] In larger town and cities, 'the dancing' usually takes place in night clubs which have been allocated for the use of 'under 16 year olds' for certain periods in the early evening (usually 6 – 9pm on Saturdays).

[14] Alcohol is not served in the premises, but is consumed before hand, usually en route from home.

> *wherever they're fae, right. So they started shouting and we were like that 'What are they shouting?' and I was wi' pure hundreds of my pals, right, and ... ... all these other lassies were growling at me and dancing into me an all that ... . and I just started dancing back into them. And the three of us, like me, Jackie and Ashley all got into a fight like in a full area of lassies and I had a big burst lip, didn't I? And ma' hair was all pulled oot, and it's just growing in. ……………*

Pauline: *There was a point when I just used to go down the town every week -–no to go to the dancing, but I'd go down there 'cos you get them coming out. We used to go down every Saturday, drunk, and wait outside for them. And fight wi' everybody.*
[Group 14]

Such violence is deeply meaningful; it serves to maintain group solidarity, reinforces friendships, affirms allegiances, and enhances personal status. But not all girls find violence 'a laugh' and go seeking it out. Some hold deeply ambivalent reactions to physical violence and abusive behaviours; whereas others find physical violence abhorrent. Gendered constructions of femininity shape both definitions of and responses to behaviour that contradict gendered norms (Hey, 1997; Lees, 1993; Sharpe, 1976). When certain girls act violently, this is often seen as wholly transgressive by other girls, particularly those who are older and who have been shielded from violent victimisation, and for whom witnessing violence is a rare event.

This research, intended as an exploratory study to establish base-line information on girls' experiences and uses of violence and the factors associated with their violent behaviour, has shown how the meaning of violence, for girls, is at once complex, contradictory, contingent and constantly shifting. In order to comprehend the meaning, impact and pervasiveness of violence in girls' lives, we simply cannot ignore the range of behaviours and situations in which girls encounter physical violence or other forms of violation. The meaning(s) of violence for those who use it and experience it are inextricably bound up with lived experiences, subjective identities and intimate and social relationships. Girls' relationships to violence need to be understood as arising from a complex set of social, material and gendered circumstances and cannot be addressed in isolation from other aspects of their lives.

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