14 Girls' Violence: Criminality or Resilience?

Jean Hine and Joanna Welford

Violent behaviour by girls has been the focus of much media and policy attention in recent years. Statistics for women dealt with by the criminal justice system for violence show large proportionate increases that have been a cause for concern in many countries (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007; Kon & AuCoi, 2008; Ministry of Justice, 2009; Poe-Yamagata & Butts, 1996). This behaviour is doubly condemned: once because violence is generally abhorred, and again because such behaviour is seen as "unfeminine". Reporting often accepts that such behaviour is criminal and gives little attention to the function that engaging in this violence can play in the lives of women and girls.

This chapter addresses this issue by considering the violent behaviour of girls from the perspective of girls themselves. We explore the gendered social and environmental context within which it occurs, and show how these actions can help girls to cope in difficult circumstances, achieving what they present as positive outcomes – indeed, as resilience: "[T]he notion of resilience focuses attention on coping mechanisms, mental sets, and the operation of personal agency. In other words, it requires a move from a focus on external risks to a focus on how these external risks are dealt with by the individual" (Rutter, 2006, p. 8).

Our research revealed that these violent behaviours are far from the homogeneous activity often represented.[1] This sample present important differences between and within individuals in terms of type of and motivation for violence – demonstrating personal agency in their attempts to take control of their lives, where family, social and economic circumstances have a significant impact upon their behaviour. Their discourse reveals how violent behaviour is their way of coping and doing well in difficult circumstances – demonstrating (albeit hidden) resilience (Ungar, 2004). The girls we spoke to show how violent behaviours are not at odds with, and indeed can enhance, their feminine identity. This behaviour often has no criminal intent, yet adult involvement and response to violence by girls can lead to the criminalisation of many young women (Welford & Hine, 2010) with the potential for long-term negative consequences.

Violence by girls and young women is a complex issue. On one hand, it is seen as an increasing and worrying concern for those responsible for policing young people's behaviour – schools, families and the criminal justice system. On the other hand, studies are increasingly demonstrating the *value* of violence to girls in certain social contexts (Batchelor, 2007; Ness, 2004). This chapter discusses the role of violence in the lives of young girls living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in

J. Hine (✉)
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK
e-mail: jhine@dmu.ac.uk

[1] The authors have papers in preparation that describe the range of behaviours, but there is no space to describe that here.

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England, and in particular, how this behaviour can be understood as resilience in particular contexts.

An Increase in Violence by Girls?

The last 15–20 years have seen growing and considerable attention from the media and policymakers towards the behaviour of girls, particularly behaviour that is seen to be "unfeminine", such as being drunk in the streets and using violence. A "moral panic" (Cohen, 1972) has been generated in many countries about the apparent increase in such behaviour. A typical example in the United Kingdom (UK) is a BBC News Report entitled "Why are girls fighting like boys?" (Geoghegan, 2008), although the treatment of the issue is much more measured here than in some of the more populist newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* which has published headlines like "Ladette[2] Britain" (Slack, 2010). Articles such as these proffer a range of explanations for this behaviour, from feminism and equality, and the "masculinisation" of women and girls to the sale of cheap alcohol. However, all accept that the increased female presence in criminal statistics reflects a real increase in violent criminal activity by girls. This is disputed by much academic literature on the topic (Chesney-Lind, 2001). There has been a steady stream of academic interest in reviewing and discussing the issues, with a range of theories emerging about the extent to which the amount or nature of female violence has changed over time and the reasons for female violence, whether increasing or not.

Official statistics of England and Wales have demonstrated a rise in violent crimes committed by girls and young women over recent years, with a 48% increase recorded between 2004 and 2008 (Ministry of Justice, 2009). The media have reported and embellished this "rise" in violence, fuelling a growing concern that more girls are becoming more violent (Batchelor, Burman, & Brown, 2001; Slack, 2009). At the same time, research conducted within and outside the United Kingdom has highlighted the "commonplace" nature of violence in the lives of some girls, from low-level violence in "ordinary" communities (Burman, Brown, Tisdall, & Batchelor, 2000; Duncan, 2006), including the oft-ignored physical nature of female friendship groups (Brown, Burman, & Tisdall, 2001), to the routine use of more serious violence in some low-income, inner-city communities (Ness, 2004).

Academic challenges to this reported rise argue that a major contributor to any increase in statistics for violent offences by young women is changes in the management of violent behaviour, particularly in the policing of these acts. Violent offences that occur in the home (Acoca, 1999; Schaffner, 2007), school (Arnull & Eagle, 2009) and peer groups (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008) that may not have been recorded in the past are now being prosecuted. This has been fuelled by the introduction of so called "zero tolerance" policies towards violent behaviour by many agencies, including police and schools. Adolescent girls and boys commit minor acts of violence at a similar rate (e.g. Armstrong, Hine, Hacking, & France, 2005) and these policies are applied equally to girls and boys, whereas in the past such incidents involving girls may have been dealt with more leniently.

A major shift in approaches to deal with young offenders in the United Kingdom saw the introduction of a new system of reprimands and final warnings for first offenders, aimed at intervening early in the offending behaviour of children and young people to prevent escalation. This policy drew more young offenders into the criminal justice system, both boys and girls, many of whom were being punished for childish behaviour that had no criminal intent (Hine, 2007). In the case of schools in the United States, high profile violent incidents and fear for the safety of pupils and teachers have prompted a rapid rise in such policies towards violence (Skiba & Peterson, 1999) contributing to a significant increase in the number of children suspended from school (Noguera, 2003). In the United Kingdom, policy-makers have responded to public fears over school safety

[2]The Oxford dictionary definition of "ladette" is "a young woman who behaves in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engages in heavy drinking sessions" (http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ladette). This term is often used more informally to describe a girl or woman who demonstrates masculine traits or characteristics, or "laddish" behaviour.

by introducing measures that have led to an increase in the number of young people being excluded from mainstream schooling for violent behaviour (Osler & Starkey, 2005).

Serious violence by girls remains extremely rare (Burman et al., 2000; Miller & White, 2004; Ministry of Justice, 2009), and the reported increase in the number of girls committing violent offences must be placed in its social context. Girls' violence is typically perpetrated within or near the home and school (Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005) and girls are much more likely than boys to fight with a parent or sibling (Chesney-Lind, 2001). Acoca (1999) observes a trend of girls being increasingly drawn into the criminal justice system for less serious crime than their male counterparts. Her research shows that the majority of the "serious" crimes girls were charged with were non-serious assaults resulting from mutual combat situations with parents. Similarly, Mayer (1994) reported in his study of over 2,000 cases in Maryland that over half of the "assault" offences by girls were "family centred". The labelling of such incidents as violent offences by parents draws in the police and can lead to daughters being arrested and charged with an offence. Lederman and Brown (2000) go so far as to suggest that some mothers use detention as a "time out" from conflict with their daughters.

The Research Study

The narratives analysed in this chapter were collected as part of a larger study exploring young people's pathways in and out of crime.[3] Funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council,[4] this research network conducted five research projects examining aspects of the influential risk paradigm[5] from the perspective of young people, challenging traditional and narrow understandings of risk and resilience. This chapter draws on data collected from one of these studies which explored the impact of the risk factor of exclusion from school on offending behaviour. The study identified young people in three categories: excluded from school; having a statement of special educational need; or being a first time offender in contact with a youth offending team. One hundred and seven young people were interviewed for this study from four different parts of England during 2002–2003. Most were interviewed just once, with a sub-sample interviewed twice and a small sample identified as "case studies" who were interviewed several times. These youth also identified significant others to be interviewed. Twenty-seven of the study sample were girls, and it is their stories that we refer to in this chapter. Ten had experienced permanent exclusion from a school, six had been given a statement of special educational need and fifteen had contact with a youth offending team. Several girls fit into more than one category. The girls were aged between 11 and 18 with a mean age of 15 years. Eight belonged to minority ethnic groups.

In the results reported here, the experiences of girls were analysed independently of those of males in an attempt to challenge the normative naturalisation of male violence (Brown et al., 2001). Sociological theorisations of violent, aggressive and anti-social behaviour have been based almost entirely on male behaviour (Giordiano, Deines, & Cernkovich, 2006), and rarely is female violence described in the literature without comparison to male violence. This comparison underlines the perception that females who demonstrate violent and aggressive behaviour are unfeminine or unnatural (Burman et al., 2000; media headlines focusing on "ladettes" also stress this) and are emotional, irrational or "out of control" (Batchelor, 2005). Our work prioritises the young female voice asserting that much can be gained from investigating girls' experiences and perceptions of violence away from male-focussed understandings and frameworks. Such an approach raises questions about the patterns of behaviour available to young women to support resilience when they are in situations of risk and limited opportunity.

[3] More details about the study can be found at http://www.pcrrd.group.shef.ac.uk and Boeck, Fleming, Hine, and Kemshall (2006).

[4] *Pathways Into and Out of Crime: Risk, Resilience and Diversity*, Grant No L330253001.

[5] The "risk paradigm" underpins much youth justice policy in England and Wales (see for example Farrington, 1996; Youth Justice Board, 2005).

None of the interviews in the study specifically asked young people about the violence in their lives, and yet most raised it in some way. Every one of the 27 girls in the sample mentioned violence in their interviews, and of these only 4 did not mention engaging in physically violent acts themselves. Discussion of their experiences of being a witness, victim and/or perpetrator of violence arose from their answers to other areas of discussion such as family, school or their community, highlighting the social ecological context of their behaviours. Most of them talked about living in problematic neighbourhoods, with all but seven of the girls mentioning the prevalence of crime, anti-social behaviour and/or drugs during their interviews. The high proportion (85%) of these girls who did discuss being physically violent themselves strongly suggests its centrality in their lives, and its omission in the interviews of the remaining four girls does not necessarily signify a lack of use of violence in their lives. Four levels of violence were identified (Welford & Hine, in press): minor (4 girls); occasional reactive (14 girls); regular (7 girls); and serious (2 girls).

It's Not Criminal

The girls describe their behaviour in a number of different ways[6] but there was no acknowledgement that the violence they engaged in was serious or criminal. On the contrary, their narratives frequently trivialised the activity:

> It was something you can look back at now and laugh really (April[7]).

> We were messing about and then, the boy asked me to set him on fire, just messing about and that. And I didn't realise how flammable it were and then, when I did, it just went on fire, so I put him out quickly and took him home … He got a few blisters and then they went and they didn't even scar (Anne).

> I just started messing around with friends and that but I'd get into trouble and then I had a couple of fights and then I used to throw stuff at the teacher and that and he used to catch me and that. I used to mess around and then, one time, I hit this boy with a wooden ruler and I got caught by the headmaster. Nothing [happened to the boy]. He wasn't hurt (Sally).

Although the girls' descriptions trivialise the incidents, they were responded to as serious by adults. The incident where the boy was burnt led to a charge of grievous bodily harm for the girl involved (Anne), and the violence in school led to a permanent exclusion for Sally. In both of these incidents the girls talked about "messing around" with no real intent to harm and certainly no criminal intent, and yet the intervention by adults had serious repercussions for both of them.

A further indication of their view that their own violence is trivial was the response to a specific question about what they considered to be the most and least serious forms of crime. Despite their own violent behaviour, a number of girls believed that violence was the most serious crime, as it could result in physical injury and even death. In contrast, they identified thefts as less serious crimes, since they did not "hurt" people. Responses such as these disassociated their own violent behaviour from "serious" or criminal violence, suggesting that they did not consider themselves to be violent individuals. Answers to the questions elicited responses such as:

> Killing someone. Attacking people.
> [*So violent type crime. What about one that is not so serious?*]
> I don't know, taking money from your friend's house. No point in getting stressed over it is there? (Emily, who admitted violence towards peers and teachers in school and police involvement for criminal damage).

> Knifing someone … Murder, and rape.
> [*And what would you put on the bottom, as something not as bad as the others?*]
> Robbing something from a shop. Because it's not hurting anyone (Alice, police involvement on numerous occasions for violence including the use of a weapon).

> Carrying something around with you, a deadly weapon.
> [*And what would you put at the bottom for being less serious, not as bad as the others?*]
> Fighting, but not intending to put in hospital (Barbara, violence at school and police involvement for criminal damage).

Barbara expresses her distinction between more and less serious crimes in a slightly different way:

[6] See footnote 1.

[7] The names of all participants have been changed.

both are violence, but they are distinguished by the intent to hurt someone. Similarly, despite admitting to a number of violent crimes, including using a knife, Alice still thought that this was among the most serious type of crime, with non-serious crimes being those that did not hurt others. She understands that violence and particularly knife crime is serious, but detaches this from her own experience, including describing an incident where she was hurt with a knife as, "It just felt like a scratch".

Anita presented a similar contradiction, highlighting the dangers of carrying a weapon, yet explaining her own such behaviour by underlining her lack of intent. When answering the question posed to her, she justifies and condemns carrying a weapon at the same time:

> I have carried a knife but not with intention to use it. That's what that one's about because this lass beat up me friend, I took it just to threaten her with it and then walk off.
>
> [*If you were to pick a crime that you thought of as being most serious?*]
>
> Carrying a knife because it's more dangerous. If I had have used it, I would have gone to court and been locked up in Youth Offending. Whereas, beating someone up, yeah it can hurt 'em and you can put them in hospital but it's not as serious as using a weapon (Anita).

This illustrates the difficulty of some girls have in conceptualising "serious violence" – here it involves a combination of the extent to which you could hurt someone and the associated punishment.

Their discussions also give an insight into the impact of environment on their understandings of criminal and acceptable behaviour, showing how their use of violence as a means of surviving in their community is an expression of resilience:

> [Y]ou get into a lot of trouble over and weapons and stuff. If someone hasn't done anything and someone goes and uses a weapon on them that's just, no I don't agree with weapons or car stealing or drugs – I don't agree with most of it … Maybe it's because you have to be like that when you're up our area, you have to be strong and mad – not mad as in psycho or something – but you have to stand up for yourself. I've never really stolen from anyone because the way I was brought up I was brought up not to steal – I need to fight back if someone hits me and if someone starts sounding off my family (Janet, permanent school exclusion for violence towards a teacher).

Janet does not see her violence as criminal, justifying her behaviour as an appropriate response to provocation by others, as a "normal" way to be in her environment and coping well. Her own behaviour is detached from what she understands (and disagrees with) as criminal acts. Violence here is a legitimate, and in Janet's eyes, necessary form of protection.

Violence as Resilience?

There are numerous definitions of resilience and what it means in the context of young people's lives, all of which involve the notion of having a successful outcome in the face of adversity. To most observers, particularly adults, violent behaviour by girls is anything but a sign of resilience, usually being seen as an indicator of risk that must be addressed and stopped in order to secure their successful future. Although a range of risks in these girls' lives are acknowledged by their schools and other professionals who work with them, their violent behaviour is generally seen to add to their "problem-saturated identity" rather than being seen as "a healthy adaptation that permits them to survive in unhealthy circumstances" (Ungar, 2004, p. 6). Our research demonstrates that listening to the girls' descriptions of and motivations for their violent activity reveals a different understanding of their behaviour, one that we understand as resilience. Hauser, Allen, and Golden (2006) describe resilience as characterised by three elements: personal agency and a concern to overcome adversity; a self-reflective style; and a commitment to relationships. All of these are present in the girls' accounts of their behaviour. By considering the girls' behaviour within the social context of their lives, we see how violence might be viewed as resilience.

Most of the girls in the sample discussed difficulties in their lives – violence in the home, living in a poor neighbourhood, struggling at school, being bullied – but few related these experiences directly to their use of violence as a protective

behaviour. Among the few that do make this link, Anita described how the difficulties she was having at home contributed to her violence at school:

> I've always been able to keep really calm but, in Year 9,[8] when this fight happened between me and Jane, she slapped me across my face and I'd just had that much pressure on me – my step dad, then my sister leaving, and my mum arguing with me all the time and my two little brothers playing up – it all just built up eventually and then she slapped me and I just flipped. I just couldn't stop (Anita).

Many of the girls described experiences of being a victim of violence themselves and several gave examples of resorting to violence in order to improve their situation. For instance, Janet discussed how she resorted to violence in order to take control of her school life from which she was disengaged as a result of being bullied:

> That's why I got kicked out, my temper, because I hit a teacher once and that's why I got kicked out because I couldn't put up with bullying … that's why I'm here because I got kicked out for hitting a teacher and I pushed the other teacher because she pushed me into the wall and I pushed her back … I got myself out because of how much bullying I had to put up with every single day of my life. I was refusing [to go to mainstream school] because I couldn't put up with the bullying, it made me so ill that I just couldn't go (Janet).

Whether her exclusion was a conscious decision or not, using violence at school led to a respite from the bullying that Janet experienced despite having a negative impact on her education. In her study of girls in further education college in London, Phillips (2003) found that being bullied at school can have damaging effects, particularly when missing school to avoid the bullying. Actively challenging bullying can however, stop the victimisation. One of the girls explained how she was bullied for a long time before reacting with physical violence:

> They [other kids] used to pick on me … I'd been from Year 6[9] in infants, to Year 9 in comp, constantly being bullied and I'd never stood up for myself before and this was the first time … I didn't know I was going to do it, my arm just reached out, grabbed hold of her hair and I just smacked her … "My God, did I just do that, were that me?" I was walking up hill shaking, I think that were mainly just adrenalin that were going through me body at time, because anger … I know I were wrong for what I did but I was also glad I did it because it's let people know that I'm not messing, when I say stop and that's enough, I mean it. And not just carry on because I'm not going to do a lot about it (Anita).

Anita demonstrates how responding to bullying through the use of physical violence can have a positive effect on a young person's life: she feels that she has managed to promote a stronger identity and as a result, alters how people behave towards her, which in her opinion has reduced the bullying. Responding to victimisation in this way may be understood as a form of self-defence and a "normal" reaction to victimisation among young women. Jarman (2005), for example, in a study of girls aged 12–17 in mainstream school in Northern Ireland, found that 71% of respondents believed it was acceptable to use violence as a form of self-defence. For those who have to negotiate danger as part of their daily lives, violence and the search for respect is a form of risk management, helping to deter a future attack (Batchelor, 2007; Ness, 2004). This type of violence reduces these girls' chances of becoming a victim. As another of the girls suggests, a physical response to the threat of violence that they experience in their daily lives can help to prevent victimisation:

> I have to explain to my mum especially because, when I go out there, I have to beat up because if I don't do that I'm going to end up being beat up myself so I have to stand my ground … I don't go out there to pick fights but, if it comes in my way and I know that I'm seriously going to get hurt, I'm going to have to stand up for myself aren't I? There's lots of dangerous people out there because a lot of people go around with weapons and that. It's lucky for me that I'm a girl because not a lot of girls go round with knives and that but all the boys and that, they all go around with knives and everything (Kerry).

This type of violence is more proactive than the reactive form discussed by Anita and Janet, but has the same aim of preventing victimisation. Kerry also demonstrates her awareness of the differing perceptions of adults and young people in

[8] In the UK school system, Year 9 is normally young people aged 13–14.

[9] Year 6 is the final year of primary school, so young people in this year are aged 10–11.

stressing how her mother does not understand her adversity and the need to use violence to challenge this.

Criminalising Resilience: Adult Responses to Violence

"Violent girls" are not a homogenous group. They describe a variety of violent activity, both in type and motivation (Welford & Hine, in press). Only 2 of the 27 girls in the sample could be regarded as "seriously" violent, both having an extensive violent history and recurrent police involvement. Most of the girls were occasionally[10] violent. Their violence was overwhelmingly emotionally driven, often an immediate reaction for being victimised themselves, directed towards people known to them, and not pre-meditated. Violent victimisation was a common and sometimes serious experience for the girls in this group, either in the family, home or at school.

Nicola, for example, described how the police had been involved in family disputes on two occasions in her life. The first occasion was when she was younger and her step-mother called the police after Nicola kicked in the front door to her father's house trying to get to her belongings. The second occasion was very similar, but this time it was her mother who called the police:

> Yeah, that [getting arrested] was a day before I got taken into care. Mum had kicked me out and, because I was banging on the house because I wanted some stuff … I hadn't got anything, I just wanted some more clothes and deodorant and whatever else what you need to go and stay at a friend's or something, but she wouldn't give me it and I kicked the gate in at the back and they locked the doors and everything on me and then the police came round and they had to arrest me to take me away. Then I got arrested and taken to a cell and I was in the cell for about 6 or 7 hours and then my dad came and got me and the next day I went into foster care (Nicola).

The perceptions and reactions of adults clash with the understandings the girls themselves have of their violence. This was particularly evident in one area of their lives – their use of violence to improve their lives. Their narratives reveal how adults respond to their violent behaviour, frequently imbuing it with an intent and purpose not anticipated by the girls themselves. Police are often brought in to deal with this behaviour (Welford & Hine, 2010), bringing longer-term negative consequences. Despite a lack of criminal intent and a belief that their violence was justified and often trivial, almost all of the girls in the sample had experienced some kind of official adult intervention for their violent behaviour. Most had been either excluded from school or dealt with by the criminal justice system for violence that was "one-off". The consequences were often severe, with the girls being forced to move schools, being placed at special behavioural treatment units, and acquiring police records. Girls who were not regularly or seriously violent were still sanctioned and criminalised for their behaviour, with potentially significant consequences for their future.

Adele highlights this disparity between how young people and adults view the adolescent world, and the damaging impact it can have on the developmental pathways available to young people:

> Well I was in school and this girl wanted to fight me and she was sending her friends up to me, blah-de-blah "she wants to fight you" and that and I sent the message back saying I'm not going to fight her in school because I'm going to get myself kicked out. So then she made an arrangement for doing it after … She tried to dowt fags in my face – she kept lighting up a fag and then tried to put it out [on me]. And then my cousin got mad and then I ended up hitting her. And then I come to school the next day and the teachers was waiting outside the gate to meet us, "go to the Head" or whatever and I said all right then, yes, I will. And I went there and he made us write down a statement what happened and other things and how it happened and her mum must have got the police involved and then I went down the police station and got arrested … At the time I thought I'll never get into trouble, I'm outside the school grounds but you do realise after (Adele).

Despite arranging the fight in what was considered a safe space, outside of school grounds, it still came to the attention of both families, the

[10] See footnote 1.

school and the police, leading to permanent exclusion from school and a formal police warning for Adele. At other points in the interview, Adele discussed being bullied in school, struggling with work but not wanting extra help and worrying that her exclusion from mainstream school would prevent her from "getting an education" and therefore a job. Exclusion and getting a police record, the likely results of girls' violence, may actually increase the young women's vulnerability and accentuate the need for future violence.

Furthermore, as a result of intervention, young people can then feel "labelled" as trouble-makers, a label which is difficult to shed and can lead to further problem behaviour. This is highlighted by one girl:

> I just did not like school and the way they did things that was like inappropriate … once you get into trouble in first year, they like target you, so, they think just because you got in trouble once you are going to do it all the time and then when they start pinpointing you it just makes you do it, so … I got a reputation (Caroline).

These girls were not from supportive and stable backgrounds, and may have had limited ways of dealing with the troubles they face. Escalation from verbal confrontation to physical violence is a frequent feature of their descriptions of conflict, particularly with peers; the girls may struggle to verbalise their frustration and resort to physical forms of aggression to assert themselves, concurring with Miller and White's (2004) finding that when girls in gangs had verbal altercations, they quickly escalated into physical conflict. Crick and Dodge (1994) suggest (albeit tentatively) that socially maladjusted children can respond to situations aggressively because they feel they have limited alternative solutions, and value aggressive behaviours more positively than pro-social alternatives. Even if more socially desirable alternatives are known by an aggressive young person, they may have difficulty in using that knowledge spontaneously (Camodeca, Goossens, Schuengel, & Meerum Terwogt, 2003).

Understanding the context in which these violent outbursts occur, from the words of the young people themselves, highlights the significance of contextual factors and seriously questions the appropriateness of the responses by authority figures in their lives. The young person is criminalised by an adult when perhaps protecting the child should be the first priority. Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) argue that the victimisation of young girls is masked by the increasingly public concern that they are becoming more violent, going so far as to suggest that "the well-documented social problems that haunt the lives of all girls can be neatly ducked, or even better blamed on the girls themselves" (p. 184).

Violence as Resilient Femininity

Violence can be important to some girls to make a statement to others about who they are (Ness, 2004). Messerschmidt (1997) calls this "bad girl femininity" to account for how girls can adopt traditionally masculine behaviours (such as interpersonal violence) within a specific type of femininity, rather than constructing a masculine identity. Alice, who discussed, at length, her experience of fighting, understood that in her world having a tough reputation was of great importance:

> I had a really good reputation in Newtown. There were these three girls; Joan was the third hardest in Newtown, Brenda – her best mate – was the second and Brenda's cousin was the hardest in Newtown centre. I beat up Joan, I beat up Brenda and I'm still waiting to find her cousin. So I've got respect down there (Alice).

In this type of environment, violence is not only a tool for survival, but also represents much more: it is a way to achieve success, to be respected by others and a way for girls to respect themselves, as well as protecting their emotional and physical selves. This situation highlights the place of violence in adolescent female development. If the context within which identity is being developed privileges violence then it has very real worth to girls. Fighting can bring "status and honour in a bleak and limiting environment" (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001, p. 671). Where fighting is privileged, this can bring respect, praise and adulation (Ness, 2004). Ness found that for

her group of inner-city girls, fighting was used to "make a statement about who they are" (p. 38). In this context, it was part of "being a girl" rather than contrary to it. In the United Kingdom, Batchelor et al. (2001) found that those girls who were violent "often spoke of fighting as an integral part of their sense of self" (p. 130).

Thus, far from being in opposition to adolescent femininity, violence can be an integral part of this stage of life for girls, providing both emotionally pleasurable and instrumental benefits. As one of the participants explained: "Everyone's like coming up to you – oh my God! I've seen your fight, that was good – and every time they was in trouble they would call you and stuff like that" (Thahmina).

Achieving status in terms of a violent reputation is enjoyed by some girls (Batchelor, 2007; Ness, 2004), with physical strength and dominance considered as desirable qualities (Phillips, 2003). The status this affords may ultimately be self-protective in their communities, but it can also bring popularity among peers in two distinct ways: admiration for a girl's violent achievements, and being valued as someone who can provide protection for others. When girls discuss the different identities available to them at school (being good and working/being bad) they express these identities as a choice without recognising the other areas of their lives that impact their behaviour.

> When I was getting in trouble I liked it, I didn't really want it to change. I just liked being bad … It's nasty really but like, in school, all the bad ones there's just loads of us and then you'd get the kids that wanted to be good and wanted to get on with their work and they was the ones that were scared of us and it felt good. Really like a bully really but, at the time, we thought we was good (Deana).

Once achieved, this "bad girl" identity has to be maintained by confronting threats to the image (Phillips, 2003). Girls who use fighting to defend and enhance their status cannot risk that reputation by walking away from fights (Brown & Tapan, 2008). Phillips (2003) describes a social hierarchy where physical strength and domination are regarded as desirable qualities, and can provide access to power, status and reputation. Some of the girls in our study demonstrated this, both by responding violently to threats to their image, and by what has been termed "reluctant fighting" (Phillips) – engaging in fights so as not to let others "walk all over" them.

> I don't go out looking for trouble. If trouble comes to me then I have to deal with it, but I don't go out making trouble … Say if someone wants to frighten me or anything like that, I'd fight back. The police told me that, if anyone hits me again, I must stand there and get beaten up then go to the police. No, I'm not going to do that. If someone hits me I'm going to hit them back. Because, if you let people hit you, they're going to walk all over you (Thahmina).

Fighting back is considered a necessity in their environment. Anne discusses how not fighting back may result not only in being beaten up, but also being called "a wimp" among friends. For those girls who commit to their reputations as fighters, failing to maintain the "tough girl" identity can clearly have detrimental physical and emotional consequences. The search for respect through violence in the social world of these girls is, arguably, "a rational response to past and potential victimisation" (Batchelor, 2005, p. 370).

The girls in this study, despite demonstrating violent behaviours that are more traditionally associated with masculinity, did not build this into any type of "masculine" identity. All girls discussed stereotypically "feminine" interests such as shopping, hanging out with friends, boys, singing and dancing. Only one girl described how she was not very "girly girly" (Anita) and was into motorbikes and cars. Their intended careers were also traditionally feminine. The most common aspirations were health and beauty and childcare, with six girls discussing each of these. Other areas of work mentioned were social work, law, working with animals, secretarial, nursing, performing arts, fashion design, teaching and working in a hotel. One girl said she would likely be a housewife, as she was from a Traveller (Gipsy) community and that was the traditional path. These girls gave no indication that violent behaviour in any way compromised these goals. The only aspiration that incorporated any form of physicality was articulated by Sally who was considering joining the army.

One girl in the study seemed to exemplify this balance between violence and femininity. Alice

was the most seriously violent girl in the sample. She listed her interests as "shopping, lads, ice skating and horse riding, swimming, football matches", suggesting that she manages to combine stereotypically feminine and masculine hobbies with little difficulty. As a result of the assault charge, she had to do community service, but was not happy with the proposed duty: "I might have to do gardening in an old people's home or something and I really don't want to because I'll break a nail and I've already snapped four" (Alice). She expressed her heterosexual femininity throughout the interviews, placing significant value on having a boyfriend:

> I was feeling a bit left out of the conversations because I know Ann's got Johnny, Rebecca's got Smithy, Lucy's got Paul and now there's me and Wayne and Jill's got Trev and Sarah's got Richy … Everyone had been saying like from first week, which were like three weeks ago, they've all been saying for three weeks now how good we look together. … He saw me and he said "are you alright Angel?" That's my new nickname, Wayne, he calls me Angel … I like that name … he's got lovely blue eyes and about 6'3" but like he's really lovely with me … (Alice).

Alice also highlights how boys can be the source of tension and fights between girls.

> The last time I did have a fight, I ended up getting stabbed … I knew who she were and I know why she did it. She accused me of shagging her boyfriend but then I turned round and told her that her boyfriend was a dog and I wouldn't touch him with a ten foot barge pole. I think she would have preferred for me to have said, yeah, I did shag him, but I didn't and he was ugly (Alice).

Research on girls who fight has highlighted the contradictory pattern that when girls engage in this "typically masculine" behaviour, boys are frequently the source of the conflict (see for example Brown, 2003). Although violent girls can be understood as empowered individuals, challenging the normalisation of the docile female body, fighting over boys may in fact "reproduce a patriarchal world view in which women are valued because of their affiliation to a male" (Adams, 1999, p. 130). Being "gender deviant" in this way may therefore simply reaffirm traditional gendered stereotypes. The girls' behaviour "ultimately serves the interests of a sex/gender system that empowers boys and men" (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 85).

A further example of the way in which violence can be understood to fit with traditional views of femininity is the use of violence to demonstrate loyalty to and care for others. Five girls discussed how fights could be caused when someone close to them was criticised, such as "they were slagging off my family" (Janet), or:

> Sometimes [I hit them], I can't help it. If they talk about my family and things like that then I get in a bad mood and I don't like that. But if it's calling me names about me I don't really listen because I know it's not true (Mary).

Adams (1999) has suggested that this loyalty is merely an alternative method for performing femininity, validating what is traditionally viewed as a part of women's relationships (selflessness, loyalty and being caring).

For girls in a particular social context, adhering to feminine norms may require the use of violence as a tool for protection and resilience, whereas in a different context, where passivity is privileged, this would be less acceptable. Exactly how girls cement their adolescent feminine identity in such circumstances is unclear. What is clear is that the girls in this study used a range of techniques to reject a violent identity and retain a feminine identity despite engaging in violent behaviour. Female violence is mainly targeted at other girls and remains within systems of gendered power relations, and despite demonstrating resistance towards narrow feminine behavioural norms, existing relations between boys and girls may in fact be reinforced.

Conclusion

Listening to girls discuss their experiences of violence offers an insight into the factors that lead a girl to react violently to a particular situation at a particular time, and shows the importance of understanding the social and environmental context within which such behaviour takes place. We have seen how the uses, justifications and understandings of violence by young women are socially and culturally located in their lives and

can play a central role for those who grow up in disadvantaged communities. Fighting is often a tool for survival in their difficult social context and can be seen as a form of self-empowerment (Adams, 1999) and an expression of agency when taking control of their lives (Batchelor, 2007). Given these patterns, we argue that these girls are demonstrating resilience as characterised by three elements: personal agency and a concern to overcome adversity; a self-reflective style; and a commitment to relationships (Hauser et al., 2006). Though these characteristics are manifested inappropriately according to those who hold authority over these girls' lives and who sanction the girls for their violence, the function of that violence as a protective factor cannot be denied in the narratives of the girls in our study.

Adult reaction does not consider the use of violence to be resilient behaviour in particular contexts of disadvantage. Rather, this behaviour is seen as a risk and predictor of future problem behaviour resulting in interventions that stigmatise and criminalise girls. The media-fuelled "panic" over a suspected rise in female violence has fed a public concern over "what to do" about the problem. This panic is likely not justified given that female violence is still relatively rare, dominantly low-level and between peers. However, female violence continues to be seen as "worse" than male violence as females are breaking gendered norms as well as criminal laws and this affects the way girls are dealt with by the criminal justice system.

The experiences of this sample of adolescent girls demonstrate a complex interplay between feminine norms and their understandings of violence in the discourses that frame their daily lives. Femininity is not a stable entity; it means different things to different people, and even to the same individual in different social situations. In discussing violence, these girls demonstrate both the ease and the difficulties adolescent girls face in challenging conventional feminine norms. They were independent, assertive and dominant in their use of violence to protect both themselves and others, with no apparent difficulty in combining these behaviours with being "a girl", as evident in the expression of conventionally female interests (boys, dancing, shopping, friends) and careers (hairdressing, childcare). They were at once the same and yet different to other girls. In this regard, these girls appear to be creating an "acceptably deviant" understanding of their behaviour (Swart, 1991, p. 46). Our work lends support to the notion that for some girls, violence can be balanced with more traditionally feminine behaviours and traits, as a part of normative femininity (Messerschmidt, 1997; Ness, 2004). By adapting their adolescent female identities to accommodate stereotypically masculine violent behaviour, these girls are demonstrating resistance to the traditional (and restrictive) framework of normatively feminine behaviour – in this sense, demonstrating resilience.

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