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University of Huddersfield School of Education and Professional Development

BA (Hons) Childhood Studies

Major Study

DHF 2940

Are children who commit violent acts against other children born evil? An evaluation through case studies

**The cases of Mary Bell, Jon Venables, Robert
Thompson and the 'Edlington' brothers**

*'Children have both been abused and been abusing and
murdering and hurting other children for a very long time'*

(Dr. Eileen Vizard)

Jo Hill

This major study complies with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines

Acknowledgements

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Finally thanks go to my family for their patience, understanding and changed habits.

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Abstract

Mary Bell, Jon Venables, Robert Thompson and the 'Edlington' boys all committed serious violent acts against other children. The 'why' of these incidents was not explored in the court cases, yet child development research indicates that experiences significantly influence children's behavioural tendencies.

A small-scale review of empirical case studies was used to help undertake a considered assessment of whether root causal factors may have been present in their backgrounds. Through an exploration of their backgrounds and family situations the possible risk factors of abuse and neglect during infancy; poor parental attachment during infancy; negative socialisation during infancy and genetic influences were selected. These themes were checked against the responses of interested parties. The responses were gained through open-ended questionnaires and telephone interviews and confirmed these risk factors, with neglect and abuse seeming to be the correlation which was most attributed to the development of violent tendencies.

Due to the nature of the study, the results cannot be purported to be generally applicable to all similar cases, but the results are worth considering and should instigate further study into this area.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This paper tells the stories of Mary Bell, Robert Thompson, Jon Venables and the ‘Edlington’ brothers: five, 10 and 11 year-olds who all caused death or serious injury to other children (BBC, 1968; Morrison, 1994; Vallely, 2010). Each case was branded as unique, and the media talked of not allowing it to happen again (Muncie, 2009). Yet these cases are far from unique (Davis, 2004; Paul, 2006; Green, 2008).

The focus here is on some of the potential causes in the background lives of Mary, Robert, Jon and the ‘Edlington’ boys: causes often ignored in the court cases. As Morrison (1997) berates, the ‘why’ is not explored. This is not to excuse their actions, nor to suggest their parents are entirely to blame (most inadequate parents had inadequate parenting, Sereny, 1995), but to use the cases to explore the potential link between childhood trauma and a child who may turn out to be harmfully violent, destructive, dangerous or ‘evil’. There is currently important, fascinating and relatively new research into areas of child development, the issues which can affect it and how links are created between development and behaviour, including violence (eg. Gerhardt, 2004; Brotherson, 2005; Perry and Szalavitz 2006; Inside the Human Body, 2011). These areas of research could provide further explanations of the behaviour of the aforementioned children.

It is hoped that additional, more comprehensive studies into this area will follow and that ultimately, enhanced understanding can inform future policy and legislation, possibly even resulting in decreased levels of both violent behaviour and abuse. This seems crucial because new policies often continue to concentrate on punitive measures rather than early prevention, such as ‘Breaking the Cycle’ (Ministry of Justice, 2010), despite its promising name. Moreover, an increased awareness could arguably be used to increase the potential effectiveness of rehabilitation; without these underpinning perceptions it is possible that only

surface issues will be addressed and the child or young person will merely learn to control or hide inappropriate behaviour (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

Rather than studying broad issues, empirical case studies were considered to be the most appropriate method of exploring the depths of the relevant relationships and situations, because case studies '*can cope with the complexity and subtlety of real life situations*' (Denscombe, 2010, p.55). The individual cases were selected for their significance, being some of the most infamous and contemporary cases in which children have committed violent acts against other children.

The aims of this study are:

- To investigate, understand and undertake a critical assessment of literature and existing research which has focussed on the backgrounds of children who have committed serious violent acts against other children.
- To seek to explain whether or not there appears to be potential causal factors in the backgrounds of children who commit serious violent acts against other children and, if so, what some of those factors may be.
- To determine the view of some interested parties in the cases selected about how they perceive the actions of children involved and possible explanations for it

This paper begins by presenting the cases of Mary Bell, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, and the 'Edlington' brothers. Using the cases as context, it continues by presenting a considered evaluation of existing research and literature; presents a discussion of the data collections methods which were considered and used; discusses and analyses the results; and concludes with a summary and recommendations.

Chapter 2: The Cases

2.1 Mary Bell

Martin Brown, aged 4, was killed on 25th May 1968. Brian Howe, aged 3, was killed on 31st July 1968. On 5th December 1968 Mary Bell and Norma Bell (unrelated) were charged with strangling the two boys. Norma was acquitted, Mary, aged 11, was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to detention for an indeterminate period. She served 11½ years in custody (Sereny, 1995; 1999).

Betty Bell's first words in response to Mary were, 'Take the thing away from me' (Sereny, 1999, p.330). Betty subsequently gave her away twice (her extended family brought her back); attempted to drop her from a third floor window, which somehow her uncle managed to prevent and she reportedly gave Mary three separate overdoses. Mary was too young to remember most of these incidents (Sereny, 1995 & 1999). During her early childhood, Mary was severely neglected and her parents were often absent (Children of Crime, 1998b; Sereny, 1999). Betty's presence meant chronic physical, emotional and sexual abuse for Mary (Ford, 1998; Sereny, 1999). Brian Roycroft, the Director of Newcastle Social Services at the time of Mary's crime, commented on the lack of emotional attachment in the mother-daughter relationship (Children of Crime, 1998b).

Betty began earning money as a prostitute (Children of Crime, 1998b) and when Mary was about four years old, the clients would sexually abuse her, sometimes even picking her up by the throat until she lost consciousness. She remembers waking up to her mother or the client saying she would be all right but Betty's amiability after the abuse did not last long (Sereny, 1999). Mary has difficulty with her memories surrounding these incidents (as she does with other memories that she finds overly-emotional), but she thinks that this continued until she was perhaps eight years old.

Extreme violence was the general background for Mary's life. She recounts a particularly brutal beating with a dog chain to which the police were called but no action was taken then or at any other time (Sereny, 1999). She also witnessed Betty's violence against her father, Billy and her younger brother. Both Brian Roycroft and Harvey Burrows (Deputy Chief Superintendent during Mary's case), also stated that she would have witnessed her mother's sado-masochism and seen daily violence between adults and between adults and children (Children of Crime, 1998b; Ford, 1998).

Although Billy was never violent, he was a known drunk and petty criminal. Mary also fantasised about being a criminal (Sereny, 1999) and shared these daydreams with her friend Norma. It is possible that they bolstered each other's confidence to be more and more daring (Children of Crime, 1998b; Sereny, 1998); Norma was present for at least one of the killings, although she was seen as having been easily led by Mary, who was described as cold and callous (Children of Crime, 1998b). Norma was acquitted of any wrongdoing (BBC, 1968; Sereny, 1995).

2.2 The Bulger Case

On 12th February 1993, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, both aged 10, enticed James Bulger, aged 2, away from his mother, whilst in a shopping centre in Bootle Liverpool. They walked him two and a half miles to the railway lines near Walton, where they assaulted, tortured and killed him. They were convicted of murder on 24th November, 1993 and served eight years in Secure Accommodation (Morrison, 1997 & 2009). Venables has since been charged with child pornography and has been returned to prison (Smith, 2011).

i. Jon Venables

Jon was the second of three children. His elder brother, then three years old, was an unhappy and frustrated baby who, according to his mother, Susan, never stopped crying and was very hard for her to cope with. Furthermore, Jon was still only one year old when his younger sister was born. Susan said that both Jon and his sister were happy babies, though his sister was also later diagnosed with learning difficulties (Sereny, 1995).

By the time Jon was three, his parents had divorced and it seems likely that he witnessed much marital strife during his formative years (Thomas, 1993). The subsequent years were chaotic for the children (Jackson, 1995), lasting until James Bulger's murder seven years later. Neil and Susan's relationship seemed disordered and the joint custody arrangements meant that Jon was shunted from one house to the other, creating an unsettled home life. His childhood has been described as unhappy (Thomas, 1993; Jackson, 1995).

Jon's eldest sibling, then aged nine, became prone to throwing violent tantrums, as detailed in his medical records (Morrison, 1997). Jon was a victim of these and would also presumably have witnessed them. Within a year, Jon was also displaying strange and difficult behaviour.

Susan also had a tendency to physically hit the children, especially if they would not go to sleep at night and Jon often had sleeping problems (Davis, 2004). She would hit them at other times, however, as she describes: '*I was hitting Jon ... he was crying and both of us, Neil too, were yelling at him. He was on the floor and I still beat on him*' (Sereny, 1995, p.314). She clearly found it difficult to cope and there were two incidents, which were possibly suicide attempts (Morrison, 1997).

Despite obvious familial difficulties there was no intervention from any support services (Morrison, 1997).

ii. Robert Thompson

When Robert Thompson was born, he already had four brothers aged eight, six, four and three; less than two years later another brother was born. Many mothers would find that difficult (Morrison, 1997) and Ann Thompson admitted that, '*she had never been able to manage her life or give to her children what they needed*' (Sereny, 1994, p.2).

Both parents also drank heavily, even in the best years (Sereny, 1994; Davis, 2004) and domestic violence was prevalent in the family. Ann, a victim of her husband's violence, took it out on her children and each child was said to have tortured the next sibling down the line. As one of the youngest brothers in age, Robert would have been both victim of and witness to the abuse (Davis, 2004; Paul, 2006). Abuse was known about in the family from before Robert's birth and throughout his life; the eldest was placed on the child protection register at the age of four, due to having a cigarette burn and a black eye (Morrison, 1994).

When Robert was six his father left and the eldest brother took over as head of the family; he used a pole to beat anyone who misbehaved (Morrison, 1997). For the next 18 months the family situation deteriorated even further; Ann began to drink heavily and the boys began to get into more and more trouble (Sereny, 1994). Robert's immediate senior [sibling] was questioned about child molestation, though it failed to be proven (Morrison, 1997; Davis, 2004).

In the early 1990s, three of Robert's elder brothers went into care at different times. One of these was voluntary (Davis, 2004). His mother and the third and fourth eldest brothers have all tried to commit suicide, one of the brothers in early 1993 (Morrison, 1997).

During the trial Robert was described as being cold, unfeeling and seeming to lack remorse (Sereny, 1995).

2.3 The 'Edlington' Brothers

On 28th March 2009 the two 'Edlington' brothers, aged 10 and 11, assaulted an 11-year-old boy. They were interrupted by a member of the public. The police interview for that attack was scheduled for a Saturday in April; the boys did not attend that interview. Instead, they were carrying out a further brutal attack on another two boys, aged 9 and 11. On 22nd January 2010, the boys were sentenced to indefinite detention for all three assaults, with a minimum of 5 years to be served (Hughes, 2010; Walker & Wainwright, 2010).

The two brothers came from a family of seven boys with only ten years separating the eldest from the youngest (Walker, 2010). Their mother was depressive and drug-dependant; their father was a heavy drinker (Walker, 2010); and an older brother was in prison (Hughes, 2010).

Domestic violence was also known about in the family from before the brothers' births (Hughes, 2010; DSCB, 2010) and the boys would have known '*sustained exposure to violence*' (DSCB, 2010, p.5). The first thing they remember from their childhood is sitting in the garden so that they could not hear their mother being beaten by their father. They quickly learnt that if they tried to intervene their mother would be beaten harder or they would receive a beating themselves (Hughes, 2010; Walker, 2010). They would also have witnessed the many sibling fights that their father instigated (Vallely, 2010) and were forced to watch violent films (Walker, 2010).

The boys themselves were also targets for their father's violence and were beaten with golf clubs as a method of discipline or hit with 'hard punches, really hard punches' (Hughes, 2010, p1) after which their mother calmed them down with cannabis (Hughes, 2010; Valley, 2010).

The Serious Case Review stated that, '*It was a family where on several occasions the children presented with injuries and evidence of their emotional and physical neglect*' (DSCB, 2010, p.5). Despite professionals working with the family it seems insufficient consideration was given to the children's needs and the causes of their behaviour. Valuable interventions were not sought for them (DSCB, 2010).

By the latter part of 2008, the family's problems, and particularly those of these two brothers, had become excessive and deep-rooted. It was noted that the boys showed little regard for their own, or other people's, well-being (DSCB, 2010) and came across as cold and lacking in remorse (Walker & Wainwright, 2010).

When the brothers were finally removed from the family home to foster carers, in March 2009, it was only at their mother's request as she could no longer manage them (Walker, 2010).

2.4 Conclusion

This section has presented a description of the cases, which was central to the generation of overall insight into the study (Patton, 2002). In the Literature Review which follows, the information discussed and presented is that which appears relevant to these aforementioned cases.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Dr Eileen Vizard stated, '*children have both been abused and been abusing and murdering and hurting other children for a very long time*' (Children of Crime, 1998a). Media interest surrounding the cases of Mary Bell, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, and the 'Edlington' brothers however, implies that such incidents are unique and, furthermore, are an indication of today's corrupt and failing society (Muncie, 2009); with documented evidence that children throughout the centuries have been involved in violent crime (Children of Crime, 1998a), this latter view is clearly a fallacy.

This chapter, therefore, focuses on the backgrounds of these children, in the context of existing research and literature, with the aim of seeking to gain some understanding of possible reasons why they, and others, have committed serious violent acts against other children.

3.2 Context

Throughout history, links have been made between parenting and juvenile delinquency. An early indication of this is illustrated by the introduction of a *Committee for Investigating the Alarming Increase in Juvenile Crime in the Metropolis*, which was set up by Parliament for London in 1816. The Committee suggested that poor parenting was principally culpable for juvenile delinquency (Muncie, 2009). Although such beliefs have undergone many modifications and updates, the general principle regarding poor parenting does seem to have endured; poor parenting could be suggested to be synonymous with child maltreatment and, thus, classified as a form of abuse or neglect (DCSF, 2010).

It has been proven that if a child suffers abuse or neglect at the hands of their caregivers, particularly as an infant, it can cause them to experience extremely elevated stress levels (Gerhardt, 2004; Horwath, 2007). Such adversity during childhood has been linked to increased anti-social behaviour and violence (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Becroft, 2009; Deater-Deckard *et al*, 2010; Allen, 2011). Such phenomena are not exclusive to Britain; similar evidence has been found in New Zealand (Becroft, 2009) and in British Columbia, an area of Canada where the youth crime rates are the second lowest in the country:

Children who have been neglected or abused are at least 25 per cent more likely to display a variety of problem behaviours during adolescence. This includes serious violent behaviours, ... low academic achievement and mental health problems. Not surprisingly, being abused or neglected also nearly doubles a child's chance of having a youth justice record (OPHO, 2009, p.4).

Additionally, Boswell (1996b) found that the incidence of childhood trauma was ninety-one per cent amongst Section 53 offenders (10 to 17-year-olds who have committed violent or serious crimes). Surprisingly perhaps, Rothbart *et al* (2000) found that it is the happy, smiley babies, who tend to cry infrequently, who are the most likely ones to react to poor parenting by developing aggressive characteristics. Gerhardt (2004) offers an alternative viewpoint: she suggests that if children are neglected and frequently left to cry in early infancy, rather than receiving affection and having their needs met, they will soon learn not to cry; a conclusion could then reasonably be made that the incidence of infrequent criers reacting with aggression, is due to earlier neglect.

Various studies (Chugani *et al*, 2001; Brotherson, 2005; Becroft, 2009) have shown that neglect and abuse can have a significant impact on brain structure, which can have vital implications. The brain is formed, in terms of its cells, three weeks after conception (Inside the Human Body, 2011) and by the time of birth the brain's cell structure is complete. However, neural connections and brain development are dependent on environmental interaction and stimulation (Brotherson, 2005; Inside the Human Body, 2011). In fact, fifty-

five per cent of the brain develops in the first three years of an infant's life (Allen, 2011) and during this time babies and infants will naturally seek to be sociable. Thus, '*the kind of brain that each baby develops is the brain that comes out of his or her particular experiences with people*' (Gerhardt, 2004, p.38); it is particularly applicable during an infant's first eighteen months, but will continue to affect their behaviour far beyond that and potentially throughout their life (Chugani *et al*, 2001; Palmer, 2010).

This concept is further supported by the work of Perry and Szalavitz (2006) and Karr-Morse & Wiley (1997). These child psychologists have worked with numerous damaged children and have invariably shown that the damage was caused by some form of adversity, even when evidence initially seemed to have shown a supportive and 'good' infancy. Perry & Szalavitz (2006) evidenced a notable long-term and potentially life-threatening survival mechanism used by children who have experienced severe trauma: dissociation. It is a primitive phenomenon which allows the brain to disconnect from reality and whilst it can be protective during the experience of immediate trauma, it can cause long-term effects, not least because it can cause the body and mind to shut down.

Developments in neurological science provide some insight into the effects of neglect. A study of neglected Romanian orphans found them unable to form social relationships; the suggested cause was that their orbitofrontal cortex had not developed at all (Chugani *et al*, 2001). Damage in this area can cause social and empathic difficulties, problems with the regulation of emotional behaviours or responses and even sociopathic tendencies (Becker-Weidman, n.d; Chugani *et al*, 2001; Gerhardt, 2004). Though these effects were seemingly the result of extreme, chronic and extended situations, Gerhardt (2004) cautions against believing that only chronic and extended situations cause such trauma: '*attachment trauma can also arise from periodic episodes of neglect or abusive treatment*' (p.147). Alternatively,

Pinker (2002) maintains it is an inextricable link of genetic and social influence which controls brain development.

Becker-Weidman (n.d) found that neglect and abuse can cause the corpus callosum to be damaged and thus the connections between the cerebral hemispheres can become less effective. The result of this can be a lack of conscience and empathy, and poor abilities to relate cause and effect or express emotions. The findings that almost two-thirds of violent juveniles on Death Row in the US were neurologically impaired would appear to support the aforementioned studies (Lewis *et al*, 1988).

Further implications of the relationship between brain development and experiences of neglect and abuse have been linked to cortisol levels (a stress hormone) (Gerhardt, 2004; Carpenter *et al*, 2011). When an infant is stressed their levels of cortisol become higher and such repeated trauma during periods of critical brain development can cause altered sensitivity and cerebral dysfunction (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). The level of cortisol produced in response to stress may decrease over time, as a kind of defence mechanism, sensitivity and empathy may also decrease; conversely levels of aggression may increase (Loeber *et al*, 2000; Gerhardt, 2004). Perry & Szalavitz (2006) argue that as well as being more aggressive or violent, children who are unable to empathise may be more commonly described as cold or unfeeling.

Moreover, inconsistent or harsh parenting, insufficient praise, inappropriate use of parental power and neglect have also been linked with a significantly greater propensity for criminality (Frick *et al*, 1992; Hopkins Burke, 2008). It seems an obvious point to make then, that nurture can positively affect a child's development; Dr Bruce Perry (2006) has shown that, even retrospectively, stimulation and physical affection can have enormous impacts on the brain.

As abused and neglected children become toddlers they often externalise their aggression (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). As they grow older still, they may render their negative experiences onto others: perhaps believing that because their own bodies can take whatever abuse is meted out, the bodies of others are also legitimate targets (Gerhardt, 2004).

This appears to provide evidence that abuse and neglect affect primary socialisation, which in turn affects behaviour. Furthermore, because this process occurs in early childhood, it could be argued that family is the most important influence during this stage and therefore, the most likely teachers of what is acceptable behaviour (Giddens, 2006).

The idea that social experiences critically affect a child's development is not a new concept; Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal theory explains that a child does not develop in a vacuum, but within families, relationships and communities. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) clearly supports this opinion:

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – [including] behavioural and moral. The quality and stability of a child's human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – ... the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in non-violent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, ... (p.1)

As noted above, it is argued that the quality of the development is affected by the quality of the social group. This must, therefore, impact on the quality of subsequent behaviour, particularly as children are apt to emulate experiences from their immediate environment (Smetana, 1999; Brotherson, 2005; Murray, 2009). Sereny (1995) illustrates this further and postulates that abusers are almost always victims of abuse themselves.

These early social experiences also impact on brain development. During the time when their brains are developing most rapidly, babies and infants naturally seek to be sociable (Gerhardt, 2004). Therefore, poor parenting and other adversities:

can have a profound effect on how children are emotionally 'wired'. This will deeply influence their future responses to events and their ability to empathise with other people' (Allen, 2011, p.xiii).

Conversely, Pinker (2002) considers external influences to be only a small part of the development picture because '*violent tendencies could be inherited as well as learned*' (p.310). The synthesis of genetics and experience is a valid consideration; a child may be born with an innate predisposition towards violence, but unless the child receives such social conditioning, the tendency could remain dormant (Moeller, 2001).

Gerhardt (2004) continues in a similar vein, stating that anti-social behaviour, or a lack of self-control, is not a genetic certainty:

All that genes can do is to provide the raw material, ... but what really matters is whether the parent meets those temperamental inclinations with the kind of response that the baby needs (p.191)

Clearly a problem with this causal paradigm is the almost impossible task of disentangling the truth: if a brain is shaped in a particular way, it could be hypothesised to be either a genetic predisposition or one which has come about due to socialisation influences. This is a particularly germane point when one considers that neglect, abuse, violence and the inability to create strong parental attachments are frequently inter-generational issues (Becker-Weidman, n.d; Perry and Szalavitz, 2006), thus further blurring the demarcation between genes and socialisation experiences.

Furthermore, various authors (eg. Becker-Weidman, n.d; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Becroft, 2009) have suggested that negative familial environments can cause infants to feel stressed and develop poor attachments with their caregivers. Risk factors include hostile or punitive parenting, frequent parental arguing, exposure to violence or abuse (Moeller, 2001; Horwath, 2007; Palmer, 2007) and overwhelmed parents who are consequently unable to provide, '*the*

most basic parental functions' (Gerhardt, 2004, p.27). The most important period for secure attachments to develop is up to the age of eighteen months (Becroft, 2009).

Other studies have shown that insecure attachments and abuse can increase behavioural problems or aggression and can also affect a child's sense of identity and their abilities to self-regulate and develop relationships (Frick *et al*, 1992; Gerhardt, 2004; Becroft, 2009; McAuley & Davis, 2009). Bowlby (1979), who introduced this now seminal theory, could be argued to have agreed with this viewpoint. His study, *44 Juvenile Thieves*, led him to conclude that children who had poor maternal attachments are more likely to become involved in criminal activity. Equally, secure attachments can enable infants to feel comforted during periods of stress, which in turn supports a child's development of internal stress-regulation (Moeller, 2001; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006) and thus criminality could be argued to be less likely (Gerhardt, 2004).

Conversely, resilience is considered to be a protective factor against poor genetic influences, adverse social experiences and a lack of parental nurture (Becroft, 2009). Though resilience is still relatively poorly understood, it is generally thought that one's ability to protect oneself from adversity may be due to such protective factors as a positive relationship with a non-abusive adult, sibling or peer, an inner strength or an outside interest (Doyle, 2006; Iwaniec, 2006). Further research is being developed in the area of resilience which could provide additional insights; one example of this is the study of Caspi *et al*, (2002), they hypothesise '*that MAOA genotype can moderate the influence of childhood maltreatment on neural systems implicated in antisocial behavior (sic)*' (p.852). Resilience would appear to certainly play a part because as Hinsliff states (2010), '*many British children grow up in such [abusive] homes, without emerging homicidal*' seem to be too frequently heard, with the implication that children who become violent must have been 'born that way'.

3.3 Conclusion

This section has considered existing literature and research in areas relevant to the backgrounds of Mary Bell, Jon Venables, Robert Thompson and the 'Edlington' brothers. It has demonstrated that, with regards to development and consequent violent tendencies or anti-social behaviour during infancy and early childhood, the majority of literature concentrates on the effects of experiential adversity such as neglect, abuse and primary socialisation. Little contemporary research regarding genetic influences was found, though Caspi *et al* (2002) did offer some insight.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the methodology of this small study and therefore it discusses the data collection methods which were considered and presents reasoning for the final choices (Thomas, 2009). Ethics are also discussed and the processes for data analysis are introduced.

The original aims of the study were instrumental in dictating the methods to be used. These aims are:

- To investigate, understand and undertake a critical assessment of literature and existing research which has focused on the backgrounds of children who have committed serious violent acts against other children.
- To seek to explain whether or not there appears to be potential causal factors in the backgrounds of children who commit serious violent acts against other children and, if so, what some of those factors may be.
- To determine the view of some interested parties in the cases selected about how they perceive the actions of children involved and possible explanations for it

4.2 Considerations and Decisions

The focus of this research is on life experiences and thus requires a phenomenological approach (Denscombe, 2010), in the interpretivist paradigm to allow for the necessary social understanding (Blaxter, 2006). Moreover, it seems obvious that qualitative data collection methods would be the most appropriate; quantitative data is concerned with numbers and statistics and would be less suitable for seeking opinions (Walliman, 2004; Blaxter, 2006).

The decision to acquire qualitative data does not, however, determine the collection methods, nor suitable frameworks for the study (Yin, 1994). Therefore, in order for the aforementioned aims to be realised, further consideration was required. It was believed that the minutiae of situations and relationships needed to be explored in depth, rather than concentrating on generalisations, breadth and outcomes; this particularly suits the case study approach (Denscombe, 2010) which is often believed to achieve more insightful results than other methods (Rowley, 2002). Additionally, case studies '*can cope with the complexity and subtlety of real life situations*' (Denscombe, 2010, p.55) and are often considered the most appropriate method for utilising new and evolving research (Eisenhardt, 1989), which is plentiful in this field.

Other methods for this research were considered; one rejected method was purposive sampling within a Secure Children's Unit. It is recognised that this would access an appropriate sample (Denscombe, 2010), potentially including violent children and young people from a variety of situations and, through the use of focus groups, interviews or questionnaires, could provide rich data and life narratives of participants, as in Taylor's commendable and interesting work (2006). Nevertheless, it was suspected that bureaucracy and 'red tape' would too easily thwart the study, as noted by other researchers (Schlosser, 2008; Gill, 2009). A further consideration was the ethical minefield that it would be necessary to negotiate for such a strategy (BERA, 2004).

Undertaking the project using only desk research to consider violent crimes by children in general, was also contemplated. It was considered, however, that because case studies encourage the use of various research methods, such an approach would allow for a more flexible and in-depth exploration (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; Bell, 2005; Denscombe, 2010) and would be better suited to answering 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 1994; Rowley,

2002). The chance to include the individual voices and opinions of respected professionals, regarding specific issues, was also deemed to potentially increase the strength of the study.

The cases to be used for the study were specifically chosen for their significance. It could be argued that media coverage of all three of the cases would suggest that they are of interest to a wider audience and have fundamental and nationally important issues at their core; Yin (1994) postulates that such considerations are crucial when assessing the suitability of cases to investigate. A further consideration which influenced the choice of cases was that they included children who had committed acts of violence against other children; the three chosen cases are some of the most infamous and contemporary of this type and thus provide a range of sources of evidence. It was felt that such infamy would provide greater scope for triangulation.

The use of various types of triangulation has allowed issues to be critically analysed from different viewpoints, which arguably increases the strength, validity and reliability of the study (Thomas, 2009; Denscombe, 2010). These different viewpoints were achieved in a 'between-methods' way by using questionnaires, followed up with more in-depth enquiries via email and telephone; desk research and a critical friend were also utilised (Thomas, 2009; Denscombe, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

Data was further triangulated by seeking out the opinions of a range of professionals, with the aim being to enhance the range of valid stances from which the issues could be critically analysed; any attempt to seek the same opinion from various sources would clearly have been fraught with potential pitfalls, due to inherent differences of opinion in this difficult subject area. Moreover, seeking such mutual validity would also have failed to reflect the true complementary ethos of triangulation (Taylor & Gorard, 2004). It could be postulated that the use of multiple case studies also provides a form of triangulation; the three cases provide the backgrounds of five different children for consideration.

In addition to increasing viewpoints, the use of triangulation also enables the validation of data (Denscombe, 2010). Validity, generalisation and reliability were considered throughout the study; the three issues are inextricably linked and, as Rowley (2002) wisely states, they:

Establish the basis on which other researchers should regard a piece of research as knowledge that can be assimilated into the knowledge base of a field of study (p.20).

A study is judged to have external validity if the results can be generalised to a greater number of examples of the phenomenon (Rowley, 2002; Denscombe, 2010); arguably, generalisation from a case study can be a contentious issue due to its very nature and is often cited as a weakness of the paradigm, or even something to ignore (Yin, 1994; Gomm et al, 2000; Bell, 2005; Thomas, 2009). It is not suggested here that this case study can be generalised to all similar cases. However, the use of multiple cases, rather than a single case, provides an argument for some generalisation; more importantly it affords a basis for further studies into similar areas, which may in turn increase general applicability (Rowley, 2002). It is further contended that replicability is also vital to external validity, yet surely qualitative research cannot intend that identikit studies are reproduced time and again by rigorous researchers; much of the illumination of a comprehensive investigation undoubtedly comes from the influence that the researcher's individual attributes and perspectives can add to the study (Schofield, 2000). Hence, it is argued here that the unique qualities of this study are part of its strength (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). Therefore, this paper focuses more upon construct and internal validity and consequently the choice was made to use a critical friend to obtain feedback or suggestions for alternative viewpoints and to ensure that conclusions are supported by sufficient evidence (Schofield, 2000; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). This is a particularly important consideration within case study research, which is sometimes thought to lack objectivity (Rowley, 2002). The use of a critical friend was deemed of further importance due to the qualitative and interpretivist nature of the study (Walliman, 2004; Denscombe, 2010). Furthermore, it was believed that

the use of a critical friend would assist in the aim to avoid potential bias and the research would be constructed as if under constant observation, purported by Yin (1994) to be an effective approach to the problem of reliability.

With a view to further strengthening the reliability of the study, the professionals questioned were chosen either because they had worked, in a range of capacities, on the particular cases or with the children involved, or because they work with or specialise in the area of challenging children in general. It was hoped that they would have differing opinions, at least with regards to some of the questions, and thus improve the rigour of the research. Though it was realised that a low response rate is a potential problem of questionnaires (Denscombe, 2010), a standardised questionnaire with open-ended questions (see Appendix Two) was, nevertheless, deemed to be the most effective way to collect the beliefs, opinions and attitudes of a range of professionals (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003; Denscombe, 2010) in an economically viable way because the respondents are situated in various parts of the country. Furthermore, it was considered more likely that participants would agree to spending time on a questionnaire rather than a potentially time-consuming meeting and interview.

Regarding the questionnaire itself, it was recognised that open questions can make analysis more difficult (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010), however closed questions would not, '*get at the central concerns of an issue as [the] respondents see them*' (Thomas, 2009, p.175). Each of the questions relates directly to the aims of the study and was constructed so as to not be vague, ambiguous or leading. The questionnaire was kept short and precise to increase the potential response rate (Thomas, 2009; Denscombe, 2010) and was discussed with a critical friend.

Finally, secondary documents, '*an invaluable methodological tool*' (Blaxter, 2006, p.168), have been utilised to provide essential background information for each of the children

involved. This allowed for a considered assessment of the backgrounds of the children to be made in the context of existing research materials. Furthermore, these materials have provided the basis for the search for potential causal factors of their violent acts.

4.3 Carrying out the Research

Ten questionnaires were emailed: six were returned; two contacts declined and two did not respond at all. A covering letter (see Appendix One) explained that the research would be carried out with regard to the BERA Guidelines for Ethical Research (BERA, 2004) and it was further ensured that the potential participants understood the nature of the research and how their answers would be used within it. The letter also requested permission to attribute responses to individual participants; though it is recognised that this is not standard practice (BERA, 2004), it was deemed to have the potential to add further credibility to the study. Anonymity, was guaranteed if requested by the participant; however, four participants agreed that their responses could be accredited.

The covering letter also requested permission for further brief contact via email or telephone, with the latter contact being the preferred option and two respondents agreeing (see Appendix Three). This gave the opportunity to conduct a small sample of semi-structured interviews, thus adding more depth, information, and detail which had not been gained from the questionnaires (Blaxter, 2006). These conversations also allowed for more flexibility than either the questionnaires had or email correspondence would have done; this meant that the interviewees had more autonomy during the interviews, which was an additional deciding factor against the use of structured interviews during this follow up procedure (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003; Denscombe, 2010).

Ethics were given due regard during this process and the comments of the participants have been reported faithfully and within context throughout. A final noteworthy point with regards

to ethics is that throughout this study it has been taken into consideration that real people, often children, are discussed throughout, and thus every attempt has been made to address the issues with due sensitivity (BERA, 2004).

4.4 Analysing the Data

The data collected must be analysed and examined in order to address the original study propositions (Yin, 1994). The main tenet of nature versus nurture was selected as an overarching theme from both the review of literature and studies, and the primary research data; it was then analysed to produce sub-themes. This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

4.5 Conclusion of Methodology

This section has discussed the considerations and decisions that were undertaken prior to and during the research methodology. It has also explained how the research was carried out, within an ethical framework, in accordance with the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2004). The themes selected during the analysis process have been presented. The following section presents the genesis and evolution of the themes.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents, analyses and discusses findings from the fieldwork undertaken with interested parties in relation to the cases identified in Chapter 2. It is important to remain mindful that the study sought to establish further understanding of whether research participants believe children who commit violent acts against other children are 'born evil'.

Within this, the aims were:

- To investigate, understand and undertake a critical assessment of literature and existing research which has focussed on the backgrounds of children who have committed serious violent acts against other children.
- To seek to explain whether or not there appears to be potential causal factors in the backgrounds of children who commit serious violent acts against other children and, if so, what some of those factors may be.
- To determine the view of some interested parties in the cases selected about how they perceive the actions of children involved and possible explanations for it

5.1 Process of Presenting Findings

The initial consideration with regards to analysis was how best to organise, interpret and present the information that the desk research, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews would amass. Early analysis of the data allowed for a more iterative, thoughtful process (Denscombe, 2010).

An initial cross-case search of the three cases sought general patterns; subsequent theming of the questionnaire responses ensured that the themes matched and that false conclusions had not been reached (Eisenhardt, 1989; Patton, 2002). A constant comparison method was used (Eisenhardt, 1989; Thomas; 2009) which is appropriate for an interpretivist approach

and, 'creates *themes* or *categories* [which] are the essential building blocks of ... analysis' (Thomas, 2009, p.198). This allowed the data to be organised and interpreted through a *priori* issues, in relation to the aforementioned aims. The themes were selected on the basis of their relevance and the importance that the respondents seemed to ascribe to them, rather than to their prevalence (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Network analysis was used as a mapping method, allowing the over-arching theme of the data to be explored and thus broken down into smaller themes and sub-themes (Thomas, 2009). This was a vital mid-process stage which allowed further depth and clarity to be sought during semi-structured telephone interviews with the two respondents who were prepared to participate further.

The data was subsequently analysed again to identify and confirm relevant themes and issues (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003); 'when a pattern from one data source is corroborated by the evidence from another the finding is stronger and better grounded' (Eisenhardt, 1989).

5.1.1 Key Findings: General Overview

Analysis of the data identified two main themes and three sub-themes, one of which split into a further two sub-themes, these were mapped using a network analysis method (Thomas, 2009). The result is illustrated overleaf:

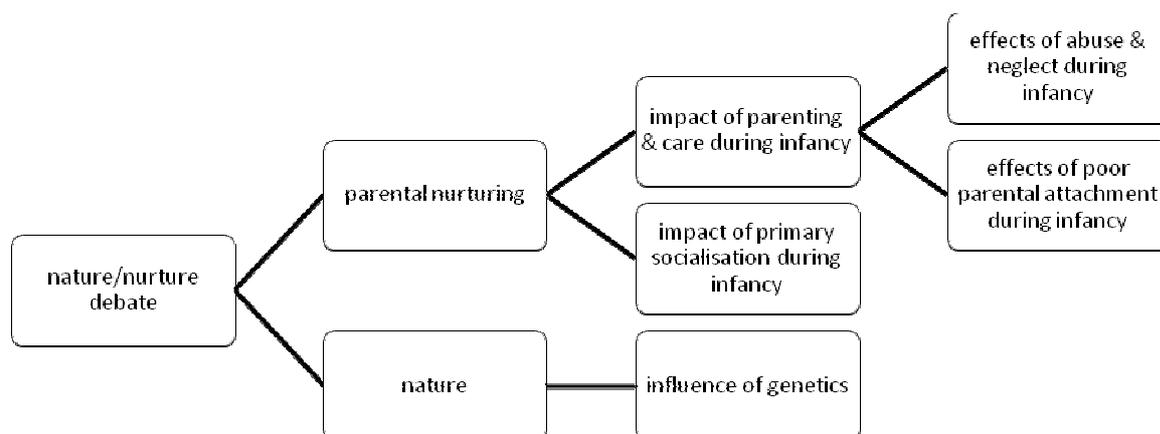


Fig 1: Network analysis of identified themes

5.2 Analysis and Discussion of Key Findings

The critical analysis and discussion of the findings is continually referred back to the evidence presented in the literature review, an important aspect of strengthening the, *'theoretical scope and validity'* (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.545) because the findings are dependent on a limited number of cases and respondents.

First names have been used to relate respondents' comments; as previously mentioned in Chapter 4, four participants agreed that their responses could be accredited, thus the names of **Blake, Helen, Jim** and **Laurence** relate to **Blake Morrison** (author and journalist; has written prolifically about Thompson/Venables and the 'Edlington' brothers), **Helen Masson** (Professor of Social Work), **Jim Reid** (senior University lecturer with social work background) and **Laurence Guinness** (from Kids Company, London); the two other names are pseudonyms, **Nathan** and **Neil**).

The identified themes which were selected from the research are explored overleaf.

5.2.1 Impact of Parenting and Care during Infancy

i. Effects of Abuse and Neglect during Infancy

'Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child' (DCSF, 2010, p.37). *'Neglect is generally the highest form of child maltreatment listed on the child protection register'*

according to **Jim** in his Interview. This clearly has implications for both children and the wider society, as another of the respondents, **Laurence**, argued:

There is substantial evidence that maltreated children are more likely to engage in delinquency and juvenile offending than children for whom there is no evidence of maltreatment. This relationship is evident regardless of the methods used to measure maltreatment and delinquency (Respondent LG: Questionnaire).

There is general consensus amongst the respondents that children who have experienced neglect, abuse or violence may be adversely affected. **Nathan** agrees that without love and affection, *'children are likely to behave outside of accepted norms'* (Respondent NF: Questionnaire). Betty Bell appeared to lack love for Mary from the first moment, when she simply told the nurses to, *'take the thing away from me'* (Sereny, 1999, p.330); over the following four years she tried, on various occasions to either give Mary away or end her life (Sereny, 1995). There is also much existing research to support **Nathan's** view (eg. Boswell, 1996b; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006); furthermore, it is not unique to the UK. Even in British Columbia, where youth crime rates are notoriously low, it is accepted wisdom that *'being abused or neglected ... nearly doubles a child's chance of having a youth justice record'* (OPHO, 2009, p.4). According to **Laurence**, the figures for this country are significantly higher, with statistics showing that:

Abused and neglected children are 4.8 times more likely to be arrested as juveniles; ... and 3.1 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime than matched controls (Respondent LG: Questionnaire).

Certainly the cases which have been considered here would appear to strongly support this evidence; all of the subjects experienced extreme violence, abuse and neglect (as detailed in Chapter 2).

However, despite the general consensus of opinion amongst the questionnaire respondents, the extent to which adversity influences possible criminality did seem to result in some uncertainty:

All the evidence would suggest [that children who experience neglect, abuse or violence may show a greater propensity towards criminal activity], though how much is not so clear (Respondent NP: Questionnaire).

And:

Some [children who experience neglect, abuse or violence] may [show a greater propensity towards criminal activity] however it is an over-simplified analysis of causality since many children who experience neglect, abuse or violence do not engage in criminality or anti-social behaviour (Respondent JR: Questionnaire).

Such responses clearly require that consideration is given to resilience, a protective factor supported in various literature sources eg. Doyle (2006), Iwaniec (2006) and Becroft (2009). Interestingly, **Laurence** mentioned during his Interview, research into the area of resilience which suggests that there may be a protective factor within our genes. Caspi *et al* (2002) could be an example of such research; they propose that their initial findings suggest that, '*MAOA genotype can moderate the influence of childhood maltreatment on neural systems implicated in antisocial behavior (sic)*' (p.852).

Resilience also links to the issue of '*false negatives and false positives*' which **Nathan** argued need to be considered because, '*any prediction will miss some offenders and will predict some cases as offenders who turn out not to be*' (Respondent NF: Questionnaire).

This is patently a valid consideration; for example, Robert Thompson was one of seven brothers and grew up in circumstances that would have perhaps predicted all brothers as future offenders, yet as far as we are aware he was the only one of those seven who went

on to murder a young child. Moreover, oft repeated mantras such as, '*many British children grow up in such homes, without emerging homicidal*' (Hinsliff, 2010) seem to be too frequently heard, with the implication that children who become violent must have been born that way. Perhaps such adversity can be endured if a child has resilient resources, as suggested by **Jim** in his Interview.

As discussed in the earlier review of literature, experiences of abuse and neglect can cause a child to suffer extreme levels of stress (Horwath, 2007). **Laurence** agrees with this: '*it has been evidenced that the impact of chronic stress on the developing brain plays a part in the development of psychopathology*' (Respondent LG: Questionnaire). The findings of Lewis *et al* (1988) would also seem to support this; it is worth remembering that, '*the kind of brain that each baby develops is the brain that comes out of his or her particular experiences with people*' (Gerhardt, 2004, p.38). **Laurence** clearly supports this view, he comments that '*child maltreatment and psychosocial deprivation*' during periods of critical brain development can significantly alter the brain's structure, which can subsequently impact on the ability to empathise (Respondent LG: Questionnaire).

Another supporter would appear to be **Blake**. He responded that it should seem obvious that if one '*grow[s] up in a situation of neglect and abuse (which in itself implies a lack of empathy on the part of one's carers) ... the chances are that you will be less able to empathise*' (Respondent BM: Questionnaire). **Jim** makes a similar point, though he is initially more cautious, only going as far as to say that effects on brain development *may* impede an individual's ability to empathise '*for some but not for all*' (Respondent JR: Questionnaire). He does, however, go on to explore further:

This ... leads to suggestions that young people who lack empathy can go on to undertake heinous crimes against others and there is some validity in this premise. Certainly anyone who experiences consistent abuse including psychological harm that demeans their person, whose esteem is constantly undermined, may not

have the faculties to understand the impact of their behaviour upon others. Their mental health can be impaired (Respondent JR: Questionnaire).

Another respondent, **Helen**, concurs with this, hypothesising that if children grow up in severely neglectful or abusive situations, *'their normal development will be affected in all kinds of ways, including, potentially, their ability to form successful relationships, to empathise with others and to behave in pro-social ways'* (Respondent HM: Questionnaire).

Laurence stated that, in his experience, adolescents who have trouble with behaviour are often characterised as having a lack of empathy, and being indifferent to the thoughts and feelings of others (Respondent LG: Interview). This is reflected by Perry & Szalavitz (2006) who argue that lack of empathy may be perceived as being cold, unfeeling and/or more violent. A lack of empathy could also be linked to poor cerebral integration (Becker-Weidman, n.d). **Laurence** supports these findings. He believes that, *'child neglect, physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, can cause significant reductions in specific areas of the corpus callosum [which] connects the left and right hemispheres of the cortex'* (Respondent LG: Questionnaire). This can also impact on the conscience and the ability to link cause and effect (Becker-Weidman, n.d). Further studies such as Brotherson (2005) and Becroft (2009) also provide support for the argument that abuse and neglect affect the structure of a developing brain.

To illustrate the relevance and further support the theory, it is worth mentioning that Mary Bell, Robert Thompson and the 'Edlington' brothers were all described as seeming to lack emotion, empathy or remorse (Thomas, 1993; Morrison, 1994; Children of Crime, 1998b; Walker, 2010). Interestingly, **Laurence** mentioned during his Interview that there is now new research into children of primary school age regarding their behaviour and subsequent remorse: it is not always that they are unfeeling, but that they are unable to associate themselves with that behaviour and therefore cannot realise the impact their behaviour will

have had on others. It is only when they are replayed video footage of their behaviour that, through a reward rather than punitive system can they come to understand it.

Mary Bell could be argued to fit into this category; she often had difficulty with memories around traumatic events when talking to Sereny (1999). On a similar note, Perry & Szalavitz (2006) illustrated that children who had experienced extreme trauma or abuse can sometimes go into a dissociative state in an attempt to protect themselves.

Laurence argued that in his experience, and based on his understanding, reduced empathic abilities are not the only result of exposure to situations which induce chronic stress in a developing infant:

The result of early and repeated traumatising of a child's brain produces changes in the neurochemical systems of the brain that lead to poor attention and concentration, disturbed sleep and poor impulse control and fine motor control. This chronic activation of the brain can lead to a reduction in size of the hippocampus, which is involved in cognition and memory (Respondent LG: Questionnaire).

Laurence also comments that:

Brain imaging research has exposed critical structural and functional differences in the brains of violent adolescents, notably in the orbital cortex, the area of the brain that is imprinted with ethical and moral thought, and thereby controls violent and aggressive impulses (Respondent LG: Questionnaire).

It is notable that, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Jon Venables often had difficulty sleeping, and was beaten for it by his mother (Davis, 2004), arguably this would have created a vicious stress-inducing circle for Jon. Furthermore, Rothbart *et al* (2000) indicate that it is the quiet, happy babies, as Susan described Jon to be (Sereny, 1995), who are the most likely to demonstrate later aggression if subjected to poor parenting. An alternative view of Jon's happy infant temperament could be that it had been caused by neglect. Gerhardt (2004) explains that children who are neglected learn not to cry once they learn that crying does not result in their needs being met.

It would be reasonable to assume that children who have been neglected, or abused, and thus let down by those who are meant to care for them may, as **Nathan** stated, '*grow up to be anti-authority and lacking in trust with adults and authority figures*' (Respondent NF: Questionnaire). Thus, perhaps **Blake** makes a valid point when he postulates that, '*the abused often become abusers themselves*' and:

It's almost as if they are trying to recreate the circumstances in which they were brought up - perhaps to make them feel safer (in a familiar place, if not a comfort zone) or perhaps to re-experience the trauma in order to expurgate or heal it (Respondent BM: Questionnaire).

He says that research conclusively supports this; one such supporter appears to be Gerhardt (2004).

ii. Attachment

Though poor attachment is frequently linked to neglect, it has been addressed separately because it was considered that it can exist independently of physical abuse.

The development of oneself is attenuated and mediated by caregiving according to **Laurence** (Interview). A supportive and loving relationship can develop a strong, '*early attachment [which] is a significant indicator for good outcomes across a number of indicators in later life*' (Respondent JR: Questionnaire). Conversely poor parenting, and consequent poor attachments, can be a predictor of high cortisol levels, in a similar way to neglect and abuse (Gerhardt, 2004). **Laurence**, in his Interview, said that, '*the earlier poor attachment happens, the longer the duration and the more chronic it is, the more damaging it will ultimately be*'. Bowlby (1979) believed that this was a causal factor of juvenile delinquency. **Laurence** offers further insights into this link; he suggests that, '*affected children have little capacity to regulate emotions like terror, rage and even elation, or emotions like shame, disgust and despair*'. He also proposes that this '*inability to regulate intense feelings is*

probably the most far-reaching effect of a failure of attachment in infancy following repeated traumatisations (Respondent LG: Questionnaire). This would appear to be supported by other studies (Frick et al, 1992; McAuley & Davis, 2009) and further reinforced by the noted strange behaviour of Jon Venables, which could arguably be said to be something he felt unable to regulate. Though it is impossible here to categorically comment on the state of his attachment status it would be reasonable to assume, considering his chaotic home life, that he was unlikely to have developed a secure attachment.

Helen, however, criticises Bowlby's (1979) over-simplistic approach and counters that:

The most damaging negative experiences are those that are chronic and last for many years. A bad start in life ... which is not replicated over many subsequent years won't necessarily have lasting impacts (Respondent HM: questionnaire).

In his questionnaire responses, **Jim** also reflects this and further qualifies the argument: it is, he suggests, *'unchecked, poor attachment [which] may lead to a disorganised lifestyle including anti-social or criminal behaviour'* (Respondent JR: Questionnaire). Nevertheless, it could be posited that the situation would not need to remain unchecked for very many years for it to be damaging. **Laurence** mentions that research has shown that even, *'toddlers in insecure attachment relationships exhibit significant cortisol elevations to events that produce fearful behaviour'* (Respondent LG: Questionnaire). Such elevations are particularly important during this time because it is a significant period for brain development: fifty-five per cent occurs before the age of three (Allen, 2011) and high cortisol levels can be damaging to both the function and development of the brain (Gerhardt, 2004; Carpenter et al, 2011). **Laurence** would appear to support these findings. As he understands it, it is when levels of cortisol remain high for extended periods that brain functioning can be adversely affected and if the situation was chronically regular, *'sustained or frequent activation of the hormonal systems that respond to stress [could] have serious developmental consequences, some of which may last well past the time of stress exposure'* (Respondent LG:

Questionnaire). **Laurence's** comments are also supported by the findings of Chugani *et al* (2001), Perry & Szalavitz (2006) and Carpenter *et al*, (2011). However, Gerhardt (2004) also posits that, '*attachment trauma can also arise from periodic episodes of neglect or abusive treatment*' (p.147).

In the cases of Mary Bell, Jon Venables, Robert Thompson and the 'Edlington' brothers, their home lives were chaotic and their mothers severely over-stretched (Morrison, 1997; Sereny, 1999; Vallely, 2010); insecure attachments can be caused by parenting which is inconsistent or erratic towards the needs of the child (Moeller, 2001). It would not be surprising, therefore, if their infant-mother attachments were poor in all cases. Their fathers were also seemingly inadequate carers: either violent, drunk, weak or absent (Sereny, 1995; Children of Crime, 1998b; DSCB, 2010). Gerhardt (2004) provides some support for the argument that disorganised attachments can result from a lack of ability to provide 'the most basic parental functions' (p.27); it seems likely that this was the reality for these children. Moreover, though services were involved with all of the families in one way or another there was no effective intervention (Thomas, 1993; Sereny, 1999; DSCB, 2010), which would perhaps have been a crucial mitigating factor, because as **Jim** cautions, in his experience, '*it is poor attachment PLUS lack of appropriate intervention that leads to such outcomes*' (Respondent JR: Questionnaire).

iii. Primary Socialisation

Primary socialisation takes place during early childhood and, therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the family will be the most influential factor (Giddens, 2006). The tangible results of socialisation can now be seen through:

Significant advances in neuro-science and neuro-imaging showing the development of the brain during the early years [which have] demonstrated, for example through

twin research, that experience does play a role in the development of synapses' (Respondent JR: Questionnaire).

Jim goes on to say that he believes it is, '*a range of life experiences [which places] children at greater risk of criminality*' (Questionnaire). **Laurence** points out that children from violent families will have a more active locus coeruleus (Respondent LG: Questionnaire), the part of the brain responsible for the hair-trigger alert, which could, therefore, result in violent over-reactions (Raine, 2011). This effect is perhaps illustrated by the cases detailed in this paper; all case subjects were both victims and witnesses to violence within their homes (Morrison, 1997; Sereny, 1999; DSCB, 2010).

Neil (Respondent NP: Questionnaire) states that it is now '*almost received wisdom*' that experiences in early infancy affect brain development, further illustrated by Allen's (2011) report for the Government on the necessity for 'Early Intervention'. According to **Laurence**, adverse primary socialisation can take many guises: '*poverty, substance abuse by the mother ... maternal depression [and] parental conflict [or] broken families*' have been linked to criminality and increased susceptibility to psychopathology' (Respondent LG: Questionnaire).

All respondents agree that the 'chaotic' home lives of Mary Bell, Robert Thompson, Jon Venables and the 'Edlington' brothers was a causal factor in their violent behaviour, at least in part; Blake feels, in fact, '*it was crucial*' (Respondent BM: Questionnaire). It could be argued that Murray (2009) and Sereny (1995) also support this view. Particularly pertinent illustrations of it could be argued to be Mary's experiences of losing consciousness as she was held by the throat (Sereny, 1999); Robert's older brother being investigated for child molestation (Morrison, 1997) (it is not inconceivable that Robert was either victim or witness to this at one time or another); and the father of the 'Edlington' brothers forcing the boys to fight amongst themselves (Vallely, 2010).

Jim and **Neil**, however, both refer to the additional impact of wider social experiences

(Respondents NP & JR: Questionnaires). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) reflects this and states that:

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development [including] ... the ability to control aggressive impulses (p.1)

Helen sums up the over-arching impressions of the respondents rather well; she volunteers the opinion that, *'one's experiences in the whole of one's childhood [are] particularly influential, more so than the traits we are born with'* (Respondent HM: Questionnaire).

Nathan offers a final word of caution however: we must also focus on the context of the crime: *'If we don't do this it turns people into 'robots' – products of early experiences rather than authors of their own fate'* (Respondent NF: Questionnaire).

5.2.2 Influence of Genetics

The theme of nature, and thus the sub-theme of the influence of genetics, emerged mainly through its inclusion as part of the nature/nurture discussion, which is undoubtedly still a much debated issue with advocates such as Pinker (2002) stating that violent tendencies can be a result of both genes and environment. **Blake** seems to agree with Pinker here and comments: *'you can inherit violence from your parents or family, ie. through the genes [or you can] learn about and grow to enjoy violence'* (Respondent BM: Questionnaire).

Jim also appears to firmly support this view. As previously mentioned he advocates that experience impacts upon brain development and here he offers the opinion that *'There is increasing evidence of the impact of genetics on development and a number of twin and adoption studies have produced evidence that violence is heritable'*. He also recognises that it is not a foregone conclusion that children are born violent or evil, believing that:

Rather than a specific gene for violence there is some debate over allelic differences of a particular gene, that is, the same gene develops a range of tendencies across the population. Other factors therefore come into view (Respondent JR: Questionnaire).

Gerhardt (2004) also offers support to a certain extent; she hypothesises that whilst the genes can provide the blueprint it is, nevertheless, the effects of social experiences and parenting which ultimately affect the outcome. A similar point was made by Moeller (2001).

Laurence, however, said in his Interview that he believes there is much more work to be done with the brain; research is currently providing fascinating insights, particularly concerning the MAOA gene (Caspi *et al*, 2002).

5.3 Conclusion of Analysis

The interested parties who have been consulted for this study were unanimous and clear that children who commit violent acts against other children are not just 'born evil'. They suggested various views on the matter regarding the development of violent tendencies in relation to abuse, neglect, adverse socialisation, poor attachment and genetics.

Linking the discussed themes back to the research aims, as Braun & Clarke (2006) advised, broadens the analysis and adds a greater depth and scope to the subsequent conclusions. This is addressed in the final chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Aims

It is argued here that this study has addressed and answered the aims which were initially proposed. These aims were:

- To investigate, understand and undertake a critical assessment of literature and existing research which has focused on the backgrounds of children who have committed serious violent acts against other children.
- To seek to explain whether or not there appears to be potential causal factors in the backgrounds of children who commit serious violent acts against other children and, if so, what some of those factors may be.
- To determine the view of some interested parties in the cases selected about how they perceive the actions of children involved and possible explanations for it.

6.2 Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The findings of this research suggest that the chaotic family backgrounds of Mary Bell, Jon Venables, Robert Thompson and the 'Edlington' boys were a causal factor in them committing violent acts against other children; they were not simply 'born evil'. Extreme violence, abuse and neglect was experienced and witnessed by them all, and thus they were all likely to have suffered from poor attachments. This study concludes that such factors are likely to be the strongest causal factors of violence and anti-social behaviour; this viewpoint was supported by the interested parties who were consulted and by the existing research and literature which was critically reviewed at some length.

No literature was found that supported the view that violent tendencies would be just as likely to develop in circumstances devoid of adversity, as they would in the circumstances experienced by the children on whom this study focused.

It is not suggested here that all those who experience adversities will develop anti-social behaviour or violent tendencies. However, the reverse is suggested: if a child grows up without adversity, in a loving, supportive and nurturing environment, with positive socialisation experiences it is much less likely that they will develop these behavioural traits. In other words a child may have a certain disposition, but social conditioning, especially experiences of neglect and abuse, will depend on how it is cultivated (Moeller, 2001).

6.3 Recommendations

Despite the perceived success of the study, however, it is recognised that it was conducted on a very small scale and that further research is required to provide more definitive answers. Such a project is thus recommended and it would be considered a great privilege to be part of a team studying this area.

If the findings which have been presented here were replicated in further studies, a suggested solution is the introduction of compulsory lessons in all schools, aimed at teaching young people how to be effective, nurturing and supportive parents. When children are abused, neglected and exposed to detrimental social experiences, it clearly has major implications for them and for society in general. It is argued here that if parents had a greater awareness of how their behaviour affected their children there would be far fewer instances of such adversity. Furthermore, the lessons could be offered again during pregnancy for parents believed to have been at risk of not engaging with those lessons. It must be noted however, that it is recognised here that much more research is needed before such policies would be considered, much less instigated

6.4 Dissemination

The participants who have been involved with this research have requested that copies be sent to them; therefore the study will be shared with: The Kids Company, London; Blake Morrison, author and journalist: and Leeds and Huddersfield Universities.

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Appendix One: Letter

Jo Hill
Gate Cottage
5 Town Gate
Lepton
Huddersfield
HD8 0NR

Tel: 01484 607459

Email:
u0867689@unimail.hud.ac.uk

15th February 2011

Dear

I am currently undertaking some research as part of a BA Hons Childhood Studies dissertation.

This is a case study concentrating on the cases of Mary Bell, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson and the Edlington boys. I intend to use these cases to facilitate me to investigate, understand and undertake a considered assessment of the backgrounds of children who have committed serious acts of violence against other children.

To enable me to achieve this aim, I intend to seek the opinions of a small sample of respected professionals within the scope of this area of work.

The research will be carried out in full accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) Guidelines for Ethical Research. They promote an ethic of respect which begins with seeking voluntary informed consent to participate. My intention is to use a short questionnaire (see attached), to initially obtain opinions. It is likely that I will follow this up with email contact over the next 2-3 months to acquire a more extensive understanding where necessary.

I appreciate that the standard rules of research require anonymity; however, I would be grateful if I could acquire permission to attribute your responses, as I feel that this would give more credence to the research. Excerpts and pertinent points/findings from the questionnaire, and any subsequent emails, will be included in the dissertation. However, if you would prefer to only participate under a guarantee of anonymity, I understand and would still very much appreciate your input and can assure that your wishes regarding that would be respected.

I would be extremely appreciative if you would be willing to participate in this study and look forward to receiving your completed questionnaire.

Yours sincerely

Jo Hill

Appendix Two: Questionnaire

**Please return via email or post
no later than 1st March 2011**

Continue on a separate sheet if you wish to add further comments.

1. Research (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Hopkins Burke, 2008) argues that children who experience neglect, abuse or violence may show a greater propensity towards criminal activity. Do you agree with such findings? Please explain why/why not.

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2. What is your opinion of Bowlby's suggestion that infants who suffer poor attachments are more likely to engage in anti-social or criminal behaviour?

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3. What is your opinion on the current research findings that experiences, particularly those in early infancy, affect brain development?

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4. Gerhardt (2004) suggests that the aforementioned effects can impede an individual's ability to empathise. Do you agree or disagree? Please explain why.

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5. Pinker (2002) postulates that violent tendencies can be both inherited and learned. What is your opinion on that?

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6. Evidence supports the fact that Mary Bell, Jon Venables, Robert Thompson and the Edlington brothers all suffered from chaotic home lives. Do you think this was influential in their violent acts towards other children? Please explain your reasons (if necessary, please also state which case(s) your comments relate to).

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire

Please uncheck this box if you agree to your comments being accredited.

Please check this box if you agree to further participation, via email.

Appendix Three: Interviews

The following are summaries of the telephone interviews with **Laurence Guinness** and **Jim Reid**. (NB. These respondents both agreed to being named within the study.)

Jim Reid

Tuesday 9th June, 2011, 9.30am, Approx 20 minutes

The theme of abuse and neglect was discussed in view of the fact that it was the strongest theme of the research so far. Attachment and emotional issues were covered in relation to that.

The impact of genes on the development of violent tendencies was considered.

The fact that it was hard to disentangle the different themes from each other was also debated and finally the theories of Bronfenbrenner and the impact of them were also discussed.

Some excerpts from the interview are included below:

If 2 or 3 children were in the same environment they might all turn out differently and some will have different experiences; resilience plays a factor.

Hard to divorce neglect from socialisation, there is probably a link. There are different approaches to socialisation: authoritarian parenting tends to produce some neglect whereas authoritative doesn't.

Laurence Guinness

Tuesday, 9th June, 1.30 pm, approx. 40 minutes

We discussed the fact that the strongest theme of the research so far was abuse and neglect and Laurence gave his thoughts on that. The theme was further considered in relation to development and research into its effects on the brain; Laurence added further detail and depth to his responses given on the questionnaires.

Empathy and related research were also discussed.

Finally he gave further details on his opinions of violence with regards to socialisation and resilience.

Some excerpts from the interview are included below:

We can now confidently say that neglect is causing atypical brain development.

Adolescents who have trouble with behaviour lack empathy; they are described as callous and as having cold/unemotional traits. There is some research into reward/goal motivated therapy. No good pointing out how they have made others feel because they do not understand those sort of feelings, but rewarding good behaviour raises their awareness of that; it is more centred around them. There is also therapy being piloted with young children where video footage of their behaviour is played back to them when they have behaved badly; they have been surprised that it is them. Seem to have memory blocks/incapacity to remember.

Children before the age of 7 are more sensitive to the environment so that is the most important time; most of the pre-conscious behaviours and learning are learnt before the age of 4.