

Masculinity and Trauma within the context of gangs

Trauma and gangs

Between 2015 and 2019, we interviewed 21 senior local gang members. Their remit was limited to their locality, but they were the most senior members of their respective gangs.

One section of the questions looked at the correlation between victims and perpetrators, so it was not trauma specific, but the victimisation experience would have been traumatic. Of the 21 young people, 17 had been a victim of violence or physical abuse and all were exposed to frequent violence at some point in their childhood. These findings are similar to the Met Police as the Police and Crime Plan 2017-2021 found many of London's most prolific offenders were exposed to violence at a young age.

These findings along with more recent research shows that trauma is potentially linked to aggression, criminality violence or possibly greater expression of traditional masculinity.

Traditional masculinity within gangs

We watched the top 3-5 videos of 7 local gangs and looked into the lyrics for masculinity.

The presence of negative masculinity or an extreme version of traditional masculinity is evident from the outset. The phrases like "man up" exist throughout as do phrases promoting self-reliance. The videos portray rules and should one cross them, matters are solved internally, often, violently. Although, many of the messages go out to other gangs, many videos also pass on a threat to members within their gang. Interestingly, the words used to describe what will happen to a member that crosses the gang, was far worse than threats to other gangs.

We felt that the intended audience of some videos were their own gang members and the local community, almost threatening both to stay in line, do not talk to the police, solve their own issues. Phrases expressing emotionless like "no tears" were frequently thrown around.

Unsurprisingly, all 26 of the videos threaten other gangs to stay off their turf, but we were interested in the 19 videos that also aimed some threats internally.

Traditional masculinity and control

We turned back to the 21 interviews with senior gang members, but this time interested in how senior members spoke to junior members to seal their loyalty.

There were hours of footage about the various tactics used to control young people. Some would befriend youngsters to make them feel respected, others used violence to threaten. One used to stand outside young people's homes staring in for hours, to ensure each of his members knew that he knew where their family lived.

However, we looked into the parts relating to masculinity and found four common areas across 19 of the 21 interviews:

- Traditional masculinity where young men are told to “man up” or similar masculine infused statements,
- Solve your own issues and be self-reliant. Young people were made to feel as if it were their duty and no one else could do it (e.g. “can’t let mans step into your turf”),
- Suppression of emotion. No tears, no emotion about anything. Young people told not to care. Many victimised people trying to help or humiliated others to encourage an emotionless state, and,
- Becoming father figures. Looking after their members, financially and physically so young people feel as if they owe their leaders something.

PTSD and gangs

The four common areas sounded particularly familiar to tactics used by the military to maintain control.

Strict adherence to traditional masculinity associated with more severe PTSD in veterans, a research paper by Elizabeth Neilson, PhD, was published in the American Psychological Association. The paper looked into 17 studies covering over 3,500 military veterans in the US, Canada, UK and Israel and across 25 years.

Unsurprisingly, the paper found that while all members of society were exposed to traditional masculinity, military personnel received messages that normalise, reinforce, and instil values of traditional masculinity as part of their training. Furthermore, research found military personnel report high levels of conformity to traditional masculinity such as emotional control, self-reliance, and the importance of one’s job. Parts of these findings were similar to how gangs control young people.

After building up such self-identify, when personnel experience trauma in combat or sexually, they felt common feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, which directly conflict with masculinity and exacerbate PTSD symptoms.

Interestingly, the 2017-18 Community Life Survey found 27% of men would never say they feel lonely compared to 20% of women, but after traditional masculinity is normalised in a person’s mind, both men and women are vulnerable.

Although, the effects of PTSD can be reduced by sharing, there is lots of research that finds males are far less likely to approach their parents with issues or what they would perceive as weaknesses, thus further adding to the symptoms triggered by trauma.

Symptoms of trauma

There are various medical and social research papers listing the symptoms of PTSD, but we have focussed on those linked to gangs.

Neilson's paper found veterans try to reaffirm their masculinity by engaging in extreme masculinity such as aggression, violence, and sex. From our research and that stated on the Police and Crime Plan 2017-2021, we found victims become some of the worst perpetrators.

Psychologist Terry Real, in his 1998 book *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*, highlights numerous studies. Real found women internalise pain whereas men act it out against themselves or others, like angry victims.

The US National Alliance on Mental Illness found women are twice as likely to experience depression and men mask depression and engage in addictions and violence. The Centre for Disease Control found American men are more likely to kill and be killed accounting for 91% of murders, whereas women are 3 to 4 times more likely to attempt suicide.

In 2014, we interviewed 3 young people that were recently released after stabbing someone. All said they felt humiliation after being assaulted whilst in a gang and the anger led to their assault on another young person. What we did not explore at the time, was if that feeling was anger or humiliation or a feeling of powerlessness. Also, could this be a point where a low-level gang member becomes an attempted murderer?