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Retaliate first: Memory, humiliation and male violence

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which memory and humiliation can shape the social engagement of persistently violent men. Drawing upon field data from two of our previous ethnographic studies conducted in the North East of England, we hope to make a few basic points about the importance of emotion and memory as constitutive and dynamic components in the core of identity. Focusing on the emotional 'feelings' of humiliation and regret, we will outline how violent incidents or verbal challenges from earlier stages of the individual's life-course can be drawn upon, both directly and indirectly, as motivational and justificatory instruments in potentially violent interactions in the here and now. The intention is to propose what might be important psychosocial elements of Bourdieu's concept of habitus and how an exposition of these elements might further our understanding of subjective violence.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the fieldwork in this article is drawn from our recent investigation of violence in Britain's night-time economy (Winlow and Hall, 2006) and supplemented by data drawn from an earlier piece of ethnographic research that was primarily concerned with the evolution of professional entrepreneurial crime as Britain shifted from an industrial to a consumer/service economy (Winlow, 2001). However, the central theoretical proposal we make in this article has little to do with the initial goals of these studies. It was only upon revisiting field notes and interview data that our basic thesis began to take shape. All of the men quoted later were under the age of 30 when interviews were conducted, all are from the northeast of England and all hail from what was at the time of their birth unhesitatingly called 'the working class', although identifying their precise class origin is now fraught with difficulty in a world allegedly free from such archaic and reified structural forms. All are white and live in white-dominated areas, and all but one have had a long and complicated relationship with physical violence. In the five years between the two studies the economic realities in which the lives of the post-industrial working class are embedded changed quite profoundly. These changes are reflected in the biographies of our interviewees and what they have to say about their position in the world and their relationships with others.

The initial study (Winlow, 2001) focused on individuals who were, at the time, committed and relatively successful criminals, but their fortunes have varied quite considerably since the completion of this piece of research. Some have managed to hold on to the last vestiges of traditional working-class occupations, others have managed to stay afloat on the perilous seas of the Britain's illegitimate economies, and others still have fallen into long-term economic marginalization, drug use and petty crime. Violence has always been a part of these young men's

lives, and those who moved into professional crime in their late teens and early twenties often used violence as a means of maintaining or expanding their share of illegal markets (Winlow, 2001).

The interviews for the second study were conducted between 2004 and 2005 (see Winlow and Hall, 2006). The interviewees are still in their 20s and they still occupy a cultural landscape different to that of the men from the earlier study. None of the 2004–5 cohort's members were committed criminals; indeed we quite deliberately identified socially included ex-working-class men and women. Their lives were far less characterized by extreme economic hardship and its assortment of criminogenic cultural consequences (Winlow and Hall, 2006). In comparison to the respondents from the earlier study they lived to a large extent more pacified lives, relatively unaffected by the persistent violence that inevitably accompanies street-level professional criminality (Hobbs, 1995; Winlow, 2001). Many of the respondents in the 2004–5 cohort worked in highly exploitative occupations in Britain's burgeoning service sector, but because they continued to live with parents the truth of their lowly socio-economic position was masked by the relative affluence and stability of their traditionally 'working class' families. The study suggested that transitions into work and adulthood are now fraught with difficulty and the relatively stable reproductive cultural capital that once accompanied former class-based identities is now in a state of fragmentation and flux. As compensation for what has been lost, as well as an alternative source of identity, these precariously 'socially included' young people engaged in regular bouts of expensive consumption in the fields of fashion and leisure despite being trapped in a very poorly paid employment sector. The cohort was selected primarily on the basis of its members' involvement in night-time drinking cultures. Most of the young men were often violent in this specific environment but not necessarily involved in other forms of crime.

The two groups did, however, have a great deal in common in a broader sociohistorical sense and in a more fundamental psychosocial sense: we understand 'psychosocial' as the social scientific attempt to understand the subject as an interface between the psychological and the social (see Frosh, 2003; Gadd and Jefferson, 2007). Stark similarities became apparent when our male interviewees discussed the role of violence in their lives and their feelings about their involvement in it. In what follows we will outline a broad theoretical framework and then present a number of quotes as a means of exploring how these men feel about physical violence, and the humiliation or renown that often accompany it, before moving on to propose a psychosocial extension of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *habitus*, in our opinion a much underused theoretical tool in criminology.

The anthropologist Marcel Mauss (see Levi-Strauss, 1987) is often credited with the modern adaptation and development of the ancient concept of *habitus* as a social scientific means of connecting the individual to the social structure and thus understanding everyday behaviours in their social contexts. However, it was Pierre Bourdieu who significantly expanded the concept and brought it into the sociological mainstream. For Bourdieu (1986, 1992) the concept furnishes us with a way of understanding the intergenerational reproductive nature of class cultures and the complex dispositions and practical logics that seem to guide the everyday actions and expressions of the individuals who inhabit them. Values, beliefs, opinions, tastes

and social behaviours are the products of neither the rational, calculative agency of each individual nor the free negotiation of meaning in sub-cultural groups. Nor are they the products of creative play in the indeterminate realms of existential choice or post-structural language and subjectivity, and nor can they be fully understood as the products of the individual's position as either an interpellated or a naturally resistant/transgressive subject of ideology and hegemony. Rather, the *habitus* is a suite of internalized and embodied dispositions that unconsciously guides social action, structures social attitudes and reproduces beliefs, values and practices. The enduring appeal of *habitus* relates to its ability to capture the mundane, habitual nature of the everyday. It is internalized, subjectifying and durable in the sense that after its successful internalization the individual does not necessarily need the constant presence of others to enforce the rules that govern emotional, expressive and practical life. *Habitus* captures and reproduces a highly nuanced 'feel for the game' as the actor struggles through specific social and occupational fields, equipping him with a complex repertoire of responses to everyday life as it unfolds around him. It guides the actor as he attempts to stay in tune with the social 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu, 1990) behind what otherwise seem to be habitual, unthinking responses to the external world.

Men who carry with them the deeply ingrained visceral dispositions that are the products of socialization within micro-climates of insecurity, aggression and domination often come to value violence and place its enactment close to the centre of self-identity (see Hall, 1997; Winlow, 2001; Winlow and Hall, 2006). These dispositions are not simply a product of some mythical, generic working-class *habitus*, and of course the notion that mainstream working-class masculine codes place high value on physical violence is an intellectual error propagated by the radical feminist and 'hegemonic masculinity' discourses (Jefferson, 2002). However, there is no doubt that in certain circumstances some common but very specific aspects of the masculine working-class *habitus* can indeed constitute and reproduce the self-identity of persistently violent men (see Hall, 1997). For example, in a structurally subordinated position where the *symbolic violence* of the dominant elite suffocates expressive life and prevents the development of a language that can express that subordination (Bourdieu, 1986), the desire not to be dominated by another can become extremely potent. In the late modern world structured, institutionalized conflict has been superseded by the myriad forms of fractious struggle that characterize an atomised, liquid set of social relations (Bauman, 2000, 2001; Wieviorka, 2009). Here, where the individual's sense of order and control over the life-course has diminished, defending personal space and refusing to submit to the authority of external agents keen to wrestle status, renown and tangible material benefits from the immediate social environment takes on heightened significance (see Anderson, 2001). For example, generations of working-class men have been instructed to 'look after yourself' and 'not to take any shit'. These injunctions were and still are a practical and entirely necessary response to everyday life in a cultural environment in which threats to the individual's physical integrity issued by a minority of persistently violent individuals are an unavoidable part of everyday life (Anderson, 2001; Winlow, 2001). It is not violence itself that is valued but the ability to retain some sense of dignity and respect in the face of it, and 'looking after' oneself and 'refusing to take shit' have become, for some men at least, compelling strategies internalized by the *habitus*. In most cases these injunctions are understood to be primarily defensive and cautionary, but this core logic can often backfire and act as a justification for individuals to overstep the mark and react impulsively and aggressively to perceived threats, in the process propagating what it seeks to

resist. In what follows we will attempt to explain how the embodied motivations of this *visceral habitus* act at the centre of the subject's biographical narrative.

Our general thesis is also connected in a metaphorical sense to the work of Walter Benjamin and his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1999a). In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin (1999b) proposes that history should be conceived as a 'technique of awakening' and his work throughout the *Theses* suggests a desire to break free from the constraints of chronological time. For Benjamin, history is a constellation that incorporates both past and present, and thus it becomes a crucial means of grasping the actuality of the here and now. Benjamin saw a critical re-reading of history as a means to 'take control of a memory' and drag oneself away from the restraint of tradition and traditional historicism created by the victors of the perennial class struggle. Revisiting *the truth of an event* thus becomes a crucial process in grasping *the essence of the now*. In the following sections we will adopt something similar to this framework in our investigation of the individual's subjective memories of past humiliations, suggesting that violent men often address unfolding social interaction as a means of taking control of painful and humiliating memories, rewriting the past and rehabilitating the self from its previous failures.

The thesis also draws upon the work of Freud (1975, 1995) and Lacan (2006; see also Žižek, 2006) and their readings of narcissism and ego. Freud suggested that narcissism is a fundamental aspect of the human psyche, but one that is usually attenuated during socialization as the individual enters the Symbolic Order. Here the super-ego becomes fully developed as the individual internalizes the ethical, social and behavioural expectations of her culture. Crucially, narcissism becomes pathogenic if the super-ego does not develop in a form that can prohibit the Id and sublimate its energy in socially acceptable ways; in this scenario narcissism is allowed to live on as the dominant psychodynamic force in the individual's life-course. The ego's role is to mediate between the base drives of the Id and everyday reality, guided by the guilt-inducing cultural protocols and moral judgements that have been internalized by the super-ego. We also draw upon the concepts of the *ego ideal* and *ideal ego*, which Freud used in a rather confusing, interchangeable manner (Strachey, 1962). Jacques Lacan (2006) later made a clear distinction between the two terms and their forms and functions; *ego ideal* is essentially a socially sanctioned image of oneself to which the maturing ego should aspire, while *ideal ego (imago)* is a more problematic form of identification driven by the immature pre-symbolic self's narcissistic identification with the image of a dominant other and its mysterious desires, and the desire to establish the self immediately in that other's image (see Evans, 1996; Lacan, 2006; Hall et al., 2008). These basic concepts of *habitus*, control of memory and destiny, and narcissistic identification underpin our argument in ways that hopefully will become clear.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Before we take a close look at the words of our respondents in order to shed some light on the meanings and justifications proffered by those men who regularly encounter violence and imbue it with crucial importance in their identity formation, we need to take a brief look at the roles of memory, humiliation and regret in contemporary culture. Throughout the analysis of our

data it was quite striking how the 'dark memories' that often accompany violent incidents seemed to represent missed opportunities that weigh heavily on the individual psyche. Biography and identity have been transformed from a given into a task (Bauman, 2001), and moreover an often difficult task in which the blame for any failures must be placed firmly at the door of the individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). The acceptance of personal responsibility for our own missed opportunities seems to be an increasingly important aspect of how we make sense of the intricate emotions that constitute *habitus* and identity. This constitutive process now takes place in the context of consumer culture. The inescapable mass-mediated spectacle of consumer capitalism and its attendant cultures now appear to be cultivating types of introspection, guilt and self-doubt which have never before been such active constituents of human experience. As Žižek (2000, 2002) and Hall et al. (2008) have claimed, the economic imperative to constantly expand the consumption of symbolically loaded goods that drives consumer culture has diminished prohibitions on enjoyment and the gratification of hedonistic desires. This major cultural shift has reconfigured the way we experience the guilt directed at us by the ferocious superego; we are no longer quite so guilty about gratifying ourselves, but far guiltier about missing opportunities to do so. In high-modern western societies the fundamental force of the super-ego acted to regulate subjective action and expression in social life by ensuring that the well-adjusted individual experienced a measure of guilt if they failed to be civilized and sociable. Now, in a hyper-modern era where symbolism, desire and *jouissance* (the urge to take pleasure beyond its boundaries into a realm where it becomes painful) have been conflated, we are more likely to feel guilty when we fail to take advantage of the opportunities for the hedonistic delights that abound in contemporary consumer culture.

It is in this climate of reconfigured guilt that we trawl through our archives of emotional images that dominate our memories of the way we dealt with important 'social events' in times past, a practice that tends to recall and emphasize 'missed opportunities'; forks in the road at which, we might reflect, a wrong turn was made, or at which we failed to act upon an invitation or opportunity that might have nudged our lives in a radically different direction. One of the key psychological outcomes of this process is regret; regret at what might have been, how one's life might have been different, in some way 'better', free from the travails that blight the pressing actuality of the present (Landman, 1993). Issues surrounding the event may be continually replayed, sifted and sorted by the individual, influencing powerfully the individual's perception of everyday life and her place in the social order. The discursive tools we have at our disposal to fashion some meaningful understanding of biographical progress, the politics of 'personal growth', and indeed our own intrinsic personal worth, are now inextricably linked to the acquisitive and ornamental nature of consumer culture.

Here we can see what might well be a connection between Bourdieu's *habitus*, Lacan's narcissistic imaginary and symbolic ideals (the pre-symbolic *ideal egos* or *imagos* and post-symbolic *ego ideals*) and Benjamin's urge to rewrite the past by exorcising humiliating memories of our failure to act at crucial points in our biography. Some individuals forge and reproduce their *habitus* in a cultural microclimate where intimidation, aggression and petty violence are common. As the classical industrial- capitalist era of institutionalized social conflict has given way to atomized late modern forms of interpersonal violence and delinquency (Wieviorka, 2009), the *visceral habitus* (Hall, 1997) has become the main guide for the actor's

struggle for symbolic and cultural capital in localized social fields. The guilt imposed on the subject by a reoriented superego fixated on missed opportunities propels the individual in his struggle to acquire symbols that represent this imaginary 'capital'. At the same time the new super-ego has difficulty in denying the nagging attraction of the narcissistic *ideal ego* that has slipped through the net of symbolic prohibitions in what appears to be an increasingly permissive yet insecure and competitive consumer culture and partially merged with the *ego ideal*, the position of judgement occupied by socially and functionally competent figures of admiration (Žižek, 2000; Hall et al., 2008). Guilt will therefore bear down on an individual who fails to appease underlying feelings of insecurity by following the *habitus's* guidance in the quest to acquire cultural capital represented by competent others in localized environments where the aggressive assertion and defence of the self is the norm. The failure to deal with violent incidents in the past thus becomes lodged in the memory and the emotions as a humiliating failure to act in accordance with the guidance of *habitus* and the desire to construct the self in the image of the idealized, competent and distinguished other who represents the effortless acquisition and display of localized forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Dealing with the aggression of the other in a specific encounter is experienced as a social 'quilting point' and therefore a crossroads to entirely different futures on the road to the acquisition of cultural capital. Backing away from physical conflict can generate intense feelings of humiliation and regret, which in turn fuel the urge to seek – again guided by the reoriented superego in partnership with the embodied *visceral habitus* – and take advantage of a point in the real future where the reimagination of a more positive imaginary future can be legitimized by the outcome of a real event. This basic process warrants more detailed exploration.

To cast one's eye across the spectacle of contemporary consumer culture is to be struck by the brutal excess of social competition, in which the individual's performance is judged in relation to consumerism's system of status symbols. As the economic engine of advanced capitalism runs on a fuel whose major constituent is inexhaustible consumer passions, and given that whatever consumer symbols we have accumulated in the task of constructing and maintaining our identities are destined to rapidly lose the appeal that prompted their initial acquisition (Bauman, 2001), our emotional lives have become littered with alternative and idealized versions of our individual biographies. For so many individuals today the material items and vague status signifiers already acquired are deemed unimportant very shortly after their purchase, forever 'not good enough'. It is always that which has not yet been acquired, that which remains tantalizingly just out of reach, which dominates the consumer identity. Ruminating about alternative biographical trajectories thus produces a ready collection of small and occasionally inconsequential interactions that, if they had been dealt with in the retrospectively idealized 'correct' manner, could have produced a dream-like existence devoid of all that engenders frustration in the present. Reflecting on other potential versions of our lives accentuates the significance of key events, words or gestures that could have changed things: a job interview we messed up, a business opportunity we let slide, a romantic relationship from which we retreated. What continues to weigh heavily upon our minds is not simply the regret that accompanies the fleeting missed opportunity, but constant reflection on the failure to launch the self into a whole alternative future that might have followed the opportunity had it been taken successfully; *the actual non-existence of what might have been*.

Our ego, guided by the reoriented super-ego injunction to enjoy, explores a variety of scripts in

which what actually occurred need be of no more significance than what actually *might* have occurred. These thought processes are often marginalized as unimportant daydreams, mere flights of fancy or figments of the imagination. What we are suggesting here is that the vivid recollection of key events need not necessarily be dominated by the actuality of the events at all; the negative emotions that accompany such recollections render the real memory at once unappealing yet irreducible as a means of conceiving the essence of the self. As Freud suggested, in order to truly forget something one must first summon up the courage to remember it correctly. Yet truthfully recalling the actuality of painful and humiliating experiences is often difficult. When we momentarily transport ourselves back to these key events, the painful reality may lurk beneath a range of images, feelings, narratives and scenarios constructed to transform the event into one that is less emotionally damaging, less humiliating, less injurious. These thought processes might also convert ignominious defeat into heroic triumph, or romantic rejection into moral victory. What we remember is not what actually occurred, but what, at some level, we might like to have occurred. As our consciousness attempts to process and deal with the consequences of the event, the actuality of what transpired becomes dominated by a range of idealized images of what might have happened. In other words we think not of how we *actually* responded to the event, but of ways in which we *might have* responded, ways that would have prevented the emotional harm caused by the event's actuality. In everyday conversations many individuals recount what they would have liked to have done or said in a difficult encounter rather than what they actually did or said, and one can often get the impression that they are trying to fool themselves as well as their interlocutors. However, in any localized culture dominated by a strong and insistent *visceral habitus*, the individual will tend to select in the imagination specific alternative events and reactions that reflect idealized, competent forms of masculine identity and performance, and in these cultures the thought of what might have happened can easily become transposed into the insistent normative command of *what one should have really done at the time to make it happen*.

Our data tend to suggest that this process applies to the memory of a violent assault. The desire of the psyche to address the trauma of the event is compelling and promotes significant reflection, but the brutal actuality of the event itself tends to be insulated by a range of social, cultural and psychological processes that protect the subject from revisiting directly and truthfully the real trauma of the event. We thus produce a range of idealized scripts that attempt to rehabilitate the event, to remove trauma and humiliation and replace them with retrospectively idealized responses that would have prevented what actually occurred or transformed its eventual outcome. In the same way that the narcissistic subject refuses to enter the Symbolic Order and retains the *ideal ego* as the object of identification, the humiliated subject refuses to enter an order of symbols that represent the ignominious reality of his past failure. It is our contention that these idealized scripts, which are in effect a shadow of the event itself, are not simply meaningless daydreams but an ongoing reflection of the psyche's indomitable desire to deal with the event itself, and the actual form these reflections take is intimately connected to and guided by the embodied *habitus* of the subject as it works alongside the reoriented super-ego's injunction to never miss opportunities to establish the self as its *imago* in the narcissistic identification process. This guided urge to revive the opportunity in the present is very likely to propel the individual beyond the symbolic – in effect to by-pass the symbolic order with its means of representing the real and coming to terms with past events –

to the realm of painful *jouissance* where the pleasure of aggressively rectifying the situation might well become painful (in this case psychic pain combined with literal physical pain); but this is always a risk worth taking, and in most cases barely considered.

THE TIME OF THE NOW

How does this psychosocial process drive the individual to a point where he acts out his imaginary redemption? Benjamin (1999a) suggested a fundamental space–time contradiction in which ‘social progress’ is rendered artificial and memories of alternative narratives breach chronological time to be reawakened in ‘the time of the now’. Benjamin famously noted that the revolutionary event offers the opportunity not just to address the perceived inequities of the immediate social world, but remains tied to key historical events, and is condemned to repeat or redeem the revolutionary failures of the past. As Žižek (2002) suggests, we might expand this theme further; what we seek is not just the chance to address the struggle for the suppressed past (Benjamin, 1999a), but also to confront directly the inability to act, to seize the revolutionary moment in the intervening period. That which did not occur does not necessarily disappear into complete non-existence, but remains forever attached to the event as a crucial rejoinder, a contextual device that continually struggles for existence and recognition. Therefore the immediate revolutionary act is freed from the constraints of space–time, and it may repeat or redeem the failures of the past. Now that the institutionalized collective conflict of the classical capitalist era has temporarily subsided (Bauman, 2001; Wiewiorka, 2009) the process operates only at the individual level and, crucially, it offers us the direct opportunity to address the times when we did nothing, the times when we should have acted but remained silent and immobile. This general framework, in which the failure to act battles for recognition, can be usefully deployed as a means of understanding the ways in which violent men criticize their own social engagement and how their inability to act ‘correctly’ in past events can shape social behaviour in the here and now.

Think of a key moment in your life, one that contained an element of humiliation, an event of profound psychological importance to your sense of self. In all likelihood you have revisited this event countless times, both consciously and subconsciously, in an attempt to address the core problematic of the event itself. Occasionally, these visits back to the trauma of the event may have been fully conscious, in which you actually revisit the painful reality of what actually happened in detail. Others may have taken the form of impressionistic daydreams or flights of fancy that may appear to have little to do with the event’s reality. It is our contention that this process of revisiting the event often takes the form of a recollection of *that which did not happen*. The brutal essence of the event may remain, but the interface between sub-consciousness and cultural identity endeavours to conjure up a vivid assortment of idealised triumphs rather than the actual ignominy of humiliation or defeat. When victims of violence or humiliation think about these events, they do not always think about what really happened, the blows that were struck or their inability to adequately defend themselves. The actual events are often too painful to revisit directly, and, most importantly for our purposes here, the victims tend to resist mature symbolization of the events, constructing instead idealized alternative scripts that in some way reflect how they would have liked to have reacted in the midst of the event. Rather, pre-symbolic and essentially narcissistic idealized images of their imaginary heroic reactions

are given shape, durability and social meaning by the struggle to acquire cultural and symbolic capital, and become building block of the embodied *habitus*.

The barely conscious desire to revisit the event and the creation of alternative scripts that remove the cultural and psychic harm caused by what actually occurred is often supplemented by the *ego ideal's* desire to construct an image of the self that in western consumer culture reflects admiration for the aggressive, dominant other. Here the narcissistic *ideal ego* is no longer opposed by the social *ego ideal*; rather the two merge (see Hall et al., 2008); many of the interviews we conducted suggested a subconscious and indirect form of *mimetic admiration* for the aggressively dominant and narcissistic other as *ego ideal*. The dominant other now represents the self in the alternative triumphal narrative, a vengeful self driven by *amour-propre* that can find respite only in the downfall of others (Hall et al., 2008). In these abstract recollections, the image of the dominant other stands in for the self and enacts the idealized response to the event. In these recollections, therefore, the victims see themselves in the image of the dominant other and it is this image that retrospectively performs in the mythical shadow event. Our interviewees' ruminations on past humiliations could be rehabilitated only if the self became dominant and refused to back away from future social or physical challenges. The completion of this process, where the subject actually enacts domineering behaviours as a result of a retrospective critique of previous social conduct, allows the psyche to address the actual trauma of the event by transforming it into a mere learning process or staging post on the journey towards ultimate self-becoming.

For some of the men we interviewed, the image of the non-event – that is, the transformed and idealized shadow of what actually occurred – stimulates the desire to imagine oneself as the undefeatable, all-dominant hero striding manfully over challenging terrain. If this cannot be achieved in the acceptable pacified ways of achieving power and status, then violence becomes a likely option, especially if the *visceral habitus* is carrying this tendency as a vestigial form of practice in the struggle for cultural and symbolic capital. Sublimated and restrained alternatives routes to domination do exist – demonstrated by those who are inclined towards the role of the 'reluctant hero' (Slotkin, 2000) who battles gallantly against insurmountable odds or the 'intelligent other', the 'Odyssean trickster' (see Adorno and Horkheimer, 1992) who can confuse and defeat the guileless barbarian with reason, intelligence, verbal dexterity or comedic put-downs – but the identification and struggle remain the same. Our central suggestion here is that these emotionally charged images feed back into the very nature of identity and can become a crucial context for future social behaviour. The image of what didn't happen continually battles for recognition, infiltrates the victim's core identity and exerts its subtle influence upon unfolding social engagement.

TALK ABOUT HUMILIATION

The quotes below are examples of how young men who have experienced the emotional trauma caused by humiliation and violent defeat experience this process of reflection and negotiation. The interviews themselves were often highly charged as our respondents revisited traumatic events of the past and attempted to convey to the interviewer how these events have affected their social behaviour and social identities. Indeed it's also worth noting that a small

number of our respondents revealed that they took to striking inanimate objects as a result of powerful recollections of ignominious defeat and the idealized scripts that accompany these recollections. For these men, directing one's aggression at inanimate objects appears to be a result not simply of feelings of anger or injustice, but also of a retrospective dissatisfaction with their performance in the event and the terrifying prospect of a bleak future of acquiescence and cultural irrelevance. We might speculate that this punching of walls, windows and doors is not just about transference, whereby the wall substitutes for the foe and the blow struck stands in for the blow that should have been thrown in the actual event itself. It's also quite likely that this seemingly irrational activity may also act as a self-administered punishment and critique in which the blow, the object struck and the resulting physical pain address the subjective inability to act in the retrospectively idealized way, demonstrating again a process by which the original humiliation cannot fade away but reproduces itself and demands cathexis.

Michael, a key respondent in our earlier ethnographic study (Winlow, 2001), was interviewed on many occasions throughout 1998 and 1999. Michael was and is a committed professional criminal who has experienced a degree of financial success as a result of his involvement in local criminal markets. His place in the local criminal hierarchy is grounded in his ability to be successfully violent and to constantly promote his aura of physical threat. Michael is happy to admit that he has not triumphed in every physical fight in which he has been involved, but as he tells us, 'winning' isn't always the point. Here Michael has been asked why it is impossible for him to walk away from a verbal challenge:

I couldn't . . . I'd just stew on it . . . just go over and over, just stew on it. There's things can't be allowed to happen, otherwise you just stew on it. Can't get it out your head . . . Maybe it gets worse, the more you think about it, it gets worse . . . If it happens [you let a verbal challenge pass], it can happen over and over. Then, what's left [of masculine identity?]?

Michael is making a basic but highly insightful observation about the nature of masculine identity for those who inhabit this particular cultural milieu. He appears to be making a direct reference to the emotional disturbance caused not simply by defeat in a violent conflict, but also by allowing subsequent perceived slights to go unpunished. Michael believes his immediate social world to be inhabited by nakedly instrumental others attempting to wrestle dignity from each other. Without due vigilance, his social position and self-identity will be challenged, found to be lacking, and eventually destroyed. Michael talks of being unable to get perceived challenges 'out of his head', and here he uses an interesting word to describe his emotional temperament; he will 'stew' over it, which implies that his rumination on the incident will simmer away gradually, requiring no immediate or continual action but requiring eventual resolution if even more powerful threats and injuries to his self identity are to be avoided. The idea of 'having nothing left' if one allows the instrumental other to ignore the cultural protocols associated with respect and dignity while aggressively dominating everyday interactions was a common theme across both samples. This is not an attempt to be dominant but an attempt to prevent others from becoming dominant, to retain dignity and protect the self from painful humiliation and rumination by being ready to fight and trump aggression with actual violence. This is a key component in Michael's culturally informed self-image. From his standpoint he *cannot* allow slights or insults to go unpunished. He appears to

be expressing the fear that if these components cannot be retained the 'self' in its present form is lost.

Jimmy agreed to interview in 1999 and at that time was a reasonably successful professional criminal. Again, he is responding to a succession of questions about the importance of being violent:

It's something everyone goes through coz it's a learning experience isn't it? . . . Eventually you learn it's not worth it, you've got to sort it out. And it changes things . . . No, you just get, you know, 'fuck it' [he means get to a stage where he can exclaim, 'fuck it! Let the chips fall where they may']! Because you don't want to get into the situation where people are getting on top of you, so next time you know you can't stand back . . . Yeah, it goes around in your head a bit. Then next time you're ready.

All our respondents seemed to be experiencing emotionally driven psychosocial processes that are far more complex than peer-group pressure or an injunction to follow the scripts that guide the 'doing' of some suppositious 'hegemonic masculinity'. In mainstream western culture it is not the guilelessly violent male but the reliably pacified individual – expert in the practices of patient, sublimated aggression and competition – who is successful and therefore more representative of the prevailing hegemony (see Hall, 2002). Here Jimmy is ready for the next challenge that must ultimately come his way, not simply because he has applied negative sentiments to previous challenges from which, with much regret, he has backed away or in which he has been defeated, but because 'it has gone around in [his] head', and because he has worked through a variegated assortment of alternative scripts in his imagination which allow him to emerge victorious by responding 'correctly' to the perceived challenge. Jimmy's words appear to be more than mere bravado. Our ethnographic observations of Jimmy at work and play indicated clearly his willingness to use violence when he sensed threat. Indeed, in a way that on the surface appears paranoid, he would often search conversation for signs of a challenge or slight to which he can respond aggressively. For example, he would often say, 'what do you mean by that?' or offer an entirely unreasonable summation of the speech of others, for example 'are you trying to say I'm fucking stupid?'. It seemed as if this overt aggressivity is geared towards cultivating fear in others, but it is also drawn out by his firmly held belief that many of those he encounters are trying to get one over on him in some way, and if he doesn't aggressively defend himself and his interests his self-respect will be demolished, his reputation tarnished and his position in the criminal marketplace usurped. In this environment these thoughts are not paranoid but reasonably accurate assessments of the situation and its hypothetical outcomes.

For Jimmy, backing down from a challenge 'isn't worth it', even if one avoids significant physical injury, because, to him, the intense discomfort of humiliation and constant guilt-driven rumination about idealized alternative responses, and the risk of intensifying them further, are much more burdensome. Once again, allowing 'people to get on top of you' means discarding a key component of one's identity. The key part of this quote is the sentence, 'so next time you know you can't stand back'. Jimmy appears to be addressing directly the relationship between the imaginary non-event and his present social engagement. Having experienced humiliating events and the psychic disturbance that accompanies them, in order to cathect the energy generated he has resolved to make real the mythical non-event the next time he encounters

a verbal or physical challenge. As he tells us, the 'next time you're ready'; ready not to back away, but to make real the mythical response to the challenge as faithfully as possible. Although the ideal of the self as the dominant, aggressive other is indeed a fantasy, it fuels a real struggle for 'capital' in the variations found in this class-based and historically continuous cultural milieu. Jimmy intends to *actually enact* the script of the non-event, that is, the product of the psychological rumination that inevitably accompanies the initial event itself; thus the reproductive *habitus* is reinforced and the past is linked inextricably to the present and the future.

The trauma of the actual event has caused Jimmy to revisit idealized versions of the encounter persistently until it becomes clear that future events of this type can be met only with at best domineering verbal abuse or at worst actual violent aggression if he is to avoid further emotional discomfort. Because he is firmly incorporated in his cultural milieu, where 'backing down' promotes visions of a bleak future after the event, the alternative strategy of constructing the ideal of a permanent victory by imagining himself to be 'above' this 'uncivilized' interaction is unavailable to him. Physical harm becomes marginalized as an issue because Jimmy regards passivity as potentially far more injurious, and he often responds aggressively to words or behaviours that suggest the first inkling of potential trouble. The person who utters such words, or the audience that witnesses this kind of aggressive eruption, may then judge Jimmy to be wild, unnecessarily aggressive or violent beyond reason. This reading of the social encounter is thus a reflection of their inability to decode what is occurring in the same way as Jimmy because they are denied any direct insight into Jimmy's subjective interpretation. In the vast majority of cases the incident is understood from afar as the pathological individual fixated on an atavistic version of 'male honour', disrupting what would be without the presence of himself and other like him the civilized cultures of late modernity; indeed, perhaps rather surprisingly, this rudimentary and superficial notion is still put forward as a total explanation for violence (e.g. Spierenburg, 2008). However, as we have seen, it is far more complex than that. From Jimmy's standpoint, unequivocal and immediate aggression is entirely rational and a necessary therapeutic and self-rescuing response if he is to achieve some respite from the constant emotional disturbance caused by retrospective assessments of his own failure and passivity, which are reinforced by the broader contextual forms of socio-economic failure and political passivity that accompany his current position in the world.

What Jimmy is alluding to is a standard axiom of this particular *habitus*, one which was voiced by a number of our respondents in both samples; if one is to have any hope of respect and psychosocial survival upon this marginalized and often violent cultural terrain, if one is to have any hope of emerging triumphant from a physical conflict, then one should *retaliate first*, or run the risk that the new event will become a time-portal through which the humiliating historical tragedy will repeat itself. This particular adage is drawn from deep experience and highly nuanced knowledge of an external world in which the possibilities of physical danger and emotional humiliation constantly haunt social experience. To be in any way reticent about physical conflict invites others to dominate in a way that destroys rather than affirms the narcissistic desire to see the self reflected in this merged *ideal ego* and *ego ideal*, and consequently the victim must always allow the *visceral habitus* to act automatically once a sense of danger is detected and enters the consciousness.

Here, the first blow of the conflict is struck metaphorically; a direct or indirect challenge is issued, or, crucially, is at least perceived to have been issued. In the phenomenological sense the retaliatory blow is actually the first physical blow struck, and, for combatants operating outside archaic codes of chivalry, it is usually the decisive blow (see Hobbs, 1995; Winlow, 2001). It is also important to understand that the physical retaliatory blow need not be thrown in the immediacy of the moment. As many of our respondents suggested, the perception of a challenge might engender significant reflection, rumination and symbolic mutation. The significance of what has been said slips and slides until the words are unequivocally understood as a threat or challenge. This process might take some time, and the failure to respond adequately in the immediacy of the moment augments and intensifies the burden of regret and self-criticism as the initial event and its shadows command the attention of the psyche; retaliation might be postponed, but it isn't abandoned, and the temporary desistance actually carves out a space for further rumination. There is no doubt that the presence of an audience of peers can put further pressure on the individual to perform, but we must stress that for those whose *habitus* carries this emotional drive and practical logic, and whose super-ego is fixated on the missed opportunity, it is by no means a vital precondition.

As some of our respondents emphasized, the actual physical conflict itself might occur some time after the perceived challenge, but during the intervening period, anger does not dissipate and can intensify quite significantly. These delays can often persuade audiences to interpret these disputes as acts of random violence. Jimmy or Michael, or someone else, might suddenly assault a man in a bar or on the street. These supposed random acts of unwarranted aggression are often highly prized in criminal cultures and can bestow a degree of esteem and status, but in most cases they are not at all random or poorly thought out. In some cases they may be the result of a previous incident that one participant judged unproblematic and the other has brooded over before eventually reading the event as a challenge, a threat or a slight, demanding a postponed assault understood as an actual continuation of the initial event. They have brooded over what might be tiny aspects of interaction, eventually identified as threats or challenges, and decided that their sense of self will not and cannot absorb the perceived humiliation of passivity or withdrawal. Other supposedly random acts of violence might also be the result of one participant's desire to enact idealized versions of a humiliating event, even if the other participant knows little or nothing about it. Their social experience has told them that this type of symbolic defeat can never be easily absorbed by the ego. Unless they act, they will suffer the ceaseless frustration of what might have been.

Thus the stereotype of the violent Other waiting for some form of social interaction that can then be construed as a challenge or slight, which therefore requires immediate violent resolution, actually resonates in some cultural fields, but not in the straightforward manner we often presume. As Freud (1975) noted, this 'compulsion to repeat', proposed by Lacan (2006) as that which drives the subject to the painful realm of *jouissance* beyond meaning and signification and is therefore not amenable to language and rationality, can give the appearance of some 'daemonic force at work'. For some men violence becomes a visceral theatre in which they can subconsciously seek to resolve complex biographical issues and attempt to enact a culturally framed version of the mainstream's fantasised *ego ideal* merged with the individual's narcissistic *ideal ego*. Jimmy and Michael continually find themselves in violent situations not because of bad luck, and not simply as a basic reflection of the environments in which they move; to them violence is emotionally charged, compelling, an aspect of social action that

'makes sense' and offers them the opportunity to do the kind of 'identity work' that reflects the cultural concerns of the *visceral habitus*. He who places violence and domination close to the centre of self-identity can often appear uncontrolled and highly volatile; recognized features of men who carry violent repute with them in criminal cultures (Hobbs, 1995).

Paul was interviewed in 2005 for our recent book, *Violent Night* (Winlow and Hall, 2006). Although he is young and 'working class', Paul has no experience of the pressures of active involvement in criminal cultures and occupies a cultural landscape far more pacified than that occupied by Michael and Jimmy. Here Paul is recalling the psychological processes involved in dealing with a recent violent incident in which he was seriously assaulted by unknown assailants while out drinking in the city centre:

I suppose I was a bit upset, a bit angry . . . just going over it and over it and making it worse . . . I did go over it a lot. I still do really. Now, talking about it, just makes me wish I'd, you know, whacked the bastard, just tore into him, and the more I went over it the more I decided I wasn't going to get caught like that again . . . I think I probably just starting to think about it more and more. I went to the gym a lot more and just changed a bit really overall . . . It might have just been me growing up but I think my mood changed a bit . . . I just kind of thought I wouldn't let that happen again.

In a similar vein to both Michael and Jimmy, Paul is suggesting that the incident itself has been the cause of significant rumination. Once again, he has concluded that his response to the incident was wholly inadequate, and he has produced a range of idealized responses that, had they been enacted, would have allowed him to escape the humiliation of ignominious defeat. In the idealized shadow of the event, he stands firm instead of running away, fights back instead of rolling into a ball, battles heroically against insurmountable odds in order to emerge battered and bruised but otherwise victorious. He now appears resolute in his desire never to allow such events to transpire again. For many men of working-class origin, the correct response is not simply about achieving triumph, but rather gallantly taking on the challenge in the expected way. During childhood and adolescence they are subject to both subtle and transparent forms of cultural socialization that stress the importance of fortitude, endurance and steadfastness. Ideally, if defeat must come it should be embraced courageously; the psychological wellbeing and the maintenance of dignity and selfhood ensured by this 'correct response' are far more important than experiencing actual physical defeat. Responding to threats in ways idealized by the embodied *habitus* thus enables the individual to shuffle a little closer to the sense of self that signifies the ceaseless desire of the disturbed psyche to find tranquility (see Damasio, 2003).

Tellingly, the imaginary revisiting and reworking of the assault have had a clear impact upon his social behaviour in the here and now. The dark shadow of his ignominious defeat has produced a range of idealized responses that dominate his thoughts, so much so that he now tentatively seeks out challenges to which he may respond in the correct manner. His life up until this point is clearly indicative of the successful pacification of his basic biological and psychological drives, but the sudden arrival of violence into his life, and the emotional processes that accompany it, have prompted him to reappraise his idea of the essence of himself. Violence appears no longer to be buried beneath a broad array of socio-cultural prohibitions and psychological strategies of containment, and is now a social and behavioural

option which he is now willing to utilize immediately as an internal and external expression of selfhood:

Paul: *One time we were in this bar and my mate got into a fight. It was over something that had been going on ages since we were kids and they'd had a fight before and we all kind of knew each other. He was getting the better of my mate so I just whacked him really.*

Q: *Why?*

Paul: *Just happened . . . I just saw him there and then I hit him . . . I suppose I just felt angry, just angry and then hit him . . . I don't think I felt good but I didn't feel bad . . . [I think] maybe people might have thought about me a bit different, and that was kind of good.*

While Paul has yet to earn the hard-won street credentials of Michael and Jimmy, our data appear to suggest that he might have followed their tendency to seek out a potentially violent situation, hitherto judged to be unpleasant, in order to invoke a sense of control over the event. Paul has attempted to reproduce a social situation in which he may face his dark memory of passive victimhood and achieve redemption and peace. This new reality thus provides him with the opportunity to paint over his previous image of himself in vivid, heroic tones. Now he is no longer the humiliated victim of domination and control. Paul also indicates that this is not purely an internal process; he is keenly aware that an image of himself in his external cultural habitat can be modified by engaging in such visible acts. However, this is rooted in something far deeper than hegemonic pressure transmitted by a peer group; passivity risks contravening the primal and enduring anthropological principle of *symbolic exchange*; he who cannot appropriately exchange an act ceases to exist in the eyes of self and others (see Bourdieu, 1992; Baudrillard, 1993, 2007). He presumes that his undefined external audience has previously understood him as passive, even emasculated, and this new test and the displacement of a former self has enabled him to express and exchange positively his social identity. However, as we have already suggested, the existence of an audience on the spot is important but not vitally necessary; the judgements of others, which can be indicated simply by the inability to see the self reflected in an unresponsive *ideal ego*, have already been internalized in the prolonged narcissistic identification process.

Ray proved to be one of our key research contacts in the 2004–5 cohort. Unlike Michael or Jimmy, Ray has no involvement in professional crime. Indeed, when we interviewed him he was working short-term contracts in the building industry. Ray has, however, been socialized and sees the world in a very similar way to Michael and Jimmy, and actually grew up on the same estate as Michael. Ray has achieved a small but entirely justified reputation for violence within his immediate social environment but is not feared in the same way as Michael or Jimmy. He suggests,

'I mean, I know if something happened I couldn't just walk off and leave it because I'd just feel like a complete waste of space, just some fucking idiot. I'd probably go to jail rather than let someone take the piss.'

What Ray appears to be suggesting here is that his self-image could not cope with the realization that he retreated from a direct or indirect challenge. Those who do retreat are, from his point of view, 'a complete waste of space, [a] fucking idiot', not simply because they

have failed to live up to the idealized standards of intimidating masculinity in these cultures, but more importantly because they have failed to recognize that the real defeat is suffered in retrospect, as one is forced to constantly revisit the event and judge one's performance negatively. To Ray, it is foolish and irrational to suffer this prolonged pain, to allow oneself to be propelled into the realm of *jouissance* without acting to break the repetitive cycle (Lacan, 2006). We talked about violence at length with Ray and he appeared particularly keen to impress upon us that physical harm isn't particularly important. He positioned himself as a virtual violence evangelist, he who had 'seen the light', and now knew that it was better to have fought valiantly or responded acceptably to threats, even if he was badly beaten for his troubles. Cuts and bruises and broken bones would heal, but the emotional trauma that accompanies perceived cowardice, passivity and inability to exchange would not easily subside. Here Tim, another non-criminal respondent in our 2005 study, makes a similar point:

The type of lad I am is just, I'm not the type who's going to stand there and take shit from anyone really. I'm not the hardest bloke in the world, but it's just automatic if someone has a go at me. There's loads of people around here who could batter me, but I'm not bothered by it. I've had kickings before, it doesn't bother me. I'm not bothered by it. I'd rather stand and get a kicking than run off, because that's just not me.

Tim is clearly not in a position to challenge directly someone like Michael or Jimmy, but he has found a degree of comfort in occupying the position of 'he who will not retreat'. This position allows him to retain a degree of dignity in a cultural environment populated by aggressive and occasionally highly skilled potential combatants. Tim has and will face the horror of violent defeat so that he can retain some sense of dignity and respect within his immediate cultural environment. He may not be one of the dominant local gladiators, but Tim can retain a culturally informed sense of masculine identity with the knowledge that even they know that he is willing to 'stand up for himself', no matter what the costs. However, of all of our respondents, it is perhaps Al, another non-criminal respondent from the 2004–5 cohort, who comes closest to vocalizing our core point:

People test you all the time and they'll see how far they can push, pushing and pushing until you either think, that's it I've had enough [and launch an attack], or you pussy out and walk off. But that's not me and it's not really any of the lads I call mates. What kind of man are you if you let people push you about? I've seen people bottle [meaning 'chicken out'] trouble loads of times and it makes you think, how do they live with it? Don't they understand? . . . They might get out of a beating, but really, what would you think of yourself if you let people just steamroller all over you? It's just got to boil your piss hasn't it? Me it would just send me around the bend. I'd be ohhh! arghh! Just going over it and over it because I couldn't get it out my head. And when you get like that, it just gets worse and worse until you do something about it. At least with me anyway . . . I'm not the type of lad who could do that, walk away and then forget it. I'd be thinking, people think I'm a fucking idiot, don't they? Like you become a joke, people taking the piss and that, and I couldn't live with it, it would prey on my mind.

CONCLUSION

Our basic thesis here is essentially a psychological extension of sociological theories of violence that address the social, cultural and economic context of marginalized masculine identities. What we have suggested here is a potential springboard for further sociological analysis that takes psychological processes seriously. Theorized in this way our data suggest that what appear to be random acts of violence are often deeply subjective responses to the complexities of identity construction structured and motivated by the transformed *super-ego* and marginalized *habitus*, and that memories of key events are often accompanied by an idealized shadow event that can impact powerfully upon future social interaction.

The lives of our respondents are no longer bound by the institutions, codes and rituals of traditional working-class male cultures which often provided collective and socially configured 'opportunities to act' in situations of far broader social conflict, thus negating the elite's *symbolic violence* and addressing the humiliation that eats away at the psyche. Most of these codes, rituals and institutionalized and politicized forms of conflict – from durable territorial gangs to assertive trade unions – have now all but evaporated, and the elite's relentless *symbolic violence* has erased the language and practices that once explained the sources and structured the responses to subordination and humiliation (Bourdieu, 1986; Hall, 1997; Wieviorka, 2009). Now the isolated individual is condemned to sense conflict as an individual problem and 'stew' it internally. For our respondents, the controlled release of repressed humiliation allowed by cultural sublimation and structured, institutionalised conflict appears almost impossible as bottled-up impotent rage bubbles to the surface in acts of individual violence. The absence of the codes, rituals and institutions that symbolized and dealt with conflict suggests that hostility and violence need not be directed solely at the original perpetrator or his group; thus it can be random, diffuse and unpredictable, feeding back into the general sense of fear and trepidation that often grips these marginalized neighbourhoods. Here it makes sense for some young men to invest heavily in violence and intimidation; here it makes sense to diligently cultivate an image of dominance, destructiveness and unfocused aggression; and here it makes sense to *retaliate first*.

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