

## **BOARDING SCHOOL SYNDROME: Disguised Attachment-deficit and Dissociation Reinforced by Institutional Neglect and Abuse**

**By Simon Partridge, A boarding school survivor**

*"...the ex-boarder is a master of emotional disguise."* (Joy Schaverien, 2011, p.147)

**This paper is based on the talk Simon Partridge gave recently to Inner City Centre psychotherapists and counsellors and therapists from other organisations. As far as we know, this was the first time a former boarding school pupil had addressed a group of therapists and counsellors as a 'survivor' of this type of schooling normally associated with wealth and privilege.**

### Leaving Home at 8

I started my talk by showing a brief extract from the beginning of the TV documentary *"Leaving Home at 8"* (2010) - - directed by Charles Russell for C4 TV's *The Cutting Edge* series which you can watch by clicking onto the 'Video Clips' page on this website.

I chose it because it cannot be dismissed as being dated. It follows the story of four eight-year-old girls - two are twins - as they struggle to cope with their first term at a co-educational preparatory boarding school, the prestigious Highfield in Hampshire.

I felt the opening graphically illustrated the struggle of Sandra, mother of April, to override her maternal instincts of attuned attachment.

In many respects it is a reprise of James Robertson's pathbreaking 1952 film *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital*, which illustrates the effects on a young child of being left alone in hospital, and led to the abolition of this practice.

### A brief history of the diagnostic category Boarding School Syndrome [BSS]

The diagnostic term actually originates with Charles Brasfield (2001), a psychiatrist who worked for many years among the indigenous peoples of British Columbia (BC), Canada. This wasn't accidental because many of them had suffered terribly in residential [or boarding] schools set up, usually under church auspices to "civilise" them. An article titled "Residential School Syndrome" first appeared in the *BC Medical Journal* in March 2001, but drew on earlier versions going back to August 1998 – I think we can say the concept has been around for about 15 years.

The abstract for the article announced: "Many of the suggested diagnostic features are similar to the diagnosis of PTSD, but with specific cultural impact." The work of Brasfield and others provided part of the stimulus for the eventual foundation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] in June 2009 – <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3> .

The effects of BSS in Canada amount in the opinion of some to a cultural and physical genocide in the indigenous populations. It is estimated that several thousand indigenous inhabitants – no one knows the exact number because there are no comprehensive records – died from disease, malnutrition, heartbreak and homesickness in such schools. Our boarding school issues, while very serious [there were deaths here too, as Ian Hislop's recent 3-part BBC2 TV series of October 2012 "Stiff Upper Lip" showed], are of a somewhat different order. I urge you to visit the TRC website (above) and prepare to be deeply shocked. Until quite recently this Canadian work continued largely in parallel to – and unknown to - the work going on in the British Isles.

## Nick Duffell – the British pioneer

Before acknowledging the pioneering work of psychotherapist Nick Duffell, I want to take a look at a moving anecdotal critique from the early 19th C. Here satirist and novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, author of the classic book *Vanity Fair*, describes how he felt as a 6 year old in 1811, on departing for school, alone, in the stage coach of the day:

*Twang goes the horn: up goes the trunk; down come the steps. Bah! I see the autumn evening: I hear the wheels: I smart the cruel smart again; and, boy or man, have never been able to bear the sight of people parting from their children.* (Brendon, 2009, p.9)

Thackeray had been sent to boarding school in England while his mother and her new husband remained in Calcutta for the next three years. “*We Indian children were consigned to a school...governed by a horrible little tyrant, who made our young lives so miserable that I remember kneeling by my little bed of a night, and saying, "Pray God, I may dream of my mother!"*” (1863).

Duffell’s route into working with boarding school survivors was via the Men’s Movement of the mid-1980s, itself a response to the feminist revolution. Here he discovered what he called the “nameless shame” of those wounded by boarding school, himself included, and to his eternal credit as a novice psychotherapist grew curious about it. In his book *The Making of Them* [self-published, 2000], he says: “I began to wonder how such a “survival personality” gets constructed and how it endures for so long...One day one of my clients really hit the nail on the head, saying:

*I became a strategic person, always on the look out for danger and how to turn every situation to my best advantage. I still do it. It's exhausting. I don't know how to stop doing it.*

Duffell writes: “That was exactly it, I thought, it is a “strategic survival personality” that we are dealing with.” [p.10]

Duffell went on to describe the “survival personality” of a man sent away to board at 5½ as being in a “classic double-bind”, on account of his shame at being shamefully treated. He identified a “second double-bind” due to the conviction that “there will be little sympathy because it happened in an institution of privilege, because his parents are wealthy enough to have chosen that for him”. (p.55) Now while these are undoubtedly very painful contradictions, I don’t think they are “double-binds”, at least not in the original sense explored by Gregory Bateson *et al* in the 1950s (1956). Double-binds require two contradictory messages to be imposed on the “victim” [as Bateson called the recipients] in a way that the victim finds it impossible to define the exact nature of the paradoxical situation in which he/she is caught.

I do think that a “double bind” situation does exist in the case of the early boarder, but it is located elsewhere and is of a more painful, destructive and fundamental nature than the ones Duffell identifies. In my view its nature is akin to that of an “emotional-deprivation torture”, and comparable to the “fear without solution” created by the fear-inducing caregiver, identified by Attachment Theory researcher Mary Main (Main & Hesse, 1992).

It is this: There is a continuing attachment imperative in the early boarder, which unconsciously pleads “please, please keep me in close proximity to my primary caregiver; or at least let the separation be of a bearable length, hours, not days or weeks”. However, the mores of upper class culture assume the direct opposite; that it is time for independence and for cutting the apron strings. Pithily summed up by a Mr Woodard, founder of Ardingly public school [and others] in 1858 who said the aim was to, “remove the child from the noxious influence of home and home comforts”! (“Stiff Upper Lip”, part 2)

That is the fate which awaits every upper class child [certainly boys], and one for which they have usually been prepared for long before they're sent off to school – it's the “done thing”. That is the unspeakable [and real double-binds have to be unspoken], double-bind to which every boarding school child is subject.

### Joy Schaverien – hidden trauma of the privileged

Joy Schaverien, a Jungian Psychoanalyst and Art Psychotherapist, and non-boarder, followed in Nick Duffell's footsteps, building on her own extensive clinical work with boarders. In 2004 she published “Boarding school: the trauma of the ‘privileged’ child” – no one had linked “trauma” with “privilege” quite so directly. This was followed by another, more elaborated paper in May 2011, “Boarding school syndrome: broken attachments a hidden trauma”, in the respected *British Journal of Psychotherapy [BJP]*. This stirred up considerable media interest, leading to a headline in *The Telegraph* “Does ‘brusque’ and ‘rude’ David Cameron suffer from Boarding School Syndrome?”, and led to an extended *BJP* correspondence (Standish, 2011, 2012; Duffell, 2012a,b; Partridge, 2012a,b).

Although Duffell had described many features of the traumas associated with boarding, Schaverien was the first, in the British context, to identify a pattern and call it a “syndrome” [she confirmed to me in a personal communication that she was unaware of the Canadian precedent]. I was at the same time working on a similar formulation with regard to my paper on the upper-class psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft, which I called “British Upper-Class Complex Trauma Syndrome: The Case of Charles Rycroft” (2011). Here I extended the syndrome back into Rycroft's familial environment, and identified it for the first time as a “complex trauma” (Herman, 1992, 2001).

Schaverien maintained that “it is not my intention to pathologize all those who attended boarding school” (2011, p.140), But she points out: “For the first time in their life the child may be in a situation where there is no intimate contact; no love. *Even when not mistreated, being left in the care of strangers is traumatic.*” (p. 141, my emphasis)

Like Duffell, I think that Schaverien underestimates the losses and pain for psyche and soma associated with the upper class family and the boarding school nexus. There is considerable talk in her paper about the “self”, as if it is already pretty well formed. But we are not examining here an adult self suddenly impacted by a natural disaster, accident, interpersonal attack like rape or GBH, or horrors of war or concentration camp. We are confronting a child “self” which in many ways is still incoherent, but ripe for influencing or mind control.

We are looking at a situation of continuing extreme stress and neglect and sometimes the sort of outright physical and sexual abuse documented in the film *Chosen* (though one hopes this is less prevalent today), amounting to what has come to be called “complex trauma” or DESNOS, disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified (Herman, 1992). This process, it seems to me now, is more like the radical disruption of the formation of any true self.

Perhaps Schaverien is getting near this when she observes: “The child in the boarding school is bereft because his or her primary attachments can no longer be relied upon; the environment has become unsafe. Later problems arise because, as time passes, the self remains unknown.” (p.142) But for me it seems that self-development or individuation has been arrested and disrupted. The description “unformed” or even “non-existent” seems nearer the mark, and in this way the “self” comes to resemble the “dissociated identity” increasingly familiar to early trauma therapists.

Schaverien devotes considerable space in her paper to examining why there has been so little recognition of BSS in the analytic and psychotherapy communities. The reasons she gives all seem to carry weight to me:

- deference by the therapist in response to upper class “confidence”;
- collusion with the patient/client if therapist is of the same class background; and
- the subtlety of “emotional disguise” [dissociation] which many ex-boarders can deploy after a boarding indoctrination lasting ten years or more [and a family tradition perhaps extending over generations].

However, perhaps we have to recognise two other factors:

The reality that people of this ilk – the “Cameroons” of this world – wield influence and power out of all proportion to their numbers [less than 1% of children attend boarding schools]. Successful treatment of such patients/clients shades into making them “class traitors” to their families, friends and perhaps employers, with all that implies.

The fact that until quite recently we have lacked a coherent conceptual framework within which to address the problem. As the psychoanalyst Rycroft tellingly put it later in his life: “Sharpe [his training analyst] had only been interested in the Oedipus complex and infantile sexuality, and that loss, bereavement, grief – subjects about which I then needed enlightenment – did not enter into her theoretical scheme of things.” (1995). And we still lack, as Schaverien admits, any large-scale psycho-social evidence base – and how we gain access to boarders and ex-boarders for that, I don’t know. This is not true of Canada where, in a different and more extreme situation quite a lot of evidence has been gathered, some immediate, some longitudinal (The Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2003), and much more is being collected by the TRC. Hopefully, with more contact, British researchers and therapists can learn something from this.

At the end of her 2011 paper Schaverien proposes that the “painful experience of boarding...inhabits the shadowy realm of split-off negative emotions”. She recognises that we haven’t grasped the full extent and gradations of this debilitating condition and suggests the need for “further exploration...and a specialist framework within which to consider approaches to working with ex-boarders” (p. 153). I agree with her assessment, and here’s my survivor’s contribution:-

### The Triple Lock

I see the early boarder as subject to a real double-bind or “fear without solution” in triplicate. We could call this a “triple lock” from which it is almost impossible to escape without informed and empathic therapeutic assistance.

**First**, as usually a member of a family where an avoidant attachment style predominates: physical contact is sparse or non-existent, in which emotions are discouraged or inexpressible, where intra-familial relationships are already “detached” or “professionalised” through nannies or au pairs [perhaps this is also a defensive measure which dissipates somewhat the pain of premature separation, which *Leaving Home at 8* illustrates so well];

**Second**, by entry to a pedagogy which removes the child from what elements of secure attachment that might exist – e.g. pets, siblings, nannies/au pairs and familiar surroundings, yet at the same becomes a surrogate caregiver of sorts demanding its own avoidant attachment [hence the often extraordinary “allegiance” to School or Club]; and

**Third**, this “avoidant attachment” is legitimised by, and the norm of, the wider culture of the ruling elite which places power, influence and instrumental control [rationalised as “public duty” – the “Stiff Upper Lip” well demonstrated this] at the core of its *raison d’être*, leaving little or no room for emotional warmth and security [though there is sometimes a false “bonhomie” à la Boris]. Indeed, deviation from “avoidant attachment” in any of the spheres threatens the intricate balance that has been achieved between them, at great emotional cost. “Do not rock the boat” captures this precarious equilibrium – “dissociation” has become *de rigueur*.

As I know from bitter experience, our upper classes by their upbringing and schooling, sadly forego the opportunity to develop a real, sentient and reflective self. Falsity rules and instead there is an instrumental carapace [see “Apparently Normal Personality”, below], which can often function quite well, even apparently very well, in situations which don’t need emotional empathy or which even require cruelty [one only has to think of the appalling crimes committed in the name of Empire and class coercion, and, yes, current “austerity”]. Duffell’s “strategic survival personality” certainly rings bells with me, but doesn’t seem to capture my sense of being a helpless victim nor the vacuous emotional incapacity which goes with the condition.

This functioning-up-to-a-point personality does seem to fit rather well with the “Apparently Normal Personality” [ANP] described in Onno van der Hart *et al’s* paper “Trauma-related structural dissociation of the personality” (2004). This argues that under prolonged trauma [which the triple lock guarantees] there is a structural dissociation in the embryonic self as between what they call the “Emotional Personality” [which holds most of the trauma] and the ANP which continues to deal with the world as best it can. One could see early boarding as a crucial agent of a social system [family, school, and upper class society], by means of which a necessarily Apparently Normal Personality is consolidated and then conditioned to function for its instrumental role in the ruling elite. This paper, which I have only discovered recently in the course of preparing for my talk, is closely argued, rich in evidence and for me threw new light on the function and consequences of early boarding.

Are there other ways of identifying the boarding school personality which resonate? Perhaps we could modify the “Chinless Wonder” into a less eugenic, more psychological, “Mindless Wonder”. Does that describe Chancellor Osborne when he gets up and spouts, without batting an eyelid, without blushing, the ridiculous lie “We’re all in this together”?

### My reaction to non-recognition of my boarding school trauma

What happened to me in 2005, post-analysis, when I first really caught up with my boarding school victim status? To be honest I went fairly ballistic (Partridge, 2007). I felt that not only had I been abandoned by my parents at school, but I’d also been abandoned by the institution of psychoanalysis and my psychoanalysts. I’m still pretty angry, but I hope I’m dealing with it. Recently I found myself another, non-analytic, integrative therapist. We talked, and it helped when he said knowingly: remember the 20 year rule, Simon; every new idea takes at least 20 years to enter the public domain. Well that’s about the length of time Duffell and Schaverien have been on the case. So, from now on I don’t think ignorance can be an excuse.

Positively, I channel my feelings about boarding and growing understanding of its consequences into work with the campaigning and support organisation **Boarding Concern** – [www.boardingconcern.org.uk](http://www.boardingconcern.org.uk) – and by writing about the issues and giving talks. Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (2001) is a sort of bible for me on how to “get over it”. For her, recovery from trauma is largely about building capacity, from a position of safety, to reconnect to self and society, and often groups are part of that. I also belong to a small men’s self-support group which meets every two or three weeks. And I have started a training course

with Camila Batmanghelidjh's Kids Company to gain some skills in working with traumatised kids.

But there's a lot of sadness and grieving, which I think is more difficult to address than the anger. For the pleasures of childhood irrevocably missed – my sister, 13 months younger than me, was sent for full boarding [from 6 she was weekly] at 8, literally 3 miles down the road from my school, yet I never saw her in term time! For the lack of good parenting; for the awful experience of loneliness and abandonment: in many ways our parents became strangers to me and my sister - how awful is that? And for the time lost in taking so long to undo the inner blockages and damage; to shake up those life-saving yet dreadfully limiting avoidant attachment templates. I wish I'd got there at 35 and not nearly 60!

### A few policy thoughts

While we may not have yet grasped the full extent and exact nature of BSS I think it is beyond reasonable doubt that there is a highly disabling psycho-somatic syndrome associated with early boarding, usually compounded by the upper class familial environment and ruling culture. One or two policy recommendations flow from this awareness:-

1. Any therapist [or referral therapist] worth their salt should try and ascertain in a tactful way whether their patient/client has been subjected to boarding, particularly early boarding. They would then at least be alerted to a potentially difficult task, or contraindication, and some of the pitfalls ahead. To what extent one-to-one therapy or group therapy is most efficacious, or indeed a combination - or whether words alone are sufficient to uncover and repair the consequences - remains to be determined in the light of further research and experience. Indeed, psychotherapists/counsellors could contribute to this by pooling their knowledge. As Schaverien points up, they may well be in a privileged position in this respect. There is now a network of informed therapists – <http://www.boardingrecovery.com/contact.htm>
2. A society which promotes early boarding as a desirable and superior form of pedagogy seems on the evidence we now have - and in the light of attachment research and the neuroscience of healthy brain development – to be behaving irrationally and immorally, because it puts the children submitted to such a regime at grave psycho-emotional risk. The evidence seems beyond reasonable doubt, and it follows that the institution of early boarding should be phased out forthwith for those of thirteen or less – a recommendation shared by Boarding Concern. Indeed, this is the norm in most of continental Europe.
3. I would hope that the various bodies which represent the accredited schools of psychotherapy could, at this late hour, find their way to making an informed statement on the psycho-emotional damage caused by early boarding. We have a precedent in the campaigning work which James Robertson and John Bowlby - of which the already mentioned film *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital* was an instrumental part - initiated in the 1950s round the issue of young children being separated from their mums on entry to hospital. Their campaign came to fruition in the 1960s and such medical practice would today be unthinkable. I hope one day, before too long, we will wonder why we ever sent young, desperately vulnerable kids off too boarding school. The Empire has gone!

The victims of boarding school have been “smarting the cruel smart” for an unconscionable length of time! It is high time that victims, survivors, psychotherapists and sympathisers came together in a working alliance to campaign for putting an end to early boarding and prevent this avoidable trauma - and ameliorate the Osborne-like consequences.

## Notes

1. "Stiff Upper Lip" is available on DVD from Wingspan Productions—more information from [www.wingspanproductions.co.uk/index.htm](http://www.wingspanproductions.co.uk/index.htm) . My review will appear in *Attachment: New Directions in Psychotherapy and Relational Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 7 (1), March 2013.
2. *Chosen* (2008), directed by Brian Wood, details the grooming, systematic sexual abuse, and horrific consequences suffered by three pupils at Caldicott boarding school in the 1960s and 1970s. It was first broadcast on More4 on 30 September, and an extract can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=GB&hl=en-GB&v=RipR6yFXD44> [the full film isn't available due to impending legal action] - accessed 21 December 2012.
3. Simon Partridge interviewed on BBC Three Counties radio [17 December 2012] about the emotional damage caused by early boarding. Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/jfoucar/bc-sp-bbc-3cr-17-12-2012> - accessed 20 Dec. 2012.

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