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Shame/Violence Intervention article

When Shame Leads to Violence

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Introduction

Shame and our response to it are fundamental to human culture as illustrated in the early pages of the first book of the bible, Genesis, where Adam's decision to eat the apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil introduces shame into the world and the wish to hide. In the case of Adam's son Cain, he seeks to hide his shame not with fig leaves but with an act of murder. We seek to evade our shame either by hiding (Adam) or by hiding followed by attacking (Cain). Hiding behaviour is shame evasion through fear; attacking behaviour is shame evasion through violence. The solution, as we shall see, is to develop shame awareness and the ability to match the power of others, protecting personal pride and self-respect.

Coping with guilt, while painful, relates to the specifics of thought, emotion and action. Shame, unlike guilt, is global, relating to the whole self and threatening the whole psyche. Shame has evolved to threaten the whole psyche, because the function of shame is to give instant data regarding levels of threat to social bonds (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991) and threats to social bonds are a matter of life and death: we need others to survive. When we develop shame awareness, we develop the capacity to nurture bonds and repair them in 'real time'; we become instinctively aware at the point of violation when a threat to a bond occurs. In contemporary Western culture, it has become shameful to feel ashamed. Individualism has made us deaf to the instinctive alarm triggered by shame. Threatened bonds go un-nurtured and unrepaired; rising levels of violent crime and exclusion are the result.

Shame/Violence Intervention (SVI) is a BACP Innovation Award winning programme developed in prison. For the minority of prisoners who enact violently, emphasis is on punishment and separation; SVI intervenes with this excluded client group to develop client shame-awareness to enable clients to make their own interventions to nurture and repair social bonds, reducing their violent enactment across the spectrum of assault, fighting and threatening/abusive/insulting words/behaviour, increasing their ability to integrate. All participants are volunteers. SVI is particularly popular with Afro-Caribbean British prisoners; research into the reasons why this is the case would be of benefit. The reason most often given by Afro-Caribbean British prisoners themselves for SVI's popularity relates to an experience of family break-up leading to a search for an alternative sense of belonging offered both by violent gangs and, as we shall see, by SVI. Most SVI clients convert to Islam while incarcerated, which indicates the extremely valuable social role played by Islam in offering a front-line alternative to violent gang membership; research into the reasons why this is the case would also be of benefit. Many SVI clients will have come through Care before being locked up in secure units and going on to young offenders institutions before graduating to adult prison. Some will have been prematurely extracted from their young offender institutions to the adult estate owing to their continued unmanageable levels of violence. Prisoners manifesting ongoing psychotic disturbance and prisoners who cannot speak English are not selected. In addition, for their own safety, child sex offenders are never integrated into SVI.

Inhabiting the dynamics of violent gang culture

SVI promotes engagement from an excluded and ongoing violently enacting client group by inhabiting the dynamics of violent gang culture. Instead of separating and punishing prisoners who are currently being violent, excluding them from contact with programmes and with each other, SVI brings these clients together in a confidential setting to talk about anything they want. My acceptance by clients as leader of the SVI programme depends on my ability to facilitate the primary reward also facilitated by violent gangs.

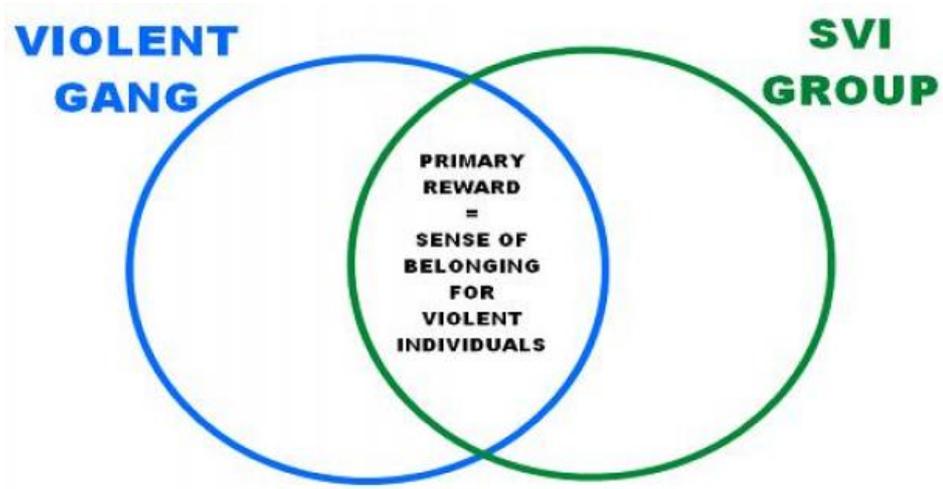


Diagram 1

Gaining a feeling of personal pride and self-respect through having a sense of belonging ranks higher in SVI clients' estimation than any other benefit of violent gang membership, including other likely contenders for primary reward such as money, power or protection. The violent gang leader facilitates the sense of belonging by deflecting the violence of gang members away from each other and himself out onto external targets such as the police, members of the public and rival violent gangs. The violent gang leader evades intra-group escalation and the threat to the primary reward, which includes the threat to his own life, by facilitating inter-group escalation and the creation of victims external to the violent gang.

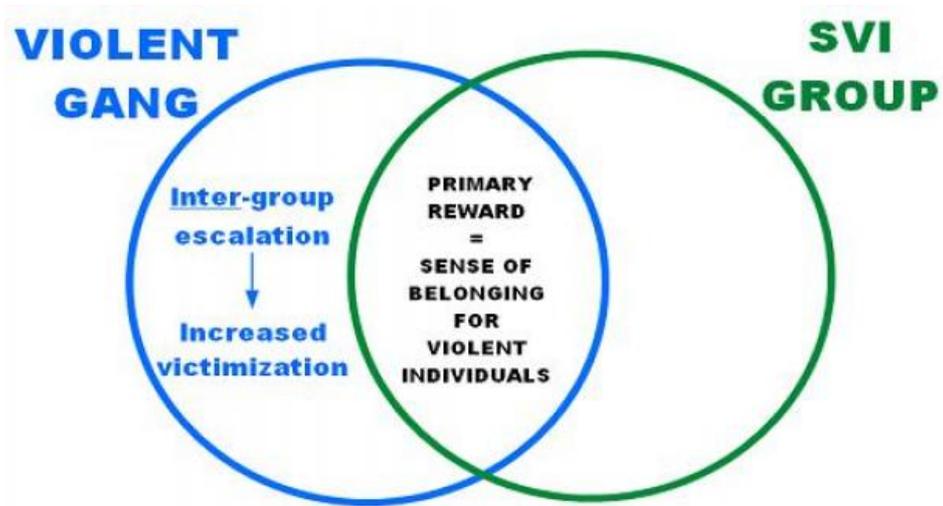


Diagram 2

SVI leadership in contrast with violent gang leadership involves working with intra-group escalation. The SVI client does not have to comply with a behaviour-change agenda pre entry; specifically, there is no ground rule against violent enactment in SVI sessions. The selection for violence, the lack of compliance and the emotional investment in personally chosen discussion material on any topic mean that things escalate in SVI sessions. SVI clients find themselves under intense and genuine pressure to enact violently as part of SVI work. The greatest threat to the violent gang becomes the greatest asset to the SVI group, however, because exposure to intra-group escalation within the SVI leadership framework motivates behaviour change. Working with intra-group escalation places the primary reward under threat, putting SVI group members under pressure to protect the primary reward by following the SVI leader's example, using shame awareness to guide action to achieve de-escalation in real time. Instantaneous emotional processing is key to the safe operation of SVI.

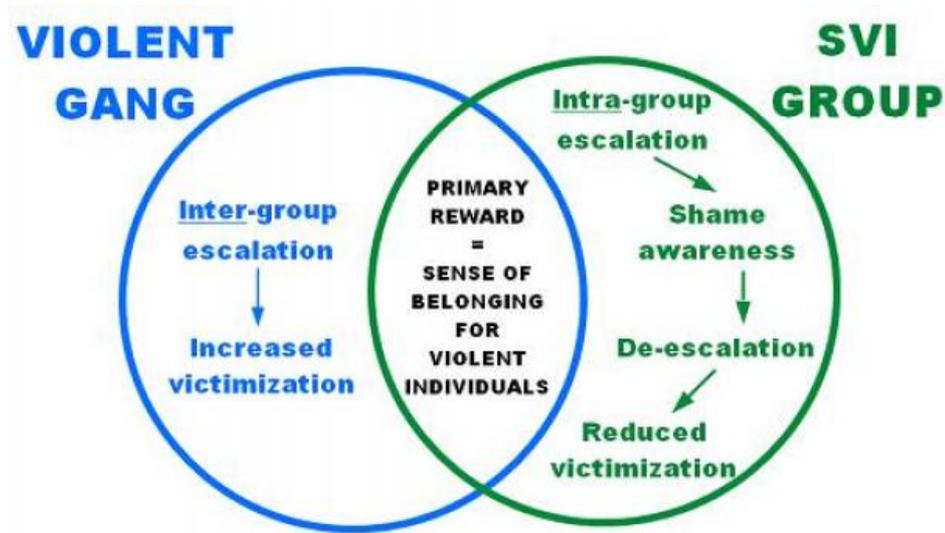


Diagram 3

Matching and sharing power

Developing shame awareness enables clients to become more expert in confrontation, so they learn how to match the power of the person they are confronting instead of having to hide (giving power away) and attack (overpowering). Because his power is being matched, the shaming adversary in SVI is being given a choice: either choose to stop shaming, or choose to take it up to the next level. If the shamer chooses to stop shaming, there is no loss of face, since he is not being forced into his decision by being overpowered; he is making a choice. Everyone wins because the primary reward is facilitated; social bonds are being nurtured and repaired. When a SVI client makes an intervention to match power successfully, the SVI leader shares power. Clients become leaders in their own right capable of delivering the primary reward.

SVI leadership involves informal 'hanging out' with SVI clients; this facilitates the primary reward by demonstrating where the leader's sense of belonging is located. The clinical extract below describes when SVI moves into one of its more structured formats: a group involving up to sixteen SVI clients engaging in discussion where the whole group is involved as speakers and listeners. The main clients featured, who I am calling 'Dwayne' and 'Tyrone', are young Afro-Caribbean British men, who have on their record premature extraction from juvenile to adult incarceration owing to their unmanageable levels of prison violence. Prior to the whole group discussion, clients have been mingling. Dwayne and Tyrone have been talking one-to-one for the first time. They are from different gangs. Dwayne has recently started in SVI and the shared sense of belonging in SVI motivates Tyrone to engage with him.

CLINICAL EXTRACT:

I ask for a discussion topic to start off the whole-group session. Dwayne takes his place round the pushed-together tables and laughs, looking from Tyrone to the group and saying, "Yeah, I've got a topic." My shame level spikes, making me aware of a threat to a social bond - I do not know what the threat is yet, but it feels potent. Dwayne continues to the group: "You know when you've got a chick, right, and she's just given you a shine..." Tyrone freezes; his face hardens. My shame level rises further; I sense that Tyrone is trying to evade shame by hiding. Dwayne is unaware of the danger; inexperienced in SVI, he has yet to develop shame-awareness. Dwayne continues, "Well..." Tyrone stands, knocking back his chair to the floor. Tyrone: "Shut the f--k up." My shame-awareness has allowed me to track the escalation from the point at which the bond was violated; Dwayne, however, is shocked and unprepared. Dwayne has got the shame dynamics wrong, misunderstanding Tyrone's willingness to engage in private conversation as a form of weakness, which is why he is now shaming Tyrone by conveying the impression that he is about to throw their private conversation out to the whole group.

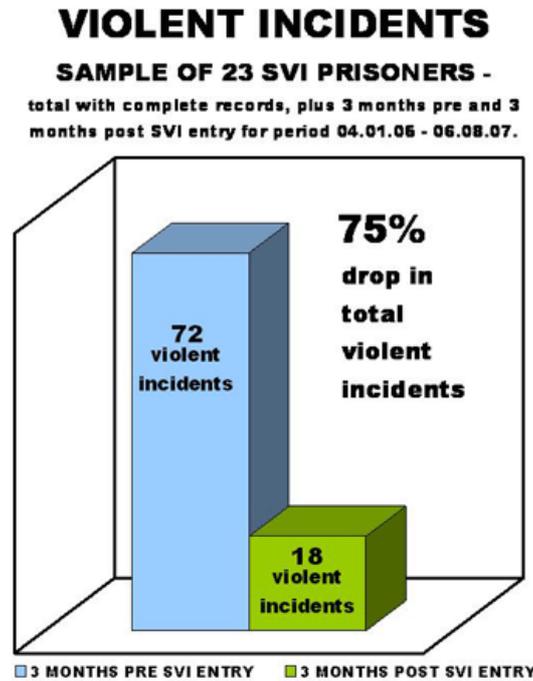
I get up and stand in between standing Tyrone and seated Dwayne. Dwayne: "What?" Tyrone: "I said shut the f--k up." Dwayne now also stands. Fight hormones course through Dwayne's body, making him shake. Without me having to think, my body language matches Dwayne's power; it is instinctive, because I am in tune with my shame awareness: I am at an angle to Dwayne and taking him in with my peripheral vision. To look at him directly, or to stand fully facing, would be experienced as overpowering and force an attack. In matching Dwayne's power, I am sharing my power with Tyrone; this gives Tyrone the support he needs to keep believing in the sense of belonging. Things are stable, but critical. I wait for someone else to come in with whom I can share power.

Errol is in the same gang as Dwayne. As a violent gang member doing a very long sentence, he carries status. Errol moves to Dwayne's shoulder. My shame level goes down, telling me Errol is helping to facilitate the primary reward. Jonathan: "Let's hear Errol." Errol: "No, bruv. Go through." Errol reciprocally shares power with me by inviting me to speak. My shame level decreases further: social bonds are being successfully nurtured and repaired. Dwayne needs all the data he can get to satisfy himself that he is not being shamed by me; his dormant shame awareness is being energized by the session. Jonathan: "Tyrone got angry because it shifted from you and him talking, to the whole group. That's where the shame came in. That's why it kicked off. That's the reason." Dwayne: "Well he's f----g mugged me off. Mugged me off, but you got nothing to say about that, have you? You ain't got nothing to say. You ain't got s--t to f----g say about that." My sense of belonging becomes stronger; my shame level continues to drop: this tells me that Dwayne's forceful and angry words to me are his way of nurturing and repairing the social bond. Dwayne needs to offload.

Jonathan: "Tyrone felt mugged off when you threw your private conversation open to the whole table. That's why Tyrone bit. That's the reason for what happened next. And Tyrone is doing brilliantly well to hold it down. And Dwayne, you are getting involved and claiming space in the group. And that's not easy to do. That's hard. Fantastic work from you too." Dwayne looks around the group, using his energized shame awareness to assess levels of threat. Tyrone sits down and shares power with Dwayne by letting Dwayne look at him and not returning the gaze. Tyrone allows Dwayne to gather all the shame-aware data he needs to guide him into his next move, which is to sit down too. Errol also sits. Errol: "Right, so what's the f----g topic?" Another group member comes in: "I got something..." The session continues.

Results

Independent evaluation carried out between 2006 and 2007, co-ordinated at national level, found that SVI clients take on board learning outcomes directly linked to behaviour change from developing the ability to view the perspectives of others and manage emotions more appropriately, through to developing the ability to listen to others and resolve interpersonal conflict. Quantitative data on prison violent enactment below is consistent with these findings.



Inhabiting not inhibiting

SVI participation is not linked to release from prison. There are ethical issues to consider in relation to programmes where release from prison to a greater or lesser extent depends on successful completion. These programmes may create threatened bonds: everything the client does or says is the object of intense scrutiny with massive consequences. Threatened bonds create shame, which is then evaded by the client in order to engage with the programme he must complete to spend less time in prison. As discussed, the shamed client hides out of fear, which creates pressure to enact violently by attacking further down the line. If these programmes operated in the heat of the moment to test behaviour change, instead of requiring clients to discuss unmet emotional charges, the shamed client might attack in the session itself as the alternative mode to hiding to evade shame. Programmes that are shame unaware are unable to work in real time with escalating dynamics; the risk of violence erupting in the session is too great. Common sense tells us, however, that whether in prison or outside, it is essential to work with escalating dynamics in sessions in order to help clients learn how to deal with escalating dynamics outside sessions.

School-age intervention

Park Campus Pupil Referral Unit in Lambeth, South London, has requested a pilot proposal to make an intervention with a younger age group. I have repackaged SVI as Real-Time for this purpose and I would be delighted to hear from any other interested organizations. The Real-Time objective is to break cycles of disruptive and unmanageable behaviour in order to break cycles of exclusion. Students with disruptive and unmanageable behaviour will learn how to handle their feelings in 'real time', that is, in the heat of the escalating emotional moment, so they develop the capacity to make responsible choices, even when under extreme pressure to behave disruptively and unmanageably.

Conclusion

The culture ashamed of being ashamed is unable to nurture and repair social bonds in the heat of the moment at the point of violation of the bond. Shame evasion causes violence because the client feels compelled to hide and to attack in order to protect his pride and self-respect, defending against the global threat to self posed by his shame. Shame evasion gives rise to reprisal attacks, which give rise to reprisal reprisal attacks, and so it continues. SVI targets an excluded group caught in unending cycles of violence. In SVI, you cannot pretend to possess skills you do not actually have, because this isn't role-play; it's happening for real. Shame triggers are being felt intensely in escalating dynamics as part of the session; clients learn how to tolerate shame and work with it in the heat of the moment. SVI develops client shame awareness to guide behaviour motivated by a desire to protect the primary reward on which pride and self-respect are based.

My motivation for being a leader in this context relates to my own traumatic childhood; from this perspective, the client and I are in search of the same thing: a sense of belonging. Originating SVI and developing it challenges an established order that denies the importance of the social bond, as evidenced by use of imprisonment on a growing scale. The importance placed by SVI on shame and the social bond means it faces ongoing organizational pressure from the wider system to cease operating, despite its award-winning and independently evaluated national status. My response is to broaden the SVI base by making a school-age intervention, which may also provide opportunities for supervised ex-clients to lead their own groups in the future. When shame is tolerated instead of evaded, bonds can be nurtured and repaired in real time.

Feedback at jonathan.asser@btinternet.com is welcome.

Recommended further reading

Braithwaite, J. (1989) *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gilligan, J. (1996) *Violence: Reflections On Our Deadliest Epidemic* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Scheff, T.J. and Retzinger, S.M. (1991) *Emotions and Violence; Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts* New York: Lexington

Appendix 1: Client feedback from Michael

At the age of nineteen I was starred up, which means that I was taken from young offenders to adult prison because of my violent behaviour. It's rare for young guys to get starred up. It's only the worst of the worst, big lads with anger and violent outbursts. To be honest, I felt tough, because no one else my age was in a big man jail. Everyone else had to wait until they were twenty-one. I felt I was feared because even Feltham could not

control me...

You could say SVI acts as a kind of super gang, but in a good way. By that I mean that members from different gangs come together in SVI despite the levels of tension and dangerousness that are there. Many people become Muslim in jail and many people in SVI are like that. I became a Muslim myself in prison. SVI is a great way of working with gang members from different gangs, whether or not they are Muslim. When you come to SVI, you learn how to build pride though being open and direct, honest about how you feel. You build pride by letting your front down and communicating in a direct way in a group where there are other people like you. I mean violent people, feared by others, and very sensitive to shame...

You learn how to be open, so it doesn't have to get to violence, instead of keeping your front up and making the situation worse. In SVI, you learn how to get your pride from different ways instead of through violence. You feel good for being part of the group because you can get things off your chest. And you feel good because you know you have to help with what comes up between people, particularly with people who are not so experienced in the group as you...

And without even realizing it, you start to take the skills you practise in the group into your day-to-day living on the wing. For example, I am single cell high-risk, which means that I am not allowed to share a cell because I might hurt my cellmate. But because of SVI, I am now allowed to bang up with someone else. The person I am banged up with is also single cell high risk, but he is on SVI too. Staff trust us to share because they know that we have learnt to get things out. My cellmate can explain things to me and I can explain things to him. Even small things like leaving washing up in the sink can cause things to go into violence unless you know how to communicate your feelings instead of bottling things up.

If it could ever happen, I would feel very proud to do SVI work in schools one day, giving to kids something I never had when I was at their stage and which would have made a big difference to me.

Appendix 2: Jonathan Asser

Jonathan Asser (BA (Hons), PGCE, MA, MSc) is an Accredited Member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, having gained accreditation working six years as an Honorary Psychotherapist seeing patients individually and in groups within the Psychotherapy Department of Charing Cross Hospital. He is also an Organizational Consultant member of the Tavistock Society of Psychotherapists and Allied Professionals. His is the originator of Shame/Violence Intervention (SVI), which won the 2008 BACP Innovation Award. The BACP judging panel were unanimous in their decision and highlighted the following strengths that were demonstrated within the Award application: 'highly innovative work' alongside 'excellent evaluation and measurable evidence'.

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