

## **They are lost in the wind**

I draw on the work of Creating A Safe Supportive Environment (CASSE), a not-for-profit organization using a psychoanalytic perspective working with trauma in the Northern Territory.

Let me take you to the heart of Australia to the town of Alice Springs. There is said to be a youth crisis – of rampaging, relentless, recidivist crime - which is taking centre stage in the town discourse. Condemnation, rage, suspiciousness, and helplessness, ricochets and is reified into a binary position of us and them. The Aboriginal youth have reclaimed their town at night where currently many dare not tread, save for the police on night patrols; the shops in the town are mostly barricaded with aluminium shop fronts.

One might say the town of Alice Springs is in breakdown. The surrounding MacDonalld Ranges encloses a cauldron of splits and identifications with seemingly dangerous objects, apparently fuelling crime occurring in marauding groups, where excitement and omnipotence may predominate, and the exploding shrapnel of unarticulated projections can find fitting targets for repressed hatred.

Three points made by Symington are helpful here. First, because the youth are deemed to be psychopathic, the responding condemnation, disbelief, and collusion noted by Symington (1980), can manifest in the countertransference and discourse. Second, denial can be employed across the racial and cultural divide, as Symington (1996) describes, to assuage guilt about the awful truth of an internal (and I add external) world, one that heralds a loveless life filled with badness. Third, Symington (1996, p.164) states that with violence, the archaic ego violently smothers the embryonic, emotional mind. For all such individuals, tyrannical, stand-over figures may have replaced loving ones in their internal world. As Symington (1996, p.57) states: 'There is, then, within, a tyrant and a frightened child'

Ninety-nine per cent of youth in detention are Aboriginal, male, and aged between ten and seventeen. Our/CASSE assessments show most have undiagnosed depression and anxiety. These youth are psychologically distressed. They tell us they offend because they “feel scared, stressed, angry, insecure, unsafe, and uncared for, bored or feel nothing at all and some offend just because they are “hungry”. Yes, they are perpetrators, but they are victims too. They tell us they grow up with grog, gambling, hunger, humbug, fights, brothers, and fathers doing jail time or dead too soon. They tell us they “feel guilty and bad for hurting their communities, sad and a little bit worried”. Many of these youth have had parents who are stolen generation, have been placed in child protection and institutional/foster care. These youth cycle through the courts on a regular basis and detention, which is based on a paradigm of punishment augmented with rehabilitation, has become a perverse rite of passage which can lead to adult criminality.

The main offences committed by the youth are property offences: theft- (home and commercial break-ins), vehicle thefts, driving unlicensed, damage to property, and substance usage NOT offences of assault, homicide, or sexual deviancy. In addition, the youth often offend in groups (from the marginalised Town Camps) and the younger ones maybe called upon to assist as partners in crime.

Most offending youth may attract a diagnosis of ASPD, but not at the severe end, and/or PTSD, ADHD, BPD, FASD. I believe, most offenders, do not meet the formal criteria of severe psychopathy. In my experience of working with severe psychopathic mainstream offenders, mostly only those who have committed the heinous crime of murder meet the criteria. In central Australia, despair and not murderousness is central to the countertransference and to the aetiology of youth offending; albeit murderousness ghosts the landscape.

The youth are the heirs to the brutalities of colonisation. Goldflam, an Alice Springs barrister, describes the legacy of anomie coined by Durkheim – which is from the Greek for “no law”,

the Arrernte, *Tywerrenge arrangkwe* – which is to live in despair, without hope, because in that state, there is confrontation of the existential horror of chaos staring you in the face’ (Craig San Roque, 2018, p. 675). Goldflam, cited by San Roque (2018), describes the fate of despair for the youth, mirrored by all, in the justice system. Watson (2009), a cultural boss, elucidates: “A lot of young people live in another culture; it’s not mainstream, it’s not traditional; they are lost in the wind”. Here, the creation of the abject- a non-person- is heralded, invoking an inherently traumatic experience where Perlberg says (2022) an object is violently cast out of the cultural world, having once been a subject. Julia Kristeva (1982) cited by Perlberg (2022) has suggested that the abject is “the place where meaning collapses”. The social pain is real and radioactive in the words of Gampel (2020) and contact with the criminal justice system is manifest in the manifold inequities experienced by Aboriginal youth.

Using a psychoanalytic lens, the impact of transgenerational trauma features in the ‘here and now’ with the ‘there and then’ emerging from the historical fault lines and vicissitudes of colonialism. Volkan’s (2022) concept of the reactivation of a chosen trauma, a collective trauma, referring to the shared mental image of a very traumatic event in a large groups’ ancestors’ history is the quintessential mega theoretical construct, germane to youth offending in central Australia. Related, Schneider (2019, p.1187) describes how the traumatic situation can variously impact, with an overwhelming “too much” where the representational world is violently destroyed or be preceded by a “too little”, an absent resonant object and an ensuing nameless void.

Bringing a psychoanalytic mindset to the inner crime scene of Aboriginal offenders, Keogh (2019) provides key understandings enriched by Symington (1996) and Hyatt-Williams. He highlights the reverberations of psychic pain of unbearable loss and traumatic rejection that cannot be tolerated, the need to kill off whatever is too painful, leading to an abandoned object and a seeking of punishment for criminality, obscuring need, cries for help and quests for hope

under the guise of ruthlessness and despair. It is important to underline that Glasser (1986) in describing the core complex, at the separation/individuation stage, states this is grossly illustrated in the stereotype of the institutionally reared child due to trauma, neglect, and deprivation with the attendant fears of abandonment.

Going farther afield theoretically now, one might speculate that there is a confluence with the 'Not Got' in the external world with the 'Negative' reality of the internal world. I think Ogden's (2021, 845), conceptualisation of 'the negative', referring to a quality of being alive in the realness of what is not there, namely the absence, the gap, the amnesia, the deprivation pervading the entire personality is of the utmost importance. Quoting Ogden here, 'The gap, the death, the nothing is what feels real and alive (2022, p.844)' to the youth offender and forms a potentiate to crime.

Ogden (2021) has described Winnicott's work on the 'moment of anger' (I add cumulative moments) in relation to maternal absence where the loss may be addressed and mitigated. However, if the anger is not expressed it will always carry the potential and the fear of violence. Ogden says the object of the feared violence is not the dead mother but the child/person. When the anger is expressed, and the negative is experienced, there can be a question that surfaces- "And what will you do about it?" and I think this question is fundamental to the criminal enactments by indigenous youth in the justice system.

I conclude with the contentious, but nonetheless compelling, opinion of John Silvester (2022), a journalist on the fatal shooting of *Kumenjay* Walker which perhaps offers a kind of denouement:

"*Kumenjay* Walker (an Aboriginal youth from Yuendumu, Central Australia) was the victim of a thousand injustices and more than 200 years of cultural oppression. Zach Rolfe (the

policeman) had to deal with the consequences in a little over three seconds. We loaded the gun. He just pulled the trigger”.

There has been a turning away by the dead Mother (Green, 1999) country, if not psychopathic country, from the youth in crisis. Symington (1996, p. 108) speaks of the crisis catalysed by an emotional knowing about self/country that has been hidden now to be revealed. Symington (1996, p.165) says the origin of violence lies in guilt. He says to quote “The more we understand guilt and the way it comes about in the mind, the more chance we have of arriving at its measures that are prophylactic against the eruption of violence in our society” Symington (1996, p.49, p. 38,) speaks of the need for mental courage, imagination, and emotional curiosity for understanding mental pain and if actualised, the good spirit of the youth may be found and not lost in the wind.

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29 October 2022 for N. Symington Conference November Sydney APAS

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