

The prenatal and perinatal roots of a later disposition towards violence

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Introduction. A variety of studies in the field of traditional criminal psychology have shown that people who commit acts of violence have had a difficult childhood and youth. Violent experiences, a broken home and a lack of positive opportunities for identification are particularly significant (Füllgrabe 1997). There are a number of observations in modern psychotherapy showing that problems begin even earlier than was previously thought (Karr-Morse and Wiley 1997). Prenatal experiences of being unwanted, in particular, determine the basic pattern of dealing with emotions and the tendency towards particular types of action (Janus 2001, 2002a). Case studies in psychotherapy have recently received convincing support from the results of research in the field of development neurobiology, demonstrating that the prenatal environment plays a role in determining the type of synapse formation that occurs (Hüther 2002). In addition, empirical studies have shown that people who experience violence before and during birth have a tendency towards violence later in life (Kandel and Mednick 1991; Raine 1994; Verny 1997).

Moreover, it is significant that the difficult childhood environments described by criminal psychologists do not provide individuals with sufficient opportunity to work through traumatic early experiences. The people they relate too are usually traumatised themselves and not fully developed, and destructive, aggressive experiences are thus repeated. It is important to note that the majority of unfavourable primary experiences are lived out in self-destructive forms of behaviour and psychosomatic symptoms and that only a minority lead to open acts of violence. The one-sided combination of being unwanted and experiencing violence at an early stage of life appears to be crucial here (Raine 1994). There is even the possibility that there has been an attack on the prenatal child by an abortion attempt, that has been survived. Under unfavourable circumstances this can reenacted by the adult through an act of terrorism (Sonne 2000).

The overall social milieu in which young people grow up and its values and conflicts are also significant. During childhood and youth, the family and the surrounding group are initially important. The patterns of behaviour and values displayed here have a formative influence on children; in a dissocial milieu and under unfavourable conditions, their scope for development is limited. During puberty, young people try to find their place in society. Here, a society's conflicts and values are significant for the individual's further development. In historical societies, military and aggressive attitudes were considered an important ideal in young men, while this changed in democratic

societies during the past century towards the ideal of the non-violent resolution of conflicts. Imagined or real emergencies within a society can also promote the tendency to deal with conflicts using violence.

It is important to note here that the collective conditions of early socialisation play an important role in a society's disposition towards violence. The excessively harsh conditions for children in Central and Eastern Europe formed in the last century a context that made these societies unable to manage the transition from a monarchistic and theocratic to a democratic form of society in a peaceful manner (DeMause 2001). In the same way, the violent conflicts in Yugoslavia in the transition from dictatorship to a more democratic form of society are rooted in the very difficult and harsh conditions that prevailed for children, particularly in central and southern Yugoslavia (Puhar 2000). The problem of the early roots of a tendency towards violence later in life is therefore made up of various aspects; these will be discussed in the sections that follow.

The conditions during early life for people who turn into murderers

The connections between prenatal stress and later criminality have been dramatically illustrated in the conversation protocols published by Balthasar Gareis and Eugen Wiesnet (1974):

"When I was in the third month of the pregnancy with Anton, I wanted to get married. When my father found out – I was seventeen at the time – he became absolutely furious and beat me. I could not get married because the man was unacceptable to my father. ... From the moment he knew I was pregnant, I did not have another quiet moment. When I came home late in the evening and he realized that I had been with Anton's father, I was unable to sleep the whole night long because he had abused and beaten me so much. I would cry the whole night. I even tried to take my life at that time but I did not find the courage to do it because I remembered my child. ... In the time before the birth, I became so nervous that I would begin to cry over the smallest thing. ... Finally, it got to the point that even Anton's father didn't like me anymore because I let myself get so rundown. ... Anton's birth was the worst experience of my life. After his birth, his left arm was paralysed. ... When I was breast-feeding him, I cried all the time so that Anton began to cry as well. Anton was often ill. He was restless, nervous and very easily frightened. ... My other two children are completely different. But during the pregnancies with them, there weren't any unpleasant events. Nowadays I think that the pregnancy is the most important time in the life of a child. Anton has a good heart. He didn't want to murder. It is not his fault that he is the way he is." [p. 16]

As a boy, Anton had occasionally attracted attention in school because of his diffident attitude, irritability and his unpredictable behavior, everything from self-mutilation to massive aggression.

"When he was seventeen, Anton brutally murdered a sixteen-year-old girl. He killed her most cruelly by multiple strangulation, choking her for a few minutes at a time. Anton committed the crime without any emotional excitement. ... His personality disturbance can be seen in heightened irritability, tendency to mistrust and jealousy. In addition, he has moods which can rise to exhibitions of suicide. Anton reacts in a peculiar way to unusual stress and opposition in his surroundings. On the one hand, he shows the tendency to get his way at any price and on the other he avoids difficulties, is undecided and becomes sentimental." [p. 15]

Here is a second report about a 16-year-old youth called Uwe who committed robbery with grievous injury to the victim. The mother's statement:

"Actually it all began in the pregnancy. After I realised that I was pregnant with him, I went to the doctor's and just couldn't believe that I was going to have another child. My husband was also so disappointed because we only had a small apartment. You just wouldn't believe how unhappy I was about the pregnancy. I was so nervous and at the end of my tether. I was sometimes dreadfully unhappy and felt such anger towards the baby. Sometimes I even thought about abortion but that would have been so unjust. I was so nervous at that time that it showed in my face. I actually got a twitch which stayed for quite a while. Even today, when I get nervous, as, for example, when I heard about the crime, the twitch starts up again. The agitation must have had an effect on the child. He was very weak after his birth and nearly died. That's when I felt a deep pity and looked at things differently. Then he could not tolerate my milk, drank badly and most of the time vomited everything out again. As a result he hardly put on weight and was often ill. He permanently had fever, sore throat and pimples. I just don't know where that came from. He was so nervous and restless that he stayed well behind in his development. ... You can still notice to this day that he is unquiet and uneasy. ... When he is nowadays agitated, then his eye always twitches. He always gets into a rage so quickly. Both of these he got from me during the pregnancy. The other three children are completely different. ... But despite everything, Uwe isn't to blame. If only I hadn't got so upset when I found out that he was on his way." [p. 18]

I imagine that some crimes are in a way the living out of prenatal suffering and agony, as if the hellish dream described above were put into practice. This always presupposes that the pre- and perinatal trauma could not be cleared up in the time after birth. In Germany, the now famous case of Jürgen Bartsch, who murdered children in a cave, bears the traces of the reactivation of an abortion trauma, a prenatal experience that is deflected onto the victim through sexual perversion. Bartsch reported that he used to hallucinate a crime many times

before he carried it out (see Förster 1984). The information about the beginning of his life is sparse but does not exclude the possibility of all sorts of negative experiences. He was born outside of marriage: "He remained in a clinic during his first year of life. His mother, who in any case did not want to have him, died shortly after his birth" (p. 21).

Empirical studies on the early stages of life of violent criminals

The connection between early experiences and later acts of violence has been particularly well demonstrated for the tendency towards violent behaviour in individuals who experienced a difficult birth with medical complications (Mednick 1971; Kandel and Mednick 1991). The decisive aspect in early experiences of pain and violence leading to a disposition towards violence later in life is the fact of being unwanted, as the study by Raine (1994) shows. This also fits with observations made in individual cases. If a child is unwanted or its mother is not psychologically and emotionally fit for motherhood, the child can only form a relationship using the "fight or flight" pattern and a destructive form of defensive behaviour.

This connection between being unwanted, experiencing problems in forming primary relationships and having an unusually difficult birth is present in almost 100 per cent of violent criminals (Kandel, Mednick 1971). Here, too, it should be remembered that even if conditions are unfavourable in that a child is unwanted and experiences violence early in life, the child will not usually become violent; however, he or she will usually live a limited life hampered by a lack of self-esteem, neurotic and psychosomatic symptoms and social problems (Häsing, Janus 1999; Levend, Janus 2000).

The history of risks at the beginning of life

In historical societies, pregnancy and birth were associated with a high mortality rate. Shorter (1984), in a summary of several mortality statistics, found an average mortality rate of 1.3 per cent in women giving birth and calculated an overall rate of maternal mortality of 8 per cent for women giving birth before the nineteenth century. Perinatal mortality rates among children were always high too, and combined with infant mortality in the first year of life, about a third of children did not survive these dangers. The beginning of life was therefore an extremely dangerous period for mother and child and was thus associated with basic fears, as shown by the superstitious measures that accompanied birth (Gélis 1989). A study from Yemen, where maternal mortality today is still as high as it used to be in Europe, showed that women in these conditions feel very insecure and are scared of giving birth (Kempe 1994). Even for those who coped with them and survived, these risks were often associated with a great deal of

suffering and insecurity. Thus 50 per cent of infants in Bavaria died of malnutrition around 1900 (Ottmüller 1991).

In addition, all social disasters, such as famine, war and disease, always hit mothers and children in the early stages of life the hardest. I believe that this distress in the early mother–child relationship is partly responsible for the low status of women in history. These difficulties at the beginning of life are no doubt one reason why relationships between parents and their children were impaired and impersonal during the Middle Ages and early modern times, and for the harshness in the way children were brought up and the tendency towards violence at that time, as reflected in the endless series of feuds and wars. The growing social and economic security of later modern times took the pressure off early mother–child relationships in Europe and the United States. This led to better relationships between parents and their children, and these relationships have become increasingly personal since the end of the eighteenth century up to the present (Shorter 1986).

We often fail to realise today the extent to which the "normal" way in which infants and children were treated in historical societies undermined their sense of security. This becomes tangible if we recall that infants were left to cry and put down and children were beaten, methods that were widespread in Central and Eastern Europe well into the last century. Another indication is the book written for young mothers (Haarer 1940) that was still very widespread in Germany in the middle of the last century; its lack of empathy and the inflexible attitudes it reflects document how the education of children in Germany was marked by feelings of insecurity and of subjugation of the child right from the beginning.

A fundamental change has taken place here over the past few decades towards a more relationship-based way of dealing with pregnancy, birth and infancy. A parallel development has been the emancipation of women during the past 200 years towards more equality and greater self-determination. Sound knowledge about the basic needs of infants and small children and, more recently, of children before birth has only developed in the western world in the course of the past few decades (Chamberlain 1998, Janus 2001; Verny 2002).

The pressure caused by the way that cultural traditions dealt with pregnancy, birth and infancy can be better judged in this context. In doing so, it becomes clear that early socialisation in many cultures is marked by considerable stress, and opportunities for development are thus limited. DeMause (2002b) compiled some of the difficulties that exist in the Arab world. Particular factors here are the low status of women, the circumcision practiced on men and women, the widespread domestic violence and the distance in children's relationships with their father. Children are largely expected to conform and submit, and their individual opportunities for development are thus limited. This results in considerable tension between the Arab world and the individualistic values of

western societies, tension that forms a backdrop to the events of 11 September (Janus 2002b).

The beginning of life and the formation of cultural ideals

As a result of research in the field of psychoanalysis during the past century, we are now aware that the quality of relationships between parents and their children shape children's values and dispositions. Something that was not realised to such an extent at that time is the degree to which basic values concerning relationships and behaviour are communicated to infants and small children in our actual dealings with them and are thus transferred to them. This also applies to our dealings with the unborn child and our emotional relationship with him or her. It is here that the foundations are laid for the child's self-esteem and the way it views the world; whether it feels at home and safe in the world is essentially determined by whether it felt safe and "at home" in its prenatal relationship with its mother.

For our purposes, what is decisive here is that these primal feelings are not only transferred to the parents and the family, but to society as a whole later in life. The values of a society are directly reflected by the conditions of primary socialisation. This can be seen particularly clearly in small tribal cultures: dealings with infants and children are directly interconnected with the values and rituals of the tribal culture (Erikson 1966). However, relevant observations can also be made in larger societies. Thus, as mentioned at the beginning, we can assume that the harshness of upbringing and of dealings with children in Central and Eastern European countries was an essential factor determining the strictness and hierarchical nature of these societies and their tendency to resolve conflicts by violent means. We can also conclude that the democratic developments that have taken place in the course of the past century are interrelated with improvements in conditions during childhood. As already mentioned, certain aspects of the general disposition towards violence in earlier times can be better understood if we consider the excessively harsh conditions that prevailed for children (DeMause 2001). The same is true of the period of transition in Yugoslavia (Puhar 2000). This results in two levels of political influence. A society's capacity for peace can be promoted by improving mother-child relationships and relationships between parents and their children and by developing collective values. Influence has to be exerted at both levels.

Concluding remarks

One of the aims of this paper is to draw attention to the interconnectedness between primary socialisation and the way individuals live as adults later in life. In terms of individual psychology, the experience of being unwanted and of violence before, during and after birth leads to a disposition towards violent

behaviour during situations of conflict and stress later in life; in terms of collective psychology, insecure mothers and children who are left alone and who lack a feeling of security in their primary needs will later help shape the social climate within the family and within society as a whole. In historical terms, it is significant that early mother–child and father–child relationships were impaired to a much greater extent by distress, ignorance, hunger and war than is usually realised (DeMause 2000; Nyssen and Janus 2002). The transition from monarchistic and dictatorial forms of society to democratic societies corresponds to a major improvement in early relationships between parents and their children. This suggests that humans have a pro-social attitude by nature and that this can take effect under favourable, non-stressful conditions. The disposition towards violence in historical societies is closely connected with the difficulties and traumas that occurred during primary socialisation, as we can now tell from our more extensive knowledge.

This leads to very clear perspectives for action. The promotion and improvement of primary socialisation and support for parents-to-be are important and effective instruments to improve the capacity for peace and for dealing with conflicts in our societies. It seems to me to be crucial that this insight into the significance of relationships, maternity and parenthood should be taught in schools much earlier than it is at present. Our schools should not only be places where children are required to perform, but where they can prepare for life. Successful relationships and lifestyles as parents require a long period of preparation.

In terms of healthcare policy, it is important to actively approach parents-to-be from socially disadvantaged milieus and not to wait until children show behavioural disorders or adolescents begin to commit crimes. Here, too, it is clear that there is huge scope for interventions at the beginning of life to promote positive development.

Our countries are still living within the tradition that truly significant conflicts between societies are ultimately solved by military means. We may no longer have ministries of war, only ministries of defence, but what we really need are ministries of peace to promote the political developments between and within societies with the instruments of non-violent conflict management. The means to do so have been developed in the democratic institutions and in the modern social sciences (Ottmüller 2002). In politics, we need quite different psychological, psychosocial and sociological advisory and planning bodies in order to run through the psychodynamics and sociodynamics of political decisions and to develop guidelines for the implementation of targets. During the past few years, psychohistory has begun to provide ways of doing this (Janus, Kurth 2000; Kurth, Rheinheimer 2001; and Ottmüller, Kurth 2002; DeMause 2002b).