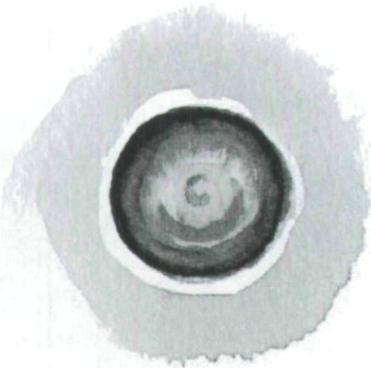


VIOLENCE: ACTUAL AND IMAGINED REFLECTIONS ON MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF RESEARCH

Jane F. Gilgun, Ph.D., University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

For more than 20 years, the author has done research on the perpetrators of violence and on persons who are at risk for violence but who lived law-abiding, pro-social lives. In this narrative, the author describes her gradual understanding of the meaning of violence to perpetrators.



I spent many years talking to men who had committed violent acts. Most were in prison when I interviewed them; others had served time and were living in communities. I wanted to understand what violence means to perpetrators. I also wanted to understand why some men become violent and others with similar risks do not. To do this, I interviewed men who were at risk for being violent but who had not inflicted great harm on others and were law-abiding. To extend the comparisons, I interviewed women who were also at risk for violence, as well as some who had committed violence.

The people I interviewed taught me a lot. For example, I learned about resilience or how people cope with, adapt to, or overcome risks and adversities (Gilgun, 2009, 2008b, 2006, 2005, 2004a, 2002a, 1999a, 1999d, 1996a, 1996b, 1992, 1991, 1990; Gilgun & Sharma, 2008; Gilgun, Klein, & Pranis, 2000). Some people experience hardships—such as long-term abuse and neglect during childhood and the teen years—and still manage to live productive lives. Persons who showed

resilience told stories of suffering and courage. Many became advocates for other people and served in battered women's shelters, self-help groups, and in lobbying efforts for policy changes.

Their stories inspired and enlightened me. I came away from those interviews full of admiration for their persistence, courage, and determination to use their experiences to make life better for others. I was also angered at the abuse and other hardships they had endured, which made me more determined than ever to contribute to making things better. On a personal note: my listening and learning helped me to see my own resilience, and to appreciate the persons who had loved and cared for me during my childhood and teen years.

Their stories taught me many other things, such as what can happen when children and teens do not have attachments of love and care. When they do not get help and comfort when distressed and hurting, or when there's no one to help them sort through a whole range of positive and harmful ways of dealing with risks and adversities (Gilgun, 2009, 2006, 2002b, 1999a, 1999c, 1998a, 1988; Gilgun & Sharma, 2008; Gilgun & Abrams, 2005; Gilgun & Connor, 1990). When they are exposed to models of violence day-in-and-day-out from their families, communities, and media (including videos, television, computer games, and the internet). When they don't receive messages that show them they can get respect and attention through acts of consideration and kindness.

Vulnerability and Dysregulation

Other learnings were ideas of vulnerability and dysregulation (Gilgun, 2008b; 2006, 2005; Gilgun, Jones, & Rice, 2005). Persons who had experienced adversities and risks had vulnerabilities; that is, they had what I eventually called “soul wounds” and “hot buttons.” When these persons are stressed, their soul wounds may be activated, much like hot buttons being pushed. They are then set up to relive many of the emotions and thoughts associated with the original adversities and traumas. These are painful, chaotic states that can lead to dysregulation, where thoughts, emotions, and behaviors become confused and agitated. Heart rates and breathing accelerate. Thoughts of being bad and unlovable, self-hatred and self-contempt, and fears that the dysregulation will last forever are typical signs of these chaotic states. Some people also experience dysregulation as physical pain—similar to being dropped into boiling oil—or have various somatic complaints, such as headaches and shortness of breath.

Dysregulation is intolerable. Persons do many things to re-regulate; that is, to restore themselves to comfortable and composed states. After many years of interviewing, I slowly came to see that persons have four general ways of coping with dysregulation (Gilgun, 2008b; Gilgun, 2005; Gilgun et al, 2005):

- **Pro-social.** Persons who activate pro-social efforts to re-regulate do not harm themselves or others and sometimes enhance their quality of life and the quality of life of persons who are there for them. Examples of pro-social ways of coping are: confiding in other people; writing in journals; looking for ways of being useful and kind to others in order to get some affirmation and to feel good about one’s self-worth; doing something enjoyable and energetic such as dancing, riding a bike, and going for a walk; and meditating on something pleasant.

- **Anti-social.** Persons who use anti-social efforts to re-regulate engage in behaviors that harm others

and themselves or threaten the well-being and even the lives of others. Examples are: picking on someone else; taking out anger on someone else or on an animal; and driving angrily and recklessly. Some people develop elaborate fantasies about themselves as powerful creatures who can do what they want, when they want, to with whomever they want. They are the heroes of their own fantasies. They feel powerful and in control. Often acts of extreme violence have a long-term build-up of fantasies that are like movies with plot lines and climaxes and denouements.

These attempts at re-regulation are short-term and eventually become part of the problem that individuals had wanted to solve. They are harmful and sometimes pathetic ways of gaining control over inner chaos and of restoring a sense of self-worth. Ultimately, anti-social ways of coping with dysregulation are self-defeating because persons whose violence stems from dysregulation typically feel remorse after harming another person. I refer to persons who act out violently while in dysregulated states as “reactors,” because they are highly reactive to chaotic inner states.

- **Self-destructive.** Some people act in ways that harm themselves. Examples are: over-eating; taking drugs; getting drunk; gambling; and cutting oneself. Each of these acts temporarily relieves the painful states of dysregulation, but the underlying mechanisms that lead to dysregulation are unaffected. In fact, these short-term solutions may become part of the dysregulating mechanisms themselves, though the intent of the persons who behave this way is to make themselves feel better and to restore themselves to a sense of sanity and safety.

- **Inappropriate.** These are behaviors that do not harm the self or others, but are inappropriate, such as

“zoning out” and not paying attention at school, in families, or in peer groups, or humming or singing to oneself while another person is talking.

When dysregulated, persons usually consider or use all four of these strategies, but one style typically dominates. For example, for persons with pro-social styles of coping with dysregulation, thoughts of kicking the dog may flash into mind and be discarded immediately. Having a bowl of ice cream or going shopping might be considered and even indulged in. Finally, the person finds someone to talk to, goes dancing, or phones an uncle in frail health to see if he wants to go grocery shopping (or may do all three). Individuals may behave in some anti-social or self-harmful behaviors along the way to pro-sociality.

Gender, Violence, and Ideology

Gender plays a role in styles of coping. Although members of both genders may engage in all four types of behaviors, men are overrepresented in the acting out, anti-social styles of coping. Women are overrepresented in self-destructive behaviors. Overall, most women and men engage in pro-social ways of coping with adversities. However, in terms of numbers of arrests and convictions for acting out violent felonies, men outnumber women by more than nine to one.

I also learned that some violent acts have nothing to do with misguided attempts to cope with the effects of adversities and nothing to do with dysregulation. Some men are violent while in regulated states (Gilgun, 2009). Their violence is their way of getting them what they want, plain and simple. They have internalized stereotypes and beliefs of what it means to be a man, and they act as if these meanings give them permission to do whatever they want, regardless of how their behaviors affect others.

I also learned that some women enact the worst aspects of female gender socialization, and hurt other people simply because it is something they want to do; it gives them pleasure. These cruel and sometimes violent behaviors occur when persons are in regulated states. They do not result from efforts at

copied with dysregulation, emotional pain, and other effects of adversities.

In some forms of violence, therefore, I have concluded that soul wounds and hot buttons are not at issue. Both men and women internalize gender stereotypes and beliefs that become part of internal working models of themselves, others, and how the world works. These working models, which can be considered inner representations and cognitive schemas, become guides to behavior.

Like those who act on their violent beliefs, reactors, when they are in dysregulated states, typically have recourse to internalized working models based on gendered stereotypes. When stressors “push” hot buttons and these internalized working models are activated, then reactors fall back upon gendered stereotypes and beliefs they have internalized. They then are at risk to harm self and/or others.

My Naiveté About the Meanings of Violence

It became apparent that I couldn't have been more naïve about understanding the meanings of violence to perpetrators of both types: the reactors and the ideologues. (For examples of what violence means to perpetrators, see Gilgun, 2008a, 2004b, 2002b, 1999b, 1999c, 1996c, 1995; 1994; Gilgun & Connor, 1989; Sharma & Gilgun, in press). I was able to handle stories people told me about being victimized, as haunting as their experiences may have been. What the perpetrators shared about their violence was sometimes so far outside of my own experience that I didn't understand much of what they had to say. I was frequently stunned into silence. Many of the stories I heard are still beyond my understanding. Yet, some of their tales gradually made sense when I was able to see my own dark sides in their stories.

Here's an example of a story I didn't understand when Stan (not his real name) told it to me, and I still don't understand it today. A woman told Stan, “I'll do anything” for a hit of the cocaine she had seen Stan share with three other people in the room. He told her to have sex with his white German shepherd. She did. Stan said:

It was like I was God and the white leader or whatever. All these people were laughing and making comments. It was like I made this happen. It wasn't just her and the dog itself. It was like them other people, too.

As he talked, he laughed and waved his arms around, as if reliving what for him was a glorious time. The woman. The dog. The appreciative audience. The degradation. Stan gave me what I asked for: an account of his violence from his point of view. I was appalled, and had no idea how taking advantage of a desperate woman could be a peak moment, comparable to being God. That was not my idea of God. However, I got what I wanted, which was his account of a violent act, but I was confused and horrified. I didn't "get it" and still don't. He felt powerful, but for me it was a despicable type of power, based on taking advantage of another person.

Seeing Myself in Some of Their Narratives

Some stories that mystified and horrified me later made some sense. I saw a piece of myself in them. One day Charley (not his real name) convicted of beating and raping his wife, talked over his reactions to other prison inmates who offend him:

At times when somebody's done something around the [prison] unit, I'll say to myself, and these are my exact words: "Fucking dickhead, you have no idea who you're even saying that to. I could rip your skull off." That sense of power is inside of me. It's always there, okay. That sense of power is there that says, you know, you know how powerful you are, okay. When you feel a little bit threatened, okay, sometimes that will pop up. I go, (chuckle), I go, "Listen to you," you know. Those will be my exact words. "I have to listen to you. If you only knew." I'm sure there are guys in here who have no idea and no matter how many times I've told them or talked about it, I don't think they have any idea who they're dealing with.

I didn't identify then or now with the ferocity of his words, nor with the certitude of his willingness to use violence. What I eventually saw in myself was my enjoyment of the violence I commit in my imagination, just as Charley and so many of the other men I had interviewed had raised their own spirits by imagining themselves committing violent acts. The difference between me and perpetrators is that they acted out their violent thoughts.

Here's how I discovered my own enjoyment of my violent imaginings. One bright winter day as I drove to work on the highway, another driver pulled in front of me in order to exit. I quickly looked in the rearview mirror and saw that I had space to brake and did so. I avoided hitting the other car with my front bumper by what seemed to be inches. I was first terrified and then enraged. I felt as if the other driver thought I didn't matter, that I didn't count. In my mind, he thought he could do whatever he wanted and get away with it. I let loose a string of curses. As I did, I laughed, bubbling over with the power of my display of aggression. Next I imagined ramming his car with mine. Then I had an image of the other driver bloodied and dead and myself with broken bones. The violent images and words disappeared. I laughed again, this time at how ridiculous I was acting. I drove on to class, relaxed.

The whole incident took seconds, but in that time, the dark side and the more healthy side of my personality activated itself. I don't think I would have been able to describe my own violent imaginings had I not heard prison inmates describe over and over again what went on in their minds before, during, and after they committed their violent acts.

Listening intently and opening myself up to their words revealed to me my own dark side. Until I started this research, I never acknowledged the violence that I sometimes commit in my mind and how much I enjoy it. I also never considered the automatic responses that stopped me from acting on these violent images. I never worried that I would act on these violent images, and I never have.

Differences and Similarities Between Me and Persons Who Act Out

I am different from the persons who act out the violence they imagine, but I am also the same in my mind and heart. The difference between me and those persons is that I experience automatic responses that prevent me from carrying out my imagined violent acts. When my hot buttons are activated and I conjure up violent responses, my mind moves swiftly to the dire consequences. I realize how ridiculous I am being. Images of consequences that hurt others and myself dissolve the violent images. My aggressive displays and their ridiculousness cheer me up. I don't want to maim them or kill anyone, or hurt their families and friends.

What I am describing is one kind of resilience as process. There are many other resilience processes, but the automatic activation of thoughts and images that dissipate my violent thoughts is a protective process. I have hot buttons that activate my own inner violence, but so far my protective processes have stopped me from acting on them.

I also realize that when I display aggression and enjoy it, I'm puffing myself up; like a gorilla banging his chest to scare other gorillas and attract an audience of females and young gorillas who want to be like him. Images of violence serve the same purpose for me that they serve for men who act out their violence. I momentarily feel giddy with power. Thoughts of what I could do if I felt like it restore my spirits for a second or two. I even feel a sense of relief when I laugh at myself for being so ridiculous.

I have been a reactor in my heart and mind, but I have noticed in the past several years that I rarely have these responses any more. The research helped me realize that I had them in the first place. I could then deal constructively with the violence in my own heart. I gradually found that automatic violent thoughts decreased when I felt demeaned. I might even be less vulnerable to feeling demeaned.

The Absence of Protective Processes

Here's the story that illustrates what happens when automatic responses do not

dissolve the enjoyment of imagined violence. Charley enjoyed imagining, threatening, and committing violent acts. Like Stan and many other men I interviewed, he reveled in the admiration that he got when he was violent. When he was depressed and angry, fighting made him feel better. He'd go to bars to pick fights. When he woke up in the morning, he got another charge. He said:

I've woke up in the morning with my lip hanging out here, the side of my jaw this big [puts hand over left side of face] and my eyes swollen shut and my nose broke. I'd have my friends come over, and we'd yuck it up. "Hell of a fight, wasn't it?" Somehow I was a man then, you know.

On occasion, I, too, have enjoyed talking about hurting others, and sometimes even believed that others enjoyed themselves when I told them about it. I may have had an imaginary audience as I cursed at the driver who cut me off. Yet, who in my life would ever approve of my displays of aggression? It had to be someone way back when I was very young, because I do not remember anyone who would have admired that behavior except perhaps the little boys with whom I had played from about age three to age seven or eight.

I have observed the enjoyment of movie audiences when they view violent film images. Maybe that was an influence. Maybe the rage and complaints I have heard women share with other women influenced the development of my inner violence. Maybe the venting that women did was a way of connecting emotionally with other women.

Sometimes I had an actual audience for my displays of imagined aggression. I considered this venting as a way of getting rid of anger and often used violent language, though I had no intention of committing violence. During the years I was interviewing, I had some friends who didn't vent about their men by using violent language. They drew back from me when I began to vent in this manner, so I learned to curtail my expression of anger in their presence.

The last time I vented using violent images in my speech, a man in my life was not doing what I wanted. I thought he was tossing me out of his life. I told a friend that I'd like to punch him in the nose, kick him in the butt, and jump all over him as he lay writhing on the ground. I enjoyed telling her, and the telling lifted my spirits. I didn't mean a word of what I said, and I thought she would think my words were as ridiculous as I did.

Instead of laughing with me, she looked frightened. She was taking me seriously. I stopped and told her that I would never do anything like that. It was just talk. She didn't seem convinced. The realization that someone else might think I meant to harm another person pulled me up short. I never shared a violent fantasy again. When something pricks me, and I start thinking about a display of aggression, I divert my negative energy to something more constructive. In other words, I now avoid sharing my violent fantasies with others and, when they are activated, I divert my attempts at re-regulation to something prosocial. I no longer want to enjoy my display of violence.

Charley, on the other hand, did not divert his aggressive imaginings elsewhere. He frequently experienced a "prick" to his heart, which I interpret as a hot button whose activation leads to dysregulation. This is how he described the "pricks:"

I see myself as a great big heart [holds out hands to show the size of his heart]. Got a picture of this, the heart being this big, okay. I see times when somebody comes up and tries to poke that heart and I get relatively mad. Okay. And then I see sometimes when my heart actually gets punctured. Then I get angry and rageful. In most cases in my life, the person who got hurt is me, you know, but in other cases I got tired of hurting me, and I wanted somebody else to pay, you know.

He wanted his wife to pay when he thought she was having an affair with another man. He beat and raped her in front of their four year-old daughter. His wife begged him to stop, and he daughter screamed and cried in the corner of the bedroom. He said:

Let's put it this way. When I quit swinging at her [he paused for two seconds] I was so exhausted that I thought I was going to pass out. I couldn't breathe.

After he beat his wife for "two minutes," he "wanted his sex." He raped her. When he woke up beside her the next day and saw what he had done, he said he was more concerned about what would happen to him than what he had done to his wife and daughter. Charley told me that he knew the difference from right and wrong and good and bad. "I chose the bad," he said, "because it made me feel better." He expressed regret for raping and beating his wife and traumatizing his daughter. He'd do anything to fix what he had done, but it was unfixable, he said.

Impact of Violent Narratives on Me

I was unprepared for the impact these stories would have on me. One time, after listening to Alan (not his real name) describe his murder of his two toddler sons, his fiancée, and an unrelated woman (Gilgun, 1999b), I had lunch with a friend. As I struggled not to tell her about the horror of this interview, I had what could've been an out-of-body experience. I felt myself shoot up into the sky like a helium-filled balloon and saw my friend and me sitting at the round outdoor café table. I finally told her a bit about the interview and then said I wouldn't know until later whether I had been traumatized by the interview. I wrote in my journal a few days afterwards:

By the next day, I knew I was. . . . [I didn't finish the sentence.] I was working at the computer. The program must've been very complex because it took the computer about 15 seconds to respond to every command. I was getting angry because I had to do this and I also had [to go to a social gathering]. I had several flashes of pounding and kicking the computer. I cried and I yelled, and I was hoarse for the night.

I didn't touch my computer because I didn't want to break it. At the social event, I saw two old, dear friends, whom I told about my upset. They comforted me in a sympathetic, but humorous way. Seeking and

receiving comfort are part of my automatic responses to stress. Luckily, my primary response is pro-social.

What to Share? How?

Over the years I've done this research, I felt like the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's poem of the same name, wanting to grab people by the arm and tell them my terrible tales. I managed to hold back on telling these stories to unprepared audiences nearly all (but *not* all) the time.

Interviewing men who had perpetrated violence was a descent into hell. The descent came in stages. I didn't stay there, though I still go back periodically when a story propels me back. I was never confused about the horror of violence. That was clear and unambiguous. I was never confused about my will to do something to stop it.

For several years on and off, I was confused about how to share what I knew about violence. For example, I wanted to write a book containing a comprehensive theory of interpersonal violence for years and made many attempts, all unpublished (Gilgun, 2000, 1999d, 1998, 1996c). I would tell myself and others that I'm a slow learner. I didn't have a coherent way to talk about what I knew. I had waded into something I did not understand, and it was taking me an enormous amount of time to grapple with and organize what I was learning.

Sometimes I said stupid things. One example is a comment I made to a woman who herself had been raped and had become a well-known advocate for changes in policy and practice around rape. I had said, "I ruined my life for people like you." I was trying to communicate the irony of my situation; namely, that to make life better for others, I had put myself through misery. The humor fell flat for both of us because as the words flew out of my mouth, it sounded as if I were blaming her and other survivors of violence. Another example is a story I told to an audience of seniors about a burglar's invasion of an old woman's home. Upon observing the fear in their eyes, I realized that I had terrified them, not enlightened them.

Sometimes when I talked or even wrote about the stories told by perpetrators, I experienced waves of rage and disconnection. I suspect I sometimes was in a dysregulated state, but other times I simply did not know how to make some sort of intelligible whole out of what I'd heard.

Many times I began writing a book on violence (Gilgun, 2000, 1999c, 1998, 1996c). My attempts were disconnected pieces of a puzzle that I couldn't properly fit together. I did write many articles that told parts of the story, but I couldn't weave together the tapestry that embodied the sum of what I had learned.

I did not and do not want to sensationalize violence. The stories that haunted me would have been sensational. To publish a sensational book would have betrayed the persons who had suffered so mightily from violence and would do nothing to prevent violence. I wanted to write a book that gave a constructive view of violence so that persons who wanted to change things could use what I have learned.

Some Shifting and Integration of My Personal Understandings

Over time and with great effort, I gradually integrated what I had learned about violence into how I had previously viewed myself, others, and how the world works. For me, if there is a balanced, constructive, accessible view of violence, this would involve showing the meanings of violence and how these behaviors develop. Balanced, constructive, and accessible accounts include the hopeful, inspiring stories of people who in many ways should have been violent and weren't.

I thought that comparing the pathways to violence with the pathways to resilience would put the horror of violence in a framework that would enlighten others and give them material they could use to do something constructive about violence. I wanted the solutions to violence to be obvious in my telling of what I have learned over many years.

To understand violence as I do today, I also did a great deal of reading in such fields as developmental psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, gender development,

critical discourse analysis, and philosophical readings on human will and free choice. My present understanding represents an integrated understanding of violence—what it means, how people develop violent behaviors, and the factors that move people away from committing violent acts.



Pathways Toward Understanding Violence

In summation, the stages of my learning about violence were as follows:

- shock and horror
- search for a framework to understand with some success what I was hearing
- appreciation of the persons who had risks for violence but who overcame these risks
- identification of the processes people use to cope with, adapt to, and overcome these risks
- identification of the processes I used to cope with, adapt to, and overcome adversities and risks for violence in my own life
- “in the bones” appreciation of the persons who loved and nurtured me in good times and bad;
- “in the bones” understanding of what violence is
- identifying my own dark side in some but not all of the stories
- confronting and letting go of my own slights, losses, and traumas
- profound empathy for what victims had experienced
- emotional availability to the stories of horror that perpetrators told me
- gradual integration of my new understandings into how I view myself, other people, and the world
- struggles about appropriate ways to share what I had learned about violence

- doing a great deal of reading and reflection in order to help me interpret and understand these stories of violence and stories of successful coping

- developing an integrated way of understanding violence that can lead to constructive responses to prevent violence and to transform the lives of those at risk.

I did not progress in an orderly way through these stages. Instead, I moved back and forth between them, and the order shifted. What is important to me today is that I think I have found a way to share these terrible tales in ways that will lead to constructive solutions.

Final Thoughts

I have learned a great deal about the development of violent behaviors, the meanings of violence to perpetrators, and how persons overcome risks for violent behaviors. I am in the midst of reflecting upon issues such as how the violence in our own minds and hearts plays into violence that some people actually commit.

I realize now that listening to these stories of violence helped me to become aware of my own internalized violence. I have processed my internalized violence and have let go of most of it, although I will not let myself forget that violent thoughts and images are within me and presumably in other people as well. It seems impossible to be part of this culture and not to have internalized violence. My hope is that what I have learned will make a constructive contribution to the understanding and prevention of various forms of interpersonal violence. I have a lot of thinking to do.

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Jane F. Gilgun, Ph.D., is a Professor at the University of Minnesota, School of Social Work. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: jgilgun@umn.edu.

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