

**BOARDING SCHOOL SYNDROME: BROKEN ATTACHMENTS A
HIDDEN TRAUMA**

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to identify a cluster of symptoms and behaviours, which I am proposing be classified as '*Boarding School Syndrome*'. These patterns are observable in many of the adult patients, with a history of early boarding, who come to psychotherapy. Children sent away to school at an early age suffer the sudden and often irrevocable loss of their primary attachments; for many this constitutes a significant trauma. Bullying and sexual abuse, by staff or other children, may follow and so new attachment figures may become unsafe. In order to adapt to the system, a defensive and protective encapsulation of the self may be acquired; the true identity of the person then remains hidden. This pattern distorts intimate relationships and may continue into adult life. The significance of this may go unnoticed in psychotherapy. It is proposed that one reason for this may be that the transference and, especially the breaks in psychotherapy, replay, for the patient, the childhood experience between school and home. Observations from clinical practice are substantiated by published testimonies, including those from established psychoanalysts who were themselves early boarders.

Key words: attachment, boarding school syndrome, child development, trauma, loss, prep schools, public schools, psychotherapy, transference

Introduction

Tom was 6 years old when he arrived in a preparatory boarding school. He was taken there by his parents and his little sister. This was exciting; a very grown-up event for which there had been much preparation. It was confusing because there were teachers and other boys milling around. His parents were with him, and then he suddenly realized that they, and his sister, were back in their car. Uncomprehending, he saw the wheels of the car turning and he realized with horror that they were driving away. The bottom fell out of his world. Now he realized what it meant to be left at school. He felt alone in the world; deserted by his family.

'Tom' is now a man but, in psychotherapy, he recalls this moment as if it were yesterday. We will return to Tom's story later.

This article^{1,2} is an analysis of some of the enduring psychological effects of boarding schools on those, like Tom, who attended them. Whilst boarding might be considered to be a privilege, early boarding can cause profound developmental damage. The wisdom of the time-honoured tradition of the British

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Establishment, of sending very young children away from home to boarding schools, is therefore questioned. The psychological impact of this socially condoned, early rupture with home has a lasting influence on attachment patterns.

In normal development the 'good enough'³ family adapts with the child as he or she grows. For the child in boarding school this process is reversed; the child has to adapt to an inflexible system. The consequence is a form of psychological splitting in which the child becomes apparently self-sufficient. This armouring, initially acquired to save the vulnerable child from further insults to its autonomy, may result in a lasting cluster of symptoms and behaviours which I am identifying as '*Boarding School Syndrome*'. These patterns are observable in many adult psychotherapy patients with a history of early boarding.

I did not myself attend a boarding school; my interest developed from observations from clinical practice. In my private practice, like many of my colleagues, I repeatedly witness the blight this experience has cast on the lives of many of the adults who come for psychotherapy. These adults are from different generations; some were boarders in the 1950s, others in all the decades to the 1990s, and sometimes I see a current boarder.

In previous publications on this topic I have explored clinical issues relating to men who have boarded (Schaverien, 2002, 2004). Traditionally children are sent to prep schools at 6 or 8 years old but it is not unusual to meet those who went as young as 4 or 5. Whilst, historically, the majority of early boarders were boys, a significant number of girls were also sent away early. Therefore this paper includes the experiences of women. Through my clinical practice I have come to realize that a number of people from apparently privileged backgrounds were, in effect, 'looked after children'. The term 'looked after' here has a double meaning. Children whose families break down are sometimes taken into foster care; in the social care system in Britain, these are called 'looked after children'. Such children are often from economically deprived backgrounds and there is little alternative to this intervention. The initial impression would be that there is little comparison with the child from an affluent home. However, a child living in boarding school is also a 'looked after' child. They spend many of their formative years in institutional care and are, in effect, fostered with strangers. The parents of children in the social care system are often reluctant to let their children go (this is evident from the much publicized custody battles in the press, as well as observations from clinical practice). The boarders' parents choose this form of care for their child and pay a great deal of money for it. In both situations the child experiences loss of attachment figures and the distress of being 'looked after' by strangers.

When boarding schools are discussed the parents' and teachers' voices are often heard but not the children's. For many boarders it is only as adults that they can begin to recognize and then articulate their experience and, for some, the first time they do so is when they engage in psychotherapy. The purpose of this paper is to address the impact of early boarding in the light of developmental theory and to consider why the depth of this trauma may, at times, pass unnoticed in psychotherapy. My wider project is to differentiate the psychological impact of boarding on children at different developmental stages. This is

beyond the scope of this article so the focus here is on early boarding and the latency child. Latency is the developmental period, from the age of roughly 5 or 6, until the onset of puberty. A further planned publication will address puberty; this is when gender differences become significant and the respective experiences of girls and boys may become more marked.

Boarding School Syndrome

Syndrome is a term usually applied to a collection of symptoms related to disease, but it is also a combination of opinions, emotions or behaviours. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definitions: *Syndrome*: '1. a group of medical symptoms which consistently occur together. 2. A set of opinions or behaviour that is typical of a particular group of people.'

Although Boarding School Syndrome is not a medical category, it is a cluster of learned behaviours and discontents that follow growing up in a boarding school. The need for theory leads me to seek such a definition but it is not my intention to pathologize all who attended boarding schools. However, people who present for psychotherapy are often those for whom boarding school was an unhappy, if not a traumatic ordeal. It would be a misunderstanding to limit any one person to specific symptoms, as its manifestation in each case is different; it is the *pattern* that is discernable. The aim is to alert practitioners to common, identifiable elements in the psyche of those for whom early boarding ruptured their primary attachments and who had to adapt to growing up in an inflexible system. The *pattern* may replay in a number of subtle ways, including the re-enactment, in the transference, of the boarding school/parent dynamic. Boarding school is rarely the presenting problem as the traumatic nature of this early experience frequently remains unconscious. The ex-boarder might present with a generalized sense of depression – a history of broken relationships, marital or work related problems. They may only gradually become aware that aspects of their distress originate in the losses and broken attachments of their early childhood.

The cluster of learned behaviours and discontents that result in what I am calling Boarding School Syndrome revolve around problems with intimacy. Whilst appearing socially confident, the ex-boarder may find intimate engagement threatening. This is a pattern well known in couples' psychotherapy where one partner, often the man, attended boarding school and is unable to talk about his feelings. The person may make deeply dependent relationships and then suddenly emotionally or, actually, abandon the loved person (Schaverien, 2002). This cutting off from emotional need can be experienced by the partner as a violent attack or abrupt rejection. This often replays in the transference and may lead to the sudden termination of analysis when the rage associated with dependency begins to surface (Schaverien, 1997).

The data on which this article is based is drawn from observations from clinical practice. Since Freud's early findings, case studies have been the evidence on which much psychotherapy research is based (McLeod, 1994, p. 103; Roth & Fonagy, 1996, p. 49). In that tradition I am drawing on more than 20 years of witnessing these patterns in numerous clients who have attended

boarding schools. I have also worked with the siblings, usually girls, who stayed at home whilst their brothers went away to school; the effects on sibling relationships are often profoundly disruptive. These observations are substantiated by a wealth of data accumulated by the psychotherapist, Nick Duffell. Over the last 20 years Duffell has conducted workshops for those he calls 'boarding school survivors'. He has identified many common patterns in adults with a history of early boarding (Duffell, 2000).⁴

Traumatic Losses

Early boarding is a traumatic event in the life of many young children and its psychological impact affects the core of the personality. The sudden loss of attachment figures (parents, siblings, pets and toys) causes the child to protect itself. 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. There are no words to adequately express the feeling state and so a shell is formed to protect the vulnerable self from emotion that cannot be processed. Whilst appearing to conform to the system, a form of unconscious splitting is acquired as a means of keeping the true self hidden. Duffell has identified this as 'the strategic survival personality' (Duffell, 2000, p. 10). The child then makes no emotional demands but also no longer recognizes the need for intimacy. The self begins to become inaccessible; 'Boarding School Syndrome' develops. This may continue as an unconscious pattern into adult life. Psychological splitting is a well-known reaction to trauma (Fonagy, 1991; Kalsched, 1996; Wilkinson, 2006, 2010). In Boarding School Syndrome the memory of the losses and the associated rage are repressed and only surface later, very often within a marriage or subsequently in psychotherapy.

The initial loss is compounded by its *repetition*. As the pattern of term time, at school, and of holidays, at home, becomes established the child is unable to settle in either place. For those whose parents live abroad the child is effectively homeless. For others, during the holidays, there is the return home and school can be temporarily forgotten; but all too soon the packing starts again. Even as adults many ex-boarders find packing very difficult and it may come as a revelation to make the link with this childhood memory. This pattern is inevitably replayed in psychotherapy because the regular breaks evoke a similar pattern of attachment followed by absence. The transference around breaks is a time for particular vigilance (Schaverien, 1997, 2002, 2004).

Developmental Perspectives

Disrupted early attachments may permanently affect the ex-boarder's investment in intimate relationships. The loss of home and family, alongside the social conditioning of school routines, impinge on the relationship between psyche and soma. Many report the longing for their mother and, in her absence, especially in all boys' schools, the need for a female/mother figure. Temporary respite could be found in being ill for a few days and sent to the sanatorium where matron presided. Homesickness is therefore an appropriate term. The child who misses home becomes physically sick. This pattern was noted by Patrick Kaye (2005) in

his role as a GP working for 18 years in a major public school. Children presented with various ailments which he established were attributable to homesickness.

There is increasing evidence to demonstrate that the bond with the primary caretaker influences the baby's physical as well as psychological well-being (Gerhardt, 2004; Lanius, Vermetten & Pain, 2010). Bodily functions of the growing child, as well as the baby, are managed by the mother, or primary carer. The too early loss of this intimate connection may distort the development of relatedness and the ability to move confidently into the world at the appropriate time. Moreover, a child who is perpetually vigilant has little space for symbolic play. In boarding school there is little time for reverie and the life of the imagination may therefore suffer.

Bowlby was an important and, for a time, a lone voice in emphasizing the importance of attachment in early life (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). However, there is now much published research into the importance of the reciprocity of the infant and its environment (Lewin & Trevarthen, 2000; Stern, 1985, 1988; Trevarthen, 2009). Applying systems theory, Beebe and Lachmann (2002) argue that the attachment between a baby and its mother is a bi-directional system; each plays a part in influencing the other. Their approach in psychotherapy with adult patients is informed by this: 'Particularly at the non-verbal level, mother and infant, as well as analyst and patient, participate in a moment-by-moment coordination of the rhythms of behaviour' (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002, p. 25). Their infant research leads them to argue for mutual influence, rather than separation-differentiation, as the prime tasks of analysis. This is relevant for considering the approach to the treatment of ex-boarders as, with them, working with attachment in the analytic present is essential.

Michael Fordham's work is pertinent to the effects of early boarding. Like Beebe and Lachmann his theoretical formulations were founded on infant observation and are applicable to the latency child, as well as to adults in analysis. Fordham developed Jung's concept of the self through infant observation, realizing that there is a nascent self present from the beginning of life. He proposed the terminology 'integration and de-integration' (Fordham, 1967; 1985, pp. 50-63) for his observation that the baby was already: 'integrated - a person distinct from his mother' (Fordham, 1985, p. 50). He noted that, in the waking state, the baby de-integrates; that is, opens out, complains if uncomfortable, smiles, feeds and so evokes a response from the maternal environment. When sufficient stimulation has been obtained, the baby withdraws and returns to rest, reverie or sleep; integrating into the self. If the mother is depressed, or otherwise unavailable, the baby will adapt, making fewer demands, but, if all goes well, the infant gradually develops a sense that he can trust the environment. This is the foundation of the capacity for reverie and imagination.

The baby, and later the child, is an active participant in its emotional growth, mirrored through relationships that continue from infancy and into latency. This is the point; if the latency child is sent away to school before he or she is ready to leave home, psychological development is likely to be distorted. The child in a 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. Therefore, whilst apparently professionally and socially successful, the ex-boarder is troubled without understanding why.

In a family, influence is reciprocal; its members change in response to the needs of the growing child. Integration and de-integration is therefore a process that embraces the wider environment. At boarding school this is reversed; the child has to conform to survive. Inflexibility is threaded throughout school life; lack of privacy extends to eating and sleeping, which take place *en masse* and at times that suit the institution. At night, lights are put out at a designated time, irrespective of what the child is doing. In some schools, in the past, lavatories had no doors and showers were taken communally. The tradition of fagging, in boys' public schools, meant that junior boys were compelled to be available as servants for the older boys – which condoned bullying as a privilege of age.⁵ A child, in a strange institution, where the rules are unknown, is tense and on guard. There is little opportunity for reverie or integration, and de-integration is to the institution. Therefore, whilst independent and intellectual thought are encouraged, emotional autonomy is not fostered.

Learning to Conform

There is little published research or psychoanalytic literature about the enduring psychological effects of boarding school, apart from Duffell (2000) and Schaverien (2002, 2004). Several personal accounts have been published in the journal *Attachment*, and one by Simon Partridge (2007) was followed by a theoretical discussion by Annie Power (2007). However, sociological research was conducted in the 1960s by Royston Lambert (1968) and John Wakeford (1969). Vyvyan Brendon (2009), a historian, has traced the history of prep schools across two centuries through the written testimonies of children. There is not space here to do justice to these texts but it is important to acknowledge them. In each, the approach is even-handed and the psychological damage of the system is implicit. It is my project to make it explicit.

Two documentary TV films reveal the psychological suffering of children who board. In 1994 Colin Luke (*The Making of Them*) filmed 8 year-old boys during their first term in preparatory school. The viewer observes the psychological conflict taking place in the mind of each child who, ignoring his intuitive feelings, speaks words he has been told (i.e. that school is good for him). It is evident that their emotional experience contradicts the explanations given by their parents and teachers. The beginning of acculturation is evident in the psychological gymnastics that the child performs in order to believe what he has been told. This film, like the books, witnesses the children our patients once were. It demonstrates the source of the problems which sometimes emerge in psychotherapy. In *Chosen* (Channel 4, November 2008) four men, in their 40s, talked about the sexual abuse to which they were each, individually, subjected by masters to whose care they were entrusted, in the same school. Their lasting sense of injustice, anger and injury is evident; psyche and soma remain profoundly affected. All admit that they could not have disclosed the abuse, nor made the film, whilst their parents were alive. This is the tragedy of exposure to

such maltreatment in an institution in which the parents have placed their trust; it is impossible (except in very rare cases) for the child to tell the parent. The child is ashamed, feeling culpable for the humiliating experiences to which they were subjected, and this cannot be articulated, even many years later. Boarding School Syndrome is thus established; the true self remains hidden and the child is unknown to the parents and so is, in effect, lost.

These films give weight to the importance of being alert to this form of psychological suffering in children, as well as in adults, who seek psychotherapy. Although boarding schools are claimed to have improved, many of the same problems including, in some cases, extreme bullying, physical assault and sexual abuse, continue in the so-called 'best schools'.⁶ Often these cases are only known about by the few people involved and do not reach the public arena. Psychotherapists may have privileged access to this information.

The First Days at Prep School: The Threshold

The emotional impact of the first days in prep school is often repressed. The memory may return in psychotherapy, as it did with Tom, described earlier. The awe with which a small child approaches such a socially valorized institution may be encapsulated in the image of a formidable entrance (described by Paech, 2009). This is often followed by recalling a first moment of realization; of perceived parental betrayal. Instead of the special place that has been promised, what looms ahead is exile. The loss is so total and the child so unformed that there are no words adequate to convey the feelings. It is only as adults that words can be found to describe this moment of realization. This moment is vividly conveyed by Roald Dahl (1984, p. 79) and Andrew Motion (2006, pp. 93–101). Partridge describes 'the rising tide of feeling' as he relived this, 'the threshold' in one of Duffell's workshops. He became aware that his parents, his sister and 'the familiarity of our farm-life were about to vanish as I crossed, irrevocably, into the domain of my prep school in 1955' (Partridge, 2007, p. 310). This is a man remembering the experience of his 8 year-old self 50 years after the event. This is a familiar story; as psychotherapy begins memories of such events flood back into consciousness. In order to survive the pain of this moment of loss many shut down, emotionally; this is the genesis of Boarding School Syndrome.

The Unprotected Child: Philippa's Story

The loss and bewilderment are compounded by exposure to danger. In order to convey this, I will give instances of the first days at prep school remembered by two of my psychotherapy clients. The first is 'Philippa'; the second is 'Tom' with whose first day at school the article began. Their stories are very different but each reveals the subtle ways in which the innate capacity, in the young child, for trust may be eroded.

There are those for whom the threshold is not such an extreme experience. For some children there is an excited anticipation of joining the world of older siblings. Very often the imagined thrill is quickly deflated as the realization of the endless stretch of time ahead, before there is contact with family, dawns. Philippa, at first, talked about her school days with humour. She seemed

generally to have had a good time at school and she had made lifelong friendships. At 50 Philippa was married with three children, who were nearly grown up. The youngest of four sisters, she was impatient to join her older sisters at school; she had been lonely at home without them. She was well prepared as she knew the school from visiting her sisters. The first day she was excited and remembers arriving and seeing all the other little girls crying. She was 9 and she did not understand why they were crying. This is unusual in that the transition from home to school was apparently gradual. Philippa had always considered that school had been fun and she had not suffered bullying. That was until she started to remember an initiation to which she was subjected:

As she talked, she realized that she had not previously remembered the first year dormitory, which she shared with 10 other girls. She mentioned, in an off-hand way, an ‘initiation’ to which she was subjected in that dormitory: she was stripped naked and hit with slippers by the other girls.

Recounted in this way it was quickly told. There was no emotion and Philippa would have left the story at that if I had not asked her to pause and think about what she had just said. As she thought about her 9 year-old self she began to remember how frightening this incident had been. Thinking about her own children, and about how small they were at that age, helped her to have empathy for the child she had been. Her children had attended day schools and she had never considered sending them away; she now began to appreciate why. She recognized that she had completely blocked the memory of that first-year dormitory, remembering instead, her second-year dormitory. This had been much smaller and shared with just two girls whom she liked. Moreover, she was already used to living at school by then.

This is what happens; acceptable words such as ‘initiation’ are attributed to behaviours which would otherwise be deemed completely unacceptable; a new script is written in which these behaviours are condoned. The law of the mass is accepted and a blind eye turned to it by staff. This child was exposed to the abuse of her peers. This was followed now by another memory; again of an ‘initiation’:

Philippa was encouraged to climb a tree and then was tied up in it. The other girls were jeering and laughing at her. She did not understand why.

These incidents were bullying but dignified with a name that made them part of a social norm. To complain about such abuse is to risk the scorn of the group and therefore the potential for increased bullying. If it is endured, with apparent good humour, the person is then considered a ‘good sport’ and accepted as one of the group: an ‘initiate’. This is how Philippa had coped and she had not admitted, even to herself, the shock and humiliation of being treated in this way. Ignoring the pain and shame is a common way of dealing with such incidents but it also has the effect of subtly eroding the person’s attitude to themselves. The wounded and vulnerable part of the self remains hidden, safely encapsulated, where its truth is concealed from conscious awareness. This is a common and lasting effect of early trauma (Kalsched, 1996; Wilkinson, 2010). Although glossed over, an incident like this is often traumatic. It is made worse because there is no one to whom it can be recounted so the child has to cope with it alone.

Bullying occurs in day schools too. The difference is that, despite the upsetting nature of such events, the child returns home in the evening and so there is a refuge, a place away from the bully. Even if the child cannot speak of it most parents notice and are concerned if the child is apparently upset. For the boarder there is no respite and no one in whom to confide. The natural instinct may be to tell but there is no one to listen. This may compound the sense of having been abandoned and contribute to a devastating realization of being alone in the world.

Philippa maintained a positive attitude to life and was generally successful. She was good at sport and so she fitted in socially. She used humour and, as she put it, being naughty, to deflect from her loneliness and from potential trouble with her peers.

It was only now, as an adult, that she realized how her relationship to herself had been affected; as, she put it, she spent nine years of her childhood in an environment where she was looked after by adults who did not love her. This encouraged the development of a stance where she seemed, apparently, emotionally unaffected and self-sufficient. In common with many ex-boarders her vulnerability was hidden, even from herself. This is typical of the way the boarding school child comes to deal with such events: and it is how Boarding School Syndrome becomes established.

Philippa's first two analyses had lasted for a number of years but did not address the painful aspects of boarding. It seems that the analysts had been misled by the deflection of the boarding school persona, accepting the superficial version of her school experience. The transference may have replayed the way in which Philippa had glossed over the experience of school with her parents. When she returned home for the vacations she did not recount the incidents of bullying. She had learned to be independent and, along with her older sisters, she gave her parents and herself, at the same time, the happy version of events. Rather unsurprisingly this was replayed in the transference in her first analyses. It was only when she sought a third analysis, for apparently unrelated reasons, that her attention was drawn to the ways in which she deflected from her own suffering. It was persistently pointed out to her when her concern for others masked her own distress; eventually, as she began to notice it, the pain associated with her memories of boarding emerged.

For Philippa boarding had been anticipated as an adventure, and it was only after arriving that the reality of its loneliness dawned. This indicates the problem of the current trend to consider that the child is involved in the decision to choose boarding over day school. Often children as young as 8 or 10 are shown the school by their parents and given the 'choice' to go there or to a day school. However, for small children, until they are left alone in the school, there can be no real understanding of what boarding means.

The Hidden Trauma

In professional papers and case discussions, boarding school is frequently mentioned in passing but, as stated earlier, there is little psychoanalytic theory about

its lasting psychological implications. Moreover, the full traumatic impact of early boarding sometimes remains hidden in psychotherapy. This is curious as in my practice, as well as those of some of my colleagues, a high percentage of people presenting for psychotherapy attended these schools.⁷ It is possible that analysts and psychotherapists take this damage for granted, as a sort of by-product of a system of privilege in education, which is so familiar that it hardly merits comment. The boarding school child, as we have already seen, learns not to complain.

Whilst there is little psychoanalytic theory, the biographies and autobiographies of well-respected psychoanalysts contribute to understanding of the lasting effects through discussion of their own boarding school experience. Wilfred Bion (1982), writing in the later years of his life, recounts the story of his childhood with wonderful dry humour. He was brought to England, from India, to boarding school at the age of 8 and his family returned to India. He traces the rest of his childhood in this lonely and mysterious world. Bion has the gift of being able to convey the bewilderment of a small boy growing up in a boarding school. With acerbic wit he comments on the absurdity of the situation without being explicitly critical. John Bowlby's (1973) emphasis on the importance of attachment in child development supports our discussion, and it is significant that he was unambiguous in his repudiation of the tradition of sending children under 13 away to boarding school. Bowlby is quoted by Holmes, as describing it as 'merely the traditional first step in *the time-honoured barbarism required to produce English gentlemen*' (Holmes, 1993, p. 17, italics mine). Bowlby, whose own stay in boarding school was relatively short, was not happy boarding (Van Dijken, 1998).

Patrick Casement came from a naval family with the tradition of sending children to boarding school at an early age; he was sent at 8 (Casement, 2006). This is common for those in the armed forces because boarding offers stability when the parents have to move home frequently. Sadly it also distorts the child's developmental needs, as Casement makes clear. It was not until into his adult life that he began to realize how profoundly his early experiences had affected him. In a moving description of his attachment to the buildings of his public school, he shows how, in the absence of family, places are substituted in the imagination of the lonely child (Casement, 2006, p. 29). The attachment to houses, rather than people, is a kind of desperate solution found by the child whose capacity to love is distorted by the absence of human attachment figures (Schaverien, 2002, pp. 32–8). Casement's first psychotherapy did not address the negative transference and therefore the depth of his early experiences of loss (Casement, 2006, pp. 14–15).

There are many other cases where the depth of the pain associated with early boarding has passed unnoticed in psychotherapy. It is rare that boarding school is the presenting problem and the ex-boarder is a master of emotional disguise. The acquired veneer of confidence may contribute to the fact that sometimes the profound significance of this formative experience is missed in psychotherapy. Thus the reality of the lasting distress associated with boarding remains a well-kept secret. Duffell expresses it thus:

One thing which never seemed to come up in my therapy . . . was the effect that my boarding school education had had on me. I sensed that it was one of the things that I was running hardest from, but my psychotherapist never seemed to mention it. I suspected it was either a quite unknown subject or, as I assumed, one not fit for therapeutic enquiry. And I . . . was too shy to bring it up . . . the critic who lived in my head said I had not yet grown up properly or that I was whingeing on about something which had actually been a privilege. (Duffell, 2000, p. 3)

Duffell blamed himself, fearing that there was something so profoundly wrong with him that it would not be appropriate to raise it. In British society the assumption that boarding school is a privilege is a cultural myth, with some justification. It is partly because of the advantages in material circumstances that the ex-boarder is embarrassed to complain. Duffell (2009, personal communication) was aware that class played a part in this interaction. There are many others whose psychotherapy did not address the extent of this early trauma. Partridge (2007, p. 310) writes that 'deeply disturbing issues' relating to his time at boarding school were not addressed in either of his long-term Kleinian-orientated psychoanalyses.

These are not isolated cases; whilst its extent merits further inquiry this is not uncommon. The published cases, mentioned above, were conducted by experienced practitioners, registered with respected UKCP and BPC organizations. In order to substantiate this I give details. Casement's first analysis was conducted at three times a week over seven years with a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. It was not until his second psychoanalysis, this time conducted at five times a week, that the deficit of the earlier therapy was made good and that he touched the depth of his losses (Casement, 2009, personal communication). Duffell's psychotherapy took place once a week over nine years, with three different psychotherapists, two humanistic and one analytic. He spent three years with each but the significance of his boarding school experiences was not addressed (Duffell, 2010, personal communication). Partridge's first psychoanalysis was conducted at five times a week over nine years and his second, also psychoanalysis, at four times a week over five years. In each case his boarding school trauma was not addressed (Partridge, 2010, personal communication). Philippa's first two analyses were conducted over 10 years: three years at three times a week with a Jungian analyst, one year at once a week with a humanistic psychotherapist, and then she returned to the first analyst for another three years at once a week. It was not until she embarked on a third analysis, some years later, that her positive presentation was challenged and she contacted the trauma of her boarding school experience.

We have seen that the ex-boarder may expertly deflect from their suffering. However, the analysts and psychotherapists in the cases concerned, as I have indicated, were all well trained and were experienced. Therefore I would speculatively suggest that a failure to take up the boarding school experience may have to do with a number of factors which might remain unconscious in the therapeutic dyad. As mentioned above it is possible that class is a factor; but what does this mean? One of the advantages of private boarding school education is that it equips the ex-boarder with a confident presentation that

commands respect; this is recognized in British society at a subliminal level. If the psychotherapist was not private boarding school educated, it is possible that an unconscious deference may get in the way of challenging the powerful defence. If, on the other hand, the psychotherapist attended a boarding school it is possible that there is an unconscious recognition; a shared subliminal acceptance that it is not a problem. Clearly this is not always the case and many psychotherapists are not deflected from the suffering involved. However, there is enough evidence to indicate a need for further inquiry into why such highly qualified people sometimes miss the depth of trauma that follows early boarding. It may be that this would lead to a different technical approach to working with ex-boarders in psychotherapy.

Educational Advantage

Boarding is a legacy of British history that is regarded with incomprehension in nations, such as Scandinavia, where sending children away from home to school is practised only in exceptional circumstances. The educational advantages offered by most of these schools are considerable but the benefits need to be weighed against the long-term psychological damage brought about by the losses involved. Whilst many achieve significant social status, as a result of the educational advantages provided, there are casualties. The most severely affected are barely able to hold down a job or maintain intimate relationships.⁸ For them being sent away from home may have been the final straw in the face of other factors or personal sensitivities. These people were unable to reap the rewards of the academic, social and sporting opportunities provided.

As already stated, those we meet in psychotherapy are usually the ones who struggled with boarding; however, others assert that boarding school was a positive experience for them. Often further discussion leads to painful memories with them too but these are not immediately recalled and the balance of positive experiences seems to outweigh the negative ones. Perhaps the difference lies in the age at which a person enters the school. Those who can take advantage of the educational opportunities, provided by committed teachers in academic studies, music or sport are often those who first went to school as teenagers. A child at 13 is more mature, psychologically, and physically, than the prep school child. At 16, some make an informed choice to complete their education away from home. Even so, many older children endure distressing episodes of loneliness, sexual abuse and bullying. It is now illegal to beat children but in the past, when many of our clients boarded, beatings (often sadistic) were ubiquitous; they were considered to be character forming. Age was no bar to this maltreatment.

There are some for whom school is better than their home. In these cases school is a sanctuary, offering relief from constant insecurity, neglect or abuse; as one of my patients expressed it: 'At school at least you knew where the punishment was coming from.' For this man, and others like him, boarding school was preferable to home because it offered stability which his parents, despite their material wealth, were unable to provide. Corporate identity and

engaging in team games can give a real sense of belonging and of fair play and, as in the case described by Meredith Owen (2007), may compensate for the loss of the familiar environment.

The Unprotected Child: Tom's Story

I return now to Tom whom we met on the threshold of his prep school at the beginning of the article. Tom, a married man in his mid-30s, was referred by his GP for psychotherapy. He knew something was wrong but he could not understand what it was. He was clinically depressed but he did not want medication. Until recently, he had had a number of jobs in different countries but he had hated being employed. Now he was home and had set up his own small business. He had recently married and his wife had identified his emotional isolation. They slept in separate rooms, an arrangement which suited Tom. At boarding school he had shared a dormitory and now, free of school, he could choose to sleep in a space of his own; understandably his wife was unhappy about this arrangement.

Tom, the elder of two children, was sent to prep school when he was 6. His sister was born when he was 5 and after this his mother found his temper tantrums impossible to manage so it was decided that school would be good for him. It was a family tradition to send children to prep school, but usually at 8. Tom had accepted his parents' version of events – that he had been a difficult child. He had felt rejected but concluded that this was because he was bad. He was surprised when I suggested that he might have been jealous of his sister and this could have been exacerbated by being sent away. Sometimes it is not boarding school alone that has a negative impact, but the story the child is told associated with it. For Tom it had seemed that school was a punishment; he was banished for his badness.

This emerged in the early sessions but was passed over by him as unremarkable. The content of the sessions then stayed in the present and there was much about his work and home life. It was only when I asked him more about his school that he began to recount the cruel incidents of bullying he had suffered in his early days at school. This continued until he grew physically strong enough to stop it. He dismissed it as merely the type of initiation to which boys were subjected. However, as he became aware that I took these incidents very seriously, he began to do so himself. Then, in the fourth session, he told me the following story from his first days in prep school:

As already stated, Tom was six years old when he was taken by his parents to his prep-school and left there in the care of strange adults. However, for Tom it was not the adults who mistreated him. One night, very soon after he arrived, an older boy appeared to befriend him. He took him by the hand and said they were going for a walk. Innocently Tom was led out into the dark night, a long walk from the school, and then the older boy told him he was going to kill him. Tom was terrified. The boy told him that his parents were not there and no one would hear if he cried out. Having duly frightened the child, he stopped; and then he told him he was only joking and led him, still by the hand, back to the school. Tom was unable to tell anyone what had happened.

This story of innocence abused reveals the trusting nature of a small child in the hands of someone only a year or two older. A casual witness might consider that nothing very much had happened; there was no dramatic assault and no physical damage. However, the psychological effects of this incident had lasted 30 years. Tom was in middle age and yet I was the first person he had ever told of this experience. This highlights the problem; even if staff members are kind, the child is exposed for many hours in the day and, even worse, in the night, to the impulses of other children. These children are themselves very young and may have little sense of the impact of their behaviours. Both these children were unprotected – the perpetrator, as well as the victim, in the grip of terrifying fantasies. The distinction between fantasy and reality, between symbolic thought and action, was not yet formed in their minds.

The older boy was apparently a sadistic abuser but he was also a small boy and he was out of control. He too was exposed because he could perpetrate an act that, had they known, adults would have prevented. Hypothetically, we might assume that he had been left in this school a year or two previously. He would therefore recognize Tom's insecurity. Taking charge of the smaller boy might alleviate his own insecurity, proving that he was no longer the youngest. It is possible that he regarded this to be a joke but it is likely to have had a more sinister, if unconscious, psychological motive. By terrifying Tom, it is probable that he was sadistically externalizing his own rage and fear; seeing them reflected in another he could feel in control, and powerful. Then, rescuing the younger boy, he could soothe himself and feel benign. One might speculate whether he felt guilt; if so there would be no one to whom to confess and to mediate his own rage and terrifying fantasies.

However, our concern is the lasting impact of his behaviour on Tom. For Tom the terrible thing had happened. He knew now how vulnerable he was and his trust had been violently shattered. There were no words for what he had experienced and no one to tell. In order to survive, in cases like this, a hidden compartment in the self is acquired where such experiences are locked away. This type of dissociation is a common response to trauma (Davies & Frawley, 1994; Wilkinson, 2006). This was a traumatic event in this child's life; Tom had learned that he could depend on no one. First his primary attachments had been broken and, subsequently, he was offered the potential friendship of an older boy, only to realize that he was at his mercy.

When he grew bigger Tom would intervene if another child was being bullied. This attitude continued into his adult life; Tom looked after his loved ones and was fiercely protective of them but he did not expect anyone to look after him. We might understand this in the light of Boarding School Syndrome. The boarder is trained in a similar way to an officer in the military; to look after his men and to care for others before himself. Consciously, Tom was friendly, kind and thoughtful but the unconscious opposite of this was that he was also furiously angry. His fear of his own violence kept him isolated; he kept separate to protect those he loved from the perceived danger of getting close to him.

This replayed in the transference. He was at first relieved to have someone in whom to confide. Gradually he began to understand how he had always cut off

from people who came emotionally close to him. Banished by his parents, because of his rage, he continued to feel dangerous in relationships. In common with other ex-boarders he had, in the past, cut off suddenly from jobs and from girlfriends. This is a common form of self-harm in Boarding School Syndrome. The person makes a deeply dependent relationship and then severs his emerging tender feelings. Suddenly abandoning the loved object is an extreme form of self-abuse. Simultaneously it unconsciously expresses rage towards the present lover and those who abandoned him in the past.

As psychotherapy began to become important to him, Tom worried about how he would manage when, eventually, it ended. With ex-boarders, the breaks in psychotherapy apparently have little impact at first. The regular pattern of school holidays, followed by the return to school, arms the ex-boarder with a mechanism for coping with disrupted attachments; he is expert at cutting off. This Tom did for the first two breaks, telling me that he had been fine. However, after the third break, psychotherapy nearly came to an abrupt end when he left a message, telling me that he now needed to stop and work things out for himself. This is an occurrence that I have noted with men in psychotherapy with female therapists (Schaverien, 1997) and, in terms of working with Boarding School Syndrome, this is a common occurrence (Schaverien, 2002, 2004). Tom could not bear dependency and so he reverted to the previous method of dealing with attachments in his adult life; the impulse was to leave.

It is likely that Tom experienced the feelings that were emerging in the transference as intensely dangerous. The decision to leave was probably motivated by an unconscious need to protect us both from his potential violence. Steiner (1993) writes of the 'patient who is dominated by feelings of resentment and grievance' and suggests that such patients use a form of 'psychic retreat which operates as a defence against anxiety and guilt' (p. 74). Feelings of 'resentment and grievance' threatened Tom's previous self-image. His defences were breaking down and he was forming an attachment to me. As a result the sense of injustice and his previously unconscious wish for revenge began to become live in the present. Steiner describes this type of emotional turmoil: 'These patients feel wronged but are unable to express their wish for revenge actively by openly attacking the objects which have wronged them' (1993, p. 74). Some hold back for fear of retaliation but others are inhibited because of the 'fear that the revenge would be excessive' (Steiner, 1993, p. 74).

Consciously Tom was a caring man but he was beginning to realize that he was violently vengeful. His anger with his mother for abandoning him and his sister, for replacing him, were becoming conscious and replaying in the transference. He may have experienced me as another woman whom he had to look after; the fee often brings this to the fore. His impulse to leave was fuelled by conflicted emotions – a desire to make me suffer, as he had, but also the fear that he would wreak some terrible revenge. The 'psychic retreat' to which Steiner refers is an emotional retreat but with the ex-boarder it can be enacted as a concrete abandonment of the process. Tom returned to discuss his decision to

terminate and eventually agreed to continue. Then the violence of his feelings was expressed; he was terrified of what he might do to me. It became evident that, no longer a victim, he was scared of his own power; now he could be the sadistic abuser. For a while he could not distinguish between his violent fantasies and acting on them; to imagine destruction was to have done it. It took a while for this to become separated out and for him to realize that his hateful fantasies were a form of attachment.

In the light of incidents, like the one to which Tom was subjected, the ostensible privilege of boarding might be viewed rather differently. It exposes the child to the unpredictable and, sometimes, harmful actions of others.⁹ This story is far from unique and only one of many similarly damaging events that are reported. The deep scars left on the psyche may affect the person's ability to love. It is therefore troubling that this suffering may be dismissed as insignificant in comparison with the problems of material deprivation suffered by others.¹⁰ This ignorance of the extent of exposure of such children seems to disregard the importance of emotional attachment. A child, of whatever social class, who feels neither physically nor psychologically safe is always vigilant and so their development may be adversely affected.

Boarding School Syndrome: In Conclusion

Boarding School Syndrome is a significant factor in the presentation of the ex-boarder in psychotherapy. As psychotherapy develops it becomes clear that the personality structure, acquired as a necessary protective shell at school, is still active. The child who learned to adapt continues to have unmet emotional needs that distort their development. These needs remain active in the adult. The intimacy of the mother-child bond can never be recaptured but the yearning for it, which begins with homesickness at school, may unconsciously dominate later life.

We have seen, through the stories of Philippa and Tom, how differently boarding school affects different children. The home situation is a factor. For Philippa the role models of her sisters, as well as their physical presence in the school, mediated her experience. Even so she was helpless and subject to painful 'initiation' which might well be reframed as group bullying. For Tom school was unfamiliar and the situation he was leaving at home, a little sister in his place, contributed to his distress and feelings of being abandoned. The bullying to which he was subjected was more sinister because of its one-to-one nature and because of the initial friendship offered.

The painful experiences of boarding, for many, inhabit the shadowy realm of split-off negative emotions. Secretly hidden they remain unconscious until the person is emotionally compelled to explore it. The transference can be complicated by the projected veneer of sophistication and confidence. This is the barrier that has to be overcome with the ex-boarder in psychotherapy. This is the reason there is a need for theoretical nomenclature such as 'Boarding School Syndrome'. Whilst further exploration is needed, and indeed planned, this may provide the beginning of a specialist framework within which to consider approaches to working with ex-boarders.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given as a talk for the public programme of the Society of Analytical Psychology in Oxford in March 2009.
2. This article offers preliminary thoughts – a book on this topic is in progress.
3. I mean this in the sense of Winnicott's 'good enough mother' who, although good enough, also, at times, fails the child. This is a necessary developmental process (Winnicott, 1971, p. 11).
4. A campaigning group Boarding Concern was formed as an outcome of these workshops. Available from: <http://www.boardingconcern.org.uk/>
5. Fagging was finally abolished in the 1990s.
6. My own observations, from clinical practice, are confirmed in a personal communication from James Foucar, one of the Directors and Founders of Boarding Concern, who writes: 'We . . . need to challenge the myth of "modern" boarding schools – my recent research shows that little has changed especially in boarding prep schools.' He quotes: *School Life – Pupils' Views on Boarding* (Department of Health, 1993); *Good Practice in Boarding Schools* (Boarding Schools Association, 2001); *Head to House: How to Run Your House Effectively* (John Catt Education Ltd, 2000).
7. Further research is planned to verify the actual percentages.
8. This is based on conversations with colleagues and observations from my own practice. The case described in Schaverien (2002) is one such example.
9. This is reminiscent of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.
10. In presenting papers at professional conferences on this topic I have met this response on several occasions.

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Television Programmes

- The Making of Them* (BBC film made by Colin Luke and broadcast in 1994)
- Chosen* (Channel 4 broadcast in November 2008)