Introduction

Violence is all around us. No one can feel safe from its effects. We can experience it in the intimacy of our home life, we can expect it in the street; we are bombarded with daily news of terrorism, war, murder, rape, torture and ecological disasters. We are the children of those who survived two devastating World Wars. We have witnessed some of the early effects of a weapon so destructive it defies the imagination. We live in its nuclear shadow, scarcely able even to acknowledge its existence.

And now, with the end of the Cold War, we are confronted by the fact that neo-Nazism, racism, nationalism and all the violence these beliefs bring with them are coming back to haunt us in Europe. The future is one of uncertainty and fear. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center’s twin towers in New York on 11 September 2001 has not only led to increased insecurity in the West but also to a violent antiterrorist backlash which could further undermine our security in the world.

Whether we live in the concrete jungle of New York or in the threatened rain forests of Borneo, every one of us knows that we are capable of destroying ourselves as a species. The dim awareness of what could be is always with us, colouring the lives of many with a sense of deep despair about our very humanity. No wonder violence preoccupies us so much, for we are, as a species, quite alone in our capacity to murder in cold blood, to torture one another and to threaten our species’ very existence.

Man’s need to understand himself, to make sense of his cruelty has never been greater. There is already a vast literature on aggression in our species with thousands of references on the subject. So, one may well ask, why write yet another book on violence?

The fact is that there are so many different views concerning the origins of human violence, that it is clear we still do not understand why ‘we are the cruellest and most ruthless species that has ever walked the earth’ (Storr, 1968, p.9).
What is interesting about most of the work on the subject of human aggression and cruelty is that it is based on the premise that we are essentially individuals driven by our inherited instincts. The ‘other’ acts essentially as a provider or as an outlet for these drives. For example, a well-known ethologist like Konrad Lorenz describes very clearly the intra-specific fighting behaviour seen in fish, geese and other animals. He then goes on to extrapolate his findings with regard to mankind: ‘Intra-specific aggression bred into man a measure of aggression drive for which in the social order of today he finds no adequate outlet’ (1966, p.209).

The basic assumption here is that we operate as individuals with innate drives that need to be discharged. To deprive man of such an outlet is what leads to more aggression, to wars and other forms of violence. The implications are that outlets for our aggression must be found and that those who are working for peace are, according to Lorenz, ‘at a decided disadvantage’ (Lorenz, 1966, p.246).

Such a conclusion may appear scientifically sound and quite acceptable because it fits in with Western cultural premises about the central importance of the individual in relation to society. However, it is this very premise that is being challenged today within both the field of biology and that of psychology. Paradoxically, it is because of our attempts to help the victims of war, of the concentration camps and of natural disasters that we are beginning to realise how emotionally vulnerable our species really is. What researchers have come to realise is just how much human beings matter to each other, so much so that psychological trauma has been defined as ‘the sudden cessation of human interaction’ (Lindemann, 1944).

This need of one person for another comes as no surprise to those who have been studying attachment behaviour. Workers in the field have been able to show us that man is not intrinsically destructive; he need not be driven to kill and to torment. Study after study points to the same inescapable fact: the human being is inherently a socially co-operative animal. This has allowed Bowlby to conclude that ‘human infants . . . are pre-programmed to develop in a socially co-operative way; whether they do so or not turns in high degree on how they are treated’ (1988, p.9).

Such a conclusion, with its accompanying research, is crucial to those who are concerned with violence as a human phenomenon that can be and needs to be understood if it is to be prevented. What these findings show is that human destructiveness, like psychological trauma, cannot be understood without recognising the intrinsic importance of human relationships in our development and in our sense of
well-being. It could be that it is because we have denied this for so long that an understanding of human violence has been so elusive.

When we begin to think about human violence, we discover that we are not dealing with an instinct, a drive or a predisposition, as some would have us believe. Violence has in fact no clearly defined meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary interprets the term ‘violence’ in several different ways, one of which is ‘the treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom’. Implicit in this particular definition is the assumption that we are entitled to a certain degree of freedom, an abstract concept that is intrinsic to our human condition. As Stoller states: ‘the brain substrates of what we call “choice” or “freedom” simply do not exist in any creature as in man’ (1975).

This makes it difficult to study human violence as a biological phenomenon. A brief scan of the scientific literature on violence shows that what would be defined as violence, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is in fact referred to as ‘aggression’; this usually implies that it is an ‘innate’ behavioural manifestation of our genetic make-up. Some authors do go to the trouble of differentiating ‘simple’ or ‘normal’ aggression from violence, which they refer to as a ‘transformed aggression’ (Durbin and Bowlby, 1939) or ‘malignant’ aggression (Fromm, 1974, p.24). However, when reading their work, it is often far from clear when aggression ceases to be seen as ‘normal’, to become ‘transformed’ or ‘malignant’.

In fact, the confusion cannot be avoided, because aggression is a form of social behaviour studied by ethologists, biologists and psychologists, whereas violence is more about the interpretation that is given to a form of social behaviour, an interpretation that is essentially determined by the social context in which we live. At times both terms are interchangeable but at other times they are not: an interaction deemed abusive or violent in one culture may be considered quite ‘normal’ in another. It is only since we have begun to study the effects of psychological trauma that we have been able to tease out the various components of our violent responses: the results have been quite surprising, for they have confirmed what psychoanalysts have always known, that the very essence of our humanness is that we invest all our experiences with meaning and that the way we interpret our experiences has a direct effect on how we respond to trauma.

So, whilst we are psychobiological entities with all that this means in terms of physical needs, behaviour patterns, genetics and biochemistry, what we do and do not do is also intrinsically linked to how we perceive ourselves and the world about us.

For instance, a man kills another man. This could be seen as an act of violence, a ‘bestial act of brutality’, but it could also be seen as an
‘act of self-defence’, a ‘legitimate act of aggression for the defence of our nation’, an ‘act of justice for the preservation of law and order’, a ‘necessary step in the fight for freedom’ or the ‘inevitable manifestation of our instinctual drives’.

In defining an act of violence, we are giving a meaning to a form of interpersonal behaviour. Such an appraisal could be seen to be entirely subjective but it is not: how we perceive the world is intimately linked to our sense of ‘self’, to our beliefs and attitudes, emotions and behaviours, all of which are very much part of the social matrix to which we belong. Through our upbringing, our language and our daily social activities, we learn and absorb the culture in which we live. Through language, we in turn give a socially defined meaning to our life; we acquire a linguistic identity, a verbal sense of self that organises and defines our experiences. Thus over the last few years the abused child has been allowed to put a name to his or her experience. Through Childline, the telephone helpline founded by Esther Rantzen, such children struggle to put the unmentionable into words and in the process their pain is validated and their trauma is given a meaning. But what if others cannot perceive your trauma? What if people cannot understand your desperate behaviour as the manifestation of being abused or tormented? What then?

Violence has to be recognised as such not only by its victims but also by those who witness it, particularly as the perpetrators of violence often fail to do just this. For such a validation of the trauma to take place, particular values need to be shared, such as the belief in our entitlement to both a certain degree of freedom and a socially sanctioned need for self-respect.

Violence is thus essentially human and it is about the meaning we give to a destructive form of behaviour, which is usually taking place between people. It can also be an attack on oneself. But, whatever form it takes, the fact that humans commit acts of violence suggests that in the act itself there is a thinking ‘subject’ doing something to another, who, from the observer’s point of view, would be defined as ‘human’, be it an infant as in the case of child abuse, a woman in the case of rape, or a man in the grips of torture. We will usually identify the victims as having the same capacity to think and feel as we do; we perceive them then as human.

However, how do the ‘violent’ members of our society see their victims? For instance, what did the men in the New York gang who attacked and raped a woman until she was unconscious say about her? They said: ‘she was nothing’ (Levin, 1989). Do we believe them? Was she ‘nothing’ to them as they attacked her with bricks, a metal pipe and a knife and then gang-raped her? To attempt to answer this ques-
tion, we have to try to understand what is going on in the minds of those who torture and kill. What does such a person think he is doing? To whom does he think he is doing it? What is the victim in the eyes of the tormentor at that particular moment in time?

The study of human violence hinges, therefore, on understanding how humans develop in terms of how they perceive themselves and the ‘other’ and what they feel about themselves and the ‘other’: feelings and cognition are both involved in human destructive behaviour.

This particular work arises from a belief that those who are involved in trying to understand human behaviour have a role to play, however small it may be, in alerting others to psychological processes, which exacerbate or reduce our need to be destructive. We owe it to the countless victims of Nazism, to those who died or suffered in the devastating violence of the last two World Wars and many civil wars: we owe it particularly to those who even now are suffering from man-made cruelty.

As a psychotherapist, a psychiatrist and a biologist, I have attempted to present a variety of different studies which give us a great deal of information about human violence, but we are still left with a considerable body of tentative ideas. It is my hope that these will be considered, argued against and tested. In an attempt to help the reader make sense of what is to follow, I can divulge that this book rests its particular case on seeing ‘violence’ as a by-product of psychological trauma and its effects on infants, children and adults. Particular attention will be given to how trauma can be processed into rage and how memories, which are ‘split off’ within our minds can re-emerge, even if only partly, when triggered off by the appropriate environmental stimuli.

Following in Freud’s footsteps, researchers and therapists have been working with the psychological effects of trauma in all their manifestations. Their conclusions are reviewed and discussed in the following chapters because they show a link between psychological trauma and a propensity to develop destructive interpersonal relationships.

In addition to the work done with trauma victims and violent offenders, other researchers have studied the behaviour of so-called ‘normal’ people to see what capacity they have to be violent. Their results are revealing and confirm that most of us can become violent in the appropriate circumstances.

Although all the above mentioned research is essential in understanding violence, a parallel development in the field of psychoanalytic theory was necessary to integrate these different findings. The theo-
retical underpinning of the research on trauma is mainly provided by the ‘object-relations theory’, Bowlby’s ‘attachment theory’ and Kohut’s ‘self-psychology’, all of which stress the importance of interpersonal and, particularly, early relationships in determining the way we perceive ourselves and behave towards each other. Thus, the invalidation of our sense of self or of our sexual identity is seen to be at the root of some of our most violent behaviour. Also of great interest to the student of violence is the understanding of human defence mechanisms that allow us to deny what is painful and to ‘split off’ such memories and feelings. In this way we can all become potential ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ characters, like the respectable day-time bank manager who becomes the frightening sexual night visitor of his son’s childhood.

This book is essentially divided into three parts.

**ATTACHMENT GONE WRONG**

The first part focuses on the various theoretical approaches to violence and their different historical, philosophical and psychological origins. A case of child abuse and murder is described, to introduce the reader to the more obvious links between childhood trauma and child abuse (Chapter 1). This is followed by a brief historical account of how the belief in ‘original sin’ came into being and what social and psychological functions it provided for Western man (Chapter 2). The third chapter provides a brief overview of the literature on violence and aggression, stressing the polarisation of views that continues to exist in this particular field because of its links with a theory of human nature (Chapter 3). The evidence is then given concerning our physical and psychological need for the ‘other’ throughout our development, with particular reference to studies on attachment behaviour (Chapter 4). The effects of loss and deprivation are seen to be very important in the development of violent behaviour. These findings indicate that violence could be understood as the result of a failure in adequate caregiving (Chapter 5). Particular emphasis is then given to the development of the self through the ‘internalisation’ of our different types of attachment relationships (Chapter 6). This leads on to a psychoanalytic understanding of the self in relation to ‘object-relations theory’ and Kohut’s ‘self-psychology’, two psychoanalytic models that appear to be the most useful in our understanding of human attachment and destructiveness (Chapter 7). Deprivation, loss and abuse can so deplete the self that defending itself becomes of paramount importance, whatever the cost to the ‘other’. This desperate need to bolster the self by whatever means contributes considerably to our under-
standing of the importance of the self in the origins of violence (Chapter 8).

THE PSYCHOBIOLOGY OF TRAUMA

The second part of the book focuses more on the psychobiological effects of trauma on both sexes and at different ages. The unspeakable trauma of child sexual abuse is the subject of our first chapter. The psychotherapeutic treatment of a victim of child sexual abuse illustrates most clearly how the disruption and abuse of the primary attachment relationships can have devastating effects on the self and engender considerable violence, a violence that is usually turned against the self (Chapter 9). This specific account is followed by a more general study of the physiological and psychological effects of psychological trauma or ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD). Both the meaning given to the trauma, and the quality of the interpersonal relations developed by its victims, appear to be of great importance in determining the extent of the psychobiological damage, be it cognitive or physiological: the greater the traumatisation, the higher the risk of later violence (Chapter 10). The last chapter in this section looks more closely at psychobiological effects of trauma on children: links are shown to exist between psychological trauma, child abuse and human destructiveness. Violence can now be seen both as the extreme expression of human rage, due to overwhelming narcissistic injuries to the self, and as the expression of a disrupted attachment system. The compulsion to repeat the trauma is seen to be of crucial importance in understanding the traumatic origins of violence; the possibility that victims become addicted to their trauma is looked at (Chapter 11).

THE PREVALENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

The third and final part of this book attempts to link the traumatic origins of violence with Western cultural requirements. Historical and anthropological studies suggest that human beings can develop different social structures and behaviours, some of which were and still are considerably less violent than the patriarchal and Western cultures that now dominate the world. Primate and human studies show that the most effective transmission of cultural values occurs through manipulation of the infant–caregiver attachment system. This is most clearly highlighted by studies that show the traumatising effects of
corporal punishment and the implications of such a generalised form of socialisation in terms of social violence (Chapter 12).

It is the dehumanisation of the other that is at the root of all human violence, a dehumanisation that unfortunately appears almost intrinsic to the development of the male–female sexual role differentiation seen in patriarchal cultures. Man’s love affair with violence is examined in terms of his vulnerable sexual identity and his resultant need to perceive women as ‘objects’ with all the violent consequences this entails. Woman’s masochistic collusion with this split is also addressed, as are its implications for childrearing. In the act of making mother ‘less than human’, men become men at the expense of the ‘other’: exploitation, abuse, racism and violence are the result of such a cultural system (Chapter 13). This is vividly illustrated by experiments that show how the ordinary man and woman can torture and kill when given orders by men in authority. The fact that the medical profession is seen to be particularly vulnerable to becoming the instrument of state torture and genocide is of particular interest, because it illustrates the reciprocal relationship that exists between caring and abuse, the latter being the manifestation of attachment and love gone wrong (Chapter 14).

The final chapter focuses on a brief review of research on the ‘altruistic’ personality as compared to its counterpart, the authoritarian or ethnocentric personality. Links are made between these two types of personality which confirm once again the importance of certain rearing patterns and, in particular, of physical abuse in the development of violence, at the level both of the individual and of the group. The book ends by arguing the case for a marked change in our attitude to childrearing patterns if any reduction in social violence is to be achieved (Chapter 15).

Following the London bombs of 7 July 2005, I added an epilogue to the book, addressing the origins of terrorism. It highlights the importance of some of the factors mentioned in earlier chapters and suggests how we can begin to address the threat of terrorism in the UK and abroad.