

Boarding School Syndrome: reconsidered in social context and through the lens of attachment theory

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Abstract: I argue the time has come to expand the now recognised clinical diagnosis of boarding school syndrome to take account of its invisible precursors in the avoidant attachment patterns of British upper-class culture. This elite, comprising less than 1% of the population, has sustained fee-paying boarding “public” schools, and is sustained by them, in a remarkably effective nexus of power and influence. I propose to call this avoidant culture with its severe affective limits and entitled assumptions, “British Upper-Class Complex Trauma Condition”. Until we can recognise it and understand it as a form of group trauma, we will not be able to deal with its grave incapacity when it comes to empathy with the lives of others. Like Bowlby¹, I advocate the abolition of early boarding as a key part of transforming the condition’s psychosocial limitations, which profoundly impact us all.

Keywords: avoidant attachment, complex trauma, alexithymia, entitlement, discrimination

This rethink has been partly inspired by Resmaa Menakem’s extraordinary and challenging book, especially for the white-bodied, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (USA 2017; UK 2021). The UK edition makes it uncomfortably and unmistakably clear that the curse of “white-bodied supremacy” originates in mediaeval Europe, and as regards the USA in the oppressive elite of England. Menakem makes a powerful case that the early settlers in “New” England also carried with them the internalised traumas of violence they had been exposed to in their former country. This violence was then acted out upon the indigenous peoples they met – and later on several hundred thousand slaves and their descendants from Africa - and transmitted inter-generationally until the present day. The pivotal and destructive role that the “public school”, once it was taken over by the English aristocratic elite who then diverted it from its original charitable aims², played in spreading havoc and trauma among the black-bodied is now well-established. Although, as Menakem generously acknowledges this process also grievously impacted disempowered white bodies too.

Menakem’s insights have been given added impetus by another black author, the ex-Etonian Musa Okwonga, of Ugandan parentage. He has published his memoir *One of Them: An Eton College Memoir* (2021), which details his unusual privileged existence there from 1993 to 1998, and which engages with wider social and political issues, including the “boys’ club” of Westminster government and the power of the few to control the fate of the many. As he tellingly puts it: “Boys don’t learn shamelessness at Eton, it is where they perfect it.” It is from within such a privileged social context framework³ that I want to take another look at what has come to be called rather innocuously in the UK (and some former imperial colonies), “boarding school syndrome” (BSS).

These thoughts have been brewing since about 2010, when I started to have some reservations about the conception of BSS developed by Nick Duffell (2000) and Joy Schaverien (2004, 2011, 2015) to explain the until then largely unacknowledged psycho-emotional damage caused to children by being sent at an early age to boarding school. While greatly appreciating Duffell’s and Schaverien’s pioneering recognition of the “trauma of the privileged”, which as an ex-boarder I found very helpful, after a while their account did not seem to fully accord for me as a son of parents who had

been to private prep and public boarding school⁴. I now see my paper on the upper-class psychoanalyst and psychotherapist Charles Rycroft (Partridge, 2011) and my idea of the “triple lock” (Partridge, 2013b) as preliminary attempts to articulate this. These misgivings have been reinforced by some exchanges in late 2020 on a boarding school survivors’ Facebook⁵ which give testimony to different experiences of boarding school, increasingly revealing a pre-boarding dimension to the apparently boarding-only consequences. I want to try and tease out these differences further, and place the origins for the syndrome where in my view it really belongs: in the hegemonic, avoidant attachment nexus of the British upper-class rather than the boarding schools themselves, though they are evidently interconnected.

To engender further clarification I think it would be helpful to go back to the origins of the term “boarding/residential school syndrome”. The common assumption is that this was coined by Schaverien in about 2011 in her paper of that title published in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, and later used in the follow-up book of similar title (2015). The term was first used some seventeen years earlier by the First Nation of Canada authors Roland Chrisjohn and colleagues in their extraordinary and ground-breaking report⁶, “The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada. A Report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples – October 1994”. They actually used the term in a deeply critical way because they saw the focus on “residential school trauma”, and possible psychotherapeutic intervention, being used as a cover-up by the Canadian government for the wider genocide⁷ committed by French and British colonists. It was taken up in a less negative way by the psychiatrist Dr Charles Brasfield who worked for many years among the indigenous people of British Columbia. He became aware that many such people had suffered appallingly in residential/boarding schools set up under the auspices of various churches initially, but later funded by the federal government to forcibly acculturate them to Christianity and European ways. He wrote an article on Residential School Syndrome in the *British Columbia Medical Journal* in March 2001 (but drawing on an earlier version going back to 1998). The abstract announced: “Many of the suggested diagnostic features are similar to the diagnosis of PTSD, but with specific cultural impact”.

This PTSD-like impact was due to the sudden and forced rupture of the indigène from her/his family-tribe of origin, culture and language, and usually territory. The analogies with the British boarding school are rather striking if you are sent there from a modest middle-class or working-class background which is miles from home. This is unusual because families from such backgrounds cannot usually afford the enormous fees for such schools, but for the successful aspiring or the few who receive a scholarship it is not impossible (Okwonga is an example of the latter). As Duffell makes clear, this was indeed the trajectory of his own father and financed his private boarding education, first in Switzerland (his father worked for EMI in Europe) and then at top-flight Radley College in England.

It is not surprising then that the primary trauma of “rupture” for Duffell and Schaverien (who did not attend boarding school but developed her initial interest in BSS from her clinical work as a Jungian psychotherapist) appears at the point of departure from home; often around the age of seven to eight for boys, sometimes a bit older for girls (my sister was sent at the age of eight). For those like myself from an upper-class background (which for my purposes here I will define as “second generation” boarders, implying some continuity of wealth and social status – my maternal grandfather was sent to Eton on the back of money made in India), I don’t think it is accurate to assume rupture at such a late age - late that is in developmental terms. In my paper on boarding school syndrome (2013b) I described a prior, “first lock” stage as:

“...usually (being) a member of a family *where an avoidant/dismissing attachment pattern predominates*: where physical contact is sparse or non-existent, in which emotions are discouraged or inexpressible, where intra-familial relationships are already “detached” or “professionalised” through nannies or au pairs.” (2013b, p. 207, emphasis added to original)

We could add to that the likely limited maternal capacities of a mother who has probably been subjected to boarding school herself (mine was because her family were colonial entrepreneurs, extracting indigo and then mica, in French and then British India). This upbringing seems to have discouraged my mother from breast feeding and my being handed over, as was family custom, after a few days to a nanny or nannies (Coles, 2015).

In my experience this forms a culture of neglect (and where abuse by paid carers was not unknown – Freud himself fell victim to his nurse (Partridge, 2014); and there is evidence from my own problems and from my psychotherapy that something similar happened to myself) inherently lacking in early emotional nurture and described in its own normative terms as one of a “stiff upper lip” (Hislop 2012; Partridge, 2013a; Renton, 2017). This attribute is well-known, even lauded, for its limitations in the realm of affections. In some ways, rather than rupture, there is going to be a fairly easy transition from this nannied, detached familial and cultural setting to the expected tradition of a boarding school, which represents similar qualities and encultures them by design. Such practised detachment makes it unlikely that ex-pupils from this sort of background will present for psychotherapy – indeed, statistically few do. As Anne Power, an experienced attachment-based psychotherapist who has treated ex-boarders puts it:

“In my experience those who come to therapy are not likely to be from a *family with generations of early boarders*. In contrast, my boarding clients have mostly been sent away for some additional reasons; their parents may have been living abroad or their mother was unwell. It seems that these individuals the *avoidant defences* that are prevalent in the thriving group (Power has previously defined “thrivers” as those for whom boarding school has successfully prepared for post school life) are not so common or at least not so comprehensive.” (2013, p. 191, my emphasis)

I posit that this is the cohort from which are drawn what Duffell calls “compliers” (Duffell & Basset, 2016), who form the great majority of ex-boarders. There are others at boarding school from outside this cohort who become so successfully brainwashed after ten years or so in a “total institution”⁸ (Goffman, 1957) that they also “comply”. My father, as a first generation boarder, was an example; he went straight from Eastbourne College public school (where he also sent me) into officer training at Greenwich Royal Naval College for entry into the Royal Marines at seventeen, where he ended up as a Major with a Distinguished Service Order, despite there being no military tradition in his family. (I could not follow in his footsteps.)

If we typify the predominant attachment style of the British upper-class as “avoidant”, as I think we must when it is measured against the inner working models and attachment styles empirically observed by Dr John Bowlby⁹ and his co-researcher Mary Ainsworth, then we have a diagnostic contradiction in that this state is considered unremarkable or even normative; whereas the BSS, thanks to the work of Duffell and Schaverien, is now widely recognised as a clinical psychotherapeutic diagnosis.

The observational findings of Bowlby and Ainsworth (and now many others) are confirmed by modern neuroscience - aided by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of brain function not available to them - and its revelations about epigenetics and autonomic nervous regulation, and the effects of neglect and abuse on optimal brain development (Gerhardt, 2004). I propose that what it

does, without going into the psycho-neurobiology in detail (Lanius et al., 2010), is dispose members of this hegemonic social group to what is now called Complex Developmental Trauma (D’Andrea & van der Kolk, 2010; Herman, 1992), which is now recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2019) and NHS-UK. I have not found a full recognition of this additional diagnosis in the writings of Duffell and Schaverien for those who attend boarding school. But this is not surprising if the clinician assumes that the major trauma event happens around seven to eight years old, and the preceding years are not examined in any detail. I am suggesting that while BSS is an appropriate diagnostic for those ejected from a loving family or tribe – the Brasfield PTSD-like scenario - it does not adequately identify the psycho-emotional vicissitudes of someone brought up in a typical upper-class home. In my experience these are grounded in an avoidant attachment pattern resulting from early parental deprivation, followed by emotional and touch austerity, sanctioned by the class group.

In his essay “Reminiscences of a survivor: psychoanalysis 1937–1993”, Charles Rycroft (1995) made a somewhat similar critique of his experience of psychoanalysis when he said this of his analyst Ella Sharpe: “(she) had only been interested in the Oedipus complex and infantile sexuality, and that loss, bereavement, grief – subjects about which I then needed enlightenment – did not enter into her theoretical scheme of things” (my three psychoanalysts suffered similar limitations). It is my contention that the “subjects” Rycroft needed enlightenment about are embedded in the cultural mores of the stiff upper-lipped British ruling class and infect even those who do not exhibit explicit PTSD-like symptoms (Partridge, 2011). I suggest this invisibility is why the rubric of “boarding school syndrome” has actually had a minor impact on this hegemonic culture, because it is open to dismissal as affecting only a small minority of those who attend boarding school and who are then typified as an abnormal minority lacking in the sort of resilience provided by Power’s “avoidant defence”. It would certainly be interesting to know more about the sociological background of those who self-identify as boarding school survivors, about which as far as I know there has been no evidence-based research. From anecdotal observation, I have felt myself in a minority among the self-identified boarding survivors on the boarding school survivors’ Facebook group.

From my personal perspective I want to claim a more extensive condition which overlaps with my experience of actual boarding from six to seventeen (weekly from six to seven). I don’t want to claim that I have necessarily suffered more. Indeed there is evidence in the testimonies of survivors on Facebook and elsewhere (Stibbe, 2016) that those plucked from loving homes (for a variety of contingent reasons – parents’ social mobility aspirations, overseas work, military/diplomatic posting, parental death, divorce, sight impairment etc.) and sent to boarding school have suffered most grievously. But what I do want to say is that it can complicate the picture and the treatment and recovery modalities, which now must include an awareness of possible pre-existing complex developmental trauma. This can indeed be very complicated, as I know from experience, since once aware of this pre-school precursor it makes it more or less impossible to return to one’s upper-class origins – one has to find a new home, but where? This was not addressed for me. I propose to call this already existing state “British Upper-Class Complex Trauma Condition” (BUCTC); changing it slightly from the title of my Rycroft paper, which still implies for me a too simple, single-event PTSD.

Over time and after further theoretical reflection it has become clearer to me that BUCTC doesn’t appear in a recognised clinical form for most ex-boarders. It is subclinical, I suggest, because it is congruent with the culture of the hegemonic upper-class elite environment, itself invisible or unproblematic for those who swim in these waters: “The done thing”, as my memoir tells me. The notable features are:

- Stiff upper lip: alexithymia, detachment, avoidance, dissociation.
- Entitlement: arrogance, gaslighting.
- Discriminatory behaviour: resulting from exposure to familial and institutional patriarchal power and racism - experience of a basically white institution (Okwonga the exception), associated with Empire, slavery, colonial subjugation.

These character traits are often linked to power, wealth, and influence and have a recognisable “received” accent and body code – instantly recognisable and differentiated from lower class and skin colour in the British polity. I think it is also clear that within this class framework these traits are highly functional rather than dysfunctional. One only has to examine the composition of the present British Cabinet for that, 27 per cent of which attended boarding school, far in excess of the less than 1% of pupils they represent!¹⁰ And through the evolutionary human primate survival tendency to identify with the powerful in self-protection, whether as group or leader (“identification with the aggressor” - Fairbairn (1952); Ferenczi, (1932) [1949]), these “markers” tend to become accepted – and deferred to - way beyond the elite itself: as in “Keep Calm and Carry On”. These cultural norms are seldom called out because many of the commentators in British society who might question them are drawn from a similar white, upper-class boarding background. Most psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, psychotherapists, and psychoanalysts, even when aware of boarding school-induced trauma, see only the overt clinical form and fail to properly recognise the full extent of the complex developmental traumas that lie largely hidden, often disguised by jokey charm, in the familial neglect granularly present in the British upper-class.

While critics of boarding school remain largely wedded to the now standard account of a psychopathological syndrome, I think such an approach will make little impact on the sponsoring culture which denies adequate and proper nurture to its children. This has two highly deleterious consequences. It sets the tone for a cavalier attitude towards children in general in our culture – witness the enormous prevalence of child sexual abuse which is only now being recognised¹¹; and it leads to political leaders in Britain who lack the empathy and understanding for those they purport to represent. Duffell does address this in his “psychohistory”, *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion* (2014), but again it is framed around the notion of an “abandoned child complex” (p. iv) focused on the rupture of being sent off to board¹². This oversimplifies the early and insidious process of avoidant enculturation in the British upper-class.

I submit that there is an urgent need to move beyond the individualised, over-psychotherapised critique of the private boarding issue as one focused on the damaged victim/survivor. If we are to escape from patriarchy and racism, and fundamental wellbeing inequalities – the latter graphically revealed by the fallout from Covid-19 - we critics need to grasp the need for systemic socio-cultural transformation and expose the unwarranted sense of superiority and baked-in emotional incompetence of the British ruling upper-class. Of course, this is compounded when children from this background are sent away from home far too young for their education. It requires a radical change in child-rearing attitudes, away from detachment and towards an attachment-informed view of childcare which provides sufficient security and kindness for the developing child. This needs to be linked to good local community schooling which preserves and fosters familial bonds, essential protection against “adverse childhood experiences”.¹³

In such a scenario, as Bowlby propounded, there can be no place for private primary boarding schools (note 1).

Notes

1. As Bowlby unequivocally put it in his final interview in 1990 with Virginia Hunter, “I’m very much against young children going to boarding school.” (Hunter, 1994, p. 120)
2. This history explains the misnomer “public” to describe a now very expensive, fee-financed institution.
3. I have borrowed the idea of a “social context framework” from the ground breaking report by Haskell and Randall “Disrupted Attachments: A Social Context Complex Trauma Framework and the Lives of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada” (2009). This inverts the conventional process of seeing the trauma victim/survivor as an individual but rather places the victim back into their historical and social context. It then examines the ruptures they have experienced from an attachment and trauma perspective, including a cultural and intergenerational dimension. This leads to the concept of a “social context trauma”, which in Haskell & Randall’s research study is applied to the First Nations of Canada. My essay attempts something similar but applies it to the British Upper-Class social context – identifying a complex trauma in the oppressor rather than the oppressed, one which by its nature is more easily hidden. Both perspectives break from the orthodox individualised frame of Western psychotherapeutics handed down from psychoanalysis and medical psychiatry.
4. I need to explain here my first account of my boarding school experience, “Trauma at the Threshold: An Eight-Year-Old Goes to Boarding School” (2007). This was written after a double weekend at a boarding school survivors’ workshop in 2006 run by Nick Duffell and Darrel Hunneybell. It was helpful to locate some of my elusive psychosomatic issues to abandonment at boarding school (actually I discovered a bit later I was still 7 when sent), but I feel now it reflects some “confirmation bias”. I came to realise with further reflection, reading and integrative psychotherapy that my neglect and abandonment preceded my boarding school experience. Much of my hidden trauma was caused prior to the prep school “threshold”, quite possibly from birth, or even in utero. These precursors were located in the norms of my familial upbringing, its post-colonial and post-war disruptions, and social class assumptions.
5. I am a member of this group which is only open to boarding school survivors.
6. Helena Thomas, a psychotherapist specialising in boarding school issues, drew my attention to this report in the autumn of 2020.
7. This was the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on residential schools for First Nations, active from 2008 to 2015 (Haskell & Randall, 2009).
8. “Fourth, we find institutions purportedly established the better to pursue some technical task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds: Army barracks, ships, *boarding schools*, work camps, colonial compounds, large mansions from the point of view of those who live in the servants’ quarters, and so forth.” (Goffman, 1957 – types of total institutions – my emphasis)
9. Bowlby was himself a renegade from the upper-class. His father, Major General Sir Anthony Bowlby, was surgeon to King Edward VII’s household; he knew directly about the attachment/detachment he studied. As he makes clear in volume 1 of his three part magnum opus *Attachment and Loss* (1969) in his woefully neglected chapter four, “Man’s Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness”, that given our long hunter-gather past in a hostile environment we are instinctually adapted to maintain a close bond with our proximate caregivers. Upper-class childrearing traditions fly in the face of this inherent primate requirement, though historically were partly compensated by the surrogate

mothering of the wet nurse, the nurse/nursemaid and more latterly nanny/au pair. I was born in 1947 and in my family this system broke down after WWII. Bowlby himself was saved by his loving nursemaid, Minnie Ashbolt; Churchill it is well-known was another beneficiary of a kind nurse.

10. Johnson's Cabinet (September 2021) has 30 members:

- 8 went to private boarding schools (that is 27 per cent of the Cabinet compared with 0.7 per cent of the UK's school pupils). Three of those went to Eton.
- 12 went to private day schools (that is 40 per cent of the Cabinet compared with 6 per cent of the UK's school pupils);
- 10 went to state schools (that is 33 per cent of the Cabinet compared with 93 per cent of the UK's school pupils).

It is evident that statistically speaking the boarding and privately educated are grossly over-represented in the Cabinet. (Source: Wikipedia)

11. There are independent inquiries into child sexual abuse currently running in England and Wales, and Scotland, covering residential and boarding schools among other institutions - <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/> ; Scotland - <https://www.childabuseinquiry.scot/>
12. "(Socially privileged boarding school children) trade access to a normal family-based childhood for the institutionalised hothousing of entitlement...The child who has not been able to grow up organically, whom ex-boarders are unwilling to identify with, gets stranded, as it were, inside of them. As a psychological consequence, an *abandoned child complex* inside these leaders ends up running the show." (Duffell, 2014, my emphasis) In addition, the upper-class family is not "normal".
13. "Thus *adverse childhood experiences* have effects of at least two kinds. First they make the individual more vulnerable to later adverse experiences. Secondly they make it more likely that he or she will meet with further such experiences. Whereas the earlier adverse experiences are likely to be wholly independent of the agency of the individual concerned, the later ones are likely to be the consequences of his or her own actions, actions that spring from those disturbances of personality to which the earlier experiences have given rise." (Bowlby, 1982, p. 675, my emphasis)

The conceptualisation of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) got a massive boost with the publication of The ACE Study (1998) by Felitti et al., based on a very large epidemiological survey of 17,000+, but Bowlby was the first person to identify and name the syndrome in 1981 (Partridge, 2019) in his lecture to the American Orthopsychiatric Association, New York, which was published in their journal in 1982, and republished in Bowlby's *A Secure Base* in 1988.

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