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## **Parricides, School Shootings and Child Soldiers: Constructing *criminological phenomena* in the context of children who kill**

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There are more academic articles published in the UK about *two particular children who killed* than there are articles published more generally about *children who kill*. The murder of James Bulger in 1993 by two ten year-old boys has produced both empirical and theoretical outputs from a range of academic disciplines across the arts and social sciences, including psychology (e.g. Levine et al, 1999), sociology (e.g. Hay, 1995), theatre studies (e.g. Ravenhill, 2004), law and human rights (Wolff et al, 2000), media studies (e.g. Franklin & Petley, 1996), history (Rowbotham et al, 2003) and criminology (e.g. Turner, 1994). Indeed, identifying research about children who kill whose names are *not* Robert Thompson or Jon Venables is a challenge. And while many of the academic outputs concerning this particular case are illuminating (as case studies often are), the 'immediate and ferocious moral panic' (Cohen, 2002: xi) that the Bulger case triggered means that it should not speak for all. That it does is particularly troubling given the diverse range of contexts that surround children who kill. There are a number of reasons why it is important to recognise this imbalance, not least because the circumstances of the Bulger case do not represent those commonly found in most other cases of children who kill. Analysis of the Homicide Index collated by the UK Home Office (see next section) suggests that, while it is true that most children who kill are male (as are most adults who kill), most cases (i) involve older perpetrators in their mid-teens (rather than pre-teens); (ii) involve spontaneous acts of violence that are over within seconds (rather than hours); (iii) involve older victims (rather than infants); and (iv) do not involve abductions. Indeed, it is likely that it was the very unusual characteristics of the Bulger case that garnered such widespread attention. One particularly fascinating aspect of the academic discourse surrounding the Bulger case is that it has focused almost exclusively on its symbolic properties: what it *means* for how we construct children, what it *means* for our juvenile justice system, what it *means* for newspaper reporting and media campaigns for 'justice'. Many researchers have pointed out that the Bulger case was a 'watershed' in changing how we conceptualise children who harm others (Muncie, 1999). The potency of collectivised media, police and court 'narratives of wickedness' served to produce two modern day 'folk devils' (Cohen, 2002: 38) who were set adrift from the multiple structural and cultural inequities – including their own victimisation – that anchored Thompson's and Venables' violence (Scraton, 1997).

While the obliteration of context and the foregrounding of the individual is most keenly felt in the Bulger case, it appears to be a feature of our understandings of children who kill across a range of settings. To explore this issue further, this chapter examines the nuanced ways in which discourses of childhood development frame our understandings of *children who kill*. Children who kill arguably operate at the limits of what we understand 'childhood' to be because they challenge our normative understandings of the moral, cognitive and physical competencies of children. Thus, while such cases are relatively rare, they can be instructive in helping us to question dominant ideas about childhood that configure particular subjectivities and set up assumptions about 'norms' against which 'the 'other' is judged. The chapter begins by drawing on original Home Office data to examine what 'children who kill' look like in terms of gender, age, and circumstances of incident. With this in mind, the chapter then explores how three particular contexts in which children kill have so preoccupied academics and researchers that they have become 'criminological phenomena' and have consequently shaped our thinking about *all* children who kill. This has troubling implications for both the groups of children they speak of, and for our understandings of childhood more generally.

## Children who Kill

In England and Wales, the only way we can identify 'children who kill' is through the Homicide Index, a database collated by the Home Office that is compiled from 'homicide returns' that are completed for offences initially recorded as 'homicide'<sup>1</sup> by all forty-four police services across England and Wales (including the British Transport Police). An offender-based analysis tells us that, in the eleven years between April 2003 and April 2014, there were 530 offenders involved in homicide who were aged 17 years or younger, whether as a 'principal' offender (58%) or as an accomplice (42%). This constitutes almost nine percent of all recorded homicide offenders where his/her age is known. The majority of child offenders (72%) were aged sixteen and seventeen years at the time of the killing, and the youngest was twelve years old. In terms of gender, 91% of child offenders were male and 66% were involved in the offence with others (whether as 'principal' offenders or as accomplices). 41% of child offenders killed a stranger, 29% killed a friend/acquaintance and 7% killed a family member.<sup>2</sup> Most victims (86%) were male with an age range of 0-93 years (median age = 24 years). The most common methods of killing amongst child offenders were use of a sharp instrument (e.g. a knife) (41%); hitting or kicking (25%); and use of a blunt instrument (11%). Only 3% of child offenders used a firearm, and only 2% of offenders killed in a location that could be described as a public institution (such as a school, hospital or church) – the most commonplace location where children killed was outdoors on a street or footpath (30%). The most commonly recorded 'circumstances of offence' (as identified by the police) were 'pub fight, argument over girlfriend' (32%), 'neighbour, feud' (16%) and 'robbery' (13%). The circumstances of the offence were recorded as 'unknown' for 15% of child offenders. In terms of court outcomes, 53% of child offenders were found guilty of murder, 45% were found guilty of manslaughter (common

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<sup>1</sup> In initial police reports, 'homicide' refers to the suspected killing of another. In England and Wales, possible offences that might constitute unlawful 'homicide' at the stage of charge, indictment and/or conviction are *murder*, *manslaughter*, *infanticide* and *corporate manslaughter*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Family member' constitutes *parent* in 2.6% of cases, *other relative* in 1.5% of cases, *son/daughter* in 1.3% of cases, *brother/sister* in 0.9% of cases and *step-parent* in 0.4 % of cases.

law) and 2% were found guilty of manslaughter (diminished responsibility). It is worth noting here that the minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is currently 10 years. While no homicide suspect was identified in the Homicide Index as being under that age between 2003 and 2014, there have been historical cases where children younger than 10 years have been suspected of killing another: for example, the case of George Burgess, killed in Stockport by two eight-year old boys in 1861 (see Rowbotham et al, 2003).<sup>3</sup>

As useful as these data and analyses are, they give little indication of which particular dimensions of *children who kill* researchers and academics have focused on. Attention has certainly not focused on the most commonplace contexts in which children kill, which - as the analysis above suggests –are rather mundane and appear to be the product of arguments or through the engagement of other offences. Aside from the disproportionate focus on the Bulger case, attention has instead organised into clusters of particular – and fairly spectacular – ‘criminological phenomena’: *parricides*, *school shootings* and *child soldiers*. This is troubling because once a broad range of behaviours become organised into discrete categories of specific phenomena, they tend to become dominated by particular disciplinary frameworks and much of the potential for multidisciplinary is lost. Furthermore, such academic constructions inevitably foreground the defining setting of the offence (such as ‘the family’, ‘the school’, ‘the warzone’) and the developmental status of the offender is reduced to the single homogeneous variable of ‘child’. This is problematic because each of these so-called ‘phenomena’ represents a rather unusual context for children who kill, yet the theoretical models that are used to explain them dominate our understandings of *all* children who kill. Furthermore, they serve to exclude other frameworks that might more usefully explain the *majority* of cases of children who kill and which may tell us something more illuminating about children and childhood more generally. A review of these aforementioned categories of crime will illustrate.

## Parricide

The killing of one’s parents, known as parricide, is incredibly rare. It constitutes only 4% of all known homicides in England and Wales. It is particularly rare for a person under the age of eighteen years to engage in parricidal acts: only 9% of all parricide offenders are aged seventeen years or younger (Holt, 2017). Of child-aged perpetrators of parricide, 90% are male, 68% of their victims are fathers and most killings are particularly violent, using sharp or blunt instruments (Holt, 2017). Despite the rarity of parricides committed by children, such cases have received a disproportionate amount of academic attention, with significantly more research published on parricides perpetrated by children compared with parricides perpetrated by adults, resulting in the terms *parricide* and *child-perpetrated parricide* becoming virtually synonymous (Evans et al, 2005). As Holt and Shon (2016)

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<sup>3</sup> Back in 1861, the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales was seven years, and one example of the way in which the ‘limits of childhood’ (and thus childhood transgressions) vary across context is found in the varying age of criminal responsibility, both historically and currently around the world, where it varies from seven years (in North Carolina, US) to 18 years (e.g. in Uruguay, though children younger than 18 who ‘offend’ can be subject to ‘socio-educative measures’). The median age of criminal responsibility around the world is 12 years, which is the minimum age recommended by the *Committee on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 2007: para. 32).

suggest, one possible explanation for this academic focus on child-perpetrators may be that high-profile cases of parricide have tended to feature child offenders. In the United States, the first parricide to grab media attention featured the case of sixteen year-old Richard Jahnke and his seventeen year-old sister Deborah Jahnke in Cheyenne, Wyoming in 1982, who shot and killed their father in an alleged pre-planned attack after years of experiencing physical and sexual victimisation. Furthermore, the first seminal academic publications on parricide<sup>4</sup> focused exclusively on child-aged perpetrators, and these texts have subsequently served to frame the terms of the academic debate. In particular, these early texts established the dominant discourse of *the abused perpetrator*. Based on analysis of their own legal and clinical case notes, both Mones (1991) (a defence attorney) and Heide (1992) (a forensic psychotherapist) claimed that parricide was the result of early abuse and maltreatment suffered by the child at the hands of their parent(s). Drawing on Wertham's (1937) early theoretical work on parricide, psychoanalytic notions of *catathymic violence* have been drawn on by many researchers in this field in an attempt to explain parricide as a release of frustration that protects one's self-identity from psychic and physical disintegration (e.g. Strong, 1988; Galatzer-Levy, 1993). Furthermore, claims of extreme emotional disturbance due to past experiences of childhood abuse have been used successfully as a defence in cases of child-perpetrated parricide in the United States and elsewhere, achieved through the operationalisation of 'battered child syndrome' and its assumed link to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Hart and Helms, 2003; Malmquist, 2010). This emphasis on victim-precipitation has served to position the perpetrators of parricide as *victims*, and the victims of parricide as *aggressors*. Such reverse positioning is made all the more credible because of the role of parental responsibility in accounting for crimes perpetrated by children. Predicated on the notion of 'parental determinism' (Vincent and Ball, 2007), there is an assumption derived from developmental psychology that the life chances of children are determined entirely by the choices made and practices exercised by their parents. This assumption has found its way into many youth justice systems across Westernised jurisdictions through the codification of 'parental responsibility laws' (see Holt, 2008 for discussion).

This discourse on child parricide, which is circulated in popular media and can be found in lay understandings of parricide<sup>5</sup>, is shaped by a strong developmental determinism that is predicated on an assumed developmental vulnerability that removes any sense of childhood agency (after all, *adult-perpetrated* parricide is not assumed to be the result of childhood abuse: see Heide, 2013). Furthermore, the dominance of this discourse functions to obscure other important dimensions of such incidents. For example, like other forms of homicide, parricide is deeply gendered: across the international literature, male perpetrators account for approximately 90% of cases, and this includes those cases that involve child-aged perpetrators (Holt, 2017). While this gender disparity is often acknowledged, few researchers have attempted to include it within their theorisation, and its bracketing off in explanations of parricide also works to bracket off gender in the models of child abuse which are embedded within these explanations. Second, the dominance of forensic psychiatry within this field of enquiry serves to obscure the complex and diverse ways in which children actively negotiate and manage experiences of abuse which, in the

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<sup>4</sup> See *When a Child Kills* by Mones (1991) and *Why Kids Kill their Parents* by Heide (1992)

<sup>5</sup> For example, see headline: "Son charged with fatally stabbing dad 'definitely pushed' to commit act after years of abuse, neighbour says" (New York Daily News, 20 July 2015)

vast majority of cases, *do not* produce homicidal acts of violence, whether against their tormentors or anyone else. Child abuse is much more commonplace and mundane than this, and the continuing dominance of such discourses within the parricide literature has profound implications for all children, not least through its stigmatisation of childhood abuse through notions of disrupted childhoods and pathological/homicidal outcomes. Third, this model is almost entirely rooted in research from the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Yet, like all categories of crime, our understandings of parricide are both historically-produced and culturally-produced: indeed, the term ‘parricide’ was once used to define the killing of *any* elderly family member such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle, and the term is still used in this way in some countries such as South Korea (see Keum, 2000; Kim, 2012). The reconfiguration of family structures over the past century, and the ensuing dominance of the nuclear family, may well have instigated the more narrow term we use in Westernised cultures today. In turn, this has likely narrowed our theoretical possibilities as children who kill other family members are eliminated from any analysis due to their absence as a recognised ‘field of enquiry’. Furthermore, we need to recognise that the dominance of the psychoanalytic discourse that is used to theoretically ground our understandings of child-perpetrated parricide is also a recent product of the West: analysis of historical cases of parricide that took place prior to the emergence of *developmentalism* (Morss, 1996:28) highlight the historical specificity of such explanatory models. For example, an analysis of newspaper reports from the United States in the nineteenth century found that most cases of parricide were explained in terms of trivial family arguments that, in a minority of cases, escalated into lethal violence (Shon, 2009). In a different time, and with no dominant psychoanalytic discourse to draw on, other more mundane explanations were found which, in the context of what we know about the circumstances of more common kinds of child-perpetrated homicide (see earlier), may perhaps be more fitting.

## School Shootings

Broadly speaking, ‘school shootings’ constitute a criminological phenomenon that refers to gun violence against persons within a school setting. It can take a number of forms: the most common are *targeted attacks* against specific victim(s) while the least common form (but which receives most publicity) are *rampage attacks* that involve multiple victims who are seemingly selected at random (Muschert, 2007).<sup>6</sup> School shootings can be perpetrated by adult offenders but, as with parricide, the term has become almost synonymous with child-perpetrated offences. School shootings are very rare: in the United States, less than 1% of all child-perpetrated homicides take place in school, and those which take the form of rampage-type ‘school shootings’ constitute a very small proportion of this figure (Modzeleski et al., 2008). In the rest of the world, this figure is even smaller<sup>7</sup>. In their

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<sup>6</sup> It is this second, rarer form of school shooting that is the subject of the analysis presented here, since this is the form that has attracted most empirical and theoretical attention and is the form that is generally understood to represent the *criminological phenomenon* known as ‘school shootings’. However, this not an unambiguous category: for further discussion of definitional problems, see Harding et al (2002).

<sup>7</sup> School shootings are often constructed as an ‘American problem’, and there are certainly a number of macro-level factors that make the US a more likely context (such as gun availability, exposure to ‘cultural scripts’ that suggest that school shootings provide resolution, and the failure of support systems for young people – see Harding et al, 2002). However, as Boeckler et al (2013) identify, school shootings have taken place around the world in a surprisingly diverse range of countries, including China, Saudi Arabia and Sweden.

analysis of all recorded rampage-style school shootings from around the world up to the end of 2011 (n=120), 63% of all cases took place in the United States (Boeckler et al, 2013). Boeckler et al (2013) also found that most cases (76%) involved perpetrators of adolescent age (i.e. between 12-21 years), 97% of perpetrators were male, most perpetrators (97%) acted alone and just over a quarter (27%) took their own lives following the attack. An analysis of thirty-seven incidents of rampage-style school shootings between 1974 and 2000 in the United States found that most incidents were planned and 44% of offenders had identified at least one target against whom, in the majority of cases (77%), the perpetrator held a grievance. Most perpetrators (78%) had a history of suicidal ideation and/or had made previous suicide attempts, and 68% of perpetrators had a documented history of 'feeling extremely depressed or desperate' (Vossekuil et al, 2002: 25).

As with parricide, the criminological phenomenon of rampage-style school shootings emerged during the 1990s when seemingly isolated and sporadic incidents reached a 'provisional peak' by the end of that decade (Bockler et al, 2013: 9). These incidents culminated in the case of *Columbine High School* in 1999 (Littleton, Colorado, US.) when 17 year-old Dylan Klebold and 18-year old Eric Harris killed twelve students and one teacher, and injured another twenty-one. Following the attack, they both took their own lives. The case was seminal because CCTV images of the attacks were taken from inside the school and were made available for public consumption across media outlets, enabling the incident to become the most-covered news story of that year in the US. However, unlike cases of child-perpetrated parricide, school shootings present little ambiguity about who are the victims are and who are the perpetrators. Furthermore, unlike cases of parricide, which are very much constructed as extreme responses to intrafamilial problems, school shootings have instigated the development of explanatory frameworks that go beyond the individual. School shootings have been linked to wider social discourses about 'the youth problem' through a range of sociological concepts, including *hegemonic masculinity* (Kimmel and Mahler, 2003), *the spectacle of violence* (Frymer, 2009) and *the performative script* (Muschert and Ragnedda, 2010).

While parricides tend to be considered as impacting only those directly affected by the violence (i.e. the victims and their immediate family), school shootings are frequently constructed as having a much wider social impact. Indeed, dominant cultural discourses about their wider symbolism often eclipse any recognition of the more immediate harms they cause to those directly affected. Empirical work has highlighted how school shootings shape children's and parents' perceptions about the likelihood of being a victim of such a crime, and about perceptions of children's safety in schools more generally (Jones, 2013; Madfis, 2016). Furthermore, school shootings have instigated wider academic debates and policy changes about school security, student profiling and gun control (Borum et al, 2010) and, in the case of Columbine, have been linked to broader academic concerns about increased surveillance, security measures, public fear and terrorism in a new *discourse of control* for the twenty-first century (Altheide, 2009). This is not to suggest that more individualistic explanations are not also put forward to explain school shootings in academic discourse, but the deep symbolism imbued by school shootings has meant that such explanations do not dominate the debate. Thus, when factors such as 'mental illness' or 'family dysfunction' are identified as important contributory factors, they are used in combination with other levels of understanding to produce *multi-level* theories (e.g. see

Levin and Madfis, 2009; Madfis and Levin, 2013; Harding et al, 2002; Heitmeyer et al, 2013). However, this is not an altogether positive shift, since the theoretical process is an 'additive' one. That is, while the preoccupation with the cultural symbolism of school shootings may provide us with *additional* explanatory frameworks to help us make sense of them, their reliance on the traditional Western dualism between 'individual' and 'society' ensure that they are never *transformative*. As Burman found in her analysis of conventional writings on child development, the 'optional overlay' (1997: 136) that constitutes the sociocultural milieu occasionally surrounds the individualised domain of the psychological, but it never fundamentally constructs it. As Burman explains, individuals are constructed as existing 'prior to sociality, and relationships are only formed by exchanges between these already-enclosed individuals. There is no scope here for an account that tries to address our culturally defined construction of forms of experience' (1997: 136).

In the case of school shootings, the academic research merely adds together psychological characteristics to a particular 'sociocultural milieu' (gun culture, masculine culture, American culture™...) to explain something that is extremely rare, in apparent decline and is not representative of the majority of contexts in which children kill. Neither do children represent the perpetrators of 'mass shootings' which, as Squires (2014) points out, mostly involve adults and mostly take place in other public arenas. Yet, as with parricides, it is a 'criminological phenomenon' that has become associated with child perpetrators, again serving to obscure the wider violence and harms that impact children every day.

## **Child Soldiers**

Child soldiers refer to those boys and girls who are under the age of 18 and who are engaged in armed conflict, whether recruited through state forces (such as the military or police) or through non-state armed groups who have political goals. The term is broad and refers to a range of roles which includes fighting but also encompasses cooking, portering, spying, mine-sweeping, guarding and/or performing sexual roles (Child Soldiers International, 2012). To reflect this complex range of roles, and the archetypal masculinity evoked by the term 'soldier', *children associated with fighting forces* is sometimes used in the academic literature, although this term is not without its problems in its connotations of passivity and peripherality. Furthermore, in non-Westernised countries (e.g. in sub-Saharan Africa), where the demarcation between 'child' and 'adult' is less legally-defined and more socially-defined (determined by the completion of culturally-scripted initiation ceremonies), community members may instead refer to 'underage soldiers' or 'minor soldiers' (Wessells, 2006).

It is therefore evident that the term 'child soldiers' is not synonymous with 'children who kill', though it nevertheless includes such children. Thus, we do not know how many children kill within this context, although it is estimated that approximately 300,000-500,000 children from around the world are engaged in armed conflict (Song and de Jong, 2015). Despite the almost-universal principle that children should not be engaged in armed conflict (reflected in the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* by almost two thirds of UN states), children are engaged in armed conflict in many parts of the world including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Syria (Child Soldiers International, 2012). Children's entry into

soldiering inevitably varies: while some children are recruited voluntarily, others are recruited compulsorily while some are recruited through force or abduction, in some cases from as young as ten years (Child Soldiers International, 2016). However, as with school shootings, child soldiering should not be constructed as a ‘cultural problem’ that is ‘over there’: the UK government allows children aged 16 and 17 to engage in hostilities, despite protocols apparently set up to prevent under-18s being deployed in such ways (UNICEF, 2007; Principle 6.4.1).

Denov’s (2012) analysis of representations of child soldiers in newspaper print in the US, Canada and the UK identifies three categorical themes. The first theme identified is *dangerous and disorderly*, which signifies child soldiers as threatening, uncivilised and permanently damaged (having perverted from the natural course of ‘childhood innocence’). This theme serves to pathologise and dehumanise the child and represent warfare in non-Westernised countries as inexplicable and savage. The second theme identified is *the hapless victim*, which signifies child soldiers as victims of powerful warlords: helpless, dependent and non-agentic. Such representations highlight what Burman (1994: 246) refers to as ‘the iconography of emergencies’: that is, media imagery that is used strategically to capture attention but which is ultimately disempowering and degrading for those rendered as ‘other’ by the Western gaze.<sup>8</sup> The third theme identified is *the hero*, which signifies child soldiers as having overcome extreme violence and adversity to achieve redemption, and who may acquire celebrity status having undergone a transformative Westernisation, such as in the case of Ishmael Beah<sup>9</sup> (Denov, 2012).

However, when examining academic texts of child soldiers, it is the second theme – *the hapless victim* – that is dominant. Academic research examining child soldiers is dominated by a biopsychomedical framework and a focus on the post-war impact of trauma on former child soldiers (e.g. Amoné-P’Olak et al, 2014; Hermaneu et al, 2013). Trauma is found to be particularly associated with ‘toxic’ soldiering experiences such as surviving rape and perpetrating violence (Betancourt et al, 2013). Randomised controlled trials for treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in former child soldiers are common, with a focus on measuring post-treatment reductions in quantitative measurements of ‘psychosocial distress’ (e.g. McMullen et al, 2013; Bayer et al, 2007). Summerfield (1999) locates the emergence of the trauma discourse as an international humanitarian issue to the 1990s, when a number of ‘trauma projects’ headed by a range of intergovernmental organisations (e.g. UNICEF, World Health Organisation) began to proliferate in war-affected settings. However, Summerfield (1999) and others (e.g. Harlacher et al, 2006; Both and Reis, 2014) are highly critical of the assumptions that underpin this framework, notably how it objectifies suffering and relocates it within the biopsychomedical realm that demands technical solutions (e.g. psychological counselling) to a technical problem (i.e. ‘trauma’). There are also concerns about the assumption that Westernised psychological frameworks

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<sup>8</sup> For example, consider the title of the recent report by Child Soldiers International, *Lost Childhood: Caught in armed violence in Jharkhand* (April 2016) which, as Burman (1994) identified over 20 years earlier, represents ‘an idealised representation of Northern models of childhood, [that] achieves globalized status through its inscription within international development policies and legislation’ (Burman, 1994: 242)

<sup>9</sup> Ishmael Beah was forced to become a child soldier at the age of 13 during the Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002). After three years he was rescued by UNICEF and moved to New York, where he was fostered and eventually graduated with a degree. His highly-acclaimed memoir, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* was published in 2007.

capture a universal human response to such suffering (Summerfield, 1999). Or that specific 'vulnerable' groups (such as 'child soldiers') need to be targeted for psychological intervention, an assumption based on Westernised conceptions of healthy and pathological child development (Boyden, 1994). Summerfield (1999) cites evidence that child soldiers who have been forced to kill require not psychological intervention, but attention to their families, their education and their communities to repair the harms caused (in effect, to *return* them to childhood). Thus, such frameworks and associated practices risk eroding traditional values and practices, familial networks, civic services and social cohesion '...and [which] therefore destabilizes the entire social ecology of affected communities' (Vindevoel et al, 2012: 2). Yet again, we see the construction of a 'criminological phenomenon' that over-emphasises the psychologised individual child and which serves to obscure both the wider social contexts of war that impact on children every day (including UK contexts), and the more commonplace contexts in which children kill others.

Such complexities are illuminated in the recent case of Dominic Ongwen, a former member of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda who is to be tried at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for a series of war crimes including murder, pillage and enslavement (Burke, 2016). His legal team plan to raise the defence that he was abducted by the LRA when he was nine years old and should therefore be considered a victim as much as a perpetrator. In her research with child soldiers following post-war reintegration in Sierra Leone, Shepler identified 'discourses of abdicated responsibility' (2005: 199) within their narrative accounts, whereby agency was practised paradoxically through claims of wartime *nonagency* by drawing on appeals to their victimhood and innocence. Such discursive practices enabled their reintegration into their communities and facilitated forgiveness and acceptance. Similar examples of agentic claims of nonagency are evident in the defence claims made during parricide trials through appeals to 'battered child syndrome' and PTSD, and in school shooting trials through appeals to psychotic disorders and childhood trauma (see Langman, 2009). Thus, the status of childhood, and its implicit assumptions of non-agency, can be usefully mobilised in cases of children who kill, such that while children who kill question our understandings about the limits of childhood, they never transform them.

## Conclusion

While there is much to distinguish prevailing discourses about these three dominant categories of 'children who kill', they also have much in common. All three criminological phenomena emerged during the 1990s and all construct the problem as exclusive to children. Furthermore, they all serve to decontextualise and dehumanise the children of which they speak. The complexity of the children's lives – before, during and after the critical 'incident' that defines them – is lost, and the dichotomous discourses that construct them both as *victims* and as *threats* represent Westernised constructions of childhood more generally: at once, they are both innocent and passive, and deviant and duplicitous. The relative rarity of children who kill contributes to their exoticisation, but the academic fetishisation of these three particular criminological phenomena – at the expense of exploring the more mundane and more commonplace contexts in which children kill – exacerbates this exoticisation. And despite academics' continual calls for the media to

avoid focusing only on ‘sensational’ crimes that fuel moral panics and skew public discourse, we may be guilty of such practices ourselves.

Furthermore, the even greater rarity of female children who kill renders gender invisible from the analysis: ‘children’ and ‘boys’ become synonymous, and rather than being foregrounded as a clearly important analytic dimension to all three phenomena, gender remains on the sidelines. Other important contextual dimensions are also lost: in their detailed longitudinal analysis of child-perpetrated homicide, Loeber and Farrington (2011) identified a series of ‘risk factors’ that differentiated children who kill from other child offenders and from child non-offenders. They found that neighbourhood, low socio-economic status, and being born into unemployment were key, and were far more predictive of child-perpetrated homicide than any individual factor. Factors that were of no significance were parental factors, peer relationships and psychopathic characteristics. The ‘exceptional’ status of children who kill and claims of their aberration has the potential to open up space for alternative understandings of childhood to emerge and allow us to challenge the status quo. Unfortunately, current dominant discourses of ‘children who kill’ merely serve to perpetuate entrenched Westernised conceptions of child development.

### **Final word: transgressing the final frontier of childhood**

This chapter is oriented to the idea of the ‘limits of childhood’. Children who kill – in any context – raise uncomfortable questions about the extent to which we can apply a critical framework that celebrates *difference* and questions so-called normative trajectories. In the context of children who kill, we cannot suggest that their ‘transgressions’ have equal moral weight to some of those other ‘transgressions’ identified in this collection. However, as this collection has emphasised, children are *not only* their difference, they are so much more than that, and one concern is that, once children transgress the final frontier of childhood and kill another, then that is *all* they are. In some cases, an option is available for such children can find their way ‘back’ to childhood (whatever that means). In other cases (such as the case of Thompson and Venables), even that option is unavailable.

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