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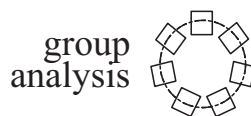
Homophobic and racist gang violence and the rise of fascism: Group psychic secondary skin formation as a perverse binding

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This article aims to offer both theoretical and practical insights for clinical engagement with male adolescents exhibiting violent behaviour in the context of gang involvement. My objective is to equip clinicians with conceptual tools to address the myriad of complex issues associated with gang violence, particularly in relation to the contemporary rise of alt-right populist movements that propagate abhorrent homophobic, misogynistic, and racist narratives through the extensive reach of influential online social media platforms. This article analyses the psychodynamics of these adolescents, which render them vulnerable to participation in gang violence, as evidenced by recent occurrences in the UK involving racially motivated gangs, igniting fires at mosques, and targeting victims. Furthermore, I aim to elaborate on Esther Bick's concept of psychic skin within a collective or gang context. In this examination, the article introduces the concept of a metaphorical 'group secondary psychic skin formation' as a dysfunctional and perverse psychic container, applicable to individuals ensnared by violent gangs, resulting in destructive actions and violent behaviours that often lead to extreme criminality.

Key words: gang violence, racism, homophobia, psychic skin, alt-right, Lucy Letby, lone wolf

Introduction

The murders committed by a black male adolescent, Axel Muganwa Rudakubana, triggered a terrifyingly racist response with coordinated racist lynch mobs marauding around various British cities, hunting down refugees—black and brown people, or those suspected as being Muslim, and those professionals who would wish to help and support them. Axel Muganwa Rudakubana, with a history of mental disorder, is alleged to have murdered three children and is also charged with 10 counts of attempted murder during a psychotic break in a one-off incident in a day nursery. This is contrasted with Lucy Letby, a young, white, middle-class, highly educated woman, a children's nurse with no known history of mental illness who, in her professional capacity, was convicted of murdering seven infant children and attempting to murder 10 more over at least a one-year period. That a neonatal nurse was murdering babies under her care and attempting to harm more is hard to comprehend. But so is the fact that healthcare professionals raising several grave concerns that Letby may have been behind these deaths were silenced and, worse still, were accused of bullying and threatened with referral to the General Medical Council. Incredibly, they were forced to formally apologise for bullying Letby.

This article is *most certainly not* a discussion of the police investigations, judicial process, expert testimony, the threshold of evidence or safety of actual or potential findings between these two painful and tragic cases, or indeed of the two who is more culpable for the crimes committed—which of either is the more mad or just plain bad. Instead, the primary consideration here is to contrast the factors that triggered very different responses to Axel Muganwa Rudakubana before any finding and conviction compared to the case of the convicted child serial killer Lucy Letby, a young middle-class white woman from a privileged family, who is one of only four women in the UK to be given a whole life tariff.

This 34-year-old woman will, if all her ongoing appeals continue to fail, spend the rest of her life in prison. This is in contrast with the racist lynch mob response to the alleged murders, even before the conclusion of the prosecution, committed by Axel Muganwa Rudakubana, a black male adolescent with significant mental health issues. In writing, the Rudakubana court case trial is still ongoing and has yet to conclude. It would seem, however, that the more racist members of the community have already tried and convicted him and others like him, black and brown people, and sentenced him and others like him to death by racist lynch mob.

This article is written against a backdrop of multiple historic murders here in the UK by medical professionals of vulnerable patients in their care, such as Beverly Allet, Harold Shipman, and Colin Norris. Such murderers are often referred to as '*the Angels of death'*. In parallel, there have been various racist and homophobic multiple murders here in the UK and the US. In the US, many have been shootings by a single murderer—referred to as a *'lone wolf'*—often but not exclusively acting according to disturbed racist and homophobic ideologies.

These 'hate crimes' targeting marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as the gay club in Florida, killing 49 people, and the African American churches and synagogues in the US, are often ideological, an enactment of white supremacist and homophobic terrorist ideas. However, some have been much more, at least on the surface, random murdering of schoolchildren and their teachers, perhaps due to greater accessibility to assault weapons in the US and vulnerability of the population targeted—but what makes this different is it is without any apparent ideological underpinning. Such an ideological underpinning usually holds a disturbance within itself, in that ideology can be psychotic, but at the same time, leaves its advocates calm and free of feeling that they are in an extreme state of mind. In other words, on the other hand, non-ideological murderers such as the *Angels of death*, who predate from an actively distressed and disturbed state of mind, 'do to do it'.

The Lost boys—disaffected white male youths
What is distinct about the recent racist lynch mobs that have been marauding cities in the UK is the sense of organization via online forums that have an incredible reach, adding to it a much more sinister and deliberate dimension. I have written about lynch mobs in two previous articles (Stevenson, 2019; Stevenson, 2021a) and discussed in some detail the impact of what it means to be the victim of a racist or homophobic lynch mob as opposed to the psychodynamics of those who are members of such lynch mobs. Here, I will attempt to discuss the specific attraction of such gangs and focus on the attraction they offer to disaffected (very often white) males, and I will attempt to draw out the motivational similarities and different dynamics of a '*lone wolf'* perpetrator and a gang member.

What is evident within a lynch mob, a grouping or ganging as such, offers a sense of stability and structure outside of the ordinary

rules of established society, and the questions need to be asked: *What does a lynch mob with its much harsher rules in terms of membership and discipline offer to those that it ensnares? Is the delinquent subculture a reflection of the personality structure of those who gravitate towards them? Do these sub-groups ensnare those more likely to have symptomatic personality disorders? Are they conflicted in the same way as a neurotic criminal? Do the group members feel wronged or underprivileged in some way? Are there issues and traumas in their earlier history that are being acted out within the lynch mob?*

Men and boys are raised in a social context imbued with notions of what it means to be masculine. Many are highly anxious about not reaching normative masculinity or its notions (Jukes, 2010). These adolescents and young men most vulnerable to being ensnared by these ideologies are in an identity confusion or developmental limbo between late adolescence and the identity integration of adulthood (Erikson, 1950). Preoccupied with personal grievances due to pathological narcissism and intense sensitization to rejection, they have an inflated but fragile sense of self-worth that is easily shamed and shattered. The consequent humiliation is quickly defended against with rage and motivates them to find an ideology within which to frame their grievance. An absence of a father or credible male role model is particularly problematic for these males, leaving them vulnerable to gangs or any adult male role models who convey authority and a warped belief in ideology, even if they sanction planned violence.

Kinouani (2023) explores the complex dynamics of racism in group contexts. She investigates how specific white individuals, frequently labelled as 'racists', are scapegoated, acting as vessels for society's recognized racism. This scapegoating enables the wider white community to dissociate from racism, preserving a self-image of innocence and morality. She argues that this process not only perpetuates systemic racism but also silences and marginalizes the voices of people of colour. By attributing racism solely to these 'low-value' white bodies—pejoratively labelled as 'white trash', the structural and pervasive nature of racism is obscured, thereby hindering genuine dialogue and healing within group contexts and marginalizes the voices of people of colour within groups attributing racism solely to these 'low-value' white bodies, the structural and pervasive nature of racism is obscured, hindering genuine dialogue and healing within group contexts.

Definition of gang violence
Gang violence refers to criminal activities carried out by organized groups known as gangs, which typically engage in violent acts to establish dominance, intimidate rival groups, or assert control within a community. Such violence includes acts of aggression, intimidation, or crime perpetrated by gang members, often targeting rival groups, communities, or individuals. Gangs frequently employ violence to maintain control, enforce their rules, retaliate against enemies, and assert power within a specific territory. This violence can manifest through organized criminal activities, street fights, or targeted attacks. Gang violence may be characterized as a 'racist mob' if certain criteria are met, including *ideological motivation*: violence driven by racial hatred, prejudice, or a desire to assert the dominance of one racial group over another; *collective identity*: perpetrators identify strongly with their racial or ethnic group and dehumanize the target group; *group cohesion and anonymity*: group dynamics may reinforce extreme behaviours, where individual members feel emboldened or absolved of personal responsibility due to the collective nature of their actions; *targeted violence*: the violence is explicitly directed at individuals or communities based on their racial or ethnic identity; *social symbolism*: the violence serves a symbolic function of instilling fear or reinforcing the racial hierarchy within a society.

Freud's theory in group psychology and the analysis of the Ego
Freud's (1921) work on group psychology provides insights into the dynamics of collective violence. Freud argued that individuals behave differently in a group due to psychological processes such as identification, emotional contagion, and diminished individual ego control. His key concepts relevant to gang violence and racist mob behaviour include *identification with the leader*; Freud posited that groups form around a leader, with members projecting their individual egos onto this figure. In the context of racist mobs, charismatic figures or ideological beliefs may serve as symbolic leaders. *Loss of individuality*: Within a group, individuals may experience a weakening of their personal moral constraints, leading them to commit acts they would not perform alone. This explains how gang members can engage in extreme violence when among their peers. *Unconscious drives*: Freud suggested that groups tap into unconscious instincts, such as

aggression and the fear of the 'other'. In the context of a racist mob, these instincts are directed towards the perceived threat posed by a different racial group. *Group solidarity through shared aggression*: Freud believed that hostility towards an external group reinforces solidarity within the group perpetrating the violence. Racist mobs, for instance, utilize acts of violence as a means to bond and affirm their group identity. Gang violence, particularly when racially motivated, can be understood through Freud's lens of group psychology. Members of such groups may experience a temporary dissolution of individual accountability, driven by an unconscious desire for identification, protection, and power within the collective.

These insights help explain why gang violence, especially in a homophobic and racist context, often escalates beyond rational limits and becomes symbolic of broader social anxieties and conflicts. Freud (1921) offers significant insights into the dynamics of collective human behaviour, albeit with less development than his exploration of the individual psyche. A fundamental aspect of Freud's theory regarding groups is the notion of collective identity. He argued that when individuals come together to form a group, they undergo a transformation that impacts their individual psyches. This transformation results in the emergence of a shared identity or collective ego, which surpasses individual distinctions. In this context, the group manifests as a formidable entity that influences its members' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Individuals frequently surrender their unique identities within a group context and acquiesce to the collective will. This phenomenon can be traced to the primal instincts intrinsic to all humans. The group offers a sense of belonging and security, as members derive comfort from the shared beliefs and objectives of the collective. Nevertheless, this amalgamation of identities may also diminish critical thinking and personal accountability as individuals become increasingly vulnerable to groupthink and conformity.

A fundamental aspect of Freud's theoretical framework is the leader's function within a group. He posited that leaders often embody collective ideals and aspirations, serving as a figurehead for the group's ambitions. A leader's capacity to inspire and mobilize individuals derives from their adeptness at connecting with group members' unconscious desires and fears. This interaction cultivates a bond between the leader and their followers, a phenomenon frequently observed as transference, wherein individuals project their emotions and feelings onto the leader. Group members tend to idealize their

leaders, perceiving them as endowed with attributes they themselves lack. This idealization can engender profound emotional attachments, affording leaders substantial influence over the group's direction and decision-making processes. Notwithstanding, Freud cautioned against the potential dangers inherent in this dynamic, which may precipitate authoritarianism and suppress dissent within the group.

Freud's exploration of group psychology also emphasizes the tension between individual and group dynamics. While individuals may seek to assert their individuality, the pull of the collective often proves to be a formidable force. This tension is particularly evident when group cohesion is prioritized over individual expression. Freud highlighted the paradoxical nature of group behaviour, where individuals can experience both a sense of empowerment and a loss of autonomy.

Moreover, Freud's theory suggests that the unconscious motivations that drive individual behaviour do not disappear in a group context; rather, they are amplified and manifested in collective actions. The group setting can serve as a catalyst for expressing repressed emotions and instincts, leading to both constructive and destructive outcomes. This duality underscores the complexity of human group interactions and the need for a nuanced understanding of collective behaviour. His exploration of group psychology offers profound insights into the dynamics of collective behaviour, including the phenomenon of group violence. By examining the mechanisms of collective identity, the influence of leadership, and the interplay between individual and group dynamics, we can better understand the psychological underpinnings that contribute to violent actions within groups, highlighting how the loss of individual accountability, the role of charismatic leaders, and the activation of primal instincts can culminate in a '*fascist state of mind'* and destructive, collective behaviour.

There is a social context to any group that can represent a wider social pathology, whether this be racist or homophobic violence. This applies to all groups, from task-focused work groups to violent gangs. The latter is in thrall to the most malign and insidious anti-group phenomena. When they become gangs, the structure of human groups relates to the states of mind and can be displayed from a descriptive and theoretical point of view. Ganging dynamics reflect a move from the states of mind and can be related to Klein's (1959) description of the depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions that are not just located in infancy and childhood. The work group from the depressive position

(concern for others) and the gang reflect regression to the paranoid-schizoid (egocentric and paranoid) and become dangerous when they dominate in adulthood, such as in regression to the paranoid-schizoid position, which is a characteristic of the gang—a group that is functional and approximated to normality (depressive) as opposed to a gang formed by a pathological organization (paranoid-schizoid) led by psychotic mechanisms. The latter offers false stability with paranoid fears and a lack of genuine stability at the nucleus of such a group.

These deadly group dynamics are driven by a particularly malignant type of narcissism that demands subjugation in the most brutal and absolute terms. These groups are malignantly bound together to generate potentially deadly enactments that target specifically marginalized populations deliberately. These destructive and powerful interpsychic and interpersonal group dynamics occur within a malignant group matrix that has been generated with the express purpose of gaining gratification by causing the most devasting, insidious injury and trauma to others (Stevenson, 2024b). Within these groups, members are sharing and co-creating experiences which are specifically directed at a target. Each person modifies the form and actions of the group, but in this psychotic process, individuals can lose their boundaries. This involves a particular use of projective identification that is so powerful that there is a compulsion to share extreme experiences and is used to control group members (Stevenson, 2021a; Stevenson, 2024a). Here in the UK, 'Paki bashing' and 'Queer bashing' were almost rites of passage in northern England and the East End of London (Hobbs, 2016). They have a degree of respectability in some areas, and these communities remain vulnerable today.

Definitions and theoretical context

To characterize a disturbance as the work of a 'racist mob', it is essential to define the criteria clearly. Are these individuals acting on shared racist ideologies, or do group dynamics impulsively shape their actions without explicitly shared beliefs? Addressing these questions prevents assumptions and enables a more precise analytical approach. Similarly, the term gang violence requires elaboration. How should a gang be defined—through formal structures, shared criminal behaviours, or socio-political narratives shaped by media and law enforcement? Research indicates that these narratives often racialize such terms, overlooking broader socio-economic and systemic factors influencing group behaviours (Armstead et al., 2021; Williams, 2015;

Cayli Messina, 2024). Therefore, providing clear definitions and contextualizing terms like gang violence in relation to civil unrest, rioting, or political protests is crucial for accurate interpretation.

Given the emotionally and politically charged nature of this article, it is critical to ground concepts such as racist mob, gang violence, and white supremacist dynamics within group and analytic theory. Freud posits that individuals in large groups can lose self-control, leading to shared impulses driven by unconscious motives that often manifest as aggression or exclusion. These insights help clarify whether participants in collective violence are ideologically motivated (e.g., a racist mob) or influenced by more complex situational factors.

Both shared ideologies and impulsive group behaviours can drive gang violence. While some gangs are ideologically structured around racist or supremacist beliefs, others may not hold such explicit ideologies. In these cases, violence may arise from peer pressure, group norms, or the pursuit of social status within the gang. Even when gang members lack strong racist or homophobic convictions, they may still engage in targeted violence due to these social expectations. Law enforcement typically defines gangs as groups of three or more individuals who adopt a collective identity and engage in criminal activities to further their objectives. However, media and law enforcement narratives often shape public perceptions, which may emphasize certain racial, ethnic, or LGBT groups, contributing to racialized or homophobic views of gang activity.

These narratives can obscure the socio-economic and systemic factors that influence gang formation and behaviour. Research (Ghandnoosh et al., 2023; Cayli Messina, 2024) highlights that racialization of gangs often results in biased policing and policies that fail to address root causes, such as poverty, educational inequities, and limited economic opportunities. Recognizing the complexity of gang violence requires situating it within larger social phenomena like civil unrest or political protests. While often portrayed as purely criminal, gang violence can sometimes intersect with political or social movements. In some cases, gangs emerge in response to perceived social injustices or as protective entities within marginalized communities. Therefore, distinguishing between criminal and politically motivated violence is essential for accurate analysis and effective policy development. Gang violence is a multifaceted issue shaped by ideologies, group dynamics, and socio-political narratives. Developing interventions and responses requires a nuanced understanding of these interconnected factors.

Racist riots in British cities 2024
In the summer of 2024, the United Kingdom experienced significant unrest following a tragic stabbing incident in Southport on July 29. The ensuing riots, fuelled by misinformation and far-right agitation, led to widespread violence and numerous arrests. By 1 September 2024, authorities had arrested approximately 1,280 individuals in connection with the riots, with nearly 800 facing charges. As of 13 August 2024, 54 individuals had been convicted, with 47 adults and three minors receiving prison sentences averaging two years. The average age of those charged was 32, with over a third being over 40 years old. Notably, 34.6% of defendants were over 40, and the youngest individual charged was 12. A significant majority of those charged were male, accounting for 92.5% of the defendants. Many rioters originated from economically deprived areas characterized by poor health, low education levels, and high unemployment rates (Braga et al., 2024). This suggests that underlying social and economic grievances may have contributed to the unrest. Contrary to initial beliefs that external agitators were responsible, data indicates that most rioters were locals from the affected communities. These statistics highlight the complex interplay of misinformation, socioeconomic factors, and local dynamics that contributed to the 2024 UK riots.

Statistics on arrests, particularly for events like the UK riots of 2011 and those occurring in 2024, can provide empirical comparisons to address this concern. Data from sources such as The Guardian newspaper (4 Feb 2025) highlight the complex socio-economic and racial dynamics involved, indicating that broad-brush descriptions of rioters as gang-affiliated may be inaccurate or oversimplified. While certain individuals may have had affiliations with street organizations, this alone does not explain the structural factors contributing to the events. Furthermore, white supremacist dynamics—both within and outside of law enforcement—may have influenced the framing of these disturbances in public discourse, warranting careful examination of how narratives around criminality and racial identity intersect.

**A collective second psychic skin formation/psychic
retreat—a perverse binding**
In her seminal paper Esther Bick (1968) describes the function of skin and its psychical equivalent in terms of the necessary primitive

binding together the parts of the personality. This can become faulty early on due to problems of dependence and separation. This intensifies during adolescence when dependence and separation are renegotiated; primitive parts of the personality, according to Bick, have no binding force amongst themselves and must be held together by the psychic skin, which functions as a boundary, creating an internal function and space that contains parts of the personality. This depends on the introjection of good core object relations, including an actual or symbolic paternal function—*the law of the father*, which enables triangular thinking and reduces the compulsion to act out.

As described by Bick, the primary psychic skin provides an internalized psychic structure that enables the management of frustration and anxiety, mitigates the excessive use of projections and projective identifications and increases the management of neurotic and psychotic processes. In the psychotic structure, primitive effects, particularly hatred, contempt, disgust, shame and humiliation, dominate and motivate violent action. Such violence is motivated by a state of mind in which the capacity to think and symbolize is absent. Rational thought gives way to powerful effects and impulses that dominate group behaviour. This amounts to a loss of reflective capacity or mentalization and regression to more infantile modes of thinking. A movement between psychotic and neurotic states of mind is an ordinary aspect of mental life, with individuals and groups moving in and out of such states of mind, often without realizing. In the neurotic structure, what is contained are the previously unmanaged, unconscious aspects of experience, which first need to be made thinkable and, therefore, tolerable. This containing psychic structure enables symbolization of the difficult-to-manage experience to facilitate the mental representation as in this instance of a potentially racist or homophobic situation, making it more accessible to thinking rather than acting out in a conflictual way.

A failure in the container-containing relationship (Bion, 1957, 1962) underpins Esther Bick's concept of second psychic skin formation, which applies to a dysfunctional group formation. In so doing, I introduce the concept of a metaphorical *'collective second psychic skin formation*—as a perverse binding*'*. This is a dysfunctional psychic container offered by membership of a gang as it applies to, in this instance, disaffected white males but serves specifically to enable them to evacuate unbearable states of mind via racialized and homophobic projections and projective identifications, leading to destructive and deadly enactments that can take them into

the criminal sphere. (Concerning the recent racist riots by far-right activists here in the UK, The National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) confirmed that, as of 30 August 2024, 1,280 people had been arrested for their involvement, with 796 people charged.)

If such an essential internalization fails, it may not be possible to create a containing space within the self, leading to severe anxieties about identity and a chronic fear of instability and internal collapse. I want to pronounce what Bick describes as a symptom of the *primary psychic skin function disturbance*. I attempt to extend this to developing a '*second psychic skin formation'* as a substitute for the *primary psychic skin*-containing function. Faulty development of this primal skin function can result either from defects in the adequacy of the actual object or from fantasy attacks on it, which impair introjection. What follows is the formation of a muscular type of self-containment—'a second psychic skin formation'—in place of an integrating, holding skin container. Here, I describe how dependence on the object is replaced by a pseudo-independence on a dysfunctional group or gang, which I term as a '*collective second psychic skin formation*' to create a substitute for this *primary psychic skin container function*.

In this discussion, the formation of a *collective second psychic skin* is based on an adhesive binding to a group that projects a clear outside and inside, no doubt between a belonging or exclusion, who is right and who is wrong and a 'for us or against us dynamic', rather than identification with a thinking containing object that can tolerate the anxiety of nuance and value the richness of otherness and differences. This faulty primary psychic skin formation produces a general fragility in later integration and organization. The *'collective second psychic skin'* phenomenon, which replaces primary skin integration, manifests itself as either a partial or total type of muscularity that offers a promising but highly conditional form of protection and membership within a group to a personality and an identity that is experienced as fragile and unstable—vulnerable to catastrophic collapse.

The gang formation as it is discussed here is a development related to Steiner's concept of a *Psychic retreat and pathological organizations* (2003) and Esther Bick's (1968) *The experience of the skin in early object relations*—by way of *group second psychic skin formation* which wraps itself around members in a dysfunctional way, which makes it different from early *psychic skin formation* based on the introjection of good object relations, which binds the personality

enabling thinking and reflection. The promise of this type of psychic retreat includes taking refuge from a complicated world and a new beginning through the adhesive nature of gang members being together. Robust and not alone, less vulnerable to paranoid, vengeful attacks due to their projection of hate onto the other. This is influenced by adverse childhood experiences and the complexities of the modern world, particularly for certain sections of the population who often feel that a sense of power has been taken from them and replaced with a feeling of powerlessness. Perversely, such gang membership offers a sense of stability and belonging that many, particularly those who have suffered adverse childhood experiences, did not experience within their own families and communities.

What makes a gang different from a group or team is a destructive core purpose rather than a desire for reparation and connection through a genuine relationship that requires empathy and a concern for the internal and external world of the other. The *collective psychic second-skin formation* provides a fantasy of belongingness and a sense of protection and holding. Swaddled in the collective psychic skin, the individual feels much more potent in the sense of an 'us and them' related to the excitation offered by the destructiveness of a gang and the attraction to ideological positionings that are without any doubt or uncertainty and do not require thinking or reflection, making the complexities of life simple. This is an enthralling, irresistible, and mesmerizing opportunity for some vulnerable to malignant and manipulative leaders who offer them simple solutions to complex problems.

The original group is that of the family. Difficulties in the internalization of a 'good enough' family result in feelings of sometimes extreme discomfort, which is often the case for those who have been traumatized and abused within their original family. This can result in a compulsion to expel these feelings into a wider external group. There is a magical, or indeed psychotic, wish for a group with an ability to manage the discomfort experienced by the individual, or at least this is what the external group is felt to promise—by way of a transformational object (Bollas, 1979). This promise includes an opportunity not to think and an increased capacity to take on the world.

However, these gangs are not reliably the 'transformative object' (Bollas, 1979) that is sought; instead, they are often a manifestation of a damaging anti-group (Nitsun, 1996), an identification with aggressors, and an enactment of a repetition compulsion (Freud,

1936) played out to vengeful, destructive ends. The lynch mob offers, by way of a 'transformational space', the promises of a 'transformed self' and the allure of fitting into a niche group. Members feel that they can, at last, belong, albeit temporarily. However, these groups very often mask an angry depression, terrible anguish and identification with aggressors by attempting, unconsciously, to take control and revenge for perceived grievances (Stevenson, 2024a). When a psychotic structure, which always requires the destruction of important mental functions, such as empathy and reality testing, dominates, this leads to an impairment of the ability to engage with the real world and take refuge in phantasy through excessive projection and the hatred of thinking and denigration of the other which results in a paranoid fear in terms of the projected retaliation from the object.

In the following vignettes, I will illustrate the consequence of such a failure and how this links to the work of Esther Bick and the development of a '*collective second psychic skin formation'*, reflecting the appeal of such dysfunctional and dangerous group dynamics. The failure fuels a retreat into *a collective second psychic skin formation* with others, who are felt to share the same states of mind that wrap around its members, a process of sticking together within a gang bounded by an envious attack on a perceived enemy. This *second collective psychic skin formation* holds them within the group by offering a degree of protection from paranoid anxiety. These gangs generate a very toxic form of projective identification and 'malignant mirroring' (Zinkin, 1983) that binds them together, involving a transgressive core purpose in a non-thinking, non-reflecting, destructive, and hateful way. This hate is dysfunctionally turned into an identity and belief in an access to a truth that cannot be challenged due to a terror of making emotional contact with the other that is so desperately needed (Stevenson, 2024a).

It should not be lost on the reader that the concept of '*collective second psychic skin formation'* links well with the concrete concept of race based on skin colour, as it is a visible code that points directly to a racist history that impacts black and brown people specifically. This 'colour coded' racism (Dalal, 2002) stems from the beginnings of notions of categorization of 'black and white people' during colonization and the slave trade and the aggressive emergence of 'white supremacy' that requires the socially constructed subordination of a class of 'black people' to bolster a construction of some people being categorized as white and superior (Stevenson, 2020, 2021b) This

hierarchal 'caste system' makes these categorizations visibly available for conscious prejudice and unconscious racist projections, which are embedded in societal, legal, historical and institutional structures placing people on different levels of status based on the colour of their skin (Wilkerson, 2020).

Group formation and the gay male child and adolescent

Male children form groups that are said to be much more hierarchically arranged than those of girls. Mainly for their social interaction, children aged six to 12 move away from the family group into the world of peers. There is an intense need to mix, often in same-gender spaces (Downey and Friedman, 1995). This period proves to be particularly traumatic for the gay child, and much of my clinical work with gay men shows this as a harrowing and humiliating time in their lives and identity formation, leading to ongoing emotional scarring well into adulthood. Some of the most powerful heterosexist and homophobic influences in childhood come from the social world of peers during the juvenile years; this very often leads to ostracization and bullying for non-gender-conforming boys. With a high level of non-gender-performing boys being found in later life to be same-sex attracted (Marino et al., 2023). Temperamental differences during childhood lead to enduring abuse during juvenile and early adulthood.

This is very often internalized in that the gay boy internalizes the same view of himself as his bullying peers, often reporting being explicitly excluded and alienated during middle and later childhood. An important psychological process that leads to internalized homophobia during late childhood is *an identification with the aggressor*, a mental mechanism common in victims of abuse. Although still male, he is different from other boys in terms of his self-perception and interest and how the world relates to him. This generates a profound unease in the gay boy, as he cannot locate himself in a particular peer group. A sense of not belonging, loneliness and an empty feeling of otherness, with a sense that his self-image is somewhat deviant and unacceptable.

The experience of being different is a label for inner experience, reflecting a strain on his self-cohesiveness. This generates a strong desire and vulnerability to belong somewhere safe and to be less powerless. Through a 'transformational space', the gang offers the

promises of a 'transformed self' and the allure of fitting into a niche. He can finally feel a sense of belonging, albeit temporarily, but as described in the following vignette, a significant tax must be paid.

Vignette 1 Alex—a homophobic lynching

Alex was 17 years old when I met him. He had already spent a year in juvenile detention after he and six other male youths had rounded up and attacked a gay man outside of a nightclub. Alex was convicted of smashing this man over the head with a bottle, causing a skull fracture. This was a particularly vicious attack. Reading his file, I initially felt anxious and fearful about the prospect of meeting Alex, and before he entered, I moved my chair close to the door in case I became under threat. I was somewhat embarrassed when he entered my consulting room, and I was struck by just how small and effeminate he seemed. He looked at me with a fearful and anxious expression.

Alex had a low-income family history; his father, a very violent and frightening man, left the family home when he was six years of age, leaving his mother, an alcoholic, to care for him and three other older male siblings on her own. He was bullied by his elder siblings and suffered bullying in school for being a sissy. I was struck by my negative, somewhat punitive feelings toward him, which made me feel rather ashamed. Given his pathetic and weak presentation, it was difficult for me to imagine Alex showing any scary or menacing behaviour. Clearly, the gang offered him a sense of power, belonging and safety. Also, he had an identification with his aggressors and an ability to project his victim self onto those that the gang targeted. However, he was ultimately scapegoated by the gang and was pushed forward to do most of the violent enactments, and he took most of the punishment as a consequence. He was conned and tricked by the group dynamics that ruthlessly exploited his vulnerability, and he failed to convincingly turn his victim self into a perpetrator because he was ultimately the victim of the contempt of the gang when he was chosen for sacrifice. He was threatened by the gang to 'keep his bitch, faggot mouth shut', leaving him too terrified to give the details of the other gang members to the police, which added to his harsh treatment by the court.

There is some gratification for those involved in these groupings. These groupings gave Alex access to a set of circumstances and links with acts that he would not have ordinarily engaged in due to being forbidden by law and his fragility. *To what extent is the loss of his*

individuality a factor that allowed him to forego and be part of something so remorseless?

Individual psychopathy and temperament are what differentiate him from those who do not carry out acts of violence despite any grievances that they may have. Through the lens and application of contemporary psychoanalytic and group analytic theory, understanding group or individual violence recognizes the significance of attachment, object relations, mental structure, defences, and the developmental course. These dynamics are embedded in larger social, religious, and political forces—whether ideologically driven or not—in the sense that an individual decides to commit the act alone or within a closely affiliated group (Volkan, 2023), this decision, or indeed a compulsion, is heavily influenced by interpersonal and other social pressures. The violent act may also be understood to be based on historical traumas that remain unresolved, unsymbolized and unspoken, containing within it a myriad of unconscious individual and collective fantasies, traumatic memories, defences and wishes that may be unconscious.

Delinquents find themselves pitted against society and often respond with disproportionate hostility, which seems to increase in their gradations and responses. This has a very damaging effect on delinquents' suffering in any regard. They will often present as lonely and seek solace in groups of others with similar difficulties. This provides a binding or swaddling—'*a collective second skin formation'*—that mitigates the feelings of loneliness and guilt for the delinquent acts. This is a poisonous structure reflecting personality issues and delinquent needs, often exploited by destructive forces in society and within the gang itself, whose actions seem like a redressing and a taking-back of something that has been stolen.

What is currently concerning about gang violence in terms of delinquent adolescents and young adult males is that they are now systematically organized online lynch mobs who gather and locate and exact a target or targets, as we have just seen here in the UK with the racist riots. This is a modern set of lynching dynamics embedded in societal structures and technological advances that enhance primitive mental states and enactments, providing these racist gangs with an exactness, efficiency, and strategy around the '*time, task and territory*' of the attack. They know where and when to congregate and who they are going to lynch.

At this time in history and now with the emergence of compelling and highly destructive leadership figures such as *Andrew Tate, Tommy*

Robinson, Elon Musk and even *Donald Trump*, who are experienced as a potentially life-changing Messiah—or a transformational object (Bollas, 1979), who rely on, and spout the most grossly racist and misogynistic troupes from awesomely powerful and influential social media platforms. These leaders are appealing to disaffected and delinquent groups of young white men, very specifically those who are ensnared into a group ideological positioning of the '*populist movements'* worldwide referred to as the '*alt-right*,' that have been actively harnessing psychotic group processes for decades.

This far-right ideology generates, very often, racialized fake news, leading to sections of the more vulnerable and marginalized sections of the population becoming more vulnerable to psychologically disturbed processes of thought and action, spreading psychically destructive communications, creating a mentally confusing virus, breading fear and civil unrest that becomes an unthinkable mental reality in the individual that needs to be violently evacuated into the matrix of a dysfunctional group—such as a lynch mob hunting for '*not me'* victims. This grouping reinforces maladaptive and anti-developmental processes and reinforces very destructive splitting processes that, as mentioned, are not just intrapsychic but become embedded in dysfunctional and destructive gang dynamics that target 'others' who are considered to belong to an *'out-group'* that is different.

The banality of evil

The thesis of this article evokes Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil', a critical idea articulated in her seminal work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (2006), rooted in her observations during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a senior Nazi official responsible for orchestrating the logistics of the Holocaust. Arendt asserts that Eichmann was neither a fervent ideologue nor a monstrous figure driven by intense hatred; rather, he was an ordinary bureaucrat who unthinkingly complied with orders, lacking critical reflection or personal accountability.

The term 'banality of evil' illustrates how significant atrocities can be committed by seemingly ordinary individuals who comply with authority and conform to societal norms without thoroughly questioning the moral implications of their actions. Arendt argues that Eichmann's motivations were more closely related to a desire to further his career and maintain his status than to ideological beliefs. His

behaviour arose not from deep malevolence but rather from a marked lack of empathy or moral insight.

Arendt's scholarship challenges traditional conceptions of evil, which typically portray offenders as innately immoral or sadistic. Instead, she demonstrates that in totalitarian regimes, evil emerges from ordinary individuals surrendering their autonomy and moral discernment to hierarchical powers. This viewpoint incited substantial debate, with critics asserting that Arendt was excessively lenient towards Eichmann and misconstrued his motivations (NELSON, 2024). Nevertheless, her ideas persist in exerting considerable influence within the realms of political philosophy, ethics, and the examination of totalitarianism.

Vignette 2
On the day in question, Joe, aged 14, had witnessed his father punch his mother repeatedly in the head. His father kicked Joe in the face on the way out of the house. On his way home from school, a group of older adolescents who were known to Joe, as they had intermittently targeted him for bullying, told him that they were going to go 'Paki bashing' and asked him if he wanted to come along. Filled with fear and a 'weird feeling of excitement, acceptance and amusement', he agreed to come along. They then set upon an adolescent Asian school-boy standing at a bus stop, whom Joe knew from school. This Asian boy was verbally and racially abused, spat at, punched in the stomach and head, and kicked in the genital area before they ran off laughing. Joe then spent the rest of the day with these boys, talking excitedly about what they had done.

Vignette 3
An Asian woman in her 70s had been standing at a bus stop. A young white woman in her early 20s was also at the bus stop with her three-year-old child at her side. A group of white male youths set upon the Asian woman. She was verbally and racially abused, spat at, punched in the stomach and head, and kicked in the genital area before they ran off laughing. At this time, the young white woman and her child were stood frozen. The child did not make a sound during the attack, which lasted less than a minute.

She lived in a block of flats and was isolated with limited community and family support. The child had regressed since the incident, soiling and wetting. His sleep had become very disturbed, and he

would wake up in the middle of the night, seeming to have night terrors. This was unbearable to the mother, who was unable to contain him. Due to her anger and frustration, she had begun to withdraw from him, leaving him in his bedroom at night to cry on his own in great distress whilst she sat in another room full of anguish. There had been a referral to social services after it was discovered that the child had bruising on his arm and torso, which was considered consistent with hard gripping. The mother admitted grabbing and yanking him in a fit of rage. She had a history of being in the care system herself due to abuse during her childhood, which included sexual abuse and witnessing domestic violence between her mother and her mother's various partners. More recently, she had suffered domestic violence from her child's father, who was currently in prison for a knife crime.

The young woman seemed frightened and dishevelled, looking wildly around the consulting room. Both mother and child looked exhausted, with dark shadows around their eyes. When the mother sat down, I asked about what had happened more recently. I was aware of a spate of racist incidents in the area and that she had indeed witnessed such an incident. Incredibly, she began racist vitriol, aiming the blame for the incident at the Asian woman and the number of Asians living in the community and complaining just how hard it was to be white in the UK at this time with all the f . . . ing Muslims. She said explicitly, 'If it wasn't for these f . . . ing Pakis this incident would not have happened'. She attributed the blame for what she and her child had experienced entirely to the woman's race and not to these youths for their violence. This was very shocking, and in common with Alex in vignette 1, I had a very negative personal response to her as a clinician of colour, recalling my own experiences of racism, including incidents of racist and homophobic assault on family and friends. I knew this would need to be managed and I needed to be mindful of how vulnerable this young woman was.

A homophobic and racist organization as a psychic retreat

Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are housed securely within its borders usually do not examine it. (Frankenberg, 1993)

Racist, sexist, and homophobic thoughts cannot, alas, be abolished by fiat but only by the time-honoured methods of persuasion, education and exposure to the other guy's-or excuse me, woman's-point of view. (Barbara Ehrenreich)

The individual mind consists of internalized forces operating in the group to which he or she belongs. Inner processes are internalizations of group dynamics, challenging the notion of the mind as an isolate and concentrating the group as the most potent agent in relationships operating in the interactions between people. The direction, therefore, is from outside to inside (Dalal, 1998; Foulkes, 1953), recognising the mind as essentially relational and permeated by the social (Foulkes, 1953) empathizing with the impact of the social, which means that racism and homophobia exist in interaction and the relationship between people in the overall matrix, including the social unconscious. Therefore, gang violence is an enactment of a split-off projected and amplified part of society that wants to punish and even destroy those who are considered other. The other that represents potency on the one hand or dirt and deprivation on the other must be erased.

All of us, therefore, project 'otherness' onto so-called out groups that extend beyond race and homophobia. In my experience, this leads to extreme and psychotic responses that require further understanding. Suppose there is an actual and assumed privilege to belonging to an in-group, an 'us rather than them' in very crude and primitive terms. In that case, there is the inevitability of a wish to maintain such privilege and, as mentioned, increased anxiety if this privilege can offer a sense of safety and protection at times of great anxiety.

Questions about the meaning of othering in terms of homophobia and racism and why and how it is used in terms of its social construction and psychic organization require robust scrutiny. Additionally, an analysis of the unconscious dynamics of a racist or homophobic solution and how to manage it can offer important insights into such a dangerous and deadly phenomenon—turning then to the racist and homophobic identification in the three vignettes that were made with these violent gangs and not the gay man or Asian boy and woman. These three people have had complicated personal histories. They have always been relatively powerless and bullied during their own lives. By identifying with the gang and not with the people who were targeted by such a violent and potentially lethal attack, they aligned themselves with their aggressors. Being a victim was now unbearable for them. They sought a 'psychic retreat' (Steiner, 2003), allowing themselves to be wrapped in the *collective secondary skin formation* as a psychic retreat

provided by the violent gang in a racist and homophobic organization that superficially gave them a sense of safety.

The racist and homophobic retreat by way of what the gang offered in a *collective secondary skin formation* offered something of a haven, some protection from the re-traumatization. However, this comes at a significant cost, as such retreats prevent connection and meaningful contact. The person denies his/her humanity and identifies with aggressors. In this instance, the pathological organization was racist and homophobic. The primary function of a retreat into a *collective secondary skin formation* is to avoid intolerable anxiety and fear, very specifically, the fear of death.

The primary human anxiety is that of death, and an identification with the violent gang offers a transcendence of the reality of individual death, a sense of immortality that becomes equated within a privileged group, that promises a psychotic solution of immortality fuelled by a denigration of a hated-out group whose members need to be cruelly killed off.

> For man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skilful defiance of it by watching others feed to it as he survives transfixed with rapture. (Becker, 1975)

Summary

This article has aimed to apply a broader group analytic theoretical scaffolding to our work with victims and perpetrators of group violence by locating this phenomenon very firmly in a social context and pathology that predates vulnerability and exclusion. This involves a destructive matrix embedded in social unconscious and social facts, very specifically toxic masculinity, racism and homophobia. My role as a clinician was to enable these patients to emergency from this retreat, which would mean putting them in touch with more depressive anxieties, a sense of empathy and connection with their victimized selves, those predated and less of a denial of what these violent group dynamics symbolized to them, that is a hated and abused part of themselves, which they could not tolerate due to their own experience of having been hated and abused. It, therefore, felt safer to make an identification with these lynching gangs. Loosening the grip of this defensive structure is painful and diligent work. The clinician is never an uninvolved observer, and the management of the transference and the provision of a facilitating and holding environment is

particularly so if a clinician is from two marginalized and vulnerable communities and will almost invariably have had to manage his/her traumas relating directly to racism and homophobia.

My role was to help them reconnect with their trauma and feelings and not to persecute them with accusations of racism and homophobia. The role of the clinician is to enable them to understand, contain, and connect with these terrible anxieties and support them to make steps, thereby enabling an emergence from the racist and homophobic retreat. However, one would need to be very cautious. Making contact with such anxiety can be terrifying, and during the work, the emergence from the retreat will not be a linear process. The work, therefore, is back and forth between emergence and retreat. It is potentially slow and painful and must be done at the right pace to help the perpetrators connect with such vulnerable and terrifying aspects of themselves.

The introduction of the *group collective psychic skin* concept aims to illustrate and make the complex and harmful dynamics of group interactions recognizable to clinicians, whether or not they have been trained in a group analytic context. Those who take part and are members of this malignant group matrix will no doubt have a particular traumatic history of their own. The gravitational pull of this group matrix has drawn them in, and there is a reproduction of their trauma as they lure others into this powerful, gravitational pull. The consequences of having been pulled into this violent group can be devastating. Whether an individual ensnared in this way can survive will largely depend on their context and internal objects, which they could draw upon to help them resist and survive an attack on the very essence of their humanity and that of the victim targeted. Hopefully, greater knowledge of the complexities of this deadly group phenomenon and how it manages to ensnare its members will reduce the occurrences of this happening to so many others.

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