

A SYSTEMS VIEW OF VIOLENCE AND SOME PARADOXES OF WORKING WITH VIOLENT ABUSERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper commences with a theoretical underpinning of the nature of violence from a systems perspective, exploring the interactions between parts and wholes where boundaries are transgressed or vital flows are disrupted. A case study of Rangi, a perpetrator of family violence, who is a composite of people the author has worked with over the years, is then used to demonstrate how systems principles can be used to understand the nature of human violence on an individual level and inform ways of working with clients aiming to reduce the frequency and severity of violence in their lives and the people around them. The focus then shifts to structural violence imposed on the parts of the system by the whole. First, this is examined at a societal level, then returning to the case study of Rangi, there is an exploration of structural violence within the criminal justice system revealing paradoxes to be confronted in working with violent clients.

Key words: Systems thinking, DSRP, boundary, violence, abuse, structural violence

INTRODUCTION

As in many other countries, violence is a serious problem in New Zealand. More prisons are being built to cope ¹. Most work within the field of criminal justice has a linear focus, thus missing many of the complexities involved in the work and creating unintended consequences. This paper uses systems thinking to explore the nature of violence and help people working in the field. The author has been working in the field of violence in New Zealand for nearly fifteen ten years.

The first section looks at violence from a theoretical systems thinking perspective. This is followed by a case study of Rangi, a male perpetrator of domestic violence, who is a composite of a number of individuals with whom the author has worked. Systems thinking is applied to Rangi's individual situation and shows how systems thinking can be useful in helping him gain a better understanding of his violence and develop strategies to reduce it. The focus then shifts to understanding structural violence, where organisations unnecessarily impose harmful restrictions on individuals, further

¹ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/85448143/government-to-spend-1b-to-sleep-1800-more-prisoners>

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entrenching the domination and control of those with power, and degrading the well-being of the organisations members. Rangi is re-introduced, highlighting his interactions with the criminal justice system and the impact on his life.

A SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE OF VIOLENCE

Cabrera and Cabrera's (2015) DSRP model provides a useful overview of the nature of systems that can be applied to humans as multi-levelled complex adaptive systems (Stacey, 2011). The DSRP model makes four claims about complex systems:

Distinction: Distinctions are made that create boundaries.

Systems: Systems are formed by parts that connect to create wholes.

Relationships: Relationships exist between the parts and other parts and wholes.

Perspectives: Each part and whole has its own perspective.

The DSRP model can be linked to the principle of autonomy and connectivity (Rzevski & Skoboelev, 2014). Each part needs autonomy. By noticing difference (Bateson, 2000) in an environment, a distinction is made and a boundary (Midgley, Munlo, & Brown, 1998; Ulrich, 2006) is placed that defines the part. That autonomy of the part must be maintained or the part ceases to exist. Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby, 1947) tells us that an effective system needs to maintain variety between the each of the parts, in order for the parts to be able to respond to a wide range of situations in which the overall system might find itself. Difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 2000) between parts implies conflict to be resolved. Conflict can be resolved in ways that increase the well-being of the system, or in ways that are harmful to the system.

A system also needs connectivity, so the parts link together and interact in ways that enable the whole system to function effectively. The parts must cede some of their authority to foster cohesion within the whole. Connectivity creates cohesion, so the parts do not become too varied or dissimilar to be able to work together. Because the parts are connected to parts and wholes, there are flows (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004) between the parts and between the parts and wholes. The flows can be flows of matter, energy or information (Umpleby, 2007). Those flows bringing vital resources to the system must be maintained for its well-being. An open system is therefore left vulnerable to those flows if they do not adequately support the well-being of the system.

If autonomy is over-emphasised the whole becomes disconnected and cohesion falls away. If connectivity is over-emphasised, the parts lose diversity and become servants of the whole system. There is therefore a dynamic tension between autonomy and connectivity that must be continually rebalanced for the system to operate effectively. The balance of autonomy and connectivity can, however, be distorted such that harm results either for the parts or the whole. Violence can thus be defined as the invasion of a boundary or the disruption of a necessary flow across a boundary.

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HUMAN COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEM

Human complex adaptive systems have their own characteristics. We are fractal (Mandelbrot, 1982), complex adaptive systems of systems (Stacey, 2011; Troncale & Friendshuh, 2012). Within and between all the levels there is an enormous number of boundaries to be protected from potential sources of violence. At each level of functioning a person has needs (Maslow, 1943). When we fear our needs will not be met we often feel anxiety that must be contained (Stacey, 2011). When our anxiety cannot be contained, we are more likely to respond from the immediate, self-preserving fight or flight response in the midbrain rather than the pre-frontal cortex that mobilises empathy and long range thinking for a more effective response. A threat to identity or reputation is often felt as keenly as a threat to physical well-being.

RANGI AND ELIZABETH

A case study is introduced to explore the various levels at which violence can occur. Rangi is a composite of several people the author has worked with over the years. He is a 42-year-old man, who was brought up amongst alcohol, drugs and violence in a gang home. Rangi has been imprisoned several times. He has poor emotional regulation, resulting in impulsive bouts of anger arising from small trigger events. He was sent by the court to undertake a programme because of his arguing and abuse towards his partner, Elizabeth, who also had a difficult upbringing. Rangi struggled to attend the programme and was often loud and abusive. He was sent back to the court for non-compliance with a court order and eventually jailed.

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To investigate why Rangi and Elizabeth argue so often, we analyse an interaction between the two. Figure 1 describes the interactions between Rangi and Elizabeth as they negotiate difference (Bateson, 2000).

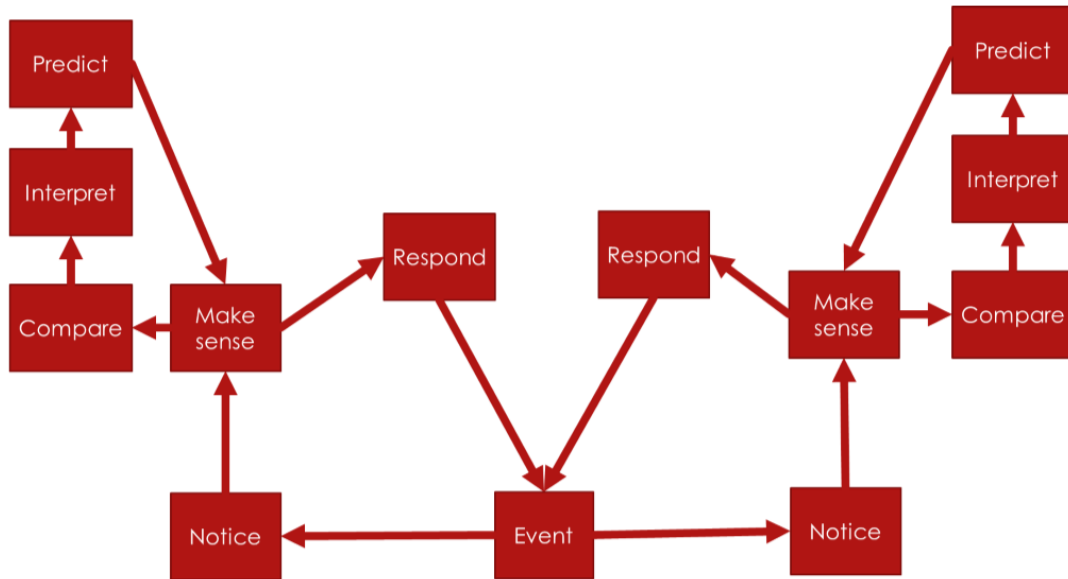


Figure 1: Two people (such as Rangi and Elizabeth) interacting, creating recursive behavioural feedback loops. This diagram helps identify how violence might arise through their recursive interactions.

First they appreciate (Vickers, 1968) the situation they find themselves in by noticing the event. They each notice what is happening in the wider environment and their internal reactions, each from their own perspective. Rangi processes the event, comparing it to past experiences through the filter of his lived experience and a resultant worldview that contains a set of core-beliefs (Beck, 1979) about himself, the world he finds himself in, the people in his world, and his future. These beliefs act like a map, helping Rangi navigate his lived experience. They become so deeply entrenched as to become unconscious and virtually invisible.

Rangi's life experiences have led him to have beliefs like, "I'm useless", "Those you love always let you down", "Everyone is out to get me", "Sooner or later, she'll cheat on you", and "Never back down". This has left him hyper sensitive to flows across boundaries and the potential threat they might carry. He has constantly on the alert for signs that Elizabeth might be a threat. He has built very firm boundaries out of a perceived need to protect himself from harm and easily takes offence.

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Elizabeth has similarly appreciated the situation according to the filters she has developed over the years also making her also hyper sensitive to potentially abusive behaviours. They both then compare what they notice to the worldview they have constructed from the boundaries and patterns they have enclosed themselves in. From that Rangi and Elizabeth each formulate a response, which all feeds together to generate a new event, and the process cycles around forming feedback loops. They can be seen as two structurally couples autopoietic systems (Maturana, 2002; Maturana & Verden-Zoller, 2008). They are able to self-produce within their boundaries on all levels, but are synergetically bound together and interdependent through the recursive responses to each other. Two hyper-sensitive people are prone to setting up destructive recursive behavioural feedback loops, which can be triggered very quickly.

Gottman (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Silver, 2007) writes of 'harsh start-ups', whereby an initial harsh comment can constitute a butterfly effect (Lorenz, 1963) that has a high likelihood of generating a harmful positive feedback loop (Ashby, 1954), whereby each harsh response invites an equal or harsher reply and the interaction quickly degenerates beyond a tipping point (Gladwell, 2001) into an argument or even violence. If a negative feedback loop can be initiated the impact of a harsh start-up is reduced and an argument may be avoided.

Each comment is thus like an invitation for the other to respond in a like manner escalating tension. A response can also elicit an opposite response. An aggressive response can be an invitation for the other to respond passively and a passive response can invite a hostile response. Like any invitation, however, there is a choice as to whether to accept the invitation or not. Gottman and DeClaire (2001) also write of talks of bids for connection. In a healthy relationship, there are constant bids for connection in such forms as smiles, touches or kisses that are reciprocated. As a relationship becomes less healthy bids are more commonly ignored or rejected.

Whenever we place a boundary, what is placed inside that boundary is generally favoured and familiar. That which is beyond the boundary easily becomes the 'other' or marginalised (Midgley & Pinzon, 2011) and becomes seen as a potential threat or enemy. Gottman notes a tipping point (Gladwell, 2001) in relationships when the partner shifts from being someone within my boundaries, whom I support even if I find them difficult, to being 'the cause of my problems' and 'the enemy'. As is typical with complex systems returning to a previous state after a tipping point has been reached is very difficult, if not impossible. Once a threat is perceived (whether it is real or not), it is easy for a partner to be 'othered' (Milojevic, 2013) and an attack becomes 'justified' as a means of protection.

As a result of Rangi's violence towards Elizabeth, he was arrested and appeared before the court. He was sent to undertake a programme to address his violence. With encouragement, Rangi was willing to acknowledge that as a result of his dysfunctional upbringing, he had developed habit patterns for responding to situations perceived as threats that were abusive and harmful to others. He acknowledged feelings of guilt and shame for what he had done to his partner, Elizabeth. Ironically, his lack of emotional regulation and impulsive outbursts, meant not only that he abused Elizabeth, but he was

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unable to control his emotions while attending the programme. He was hyper vigilant about any comment that might threaten his existing sense of himself. His aggressive behaviour towards staff and other participants in the programme, meant he was disengaged from the service and sent back before the judge. In the meantime, his abuse of Elizabeth, fuelled by drug use, had continued and Rangi was arrested and subsequently imprisoned.

Rangi obviously need to take responsibility for his actions and learn new, non-violent ways of responding to difficult situations. Many of the skills he needs are systems skills:

1. Observing the system. First this means observing himself. Rangi can build awareness of his own emotions and motivations, learns to control his emotions better (by learning skills like distress tolerance (Lineham & Dimeff, 2001)).
2. He can observe others more closely. This will build empathy for other people around him, can reflect on his actions and their consequences (Bateson's learning II (Bateson, 2000)). He will also recognise that his perspective is only one perspective and there are other ways to understand or reframe the events he is experiencing.
3. He can notice the relationship between what he observes in himself and what he observes in others. He will be more alert to the impact of his actions on others and notice how modifying his behaviour changes the behaviour of others. He will better recognise leverage points (Meadows, 2008), better anticipate future risk situations (Rosen, 2012), build an awareness of his boundary placements (Midgley et al., 1998) and their impact.
4. Use systems thinking instead of black and white, linear thinking. This includes accepting uncertainty, expecting unintended consequences, thinking of the impact of implicit consequences of having chosen one thing over another (e.g. spending money on alcohol rather than rent or his daughter's birthday), not focussing aggression on the immediate target (e.g. being aggressive to a bailiff as the visible face of the court system).

Midgley and Pinzon (2011) writes of widening boundaries to include other perspectives and dialectic systems thinking whereby a counter argument to a situation is specifically sought, which can be guided towards a synergistic "third way". They also write of how conflict can arise because one person places boundaries differently to the other, which creates a marginal area where conflict can arise.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

The focus so far has been on parts that invade or interfere with other parts or with the whole. We now turn our attention to systems where the whole constricts and controls the parts so they lose autonomy and the system becomes less effective. This is what Galtung (1969) describes as structural violence.

The parts initially came together because they could achieve more than they could on their own. As the whole becomes bigger an increasingly larger infrastructure becomes necessary to co-ordinate all the interactions (Boulding, 1968). The infrastructure should exist in service of the parts that comprise the whole.

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If the prime directive of a system is to maintain its function and wellbeing, then it must be able to impose constraints on the parts to conform sufficiently to meet the needs of the whole, thus maintaining cohesion. If the parts are unwilling or unable to operate within those constraints, mechanisms then need to be put in place to impose further constraints over those parts, lest the whole system lose coherence and descend into anarchy. This leads to a tension within the system. The infrastructure is set up for the parts, but at times, the infrastructure must impose restrictions and controls over dissident parts.

This whole situation becomes very messy (Ackoff, 1999) when we add human dynamics to the mix. It is fallible human beings who each have their own perspective, driven by their worldview and core beliefs, who must decide where boundaries need to be placed, determine when a part has transgressed a boundary and how that transgression should be sanctioned. Acts of omission can be as destructive as acts of commission. With the best of intentions, the whole can perpetrate violence on the parts in any manners of ways.

Unfortunately, those who have control over the infrastructure do not always act with the best of intentions. Individuals within the infrastructure can fall prey to prioritising their own needs and desires, or the needs of the whole for itself over their role as the guardian of the whole for the parts. The whole system can then be subverted to oppress the very parts that constitute it. The threat of a loss of livelihood or status of an official in the infra-structure can cause them to manipulate the system for their own protection causing harm to the parts.

Those in control can directly invade boundaries and manipulate the flows through the system, directing it in certain directions and denying it to others. The ancient empires, such as the Egyptians, Persians, and Chinese and the Aztecs mainly used direct violence or the threat of direct violence to maintain their control over the people they dominated. Over time it became apparent that such blunt use of violence was not necessary to maintain control and cohesion. The Romans, who were also brutally violent, found the power of having a state religion. They established a unifying set of core beliefs that would bind people of widely diverse cultures and impose self-regulating constraints on those under its power. People could be bound by ideas as much as by tortuous crosses. Christian (2011) notes that with the shift from physical violence to belief systems came a deep-seated sense of anxiety, disconnection and disorientation as emotions as external control shifted to internal control.

Structural violence includes the knowledge that, in last resort, the state has access to legitimised violence. Indeed Weber (1972) defines the state as “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” For most people, who live within the constraints of the society, this violence never is never apparent, but it is nevertheless ubiquitous. In New Zealand in 1977 hundreds of protesters moved onto land at Bastion Point ² in the middle of Auckland city that indigenous tribes claimed had been stolen from them. The occupation lasted for nearly eighteen months before Police came and forcibly arrested over two hundred protesters. Apparently, a kilometre or so down the road there were army trucks with

² <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/keyword/bastion-point>

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armed soldiers. This encapsulates for me the hidden threat of violence the state always has at its disposal. It is only those who cannot or choose to not to align their behaviour within the constraints determined by those in control of the infrastructure, who experience the raw violence of the state.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony describes how those in control of the infrastructure get to define the worldview and socially accepted core beliefs (Bourdieu, 1989; Butler & Anthanasiou, 2013; Foucault, 1977; Hoare & Smith, 1992). From the day of our birth we absorb a worldview through our interactions with others that forms a shared cognitive framework enabling us to communicate and co-operate. That same worldview, however, also inculcates the power distortions and subtle controls of the society. The violence perpetrated through the system to the parts becomes normalised and invisible. We are caught in the double bind (Bateson, 2002) that we must have these shared beliefs to interact, but they are so susceptible to being vehicles for structural violence.

We willingly take on roles within the whole that maintain and sustain the existing paradigm. We take out mortgages to buy houses and in return support our own oppression by taking roles of teachers, police officers, prison workers that educate people into the narrative, monitor behaviour and sanction transgressions. The system is so powerful not because of how it manipulates our external world, but because it is totally embedded in and defines in our inner world. We cannot live within our society without accepting this Faustian bargain.

The whole neo-liberal paradigm is structured around a narrative of the ability of an individual to achieve whatever they want if they try hard enough, and prioritising the valuing of money and profit (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Korten, 2000; Piketty, 2014). In actual fact, there is far from an even playing field where all can achieve their goals. As observed in the conservation phase of the adaptive cycle (Gunderson & Holling, 2002), those agents who gained ascendancy in the early growth phase can block out the others wishing to get established later. Values of community, equality and justice have been bypassed, justifying the 'othering' of the vast bulk of the population. This predatory capitalism has enabled the destruction of the environment, the marginalisation of people, enslavement by debt as the profits are accumulated into the hands of literally a few dozen people at the expense of the rest. The neo-liberal paradigm is like a dragon that eats its own flesh. Having devoured the first world and lower classes of the first world. It is now devouring the middle classes. How long can the dragon continue devouring itself with its suicidal behaviour before it collapses totally?

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

To return the focus to Rangi and Elizabeth, we next investigate the criminal justice system because that is the societal system that impinges on their lives the most. Because of the author's experience, the focus is on the New Zealand criminal justice system, but the principles are generalizable to other countries. The criminal justice system has the function of determining and carrying out the remedies for transgressions of the societal

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constraints as agreed through parliament. Rangi was unable to use self-discipline to control his behaviour, so discipline is imposed by external agencies. There are a number of paradoxes or double binds (Bateson, 2002) that must be negotiated in work with people who have used violence.

Some of the constraints imposed by the whole system are necessary to enable the harmonious interactions amongst citizens, while others are a part of maintaining dominance over the populace. Any distortions or biases in the undergirding myths and metaphors, such as racism or sexism filter down to the worldview, to the social structures and finally manifest in the day to day lives of the people (Inayatullah & Milojevic, 2015). The lived experience of large numbers of people mean they are more likely to come under the gaze of the criminal justice system. They can expect lower educational outcomes, poorer health, poverty and much more. Some people come to the attention of the criminal justice system because they do not have the required skill set to remain within the imposed societal constraints. These are Kohlberg's (1981) pre-conventionals. Others are able to live within the imposed constraints but recognising the iniquities of the system choose not to comply. These are Kohlberg's post-conventionals.

By using internalised self-coercive mechanisms most of us live our lives within the proscribed rules set (both spoken and unspoken), but at a cost of ceding some of our vital essence. Outliers like Rangi, however, bear the brunt of the structural violence that usually remains hidden and potential. Once caught up in the criminal justice system, it can be very difficult to leave. It is somewhat like a shark with inward facing teeth that pull their victim further in with each bite.

Once a person comes to the attention of the Police, they will be observed more than other people, picked out of a crowd, and immediately suspect. Sentences become progressively more severe and prison is often a place to learn more about criminal behaviours. People like Rangi typically lack resources of education and money, that help facilitate fair treatment within the criminal justice system. This can form into a positive feedback loop that gets worse and worse. The reporting and attendance requirements can become onerous, especially if there are other impediments like a lack of transport, mental health issues, addictions etc. The more Rangi struggles with the injustices he faces, the more he is seen as resistant and is further marginalised. Extra penalties then further entrap him within the system.

The criminal justice system operates at core in a very dualistic way. A person is guilty or not guilty, an offender or a victim³. While this makes the process of identifying transgressions and imposing remedies simpler, a systems perspective will quickly tell us that it does not match up to real world realities.

With very fixed, dualistic roles of offender and victim, the offender is 100% responsible for the situation and the victim 0%. The offender must take responsibility for their actions, irrespective of the actions of the victim. There are times when the division of

³ While concepts such as mitigating factors add some flexibility to the decision making, it remains at core still dualistic.

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responsibility is this clear. One person has clearly unacceptably invaded a boundary and caused harm. The reality is usually far more fuzzy (Zadeh, 1996). There can be provocation, manipulation and any number of ways assigning responsibility is less clear. It is exacerbated also by the frequent lying, exaggerating or otherwise obfuscating the version of events by all involved. Sometimes this is deliberate. More often it is simply the consequence of people interpreting the events from within their own worldview.

The author attended a meeting of an offender and victim. The offender was told, “You are at fault because of your behaviour. It is totally up to you to repair the damage you have done.” The victim then tried to say that she had issues (like drug use, mental health issues, trauma from abuse in previous relationships) that made it hard for the offender to cope. She was told, “You can sit down, this is nothing to do with you. You are the victim.” Both felt disempowered. The offender felt overwhelmed by the tasks he was given, the victim felt that there was nothing she could do to improve her situation. In reality, the perpetrator is often also a victim and the victim often a persecutor. Unless the both learn how they impact on the relational dynamics, the same patterns of behaviour will continue to be experienced.

If an argument occurs, it does so co-creatively in the relational space (Maturana & Verden-Zoller, 2008) between the two people arguing. Neither is in control, but both influence the dialogue. Karpman’s triangle (Karpman, 1968), often used in programmes for offenders, recognises that dysfunctional relationship dynamics often result in agents taking on the role of perpetrator or victim (the third agent is the rescuer). He notes that the perpetrator’s aggressiveness can lead to the other taking on the role of victim.

Counterintuitively, taking the victim role can be tempting. The victim does not have to take responsibility for their actions. They can blame the perpetrator, instead of taking responsibility for themselves. Playing a victim role can invite aggression. The paradox is how to work with this without further victimising the victim.

The range of rehabilitation programmes used in New Zealand are designed to encourage better control over thoughts and emotions, build empathy, teach coping skills and set positive goals for the future. They are strengths based (Rapp, 1997) focussing on building and encouraging positive attributes and use techniques like CBT (Beck, 1979), DBT (Linehan, 1993), and mindfulness (Teasdale, Williams, & Segal, 2014).

Many people attend such rehabilitative programmes and learn skills that enable them to interact with others more effectively and lead non-violent lives. Others, like Rangi, remain caught in abusive behavioural patterns. Since his behaviour on the programme was abusive towards staff and others and a threat to their well-being and safety, it was right that he was discharged from the programme. However, if Rangi is discharged from a programme is it his fault for not behaving within the guidelines of the programme or the system for not having a programme to meet his needs? Motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 2012) (another frequently used technique) has a principle if client is resistant, the problem is with the clinician needing to develop skills rather than blaming the client for being resistant.

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A further paradox is that, when more positive strategies have been tried and failed, the system reverts to violent forms of punishment, which further entrench alienation and reinforce the existing maladaptive core beliefs. A house divided on itself cannot stand.

The operation of violence, both from the perspective of an individual as a part in a wider system being violent to another or from the perspective of the whole system perpetrating violence on the parts that constitute it, the dynamics are far from linear. There are many skills a person prone to using abuse and violence can use to build resilience and live without resorting to old habit patterns. Systems thinking introduces many ideas and concepts that help build these skills. Violence is often treated in a linear way with a clear offender and a clear victim, because it makes the process much simpler, but in the end, we must come to terms with the fuzzier aspects of the inter-relationships between individuals and the coercive nature often demonstrated by social systems on the individuals those structures are there to support.

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CONCLUSIONS

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